

### eParticipation in the institutional domain: a review of research: analytical report on eParticipation research from an administration and political perspective in six European countries

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# eParticipation in the institutional domain: a review of research

Analytical report on eParticipation research from an  
administration and political perspective  
in six European countries

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**Abstract:** This deliverable provides an analysis of existing research about eParticipation in the institutional domain. It includes a review of the empirical research about eParticipation in six European countries (Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, and Sweden) and in the international research literature. The deliverable also provides a comparative picture of national and international research, and outlines overall research findings and research gaps.

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Rony Medaglia and Jacob Nørbjerg have written the international review and the comparative section. Georg Aichholzer, Doris Allhutter and Florian Saurwein have written the chapter about Austria. Christine Secher has written the chapter about Denmark. Thierry Vedel is the author of the chapter about France. Hilmar Westholm is the author of the chapter about Germany. Anna Carola Freschi, Luca Raffini, Giovanna Tizzi have written the chapter about Italy. Joachim Åstrom has written the chapter about Sweden.

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## Executive Summary

This deliverable provides a review of the available empirical research on eParticipation in the institutional domain, privileging the social and political sciences disciplinary perspective. It includes analyses of eParticipation research, in six European countries (Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, and Sweden), also drawing on the scientific documentation available in the different national-language, and an overview of the recent international research literature. The analyses tackle several aspects of eParticipation research, including theoretical approaches, research findings, research questions, and methods. The deliverable also outlines overall research findings and future directions in the analysis of eParticipation.

## Introduction


As the body of research knowledge on eParticipation keeps growing, a stronger need for outlining the current research scenario emerges. Although there are many different definitions of the concept existing, we can here refer to eParticipation as describing “efforts to broaden and deepen political participation by enabling citizens to connect with one another and with their elected representatives using information and communication technologies” (Tambouris et al. 2007, p.9). Given the widely acknowledged interdisciplinarity of the field, contributions in eParticipation research have increasingly included not only a multitude of disciplinary perspectives, but also different methodological approaches and normative stances. The diversity of overall values underlying pieces of eParticipation research, the wide range of methods adopted, and the different disciplines embarking in studies related to eParticipation initiatives, all make the current eParticipation research scenario more difficult to picture as a whole. Research contributions include a wide array of sources and speak different epistemological languages. The eParticipation research scenario reflects also the institutional variety of its research objects (the social and political systems) as well as the different research focuses and backgrounds. The consequence of this is not only the parallel growth of studies published in different languages, that reduces a wider circulation of the research findings. But also the fact that, in the short term, this variety challenges the opportunities to compare national contexts that feature largely diverse characteristics, traditions, and even “natures” of eParticipation initiatives.

Such features of the current eParticipation research scenario – its steady growth, and its fragmentation – call for an effort for a systematization of the existing body of knowledge about eParticipation. A comprehensive view is needed regarding the nature of the research questions dealt with, the methods used, the scientific disciplines involved, the units of analysis adopted, etc. The DEMO\_net network is deemed to feature the pool of skills and integration to provide a first view on the current variety of eParticipation research.

This report aims at providing a selective analysis of the available research on eParticipation from an administrative and political perspective. The report aims at outlining and analysing the current body of research on eParticipation adoption and use in the public institutions within their political, organizational and institutional contexts. This scope includes any eParticipation activity initiated by, or framed within, public institutional agencies and political actors.

As outlined in Task 14.1 description, “The review will focus on the adoption and use of e-participation in the public institutions (assemblies, governments, administrations) within their political, organizational and institutional contexts at different territorial levels (from local to European and supranational), paying attention to the effects on the decision making process and its implementation, and on the citizens /groups /associations participation. The main section of the analysis will concern: theoretical approaches and their applications, local-regional- national initiatives,





public policy to promote e-participation projects, administration and organizational change, the role of the politicians and of the political parties, the issues of e-participation, the participants, specific emerging deficit in the available researches”.

In order to do so, the report investigates empirical research on eParticipation in six countries (Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy and Sweden), and in literature published in English in international sources (international scientific journals, conferences, etc.) during the last two years, not primarily concerned with national cases. Such a coverage (national + English-international breathe) aims at valuing a wider set of eParticipation research contributions, which otherwise would often remain hidden to the wider eParticipation research community. This is the reason why the booklet put big emphasis on the empirical research and methodologies.

The resulting report reflects also the diversity of the background of the researchers involved in this project-booklet, besides the distribution of eParticipation studies among different focuses, methods, approaches, and also between the different shapes of national eParticipation research scenarios. Therefore, the national chapters do not follow an identical structure in their presentations, but rather have been chosen to provide different focuses depending on the different aspects that prove to characterize them. However, each chapter answers to the same questions about the features and the results of empirical research on e-participation in the different countries.

The report is structured as follows. After this introduction, Section 2 includes all eParticipation research accounts in the six countries analysed: Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy and Sweden. For each country an account of the data collection method is provided, together with analytical sections related to the units of analysis used in each country, the disciplinary approaches, the methods, the actors involved, etc. Section 3 then moves on to investigate the eParticipation research scenario at a wider international level. Similarly to the national chapters, the literature collection method is described, and the findings reported and discussed. Section 4 provides a summary of the main findings, on the basis of the results emerged from all six national scenarios, plus the international eParticipation research, distinguishing between main research focus, unit of analysis, methods used, main findings, and promising future research directions. This wide body of data is comparatively brought together: the result is a set of five overall groups of findings emerging from the national chapters, and four future directions for research on eParticipation emerging from the analysis. In the conclusions (section 5) these findings and future directions are summarized and discussed, and further challenges for the development of eParticipation research in the administrative and political perspective are outlined. To improve the report readability, all bibliographical references have been grouped in section 6 of the deliverable.

## National research on eParticipation in an Administrative and Political perspective

This section analyzes the research on eParticipation in the institutional domain in the following countries: Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, and Sweden.

### 1.1 Austria

#### 1.1.1 Introduction

In Austria research on eParticipation started within the broader domains of eGovernment and eDemocracy. These have been developing since the mid 1990ies and some institutions have established eGovernance and eDemocracy as special research areas.<sup>1</sup> A major area of work is focused on access to *eInformation* held by government. A second strong research area is *eVoting*. Comparatively few but throughout recent publications are focusing explicitly on “eParticipation” which indicates that eParticipation has only recently started to evolve as a specific research strand.

Progress in exploring and exploiting the potentials of eParticipation in the administrative and political domains in Austria is still in its infancy. However, a number of ICT based participatory initiatives have started more recently, indicating the growing importance of eParticipation. They are paralleled by new initiatives for public participation at inter-ministerial level, among others resulting in official standards to be applied in public participation procedures by the administration (Trattnigg 2008). The initial state of practical examples implies that eParticipation research is focusing on descriptions of single activities, modes of application and contextual factors (e.g. policy/legal issues, opportunity structures, potentials and risks). Some contributions consider potential effects of initiatives under study but there is a lack of empirical analyses regarding the wider impact of eParticipation on democratic developments.

#### 1.1.2 Paper selection

This review concentrates on papers dealing with eParticipation in the administrative and political domain. Analyses comprise academic research which focuses explicitly on eParticipation as well as papers dealing with ‘relevant aspects of eParticipation’<sup>2</sup> as far as they offer theoretical approaches and/or empirical findings. In sum, the selection provides an overview which illustrates the impression of an emerging, quite

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., the Institute of Technology Assessment (ITA) at the Austrian Academy of Sciences; the ‘Center for e-Government’ at the Department for Governance and Public Administration of the Danube University Krems; the research group/initiative ‘e-voting’ at the Vienna University of Economics and Business Administration; the working group ‘e-Democracy/e-Voting’ within the forum e-Government of the Austrian Computer Society.

<sup>2</sup> However, given the wide range of applications being grasped by broad definitions of ‘eParticipation’, the review cannot be all-embracing.

heterogeneous research field in terms of involved disciplines, questions, approaches and results.

### 1.1.3 Questions and problems

A major body of literature deals with *eInformation* in the context of eGovernment and public sector information.<sup>3</sup> Questions and problems address technical design (e.g. usability), legal issues (e.g. data protection; copy rights), economic value (efficiency), social issues (access), and public awareness of eGovernment applications (e.g. Parycek/Reichstädter/Wimmer 2006). Here, 'participation' is related to interaction between public administrations and citizens, and the framing of eParticipation is often focused on accessibility, service quality and efficiency. However, eInformation is also analysed in the context of eDemocracy and related to questions of transparency.<sup>4</sup>

A second important research strand is *eVoting*.<sup>5</sup> Questions and problems comprise aspects related to the legal context (constitutional issues, electoral law), technical design (security, anonymity, identification, authentication, digital signatures), and problems regarding election fraud. eVoting is referred to as a special area of eParticipation comprising ICT use in the context of voting in elections, referenda or local plebiscites.

Scientific attention to the variety of eParticipation (e.g., eDeliberation, ePetition, eConsultation, ePolling, etc.) has just started to grow. The various modes of eParticipation are mainly dealt with in the context of eDemocracy.<sup>6</sup> Questions and problems comprise *options*, *potentials* as well as *risks* using new ICTs for political participation in order to enhance democratisation of legislation and administration (Parycek 2005; Parycek/Seböck 2003; Steinmann/Blaschke/Krek 2005); the position of political elites towards eParticipation (Mahrer/Krimmer 2005; Prosser/Heppner 2006a, b); the potential of eParticipation for grassroots movements (e.g., Fuchs 2006a); the motivations of selected user-groups (e.g., young people; local communities) for online participation (Prosser/Guo/Lenhart 2005; Maier-Rabler/Hartwig 2007); the role of social software (blogs and online communities) in political communication of parties, environmental organisations and other non-profit organisations (Brunauer 2007); the question of suitable designs for eParticipation in the legislative process, in particular on bills proposed by ministries (Weber 2008); and success-factors for eParticipation projects

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<sup>3</sup> See for example Quirchmayr/Wagner/Wimmer (2000); Traunmüller/Wimmer (2003); Aichholzer/Puay (2004); Bargmann/Pfeifer/Piwinger (2004).

<sup>4</sup> Transparency in turn is referred to as a prerequisite for citizens to make use of their democratic rights and to meaningfully 'participate' in democratic opinion formation.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g., : Buchsbaum (2003; n.d.); Heindl (2003a); Rittler (2003); Leitold (2004); Poier (2004); Schnider (2004); Krimmer/Volkamer (2005); Krimmer/Volkamer (2006); Fleischhacker/Prosser (2007); Piswanger (2007); Volkamer/Krimmer/Grimm(2007).

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Schefbeck (2000); Schefbeck (2001); Filzmaier (2003); Heindl (2003b); Heindl/Prosser/Krimmer (2003); Parycek (2003); Winkler (2003); Prosser/Parycek (2007).

(Lauer/Piswanger/Zemlyak 2008). First overviews on the state of eParticipation research in Austria have been compiled by Aichholzer (2006) and Paryceck (2007). Even if there is no common focus many contributions at least implicitly deal with relations between the use of new ICTs and democratic quality.

Austrian research on eParticipation in the administrative domain is not limited to the national arena as some analyses also deal with *eParticipation in the context of the European Union* (EU). Analyses focus on the EU's online discussion boards and online consultations assessing the potential to reduce the EU's democratic deficit. Winkler (2007a) investigates the quality of political participation, scope of inclusion and impact of contributions of EU online-consultations and -debates on policy-making processes. Wodak/Scott (2006) analyse the linguistic/discursive/multi-modal aspects of the Futurum discussion forum, asking how the structures of the discussion forum shape the debates, and whether the debates help to resolve the EU's democratic deficit.

#### 1.1.4 Main points and conclusions of selected papers

If there is a common conclusion of the papers under study, then it is the observation, that opportunities and potentials provided for eParticipation have not been exploited well in the Austrian political practice so far. While Austria is often referred to as a best practice example with regard to eGovernment and public eInformation services,<sup>7</sup> the diffusion of eParticipation tools with advanced options for interactivity seems to be developing comparatively slow.

In 2003 there were *no* websites of public administrations which offered tools for public deliberation (Parycek/Seböck 2003, 30) and a lack of interactivity and of opportunities for political participation (Filzmaier 2003, 3). According to Mahrer/Krimmer (2005, 34pp.) there was only a limited number of eDemocracy projects, with only a few initiated by the academic sector as either pilot projects or applications restricted to a special local area with little public attention. eVoting was tested in a few 'second order elections' (e.g. student representatives; chamber of commerce), but it did not play any role for 'first order elections' so far. But analyses also show that a number of participation initiatives<sup>8</sup> have recently been initiated by (local) administrations. Though many are still pilots (Parycek 2007, 23) their emergence indicates an increasing importance.

Despite the growing number of projects, several points of critique are highlighted: At the level of *legislation* (rule making) the legal framework provides opportunities for public participation, but so far on the federal level off-line procedures are not complemented by electronic procedures.<sup>9</sup> Two years ago the eParticipation offerings at the level of government and

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<sup>7</sup> In recent European benchmarking studies Austria takes a top position in eGovernment by high levels of full online availability of basic services for citizens and business (Aichholzer 2006, 45).

<sup>8</sup> For examples see Lauer/Piswanger/Zemlyak (2008). For a list of projects see [http://www.ag.bka.gv.at/index.php/E-Participation\\_Projekte](http://www.ag.bka.gv.at/index.php/E-Participation_Projekte).

<sup>9</sup> See first outlines on eConsultations by Scheffbeck (2007).

(local) public *administration* had to be assessed as rather mediocre (Aichholzer 2006, 46), informal and heterogeneous in terms of application flows and binding character (Parycek 2007, 23). It is criticised that eParticipation in Austria lacks institutional integration and legal backing.

Some results were achieved regarding the *reasons for so far rather weak application of eParticipation projects* in Austria. Mahrer/Krimmer (2005, 39f.) found out that politicians are explicitly and implicitly fostering all activities in the area of eAdministration, but they are otherwise interfering explicitly and implicitly in the advancement of eDemocracy. “[T]he ‘middleman paradox’ (...) describes that the very same politicians who would be responsible for introducing new forms of citizens’ participation for political decision making are afraid of a displacement of political representation and are therefore opposing to more civic engagement” (ibid, 40). Similar results were achieved by Bargmann (2006), studying the Austrian parliamentary discourse on eGovernance. There is strong emphasis on eGovernment applications and their potentials for modernisation of administration, enhancements of service quality, comfort for users/citizens and increasing efficiency. But only little attention is being paid to participation in deliberation and decision making processes. Politicians refer to electronic participation as an “interesting issue” which will become relevant “in the future” (ibid, 113). Bargmann concludes that when it comes to implementation of strategy papers eDemocracy is nothing more than a “lip service” (ibid, 129).

Analyses of *eParticipation at the EU level* point out that the existing potentials for further democratisation are not used by policy-makers in a meaningful way. While online discussions “help fuel the debate and bring citizens closer to each other, they do not bring the EU closer to its citizens, benefits are not being utilized by the EU institutions” (Wodak/Scott 2006, 27). This observation was underpinned by recent analyses of *quality* of political participation, *scope of inclusion* and *impact* of contributions of EU online-consultations and -debates on EU policy-making processes (Winkler 2007a).<sup>10</sup> Findings illustrate that online-debates about the future of Europe on the platform “Your Voice in Europe” are characterised by an ‘exclusive’ public that meets the main criteria of deliberative communication. Online-debates involve well-elaborated interaction patterns and a relatively high discourse quality, both indicating vivid deliberative communication processes (ibid, 189). However, discussions are dominated by a small group of participants and the EU’s initial intention attracting large and diverse parts of Europeans was not realised. Moreover, the Commission did not consider online debates for decisions linked to the ‘Future of Europe’ (ibid, 191). And due to ‘access hurdles’ the online consultations at the Your Voice in Europe platform do not provide a space for inclusive public deliberation (ibid, 192).

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<sup>10</sup> See also Winkler/Kozeluh (2005); Winkler/Kozeluh/Brandstetter (2006); Winkler (2007b).

### 1.1.5 Methodological approaches

Analyses on eParticipation are often exploratory and descriptive. They focus on descriptions of a) existing single initiatives, b) the development of new initiatives (e.g., eConsultation), c) the legal framework provided for further developments and d) the discussion of opportunity structures, potentials and risks of eParticipation. Often specific applications (e.g. best-practices; failures) are chosen to illustrate potentials and risks of using ICTs to broaden public participation in political opinion- and will-formation. Some efforts are made to develop categories and classifications in order to analytically grasp institutional and procedural designs of eParticipation projects.<sup>11</sup> There is a smaller segment of more elaborated research combining theoretical and empirical analyses. In sum the review sketches a *variety* of applicable/applied approaches.

Scholars use *interviews with public representatives* (politicians, public administration, business) in order to identify the role of eDemocracy in context of the Austrian eGovernment debate (e.g., Bargmann 2006; Mahrer/Krimmer 2005; 2006). They use *expert interviews* in order to gain insights about intentions, motivations and expectations related to online consultations (Winkler 2007a), *online questionnaires aiming at relevant stakeholder groups* such as young people in order to grasp motivations of young people for online participation (Maier-Rabler/Hartwig 2007), *quantitative content analysis* of statements in online debates in order to assess the level of discourse rationality and interaction (Winkler 2007a), and *qualitative discourse analysis* of statements in online debates (Wodak/Scott 2006). Lately also first efforts were made for *theoretically guided derivation* of evaluation criteria for eParticipation (Aichholzer/Kozeluh 2007; Winkler 2007c; Aichholzer/Allhutter 2008).

