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# REPORT

on e-democracy in the European Union: potential and challenges
(2016/2008(INI))

Committee on Constitutional Affairs

Rapporteur: Ramón Jáuregui Atondo

_United in diversity_

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# MOTION FOR A EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT RESOLUTION

**on e-democracy in the European Union: potential and challenges (2016/2008(INI))**

*The European Parliament*,

– having regard to Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2009)1 on electronic democracy (e-democracy), adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 18 February 2009, as the first international legal instrument setting standards in the field of e-democracy,

– having regard to the Treaty on European Union, in particular Articles 2, 3, 6, 9, 10 and 11, and to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, in particular Articles 8-20 and 24,

– having regard to the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, to the European Convention on Human Rights and to the European Social Charter,

– having regard to its resolution of 28 October 2015 on the European Citizens' Initiative[1],

– having regard to the communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions entitled 'EU eGovernment Action Plan 2016-2020 – Accelerating the digital transformation of government' (COM(2016)0179),

– having regard to the 2014 United Nations E-Government Development Index (EGDI),

– having regard to the three studies entitled 'Potential and challenges of e-participation in the European Union', 'Potential and challenges of e-voting in the European Union' and 'The legal and political context for setting up a European identity document', published by its Policy Department C in 2016,

– having regard to the two STOA studies entitled 'E-public, e-participation and e-voting in Europe - prospects and challenges: final report' (November 2011), and 'Technology options and systems to strengthen participatory and direct democracy', to be published in 2017,

– having regard to the work on e-democracy undertaken by the Conference of European Regional Legislative Assemblies (CALRE) using the UN cooperation network IT4all,

– having regard to its resolution of 8 September 2015 on 'Human rights and technology: the impact of intrusion and surveillance systems on human rights in third countries'[2],

– having regard to Rule 52 of its Rules of Procedure,

– having regard to the report of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs and the opinion

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[1] Texts adopted, P8_TA(2015)0382.
[2] Texts adopted, P8_TA(2015)0288.

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of the Committee on Culture and Education (A8-0041/2017),

A.   whereas  the recent crises and deadlocks in the financial, economic, political and social fields are severely affecting individual Member States and the Union as a whole and at a time when all of them are confronted with global challenges such as climate change, migration and security; whereas citizens' relationship with politics has become increasingly strained, as they turn away from political decision-making processes, and there is a growing risk of public disaffection with politics; whereas the engagement and involvement of citizens and civil society in democratic life, in addition to transparency and information, are essential for the  functioning of democracy and for the legitimacy and accountability of each level of the multi-level governance structure of the EU ; whereas there is a clear need to enhance the democratic linkage between citizens and political institutions;

B.   whereas in recent decades our society has changed extremely quickly and citizens feel the need to express their views more frequently and directly concerning the problems which determine the future of our society, and whereas political and policymaking institutions are therefore well advised to invest in democratic innovation;

C.   whereas voter turnout in European elections has been steadily decreasing since 1979, and in the 2014 elections fell to 42.54 %;

D.   whereas it is important to regain citizens' confidence in the European project; whereas e-democracy tools can help foster more active citizenship by improving participation, transparency and accountability in decision-making, buttressing democratic oversight mechanisms and knowledge about the EU in order to give the citizens more voice in political life;

E.   whereas democracy should evolve and adapt to the changes and opportunities associated with new technologies and ICT tools, which must be regarded as a common good that, where properly implemented and accompanied by an adequate level of information, could help to create a more transparent and participatory democracy; whereas, with that aim in view, every person should have the opportunity to be trained in the use of new technologies;

F.   whereas further progress on cybersecurity and data protection is essential if we wish to make greater use of new technologies in institutional and political life and thereby enhance citizen participation in decision-making;

G.   whereas a wave of new digital communication tools and open and collaborative platforms could inspire and provide new solutions for fostering citizens' political participation and engagement, whilst reducing public apathy and discontent with political institutions, as well as helping to increase levels of trust, transparency and accountability in the democratic system;

H.   whereas in his most recent 'state of the Union' address, President Juncker presented a package of measures to increase the use of electronic communications, including WiFi4EU and the roll-out of 5G in Europe;

I.   whereas open government data has the potential to foster economic growth, increase public sector efficiencies and improve the transparency and accountability of European

and national institutions;

J.      whereas access under equal conditions to a neutral network is a prerequisite for ensuring the effectiveness of fundamental human rights;

K.      whereas e-democracy could facilitate the development of complementary forms of engagement capable of contributing to mitigating the growth of public disaffection with traditional politics; whereas, furthermore, it could help promote communication, dialogue, and awareness of and interest in our Union, its politics and its policies, therefore favouring grassroots support for the European project as well as reducing the so-called European 'democratic deficit';

L.      whereas the new forms of participation in a virtual public space are inseparable from respect for the rights and obligations linked to participation in public space, which include, for example, procedural rights in case of defamation;

