



TEXTS ADOPTED

P8_TA(2017)0095

e-Democracy in the EU: potential and challenges

European Parliament resolution of 16 March 2017 on e-democracy in the European Union: potential and challenges (2016/2008(INI))

The European Parliament,

- having regard to Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2009)1 on electronic democracy (e-democracy), adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 18 February 2009, as the first international legal instrument setting standards in the field of e-democracy,
- having regard to the Treaty on European Union, in particular Articles 2, 3, 6, 9, 10 and 11, and to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, in particular Articles 8-20 and 24,
- having regard to the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, to the European Convention on Human Rights and to the European Social Charter,
- having regard to its resolution of 28 October 2015 on the European Citizens' Initiative¹,
- having regard to the communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions entitled 'EU eGovernment Action Plan 2016-2020 – Accelerating the digital transformation of government' (COM(2016)0179),
- having regard to the 2014 United Nations E-Government Development Index (EGDI),
- having regard to the three studies entitled 'Potential and challenges of e-participation in the European Union', 'Potential and challenges of e-voting in the European Union' and 'The legal and political context for setting up a European identity document', published by its Policy Department C in 2016,
- having regard to the two STOA studies entitled 'E-public, e-participation and e-voting in Europe – prospects and challenges: final report' (November 2011), and 'Technology options and systems to strengthen participatory and direct democracy', to be published in 2017,
- having regard to the work on e-democracy undertaken by the Conference of European

¹ Texts adopted, P8_TA(2015)0382.

Regional Legislative Assemblies (CALRE) using the UN cooperation network IT4all,

- having regard to its resolution of 8 September 2015 on ‘Human rights and technology: the impact of intrusion and surveillance systems on human rights in third countries’¹,
 - having regard to Rule 52 of its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs and the opinion of the Committee on Culture and Education (A8-0041/2017),
- A. whereas the recent crises and deadlocks in the financial, economic, political and social fields are severely affecting individual Member States and the Union as a whole and at a time when all of them are confronted with global challenges such as climate change, migration and security; whereas citizens’ relationship with politics has become increasingly strained, as they turn away from political decision-making processes, and there is a growing risk of public disaffection with politics; whereas the engagement and involvement of citizens and civil society in democratic life, in addition to transparency and information, are essential for the functioning of democracy and for the legitimacy and accountability of each level of the multi-level governance structure of the EU; whereas there is a clear need to enhance the democratic linkage between citizens and political institutions;
- B. whereas in recent decades our society has changed extremely quickly and citizens feel the need to express their views more frequently and directly concerning the problems which determine the future of our society, and whereas political and policymaking institutions are therefore well advised to invest in democratic innovation;
- C. whereas voter turnout in European elections has been steadily decreasing since 1979, and in the 2014 elections fell to 42,54 %;
- D. whereas it is important to regain citizens’ confidence in the European project; whereas e-democracy tools can help foster more active citizenship by improving participation, transparency and accountability in decision-making, buttressing democratic oversight mechanisms and knowledge about the EU in order to give the citizens more voice in political life;
- E. whereas democracy should evolve and adapt to the changes and opportunities associated with new technologies and ICT tools, which must be regarded as a common good that, where properly implemented and accompanied by an adequate level of information, could help to create a more transparent and participatory democracy; whereas, with that aim in view, every person should have the opportunity to be trained in the use of new technologies;
- F. whereas further progress on cybersecurity and data protection is essential if we wish to make greater use of new technologies in institutional and political life and thereby enhance citizen participation in decision-making;
- G. whereas a wave of new digital communication tools and open and collaborative platforms could inspire and provide new solutions for fostering citizens’ political participation and engagement, whilst reducing discontent with political institutions, as

¹ Texts adopted, P8_TA(2015)0288.

well as helping to increase levels of trust, transparency and accountability in the democratic system;