### 1.1.6 Theories used

Most analyses – at least implicitly – attach reference systems which highlight aspects regarding ‘democratic quality’. However, the normative implications of these aspects are rarely reflected and put into a coherent theoretical/conceptual framework. Hardly any analysis explicitly and systematically derives analytical dimensions from theories of democracy (representative/liberal; participatory; discursive/deliberative), and strongly theory-guided empirical research is rarely found. However, there are fruitful exceptions from this overall trend: Winkler (2007a) for example applies an empirical approach for analysis of EU online debates based on the theory of deliberative democracy.

### 1.1.7 Definitions of eParticipation

Austrian literature does not refer to a shared definition of “eParticipation”. Clear definitions of eParticipation with demarcations to other terms such as eDemocracy, eGovernment, eVoting, eGovernance, eAdministration, eServices etc. are hardly to be found. To the contrary: Aspects related to eParticipation are regularly referred to in definitions and descriptions of various e-Phenomena: “Definitions of eGovernment vary but generally contain goals of more efficient operations, better quality of services and

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<sup>11</sup> E.g., Krimmer/Kripp (n.d.).

increased citizens participation in democratic processes (...). E-Democracy is generally regarded as a tool for abandoning the representative system for one with a more direct citizen engagement" (Mahrer/Krimmer 2005, 28).

Parycek (2005, 14f.) undertakes significant efforts to provide an overview on definitions of eGovernment and eDemocracy. He does not suggest an explicit definition of eParticipation, but refers to participation as a 'cross-section-term' (ibid, 247) and considers eParticipation to be an essential element of definitions of the broader concept of eDemocracy (ibid, 67). Recent publications (e.g., Winkler 2007a, 32) draw on the DEMO\_net definition of eParticipation.<sup>12</sup> Winkler however notices that limiting the definition to "elected representatives" excludes relevant political and governmental actors, such as not directly elected EU commissioners and public administrations. Despite such differences, definitions of eParticipation are often descriptive focusing on its contribution for democracy and democratic quality and thereby applying a functional understanding of eParticipation.<sup>13</sup>

One of the crucial questions for further research is how far a definition of eParticipation shall be stretched. Using broad definitions for eParticipation impedes clear analytical demarcations and entails the danger of overstretching the 'eParticipation concept'.

### 1.1.8 Conclusion

In Austria, research on eParticipation – in terms of a labelled 'research strand' – has only recently started to evolve within the wider frameworks of eDemocracy and eGovernment. Opportunities and potentials provided for eParticipation in the administrative and political domains have hardly been exploited in Austria so far. However, some participation initiatives have recently emerged which indicates a growing importance of eParticipation. A review of the eParticipation literature shows that many studies are descriptive analyses of single participation initiatives and their contextual factors (e.g. policy/legal issues), but little attention is being paid to systematic evaluation of eParticipation. Most analyses attach reference systems which highlight aspects regarding 'democratic quality'. However, the normative implications of these aspects are rarely reflected and put into a coherent theoretical/conceptual framework for empirical

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<sup>12</sup> "eParticipation describes efforts to broaden and deepen political participation by enabling citizens to connect with one another and with their elected representatives using information and communication technologies." (Tambouris et al. 2007, 9).

<sup>13</sup> eParticipation shall for example contribute to engage with a wider audience, to build trust and gain acceptance of policy, to support interactive and rational debate online and to enable more in-depth consultation (Winkler 2007a, 186). eParticipation aims at enhancing transparency (Parycek 2005, 129f.), it is a means to empower the political, socio-technological, and cultural capabilities of individuals giving the possibility that individuals can involve themselves in the information society (Fuchs 2006b, 3). The framing of these set of functions is clearly related to political participation, democracy, democratic values and democratic development.

research. There is a trend to apply broad definitions for eParticipation which impedes clear analytical demarcations and entails the danger of overstressing the 'participation concept'.

## 1.2 Denmark

### 1.2.1 Introduction

This overview of the Danish research literature regarding eParticipation in the administrative and political domain is based on a search and review of books, working papers and articles published in the Danish language by researchers and research institutions in Denmark. To limit the search, literature reflecting empirical studies have been selected for the review. Thus, this section presents research in Denmark concerning experience with implementing and using eParticipation in the Danish public sector.

### 1.2.2 Questions and problems in the Danish eParticipation research

Studies into changes brought about by eParticipation dominates the Danish eParticipation research landscape. The changes are analyzed with respect to the relations and interactions between three actors in eParticipation – citizens, politicians and (public) administration.

Regarding citizens, Hoff and Andersen (2006) ask whether eParticipation changes the channels citizens use for political engagement and information retrieval. Others ask questions about how eParticipation improves citizens' possibilities for influence in local policy making. Torpe (2005), for instance, asks if eParticipation increases citizens' access to and influence on debates, and whether the number of participants and the topics debated change too. A similar research question is pursued by Torpe, Nielsen & Ulrich (2005), who study whether the digital dimension contributes to renewed or improved democracy. Similarly, Jæger (2004) studies how a group of elderly people uses the Internet to increase their influence on the local government.

A number of contributions investigate the changing relationships between citizens, politicians, and administrative bodies. Torpe (2004) asks how and which applications can potentially support local e-democracy and hence addresses the democratic challenges facing the municipalities. Others ask how ICTs create new conditions for participation by removing the distinction and boundaries between "local" and "global". Does ICT improve local democracy by creating new venues for interaction between citizens and politicians, and does this in turn change our perception of democratic processes (Hoff and Storgaard 2005), (Johansson 2004)?

A smaller body of research aims at identifying barriers for eParticipation success. Andersen argues that insufficient digitalization of democratic channels pose a barrier for eParticipation (Andersen 2004) and Jæger (2003) asks whether the politicians' lack of engagement in technology becomes a barrier for eParticipation, as they conceive technology an enabler of improved public administration, rather than changed democratic processes.



### 1.2.3 Research focus and method

eParticipation research represents only a minor part of Danish research on ICT and the public sector. The dominating approach is case studies of projects initiated by public authorities such as online debate forums, e-mail interaction with politicians, and websites with information from city councils, council members, agendas, meeting material and minutes.

Most Danish case studies – and all the references discussed in this section - study eParticipation at the local government level, as this is where the absolute majority of Danish eParticipation projects and experiments are found. This is not surprising, since the local level is easier to handle and less populated by alternative means of interaction between citizens and authorities – e.g. mass media – than the national level. Furthermore, it is easier to involve citizens in the debate over local issues (Torpe, Agger Nielsen et al. 2005). There are only few initiatives on the national or cross-institutional level and these have had very limited success.

Several case studies analyze eParticipation applications and information and communication channels available on the websites of authorities (Andersen 2004; Hoff and Storgaard 2005; Hoff, Lofgren et al. 2006; Torpe 2004). Others focus on different actors' perceptions and use of eParticipation initiated by the municipality (Jæger 2003; Johansson 2004; Jæger 2004; Torpe, Agger Nielsen et al. 2005; Hoff and Andersen 2006; Hoff, Lofgren et al. 2006). The actors are the administrative staff, city council members and citizens.

The studies combine a mix of methods, such as surveys of citizens, interviews with administrative staff and/or city council members, and archival studies of public documents or online debates.

### 1.2.4 The Danish landscape of experiences with eParticipation

The public sector's involvement in eParticipation is not motivated by a decline in the citizens' engagement in policy-making. On the contrary, Denmark has a very high level of citizen involvement in local policy compared with other countries. This may be related to the fact that municipalities in Denmark control a major part of the overall public budget (Torpe, Agger Nielsen et al. 2005).

The research discussion about eParticipation can be divided in two main areas – changes and barriers. As the summary of research questions shows, studies concentrate on the analysis of changes, if any, that can be attributed to the implementation of eParticipation, and the barriers for implementing eParticipation.

The findings and conclusions of the research in Denmark cluster around the following themes:

- Changes related to citizens;
- Changes related to the interaction between citizens and politicians;
- Changes related to politicians and administration;
- Enablers and barriers related to the municipality – administration, politicians and external actors.

### 1.2.5 Changes related to citizens

Some studies find that the municipalities' use of the web for information dissemination has improved citizens' access to information about and from the public authority – e.g. City Council composition and tasks, political committees, agendas and minutes of meetings (Torpe 2004; Torpe, Agger Nielsen et al. 2005). Citizens seem to prefer "simple" formats; i.e. text, over more advanced media such as live video, music or voice (Hoff and Andersen 2006).

The digital divide plays a small and decreasing role in citizens' opportunity to engage in eParticipation. In total, 73% have internet access in their home. No major variation across gender and age groups can be found (Hoff and Andersen 2006).

There are several ways for citizens to influence local policy, but the mechanisms that control who engages in what policy area, and how they choose to engage, are not well understood. Johansson (2004) is sceptical towards eParticipation's potential to foster changes in the public's engagement in democratic processes. He points out that there is no evidence that democratic structures are changed due to the implementation of ICT. There is only anecdotal evidence that electronic media make citizens arrive better prepared when they approach public offices, and there is no evidence for changes in access to and influence on decision processes.

On the other hand, it can be argued that the democratic potential of eParticipation will be realized through the transparency and exposure of the political agenda and thereby the citizens' ability to keep the politicians responsible for decisions (Torpe, Agger Nielsen et al. 2005). Another study concludes that the online opportunity seems to increase the general interest in policy among the younger generation (Torpe, Agger Nielsen et al. 2005).

### 1.2.6 Changes related to the interaction between citizens and politicians

Citizens in all municipalities can contact politicians through e-mail, but relatively few municipalities have so far provided debate and chat-fora (Torpe 2004). The number of fora are increasing, but they are not widely used by citizens. The (relatively few) successful online debates engage, however, more participants than traditional town hall meetings, and the number of contributions exceed the capacity of any traditional media (Torpe, Agger Nielsen et al. 2005). The most successful debates that were supported by both citizens and politicians concerned well prepared themes with a broad relevance for the public (Torpe, Agger Nielsen et al. 2005).

The lack of engagement in online interactive forums may be due to the municipality being too large a unit to maintain a running debate about local issues. The potential for engagement may be greater within smaller communities or when special interest groups become engaged (Torpe 2004).

The online debates have not replaced other forms of citizens' participation in the democratic process – e.g. letters to the editor or town hall meetings – but there is more debate of local policy than before. The debate includes similar topics and engage the same persons in the on-line sphere as in other media, but critiques of the municipality and topics that are

important for the citizens take up more space than previously (Torpe, Agger Nielsen et al. 2005). Also, it is much easier to reply and add new contributions on-line than in newspapers or at public meetings (Torpe 2004). On the other hand, there may be a tendency towards more contributions with generalizations and undocumented assertions about the municipality, which are hard to respond to in a proper manner (Torpe 2005). Other experiences show the debate fora becoming places for complaints and personal conversations. Thus, a challenge for future debate fora is to provide space for all needs – e.g. the well prepared and controlled debate, as well as the more personal complaints and discussions.

Studies also reveal that it can be difficult for citizens to influence the topics that are chosen for online and open debates. A study of municipal budget negotiations showed that 3% of the local citizens tried to influence the negotiations by mailing to politicians, but only few of the requests were published on the municipality's webpage. Furthermore, the municipality did not initiate a budget debate on the forum (Torpe 2005).

The online channels do create both social and political disparity in participation but it is less than in other forms of political involvement. The on-line debates are dominated by the same persons as the traditional media, but the lower barrier for participation using the new online channels has broadened participation (Hoff and Storgaard 2005). Local newspapers function as platforms especially for local politicians and organizations and associations, while it is more difficult for "ordinary citizens" to gain access. The situation is similar regarding regional radio and TV stations. Evidence suggests that this changes when the Internet is used in political communication, giving citizens a better platform for expressing their political views (Torpe, Agger Nielsen et al. 2005; Hoff, Lofgren et al. 2006).

The role of established interest groups may also change due to the use of on-line fora. In a study of elderly citizens' and the senior citizens' councils use of the Internet, Jæger (2004) concludes that on-line fora force different actors to focus on the role of the senior citizens councils and on how they are going to collaborate with the municipality. She describes the collaboration between local municipalities and the senior citizens council as highly varied among municipalities and without a common understanding of how the senior citizens council should be involved in local decision processes (Jæger 2004).

Moving on-line and creating local home-pages for the councils have facilitated reflections upon the councils' role and tasks vis-à-vis constituents and local authorities, resulting in a focus on the role and task of the senior citizens council and better transparency and comparability within the municipality and in relation to other municipalities (Jæger 2004).

### **1.2.7 Changes related to politicians and administration**

It is hard to identify the direct effect of eParticipation on policy formation and implementation, but Danish politicians take online debates seriously by participating and including the opinions expressed in the debates in the decision process (Hoff and Storgaard 2005).

In one municipality a survey revealed, for example, that 73% of the politicians found that an on-line hearing had provided them a clearer view on the citizens' view on the future of the municipality (Torpe 2005). Regarding differences across municipalities, it appears that the larger and/or wealthier municipalities seem to perform better regarding eParticipation than the smaller/less affluent, whereas the political composition of the council plays no significant role (Torpe 2004).

### **1.2.8 Drivers and barriers for eParticipation at the municipal level – administration, politicians and external actors**

It appears that the main drivers for the uptake of eParticipation are external to the municipalities, while the barriers (costs and technical skills among key players) are internal. In a study of decisions regarding municipal ICT and eParticipation – i.e. who decides what concepts to implement, how to use them and when and how changes should be made – Johansson (2004) finds that external actors play a principal role. The external actor with the most influence is KMD, the principal provider of IT systems and services to the Danish municipalities. Several other actors, such as The National Association of Municipalities, other ICT suppliers, the ministry, the government, citizens and the press contribute to creating a pressure for implementing ICT. Local citizens are the only actors without direct influence on this process. They can interact electronically with the municipality, but they are not systematically involved in the formulation of local ICT strategies, nor in the implementation of specific applications. (Johansson 2004).

The municipalities may not perceive any obvious advantages to taking the local democratic debate on-line. It is an open question whether ICT has the potential to support democracy as this depends on the criteria for dialogue and the way decisions are made. Furthermore the public debate about ICT for the public sector focuses mainly on digital governance as a means towards a more effective, efficient and dynamic public sector. On-line democracy is not perceived as contributing in this regard, and investments in eParticipation initiatives are therefore hard to justify (Torpe 2004).

Andersen (2004) also finds that cost focus on the local level constitutes a main barrier for electronic citizen involvement. Resources for ICT investment and implementation are in most municipalities taken from the operating budget of local institutions, and although digitising the public sector has high priority, ICT spending competes hard with spending on other local areas such as schools, health care etc.

Altogether the ad hoc characteristics of public ICT spending and the high degree of local discretion in implementation, combined with the lack of clear awareness and focus on eParticipation – e.g. national rankings like "Best on the Net" do not include eParticipation in the evaluation criteria - reinforce the cost-focus as a barrier for eParticipation. The lack of local competencies in ICT along with vague strategies and the perception of ICT as a tool and not as a core process, contribute as well (Andersen 2004).

Another study mentions the lack of ICT skills among politicians as a key barrier for eParticipation. Following an interview with a mayor who is a non-user of ICT, Jæger (2003) observes that : "...it is hard to imagine how a non-user can develop visions about future development and use of IT in

the public sector". She observes that politicians are involved in the overall decisions regarding investments in digital democracy but not in the more concrete decisions or implementation of the technology (Jæger 2003). She attributes this limited involvement in the implementation of eParticipation to the dominating perception that technology is neutral, and decisions about technological choices therefore belong in the domain of administrators and technicians, rather than politicians. This constitutes a major barrier for political involvement in on-line democracy implementation (Jæger 2003).

Cost savings may be a long-term objective of eParticipation, but the main advantage of is eParticipation's potential contribution to the democratic process and political debate. This, however, requires a much more goal-oriented and governed implementation process than seen so far. Torpe (2005) suggests, however, that the real asset of eParticipation is the potential of new democratic communication channels and forms of interaction to resolve the challenges facing local politicians who work in the cross section between engaged and demanding citizens and tight budgets (Torpe 2004). On the other hand, so far it is quite unclear who is responsible for the development of digital democracy, and the amount of resources spent on eParticipation do not come anywhere near to those spent on developing digital governance (Jæger 2003).

### **1.2.9 Conclusion**

So far the internet seems to play a limited role for local political communication, and participation in most local political debates on the internet (with few significant exceptions) is limited. However, this situation seems to be changing as politicians and citizens are paying increased attention to this mode of participation (Hoff, Lofgren et al. 2006). Torpe, Nielsen & Ulrich (2005) conclude that eParticipation does make a difference but not in a specific direction and that the questions we might ask is what we want to do with the Internet and not what the Internet is doing to us – repeating the main point of Putnam (2000).

## **1.3 France**

### **1.3.1 Introduction**

French research on eParticipation in the political and administrative arenas may appear both underdeveloped on the whole and overdeveloped on some specific topics. EParticipation is not a priority on the French political agenda. Consequently, research has mainly focused on the few areas where significant eParticipation projects have taken place (notably online forums and online campaigns). Research has primarily dealt with the potential of the internet and the broader topic of E-democracy, rather than actual uses and EParticipation.