M      whereas it is indispensable, in order to guarantee the role of the web as a valid and effective democratic tool, to eradicate the digital divide and to provide citizens with adequate media literacy and digital skills;

N.      whereas information and communication technology (ICT) systems are at the heart of modern government processes, but efforts are still needed to improve delivery of e-government services;

O.      whereas e-voting could help people living or working in a Member State of which they are not a citizen or in a third country to exercise their voting rights; whereas security and secrecy when casting and recording votes must be ensured in e-voting processes, particularly concerning the possibility of cyber-attacks;
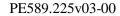
*Potential and challenges*

1.      Underlines the potential benefits of e-democracy, which is defined as the support and enhancement of traditional democracy by means of ICT, and which can  complement and reinforce democratic processes by adding elements of citizens' empowerment through different online activities that include, amongst others, e-government, e-governance, e-deliberation, e-participation and e-voting; welcomes the fact that by means of the new information and communication tools more and more citizens can be involved in democratic processes;

2.      Emphasises that Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2009)1 calls on member states to ensure that e-democracy 'promotes, ensures and enhances transparency, accountability, responsiveness, engagement, deliberation, inclusiveness, accessibility, participation, subsidiarity and social cohesion'; points out that this recommendation calls on member states to develop measures that are able to strengthen human rights, democracy and the rule of law;

3.      Stresses that the purpose of e-democracy is to promote a democratic culture that enriches and reinforces democratic practices, by providing additional means to increase

transparency and citizens' participation, but not to establish an alternative democratic system to detriment of representative democracy; points out that e-democracy alone does not ensure political participation, and that a non-digital environment to pursue political participation of citizens must also be addressed in parallel to e-democracy;

4.  Points out the importance of e-voting and remote internet voting as systems able to widen citizens' inclusion and facilitate democratic participation, especially in areas that are geographically and socially more marginalised, offering numerous potential advantages, in particular for young people, people with reduced mobility, older people and people living or working permanently or temporarily in a Member State of which they are not a citizen or in a third country, provided that the highest possible standards of data protection are ensured; recalls that, when putting in place remote internet voting, Member States must ensure transparency and reliability of ballot counting and respect the principles of equality, secrecy of the vote, access to voting and free suffrage;

5.  Stresses the need for all digital interaction processes to be grounded in the principle of institutional openness, complying with the combination of real-time transparency and informed participation;

6.  Highlights and encourages the use of e-participation as a key characteristic of e-democracy, encompassing three forms of interaction between EU institutions and governments on one hand, and citizens on the other, namely: e-information, e-consultation and e-decision-making; acknowledges that many national, regional and local e-participation cases can be taken as good examples of how ICT can be used in participatory democracy; encourages Member States to further develop these practices at national and local level;

7.  Stresses that ICTs contribute towards the creation of spaces for participation and discussion which, in turn, improve the quality and legitimacy of our democratic systems;

8.  Stresses the need to engage young people in political debate, and notes that the use of ICT in democratic procedures can be an effective tool for that purpose;

9.  Recalls the first European example of online voting in Estonia in its legally binding elections in 2005, but maintains that if the take-up of possible e-voting in other Member States is to be successful, it will be necessary to assess whether the actual participation of the whole population can be guaranteed, and also to evaluate the benefits and challenges, as well as the implications, of different or divergent technological approaches; stresses that the existence of secure, high-speed internet connections and secure electronic identity infrastructure are important prerequisites for the success of e-voting; underlines the need to harness the benefits of new technologies in current polling-booth voting processes, and believes that significant advances could be made through the sharing of best practice and research at all political levels;

10. Points out the challenge of responding to the citizens' concerns regarding use of online democracy tools; takes the view that addressing security concerns and guaranteeing privacy are of paramount importance for building citizens' trust in the emerging digital political arena;

11. Stresses that democratic processes require extensive debate at every level of EU society, as well as scrutiny and reflection, as being conducive to fair and full and rational deliberation; warns that there is a risk of distortion and manipulation of the outcome of deliberations of on-line discussion tools; takes the view that the best guarantee against this risk is transparency of all actors interacting and providing information on campaigns which are potentially being promoted, directly or indirectly on digital participation platforms;

12. Notes that for a functioning democracy, citizens' trust in institutions and democratic processes are a fundamental dimension; stresses, therefore, that the introduction of e-democracy tools needs to be accompanied by proper communication and education strategies;

13. Stresses the importance of embedding e-participation in the political system in order to incorporate citizens' contributions in the decision-making process and ensure follow-up; notes that a lack of responsiveness from decision-makers leads to disappointment and distrust;

14. Emphasises that the use of ICT tools should be complementary to other channels of communication with public institutions, with the aim of avoiding any kind of discrimination on the grounds of digital skills or lack of resources and infrastructures;

*Proposals on improving the democratic system by means of ICT*

15. Considers that participation in democratic processes is founded, first of all, on effective and non-discriminatory access to information and knowledge;