- H. whereas in his most recent ‘state of the Union’ address, President Juncker presented a package of measures to increase the use of electronic communications, including WiFi4EU and the roll-out of 5G in Europe;
- I. whereas open government data has the potential to foster economic growth, increase public sector efficiencies and improve the transparency and accountability of European and national institutions;
- J. whereas access under equal conditions to a neutral network is a prerequisite for ensuring the effectiveness of fundamental human rights;
- K. whereas e-democracy could facilitate the development of complementary forms of engagement capable of contributing to mitigating the growth of public disaffection with traditional politics; whereas, furthermore, it could help promote communication, dialogue, and awareness of and interest in our Union, its politics and its policies, therefore favouring grassroots support for the European project as well as reducing the so-called European ‘democratic deficit’;
- L. whereas the new forms of participation in a virtual public space are inseparable from respect for the rights and obligations linked to participation in public space, which include, for example, procedural rights in case of defamation;
- M. whereas it is indispensable, in order to guarantee the role of the web as a valid and effective democratic tool, to eradicate the digital divide and to provide citizens with adequate media literacy and digital skills;
- N. whereas information and communication technology (ICT) systems are at the heart of modern government processes, but efforts are still needed to improve delivery of e-government services;
- O. whereas e-voting could help people living or working in a Member State of which they are not a citizen or in a third country to exercise their voting rights; whereas security and secrecy when casting and recording votes must be ensured in e-voting processes, particularly concerning the possibility of cyber-attacks;

Potential and challenges

1. Underlines the potential benefits of e-democracy, which is defined as the support and enhancement of traditional democracy by means of ICT, and which can complement and reinforce democratic processes by adding elements of citizens’ empowerment through different online activities that include, amongst others, e-government, e-governance, e-deliberation, e-participation and e-voting; welcomes the fact that by means of the new information and communication tools more and more citizens can be involved in democratic processes;
2. Emphasises that Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2009)1 calls on member states to ensure that e-democracy ‘promotes, ensures and enhances transparency, accountability, responsiveness, engagement, deliberation, inclusiveness, accessibility, participation, subsidiarity and social cohesion’; points out that this recommendation

calls on member states to develop measures that are able to strengthen human rights, democracy and the rule of law;

3. Stresses that the purpose of e-democracy is to promote a democratic culture that enriches and reinforces democratic practices, by providing additional means to increase transparency and citizens' participation, but not to establish an alternative democratic system to detriment of representative democracy; points out that e-democracy alone does not ensure political participation, and that a non-digital environment to pursue political participation of citizens must also be addressed in parallel to e-democracy;
4. Points out the importance of e-voting and remote internet voting as systems able to widen citizens' inclusion and facilitate democratic participation, especially in areas that are geographically and socially more marginalised, offering numerous potential advantages, in particular for young people, people with reduced mobility, older people and people living or working permanently or temporarily in a Member State of which they are not a citizen or in a third country, provided that the highest possible standards of data protection are ensured; recalls that, when putting in place remote internet voting, Member States must ensure transparency and reliability of ballot counting and respect the principles of equality, secrecy of the vote, access to voting and free suffrage;
5. Stresses the need for all digital interaction processes to be grounded in the principle of institutional openness, complying with the combination of real-time transparency and informed participation;
6. Highlights and encourages the use of e-participation as a key characteristic of e-democracy, encompassing three forms of interaction between EU institutions and governments on one hand, and citizens on the other, namely: e-information, e-consultation and e-decision-making; acknowledges that many national, regional and local e-participation cases can be taken as good examples of how ICT can be used in participatory democracy; encourages Member States to further develop these practices at national and local level;
7. Stresses that ICTs contribute towards the creation of spaces for participation and discussion which, in turn, improve the quality and legitimacy of our democratic systems;
8. Stresses the need to engage young people in political debate, and notes that the use of ICT in democratic procedures can be an effective tool for that purpose;
9. Recalls the first European example of online voting in Estonia in its legally binding elections in 2005, but maintains that if the take-up of possible e-voting in other Member States is to be successful, it will be necessary to assess whether the actual participation of the whole population can be guaranteed, and also to evaluate the benefits and challenges, as well as the implications, of different or divergent technological approaches; stresses that the existence of secure, high-speed internet connections and secure electronic identity infrastructure are important prerequisites for the success of e-voting; underlines the need to harness the benefits of new technologies in current polling-booth voting processes, and believes that significant advances could be made through the sharing of best practice and research at all political levels;
10. Points out the challenge of responding to the citizens' concerns regarding use of online

democracy tools; takes the view that addressing security concerns and guaranteeing privacy are of paramount importance for building citizens' trust in the emerging digital political arena;

