

# The Idea of E-Participation Digital Engine Where People can Take Place

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**Abstract**—The use of electronic based platforms to support the government and central and local public administrations activities, allows the creation and development of new ways of interacting with the people and reinventing the relationship between state and citizens. Among such developments, we must stress the direct and electronically mediated interaction between citizens and the different public institutions, permits a new public commitment called e-participation. This paper aims at pondering upon this new model of civic involvement and its contribution to improve the processes and the democratic structures, highlighting its potential to improve the quality of democracy itself.

**Keywords**—E-participation, e-government, active citizenship, information society.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have been at the core of changes that are not merely technological as, by supporting new ways of communication among the state, the citizens and the organizations, they have created new social and economic structures and emerging governing procedures. [3]. This can be watched in the growing attention paid by many countries to e-government, meaning the central and local public administration on-line (mediated by electronic tools) and referring to the offer of less bureaucratic public services, centered on the citizens and using the ICT to obtain gains in efficiency and effectiveness in the various State and Public Administration levels either in their internal, G2G, or external relations, G2B and G2C (Alves e Moreira, 2004). In [5], the essential concepts are presented and the implications of the adoption of e-government at the national context are widely discussed [8].

E-participation is the field in which the e-government intervenes, aiming at promoting a citizens' active, inclusive and conscious decision-making process. In [5] this context, Internet is a particularly relevant aspect, as it has contributed in a decisive way to a change in the way public administration acts, forcing it to work in a new model: on a network. This model may have a deep impact in the quantity and quality of the relations the government need, as citizens are presently feeling bitterly disappointed with the political processes [17].

In this article, we intend to ponder upon this new model of active citizenship and its contribution to improve the democratic processes and structures, that is, to improve the quality of democracy.

## II. ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

Citizenship is a broad concept and should not be confused with the concept of nationality: while the latter is centered in the legal status granted to people in their relations with the country, citizenship points to a standard ideal that appeals to a feeling of belonging to a community and participate in its life.

Putnam [14, 15], builds the concept of social capital based on the links among individuals – the social networks and the reciprocity and trust norms that emerge among them. This way, the concept of social capital broadens the concept of “civic virtues”, as these are considered more powerful when inserted in a network of social interchangeable relations (a society built upon civic virtuous people who are isolated from one another is not necessarily rich in social capital). Thus, as Putnam puts it, to foster an active citizenship is putting the social capital at work, which can be done through [6]: community service (e.g. volunteer work), cultural participation (e.g. recreational associations) and political participation (e.g. voting).

Political participation reflects the society's commitment (citizens, civic associations, etc.) to building, applying and controlling public policies, which means influencing, by any possible initiatives, in a direct or indirect way, those policies (political polls; information requests and public discussions; proposals; complaints; contacts with the political class;...) The importance of this kind of participation is stressed by the OCDE since it considers the enforcement of the relationship with citizens an investment in a better way of doing politics and a fundamental element for a good governance, allowing to explore new sources of ideas and information politically relevant, increase the citizens' trust in the public administration, promote the quality of democracy and enhance the civic abilities [10].

Also according to OCDE, enforcing the relationship government-citizens involves a wide range of interactions, divided into three large groups: information (produced by the government and available to the citizens), surveying (the citizens about definite aspects of governance and active participation (of the citizens in the decision-making process, but the administration takes the final decision). These groups correspond to more and more demanding levels of active participation.

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In the Portuguese case, to ensure and encourage the citizens' democratic participation in solving national problems is, according to the Portuguese Constitutional Law [1], one of the State's fundamental roles (cf. 9th art). This general purpose is regulated in several ways, matching the logic of the trilogy information/surveying/active participation, from the basic access to information to the participation in the decision-making process, and taking into account the principle of equality of the citizens when using their rights of civic participation. Examples:

A) The economic, social and cultural rights. In several concrete situations, the citizens' participation is granted the dignity of an established right. We should mention, with an impact on the territory management: the case of housing and city planning, in which "citizens are granted the participation in the making of the instruments of city planning and any other tools of physical territorial planning" (cf. art 65th, no 5); and the case of environment and well-being, in which it is the duty of the state to perform a number of initiatives "... with the involvement and the participation of the citizens" (conf. art 66 th, no 2).