16. Calls, moreover, on the EU and the Member States to refrain from adopting unnecessary measures aimed at arbitrarily restricting access to the internet and the exercise of basic human rights, such as disproportionate censorship measures or criminalisation of the legitimate expression of criticism and dissent;

17. Calls on the Member States and the EU to provide educational and technical means for boosting the democratic empowerment of citizens and improving ICT competences, and to supply digital literacy and equal and safe digital access for all EU citizens in order to bridge the digital divide (e-inclusion), for the ultimate benefit of democracy; encourages the Member States to integrate the acquisition of digital skills into school curricula and lifelong learning, and to prioritise digital training programmes for elderly people; supports the development of networks with universities and educational institutions to promote research on and implementation of new participation tools; also calls on the EU and the Member States to promote programmes and policies aimed at developing a critical and informed appreciation of the use of ICT;

18. Proposes that further progress be made in evaluating use of new technology to improve democracy in EU administrations by incorporating, as indicators, targets measuring the quality of online services;

19. Recommends that the European Parliament, as the only directly elected institution of the European Union, take the lead in reinforcing e-democracy; considers it worthwhile, to

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this end, to develop innovative technological solutions which will make it possible for citizens to communicate meaningfully and share their concerns with their elected representatives;

20.  Encourages the simplification of institutional language and procedures and the organisation of multimedia content to explain the keys to the main decision-making processes, in order to promote understanding and participation; stresses the need to disseminate this gateway to e-participation through segmented proactive tools that permit access to all documents in parliamentary files;

21.  Urges the Member States and the EU to deliver affordable and high-speed digital infrastructure, particularly in peripheral regions and rural and economically less developed areas, and to ensure that equality between citizens is guaranteed, paying particular attention to those citizens who are most vulnerable and providing them with skills to ensure the safe and secure use of technology; recommends that libraries, schools and buildings in which public services are provided be appropriately resourced with a high-speed, modern IT infrastructure which is equally accessible to all citizens, especially the most vulnerable categories, such as people with disabilities; points out the need to devote adequate financial and training resources to these goals; recommends to the Commission that it provide resources for projects aimed at improving digital infrastructures in the realm of the social and solidarity economy;

22.  Emphasises that women are under-represented in political decision-making at all levels, as well as in ICT sectors; notes that women and girls often face gender stereotypes in relation to digital technologies; therefore calls on the Commission and Member States to invest in targeted programmes which promote ICT education and e-participation for women and girls, particularly those from vulnerable and marginalised backgrounds, using formal, informal and non-formal learning;

23.  Notes that in order to ensure equal accessibility of e-Democracy tools for all citizens, multilingual translation is important when information is to be disseminated and read by all citizens, in countries with more than one official language and by those coming from different ethnic backgrounds;

24.  Encourages the Member States and the EU to promote, support and implement mechanisms and instruments that enable the participation of citizens and their interaction with governments and EU institutions, such as crowdsourcing platforms; highlights that ICT should facilitate access to independent information, transparency, accountability and participation in decision-making; calls in this connection for all the Commission's communication and relations-with-citizens tools, and in particular the Europe Direct portal, to be tailored more closely to the challenges of e-democracy; commits to make all the existing tools of legislative follow-up more accessible, understandable, educational and interactive, and invites the Commission to do the same on its own website;

25.  Calls on the Member States and the EU to review the content on their official sites which deals with the functioning of democracy, with the aim of providing educational tools which make it easier for young people to visit the sites in question and understand their content and of making the sites accessible to persons with a disability;

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26.	Encourages the administrations to reflect their commitment to the principle of institutional openness through changes to their strategic design and corporate culture, budgets, and organisational change processes that are driven by the goal of improving democracy through use of new technology;

27.	Calls for an online platform to be created so that members of the public can systematically be consulted before the European legislator takes decisions, thus being involved more directly in public life;

28.	Believes it essential that the deployment of these new tools is backed by campaigns promoting the possibilities they offer and the civic values of joint responsibility and participation;

29.	Points to the importance of the European citizens' initiative as a means of involving the public in the political life of the EU and their direct participation therein, and therefore calls on the Commission to review the way it operates so that it can realise its full potential, in line with the recommendations made by the European Parliament in its resolution of 28 October 2015 (2014/2257(INI); draws attention, therefore, to the importance of simplifying and accelerating the bureaucratic requirements relating to this and of making wider use of ICT, e.g. through digital platforms and other applications compatible with mobile devices, in order to make this important tool more user-friendly and widely publicised; believes that the use of new technology could improve, in particular, the online signature collection system through the use of identification and authentication services (e-IDAS), which would allow members of the public more easily to receive and exchange information on existing or potential ECIs so that they can actively participate in discussions and/or support the initiatives themselves;

30.	Emphasises that several Commission processes, such as online public consultations, e-participation activities and impact assessments, could benefit from a wider use of new technologies in order to encourage public participation, increase accountability in these processes and the transparency of the EU institutions, and enhance European governance; highlights the need to render public consultation processes effective and accessible to as many people as possible, while keeping technical barriers to the minimum;