Research on EParticipation is also shaped by the organization and dynamics of research in France. The fragmentation of research on eParticipation reflects a more general division of French research into

multiple disciplines which do not necessarily interrelate<sup>14</sup>. Moreover, in some disciplines, such as political science, research on the internet has been seen as an ancillary field (because the internet was seen as a too much technical object, not pertaining to the noble field of politics). However, research on the internet has become more legitimate over the last years, as it is discovered that the internet raises old issues and problems in a new fashion. Finally, there is traditionally a gap in France between public research (mostly conducted within universities, but also some public agencies<sup>15</sup>) and private research. This has often led to a sort of division of labor with universities research being concerned with theoretical issues and other research organizations dealing with operational problems.

### 1.3.2 Main approaches to eParticipation

#### a) *Focuses*

##### *Potential versus actual uses*

As in many other countries, eParticipation was initially approached in terms of potential uses and consequences. First studies were marked by a rather determinist and Manichean conception of technology and opposed two conflicting views: the return to a “genuine” democracy age in which traditional representative organizations would be bypassed and a direct connection between politicians and citizens be established (Lévy, 1994); and the advent of a surveillance society in which citizens would be subjected to an increased social control (Virilio, 1996). Since then, research has positively moved towards a more nuanced view of technological dynamics, reinvesting the path opened fifty years ago by the seminal work of Jacques Ellul and more attention has been paid to devoted to the actual uses of ICT.

##### *Processes versus impacts*

There is a strong social demand for research on the impacts of eParticipation. Political and administrative actors want to know the effects and consequences of developing eParticipation (eg., the impact of e-voting on turn-out). Most researchers in the field are not comfortable with such a posture. While they do not necessarily refer to the socio-constructivist approach (particularly well represented in French sociology by the work of Bruno Latour and Michel Callon)<sup>16</sup>, they consider that technical systems are socially shaped and are more interested in the social processes or in the politics of eParticipation. Secondly, analyzing eParticipation impacts would require an evaluation framework. Many researchers think devising such a framework is either too premature, given the current state of eParticipation experiences, or a too normative-

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<sup>14</sup> This is quite apparent in the difficulties to sustain a cross-disciplinary communication department within the National center for scientific research (the main umbrella organization for scientific research in France).

<sup>15</sup> Such as INSEE or CREDOC.

<sup>16</sup> This approach is often criticized for replacing technical determinism by social determinism.

oriented task (because it deals with goals and values which are the realm of policy, not research).

#### *Supply side versus usage patterns*

French researchers are often more interested in analyzing usage patterns of eParticipation devices than the strategies and policies implemented by political and administrative actors. This focus can be explained by the special attention that French sociology and media studies have devoted to reception and information uses over the last three decades. Following the seminal work of Michel de Certeau (1990), original studies have been proposed on the place and role of users in ICT developments. They are not just a quantitative sociology of usage patterns users but resort to qualitative approaches (such as ethno-methodology) to understand how people have the capacity to (re-)shape technical systems through their own uses (Jouët, 1993; Vedel, 1994). The role of social representations (what French would call *imaginaire*) in the shaping of technological development is also taken into consideration (Flichy, 2001).

### ***b) Methodologies and types of research***

#### *Literature reviews, essays with a theoretical perspective*

Under the topic of E-democracy, French research offers a number of interesting literature reviews and state of the art publications (Massit-Folléa, 1997; Evanghelou & Pélissier, 2000; Chambat, 2003; Vedel, 2003 & 2006). They played a significant role in mapping the E-democracy field and identifying issues and approaches. Some researchers have proposed typologies related to E-democracy or eParticipation. They concern, for instance, the models of citizenship underlying E-democracy local experiences (Vedel, 2000; Michel, 2005) or the different types of political blogging in France (Greffet, 2006).

From a theoretical perspective, French eParticipation research has also been nourished by the work of some of the most remarkable French political philosophers, including Manin (1995, 2002), Gauchet (2002) and Rosanvallon (2000). While these authors do not centrally cope with the internet, they provide crucial insights on the current transformations of democracy (e.g. Manin's useful reminder about the nature and problems of deliberation, or the historical analysis of the trends and forms toward citizen participation by Rosanvallon).

In addition, a number of essays has been published on the internet and politics (Mathias, 1997; Rodotà, 1999; Wolton, 1999; Breton, 2000). Oriented to a general public, and sometimes very speculative, they contributed to a greater public awareness on the problems associated to ICT and participation.

#### *Empirical studies and their methods*

On the empirical side, many case studies (or *monographies* as they would be called in French) are available on French eParticipation experiences. They especially cover projects initiated by public authorities and online forums at the local level, e-voting, online campaigning and political parties. Different accounts of online electoral campaigns are also available

(see for instance Beauvallet, 2007). By contrast, eParticipation experiences or projects conducted by public administrations or the Parliament have been much less documented.

These case studies generally combine a mix of methods, including interviews with projects managers, politicians or participants, observations on the spot, data collection (from official documents to personal notes).

Some studies are chiefly based on content analysis, a method which has the advantage of allowing some cross-national or at least cross-sectional comparisons. Using the analytical framework designed by Gibson and Ward (1998), content analysis of web sites of candidates (Benvegna & Villalba, 2002) and French political parties web sites (Bouillaud, Dompnier & Greffet, 2006) have been proposed. Content analysis has also been implemented to compare the online activities of cities (see especially Loiseau, 2000; Loiseau & Wojcik, 2004).

Online discussions have also been the object of content analysis. However, methodological difficulties arise when it comes to operationalizing the concept of deliberation and capturing it through a set of indicators. Notions like the "quality" of a discussion or "equality" between participants often convey value judgements and their coding is an intricate process (Monnoyer-Smith, 2006; Wojcik, 2007). From this perspective, content analysis seems best suited to provide categorizations of "discursive activities" or to describe how participants argue (Doury & Lefébure, 2006).

A number of polling surveys on eParticipation has been conducted by consulting firms, commissioned by State agencies or local authorities. They aim at measuring the diffusion of internet applications within the French society<sup>17</sup>, or what people think about the development of some specific services. More recently, the Center for political research conducted a series of polling surveys on the political uses of the internet during the 2006-2007 presidential campaign (see Vedel et Cann, 2008).

Some other methodologies are more sparsely used for eParticipation research. Vedel (2006) based his discussion of the idea of electronic democracy on a discourse analysis of policy documents, speeches and web texts. Michel (2003) resorted to the technique of cognitive mapping to investigate the representations of voters regarding e-voting.

### ***Research questions and issues***

Given the multidisciplinary of the field, eParticipation is obviously approached through quite distinct questions. Researchers are not attracted to eParticipation *per se*, but rather interested in the social dynamics that eParticipation illuminates or reveals (Vedel & Ward, 2006). eParticipation serves as a sort test field to observe and understand new social trends or to reconsider old issues and revisit previous theories<sup>18</sup>. For instance, through eParticipation, sociologists analyze the transformations

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<sup>17</sup> See for example the annual surveys of the Centre for the study of living conditions (CREDOC) on "the dissemination of ICT in French society".

<sup>18</sup> In our view, eParticipation is primarily an object for research, not an independent research field, which has strong implications about how eParticipation research can be promoted. We elaborate furthermore this argument in the third section and conclusion of this chapter.



of the public sphere or the changes in social networking; media students study the reshaping of traditional mediation systems and communication channels; political scientists investigate the transformation of political communication repertoires, the emergence of new forms of political engagement, or they revisit established theories on deliberation.

Beyond this variety of research questions, a common topic (rather than research issue) implicitly appears. It concerns the place of the individual in complex societies and, more specifically, how self-identity is being expressed in an information age as combination of multiple roles and within multiple environments. eParticipation fundamentally raises the question of our relationships to others and to communities: how we are part of (and relate to) the polity as citizens, the marketplace as consumers, firms as workers, social groups as friends.

### 1.3.3 Main fields and findings in eParticipation research

#### a) Actors

##### **Government**

Government eParticipation applications generally focus on two main areas: information and consultation. When a new policy program is announced or launched, it has now become common to plan a consultation phase, with the concerned ministry setting up an ad hoc online forum<sup>19</sup>. While some of them, such as the public debate on the future of schools in 2003, have been thoroughly documented (Moscarola, Desmarais & Michel, 2007), many are not systematically studied. This may be due to the fact that they generally involve a very small number of participants<sup>20</sup> (not to mention their uncertain impact on policy making). Studies on governmental or public institutions web sites mainly focus on e-administration developments and the modernization of governmental operations (Alcaud & Lakel, 2004; Assar & Boughzala, 2007) rather than on their eParticipation features.

##### **Parliament**

The National Assembly<sup>21</sup> as well as the Senate<sup>22</sup> provides citizen with electronic forums for them to express their opinions on various bills. However, many of these facilities are in a sleeping state and the latest forums ("the future of research" and "the climate changes") date back to 2004. The most interesting feature of the Senate web site is the blogs set up by some senators in charge of reports<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> The web site [vie-publique.fr](http://vie-publique.fr) takes an inventory of all ongoing and past consultations.

<sup>20</sup> We touch here upon a difficult question for research: Does a marginal phenomenon deserve scrutiny? When does an object become significant for researchers?

<sup>21</sup> <<http://forum.assemblee-nationale.fr>>

<sup>22</sup> <<http://www.senat.fr/consult/index.html>>

<sup>23</sup> For example, since January 2008, Philippe Dallier, the senator of Seine-Saint-Denis, has been running a blog on the "institutional future of the greater Paris" <<http://blogs.senat.fr/grandparis/index.php>>

By comparison to other countries (see Coleman, 2004 & 2006; Macintosh & al., 2002; Shulman, 2005; Taylor; Noveck, 2004; Coglianese, 2005), the French Parliament eParticipation initiatives appear relatively poor. Citizens can give their opinion on various bills but how this opinion is to be connected to the working-out of laws is fairly unclear. French research in this area is very tiny. It includes an international conference jointly organized in 1999 by the Senate and the Center for Political Research<sup>24</sup>, a study about the uses of the internet by MPs carried out in 2001 by a private consulting group (Netpolitique) and, more recently, a conference paper analyzing how websites might serve as political communication resource to MPs (Nicot, 2007).

### **Local authorities**

Following the heavily covered project of Parthenay (Eveno, 1998), many local authorities have launched projects or experiments, which have fostered a significant amount of research in two directions:

- *The setting-up of web sites by the local authorities*<sup>25</sup>

Many studies have scrutinized cities' web sites (e.g. Huron, 2001; Chalon, 2004). Research findings are on the whole consistent with the "politics as usual" theory and show that local authorities primarily use the internet for information and services provision rather than for its interactive potential. Thus, Wojcik found out that only 45 web sites (i.e. 14%), among the 317 French cities of over 20 000 inhabitants with a web site (out of 438) hosted a discussion forum in 2002 (Wojcik, 2003). This can be explained by the lack of human resources, the difficulties of city staffs in coping with interactive tools, the reluctance of local politicians to implement new forms of participation and their preference for more traditional communication channels (Loiseau, 2003).

- *Experiments with specific technologies*

To a lesser extent, research deals with particularly innovative uses of ICT for eParticipation, including the "Interactive Town Council" in the city of Issy-les-Moulineaux, the public debate on wind power organized by the territorial community of Atrébatie (Benvegny, 2007), the blog launched in 2000 by the road department of the Belfort territory. Studies have led to mixed and, sometimes, conflicting results. For example, some researchers found that Issy's "Interactive Town Council" allowed a minimal, although very limited, participation of citizens (Maigret & Monnoyer-Smith, 2000), while others likened it to a cosmetic operation (Pailliant, 2000). In other cases, eParticipation initiatives revealed opposing visions about public participation. This was quite apparent in the case of the National Road 19 Project<sup>26</sup>, for which two public official web sites were run, each one embodying a peculiar conception of citizen participation (Benvegny, 2006).

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<sup>24</sup> *Les Parlements dans la société de l'information*, Paris, Sénat, 18-19 novembre 1999.

<sup>25</sup> See "Internet Cities" (Villes Internet) : this association is a network of elected officials, local civil servants, private stakeholders and researchers, aimed at supporting the exchange of experiences and practices for the development of Internet-based citizen services at local level. <<http://www.villes-internet.net>>

<sup>26</sup> It is a road development plan which consists of building two double-track lines between Langres and Delles, in the East of France.

Besides these two main lines of research, some studies have investigated local policies for internet development or, more generally, the visions of local public authorities towards the information society (e.g. Bouquillion & Pailliant, 2006).

### **Political parties / Online campaigning**

This is a very active research field and probably the most internationalized one. Online campaigning has raised much attention, especially after the 2005 referendum<sup>27</sup>. However, as early as 2000, various studies have documented how French political parties have been adapting to the information age (Greffet, 2001; Sauger, 2002; Ouardi, 2002; Villalba, 2003 & 2004). They have shown the initial reluctance of political leaders to encourage new communication channels which, they feared, might undermine their control over party messages. In the presidential election of 2002, web sites were primarily used as a top-down information disseminating tool, rather than as a means to increase internal democracy or to foster a greater dialogue between candidates and voters. A comparative study on the web sites set up by socialist parties on the occasion of the 2004 European elections has also shown that the internet was not thought as a transnational medium for a joint campaign (Bouillaud, Dompnier & Greffet, 2006).

During the referendum campaign in 2005, the No supporters massively invested the internet to disseminate their arguments. They used online forums, blogs and web sites as a counter-power to the traditional media and major political parties which supported the Yes. Unfortunately, the actual impact of the online referendum campaign has not been assessed by academic papers, with the exception of a study on the political blogosphere (Fouetillou, 2007). This study confirmed the findings of similar studies (notably Adamic & Glance on the US campaign in 2004) and established that the blogosphere was a divided public sphere, with blogs primarily linking to their own political communities and very little to opponents' views.

The 2007 presidential campaign has generated fresh research. Different studies have focused on Segolène Royal's online campaign, which aimed at developing a new form of campaigning based on the active participation of voters. Besides the functions devoted to campaigning (information, mobilization), Royal's web site hosted many discussion forums on which about 200 000 messages were posted (Beauvallet, 2007). These have served to identify issues and concerns for Royal to better customize her campaign. More generally, Royal's campaign illustrates changes in activism (Pène, 2007) that are challenging the traditional divide between the headquarters staff, drafting out the party's strategy and communication, and the grassroots teams, running the concrete actions on ground (Beauvallet & Ronai, 2005).

Other studies have looked at internet patterns of usage during the campaign, establishing that political web sites were primarily visited by the citizens most interested in politics (Vedel & Koc Michalska, 2007). More surprisingly, it has been found that young or highly educated internet users were not likely to visit political web sites more than senior

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<sup>27</sup> Many observers interpreted the referendum outcome as an outstanding example of the impact of the internet on French politics.

or low educated internet users (Vedel & Cann, 2008). Once connected, citizens do not exhibit very distinctive patterns of internet usage for political purposes depending on their socio-demographics profiles.

## ***b) Processes***

### **E-voting**

Research on e-voting is primarily about the politics of e-voting. There are few studies on the public acceptance of e-voting or the impact of e-voting on political behaviour. This is linked to the fact that e-voting is a controversial issue in France. A first attempt to introduce voting machines in 1969 failed in the following years (Dompnier, 2002). The emergence of the internet gave a new impetus to electronic voting and experiments or pilots were started in some French cities. It is only in September 2003 that it was decided to progressively re-introduce voting machines in France, remote-voting through the internet remaining excluded.

Given the unique history of e-voting in France (Ledun, 2004), researchers have focused on the obstacles to changing voting procedures. This has led them to focus on the visions and images associated to voting in the French context and consequently to pursue an original line of research on the role of political representations in technological development (Michel, 2003; Monnoyer-Smith, 2003). Studies show that e-voting is hampered by security or privacy concerns problems as well as the fear of a surveillance society (Enguehard, 2008). In France, another, more influential factor comes into play: it relates to the conception of voting as a special, almost religious, act, something French qualify as a "Republican ritual" (Chevret, 2003). It is often feared that the internet of ICT might trivialize the act of voting (not to mention its commoditization with the introduction industry players into the game).

### **E-deliberation**

Studies in this area have generally focused on two main objects: online debates organized by public institutions on specific issues; discussion forums offered by public authorities (Wojcik, 2006) or political parties (Marcoccia, 2006).

Over the last years, the National Commission of Public Debate (CNDP) has played an active role in fostering online debates through its innovative site, [www.debatpublic.fr](http://www.debatpublic.fr). Among the many debates which have been hosted by the CNDP, the one about the project concerning a new international airport near Paris<sup>28</sup>, was more particularly analyzed (Monnoyer-Smith, 2006 a, b & 2007). The DUCSAI debate was an original approach because it attempted to combine two kinds of participative modes: traditional (offline) public meetings and an online discussion forum. This allowed to reach different publics and therefore to enlarge the overall number of participants to the debate. However, whether this combination contributed to a better elaboration of arguments remains an open question (Doury & Marcoccia, 2007).

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<sup>28</sup> Known as Démarche d'Utilité Concertée pour un Site Aéroportuaire International (DUCSAI).

Research on online debates and discussion forums has contributed to a clearer identification of the main issues or problems met in E-deliberation experiences.