11. Stresses that democratic processes require extensive debate at every level of EU society, as well as scrutiny and reflection, as being conducive to fair and full and rational deliberation; warns that there is a risk of distortion and manipulation of the outcome of deliberations of on-line discussion tools; takes the view that the best guarantee against this risk is transparency of all actors interacting and providing information on campaigns which are potentially being promoted, directly or indirectly on digital participation platforms;
12. Notes that for a functioning democracy, citizens' trust in institutions and democratic processes are a fundamental dimension; stresses, therefore, that the introduction of e-democracy tools needs to be accompanied by proper communication and education strategies;
13. Stresses the importance of embedding e-participation in the political system in order to incorporate citizens' contributions in the decision-making process and ensure follow-up; notes that a lack of responsiveness from decision-makers leads to disappointment and distrust;
14. Emphasises that the use of ICT tools should be complementary to other channels of communication with public institutions, with the aim of avoiding any kind of discrimination on the grounds of digital skills or lack of resources and infrastructures;

Proposals on improving the democratic system by means of ICT

15. Considers that participation in democratic processes is founded, first of all, on effective and non-discriminatory access to information and knowledge;
16. Calls, moreover, on the EU and the Member States to refrain from adopting unnecessary measures aimed at arbitrarily restricting access to the internet and the exercise of basic human rights, such as disproportionate censorship measures or criminalisation of the legitimate expression of criticism and dissent;
17. Calls on the Member States and the EU to provide educational and technical means for boosting the democratic empowerment of citizens and improving ICT competences, and to supply digital literacy and equal and safe digital access for all EU citizens in order to bridge the digital divide (e-inclusion), for the ultimate benefit of democracy; encourages the Member States to integrate the acquisition of digital skills into school curricula and lifelong learning, and to prioritise digital training programmes for elderly people; supports the development of networks with universities and educational institutions to promote research on and implementation of new participation tools; also calls on the EU and the Member States to promote programmes and policies aimed at developing a critical and informed appreciation of the use of ICT;
18. Proposes that further progress be made in evaluating use of new technology to improve democracy in EU administrations by incorporating, as indicators, targets measuring the quality of online services;
19. Recommends that the European Parliament, as the only directly elected institution of the

European Union, take the lead in reinforcing e-democracy; considers it worthwhile, to this end, to develop innovative technological solutions which will make it possible for citizens to communicate meaningfully and share their concerns with their elected representatives;

20. Encourages the simplification of institutional language and procedures and the organisation of multimedia content to explain the keys to the main decision-making processes, in order to promote understanding and participation; stresses the need to disseminate this gateway to e-participation through segmented proactive tools that permit access to all documents in parliamentary files;
21. Urges the Member States and the EU to deliver affordable and high-speed digital infrastructure, particularly in peripheral regions and rural and economically less developed areas, and to ensure that equality between citizens is guaranteed, paying particular attention to those citizens who are most vulnerable and providing them with skills to ensure the safe and secure use of technology; recommends that libraries, schools and buildings in which public services are provided be appropriately resourced with a high-speed, modern IT infrastructure which is equally accessible to all citizens, especially the most vulnerable categories, such as people with disabilities; points out the need to devote adequate financial and training resources to these goals; recommends to the Commission that it provide resources for projects aimed at improving digital infrastructures in the realm of the social and solidarity economy;
22. Emphasises that women are under-represented in political decision-making at all levels, as well as in ICT sectors; notes that women and girls often face gender stereotypes in relation to digital technologies; therefore calls on the Commission and Member States to invest in targeted programmes which promote ICT education and e-participation for women and girls, particularly those from vulnerable and marginalised backgrounds, using formal, informal and non-formal learning;
23. Notes that in order to ensure equal accessibility of e-Democracy tools for all citizens, multilingual translation is important when information is to be disseminated and read by all citizens, in countries with more than one official language and by those coming from different ethnic backgrounds;
24. Encourages the Member States and the EU to promote, support and implement mechanisms and instruments that enable the participation of citizens and their interaction with governments and EU institutions, such as crowdsourcing platforms; highlights that ICT should facilitate access to independent information, transparency, accountability and participation in decision-making; calls in this connection for all the Commission's communication and relations-with-citizens tools, and in particular the Europe Direct portal, to be tailored more closely to the challenges of e-democracy; commits to make all the existing tools of legislative follow-up more accessible, understandable, educational and interactive, and invites the Commission to do the same on its own website;
25. Calls on the Member States and the EU to review the content on their official sites which deals with the functioning of democracy, with the aim of providing educational tools which make it easier for young people to visit the sites in question and understand their content and of making the sites accessible to persons with a disability;