31.	Underlines the need for more ample information for citizens on the existing e-participation platforms at EU, national and local level;

32.	Calls on the Commission to expand and develop e-participation in the mid-term review of the Digital Single Market Strategy to be launched in 2017, and to promote the development and funding of new instruments connected with e-citizenship of the European Union; recommends furthermore to the Commission that it focus on open-source solutions that can be rolled out easily across the digital single market; calls in particular on the Commission to integrate the reuse of previous projects such as the D-CENT platform, an EU-funded project providing technological tools for participative democracy);

33.	Stresses that the development of e-administration should be a priority for Member States and the EU institutions and welcomes the Commission's ambitious and comprehensive e-government action plan, for which proper national implementation

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

34. Calls for more cooperation at EU level and recommends the sharing of best practices for e-democracy projects as a way to move towards a form of democracy that is more participatory and deliberative and that responds to the requests and interests of the citizens and aims to involve them in decision-making processes; points out the need to know what citizens' attitudes are towards the implementation of remote internet voting; calls on the Commission to provide an independent assessment or consultation of public opinion regarding online voting, with an analysis of its strengths and weaknesses, as an additional option for citizens to cast their vote for consideration by the Member States by the end of 2018;

35. Stresses the need to protect, as a matter of priority, privacy and personal data when using e-democracy tools and to foster a more secure internet environment, particularly with regard to information and data security, including the 'right to be forgotten', and to provide guarantees against surveillance software and source verifiability; moreover, calls for further use of digital services based on key enablers such as secure and encrypted digital identity, in accordance with the EIDAS regulation; promotes safe and secure digital public registers and the validation of electronic signatures in order to prevent fraudulent multiple interactions, this being in line with European and international human rights standards and the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights and the European Court of Justice; finally underlines that security issues must not become a deterrent to the inclusion of individuals and groups in democratic processes;

36. Stresses the need to enhance democracy by means of technology that should be used in a secure environment that is safe from the misuse of technological tools (e.g. spamming bots, anonymous profiling and identity appropriation), and recalls the need to respect the highest legal standards;

37. Recalls the essential role that whistleblowers play – generally through the internet – in exposing corruption, fraud, mismanagement and other forms of wrongdoing that threaten public health and safety, financial integrity, human rights, the environment and the rule of law, while at the same time ensuring the right of the public to information;

38. Encourages public representatives to participate actively with citizens in existing, fully independent forums, and to use new media and IT platforms with a view to stimulating discussion and exchanging opinions and proposals with citizens (e-parliament), creating a direct connection with them; calls on the political groups in the European Parliament and the European political parties to increase opportunities for public discussion and e-participation;

39. Calls on its Members and on the other EU institutions to continue enhancing transparency in their work, especially in the current challenging political context, and asks public authorities to look into the possibility of setting up digital platforms, including the latest IT tools; encourages elected representatives to use these tools and to

communicate and positively engage with constituents and stakeholders on an efficient basis, with a view to informing them on EU and parliamentary activities and thus opening up the deliberation and policy-making processes and increasing awareness of European democracy;

40. Welcomes Parliament's initiatives in the field of e-participation; supports continuous efforts to strengthen Parliament's representative character, legitimacy and effectiveness, and encourages Members to make wider use of new technologies in order to develop them to their full potential, while taking into account the necessary limits imposed by the right to privacy and to personal data protection; points out the need for a broad reflection process on how to improve the use of ICT by its Members, not only for engaging with the public but also regarding legislation, petitions, consultations and other aspects relevant to their daily work;

41. Encourages political parties at EU and national level to make the most out of digital tools in order to develop new ways to promote internal democracy, including transparency in their management, financing, and decision-making processes, and in order to allow better communication with and participation of their members and supporters and civil society; also encourages them to be highly transparent and accountable towards citizens; suggests to this end that possible modifications be considered to the Statute of European political parties and that these cover and promote e-participation practices;

42. Calls on the EU and its institutions to be open to more experimentation with new e-participation methods such as crowdsourcing, at EU level and at national, regional and local level, taking into account the best practices already developed within the Member States and, to this end, to launch specific pilot projects; reiterates at the same time the need to complement such measures with awareness-raising campaigns in order to explain the possibilities of these tools;

43. Calls on the European institutions to launch a participatory process in order to elaborate a European Charter of Internet Rights, taking as reference, among other texts, the Declaration of Internet Rights published by Italy's Chamber of Deputies on 28 July 2015, in order to promote and guarantee all the rights pertaining to the digital sphere, among them the genuine right of access to the internet and net neutrality;

44. Notes the abundance of heterogeneous information that can be found on the internet today, and stresses that citizens' capacity for critical thinking should be strengthened so that they are able to better discern between reliable and non-reliable sources of information; encourages Member States, therefore, to adapt and update legislation to address ongoing developments, and fully implement and enforce existing legislation on hate speech, both offline and online, whilst guaranteeing fundamental and constitutional rights; stresses that the Union and its Member States should develop actions and policies for strengthening transferable, critical and creative thinking skills and digital and media literacy, as well as inclusion and curiosity among their citizens, especially young people, so that they will be able to make informed decisions and contribute positively to democratic processes;

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45. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission and the governments and parliaments of the Member States.