*Do ICT enlarge public participation?* The literature on the subject has generally found that online participation is higher among highly educated people and that blue-collars are underrepresented. This is confirmed by French studies, which have also shown that, if there is not an heavy (traditional) media coverage, only concerned people tend to join online discussions. Yet, online forums attract young people who would not have been necessarily involved otherwise and they may also contribute to transcend local boundaries. As found in the DUCSAI case, the internet allows to reach an additional public to the “usual” participants in offline meetings. The interaction between online and offline participation is therefore a crucial issue. Public participation has to be thought as an overall process, encompassing a variety of channels (including traditional media), and it is important to carefully organize the respective role of each channel but also to establish gateways between them.

*How do technologies frame or constrain discussions?*

As reminded by Manin and Lev-on (2006), online discussion groups often lead to a polarization of opinions and to a fragmentation of the public sphere into “homophiles” communities. Yet, if participants in online forums tend to avoid opposing views, it is not just a matter of personal choice. It is also the “mechanical” effect of how the web is technically operating. Search engines direct people to sites using the same semantic register; links tend to encapsulate people into closed communities; ranking systems, implemented to display the most popular posts or contributions on the top of pages, have the side effect of making dissenting opinions less visible.


The socio-technical frame of deliberative forums (that is the combination of technical features and editorial options) deeply affects how citizens may exchange online. Further research is necessary to better understand the interplay between technical and editorial/organisational features of online forums.

### 1.3.4 Conclusion

French research on eParticipation is concentrated within a small and isolated community of social sciences scholars. Despite limited resources, this community has been able to cover some dimensions of eParticipation and has set up networks which have helped to exchanges among researchers from different disciplines<sup>29</sup>. However, research is too much focused on local authorities, parties and social movements, and not enough on government operations (a field left to private research).

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<sup>29</sup> They include: the DEL network, which is more generally concerned with electronic democracy ([www.certop.fr/DEL](http://www.certop.fr/DEL)); the TICS (Technologies de l'information et de la communication et Société) network (<http://gdrtics.u-paris10.fr>), which especially focuses on the emergence of new services and consumption or social patterns relating to the internet; the French journal *Réseaux*, which publishes studies on a wide array of communication issues.



More cooperation between social sciences and computer/information systems sciences is needed. Computer scientists and ICC sciences and ICT are little involved in eParticipation research, and those who have an interest in political or policy issues are primarily working on privacy and internet governance. eParticipation research within social sciences scholars is not permeated enough by technological questions and tend to overestimate the role of social factors.

French research is somewhat parochial. While French researchers are well informed about the international literature on eParticipation, too many publications are in French. Comparative projects are too rare, although some researchers are or have been involved in international projects (currently, Demo-net and Elost; in the past, the Government and democracy in an information age (GADIA) Cost action, the EVE project on electronic voting). More international connections are indispensable to undertake cross-national comparisons and to understand the contextual factors which might shape eParticipation.

Links between academic and industry research are extremely tenuous. Bridging the gap between them would be important in the French context, where industry research is too much quantitative, goal oriented and shaped by the idea that participation is a practical problem, and academic research is not enough solution-oriented and does not contribute enough to the implementation of eParticipation projects.

More exchanges with policy makers are needed (although some do exist at the local level with elected officials). French academic researchers do not like to get into policy recommendations and are better at ease when it comes to identifying social processes. However, by doing so, they certainly help political actors and stakeholders to view eParticipation in terms of conflicts and obstacles (against the deterministic vision that ICTs are a solution to the problems of democracy).

There is something ironic in that research on eParticipation deals with citizen participation in policy-making and political decisions, but rarely thinks about the ways to involve people in research. What is sometimes called participatory research is desirable for a number of general reasons (Sclove, 1995). It helps to broaden the scope of issues to deal with. It ensures that a more diverse range of prior social needs, concerns and experiences are reflected in the design process of projects. Confronting with non-experts also helps researchers to test the solidity and coherence of their interpretations.

Exchanges between academic researchers on eParticipation and all eParticipation stakeholders and citizens are also needed because EParticipation touches upon normative issues and political preferences regarding the desirable forms of democracy. For instance, we cannot analyze the performance of participatory web sites or online deliberation without defining the prerequisites of "good citizenship". To conduct sound research, researchers must consequently devise analytical frameworks which take into account the values and preferences of the various stakeholder and civil society groups involved in eParticipation.

## 1.4 Germany

### 1.4.1 Introduction

Taking the research disciplines in Germany, E-democracy or eParticipation-research from the administrative perspective is mainly undertaken by interdisciplinary institutions of applied research (ifib Bremen, zebraLog Berlin, Fraunhofer IAIS, FIT & FOKUS, TuTech Hamburg, tetraeder Dortmund) and at universities in the following disciplines: (urban) planning (and communication) (FH Erfurt, TU Hanover, TU Aachen), communication sciences & media studies (U Düsseldorf, TU Ilmenau), political science (Marburg, Bruchsal, Stuttgart, Munich), information science (FH Cologne), and administrative science (FÖV Speyer). "Semi-research" is also done by networks (Initiative eParticipation) and due to policy programmes (Initiative MEDIA@Komm-Transfer). Besides, there is a range of junior researchers who are writing their PhD-theses about this topic.

The main criterion to select authors and papers was that their eParticipation research was embedded in longer research projects (more than one year within the last five years). Secondly, those authors and their main research topics related to the administrative perspective on eParticipation were chosen who have published for more than three years about eParticipation-topics within the last five years.

#### *Longer research:*

- A project funded by the Federal Agency of Nature Conservation explored the impact of ICT on formal nature conservation specific planning. Therefore, specific backoffice-integrating tools were developed as well as usage and usability evaluated (both of target groups such as the general public and the experts involved in the topic. The project was conducted by the city of Königslutter and the planning department of the University of Hanover. Another research unit in the same department was in charge of the evaluation. (interesting questions: specific science-based planning and public involvement or "biotope against the public opinion"). (Cf. Oppermann et al. 2008)
- The research project "Media Mix Supporting Local Democracy" funded by the Hans-Böckler-foundation and conducted by the Institute of Information Management Bremen (ifib), investigated how administration and politics can use the Internet for supporting local political participation. For concrete citizen participation projects it was observed how new media and procedures combined with old ones can be optimally used for the target groups and the contents. The basic premise was that there is no optimal media mix, but that it depends on the participation procedure, the stakeholders, the subject and the addressed target groups which media combination will lead to a high participation rate and good contributions and results. (Cf. Kubicek et al. 2008 forthcoming, Westholm 2007)

Target-group related eParticipation activities are also investigated from a planning and communication perspective by the FH Erfurt (cf. Sinning 2006).

- Not evaluated by a typical research organisation but by a provider for eParticipation tools, the project MISS explored in four cities how multilingual online content can assist and advance the political participation of migrants in urban development and urban planning. The internet should not replace the previous methods of information, participation and empowerment but should present an additional channel that could be used at different times, and that presented no barrier of language. An additional goal of the entire project was to upgrade the intercultural competence of public administration.
- Empirical research about the usage of the Internet for eParticipation and its users (who communicates how about political issues?) is conducted by the University of Ilmenau since 2005 in several rows of surveys. (Cf. Emmer et al. 2006). In 2007, similar research was conducted by ifib in cooperation together with the Forschungsgruppe Wahlen Telefonfeld GmbH (Research Group Elections) on behalf of the German Ministry of the Interior (cf. Albrecht et al. 2008).

*Important research projects related to the administrative perspective explored by experienced eParticipation researchers.<sup>30</sup>*

- In 2005, the German Bundestag launched an online system to deliver petitions. Besides, the usual right of individual petitions was broadened and citizens became the opportunity to provide public petitions (as it is already practised by the Scottish parliament, cf. DEMO-net booklet 1). A simultaneous evaluation both of the technique and of the acceptance of the new procedure was undertaken by the non-for-profit organisation Zebralog e.V. on behalf of the Bureau of technology assessment of the German Bundestag.
- Conduction and evaluation of large-scale online discussion has been done by TuTech, a centre of applied research at the technical University of Hamburg. As a follow-up of the IST-project DEMOS, since 2004 this online consultation tool was applied for online discussions in Hamburg about the "Leitbild Growing City", about the concept of a family-friendly city<sup>31</sup> and to discuss the citizen budget of the Land Hamburg. The most interesting points were how large numbers of postings can be structured by a technical tool and how quantity becomes quality by including a broad range of opinions (but a low percentage of inhabitants) (Cf. Lührs 2007, Lührs & Hohbrecht 2007).
- Evaluation of eParticipation procedures is a research task of the Institute of Information Management Bremen (ifib) but also of other researchers in Germany e.g. Märker 2007. This topic is more deeply described in DEMO-net booklet 13.3.

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<sup>30</sup> Research about political parties and their usage of ICT for internal and external communication is not covered in this context because political parties do not belong to the administrative part of the legal system but more to the civil society (papers in Germany by Leggewie/Bieber, Fuchs et al).

<sup>31</sup> This was also conducted in Munich.



- To investigate effectiveness and efficiency of its first public budget discussion which was partly conducted via the Internet and partly in different kind of physical meetings, the Berlin borough of Lichtenberg funded its evaluation by the German Research Institute of Public Administration Speyer. Research objective was whether the procedure fits its own goals. Weaknesses should be identified as well as opportunities for development and improvement of the procedure. Proposals for decisions regarding the adoption of the procedures should be made. (Cf. Klages / Daramus 2006). This case was also described in DEMO-net booklet 1.
- In 2005, the Committee of culture and media of the 17<sup>th</sup> German Bundestag launched a report about a technology-assessment "Internet and democracy - analysis of net-based communication" which covered the potentials of eParticipation. The research was conducted by the Centre of Media & Interactivity at the University of Gießen (cf. Deutscher Bundestag 2005).

*Further issues dealt with in habilitation, PhD-theses or short research projects*

- Internet and Democracy (Zittel)
- Online-Mediation (Märker)
- The role of local elites and online participation offers on municipal websites (Kuhn)
- Explorative study about online-based means of communication in urban planning (Sinning)
- eParticipation-Survey of German municipalities' websites (Initiative eParticipation)

Due to space problems, not all research activities can be more deeply characterized in the following chapter.

#### **1.4.2 Characteristics of eParticipation research**

*Nature conservation specific planning (The case of the city of Koenigslutter)*

The project investigated how an internet platform could support and supplement a traditional planning procedure on urban level. Questions in focus were for instance:

- Which technical requirements have to be followed when the Internet is applied?
- What are the impacts of the internet-platform on information and communication in the planning procedure?
- Who are the users of the new tools? Which expectations do the target groups have?
- What are the contributions of the internet and the visualizations to the discussions about future development of the city applying the tools and for the implementation of the planning?

Methods to conduct the research were interviews with citizens, experts, participatory observation and comparisons with results of similar projects. As typical for action research, the researchers informed the addressees

about interim results continuously (Cf. Oppermann et al. 2008 [forthcoming]).

#### *Citizen participatory budgets – the case of Berlin-Lichtenberg*

Conduction of citizen participatory budgets is a growing field in political participation in Germany. Some of these cases are supported by eParticipation tools (such as Berlin-Lichtenberg, Cologne and Freiburg/Brsg. and Hamburg), others are conducted without ICT-support. The process conducted in Berlin-Lichtenberg was comprehensively evaluated by external researchers from the German Research Institute of Public Administration (Speyer). Main research questions were:

- Are the citizens animated by the procedures chosen to participate at the process?
- Did the process generate consensual proposals and have these been realistic?
- Did the participation process enhance common sense and identification?
- What are the impacts of the citizen budget on modernisation of public administrations?

Methods used were observations, written questionnaires (e.g. of politicians, participants at public meetings), interviews and document analysis. (Cf. Klages/Daramus 2006...)

#### *Immigrants and use of ICT in eParticipation*

The Projekt MISS<sup>32</sup> /(2004/05) explored how multilingual online content can assist and advance the political participation of migrants in urban development and urban planning. The project was funded by the state of Northrhine-Westfalia. It was conducted by the company tetraeder.com in and together with the cities of Arnsberg, Iserlohn, Gütersloh and Solingen which were chosen for specific criteria: They had to be open-minded and experienced in the field of integration of migrants, and they also had to meet a certain standard with the implementation of e-government measures. Major cities were excluded for their particular framework conditions. The internet should not replace the previous methods of information, participation and empowerment but should present an additional channel that could be used at different times, and that presented no barrier of language. An additional goal of the entire project was to upgrade the intercultural competence of public administration.

The topics and the measures in the projects varied. They referred to the reconstruction of a main road and a plaza, the presentation of a new zoning map, or the collective work on a new concept for the development of a quarter. All websites contained multilingual information concerning the upcoming measures, offered e-mail-addresses to ask questions and presented an online-questionnaire. In the process of evaluation there were interviews conducted with organisers and participants. The results of the respective projects were compared in order to identify the conditions that had to be fulfilled to achieve the objectives.

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<sup>32</sup> MISS: Multi-linguality of Internet-offers for urban development and urban planning (Mehrsprachigkeit bei Internetangeboten zur Stadtentwicklung und Stadtplanung) (<http://www.tetraeder.com/miss/>)

In conclusion, the project proofed a multilingual-internet-appearance to be helpful for the participation of migrants in urban planning, but not as a single measure. The feedback for the online-tools was higher in those projects that were using successfully additional channels to address the migrants. In any case a multilingual website fulfils the important function of a symbolic gesture, which conveys the seriousness of the project and the intention of the public administrations to be understood. (Cf. Wilforth/Neuhaus 2005, Neuhaus/Wilforth 2007)

#### *Media and channel combinations ("media mix")*

The research project "Media Mix Supporting Local Democracy" (2004-2007) conducted by the Institute for Information management Bremen investigated how administration and politics can use the Internet for supporting local political participation. Political participation means that citizens take part in the political process in order to support certain interests. eParticipation includes the use of information and communication technology.

For concrete citizen participation projects it was investigated how new media and procedures combined with old ones can be optimally used for the target groups and the contents. The basic premise was that there is no optimal media mix, but that it depends on the participation procedure, the stakeholders, the subject and the addressed target groups which media combination will lead to a high participation rate and good contributions and results. This is based on the assumption that different target groups use different media and that the different media are differently suited to represent complex issues or to summarize things precisely. The theoretical background came from participatory theory of democracy, the approach of deliberative politics, from the complex theory of democracy and from the uses-and-gratification theory in communication science.

The investigation concentrated on six cases where the researchers were involved. Data were collected by participative observation as well as by questionnaires and (phone) interviews with the main actors and addressees. Evaluation methods included the analysis of the contents of online discussions, data (logfile) evaluation, individual interviews and group discussions as well as document analysis. In order to increase the number of cases, further participation projects were included for secondary analysis. Following the subject-related theory development and the methods of action research, insights were iteratively gained, i.e., starting from a simple framework of reference, intermediate results were presented to the actors and colleagues. The findings resulting from the discussions were then used to successively enhance the framework of reference.

Main findings are:

- Means of communication fulfill different functions in a participation process and are based on each other. This is called "sequential media use". "Parallel media combinations" means that different means of communication are used to address target groups and deal with the subject in question adequately.
- Political participation requires "meta-communication": information procurement during the process and attention for the process.

- It is necessary to embed the participation procedures and meta-communication in the use context of the addressees and the users. The use context includes technical as well as socio-cultural aspects, such as Internet access, PC equipment, use habits.
- Because of the time and effort required, complex participation procedures should only be carried out in selected cases; motivation and resources in the administration should be considered. Only in a few case studies, the tools were integrated in the back-office without media break and relieved work.

(Cf. Kubicek et al. 2007, Westholm 2007, DEMO-net deliverable D6.1 2007)

### 1.4.3 Shaping the field of eParticipation research

The following research categories and subcategories can be used to characterize the national field:

- eParticipation actors – their role, relations to other actors and interaction.
  - Experts and the public – does it make sense to discuss issues in a broader public when decisions are based on scientific hard facts? (example ILP)
  - How are public institutions / civil servants accepting online applications of institutional participation? (TÖB-involvement – example ILP)
  - How are Internet-discussions representing the different interests and how are they driven by the idea of common welfare (volonté generale) (examples Hamburg, media mix...)
- eParticipation activities – what kind of activity is the eParticipation tool supporting?
  - Different means of eParticipation: Information, consultation, cooperation (examples media mix in Berlin, Bremen)
  - Outreach of specific target groups (migrants in the MISS-project, youth in media mix (Bremen and Erfurt), Families in Hamburg)
  - Relations of topics and media (media mix; municipal budget / family-friendly cities, Hamburg & Munich; urban development, Erfurt)
- Contextual factors – as infrastructure, underlying technology, accessibility, policy and legal issues, governmental organization
  - Large scale participation (example Hamburg)
  - Backoffice integration (example ILP)
  - Institutional embedment (example media mix)
  - Change of procedures (example Bundestag-ePetitioner)
- eParticipation effects – what have been the consequences of eParticipation?
  - Embedment of eParticipation in the political and organisational context (ifib, Fraunhofer IAIS, cf. also D6.1))
- eParticipation evaluation – the emergence of models of eParticipation evaluation
  - quality of discourse (examples media mix, budgeting Berlin-Lichtenberg)

#### 1.4.4 Conclusion

There is a rich research about the field of eParticipation in Germany, driven by various actors coming from different fields. Most research is combined with the conduction of the procedures which means that there can be a bias between interests of the researchers as conductors and as evaluators (cf. also DEMO-net deliverable D4.2). Meanwhile, most applied research is less theory-based and mainly based on disciplinary approaches, and transdisciplinary research is the exception.