B) Political power organization. The political participation of the citizens is considered a condition and a fundamental tool to strengthen the democratic system, "the law must promote the equality to exert the civic and political rights" (cf. art 109th). Considering the Public Administration structure, it is established that, in the exercise of the administrative activity, "the participation of the citizens in making the decisions...related to them must be assured" (cf. art 267th, no 5), and they are also granted the right to have access to files and administrative records (cf. art 268, no 2)

### III. RESTRAINTS TO AN ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

In an idealistic perspective, active citizenship contributes to define better informed public policies, to promote transparency and responsibility within the administrations and, this way, promote the trust of the citizens in their institutions. However, in a realistic perspective, the one in which some parameters must be taken into account to evaluate the participation (dimension, diversity and quality of the participation; social representation of the participation; stimuli to promote the participation, etc.), it is possible to realize that the ideal of an active citizenship, even though it is supported by the Constitution of the Republic, is still to be considered satisfactory in Portugal.

Recent studies [2], explain this is related to the existence of restraints that prevent the participation, such as : the prevailing effects of an authoritarian regime, which repressed the association and the participation; a social structure marked by low levels of schooling and productivity; a job market inadequate to civic activities, with high rates of female work, few part time jobs, no job security and low salaries causing the need to work in multiple jobs; lack of tradition, on the part of the Portuguese institutions, of dialogue or acceptance in the decision- making process of the interest groups and non-governmental institutions and so, the concept of democracy is almost only related to the elections.

The low rates of active citizenship thus seem to show the collective lack of participation habits and the personal difficulties felt by the citizens (economic, educational, of free time, of information about the opportunities to participate, of "not knowing how to" participate; and also of the ability to do so being aware of the contexts and related issues). To free the citizens and the society up from these constraints, namely facilitating the access to the participation sites (physical access, flexi time and less time consuming activities), seducing the citizens for that task, highlighting and facilitating the possibility of participation, is a critical factor for the success of any initiative that aims at the participation of the citizens.

### IV. THE GLOBALIZATION OF THE PARTICIPATION

Some authors mention a decline of civic participation in many western democracies [15]. But the situation is different from country to country. Thus, Canada seems not to have suffered from the sharp decrease of civic participation that Putnam says happened in the USA all along the last decades. [1, 13], referring to Holland, states that the Dutch haven't lost their interest on political issues: they simply changed it (the sharp decline of political party membership's contrasts with the rise of organizations such as Green Peace and International Amnesty). As for Portugal, despite the low rates of civic participation that have occurred so far, these tend to rise slightly concerning youngsters [2], which might indicate a change in the previous tendency.

However, the situation is difficult enough to raise worries, at the highest level, expressed in the United Nations Millennium Declaration, in which the countries that signed it, compromise, within the scope of "Human Rights, Democracy and Good Governance" to work together to broaden the political issues, so that they may allow an effective participation of all citizens, in all countries [11].

This may show what we can call a "participation globalization". As, more and more, "My village is the world", the feeling of belonging to a given community doesn't prevent the feeling of belonging to another one from growing, either they are integrated or independent. Progressively, each citizen can play more than one role as an agent of participation, making his/her task more demanding and more complex. For instance, the act of exercising citizenship at the lowest level of political organization in the Portuguese state (neighbors committees), is compatible with the act of exercising it at higher levels (local counties, city councils, etc.). Exercising the Portuguese citizenship is compatible with the act of exercising the European citizenship; and in an even more extended way, all citizens are asked to intervene in planetary matters, such as Peace, Human Rights or the Environment. Thus, what we can call "participation globalization" is the assumption that, "if my village is the world", then "all the world belongs to me". So, we are responsible for everything going on around us, no matter how far, or near, we are from the events. Go beyond the barriers of distance is one of the contributions of the information society.

This is a relevant matter because, as yet, a dynamic of local strong participation is not still ingrained and the ideal of participative democracy may fall apart when facing a global participation. Within a framework of greater complexity in the modern societies and the participation processes, the deficit of participation acquires more visibility and its consequences may have a deeper impact.

What answers can be given? What mechanisms are available to provide such answers?