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# EXPLANATORY STATEMENT

The development and use of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) are effecting profound changes in modern societies. This has heralded a major technological revolution, spearheaded by the Internet and the various communication and social interaction networks it has made possible. They have also come to influence the political sphere, in particular methods of citizen participation.

The wave of new digital communication tools and open and collaborative platforms has given rise to a new paradigm for communication, discussion and social participation in public affairs and swept away the monopoly of traditional media as the conduit for relations between citizens and politics.

These changes have been taking place while apathy and distrust in respect of democracy and its functioning has grown among vast swathes of society. While representative democracy remains firmly anchored in our continent, its credibility has been tarnished in recent decades by the growing public distrust concerning the modus operandi and the performance of the institutions representing them. Several factors account for this dangerous weakness in our political system. Economic decisions, sometimes taken by faceless, unaccountable bodies removed from the national democratic sphere, which have given rise to severe conflicts between local democracy and supranational government. The technical complexity of these decisions is such that most of the public finds them hard to fathom. The global financial and economic crisis of the past 10 years has caused a serious loss of social status among the working and middle classes of the Western world, leading to increased discontent with the system. Lastly, corruption in some systems and countries has severely curtailed citizens' trust in politics and their representatives.

Both the European Union and the Member States are facing growing criticism concerning the need to improve the internal functioning of national parliaments and the executive and administrative branches of government, and to shore up democratic oversight mechanisms. Citizens, who are becoming ever better informed, demand increased involvement and transparency in decision-making, and greater possibilities for interaction between politics and the public.

Against this backdrop, the wave of new digital communication tools and open and collaborative platforms can inspire creative, complementary solutions for improving the capabilities and performance of representative democracy, thus enriching it with greater legitimacy. The purpose of e-democracy is not to seek to establish an alternative democratic system but to, in the words of Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2009)1, promote, ensure and enhance transparency, accountability, responsiveness, engagement, deliberation, inclusiveness, accessibility, participation, subsidiarity and social cohesion.

The principle distinguishes between three concepts, although they obviously overlap:

- **E-Government:** refers to the use of ICT in the workings of the public sector, particularly to provide individuals with information and services from public authorities electronically (for example, payment of a speeding ticket).

- **E-Governance:** refers to the use of ICT to establish communication channels that enable the inclusion of the various stakeholders with something to say about the policy-making process

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(for example, through electronic public consultations on whether a particular speed limit should be changed, or local budget consultations).

**- E-Democracy:** refers to the use of ICT to create channels for public consultation and participation (for example, an e-parliament, e-initiatives, e-voting, e-petitions, e-consultations).

**Current situation in the EU**

Since 2009, the Commission has been particularly focused on e-participation and e-governance. It already carries out public consultations and impact assessments online, mainly before proposing draft legislation, in order to increase public participation and improve European governance. These processes could be improved if new technologies were more accessible and more widely used, with a view to involving all stakeholders in the policy development life cycle and strengthening European governance.
ICT could also help expand and develop both eGovernment, as a way to move towards a more participatory and deliberative form of democracy, and digital participation, as a part of the digital single market strategy.
The European Parliament has published various studies (such as 'The Future of Democracy in Europe: Trends, Analyses and Reforms' in 2008 and 'E-Public, E-Participation and E-Voting – prospects and challenges' in 2012) which analyse new tools and highlight, in particular, the associated difficulties.
Lastly, the Treaty on European Union introduced a pioneering instrument of participatory democracy into the European Union: the European Citizens' Initiative. Since 2012, when the initiative was launched, over 35 requests have been registered, three of which managed to reach the threshold of 1 million signatures and, therefore, received an official response from the Commission. Adopting new technologies could lead to more widespread use of this new instrument and improve some technical issues such as the online system for collecting signatures.

E-Democracy: great prospects or potential risks?

New communication technologies have enormous potential for fostering citizen participation in the democratic system and, as a way of building a more transparent and participatory democracy, should be regarded as a public good. Their transformative power should not be restricted to electoral processes, but should be extended to all aspects of civic participation in political processes, in particular to three forms of interaction between levels of government and citizens: online information and digital consultation and decision-making.
This aspiration should not, however, cause us to disregard the risks associated with the new technological age or to forget that technology is never an end in itself but rather a means of addressing the aforementioned issues. In particular, we should take into account:
- The digital divide: access to new technologies is a prerequisite for bringing its transformative potential to bear on democratic processes. In many countries, however, there are still areas without Internet access and all societies have huge sectors of the population that do not have the technical skills for Web use (the digitally illiterate). - Electoral fraud: voting systems should preclude any type of irregularity that impedes faithful reflection of the will of the electorate.
- Protecting privacy and personal data. Since absolute data security is impossible, privacy can be undermined. This is a particularly sensitive issue for the public.