### 1.5 Italy

#### 1.5.1 Introduction

A review about empirical studies on Italian eParticipation initiatives promoted by institutional actors (such as government, councils and political parties) has to start with the consideration that the term "eParticipation" in Italy has been used very recently in order to label innovative practices of citizens involvement in the institutional political life. Thus, studies related to this issue can be found among those works on e-democracy and digital citizenship. In order to assess the state of empirical knowledge on eParticipation institutional practices in Italy we have selected books, chapters in books and papers presented at recognized national and international academic conferences in the field of social, communicational and political sciences.

Because of a weak diffusion of eParticipation meaningful experimentations, depending also by a later diffusion of Internet access in comparison with other European countries<sup>33</sup>, in Italy there has been a narrow development of empirical research, which is in contrast with the wide and robust speculative production on the political impact of Internet and the new media since the '90ies to nowadays (Rodotà 1993, 1997, Berardi 1996, Zolo 1992, Carlini 1996, Ceri 1999, Bolognini 2001, Amoretti 2006)<sup>34</sup>. In these contributions the worries for civil rights (first of all, privacy) and democratic life (for example the risks caused by manipulative usage of the new digital tools) are counterbalanced by expectations towards opportunities of enforcing free expression and opening new channels for participation and social cohesion. E-democracy applications seem to have interested for a long time very narrow techn-elites rooted in a non-homogeneous culture (computer scientists in the University, experts of technological innovation coming from public and private sectors, and also media activists, artistic vanguards, civil and women rights movements, as well as environmental, peace and hackers movements) (Gubitosa 1996). This pioneering phase has seen also several contributions from e-democracy advocates, practitioners and digital grassroots movements (Casapulla *et alii* 1998, Manacorda 1998, Ferrero 1998, Tagliapietra 1998, Stranonetwork 1996). At the beginning of the current decade there has been a growing number of contributions, which

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<sup>33</sup> Compared to Europe, in Italy there is a lower level of access to Internet and public policies addressed to contrast digital divide appear weaker (Sartori 2006)

<sup>34</sup> Among the more recent relevant speculative contributions about e-democracy coming from Italian scholars, see Amoretti 2006, De Rosa 2000, Formenti 2006, Freschi 2007a, Musella 2007.


was the consequence of a wider diffusion of Internet access within the country, and a renewed interest towards the opportunities disclosed by the new media in the rebuilding of institutions-citizens relationships.

Empirical studies about e-democracy and ICTs political usages by the Italian institutional political actors have undergone two main phases. During the '90s the first experimentations of the Internet, either in the electoral campaigns of political parties and in the applications by municipalities, opened the ground to several explorative studies on campaigning (Bentivegna 1999, De Rosa 2000) and on the adoption of ICTs by municipalities or local associations in order to provide new instruments to citizenship participation (Berra 1997, Freschi 1998, Baglioni *et alii* 1998, Vicari 1992, CENSIS-RUR 1996-2006). As the new decade proceeds, although the view on research remains still fragmented and far from the core of the academic research agenda related to the political transformations, a more critical approach seems to be suggested by the emerging problematic results of experimentations. An attempt to bridge the gap between self-representations and practices of e-democracy was made by means of a national research promoted by the Italian government in 2003 in order to assess the state of ongoing experimentations and to define a national strategy to promote e-democracy (Formez *et alii* 2004). Because the implementation of many e-democracy projects funded by the new national was completed only in late 2007, and it is still ongoing for many others, there are very few published studies about them until now: some of them are descriptive (De Pietro-Tedeschi 2005, Macaluso 2007), some others aim to explain the emersion of this policy-field and its main general features (Freschi 2004, 2007b, 2008b, Musella 2007).

In general, from the first season of e-democracy studies to the second one, there has been a shift from a prevailing tendency to consider deterministically the effects of ICTs on political participation and democracy, for better or worse, to an approach which pays more attention to the institutional/cultural contexts of ICTs usages. The focus has gradually moved from technology to its social shaping, as well as to the institutional contexts of e-democracy and the role and expectations of different social and political actors. The apparent failures of eParticipation and e-democracy technology-driven experiences, as well as the emerging of civil society and social movements growing usages of the new media and the growing crisis of the party system have encouraged this research shift.

### **2.5.2 Studies about Italian political parties**

The main questions addressed by empirical research about the Italian institutional initiative are related to two application fields: political parties and local democracy/governance. On the first side, researchers are interested in the changing modalities of political communication, especially during the electoral campaigns, and in the related changes in the political party functioning: which is the impact of the new media on the personalization trend and on the relationship between leaders and voters? Bypassing the mediation of the media system, dominated by its-own 'logic', is it possible to reconnect representatives to the people, and vice versa? What political party's functions can be reshaped by the new media?



Do politicians favour dialogic arena with their electorate or do they prefer to maintain an asymmetrical role in communication (i.e. by the usage of polls)? Do new media reduce the influence of intermediate organizational levels between leaders and citizens? What is peculiar of the Italian context in these transformations?

This branch of studies has explored the above questions with reference to the change of political landscape in the last 15 years in Italy, but also to some deeper and more general transformation of political participation in contemporary western societies. Indeed, mediatisation and personalization of politics are the core trends inspiring these empirical works. As far as research methods are concerned, most research on the adoption of ICTs by political parties is fundamentally based on the analysis of online communication; the adoption of interviews and focus groups is an exception (Newell 2001, Kies 2005).

Three main phases of the transformation in the way political parties exploited the new media in the last decade - always in a strategic manner related to their organizational needs (Bentivegna 2006) - have been identified. From 1996 up to 2000 political parties conceived their websites as a mean to inform the voters and publish their political programs. In the following period (2001-2004) a learning attitude toward the new interactive opportunities opened by the new media prevailed; from 2004, a phase of technological experimentation prevailed, in order to achieve wider advantages in targeted marketing and disintermediation of information flows.

The peculiar concentration of the national media system has been considered a reason for the early interest of some smaller political parties or internal minorities towards digital networks as alternative channels that could compensate the lack of access to mainstream and national media. Thus, the usage of new media to promote deliberative processes among activists - by means of a lively online forum, generating and supporting new social face-to-face interactions, trustful relationships and quite well spread digital skills among the participants (Kies 2005) - is seen as a strategic resource for the political organization marginalized in the colonized public sphere (Freschi 2000), or for smaller groups within big parties (Picci 2002).

The bureaucratic organizational models and the cultural background, quite far from a technological competence, have been considered as an element that explains the low readiness of political parties in adopting the new media (De Rosa 2000). The new digital media would provide new channels for a 'fluid' and 'loyal' citizen political participation, far from the old belonging behaviour typical of the old-fashioned bureaucratic political parties, as well as from the kind of involvement of social movements. Newell (2001), who have accompanied the analysis of the websites with a set of interviews to the communication directors of seven parties in 2000, supports the idea that the new digital media, and especially the Internet, have started to play partly a different role in favour of a revitalization of a more usual functioning of the activist base.

In Italy the diffusion of Internet clashes with a profound transformation of the national party system leading from "party-based" campaigns to

“candidate-based” ones<sup>35</sup>. The emergence of new types of electoral campaigning, based on non-coordinated, decentralized online and offline initiatives (the so-called ‘open source’ campaigns), is unavoidable and perceived as a threat to the party or electoral committee control (Bentivegna 2006). Lusoli, Gibson and Ward (2007), combining quantitative and qualitative data, have confirmed that the potential of the new media for a real participation within Italian political parties and towards the public is largely underdeveloped<sup>36</sup>. Some studies on political parties’ websites (Freschi 2000, Bentivegna 2006, Vaccari 2008) confirm the relevance of the organizational model and of the political orientation in relation to the provision to the citizens of opportunities to interact discursively with the party and its candidates.

In conclusion, studies about the adoption of the new online media by Italian political parties point out a lack of specific attention in providing the citizens with deliberative and dialoguing spaces, both internal and external. Nevertheless, an interesting element comes from the competitive environment created by the elections: (active) citizens use more the Internet to search information; dedicated websites are promoted with success by local associations and peculiar services of party profiling are created and managed, involving users, by no-profit associations (Bentivegna 2006, Peart-Beaz 2007, Balocchi *et alii* 2008).

### 2.5.3 Studies on local e-democracy

The studies more directly addressed to eParticipation initiated by the Italian institutions focus mainly the local institutions, particularly at municipality level. The local dimension has been reputed by decision-makers, civil society actors and scholars as a crucial field, especially in Italy, in the reshaping of citizens/institutions relationships. Moreover, the ‘90s constitute a very important decade for Italian local politics, mainly because of the reform of local authorities and the renewed relevance of cities and regions in the national political agenda.

In Italy the first digital cities emerged in the middle of the ‘90s, in the form of pioneering experiences. These first digital cities showed different profiles, according to the role assumed by local government in different contexts. A model focused on the central initiative of the institutional actor is the one that mostly prevails: in the case of the internationally well known *Iperbole* project, promoted by the Municipality of Bologna (Tambini 1998; Capecchi 2004; De Rosa, 2000) this centrality is declined as a new

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<sup>35</sup> This trend has been interrupted by a new reform in 2006 that reintroduced a proportional system with a bonus prize for the winning party-coalition and erased the opportunity to vote individual candidates within party lists.

<sup>36</sup> In the 2001 general elections only 1 out of 10 candidates to the *Camera dei Deputati* (Chamber of Deputies) and 1 out of 17 to the Senate had a website. The European elections of 2004 witnessed a growing online presence of candidates: 251 out of the 995 Italian candidates (Miani 2004). The largest parties had the bigger weight of online presence of their candidates (72% of the candidates of *L’Ulivo* coalition, and 54% of *Forza Italia* coalition). As an effect of the new electoral system, the presence of personal website of the candidates diminished in comparison with the 2001 and the 2004 elections. A study (Lusoli *et alii* 2007) includes an accurate analysis of 24 websites of political parties, finding out a weak development of the interactive services.



component of the citizenship. A second kind shows a less central role of the municipality, which provides services like other institutional actors, associations and private partners associated to the civic network: it is the case of RCM of Milan, started by the University (Casapulla *et alii* 1998). The distinction of initiators/owners can overlap the identification of two main functions of digital cities: as providers of modernized administrative services and/or of new public space, where citizens, associated or individually, and political institutions can enter in contact on the basis of a more dialogical relationship (CENSIS-RUR 1997-2006, Berra 1997-2003, Freschi 1998-2008, De Rosa 2000). According to some studies (Bolognini 2001, Freschi 1998, 2008) a further distinction concerns the vision of democracy and participation: it is possible to identify an approach inspired to referenda or polls, according to the ideal-type of techno-politics, on one side and, on the other side, a more open, continuous and deliberative model of participation, which stresses horizontal communication and new social relationships enabled by and within the new virtual spaces<sup>37</sup>(Rodotà 1993, 1997).

The main questions focused at this pioneering stage dealt with the relevance of ICTs in the modernization of government and the improvement of local development; the support to local community identity under the pressure of cultural and economic globalization; the need to identify new communication resources to promote social cohesion; the nature of digital citizenship, its relationship with the market and with the local development model (Berra 1997, Freschi 1998, Baglioni *et alii* 1998).

#### **a. Extensive studies**

A turning point in studies about e-democracy in Italy is represented by the national study (Formez *et alii* 2004) promoted by the Ministry of Technological Innovation in 2003, finalized of the drafting of a specific line of policy on e-democracy, launched in 2004 within the framework of the second stage of the national e-government plan. The research report provides two sections: the first one tries to identify the different dimensions of e-democracy, to summarize the limits of the institutional experimentations, to assess the diffusion of ICTs to support participatory policies in Italy, overcoming the prevailing separation between online and offline-based experiences, and to propose a strategy to develop local e-democracy by means of integrating both kind of experiences and stressing more the relevance of transparency, timely information, discursive methods than the role of sophisticated technologies (Freschi 2004a). Interviews, focus groups, documents analysis are the main research instruments adopted for the draft of this first section, which has been

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<sup>37</sup> Since 1997 Censis-Rur has been providing almost yearly a report on the development of digital services at local level, mostly based on the analysis of websites of local institutions in Italy (from 1997 to 2006). The 1997 report identified five municipalities as best practices (Modena, Siena, Bologna, Venice, Cagliari) and four metropolitan area networks (Turin, Milan, Bologna and Rome): among these experiences, Bologna and Rome were those which had paid attention to interactive participative usages. In 2004 Censis-Rur committed a specific report on e-democracy focusing on the problem of digital divide and on its overcoming as an essential pre-condition to guarantee the development of e-democracy.

particularly influential in the following Italian literature about e-democracy (Cavallo 2005, De Giorgi 2007, Grandi-Vaccari 2007). The second section of the report offers a snapshot of e-democracy applications at local level in Italy, made by means of an online questionnaire. The main contribution of this national study consists in having distinguished different dimensions of e-democracy (dealing with preconditions and tools of democracy *tout court*), and in having delimited the specific aim of the policy on the citizen participation in decision-making processes at local level, more than on the development of technologies.

Besides this national study there are also some other extensive research efforts. For example, Berra (2003) identified six types of digital cities (according to six different priorities: communication and relationship among citizens, communication and relationship between citizens and institutions, territorial coordination among public institutions, territorial modernization of public institutions, local development, social cohesion), derived from a content analysis of websites (data gathering in 2001). Since 1997 Censis-Rur has been providing almost yearly a report on the development of digital services at local level, mostly based on the analysis of websites of local institutions in Italy (Censis\_Rur, from 1997 to 2006). Although the useful overall picture of the digital cities in the country, the main methodological limit of this kind of survey depends on the fact that the service supply is analyzed, while their effective use remains unexplored<sup>38</sup>.

Two further extensive studies have been conducted by Peart and Diaz (2007) and Macaluso (2007). Notwithstanding the limits done by the adopted research techniques (mainly website analysis), the first one underlines the need to include the political context in studying the e-democracy project<sup>39</sup>. Macaluso (2007), through a study of the websites of 56 Italian e-democracy projects, analyzes the presence/absence of the projects on the web and then the kind of activities carried out, revealing a rather disappointing picture, in which as of 1 July 2007 only 32 projects out of 56 are on line. A year later the number is increased of 4 units, but the main problems are the general low achievements of the whole policy in terms of citizens participation (Freschi 2008).

## **b. Case studies**

The most useful studies about local e-democracy in Italy come from the field of 'qualitative' case studies, at regional and local level, particularly related to the transformation of local governance and society (Vicari 1998, Berra 1997, Freschi 1998, Baglioni-Berra 1999) and to communication studies (De Rosa 2000, Boccia *et alii* 2000, Casapulla *et alii* 1998).

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<sup>38</sup> To document e-democracy experiences, the *Assemblee Legislative Regionali* (Regional Legislative Assemblies, 2005) have promoted a survey based on a questionnaire sent by email to the representatives of the Regional Councils and the autonomous Provinces of Bolzano and Trento: findings showed that attention on e-democracy by the Councils Institutions is rather recent and that the most relevant practices are predominantly in the Centre-North.

<sup>39</sup> This study provides three descriptions of e-democracy projects of the municipality of Argenta, of the XI municipality in Rome and of the municipality of Catania.

By exploring cases of Delphi Method online and offline applications to decision-making processes at regional and municipal level (Lombardy and Bologna), Bolognini (2001) provides a critical analysis. Main findings are related to the risk of manipulative usages of eParticipation. The comparison of three Italian regional contexts, with different political, economic and social features (Piemonte, Lombardia and Emilia Romagna) points out the interplay among different actors (public, private and non profit). The emerging of different models of digital cities and regions arises challenges and tensions between public and private sector (Baglioni-Berra 1999). The alternative between market and community appears as a crucial issue, which is at the basis of the possibility to reshape urban relationships through digital networks (Berra 1997). In a recent phase (Berra 2003), a trend to integrate projects and initiatives aiming to promote a further stage of digital citizenship and digital government has emerged. This shift from a spontaneous growth to an institutional governance of these initiatives is led by 'creative' leaders, political as well as economic or associative ones (Berra 2003, p.183).

The characteristics of the civic network *Iperbole* in Bologna has been studied by Tambini (1998). Available services, short-term goals, users' profile and the agenda of the online discussions are described. One of the emerging nodal points refers to the social selectivity of electronic citizenship: among the "iperbolians" there is a clear majority of employed young males. In a city with a strong leftist subculture, users are mostly left-wing, suggesting that the Net tends to reinforce local political hegemony.

The relevance of socio-economic, political and cultural contexts in shaping different experiences of digital networks in cities characterized by different models of political regulation and economic development is underlined by Freschi (1998, 2002). The study compares two digital cities in central Italy (Florence and Prato), geographically very close to each other but different in socio-economic features (a tertiary city and an industrial district) and size (with the related different complexity of the bureaucratic public bodies). Based on online website analysis, interviews and focus groups, the study identifies different views adopted by political and social actors about what digital citizenship means. The relevance of the growing links between online and offline relationships in building social capital for individual citizens and groups emerged.

