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# From the Special Issue Editors: European Research on Electronic Citizen Participation and Engagement in Public Policy Making

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In the last decade, there has been a strong interest of both researchers and practitioners in the exploitation of the information and communication technologies (ICT), and especially the Internet, for extending and enhancing citizens' participation and engagement in public policy making. This has resulted in a huge growth, on one hand, of the research in the area of electronic participation (or e-participation), and on the other hand, of the investments made by governments for developing and operating Internet-based ICT platforms for this purpose. This trend can, even in the near future, have strong impacts both on the way government agencies operate internally and develop policies and also on the political life and the democratic processes. So it is worth examining briefly its main roots and foundations from the political and management sciences domain.

Undoubtedly, the most important of them are the “participatory democracy” and “public participation” ideas developed about thirty years ago (Barber, 1984; Held, 1987). According to them, our representative democracy, in which representatives of citizens are making the main government decisions, has been combined with continuous citizens' participation and engagement in all the stages of the policy-making processes of government agencies. This can bring substantial benefits: improvement of the quality of public policies (by taking advantage of valuable policy-relevant knowledge, opinions, and attitudes of citizens), more transparency and accountability of government, increase of public trust in government, and reversing of the declining confidence in politics and public institutions. Another equally important benefit is the education and improvement of the citizens: according to Held (1987) “the equal right to self-development can only be achieved in a participatory society, a society which fosters a sense of political efficacy, nurtures a concern for collective problems and contributes to the formation of a knowledgeable citizenry capable of taking a sustained interest in the governing process” (p. 262).

Twenty years later, it was gradually realized that many design and problem-solving activities in private firms, which were performed exclusively by highly knowledgeable professionals, can be performed even better by large, diverse, and pluralistic teams of less-knowledgeable individuals, giving

rise to new distributed ICT-based multi-disciplinary design and problem solving practices, referred to as “crowdsourcing” (Brabham, 2008; Surowiecki, 2004). The capability of a large network of people, connected through web technologies, to perform difficult design and problem-solving activities, which is referred to as “collective intelligence,” is gradually recognized by management researchers and practitioners. Furthermore, it is gradually realized that these ideas are applicable in the public sector as well, which can resort to “citizen-sourcing” for collecting information and knowledge concerning the needs of citizens, for determining the nature and the main characteristics of difficult social problems, and also for finding possible solutions to those problems (Nam, 2012). This citizen-sourcing can provide valuable information, knowledge, and ideas to government agencies, and can lead to the application of open innovation ideas in the public sector and gradually to the “co-production” of public services by government and citizens in cooperation.

The rapid development and the growing penetration of ICT provide rich opportunities for the extensive application of the above ideas at a low cost, leading to the development and growth of e-participation. ICT have the potential to support the provision of information to the citizens concerning planned or in-progress policies and activities of government and also to increase both the quantity and quality of consultation with the citizens. Also, ICT has the potential to support both top-down government initiatives and ground-up civil society ones, aiming at the enhancement of public participation in the decision- and policy-making processes of government agencies and the improvement of interaction between society and government. ICT enable the collection from the citizens of huge amounts of information, knowledge, and ideas on the problems and needs that public policies attempt to address and on proposed courses of government action and legislation. At the same time, ICT also enable advanced processing at a low cost of this extensive information and knowledge (e.g., the numerous textual postings of citizens in e-forums or social media can be processed using opinion-mining techniques [Pang & Lee, 2008] in order to draw conclusions from them), which enable a better

exploitation of them for the design of more effective, applicable, and acceptable public policies. However, in order to exploit this potential, extensive research is required for designing effective ways of using ICT for the above purposes, evaluating them in “real life” conditions and in different contexts, and identifying, on one hand, critical success factors, and, on the other hand, adoption barriers.

Especially in Europe, due to its long tradition of the “welfare state” (Ferrera & Rhodes, 2000), which has been characterized by strong interaction with society and social protection and support of weak groups (e.g., through social security, minimum income schemes, programs for fighting social exclusion, health system, public services, redistribution policies, etc.), there has been a strong interest in the above ideas. For this reason, in the last ten years, there has been extensive financial support by several institutions, such as the European Commission and the National and Local Governments, of research in this domain of ICT-supported/mediated citizen participation and engagement in public policy making. It is quite interesting to reflect on the results and conclusions of this research and attempt to exploit them both in Europe and in other parts of the world, probably with adaptations to local histories and political traditions.

In this direction, this Special Issue includes six articles presenting “European Research on Electronic Citizen Participation and Engagement in Public Policy Making.” While the initial “paradigm” of using ICT for supporting citizens’ participation in government policy processes was a web site providing to them information on current and planned government policies and activities and allowing them to participate in relevant electronic consultations in forums, European research in this area placed emphasis on the development of other more effective and advanced “paradigms.” So our first four articles analyze four such new paradigms of using ICT for supporting citizens’ participation and engagement in public policy making: opening government data, location-based e-participation services, structured e-consultations, and e-petitions.