- Need to account for democratic processes. Democratic procedures generally require extensive debate and the reconciliation of various viewpoints. The Internet is not always the ideal place for rational deliberation and getting to the bottom of arguments. It is not always possible, online, to distinguish between public opinion and viewpoints that seem to be held by the majority because of the role played by the most active Internet users.

- Some experience has shown an increasing trend towards the use of information and networks by private interests, which could cause a particular interest to be considered erroneously as a general interest and therefore ethics and transparency would be compromised. Sectorial ITC literates' and lobbies' requests should not prevail on the needs of the whole society.
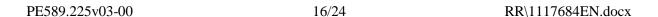
**A possible way forward**

Experts, institutions, governments and the general public have made several suggestions and recommendations. The rapporteur, after extensive debate with his colleagues, believes that the following proposals might form part of his report and be addressed at European as well as at national level:

- Since the digital revolution is already all around and will inevitably influence citizens' everyday life, it is advisable to provide educational and technical means for improving ITC competence for the ultimate benefit of democracy;

- Efforts still need to be made to help bridge the digital divide, ensure widespread access to technology for all members of the public (e-inclusion) and foster a more secure internet environment, particularly with regard to information and data security, the setting-up of secure digital public registers, and the checking of unique digital signatures to prevent fraudulent multiple interactions;

- Digital technology could be used to improve public consultation and impact assessment processes as a helping step in the process of decision-making to enhance governance;

- Promoting and encouraging mechanisms that enable the public to participate and interact with the institutions and officials who represent them. ICT should facilitate access to information, transparency, active listening, debate and, therefore, it could help bridge the gap between the public and better decision-making. It should also facilitate accountability, etc.;

- Encouraging public representatives to participate actively in existing forums, with a view to stimulating discussion and the exchange of opinions and proposals with members of the public;

- Sharing best practice for e-democracy projects as a way to move towards a form of democracy that is more participatory and deliberative, and that responds to the requests and interests of the public;

- Creating networks for working together with universities and educational institutions to encourage research on and implementation of new communication and participation tools and channels;

- Promoting cooperation at European level, particularly in relation to the transparency of the

European institutions and public participation in democratic decision-making;

- Offering political parties new ways to be open and connected with their members and supporters.

In conclusion, it should be stressed that technical innovations will not in and of themselves solve public disaffection in politics or effect meaningful change in our democracies. The reasons for this crisis are deep-seated and concern the policies implemented, together with increasing globalisation and growing dissatisfaction with the functioning of European democratic systems and their institutions. However, the digital revolution demands that we pay close and constant attention to how it can be put to meaningful use in order to prevent not only a false optimism concerning its advantages in overcoming problems besetting today's parliamentary democracy but also to avoid causing new problems that ICTs prove unable to resolve.

14.10.2016

**OPINION OF THE COMMITTEE ON CULTURE AND EDUCATION**

for the Committee on Constitutional Affairs

on e-Democracy in the European Union: potential and challenges
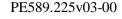(2016/2008(INI))

Rapporteur: Isabella Adinolfi

**SUGGESTIONS**

The Committee on Culture and Education calls on the Committee on Constitutional Affairs, as the committee responsible, to incorporate the following suggestions into its motion for a resolution:

1.  Acknowledges the continuous and swift technological changes occurring in the information society, the deep transformations these changes have brought about within society as a whole, with particular regard to educational and citizenship aspects, and the challenges and opportunities related to the various ICT tools, new media and other new technologies; to this end, encourages the development of criteria for assessing the added value of online engagement;

2.  Notes that an increasing number of citizens use ICT tools and new media and technologies to obtain an ever-wider variety of information, to exchange viewpoints, and to make their voices heard, engaging and participating in political life and collective decision-making, at local, national and EU level; considers, therefore, that it is crucial to increase digital inclusion and literacy, thus eradicating the existing digital divide which is a major obstacle for the exercise of active citizenship;

3.  Recalls that the participation of citizens in the democratic decision-making process through the use of ICT tools requires a legal enabling environment guaranteeing the right to privacy, freedom of expression and independent information, as well as investments by means of which citizens equipped with adequate media and digital literacy and skills can be enabled to enjoy full and equal access to a high-performance ICT technical infrastructure;

4.  Recalls that it is necessary to introduce ambitious technical standards for the whole Union that aim to substantially and effectively reduce the existing digital divide, in accordance with the specific situation of the different Member States; underlines the need to ensure equal access for all to an affordable, inclusive, fair and safe internet, where freedom of expression, the right to privacy, with particular regard to the protection of personal data, and the principle of net neutrality are protected, as well as equal access to public online and e-identification services; accordingly, calls on the Commission and the Member
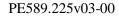
States to take into consideration all relevant physical, geographical, and social barriers to online participation, regardless of income or social and personal condition, especially in less accessible areas and avoiding any kind of discrimination as provided for in Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights;