In a later work (Freschi 2007c), the analysis of the case of Florence covers ten years of practice and it is contextualized both in the national and local political frames and in the process of new media diffusion. Problems as the gap between online and offline institutional initiatives, the absence of an online communication with the administration, the few online spaces left at citizens' disposal, seem to be the basic reasons for the failure of institutional participative online services. However, the online initiatives of the civil society seem to be more dynamic and more oriented towards deliberative-discursive processes. The main research conclusion is that current practices of e-democracy may have an effect of de-politicizing the relationships between citizens and politicians, by means of a shift from a political debate on strategic choices for the city's future, to a more routinized, administration-oriented confrontation. In other words, the aim of gathering data from citizens prevails on that of deliberating together.

In conclusion, the more recent empirical studies on the Italian institutional experiences of eParticipation have begun to deepen together all the following dimensions: the characteristics of the context; the effects of the practices in terms of opening, inclusiveness, transparency, interactivity and concrete implications on decision-making processes (Balocchi *et alii* 2007). A fresh example is represented by a study focusing on a participatory process of law-making promoted by the Regional Government of Tuscany (Italy)<sup>40</sup>, whose most important event was a one-day Electronic Town Meeting (ETM) which involved around 500 citizens (Cellini *et alii* 2007, Freschi *et alii* 2007, Freschi-Raffini 2008,). The research adopts a wide range of quantitative and qualitative instruments (from survey on participants to ethnographic observation and content analysis) in order to capture the interrelations between political contexts and deliberative experimentations adopting ICTs and to focus effectively some crucial nodes of the experimentations ongoing both online and offline (inclusiveness, discursive process, impact on decision making process and public sphere). The study reveals a significant discrepancy between the actual features of the process and the self-representation provided by the institutional promoters. Only few ordinary citizens were involved, and they have very similar political orientations. During the ETM the development of discursive processes has been really limited. The experimentation can be actually characterized as a consultation of stakeholders, politically closer to the regional government. Nevertheless, this experimentation has had the important political effect of integrating the issue of participation in the institutional political agenda.

#### 2.5.4 Conclusions


Studies on institutional eParticipation experiences in Italy include two mayor strands: studies on the digital civic networks and studies on the usages made by political parties.

The review have clearly showing that Italian political parties started to value Internet at the beginning of the new decade, but their usage of the web to foster citizens participation is still at an early stage, compared to the development of other forms of eParticipation, both in the institutional domain and, mainly, in the non-institutional one.

eParticipation is more related to the spread of local civic networks. Since the mid of the '90s there is an interesting growth of experimentations at local level, depending partially on the changing political context, characterized by the transformation of the political party system and by the new centrality of local institutions, increased by several institutional reforms. The first research contributions on these topics in the 90's were mostly descriptive and often characterized by an optimistic outlook and by an attitude basically inclined to technological determinism. Nevertheless,

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<sup>40</sup> Tuscany is a peculiar region, characterized by traditionally high rates of political participation, and by the development of an extended neo-corporatist model of local governance. Some of these traits appeared nowadays growingly challenged by the disorganizing effects of economic and cultural globalization over the basis of the local political and social representative systems. An aspect of these wider processes is the increasing number of grassroots groups (over 150 within the region) expressing claims and proposals outside the institutional channels.



there were also some studies that proposed a critical analysis about the implications of new digital media on democracy and citizen participation. Beside some extensive surveys, usually based on website analysis and focused on the quantitative increase of the services supply, more in-depth empirical studies are provided by case studies on some emblematic civic network experiences. These qualitative empirical studies move from description to a critical analysis about the role of different social and political actors (such as administrative officials, political representatives, civil society organizations, individual citizens); the features and the political functions related to different local experiences; the effects on the decision-making process and on the collective action, together with the models of ICTs usage, evaluated with reference to the peculiar political and social context. As a consequence, more recent researches carry out a more sophisticated mix of qualitative and quantitative techniques, and a more developed interpretative frame stressing the need for a contextualized analysis.


## **1.6 Sweden**

### **1.6.1 Introduction**

In Sweden, governments at both national and local levels have been keen to pursue e-government where it has led to administrative efficiency but have seen eParticipation as a lower or secondary priority. Therefore research into this issue has been mainly speculative, reflecting upon what is possible with the technology. However, this literature overview of eParticipation research in the administrative and political domain in Sweden will focus on empirical studies only. Such research is primarily undertaken by three disciplines - political science, media and communication and informatics - and the main questions addressed can be sorted into three main categories: (1) research on citizens' Internet usage, (2) research on political parties, campaigns and representatives, and (3) research on local government eParticipation initiatives.

### **1.6.2 Research on Citizens' usage Patterns**

One of the few clear political goals relevant to this field is that Sweden should be an information society for all. For this and other reasons, Internet usage patterns among citizens are quite well researched. Primarily this research is carried out by research institutes and agencies - like the World Internet Institute, the SOM-institute, the Swedish Institute for Transport and Communications Analysis and Statistics Sweden - and it is mainly quantitative in nature. These studies describe how the Internet in its different forms influences people's behaviour, habits, and needs, but eParticipation is usually not the preliminary research object. Their results show that Sweden is one of those countries where Internet penetration and use has reached deepest in society, but also that eParticipation is still a limited phenomenon that mainly reinforces traditional patterns of political participation. In 2005, 48 percent of the population had visited their local government website, 13 a web site of a political party, 14 percent the national government and 10 percent a blog (Bergström 2006).



Recent studies in the UK by Gibson, Lusoli and Ward in 2005 and Di Gennaro and Dutton in 2006 demonstrate that eParticipation cannot be treated as a simple add-on in research on Internet usage. Their analysis differs from the Swedish studies in that they significantly widen the understanding of the dependent variable — online participation — as well as introducing new Internet-specific variables as explanatory factors for this new type of participation. Using this broader ‘contextualised’ model of online political activity, they find support for the idea that the Internet is expanding the numbers of the politically active, specifically in terms of reaching groups that are typically inactive or less active in conventional or offline forms of politics. At a broader level, these findings point to the need for Swedish scholars (and scholars in many other countries) in this area to work towards a more sophisticated theoretical and empirical modelling of participation in the online environment.

There are a few qualitative and bottom-up oriented studies on citizen Internet use that include such a contextualised understanding of online political activity. Instead of making quantitative analysis of uses, these researchers often focus on how people renegotiate the new media in their use and reception. For instance, Olsson (2004, 2005) traces the mechanisms of political interest and engagement in relation to Internet in interviews with young Swedes. Writing from a constructivist perspective, the overarching question for him is the extent to which ICTs can facilitate political learning and involvement. In connection with this, there is evidence of a movement towards user-centred thinking in the public sector. Ekelin (2003) explores prevailing practices and motives of public organizations’ involvement of citizens in web-based design. To close the circle of ICT as both a place for democratic mediation and intervention, in his doctoral thesis Norén (2008) argues that it is time to investigate how eParticipation methods can be used to facilitate a broader involvement in public sector design issues. Even though these qualitative approaches might be quite fruitful, more research is needed to say whether user involvement is leading to a more ‘democratic design’ of public web applications or if partaking in design somehow contributes to democratic fostering and empowerment.

### **1.6.3 Research on Parties, Campaigns and Representatives**


Besides studies of citizens’ political use of eParticipation opportunities in the political and administrative domain, the impact of the Internet on political representatives, campaigns and parties has been of interest for Swedish scholars. These have primarily focused on the contents of websites and reasons behind adoption or non-adoption of technology. Like several others, Buskqvist (2007) concludes that political parties in Sweden primarily use their websites as a campaign tool to convey political messages. A striking result from his study is that citizens are largely discouraged from engaging in dialogue with parties during election campaigns. Zittel (2004) have found that lack of staff and money to communicate with constituents function as one incentive to ignore new opportunities for increasing MPs’ personal profile in Sweden and to focus more on geographic constituencies rather than party. He also finds that many Swedish MPs voice outright opposition to the idea of using the web

to enhance their communication with constituents as they emphasize their general role as a representative of a party who has to implement the party platform. This is not surprising, since the Swedish democratic tradition strongly emphasizes the role of the parties as formulators of policy and channels of influence. Compared to other European countries, Sweden stands out as an extreme case in this regard. However, there is no reason to take a strong social determinist stance. As Löfgren (2001) points out, there are some important variations among the parties that reflect different party traditions and cultures in Sweden. Boyd (2008) has provided evidence that there are new forms of grassroots parties that put emphasis on eParticipation, and Lindh and Miles (2007) have also found that Swedish MPs in general are becoming more of 'electronic parliamentarians'. Furthermore, surveys targeting local councillors show that experienced Internet users have much greater confidence in technology's democracy potential than unexperienced Internet users; that they are more positive towards strategic usage of the new technology in politics; and that they especially are more positive towards proposals that allow a higher degree of citizen participation in the decision-making process. The way in which technology is used at one stage thus seems to be of importance for the goals and operations associated with the technology at a later stage. The findings can be interpreted as a cumulative technological effect, or a process in which the goals are gradually being adjusted to the available means (Åström 2004; 2005; Åström & Brodin 2001).

Perhaps because of the quite limited use of eParticipation methods so far, there are very few evaluations focusing on what eParticipation would mean for the role and functioning of political parties and representatives. Evaluation of the electoral impact of web campaigns on voters has been just as limited. Only one study by Martinsson (1999) addresses this question, using data from the 1998 election. After investigating the factors determining personal Internet use and public web campaigning among candidates, he examines the impact of web campaigning on levels of electoral support, compared with other more traditional forms of campaigning, such as direct mail and canvassing. Findings show that web campaigning is more prominent among younger and resource-strong candidates. In terms of party affiliation, right wing candidates were more likely to campaign online than those from other parties. More significantly, he showed that despite being linked with traditional campaigning techniques, web campaigning had a small but independent impact on the level of electoral support that a candidate receives.

#### **1.6.4 Research on Local Government eParticipation Initiatives**

Local governments have a prominent position in Sweden as they are responsible for the major part of carrying out national welfare policies. They are also considered to be the cradle of Swedish democracy and the most important arena for democratic renewal. For these reasons, a relatively large part of research within this area has focused on local government eParticipation initiatives. In order to obtain a broad view of what initiatives the municipalities are actually taking when introducing the Internet in the democratic process, several quantitative content analyses of web pages have been carried out. For instance, Wiklund (2005) has




measured the ICT infrastructure to support public deliberation, and Åström (2004) has analysed different aspects of information and communication at three separate occasions during the period 2001-03. This kind of mapping exercise enables a rough outline of the policy development and the identification of the values that are being emphasised in practice. While Åström's study shows that Swedish local governments generally make careful use of the technology – making information available and communicating roughly as before – rather than using the medium in order to recreate politics and regenerate the relationship between local government and the citizens, Wiklund concludes that the services existing today support processes of social learning through rational argumentation only to a limited extent.

Furthermore, these studies are valuable when it comes to explaining and understanding the causes, the driving forces and counteracting forces of eParticipation initiatives (see also: Baldersheim 2004; Haug 2003). As many other studies, Åström finds size to be an important determinant of web page development. Size may be interpreted as a needs-related factor: large municipalities have more pressing communication needs than smaller ones and grasp the electronic opportunities faster in the hope of reducing transaction costs. Larger municipalities may also have more capacity to bear the development costs inherent in being an early adopter. For smaller municipalities it is rational to wait and see. There are also technological determinants of web development, especially the state of electronic infrastructure (availability of high capacity cable networks) in the area of a municipality. While political factors, such as the ideology of the dominant political party, has not been found to be of any significance for the features of the municipal web pages, there is a path dependency when it comes to the history of innovation in the respective cities. Organisations with a previous record of innovation tend to be earlier adopters also when it comes to e-democracy.

It can be seen that the Internet has so far primarily been used to provide information and receive questions or comments from the public. However, there are some more innovative projects initiated by local governments such as online forums, e-panels and online deliberative referendums. Case studies focusing on these projects usually combine several qualitative methods, such as elite semi-structured interviews with administrators and elected representatives, and content analysis of documents and online debates. They often describe the basis of the initiative, process management, different actors' perceptions of them as well as lessons learnt. One common conclusion is that governmental and citizen perspectives are significantly different from each other, especially when it comes to online debates, and that elected representatives and public officials are rather disconnected from these processes (see, for instance: Åström 2004; Granberg & Åström 2007; Nilsson & Eneman 2005; Ranerup 1999; Grönlund 2001, 2005). Somewhat more positive evaluations have followed the so-called 'deliberative referendums' in cities like Kalix, Malmö, Vara and Sigtuna (Åström 2004; Eklund 2002; Becker & Ohlin 2006; Reinikainen & Reitberger 2008; Grönlund 2001, 2005). Most importantly, perhaps, is that they seem to have had a real impact on policy decisions.





We are, however, only at the beginning of identifying the conditions under which eParticipation fails or succeeds. Although there is much speculation on what makes these processes successful or failing, few definite statements can be made for all eParticipation methods, for all policy arenas, for all stages in the policy process, and for all participants. What works in one situation may not work in another. One weakness in the Swedish case studies and evaluations is the general lack of information about the experiences of participants and their attitudes to these processes. For this reason, there is no real understanding of citizens' needs, experiences and attitudes to consultations and different consultation processes. Another weakness is the lack of comparative studies. In order to get a more distanced and critical view of the cases, a more systematic comparative approach would be helpful.

### **1.6.5 Conclusions**

Swedish empirical research on eParticipation in the political and administrative arenas is still quite limited, much due to the few significant eParticipation projects that have taken place, but also because the relationship between technology and politics is in the 'border regions' within the classical sciences. Research on these issues is mainly undertaken by entrepreneurial scholars (often young) within political science, informatics and media and communication, working in relative isolation from one another and with little institutional support (Olsson & Åström 2006). For obvious reasons, these researchers have gone where new eParticipation initiatives have been most visible, focusing on citizen usage of the Internet, political parties, campaigns and representatives, and local government eParticipation initiatives. There are big gaps, for instance when it comes to central administration and government operations. Also research on Internet usage needs more sophisticated theoretical and empirical modelling of participation in the online environment, and we need more rigorous evaluations of the various 'impacts' of web campaigns and local government initiatives.

# International research on eParticipation in an Administrative and Political perspective

## 1.7 Introduction

This chapter discusses the most recent eParticipation international research contributions, focusing on administrative and political perspective. The eParticipation research field has received attention from a number of different disciplines and scientific backgrounds so far. However, despite the emergence of some first attempts to scope the research field with more precision (Päivärinta and Sæbø, 2006; Medaglia, 2007; Sanford and Rose, 2007), the research area is still in need of refinement as far as describing the scenario of up-to-date research available is concerned.

## 1.8 Method

For this chapter we have selected the most recent contributions on eParticipation research from administrative and political perspective, focusing on the international dimension of the contributions' diffusion, by scanning international journals, books, conference papers published in English language and focusing on Europe at local, national, and supranational level.

### 1.8.1 Selection strategy

We have enquired established library databases, which are widely recognized and used by the international research community, such as EBSCO, Web of Science, and IEEE Explore. This in order to capture what are deemed to be all the internationally relevant research contributions regarding European countries, coming from established journals and conferences. The three databases index more than 8,000 journals in the fields of natural science, social science, and humanities, including important public administration journals, such as *Government Information Quarterly* and *Public Administration Review*, and the major journals of Information Systems.

The literature review carried out in this chapter draws on the selection strategy adopted in Sæbø et al. (2008), which at the moment represents the most comprehensive and up-to-date literature review regarding eParticipation research. Therefore, in order to retrieve a first comprehensive group of research articles related to eParticipation, we have enquired the systems listed above by using the following sets of keywords in the abstract and the title:

1. eDemocracy, using additional search phrases: eDemocracy, electronic democracy, democracy and Internet, democracy and information system, digital democracy.
2. eParticipation, using additional search phrases: eParticipation, electronic participation, eGovernment and participation, eGovernance and participation, eConsultation, ePetition.

3. eInclusion, using additional search phrase: digital divide and participation (within the results of digital divide since digital divide returned more than 450 hits).

The keyword search covered all publications in the period from March 2006, which is the last month covered by the previous literature review by Sæbø et al., to March 2008. The bibliographical items retrieved through the keyword search were then scanned in their titles and abstract, excluding all research contributions related only to non-EU countries. As a result, a library of 47 articles was created, to form the basis of the literature analysis.

The categories adopted to classify the literature contributions were also taken from the model proposed by Sæbø et al. (2008). This has been done not only due to the comprehensiveness of the classification model provided in such a contribution, but also to ensure continuity and longitudinal comparability in the analysis of the development of the eParticipation research field. The model includes the following categories:

- \* eParticipation actors (Citizens; Politicians; Government institutions; Voluntary organizations);
  - \* eParticipation activities (eVoting; Online political discourse; Online decision making; eActivism; eConsultation; eCampaigning; ePetitioning);
  - \* Contextual factors (Information availability; Infrastructure; Underlying technologies; Accessibility; Policy and legal issues; Governmental organization);
  - \* eParticipation effects (Civic engagements effects; Deliberative effects; Democratic effects);
  - \* eParticipation evaluation (Quantity of eParticipation; Demographic of participants; Tone and style in the online activities);
- eParticipation theories and research methods (Survey; Case study; Action research; Content and discourse analysis; National state of the art).

## 1.9 Findings

This section outlines the eParticipation field by exploring international eParticipation research contributions related to the following categories: actors, activities, contextual factors, effects, evaluation and methods.


