

Agenda for eDemocracy - an EU perspective

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European Commission¹

The European Commission has taken up eDemocracy as part of eCommission² (modernisation of internal administration, improved communication with in particular Member States and other European institutions, and better public services to citizens and business) and as an integral element of its Better Regulation approach. Activities that directly concern citizens include online availability of all legislation and other official Commission documents, and the introduction of Interactive Policy Making for input to policy-making (spontaneous feedback and online consultation).

An example of achieving a more direct impact, enabled by ICT, of businesses on legislation was the consultation process on last year's new legislation for chemicals. An internet enabled consultation period was held over some two months. 6500 contributions were received via the Interactive Policy Making web tool and all responses were published on a Commission website for full transparency to show which organisation, company or individual had advocated which amendments. Thanks to the consultation it was discovered that the legislation had a flaw indeed, one that would have increased costs by several billions of Euros, in particular for smaller companies.

European Commissioner Erkki Liikanen compared this way of open consultation over the Internet of a draft law with open source software development. The open source community is based on open online critical scrutiny and dialogue to find flaws in a piece of software ('bugs'). By analogy the chemicals legislation has been debugged³.

For the Commission services involved, it was a hard task to analyse the many contributions. The sheer volume, variety of opinions and time constraints were a real challenge and resulted in some first hand experience with the challenges of openness, transparency, personalisation, inclusion, and efficiency.

At EU level, 'YourVoice in Europe' offers a single access point in all official languages for Commission public consultation⁴. This is further enhanced by improved access to information about the European institutions, through Europa 2nd Generation, a new generation of portals for a complete range of thematic information and interactive services on EU policies and activities, hiding the organisational complexity behind the scenes.

The EU Presidencies have also become interested in making use of eDemocracy tools. An example is the e-Vote website, which was running during the Greek Presidency of the Council in the first half of 2003, to achieve broad online consultation⁵.

¹ Opinions expressed here are the author's and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the European Commission. I am grateful for contributions to this paper by Gareth MacNaughton of the European Commission, DG-Information Society.

² "Towards the eCommission: Implementation Strategy 2001-2005", June 2001.

³ eDemocracy Seminar, 12 Feb 2004, see <http://europa.eu.int/egovernment>.

⁴ <http://europa.eu.int/yourvoice>

⁵ <http://evote.eu2003.gr/EVOTE/en/index.stm>.

eDemocracy is seen as an integral part of the eGovernment policy as formulated by the European Commission⁶ and supported by the Council of Ministers, a policy that emphasizes that eGovernment is a means to enable better government, i.e. better governance in the sense of:

- (1) **Openness and transparency:** governments that are understandable and accountable to the citizens, open to democratic involvement and scrutiny;
- (2) **At the service of all:** inclusive and personalised services;
- (3) **Productivity and efficiency:** delivering maximum value for taxpayers' money.

Nevertheless, beyond good governance principles (that are also applicable to the European Institutions themselves, as formulated in the White Paper on European Governance⁷), the general policy for eGovernment, the use of online consultation as part of Better Regulation, and support for eDemocracy research and development in the EU's Information Society Technologies Programme, and piloting or implementation where applicable in the related eTEN and IDA programmes, no explicit eDemocracy policy has been formulated as of today at EU level. In contrast, the part of eGovernment that is about using ICT, organisational innovation and improvement of skills to deliver more efficiently and with better quality *administrative services* is rich in specific policy targets and related actions.

There is certainly a question of mandate at European level: democratic participation, elections, etc are in the realm of Member States. proposals for contributions at European level need to be critically reviewed as to their legal basis, usefulness and justification in line with respect of subsidiarity.

In this respect, the Commission, for example, sets out to apply good governance principles by making its own provision of services more transparent and by improving democratic participation in its policy preparation. It can also address essential conditions for eDemocracy through EU-supported R&D, pilot deployment and implementation projects that deliver common secure platforms and by removing barriers that are also impediments to the Internal Market (for example, recognition of electronic signatures, re-use of public sector information), and by advancing European Citizenship.