5. Notes the increasing use of social media for socialisation and communication purposes, and their increasing use in the creative and cultural sector; notes that the expanded use of ICT in everyday life and in the citizens' modern way of life requires the promotion of the digital inclusion of persons of all ages to address the digital divide in the EU;

6. Believes that ICT tools and new media and technologies are crucial and will increasingly play a significant role in synergy with offline channels, in order to enhance the sense of belonging to the EU, civic engagement, and social inclusion, and to provide balanced information and knowledge about the EU, its history and values and fundamental rights, in order to stimulate critical thinking and constructive public debate about the European Union;

7. Notes that e-democracy has the potential to increase the sense of ownership of the EU among the citizens, which is especially important in the current Eurosceptic climate;

8. Notes the abundance of heterogeneous information that can be found on the internet today, and stresses that citizens' capacity for critical thinking should be strengthened so that they are able to better discern between reliable and non-reliable sources of information; encourages Member States, therefore, to adapt and update legislation to address ongoing developments, and fully implement and enforce existing legislation on hate speech, both offline and online, whilst guaranteeing fundamental and constitutional rights; stresses that the Union and its Member States should develop actions and policies for strengthening transferable, critical, creative thinking skills and digital and media literacy, inclusion and curiosity among their citizens, especially young people, so that they will be able to make informed decisions and contribute positively to democratic processes;

9. Notes that while ICT tools offer wide access to different sources of information, they also facilitate the spread of low-quality content which can be hard to distinguish from serious and reliable sources and can be misleading for citizens; underlines, therefore, the crucial need for proper media literacy training aimed at citizens, especially young people;

10. Calls for caution as online political debates often produce excessively polarised opinions and can be prone to hate speech, whereas moderate voices are often overlooked;

11. Acknowledges that e-Democracy can only have a positive impact when citizens are well-informed, have the skills to be critical towards wrong and biased information, and are able to identify attempts at propaganda;

12. Acknowledges that the above-mentioned risks and goals pose huge challenges for teachers and educators, in formal, non-formal and informal settings; calls, accordingly, on the Union and its Member States to increase investment in their lifelong training and development, combining online and offline methods, stimulating peer learning, exchange of best practices and capacity-building, and creating opportunities to learn and teach in an innovative, inclusive and non-discriminatory way;

13. Stresses that the EU and its Member States, should, particularly at regional and local level, promote ICT-based lifelong learning programmes on digital literacy and inclusion and civic engagement and participation, developing actions and policies, including research, making them readily accessible to the most vulnerable citizens, especially girls and women, LGBTI citizens, people with disabilities and other socially disadvantaged categories and minorities; highlights that such programmes should be designed and used in the interest of all citizens, at the same time addressing and raising awareness of cyber bullying, stigmatisation and other forms of online violence, and exclusion from political life, while avoiding division and discrimination within society;

14. Emphasises that women are under-represented in political decision-making at all levels, as well as in ICT sectors; notes that women and girls often face gender-stereotypes in relation to digital technologies; therefore calls on the Commission and Member States to invest in targeted programmes which promote ICT education and e-participation for women and girls, particularly those from vulnerable and marginalised backgrounds, using formal, informal and non-formal learning;15.    Notes the fundamental importance of digital inclusion for persons of all ages, and calls on the Commission to fully exploit to this end ICT tools and new media and technologies for motivating positive online dynamics that contribute to human development, peace and human rights; considers that, also in this context, e-Democracy tools can help to reduce the democratic deficit and the decline of political participation in the Union, and to facilitate engagement and participation in the public sphere; asks for the designing of initiatives specifically addressed to the young generation, and also to the elderly since both are affected by the generation gap; calls for the development of a critical approach to the use of such technologies in order to protect people and particularly children from all related risks;

16. Recalls that involving the citizens further in the processes around the European policies has the potential to renew their support for the European Union while reducing the democratic deficit in the Union; underlines, therefore, the potential of e-Democracy tools to this end, while also acknowledging the inherent limitations arising from their requirements, both on a technical level (high level of internet penetration, widespread Wi-Fi connectivity, high speed internet connection, etc) and on a practical level (media and digital literacy and skills, languages available, etc);

17. Considers it crucial that the Union and the Member States should conduct a strategic reflection in order to develop and launch e-Democracy tools that are able to provide a wider variety of sources disseminating independent and reliable information, to support open and innovative models of learning, taking into consideration European cultural and linguistic diversity and the specific interests of minority groups, to improve the quality of public debate, to encourage civic participation in decision-making processes, and to stimulate their active political engagement through participatory and direct democracy mechanisms that are able to strengthen and, where relevant, complement representative democracy;

18. Notes that in order to ensure equal accessibility of e-Democracy tools for all citizens, multilingual translation is important when information is to be disseminated and read by all citizens, in countries with more than one official language and by those coming from different ethnic backgrounds;

19. Warns that while e-Democracy tools could be useful for the involvement of citizens in the European processes, they do not replace traditional democratic tools, and their results should not be regarded as the representative expression of the citizens' opinion as a whole;

