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New citizen participation through new media?

1. Electronic participation: the hopes and the fears

Technical change has always had a great influence on the political and social situation. The significance of technical innovation is especially clear in foreign and military policy. The close relationship between technical progress and military success and options began with the use of the Trojan horse and extends to the deployment of rocket defence systems in space.

The relevance of technical progress for the inner development of societies and states is perhaps less tangible, but it is no less significant. Without the invention of printing, it would not have been possible to make education universal and set up national communication systems. And these two developments in turn led to the modernisation of society and the democratisation of the state (Lipset 1959). Since the beginning of the 20th century, electronic communication has developed to become a decisive factor in political life. The increasing dominance of the media in politics developed from the use of radio and film as propaganda instruments by the National Socialists to the legendary, election-deciding TV duel between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy in the American presidential election in 1960, and more recently to a general shift of election campaigns and other forms of political information to television.

Nevertheless, it is probably no exaggeration to suggest that few technical developments in recent history have affected the relationship between governments and the governed as extensively and thoroughly as new information and communication technology. When Daniel Bell described the use of information as the most important productive force in post-industrial society in his book "The Coming of Postindustrial Society" (1976), he probably had no idea how intensively and universally the use of electronic media would have affected all areas of society a quarter of a century later.

New communication structures have now also taken root in politics and are dominating more and more aspects of the interaction between governments and the governed. All parties represented in the German parliament organise parts of their inner-party and external communication via the Internet (Bieber 2001), municipal administrations not only present themselves on websites; many have already started to offer services and provide advice to citizens on the Internet[1]. The virtual town hall is no longer a utopia, in large parts of the Western world it has already become a reality. Küchler (2000: 325) aptly

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1   A portal to local community websites can be found at http://www.kommunalweb.de

describes the significance of this development as follows: "Telephone and television undoubtedly brought about a radical change in everyday life and political culture, but they did not lay the technical foundation for a possible radical transformation of (representative) democracy". But the technical capability to organise direct communication between government and the governed makes a fundamental reorganisation of the existing political structures possible.

There is now a broad-based discussion of the potential and the risks of the use of modern information and communication technology in politics. However, the arguments presented in this debate are based more on conjecture and speculation than on solid scientific insights. And care is not always taken to distinguish sufficiently between various applications of modern information and communication technology in politics and to create the necessary connection to the academic discussion in political and administrative science. In view of the fact that political information and state services will not be offered exclusively on the Internet in the medium term, but rather will still be offered in their conventional form, the expansion of e-information and e-services seems relatively unsensational in its political importance. But the situation is different for citizen participation via new media. This is the most complicated political component of e-government and it deserves special attention - and is at the centre of the following considerations.

What hopes and fears are associated with e-participation, and to what extent Dimensions are these expectations justified? Advocates of the model of an electronic democracy propagate the vision of a virtual revival of classical city-state democracy which seemed to have become technically impossible under the conditions of modern mass democracies.

By facilitating comprehensive and direct communication between all members of the political community, the Internet and the world-wide web act as a market place of opinions in which political problems are discussed, interests are articulated and brought together and decisions are prepared (*Communication function*).

However, e-participation not only places the exchange of political information and expressions of opinion on a broader basis, it also gives it a new potential quality. Electronic democracy creates an opportunity for an unadulterated and direct exchange of views between governed and government. Persons with the same interests and values can join to form virtual action groups – even across national boundaries – and can present their ideas to the decision-makers either individual or jointly. Members of parliament and members of the government can present their ideas directly to the electors. And the electors in turn can call up and react to the necessary information at any time. Intermediary organisations, which are essential in a representative democracy as mediators between the political leadership and the population, lose their function as a filter in the communication of interests and policies (*Intermediary function for interests and policies*).