There is also the '*quo vadis*' question: there is a need at this moment in time to take stock and reflect on the next steps (as is done at this conference). The Commission organised in February 2004 a seminar on eDemocracy that set out to bring together experiences and investigate needs for more advanced work in eDemocracy. The emphasis was less on policy development than on exchange of practical experiences, confronting lessons learned and determining options for future R&D in the EU's programmes.

That seminar addressed both eVoting and eParticipating, and a number of EU-supported projects (e.g. Webocracy, E-Poll) and other experiences presented their results. Good practice experiences in eDemocracy are also made available from the eEurope eGovernment Awards and other sources⁸.

⁶ Communication COM(2003)567, 26 Sept 2003, "The Role of eGovernment for Europe's Future", and Council Conclusions of 20 Nov 2003, see <http://europa.eu.int/egovernment>.

⁷ 2001 White Paper on European Governance, COM(2001)428.

⁸ See the eGovernment Good Practice Framework at http://europa.eu.int/egovernment_research/gpf.

Clearly in the area of eVoting much activity has been happening over the past years. Remarkably, regarding practical experiences and acceptance opposite views were tabled, from widespread and successful adoption of Internet voting (e.g. in Geneva elections) to profound scepticism. Many technological issues have already been researched and perhaps the pressure for continued technological research has abated, while there is still a great need to obtain better understanding of social and cultural factors in eVoting. The main issues identified in eVoting in terms of benefits, technology and design (of solutions) are listed in the table below.

Table 1 Issues in eVoting

Benefits	Multi-channel access / digital divide Costs – benefits Increase turnout and legitimacy Advanced R&D underway or completed
Technology	Verifiability of IT-systems adopted Security and privacy provisions Open – closed source Intuitive multi-modal user interfaces Mission critical / disaster recovery / failure tolerant backend systems
Design	Variations in participation situations Main basic voting principles via ICT Federated systems ICT modelling of legal processes Role of third party providers Standards

eParticipation was seen as a rich area for future exploration, with already positive experiences and concrete gains that have been made in improving the quality of decision-making. The area is wide open in terms of both technology and non-technology research. The main issues in eParticipation identified at the seminar are listed in the table below.

Table 2 Issues in eParticipation

Benefits	In-house benefits versus users/ citizens Positive versus hazards Elite/ incremental versus divide Traditional policy cycle for decisions versus online consultations/ debate Instant evaluation versus ongoing, longitudinal Aiming for success or experiments
Technology	IT-systems adopted not suited/ designed for mass participation Trust and transparency also at the software part Log, back-up issues Scale and innovation in-house and outside
Design	Variations in participation situations Closed, structured flow versus open, unstructured Text, voice recognition, visualization Log files of activities and problems Transfer of techniques from the off-line participation sphere (dispute resolution)

The potential of further R&D in eParticipation, was explored as well during a recent R&D workprogramme planning workshop⁹. Priorities that were defined included ‘bottom-up’ eDemocracy (starting from citizens initiatives) and new technologies for eDemocracy such as simulation software, information representation and visualisation, collaboration technologies. One main issue in this respect remains trust. There needs to be research to understand the

⁹ Workshop on the eGovernment workprogramme 2005-2006, held 5 May 2004 in Brussels. For report see eGovernment R&D website http://europa.eu.int/egovernment_research.

public's willingness to develop a remote trusted relationship with government. For example, as regards electronic identification perhaps governments could consider accepting multiple secure identities that suit the general public.

At the eDemocracy seminar of February 2004 former Estonian Prime Minister Mart Laar suggested to define targets at European level, for example to use eParticipation to achieve increased interest and participation in the run-up to the European elections of 2009. There is definitely a need for further reflection and suggestions for shared initiatives and target-setting at European level to give an impetus to best use of ICT-driven innovation for improved democratic decision-making and participation.