26. Encourages the administrations to reflect their commitment to the principle of institutional openness through changes to their strategic design and corporate culture, budgets, and organisational change processes that are driven by the goal of improving democracy through use of new technology;
27. Calls for an online platform to be created so that members of the public can systematically be consulted before the European legislator takes decisions, thus being involved more directly in public life;
28. Believes it essential that the deployment of these new tools is backed by campaigns promoting the possibilities they offer and the civic values of joint responsibility and participation;
29. Points to the importance of the European citizens' initiative as a means of involving the public in the political life of the EU and their direct participation therein, and therefore calls on the Commission to review the way it operates so that it can realise its full potential, in line with the recommendations made by the European Parliament in its resolution of 28 October 2015; draws attention, therefore, to the importance of simplifying and accelerating the bureaucratic requirements relating to this and of making wider use of ICT, e.g. through digital platforms and other applications compatible with mobile devices, in order to make this important tool more user-friendly and widely publicised; believes that the use of new technology could improve, in particular, the online signature collection system through the use of identification and authentication services (e-IDAS), which would allow members of the public more easily to receive and exchange information on existing or potential ECIs so that they can actively participate in discussions and/or support the initiatives themselves;
30. Emphasises that several Commission processes, such as online public consultations, e-participation activities and impact assessments, could benefit from a wider use of new technologies in order to encourage public participation, increase accountability in these processes and the transparency of the EU institutions, and enhance European governance; highlights the need to render public consultation processes effective and accessible to as many people as possible, while keeping technical barriers to the minimum;
31. Underlines the need for more ample information for citizens on the existing e-participation platforms at EU, national and local level;
32. Calls on the Commission to expand and develop e-participation in the mid-term review of the Digital Single Market Strategy to be launched in 2017, and to promote the development and funding of new instruments connected with e-citizenship of the European Union; recommends furthermore to the Commission that it focus on open-source solutions that can be rolled out easily across the digital single market; calls in particular on the Commission to integrate the reuse of previous projects such as the D-CENT platform, an EU-funded project providing technological tools for participative democracy;
33. Stresses that the development of e-administration should be a priority for Member States and the EU institutions and welcomes the Commission's ambitious and comprehensive e-government action plan, for which proper national implementation and coordination of available EU funding will be key, in synergy with the national

digital agencies and authorities; considers that more efforts should be made to encourage open data and the use of ICT tools based on open-source and free software, in both EU institutions and Member States;