The new quality of the political process in an electronic democracy becomes particularly clear in relation to the way binding political decisions are reached. Similar to a postal vote, it seems possible to cast a vote in elections or other votes from the citizen's own computer at home. In the long term, it even seems conceivable to set up virtual constituencies as a substitute for the physical presence of electors in the voting booth. This would reduce the cost of elections and help to raise the proportion of votes cast. Public petitions and referendums would not only be possible at the local community level, the

Internet could also facilitate the introduction of direct democracy at the national level and reduce the obstacles to the success of public petitions and referendums. Representative institutions could be enriched or even replaced by elements of direct democracy (*Decision-making function*).

For many, electronic democracy thus offers a solution to the much-discussed crisis of representative democracy. Direct inclusion of the citizens in political policy-making and decision-making processes can help to overcome the estrangement of the elected from the electors and to reconcile the people with the political system, its institutions and its participants. It integrates, gives legitimacy, facilitates control of the political decision-makers and strengthens the accountability of the government to those governed.

In view of the great hopes that are associated with citizen participation through new information and communication technology, we must ask what reasons have so far prevented the political leadership from using the new technical possibilities to strengthen democracy. One of the causes is certainly that not everything that is technically feasible is politically desirable. Technical achievements are used in a social context in which people decide how the technical possibilities are utilised. Just as the vision of an electronic "city-state" democracy emphasises the positive achievements of modern communication technology, the broad use of this technology by extreme right-wing groups underlines the drawbacks. In the hands of anti-democratic leadership groups, the Internet can turn out to be a very efficient tool for control and manipulation. In view of the technical possibilities which exist today, the vision of total state control painted by Orwell seems to play down the dangers rather than exaggerating them.

As a result, the idea of an electronic democracy gives rise to fears as well as hopes. This also applies to participation via new media. From the point of view of its critics it does not automatically overcome the weaknesses of the traditional process to communicate interests - in fact, it may even heighten them. It is well known from participation research that a large number of people do not make use of the available participation rights. In all Western democracies, active participation in politics is the domain of well-resourced, socially integrated minorities (Barnes, Kaase et al, 1979; Verba, Nie and Kim 1978). At first sight, there is little reason to assume that this would change simply by a new technical design of the participation processes. This applies all the more in view of the fact that by no means everybody has access to the Internet or competence in dealing with the new technology. Thus, critics warn of the danger of a digital divide in society and an information overload for citizens and decision-makers.

Even the opportunity for a direct exchange of information between citizens and direct communication between government and the governed their is found to be questionable on closer examination. It is not face-to-face communication between partners who are physically present, rather it takes place in a largely anonymous situation. This means that e-participation risks losing the social dimension which is so important for political participation and undermining the ability to act cooperatively. Even though electronic participation permits direct exchange between the electors and the elected and weakens the traditional lobbies, it does not automatically lead to an improvement in the quality of democracy. Instead, the weakening of the intermediaries, especially the political parties, leads to a risk of fragmentation in the political decision-making process because the

aggregation and selection of interests by parties and institutions is no longer applicable.

We can only speculate on whether organising political participation through new information and communication technology will be a blessing or a curse in the long term. However, it does seem possible to explore the political potential of participation via new media rather more precisely than is done in parts of the public discussion. In the following sections I will leave aside the technical aspects of the subject of "e-participation" and concentrate instead on clarifying three questions which I believe will shed some light on the participatory potential of the new information and communication technology:

➔ What do we understand by political participation, what forms does it take, and what does this imply for the subject of "e-participation"?

➔ Who participates how and why, and can our knowledge of the present participation structures be transferred to e-participation?

➔ Does e-participation provide a new solution for old problems?

2. What is political participation and in what forms does it occur?

The principle of the sovereignty of the people as the legitimation of democratic rule leads to the demand that, in a democracy, all members of the political community should participate in political life with equal rights, but that they are also entitled to abstain from doing so if they do not feel that it is important or desirable. Following Kaase (1997: 160), I regard political participation as comprising all voluntary activities undertaken by "private persons" with the aim of *influencing* decisions about political personnel and issues, or any direct participation in such decisions. Political participation is distinguished from other political actions by its *relationship to the decision* and the voluntary character of the actions. As a *voluntary* activity of private persons, it is set apart from actions undertaken in a professional decision-making capacity. The latter are actions by participants who are involved as a result of an election, an appointment or a contract of employment in the preparation, making or implementation of political decisions, e.g. members of parliament, representatives, members of the government or employees of the public administration. On the other hand, political participation involves more than just communication or support activities because its goal is to *influence* or participate in decisions. This distinguishes political participation, for example, from reading the politics section of the newspaper or paying taxes. The concept of e-participation thus designates political influence on decisions, or direct participation in decisions, via electronic media.