### 1.9.1 Actors and activities

#### **Actors**

The role of actors in processes initiated within eParticipation is a crucial research issue that many contributions focus on. Actors involved in eParticipation activities can be citizens, politicians, government institutions, and voluntary organizations.

#### **Citizens**

A large number of eParticipation research contributions focus on citizens as playing a crucial role in eParticipation processes. Some contributions focus on how discussion interaction is initiated among participating citizenry (Ferber et al., 2006; 2007), while others look at the creation of spontaneous citizen mobilization enabled by ICT (Suàrez, 2006). On the



other hand, research such as the one carried out by Trechsel (2007) questions whether citizens actually gain inclusion in the political system as a result of ICT-enabled participatory devices, such as online voting. Kolsaker and Lee-Kelley (2006; 2007) present findings that suggest that citizens actually perceive little value in e-government as a tool of democratic participation. Similarly, Hansen and Reinau (2006) argue that active involvement among citizens, contrarily to the policy makers' intentions, is limited to rather limited groups.

### **Politicians**

Politicians are focused on to a lesser extent in the most recent international eParticipation research. Some studies investigate the use of ICT by Members of Parliament (Cardoso et al., 2006; Chappelet and Kilchemann, 2006), concluding that often politicians claim to be enthusiastic of their potential, but are ill-prepared on the many issues raised by their use (Dai, 2007).

### **Government institutions**

A larger number of studies investigate eParticipation as an output of governmental initiative, including the supranational level represented by the EU (Wright, 2007).

At the national level, Wright (2006b) examines eParticipation initiatives as a key leg of national ICT policy strategies. Empirical research on parliamentary websites carried out by Setälä and Grönlund (2006) underlines how publicity on those websites cannot replace the role of other mediating actors such as journalists, political activists and parties. Wright (2006), on the other hand, investigates central government-run online fora, focusing on the delicate role of the discussion moderator, and on its effects on deliberation freedom and censorship power.

At the local level of government, assessments of municipality websites often lead to concluding that the focus of the ICT applications concentrates technologies on the management and delivery of services, rather than on participation (Carrizales et al., 2006; Torres et al., 2006). Findings on eParticipation policies outputs at the local level of government also clearly indicate how technology is mainly behaving as an enabler within preexisting social and political structures (Medaglia, 2007b). Similarly, Moody (2007) argues that it is the institutional setting of a government that shapes the potentials of participation in an ICT-enabled environment, such as the one represented by Geographic Information Systems.

### **Voluntary organizations**

The role of voluntary organizations, also referred to as civil society organizations, is approached both as a dependent and as an independent variable with regards to eParticipation processes. Suárez (2006) looks at a borderline phenomenon such as spontaneous citizen mobilisation as enabled by mobile technologies during unexpected public opinion crises, such as a terrorist attack.

## **Activities**

The following range of *activities* tackled in international eParticipation research includes eVoting, online political discourse, online decision making and eActivism.

### **eVoting**

A number of contributions focusing on eVoting actually consist of design proposals of new hardware and software architectures for electronic voting systems (Salazar et al., 2008; Qadah and Taha, 2007), that either try to overcome the limitations in opinion representation of traditional voting systems (Geldermann and Ludwig, 2007), or are aimed at increasing citizen trust (Antoniou et al., 2007), and their usability and acceptance (Prosser et al., 2007). On the more research-focused side, Bannister and Connolly (2007) underline the risk issues raised by eVoting implementation, including electoral error and fraud, and try to provide a comprehensive risk assessment framework for investigating such systems.

### **Online political discourse**

As far as the development of political discourse on online platforms is concerned, interesting findings are pointed out by Ferber et al. (2006). They show how it is on community networks and commercial Web sites, rather than on government-run fora, that citizens engage more in political issues. Despite participation being still limited to a small number of people, discussions on politics and government have been observed to spring remarkably on private-run platforms. A similar argument is confirmed in Ferber et al. (2007), by assessing the higher potential of community websites, when compared to e.g. legislature sites, to attract political discussion and citizen engagement in political discourse.

### **Online decision making**

Similarly to contributions focusing on eVoting, online decision-making is tackled by a number of contributions in terms of design proposals for e.g. ICT-supported participatory budgeting (Insua et al., 2006; Caceres et al., 2007). Renton and Macintosh (2007) highlight the great potential of an ICT-enabled technique, such as computer-supported argument mapping in policy decision-making, by investigating the case of Scottish Parliament discussion on smoking in public places. Similarly, Lourenco and Costa (2007) propose an ICT-enabled Problem Structuring Method (PSM) as a way to engage citizens in collaborative writing processes to produce policy documents that are agreed upon. On a more speculative side, Geldermann and Ludwig (2007) discuss the pros and cons, in terms of democratic values, of weighing opinion votes in multicriteria decision making, such as urban planning.

### **eConsultation**

Initiatives of eConsultation are outlined in regards to local government initiatives. In this case, eConsultation is seen as a temporary objective in the incremental progression from ICT-enabled information provision, to active participation (Hilton, 2006).

## 1.9.2 Contextual factors and effects

### **Contextual factors**

In this section studies focusing on contextual factors affecting eParticipation are first analyzed. These are issues that are difficult to characterize as eParticipation activities, but nevertheless affect eParticipation by being part of the context.

### **Underlying technologies**

Technologies employed in eParticipation initiatives are often referred to as independent variables. Carenini et al. (2006) discuss a case study on the effect of the introduction of Natural Language Processing on an e-democracy project, highlighting the difficulties that such a technology faces in improving communication between citizens and the public sector. Some contributions focus on technologies applied to e-voting (Salazar et al., 2008; Qadah and Taha, 2007), on participatory budgeting (Insua et al., 2007; Caceres et al., 2007), or on innovative particular Problem Structuring Methods (PMS) applied to local participatory processes (Lourenco and Costa, 2007).

Suàrez (2006) focuses on the effect of mobile diffusion on the likelihood of spontaneous political mobilization, bringing the example of the outcome of national election in Spain in 2004, after the crisis started by a number of terrorist attacks.

### **Governmental organization**

The way governments are organized is argued to affect eParticipation processes, activities, and outcomes. Vedel (2006) and Wright (2006) provide some reflections on how the characteristics of governments, such as the degree of transparency, the access to information provided to citizenry, and the availability of *fora* for discussion, affect the way eDemocracy has been approached in different historical and national contexts.

Torres et al. (2006) by conducting a study on online features adoption in a number of European cities, bring evidence of a poor degree of interactivity of online channels, and show that technology is currently behaving as an enabler within preexisting social and political structures.

From an original management point of view, Andersen et al. (2007) introduce an insight into the dilemma that governments have to face when adopting eParticipation policies, in terms of deciding whether to spend on either *other* activities for citizen involvement, or on activities *other than* citizen involvement.

### **Effects**

Research on eParticipation *effects* focuses on the desired or undesired outcome and impact of eParticipation activities, thus considered as an independent variable.

### **Civic engagement effects**

Civic engagement effects refer to changes in the scope and reach of participation as enabled by technology. Changes can concern actors, processes, and forms of participation. However, conclusions on these research questions are still somewhat contradictory. A study by Kim (2006) argues that civic engagement effects are to be explained with existing deliberative practices in a community, rather than with the adoption of technologically-mediated fora.

### **Deliberative effects**

Deliberation is usually connected to the idea of a liberal democratic participatory process in which ideas are debated in a fair, egalitarian and factual way. Many of the contributions on this field are theoretical in nature. Dahlberg (2007; 2007b) points out the danger of a fragmentation and polarization of the public sphere, as a result of the diffusion of Internet-based forms of political participation. Wright (2007), on the other hand, tests a similar proposition by investigating a European online debate forum, reaching similar, not so optimistic, conclusions on the decline of the public sphere as we are used to conceptualize it.

Wright and Street (2007) point out the role of design, e.g. of different types of online fora, in shaping the type of deliberation occurring in digitally-enabled participatory practices.

### **Democratic effects**

Directly linked to the deliberative and civic engagement effects, there is the issue of general democratic effects of eParticipation. The adoption of new forms of ICT-mediated channels is discussed as enhancing, reducing, or generally reshaping the way democracies work. At such level of abstraction, no conclusive answer is provided, based on empirical basis. Walton (2007) speculates about the coming of a “modern global direct democracy” as a result of technology diffusion. Boyd (2007), on the other hand, provides a number of scenario examples on the future possibilities of eDemocracy, and the challenges posed by technologically-enabled participatory options, such as user profiling, or weighted voting.


### **1.9.3 Evaluation and methods**

eParticipation research contributions also differ in the research methods they adopt, and for the presence of evaluation-oriented studies.

Studies with a focus on the evaluation of eParticipation usually collect data on the *quantity* of eParticipation, on the *demographic* of participants, and on the *tone and style* in the online activities.

#### **Quantity of eParticipation**

A simple criterion for measuring eParticipation is by focusing on the “quantity” of participation, referred to as e.g. the number of participants, the time span of participation, etc. However, while previously more common (Sæbø et al. 2008: 15), focus on quantity of participation is less frequent in recent research. Hilton (2006) conducts a survey on eParticipation actors within a multi-method national study on eDemocracy pilots in England. Maciel and Garcia (2007) propose an original model for



measuring the degree of “maturity” of participants’ web-based deliberative decision-making.

### **Demographic of participants**

The demographic characteristics of participants, on the other hand, are still widely focused on in recent studies. Trechsel’s study (2007) investigates the gender and age composition of participants in e-voting activities in Switzerland, concluding that gender is not anymore a very relevant influencing factor on the degree of involvement in eParticipation. On the other hand, Hansen and Reinau (2006) point out that, contrarily to the previsions of an eParticipation project in Northern Denmark, only a limited demographic group actively participates in debates, that is middle-age well-educated males, featuring both education and income level above the average.

### **Tone and style in the online activities**

Interesting evaluation research is also concerned with the tone and style adopted in eParticipation activities. Wright (2006) analyzes the key role of moderators in participatory fora in England, and provides a normative model where a clear distinction between moderation and censorship plays a key role.

Wright (2007) provides an example of an EU-wide discussion forum where a fruitful interactive, transnational discourse is created, mainly as a result of good design and clear moderation. A similar stress on the key role of good design for ensuring smooth and productive online deliberation is provided by the study by Renton and Macintosh (2007) on computer-supported argument maps.

Finally, the choice of research methods adopted in current eParticipation research is rather varied, and includes surveys, case studies, content and discourse analyses, and overviews on national states of the art.

### **Survey**

Surveys, together with case studies, are the most widely used research method adopted in recent eParticipation research (Cardoso et al., 2006; Dai, 2007; Hilton, 2006; Kim, 2006; Hansen and Reinau, 2006; Chappelet and Kilchenmann, 2006; Kolsaker and Lee-Kelley, 2006; Kolsaker and Lee-Kelley, 2007; Prosser et al., 2007). Given the technologically-enabled nature of the environment they already move in, eParticipation actors are often investigated through increasingly popular on-line surveys.

### **Case study**

Case studies are the second most used methodological approach adopted in current eParticipation research. Most of the studies focus on pilots at local authority level (Parvez, 2006; Ekelin, 2006; Moody, 2007), but some do so also at a national level (Suarez, 2006; Kolsaker and Lee-Kelley, 2006). A number of contributions focus on specific online experimental platforms (Renton and Macintosh, 2007; Wright, 2006; Andersen, 2006), while studies specifically focusing on cases at the EU level are still scarce in number (Wright, 2007).



### Content and discourse analysis

Research focusing on the understanding of deliberative processes (Wright and Street, 2007; Wright, 2007) often adopt content and discourse analysis as a method for capturing the dynamics of discussions occurring on on-line participatory platforms. Content analysis of user posts on on-line discussion fora are in fact deemed to help understanding the way deliberation evolves and decisions are taken in an eParticipation environment. Such methods have been used both for the analysis of discussions occurring on private-run digital platforms (Ferber et al., 2006), as well as on purely political ones (Ferber et al., 2007).

### National state of the art

National state of the art contributions can be referred to as analyses of government eParticipation visions and policies, or as comprehensive investigations of eParticipation initiatives in one or more countries. While Vedel (2006) introduces a discussion on eDemocracy policy development and phases of evolution, Wright (2006b) provides a comprehensive reconstruction of the British policies of digitally-enabled participation at central and local level, also by outlining the role of rhetoric in shaping governmental programs. Bannister and Connolly (2007) focus on the specific policy of adoption of e-voting in Ireland.

The following table summarizes the classification of the research contributions analyzed.

<b>eParticipation actors</b>	
Citizens	Trechsel, 2007; Suárez, 2006; Ferber et al., 2006; Ferber et al., 2007; Kolsaker and Lee-Kelley, 2006; 2007 Kolsaker and Lee-Kelley, 2007; Hansen and Reinau, 2006
Politicians	Cardoso et al., 2006; Dai, 2007; Chappelet and Kilchenmann, 2006
Government institutions	Carrizales et al., 2006; Wright, 2006; Wright, 2006 <i>b</i> ; Setälä and Grönlund, 2006; Torres et al., 2006; Medaglia, 2007 <i>b</i> ; Moody, 2007
Voluntary organizations	Suárez, 2006

<b>eParticipation activities</b>	
eVoting	Trechsel, 2007; Salazar et al., 2008; Geldermann and Ludwig, 2007; Bannister and Connolly, 2007; Qadah and Taha, 2007; Antoniou et al., 2007; Prosser et al., 2007
Online political discourse	Ferber et al., 2006; Ferber et al., 2007

<b>eParticipation activities</b>	
Online decision making	Insua et al., 2007; Caceres et al., 2007; Geldermann and Ludwig, 2007; Renton and Macintosh, 2007; Lourenco and Costa, 2007
eConsultation	Hilton, 2006
eCampaigning	
ePetitioning	

<b>Contextual factors</b>	
Information availability	
Infrastructure	
Underlying technologies	Carenini et al., 2006; Salazar et al., 2008; Suárez, 2006; Insua et al., 2007; Caceres et al., 2007; Lourenco and Costa, 2007; Qadah and Taha, 2007
Accessibility	
Policy and legal issues	
Governmental organization	Vedel, 2006; Torres et al., 2006; Wright, 2006 <i>b</i> ; Andersen et al., 2007; Medaglia, 2007 <i>b</i>

<b>eParticipation effects</b>	
Civic engagements effects	Kim, 2006
Deliberative effects	Dahlberg, 2007; Dahlberg, 2007 <i>b</i> ; Wright and Street, 2007; Wright, 2007; Kim, 2006
Democratic effects	Walton, 2007; Suárez, 2006; Boyd, 2007

<b>eParticipation evaluation</b>	
Quantity of eParticipation	Hilton, 2006; Maciel and Garcia, 2007
Demographic of participants	Trechsel, 2007; Hansen and Reinau, 2006
Tone and style in the online activities	Wright, 2006; Wright, 2007; Renton and Macintosh, 2007

<b>eParticipation theories and research methods</b>	
Survey	Cardoso et al., 2006; Dai, 2007; Hilton, 2006; Kim, 2006; Hansen and Reinau, 2006; Chappelet and Kilchenmann, 2006; Kolsaker and Lee-Kelley, 2006; Kolsaker and Lee-Kelley, 2007; Prosser et al., 2007

<b>eParticipation theories and research methods</b>	
Case study	Hilton, 2006; Parvez, 2006; Suárez, 2006; Wright, 2006; Wright, 2007; Renton and Macintosh, 2007; Kolsaker and Lee-Kelley, 2006; Ekelin, 2006; Andersen, 2006; Moody, 2007
Action research	
Content and discourse analysis	Wright and Street, 2007; Ferber et al., 2006; Ferber et al., 2007; Wright, 2007
National state of the art	Vedel, 2006; Bannister and Connolly, 2007; Wright, 2006 <i>b</i>

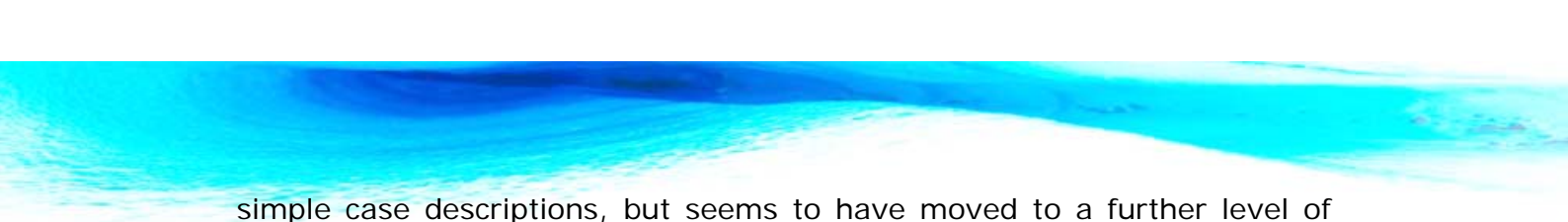
Table 1: Overview of eParticipation research contributions following the categories from Sæbø et al. (2008)

### 1.10 Conclusions

Research on eParticipation is growing rapidly, even though the eParticipation research field as such can still be considered to be in its early stages. This section has provided an overview of the most recent research contributions at international level, providing an account of the existing eParticipation research as it has been published in English language-based journals and conferences.