20. Highlights that e-Democracy tools are essential to promote accountability, transparency and good governance in public administration, broadening the public debate since they empower citizens to engage in responsive dialogue as *wreaders* in local, national and European political life; believes that in order to successfully foster citizens' engagement and trust, a change in governmental culture embracing greater accountability and scrutiny is needed; calls on the Commission and the Member States to make stakeholder consultation, policy-making and legislative processes even more transparent, accessible, digitised, consultative, inclusive, trusted, accountable and fair, opening opportunities for direct scrutiny and active oversight of elected representatives by citizens and associations;

21. Stresses that according to the OECD's analysis there are three dimensions to e-Democracy, namely information, consultation and active participation; notes that it therefore requires a government culture, an organisational culture, specific skills, defined rules and procedures for participation, and effective involvement in decision-making processes;

22. Considers that e-Democracy can increase transparency of the decision-making process in representative democracy and can have a positive impact on citizens' trust in their elected representatives;

23. Underlines that the security challenges posed by the e-Democracy tools should be addressed in a reasonable and proportionate way, through transparent, secure and distributed control mechanisms, replicating preventive measures that are already necessary in the offline environment, with particular reference to preventing electoral fraud and manipulation in online voting, ensuring citizens' privacy rights, and protection of their data against abuse, third-party surveillance software and other interference;

24. Notes that transparency, security and the existence of democratic control mechanisms throughout the whole e-Democracy procedure are vital in order to ensure citizens' rights to privacy and non-surveillance;

25. Calls on the Commission to develop and implement specific pilot projects, as provided for in the Digital Agenda, as well as to continue its support through other relevant EU funds and programmes, such as Europe for Citizens, with an emphasis on the mobility and participation of young people, with the aim of promoting and strengthening responsible and active European citizenship schemes, in order to truly consolidate democracy as a political and social experience which needs to be learned, lived, shared and embraced;

26. Calls on the Commission to continue its support for initiatives aiming at promoting and strengthening responsible and active European citizenship schemes, notably Erasmus+, the Connecting Europe Facility, the European Structural and Investment Funds, Horizon 2020 and Creative Europe; calls, to this end, for the strengthening and enhancement of the eTwinning, European Schoolnet and E-Teaching platforms, and of programmes such as European Voluntary Service which promote active citizenship.
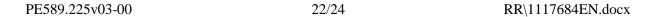
# RESULT OF FINAL VOTE IN COMMITTEE ASKED FOR OPINION

| | |
|---|---|
| **Date adopted** | 11.10.2016 |
| **Result of final vote** | +: 24<br>−: 2<br>0: 0 |
| **Members present for the final vote** | Isabella Adinolfi, Dominique Bilde, Andrea Bocskor, Nikolaos Chountis, Silvia Costa, Mircea Diaconu, Damian Drăghici, Jill Evans, Petra Kammerevert, Andrew Lewer, Svetoslav Hristov Malinov, Curzio Maltese, Luigi Morgano, Michaela Šojdrová, Helga Trüpel, Sabine Verheyen, Julie Ward, Theodoros Zagorakis, Bogdan Andrzej Zdrojewski, Milan Zver, Krystyna Łybacka |
| **Substitutes present for the final vote** | Therese Comodini Cachia, Ilhan Kyuchyuk, Emma McClarkin, Hannu Takkula |
| **Substitutes under Rule 200(2) present for the final vote** | Marco Affronte |

# RESULT OF FINAL VOTE IN COMMITTEE RESPONSIBLE

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|---|---|
| **Date adopted** | 9.2.2017 |
| **Result of final vote** | +: 15<br>–: 1<br>0: 0 |
| **Members present for the final vote** | Richard Corbett, Diane James, Ramón Jáuregui Atondo, Maite Pagazaurtundúa Ruiz, Helmut Scholz, György Schöpflin, Pedro Silva Pereira, Barbara Spinelli, Claudia Țapardel |
| **Substitutes present for the final vote** | Max Andersson, Diane Dodds, Sylvie Goulard, Enrique Guerrero Salom, Jérôme Lavrilleux, Rainer Wieland |
| **Substitutes under Rule 200(2) present for the final vote** | Isabella Adinolfi, Ramón Luis Valcárcel Siso |

# FINAL VOTE BY ROLL CALL IN COMMITTEE RESPONSIBLE

| 15 | + |
|---|---|
| ALDE | Sylvie Goulard, Maite Pagazaurtundúa Ruiz |
| EFDD | Isabella Adinolfi |
| GUE/NGL | Helmut Scholz, Barbara Spinelli |
| PPE | Jérôme Lavrilleux, György Schöpflin, Ramón Luis Valcárcel Siso, Rainer Wieland |
| S&D | Richard Corbett, Enrique Guerrero Salom, Ramón Jáuregui Atondo, Pedro Silva Pereira, Claudia Țapardel |
| VERTS/ALE | Max Andersson |

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|---|---|
| NI | Diane James |

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| | Corrections to vote |
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**EN**