34. Calls for more cooperation at EU level and recommends the sharing of best practices for e-democracy projects as a way to move towards a form of democracy that is more participatory and deliberative and that responds to the requests and interests of the citizens and aims to involve them in decision-making processes; points out the need to know what citizens' attitudes are towards the implementation of remote internet voting; calls on the Commission to provide an independent assessment or consultation of public opinion regarding online voting, with an analysis of its strengths and weaknesses, as an additional option for citizens to cast their vote for consideration by the Member States by the end of 2018;
35. Stresses the need to protect, as a matter of priority, privacy and personal data when using e-democracy tools and to foster a more secure internet environment, particularly with regard to information and data security, including the 'right to be forgotten', and to provide guarantees against surveillance software and source verifiability; moreover, calls for further use of digital services based on key enablers such as secure and encrypted digital identity, in accordance with the EIDAS regulation; promotes safe and secure digital public registers and the validation of electronic signatures in order to prevent fraudulent multiple interactions, this being in line with European and international human rights standards and the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights and the European Court of Justice; finally underlines that security issues must not become a deterrent to the inclusion of individuals and groups in democratic processes;
36. Stresses the need to enhance democracy by means of technology that should be used in a secure environment that is safe from the misuse of technological tools (e.g. spamming bots, anonymous profiling and identity appropriation), and recalls the need to respect the highest legal standards;
37. Recalls the essential role that whistleblowers play – generally through the internet – in exposing corruption, fraud, mismanagement and other forms of wrongdoing that threaten public health and safety, financial integrity, human rights, the environment and the rule of law, while at the same time ensuring the right of the public to information;
38. Encourages public representatives to participate actively with citizens in existing, fully independent forums, and to use new media and IT platforms with a view to stimulating discussion and exchanging opinions and proposals with citizens (e-parliament), creating a direct connection with them; calls on the political groups in the European Parliament and the European political parties to increase opportunities for public discussion and e-participation;
39. Calls on its Members and on the other EU institutions to continue enhancing transparency in their work, especially in the current challenging political context, and asks public authorities to look into the possibility of setting up digital platforms, including the latest IT tools; encourages elected representatives to use these tools and to communicate and positively engage with constituents and stakeholders on an efficient basis, with a view to informing them on EU and parliamentary activities and thus opening up the deliberation and policy-making processes and increasing awareness of

European democracy;

40. Welcomes Parliament's initiatives in the field of e-participation; supports continuous efforts to strengthen Parliament's representative character, legitimacy and effectiveness, and encourages Members to make wider use of new technologies in order to develop them to their full potential, while taking into account the necessary limits imposed by the right to privacy and to personal data protection; points out the need for a broad reflection process on how to improve the use of ICT by its Members, not only for engaging with the public but also regarding legislation, petitions, consultations and other aspects relevant to their daily work;
 41. Encourages political parties at EU and national level to make the most out of digital tools in order to develop new ways to promote internal democracy, including transparency in their management, financing, and decision-making processes, and in order to allow better communication with and participation of their members and supporters and civil society; also encourages them to be highly transparent and accountable towards citizens; suggests to this end that possible modifications be considered to the Statute of European political parties and that these cover and promote e-participation practices;
 42. Calls on the EU and its institutions to be open to more experimentation with new e-participation methods such as crowdsourcing, at EU level and at national, regional and local level, taking into account the best practices already developed within the Member States and, to this end, to launch specific pilot projects; reiterates at the same time the need to complement such measures with awareness-raising campaigns in order to explain the possibilities of these tools;
 43. Calls on the European institutions to launch a participatory process in order to elaborate a European Charter of Internet Rights, taking as reference, among other texts, the Declaration of Internet Rights published by Italy's Chamber of Deputies on 28 July 2015, in order to promote and guarantee all the rights pertaining to the digital sphere, among them the genuine right of access to the internet and net neutrality;
 44. Notes the abundance of heterogeneous information that can be found on the internet today, and stresses that citizens' capacity for critical thinking should be strengthened so that they are able to better discern between reliable and non-reliable sources of information; encourages Member States, therefore, to adapt and update legislation to address ongoing developments, and fully implement and enforce existing legislation on hate speech, both offline and online, whilst guaranteeing fundamental and constitutional rights; stresses that the Union and its Member States should develop actions and policies for strengthening transferable, critical and creative thinking skills and digital and media literacy, as well as inclusion and curiosity among their citizens, especially young people, so that they will be able to make informed decisions and contribute positively to democratic processes;
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45. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission and the governments and parliaments of the Member States.