The outcome of the overall picture of the international eParticipation research scenario provides a first number of interesting insights into the current state and future development of the field. There is a wide focus on the different types of actors taking part in eParticipation activities, especially on the citizen side and concerning the role of government institutions. A more established body of knowledge appears to be consolidating in this topic area, making the enhancement of this specific field's robustness more expected to come in the near future. On the other hand, while specific "sub-domains" of eParticipation do not appear to be attractive to the research community, (the ones that currently come under the labels of "eConsultation", "eCampaigning", "ePetitioning"), more general contributions on eParticipation effects seem to be focused on to a greater extent. However, research focusing on eParticipation effects on democracy, deliberation, civic structures, etc. still appears to be at a somewhat high level of abstraction, and still loosely coupled with a solid empirical basis for the claims stated.

A dimension which is strengthening its research rigour is, instead, the one related to eParticipation evaluation. Contributions focusing on the demographic of participants, and especially on the tone and style of online activities, benefit from an increasingly popular adoption of robust methods, such as content and discourse analysis. Although surveys are still by far and large the most adopted data collection method, case studies are benefiting from a refinement of qualitative approaches to investigate technologically-enabled participatory project more in depth. The large amount of case studies is, therefore, not anymore dominated by



simple case descriptions, but seems to have moved to a further level of more systematic data collection. This will be likely to have the potential to provide a further development of our understanding of the grassroots processes of eParticipation.

## Overview of findings

This section provides an overall overview on the basis of the main findings emerged from the analyses carried out in the national chapters about eParticipation regarding Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy and Sweden, and in the chapter analysing the English-based international research on eParticipation.


The picture emerging from the analysis of these different scenarios is a rather varied one in shape but quite convergent in the contents. The different research teams involved in the booklet have focused here on different areas within eParticipation in their countries. Even though a common template was developed and proposed, different approaches were chosen in drafting the national chapter, in order to account for the richness and the different nuances due not only to the differences in the national eParticipation practices, as unit of analysis, but also on the different approach/backgrounds of the research team.

However, within the large and interesting variety of research perspectives and outputs as far as eParticipation is concerned, it is possible at this stage to highlight a number of common research focuses, trends, and results. These can be considered as the current “core” features of the overall eParticipation scenario, around which a large variety of other, “outlier” specific focuses revolve.

At a more general level of abstraction we can clearly observe that, overall, the main research question tackled in the national research environment around eParticipation is concerned with *understanding the changing relationships between citizens and authorities/the political elites, brought about by on-line participation*. While such a focus encompasses a wide range of research subjects, some peculiar focuses emerge in the national chapters. Some Italian studies underline the contrast between rhetoric of democratic renewal and eParticipation implementation, as well as it emerges in Sweden. In Germany, for instance, there is a specific focus on the role of specific demographic groups, such as ethnic minorities. On the other hand, an “outlier” within this trend, can be considered the research question focus featured in the Austrian case, which is mainly related to design issues, and the way they affect eParticipation processes.

All national cases analysed have a core/main focus on eParticipation at the local level of government. This result is also confirmed by the large number of research contributions in the English-based international literature focusing on local government in the international research scenario. Besides this institutional level, it has to be noted that in some chapters of the booklet (Italy, Sweden, and France), political parties are focused on as a relevant unit of analysis, as if to underline that the issue of eParticipation can be framed also including innovation processes internal to this ‘traditional’ political actor.

The research subjects tackled in each of the national scenarios are rather varied. Many contributions focus on the changing interactions between citizens, politicians and administration introduced by eParticipation,



reflecting a similar focus in the research questions. However, many "outliers" emerge. French and Austrian research features a focus on eVoting practices, with the former highlighting the role of eDeliberation, and the latter focusing more on eInformation. eParticipation research in Germany is greatly concerned with digital inclusion as a research subject, while Italian studies show a shift from a focus on the impact of ICT on local politics to studies centered on the institutional and cultural contexts affecting eParticipation and participation processes together. In Austria, on the other hand, there is a great focus on usability and legal issues raised by eParticipaiton adoption.

A wide variety of methods are adopted in national eParticipation research scenarios. A general trend of integrating different research techniques, qualitative and quantivative, has emerged, and is linked to the scale of research, with an increasing emphasis to reconnect online and offline domains of analysis. A wide range of methods is used including action research and experiments, surveys, focus groups, ethnographies, web statistics and content analysis. Evaluation studies, independent or internal, are quite common across all national research environments, together with the use of content and discourse analysis. This latter, similarly to the international research, seems to be preferred in studies focusing on deliberation practices within eParticipation, as in France, Italy, and Austria.

Table: A synopsis of eParticipation research in the institutional domain

<b>Question</b>	<b>Denmark</b>	<b>France</b>	<b>Germany</b>	<b>Italy</b>	<b>Sweden</b>	<b>Austria</b>
<i>Main research focus</i>	Does eParticipation change/improve citizens' interaction channels and levels of influence? What are the barriers for eParticipation?	The reshaping of traditional mediation systems and communication channels.	Scope of audience, specific user groups (e.g. youngsters, migrants); Combination of media, participation and communication about it, usage of governmental supplies, capacity building of governmental institutions regarding eParticipation; Interrelations between social context and technology in participation.	The impact of the new media on the relationships between political institutions (and actors) and citizenship (individuals and organized). Relationship between political-social context and eParticipation model.	How do citizens, political parties and local government use the Internet?	Options, potentials and risks in using new ICTs to enhance participation in democratic processes. Scope of inclusion and impact of eParticipation. Design issues. Evaluation issues.
<i>Units of analysis (institutional level)</i>	Mainly local (municipal) level.	Political parties and all institutional level Local government led initiatives dominate.	Mainly local (municipal) level. National for state of the art, user view	Civic networks, political parties, local government, participation public policies and practices.	Citizens, local government, political parties, and representatives.	Political elites, grassroots movements, local communities. EU level.
<i>Methods</i>	Evaluation of eParticipation initiatives of local institutions. (Data collection and analysis not described). Evaluation of eParticipation initiatives. Experiments Empirical studies (content analysis, discourse analysis).	Evaluation; Experiments with technology and content delivery. (process analysis, content analysis; logfile analysis, usability tests); Action research (online) surveys, (expert) interviews	Case studies. Analysis of online communication (websites, mailing lists and forums). Focus groups, interviews. Ethnography. Surveys.	Web content analysis, usage statistics.	Case studies, survey, interviews, focus groups, ethnography, web content and online communication analysis	

Question	Denmark	France	Germany	Italy	Sweden	Austria
<i>Research main Findings</i>	No significant change in citizens' involvement and influence. The new media supplement existing means of interaction and influence. eParticipation not a strategic issue in (most) local gov.ts. Local level: Internet used for information provisioning and services. Interactive potential not realized. Politicians hesitant towards new communication channels and increased citizen involvement. Socio-cultural resistance to eVoting. The new media supplements existing channels.	Different means of communication and media supplement each other (if considered in planning); Socio-cultural context influences on participation in the democratic process; eParticipation often strengthens exclusion (gaps regarding gender, education, status)	EParticipation failures Issue of political inclusion/exclusion. Trend to de-politicization in government-led eParticipation experiences. Active citizens develop their own fora. Initiatives within political parties lack attention to internal processes of deliberation.	Citizens' eParticipation is still limited. Off-line patterns are repeated on-line. Parties use the Internet as a campaign tool but do not engage citizens on-line debate. Local governments provide information and receive questions and comments. Cost, size, and technological determinants impact local govt. web-adoption.	eParticipation potential is not exploited. Legal and institutional barriers. Politicians reluctant towards increased civic engagement. Existing participation patterns are reinforced. New impulses for public participation and eParticipation recently.	
<i>Promising directions</i>	Research focus on government initiated eParticipation. Need to focus on bottom-up citizen-initiated eParticipation initiatives	The research is mainly based in the social sciences. Needs interdisciplinary research and industry-academia collaboration. Involve stakeholders (citizens) in research.	Double role of researchers: initiators <i>and</i> evaluators of eParticipation initiatives; Need for more transdisciplinary research; Enough case studies, time for general implementation	Contextualization within the wider processes of transformation of democratic governance. Integration of eParticipation with participation studies.	Few empirical studies. Need for more empirical research and contextual studies <i>and</i> better theoretical models. Focus on the role of the citizen. Move towards other institutional levels. Need of more comparative studies.	Lack of theoretical grounding and empirical analysis of eParticipation projects. Need for systematic analysis of wider impacts. Need of conceptual developments.



In conclusion, if we are to summarize the overall findings of eParticipation research in the national chapters, we can reach a number of empirically shared evidences. However varied, often fragmented and heterogeneous in nature, the current panorama of eParticipation research supplies some core conclusions regarding eParticipation processes, that can be summarized as follows:

\* *eParticipation must be analyzed in the context of other forms of participation.* A shared assumption resulting from empirical research investigation in the different national scenarios regards the interaction between new channels related to eParticipation activities, and other forms of participation, namely the traditional ones. A common conclusion reached by a large share of the research contributions is that eParticipation is to be analyzed in the context of such other forms of participation, to be either considered as background, independent and/ or dependent variables of the processes included in eParticipation initiatives.

\* *New media supplement traditional forms of participation.* A large number of research contributions from the different national cases reach the conclusion that new, eParticipation-based platforms prove to be complementary of traditional participation channels, rather than replacing them.


\* *New media often reinforce existing off-line patterns of participation, rather than changing them.* When implemented and successfully running, eParticipation processes seem to follow the path of processes occurring in traditional, off-line participation processes, as research has known it so far. Together with being complementary to the traditional channels of participation, eParticipation initiatives, especially the ones promoted by the institutions, seem to follow common patterns which are largely overlapping the ones of traditional means of participation. These patterns include the way and the extent of the influence on the decision-making processes and the actor composition of participatory groups.

\* *Information dissemination and gathering, rather than deliberation and debate, dominate digital platforms initiated by parties and institutions.*

eParticipation initiatives promoted by institutional actors and political parties tend to focus on information-oriented implementation of eParticipation platforms, rather than on platforms enabling deliberation and debate. This is widely reflected, for instance, in the cross-country research contributions on the adoption of eParticipation features in institutional websites. Basically all analyses focusing on web adoption of participatory devices, especially at the local level of government, bring evidence of a common neglect of deliberation-enabling features in on-line platforms, to the advantage of information-based implementations.

\* *Politicians are generally reluctant to embrace new possibilities enabled by eParticipation.*

Closely related to the above mentioned phenomenon, there is the evidence of poor support of advanced eParticipation adoption by politicians across different countries. Many research contributions highlight the fact that behind a slow, or absent take-up of participatory features



through digital means, there is an underlying reluctance of political decision-makers to engage in such activities and to support them. Evidence of such a weak support is distributed across a wide variety of national research scenarios, at institutional and administrative level.


Given this overview on research results in the national chapters and English-based international section, a number of future directions in the analysis of eParticipation can be outlined, as a results of the analysis carried out in this report. The systematic review of these main findings can be referred to as bringing the double benefit of both mapping the research areas which are still currently overlooked in the different national eParticipation research contexts, and of suggesting a sketch for a new, European-wide agenda for the future of eParticipation research.

The main future directions in the research in eParticipation emerging from the international and cross-national analysis can be summarized as follows.

\* *Conceptual development.* As this review is mainly focused on empirical research, it is hard to reach solid conclusions about the conceptual backstage. The fragmentation of the empirical research does not help to cope with theories in a solid and coherent way. Non-coordinated methodologies or case studies, for example, make comparisons between data and findings difficult. Small-sized studies can propose exploratory hypotheses, but there is a need of wider studies to validate or falsify present or new theories. The development of theory can derive only from more coordinate efforts in the empirical research, especially in a new research field such as eParticipation, and also because of the complexity of eParticipation as a research object,

\* *Empirical studies.* Wider cross-national studies are needed in order to recombine the big fragmentation of the empirical studies. In fact in this field of analysis the problem is not the lack of empirical studies but their narrowness in terms of scale and ambitions. A comparison between the national chapters still highlights the insufficient number of empirically-based, rigorous research contributions. Too large a share of the body of eParticipation research consists of descriptive, often internal, and speculative contributions. The growing number of eParticipation initiatives in different countries should be an opportunity for wide, deeper and cross-country empirical studies, as well as for the development of a specific European level of eParticipation practices. It is worthy of attention the fact that bigger and more ambitious studies also imply a better coordination of ongoing work and resources.

\* *Focus on emerging relevant institutional levels of eParticipation, other than the local one.* As the backside of the prevailing focus on the local level of government, which is dominating eParticipation research at both national and international level, a gap consequently emerges as far as all the other levels of government are concerned. Due to the widespread development of local eParticipation projects, national and especially supranational levels (EU) of government are currently under-investigated, despite the importance of fostering citizen participation that characterizes the higher levels of government as such. Initiatives regarding, for



instance, the use of ICT to foster citizen participation as a reaction to the so-called EU “democratic deficit” are worth a closer attention by the eParticipation research community.

\* *Transdisciplinary research.* Lastly, the review of national eParticipation research scenarios brings evidence of a situation of relatively isolated disciplinary approaches, with still little cross-fertilization between them. As pointed out in the majority of the cases, eParticipation phenomena are studied from the perspective either of social sciences, including sociology, political science, policy analysis, etc., or of information systems – besides the more technical approaches. This range of disciplines seems not to interfere with each other, and approaches that combine two or more disciplinary perspectives are still rare. Such a gap is even more challenging, when considering the inherent degree of transdisciplinarity that characterizes eParticipation as such: a field that embraces a wide array of key processes related to technical infrastructures, with so many social, political and cultural implications.

## Conclusions

This report has tackled the current state of eParticipation research in six European countries within Demo-net (Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Sweden), and in the English-based international research literature having European countries as research objects. Although following different internal schemes, all the national sections of chapter 2 included a discussion on the main research questions tackled in the literature of each country regarding eParticipation, the main theoretical approaches, the methods used, and future directions.


The review of English-based international literature in chapter 3 has then tackled the research contributions having research objects related to eParticipation in the EU countries, published in the last two years. The literature review done in this chapter has used the framework proposed by Sæbø et al. (2008), in order to perform a scan of the existing eParticipation literature in the main research databases available. Chapter 3 has brought together the findings of both the analysis of the national and international eParticipation research scenarios, to provide an overview of current eParticipation research in different countries. The chapter has discussed the shared characteristics and the differences between national sections regarding the main research questions, the units of analysis, the research subjects, the methods used, the results and the future directions. As a result of the comprehensive analysis of the national scenarios and of chapter 3, a common set of research findings and future directions of research was identified. The main research findings emerging are the following:

- \* eParticipation must be analyzed in the context of other forms of participation
- \* New media supplement traditional forms of participation.
- \* New media often reinforce existing off-line patterns of participation, rather than changing them.
- \* Information dissemination and gathering, rather than deliberation and debate, dominate digital platforms initiated by parties and institutions.
- \* Politicians are generally reluctant to embrace new possibilities enabled by eParticipation.

The comparative analysis has also outlined the existence of the following needs in eParticipation research:

- \* Conceptual development
- \* Wider crossnational empirical research.
- \* Focus on the emerging institutional levels (European, national, regional) other than the local one.
- \* Transdisciplinary research.

The outcome of the analyses carried out in this report brings us to summarize the overall picture of the current state of eParticipation research, and to envision the possible scenarios of future eParticipation research.



At a more scholarly level, a challenge to be faced in the near future of eParticipation research is about breaking the boundaries between disciplines in approaching the analysis of eParticipation processes. Given that eParticipation as such is a complex social, technical, political and also economic and management process, the research community will have to move away from a relatively persisting division between different disciplinary approaches in tackling the mushrooming number of eParticipation processes occurring in Europe. This also brings us to a further need from the analysis done: the development of more solid conceptual frames. The refinement of new tools of analysis, and of new research methods to be used for investigating eParticipation needs in fact to stem directly from the encounter of various disciplines, including sociology, political sciences, law, information systems, psychology and other social sciences. Moreover, the need for transdisciplinary research underlines the practical necessity of further networking between researchers at European level.

The building of a relevant body of knowledge around eParticipation, although still somehow fragmented and with room for improvement regarding shared concepts and research tools, has been basically established so far. The next challenge to be faced in the near future is hence to provide durable integration among different research communities, in order to make this body of knowledge further flourish and cross-fertilize.

While the top-down and public institutions dimensions of eParticipation processes are still important, because they express the commitment that institutional decision-makers may put at stake in the political arena, citizen-initiated processes are becoming increasingly relevant in understanding what is going on in the “real world” of ICT-enabled new forms of democratic participation. At the level of the research subjects to focus on in the forthcoming eParticipation agenda, we have to highlight the fundamental importance of what we have called bottom-up, citizen-initiated eParticipation processes. The emergence of the Web 2.0 philosophy, the diffusion of social networking services, of entirely new platforms based on user-created content cannot be overlooked anymore as far as eParticipation research is concerned. Web 2.0 environments, such as YouTube, Wikipedia, Facebook, citizen blogging, etc., constitute now the new frontier of citizen interaction in the online world. We need to shift our focus from the top-down, institution-initiated eParticipation platforms, to the bottom-up, citizen-initiated ones, which are playing an increasingly relevant role in shaping the way citizens interact with decision-makers and the institutions. The new agenda of eParticipation research will have to include this focus shift in the immediate future.

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