From a formal and institutional perspective, the possible ways to influence or participate in decisions can be combined into three main groups. Influence can be exerted prior to binding decisions, i.e. in the process of *political policy-formation*, for example in the form of individual or collective articulation of certain interests, mobilisation of support from other persons or groups to enforce these interests or as the attempt to place previously neglected subjects on the political agenda. After a binding decision has been taken, in the *implementation* phase, there are also opportunities for political participation. This normally takes the form of individual or collective negotiations with the administration to maintain specific interests, efforts to use legal means to achieve concerns which were not politically enforceable, etc. A third category of participatory activities is direct *participation in the making of binding*

decisions about personnel or policy issues, which typically takes place in elections or votes. In all three areas, the use of ICT techniques is possible in principle, although it is associated with various problems.

In addition to questions of institutional analysis, empirical participation research investigates how individual activities interact in practice. Groups of interrelated activities, i.e. activities which are typically carried out in combination, can be called "participation systems" following Verba and Nie (1972). They are characterised by special structural features, for example the amount of work involved or their intrinsic conflict potential, and they are used by various groups of persons for different purposes. The participation studies that have so far been made were carried out at different times in different countries and did not always include the same activities, so it is not surprising that different participation systems were identified in individual cases. In a representative study carried out in 1997 on the forms of municipal political participation in the Federal Republic of Germany, four participation systems were identified: party-based, output-based and theme-based activities and activities under the heading of civil disobedience (Gabriel and Kunz 2001). The party-based activities include active participation in a political party and mobilisation of the support of a party in the interest of political demands. Output-based forms of participation include contact with public authorities and the use of legal action. Theme-based forms of participation include public petitions and referendums, participation in citizens action groups and participation in protest demonstrations. Civil disobedience activities include traffic blockades and participation in resistance activities (occupation of buildings etc.). These forms can be theoretically and empirically distinguished, but they are more or less closely linked. In other words: people who use certain methods of influencing political

decisions will very probably also use other methods if necessary.

Even though different forms of participation have been identified in the empirical studies on political participation in Germany so far, these studies agree that participation in specific forms of political activity also correlates with the tendency to use other available forms of influence. This is an important result for the discussion on the opportunities and limitations of e-participation because it leads us to assume that this development will hardly mobilise new groups for the political process, instead, it is merely likely to provide new forms of influence for those who are already active.

3. How are the possibilities for participation used in Germany?

As a result of many years of intensive activity in empirical participation research, the following conclusions can be drawn. Irrespective of the institutional arrangements which exist in a country, the population has created a strongly differentiated system of access to the political process. However, the existence of certain participation systems in itself says nothing about the degree to which they are actually used by the population, and in this point the results of the research to date are also completely unambiguous. All studies that have been carried out up to now show that voting at elections is the only form of participation which the majority of the citizens of Germany make use of. All other forms of participation, whether they be the exertion of influence through parties, associations or mass media, participation in signed petitions or protest demonstrations, public petitions or referendums, are only used by a more or less large minority of citizens, although there is a relatively broad group of potential users. In a representative study of local community