## V. PARTICIPATION AND INFORMATION SOCIETY

This is the context in which the ICT are considered an important tool to promote civic participation, because they open both new channels of communication between the electorate and the elected and create new possibilities for the citizens to intervene in the decisions at the various levels of the administration (central, local, etc.) and they support the rise of new participation communities (virtual, based on similar interests and free from geographical constraints, timetables, or even complementary interests, potentially divergent); though these may be poorly organized, they use, e.g., blogs, forums, chats, mails, wikis, electronic petitions and other instruments that grow almost daily, to exercise their civic participation (expressing opinions, organizing petitions, complaints and even spontaneous collective activities).

It is important, however, to understand if and how the ICT are changing the democratic systems, so that deceptions that may arise from too many expectations are avoided. Three approaches are proposed to realize the way how the internet affects the social capital [16]: in a transformative way for the social contacts and for the civic commitment, in which the solidarities based on local groups pave the way for networks which are geographically scattered and share distinct interests; in a reducing way, in which the recreational activities attract the attention of people who then stay less available for their community interests; and in a supplementary way, creating new standards of social contact, used by people to reach their goals, together with the means they already had at their disposal (personal contacts, telephone, letter, lobbies and traditional political organizations).

Norris considers more pessimistic the opinion of those who believe that the Internet will strengthen the politically active people, maintaining the exclusion of those already excluded and more optimistic the opinion of those who think the Information Society will reinforce the levels of political participation [9]. This work agrees on the lack of evidence necessary for a clear view on this matter, but suggests that, in Europe, the development of the Information Society has had more positive results for activists supporting causes (anti-war; anti-globalization; genetically modified food; animals' rights; environment; and even in Portugal, with the recent petition to stop smoking at public places) than for the mass participation in campaigns and elections; and that happens, he adds, not because the Information Society leads the new social movements promoting those causes, but

because it facilitates their organization, their mobilization and their expression.

The fact that the social dynamics reveal different speeds of adaptation to the ICT, helps Williams to disagree with the technological determinism (the belief that new technologies are able to shape and change society, as a prevalent vision among today's critics on the role of ICT in society), so he shows that different cultures and different political regimes use technologies in very different ways [7]. In Williams model, the impact of new tools is evolutionary and not revolutionary, as it results from an extensive negotiation or opposition among several forces, some very well established and others emerging, some fighting and some adhering to the change. The result is the impossibility of accepting that the use of digital technology will lead, undoubtedly, to more freedom and more democracy. And it is from the role that these forces play that each particular context will take possession of the ICT to use in public participation.

Saenz also gives its contribution for the rejection of technological determinism, by saying that one of the key aspects to creatively incorporate ICT is the understanding that it is not enough to introduce the Internet to work in a network, since the social institutions that haven't adopted a flexible and horizontal organization, interconnected to other organizations, are the ones that will take less advantage of these new means provided by the ICT [18].

## VI. CONCLUSION

The poem by António Gedeão [4] – a XX century Portuguese poet – under the title “My village”, provides a good insight on our position. Gedeão wrote “My village is the world” and these words can easily be linked to the process of globalization affecting us all as citizens and also affecting the organizations, either they are private or state-owned. The poem also reads “The whole world belongs to me”, showing, by words, how Rómulo de Carvalho saw himself: a citizen of the world. And rightly. In fact, his humanistic and scientific sides were tightly interwoven, a highly improbable circumstance to happen back in the year of 1958 and still so much up-to-date. He was ahead of his time, a man whose brilliant mind was in the XXI century. He concludes:” Here I meet and I mix with people from everywhere/ to the large world belonging”. Thus, the importance of interacting and connecting on a network is highlighted and that network tends to give rise to dynamics whose interconnections easily attain a level greater than the individual himself.

So, the public participation finds in technological tools emerging ways to connect the citizens with their institutions, allowing a greater proximity among the members of the same community, increasing their ability to mobilize and influence the others. It is thus adequate to search for new mechanisms to promote the public participation using the Internet and its different services, fostering the appearance of e-participation tools, that will permit the citizen to see his effort recognized. These mechanisms will also show the results and their consequences – a huge challenge, either for the citizen or for the state, which must incorporate these practices in its activities.

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