



Evolution Rather Than Revolution

– A Comparative Analysis of the Quality of E-Democracy

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Abstract

This thesis examines the democratic advantages and challenges of e-democracy, as well as its impact. The aim is to address some of the theoretical and empirical gaps in the rapidly developing but still emerging field of e-democracy. Moreover, the intention is to assist e-democracy practitioners in tailoring their projects in a way that addresses the particular democratic problems that they are facing. To this purpose, the thesis presents a theoretical frame and indicators to assess the quality of e-democracy projects.

The quality is explored through in-depth comparison of five case studies of e-democracy initiatives in Italy, France, Sweden and the UK. Two types of projects are examined: e-petitioning and parliamentary informatics (i.e. projects that enable citizens to monitor and engage in legislative activities of parliaments). The thesis provides primary survey evidence from nearly 700 e-democracy participants, as well as from interviews with project stakeholders. In focusing on e-democracy from the user perspective - rather than from the more common perspectives of policy-makers and data/tool providers - and in addressing standards of democratic quality, the thesis contributes to a rebalancing of the e-democracy debate towards civic, over structural and technological characteristics.

The e-democracy projects at hand show that ICT improve access and usability of information, facilitate the interaction between citizens and civil society, and offer important stimuli for engagement. The projects manage to attract previously passive citizens and deepen engagement with those who are already involved in politics. However, the downside is that many of the traditionally under-represented groups in politics are even more absent from e-democracy platforms. Moreover, the projects stop short of establishing direct communication between citizens and their representatives, and of achieving policy impact. In fact, the findings confirm that ICT enable new dynamics but that the traditional political institutions remain change resistant. Rather than permitting a revolution, e-democracy contributes to a slow evolution of the political system.



Jury: Graham Smith (University of Westminster), Alina Östling (candidate), Alexander H. Trechsel (EUI, supervisor), Rachel Gibson (University of Manchester), Donatella della Porta (EUI, by videolink).

Bio

Alina Östling holds a Master's degree of Science in Business and Economics from Uppsala University and has accumulated over ten years of professional experience, including managing the Democratic Governance portfolio at UNDP Belarus, working as policy evaluator and engaging in several new media and civil society projects. In most recent years, Alina has collaborated in several research projects, namely the Open Government Partnership and the WWW Foundation's Web Index 2013. She has also been involved with the development of online voting advice applications for the EU Profiler (2009) and the Swedish Electoral Compass (2010).

Her research interests are e-democracy/e-participation, democracy, ICT, citizen engagement in politics, equality, civic literacy, transparency, accountability, development cooperation, ICT4D.