In particular, the first article, titled “Benefits, Adoption Barriers and Myths of Open Data and Open Government,” by Marijn Janssen, Yannis Charalabidis, and Anneke Zuiderwijk, based on system and institutional theories and on open-data users’ experiences obtained from interviews and a group session, derives a comprehensive list of political and social, economic, operational, and technical benefits generated by opening government data, but, at the same time, reveals a number of barriers as well. Five “myths” are formulated concerning the use of open data, placing the expectations within a realistic perspective. Finally, it is concluded that critical factors for the success of government open data projects are to take the user’s view and actively govern the relationship between government and its users.

The second article, titled “Location-Based Services for Public Policy Making: The Direct and Indirect Way to e-Participation,” by Marinos Themistocleous, Nahed Amin Azab, Muhammad Mustafa Kamal, Maged Ali, and Vincenzo

Morabito, initially reviews the areas of e-participation and location-based services (LBSs) and then proceeds to a combination of them, exploiting the concept of LBSs for motivating citizens to be involved in public policy making. In particular, it proposes mobile phone-based services that facilitate citizens to respond to policy-related questions posed by government agencies which concern locations near them and therefore might be of more interest to them. This innovative class of public m-services may help reduce the “e-participation overload” existing in many cities and enable the citizens to focus on policy-related questions of higher importance to them.

The third article is titled “A Multi-Method Evaluation of Different Models of Structured Electronic Consultation on Government Policies” and authored by Euripidis Loukis and Maria Wimmer, and it investigates the effects of structuring the electronic consultations (e-consultations) organized by government agencies on various policy-related topics. In particular, it describes and evaluates two different models of structured e-consultation (differing in the level of structure they impose and the richness of discussion language they provide), using multiple methods: discussion tree analysis, quantitative evaluation, and qualitative evaluation. The results indicate that structuring the e-consultations leads to higher quality and more focused debates. However, it can create participation difficulties and barriers to less-sophisticated and less-educated citizens, so it might result in reduced participation and exclusion of some groups. Therefore, for e-consultations, government agencies should use an appropriate mix of e-forum tools with different levels of structure, each of them targeting a different citizens’ group.

The fourth article, titled “Institutional Diffusion of eParticipation in the English Local Government: Is Central Policy the Way Forward?” by Panagiotis Panagiotopoulos, Christopher Moody, and Tony Elliman, has institutional theory as its basic theoretical lens and seeks to examine if central policy and regulatory intervention can enact eParticipation, with particular focus on local government. It empirically investigates the development of e-petitioning in UK local government, after a legislation making obligatory for all local authorities to provide an online petitioning facility. Based on an analysis of 353 local governments’ web sites, the findings show that the impact of this policy was ambiguous: compliance was achieved, but most systems were only basically implemented and attracted limited use. Therefore, institutional variables seem to be very influential for the substantial introduction and application of e-participation.

The fifth article, titled “Conceptualizing E-Inclusion in Europe: An Explanatory Study,” by Vishanth Weerakkody, Yogesh K. Dwivedi, Ramzi El-Haddadeh, Ahlam Almuwil, and Ahmad Ghoneim, deals with a critical success factor of e-participation: e-inclusion. It conceptualizes e-inclusion through a review and synthesis of the previous literature on digital divide, social exclusion, inequality, and social cohesion. This resulted in the formulation of a conceptual taxonomy of the key demographic, social, cultural, political, infrastructure, and economic factors that can influence e-inclusion.

Finally, the sixth article, titled “Understanding eParticipation State of Play in Europe,” by Efthimios Tambouris, Ann Macintosh, Simon Smith, Eleni Panopoulou, Konstantinos Tarabanis, and Jeremy Millard, attempts to form a higher-level view. In order to understand the development of eParticipation in Europe, initially, a three-layered analytical framework has been constructed. It incorporates the outputs, outcomes, and impacts of e-participation and also the action of external factors. This analytical framework was used for collecting data from 40 European, national, regional, and local e-participation projects. It has been concluded that, in most cases, e-participation simply provided a suitable alternative channel for participatory activities. Only a very small number of projects were identified that contest or challenge institutionalized centers of power. Therefore, these first e-participation initiatives in Europe seem to support existing power structure and not facilitate significant redistributions at this level.

The articles of this special issue reflect the research conducted in Europe at various different levels: for developing innovative and more effective ways of using ICT for supporting citizen participation and engagement in public policy making, for evaluating them in “real life” conditions in order to better understand the value they can generate and also possible negative side effects, for determining the factors that positively or negatively affect the adoption of e-participation systems by citizens, and for understanding their impact at higher political levels. The above articles present research that has been conducted on e-participation in several European countries (from both the European “North” and “South”), based on various different theoretical foundations (such as the institutional theory, the theory of wicked problems and issue-based information systems, etc.) and using various research approaches (both quantitative and qualitative). Therefore, we believe it provides valuable “food for thought,” opportunities for international comparisons (with regions having quite different cultural, political, and economic traditions from Europe), and interesting future research directions in this important area of e-participation, which attempts to use one of the most recent creations of mankind (the ICT), for supporting and enhancing one of its oldest activities (politics).

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Euripidis Loukis is Associate Professor of Information and Decision Support Systems at the University of Aegean, Greece. Formerly he has been Information Systems Advisor at the Ministry to the Presidency of Government,

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