Consumer Protection, European Decision-Making and the Regions – the eParticipation Project VoicE

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Abstract: Technical solutions for the public sector to include participative elements into its modes of operation are manifold. Somehow many attempts and projects seem to never really take of the ground; instead, they suffer from very limited usage and acceptance, especially in complex political environments such as the EU. The authors of this paper argue, that the reduction of complexity and the creation of a holistic participative process could provide a possible way forward to overcome these problems. The project VoicE combines state-of-the-art technology with extensive editorial preparation and policy modelling, both to be embedded in a process focussing on the regions as central intermediaries between the citizens and their stakeholders in Brussels. This paper presents the theoretical and practical assumptions and implications that build the groundwork for this ambitious project.

1.   Introduction

Legislative decision-making within the European Union is often criticised as elitist, intransparent and insular. Novel electronic eGovernment devices and tools promise to tackle these problems through the establishment of new online forms of information and participation for the European citizens. Indeed, various related platforms have been established. Yet, problems remain: eParticipation projects – in common with many technology led solutions - have a tendency to fail through lack of use or follow through from the project team. Despite their promise for widespread online consultations, many eParticipation forums also tend to be used by only a small minority of their potential audience. Additionally, for the existing projects on the European level, there is little evidence of decision-makers really incorporating eParticipation results into their policy routines and practices, potentially increasing frustration and dissatisfaction among participating citizens. Following these considerations, one can identify a fundamental problem at the basis of all these points of criticism, that is at the heart of all models of eParticipation, not merely those relating to EU decision-making: a mere reliance on setting in place sophisticated technology is simply insufficient. Instead, projects and related research need to consider holistic models that incorporate all aspects of practical political decision-making: a multidisciplinary process needs to be designed, introduced and maintained that unites state-of-the-art technology with advanced modelling of decision-making processes, but also attracts, educates, guides and informs citizens as well as politicians to generate interest and real participation. The EU-funded project VoicE implements such an innovative model, attempting to face up to these challenges.

With this contribution, the authors intend to introduce their deliberations and theoretical expectations towards a broader audience and to showcase the steps taken so far to realize this ambitious project.[i] Following an outline of the baseline considerations and assumptions

behind VoicE project, the authors will present the structure of the model behind VoicE project and frame some expectations; thus aiming to disseminate their ideas and to contribute to the ongoing discussion on the feasibility of participative projects in EU decision-making.

2. Baseline Considerations

With the widespread use of modern internet and communication technologies (ICT) and the successful implementation of internet-based applications in the private sector, there raised a special need in the public sector that these new technologies will also be used for offering and informing citizens and companies. Since the early beginning of the 21st century, various projects in research and practice in the field of eGovernment have been realized, but projects for participation are still in the beginning. On the one hand there is a lack because of the not seen added and public value in the field of democratic decision-making and participation in politics. On the other hand not all stakeholders know who is responsible and the motivator for the setting up projects in this field (see [3], [5], [1], and [2]).

Yet, by omitting electronic participatory elements from the political process, decision-makers not only miss out on vast opportunities to gain valuable input through large scale social collaboration, networks and "crowdsourcing" already put to great use in the private sector. They are also risking a further alienation from their electorate, especially among the youngest voters, who are often already estranged from traditional political rituals. This trend is likely to increase, as future generations used to apply Web2.0 in most aspects of their lives will be less and less willing to contribute and tolerate the "traditional ways".

Realizing these aspects, in the last years the European Commission funded several projects, e.g. in the context of the 6th Framework Programme[ii] or the eParticipation Preparatory Actions[iii], one of them is VoicE – Giving European People a voice in EU-legislation. Citizens will be able to share their opinions with political decision-makers on issues, which are in the legislative pipeline before relevant decisions are to be made. This way, citizens will be able to really express their opinions on day-to-day legislation in the field of consumer protection, delivering real inputs. Extensive editorial preparation will provide the means for accurate preparation and easy accessibility for citizens to complex legislative issues. Several channels will also be established to forward the results of the consultations to relevant decision-makers, especially in the European Parliament and the Committee of Regions. This way it is ensured that the legislative input created by participating citizens really reaches its addressees.

Summarising these aspects, VoicE attempts to set in place a process involving manifold stakeholders and disciplines, not merely a technical structure for eParticipation. The basic considerations and proposed methodologies underlying this model will be lined out in the next section. The following graph also gives an overview on VoicE partners and proposed mechanisms:

VoicE: a multidisciplinary, citizen-driven model for eParticipation in Europe
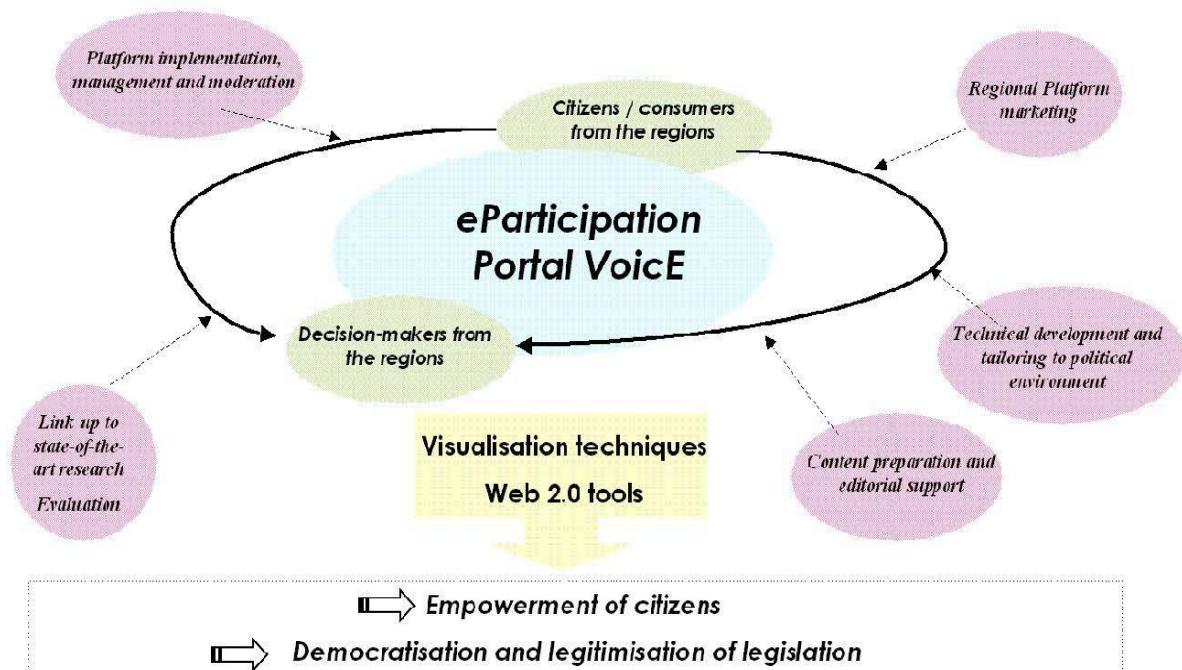
3. Methodology and Implementation

3.1 *The Need to Reduce Complexity – Regional focus*

A problem common to all models of political participation in the European Union is the big discrepancy between interested citizens and decision-makers with regards to the level of available information. For citizens, it is very difficult to get involved into a system, which is not only extremely complex, but whose acting decision-makers are also remote and mostly unknown to them. By testing a model of participation based on regions, VoicE is trying to bridge this gap. VoicE will create channels for citizens allowing them to communicate directly with decision-makers from their region which they have (in part, at least) elected themselves and which speak their language (giving otherwise anonymous politicians and decision-makers in Brussels a "face", in turn creating accountability and transparency). Mostly, this will relate to Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) of both participating regions (Baden-Württemberg and Valencia), of whom several have agreed to support VoicE project. Using the platform will give the MEPs an opportunity to directly discuss with their regional electorate issues related to their everyday-work, for example within the Committee on Consumer Protection. However, the VoicE model is not necessarily restricted on the European Parliament. Other channels of particular regional relevance that will be taken into consideration include the regional governments and their links to the Committee of Regions (COR).

A model of eParticipation in Europe based on regions as basic political entities also has further advantages:

- Citizens from the region can be directly targeted with awareness-raising campaigns far easier and with a higher intensity than a non-specified target group (e.g. all Europeans).
- Existing and well-established channels of communication on EU affairs in the regions can be used to advertise the platform. Their cooperation has been ensured right from the start.

- MEPs can discuss real policy issues with their own constituents, not only with the few they can address in person during visits home. They will be able to do this just-in-time, before actual votings are taking place.
- Regional consumer protection agencies can be included to support addressing the citizens from the region.
- Connections to Members of the regional parliament can also be established, further strengthening the input.
- Other political entities with an interest or activities in EU affairs can easily be included (as took place for VoicE, which already includes two ministries in its consortium).

The VoicE platform will initially be launched in the participating regions of Baden-Württemberg and Valencia. Extension to other interested regions is certainly possible during later stages of the project.

3.2 The Need to Reduce Complexity - Thematic Focus

Legislative decision-making in the European Union is a highly complex issue. However, fruitful citizen consultation and participation imperatively requires well-informed citizens. Therefore, a main objective of VoicE is the creation of easily-accessible, in-depth knowledge on the selected subject of consumer protection in the European Union. Consumer protection has been selected out of the large nimbus of political decision-making in the EU, as it is of high direct relevance and interest to citizens and also comparatively accessible. Additionally, citizens bottom-up feedback and input might be particularly relevant and valuable for decision-makers and especially for MEPs working in this field.

In order to structure and map the field, intensive editorial preparation and informed selection of relevant legislative issues is vital for the success of the project. Applying state-of-the-art scientific methodologies [4]. like process-tracing and using their network of advisors in the EU institutions and beyond, the experts in our consortium will conduct an in-depth analysis of the current state of affairs in the field of consumer protection in the European Union. The underlying assumption is that each legislative piece (e.g. a European directive) can be broken down to a core of usually between two and six highly challenged political questions. By focusing on those (and in turn, by omitting all technical formalities and especially the related jargon) it becomes possible to create a backbone of knowledge and analyses, which will help to structure the participative process enormously.

The resulting issue-specific dossiers are designed to give every user a broad, impartial overview on the legislative issue at hand within 10 minutes of reading time. They will also allow citizens to trace the exact legislative process and to choose for which issue and what point in the legislative process they want to get involved. By omitting technical questions and jargon and in turn by reducing legislation to its political, contested core, participation is additionally simplified.

Issue-specific preparations are also creating an important background for the work of the platform management, who can now structure events taking place on the eParticipation platform simultaneously to real legislative timetables in the European Parliament. These just-in-time consultation processes in turn will allow the political decision-makers to incorporate bottom-up inputs by citizens directly into their legislative work.

It remains an interesting question, to what degree intensive preparations and pre-structuring of debates can really be a way forward for ambitious participatory projects, especially given the enormous amount of preparations and human resources needed to deliver proper results in this process. With the project, hopefully it will be possible to deliver some answers, whether this is a suitable methodology.

3.3 *The Need to Reduce Complexity - Technical Background*

The technical implementation is based on Gov2DemOSS[iv], an eCollaborating platform with deliberation support. It was awarded the eGov Good Practice Label by the European Union in November 2006. Gov2DemOSS is an open source[v], generic but customizable, and collaboration supporting eParticipation platform. It provides institutions and organizations the possibility to keep their communities informed, manage their information repositories, gauge public opinion, interact directly with their constituents, and involve them in the decision making process [4]. Gov2DemOSS includes the following features besides typical Web Content Management System (CMS) features (cp [4], p. 500):

- User registration to ensure portal access only to viable members: The user registration uses a standard authentication system with username and password and an email verification system, so only registered users can post or reply messages in the forums.
- Deliberation forums to provide participation possibilities for stakeholders.
- Blogs for state-of-the-art information sharing.
- Polls for gauging users' opinion.
- Petitions to mobilize citizens around specific issues.
- Secure, private and personal messaging service for forum users.
- Member Profile Page to provide a record of each user's details and of their contributions.
- Search Engine for easy access to information.

The Gov2DemOSS platform has more features than a traditional simple Web-CMS to support collaboration and deliberation. An initial evaluation of the Gov2DemOSS platform with 40 participants of different age, presented in [4], showed that it needs some advancement, which will be tackled in the project by informing the people what they are doing and why it is necessary to participate in the decision-making process. An ongoing moderation process, that will take place during the runtime of the platform, will ensure usability and support for citizens, but also update information and structure debates. After the 12-month runtime of VoicE in two separate regions will have been completed, more valuable statements about its usability in this context will be feasible.

4.   Conclusions and Expectations

VoicE sets up an ambitious new model of political participation in the EU, which relies on the thematic focus of consumer protection, detailed editorial preparations and regional addressees in combination with state-of-art software. The details of this model, the expectations and possible points of criticism deserve closer scrutiny beyond the limited framework of this paper. It remains to be seen what contribution the VoicE model can deliver to our understanding of opportunities for citizen participation on a pan-national, European scale. The project also touches a few problems that are common to many applications in eParticipation: how can a process be designed that really ensures effective and inclusive participation in a highly complex political environment? By incorporating technology with political science, marketing with moderation, policy modelling with issue-preparation, VoicE posses many interesting questions of both theoretical and practical nature, and hopefully also some first answers.

Acknowledgements

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[3] Macintosh, Ann; Coleman, Stephen (2003): Promise and Problems of E-Democracy: Challenges of Online Citizen Engagement. OECD Publications Service

[4] Koulolias, V., Karamagioli, E., & Xenakis, A. (2006): The Gov2DemOSS eParticipation Platform: A New Era Tool for eDemocracy Implementation. In P. Cunningham & M. Cunningham (Eds.), Exploiting the Knowledge Economy: Issues, Applications, Case Studies. Amsterdam: IOS Press.

[5] Commission, European (2006): International High Level Research Seminar on "TRUST IN THE NET". Main Recommendations. European Commission. Vienna, Austria.

[6] Thomson, Robert et al (2006) : The European Union Decides – political economy of institutions and decisions. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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[i] In the period up to the deadline to finish this paper (June 2008), the VoicE platorm is still in a BETA version and scheduled to go online in a final version in September 2008, in hand with a targeted marketing campaign. Therefore, only preliminary results and considerations can be published here. Initial results will be published shortly.

[ii] http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/egovernment/projects/index_en.htm

[iii] http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/egovernment_research/eparticipation/index_en.htm

[iv] For further information see http://www.gov2u.com/

[v] Gov2DemOSS uses the open source Web-CMS Joomla (http://www.joomla.org/)

[vi] for more information please check

http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/egovernment/policy/eparticipation/index_en.htm