political participation carried out throughout Germany in 1997, the following pattern was observed: about every tenth citizen of Germany stated that he or she had participated at some time in a party-based activity or an action of civil disobedience, and the number was twice as high for theme-oriented and output-oriented forms of participation. If we add the potential users, this gives us a maximum of almost 40 per cent of potential active participants. This is still a minority of the citizens of Germany, but it is a strong minority which amounts to about 24 million persons (Table 1). A typical observation is that activities with a limited content and for a limited time are more broadly received than permanent activities such as active participation in a political party. A survey carried out in 1998, although its differed in its structural details and its distribution, nevertheless came to similar results (van Deth 2001). If we bear in mind that the use of electronic media to exert political influence is likely to be dependent on the same fundamental conditions as the forms of participation outlined above, and that access to the Internet and competence in using new media are additional demands that are made on participants, the expectation of broad participation as a result of the use of modern communication technology is fairly unrealistic. As with other forms of political participation, for the foreseeable future only a minority will participate through new information and communication technology - mainly the population groups which are already politically active in other forms, i.e. by membership in political parties or citizens action groups or participation in demonstrations or signed petitions. This assumption is based on the insight, which is supported by several empirical studies, that different forms of political participation are supplementary rather than mutually exclusive (Gabriel 2001).

Table 1: Forms of municipal political participation in Germany, 1997 (figures in percentages)

	Activity	Potential activity
Civil disobedience	10	16
Party-based activity	9	21
Theme-based activity	18	20
Output-based activity	20	19

Source: Konrad Adenauer Foundation, autumn survey (1997).

4. What factors influence people's tendency to be politically active or inactive?

One of the most important features of a democratically organised political regime is the freedom of the citizens to decide what role they want to play in politics. The concept of the citizen who is active in all areas and at all times, which is cultivated by the participatory theory of democracy (e.g. Pateman 1970), not only flies in the face of political reality, it is also problematical as a normative concept for the above reason. The important thing in democracy is not whether all citizens are really always actively involved in political life, it is that they have the possibility to be politically active and have an influence on political decisions whenever they want to.

From this point of view, the typical differentiation of professional roles in a democracy – professional politicians, political activists, spectators and the inactive (Milbrath 1965) – is not problematical in itself. Problems only arise against the background of what is known about the factors which determine political participation. For example, the

democratic ideal of equal access to the political process for all people is formally fulfilled, but not implemented in practice. In particular, activities which place high demands on time and intellect are far more intensively engaged in by well-resourced, social integrated people than the average level for the population (cf.: Milbrath and Goel 1977; Barnes, Kaase et al, 1979; Verba, Nie and Kim 1978; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). An additional factor is the traditional sex-specific role model which still has an effect today and means that women are politically less active than men (Hoecker 1998). To some extent these factors act directly – as obstacles or incentives to political participation – and to some extent they create the attitudes which are decisive for political participation (interests, sense of competence, sense of civil duty) and thus influence people's participation in political life. Personal resources can be measured in terms of social and structural features such as educational qualifications, work in fields related to politics or level of income, social integration in terms of integration in the job market, partner relationships, friendship groups and membership of voluntary organisations. These background factors are typical of both traditional and new forms of political participation; the area in which they have the least influence is participation in elections.

Although participation research has so far concentrated almost exclusively on the demand side of the political market, i.e. the resources and motives of active and inactive citizens, political participation depends not only on demand factors, it is also affected by supply factors (cf. Rosenstone and Hansen 1995; Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). In the first place these include the institutionally pre-defined participation options. If a political system does not include referendums, for example, they are not available as a means of political influence. The greater the differentiation in the official or unofficial means of participation, the greater is the chance that they will be used. In addition to the general institutional conditions, the behaviour of the political leadership and the conduct of active political figures also influence the type and extent of political participation. A municipal administration which is conducive to participation and gives the citizens the feeling that their wishes and suggestions are taken seriously will be better at mobilising the population to participate than a political leadership which is always defensive when citizens express a wish to participate. But leadership behaviour not only affects the extent of political participation, it also affects the manner of participation. As has already been shown in several studies of the conditions of political protest in Western democracies, participation in protest activities is often based on the conviction that conventional forms of political influence are not likely to be successful, and therefore more spectacular forms of action are necessary (e.g. Inglehart 1979; McPhail 1971).

Many forms of political participation are collective activities which do not come about on their own, but are dependent on mobilisation by active political figures. This role is played by political parties, interest groups, social movements or associations which, when necessary, call on their members and adherents to become active in order to enforce political goals. In some cases, individuals or small groups go to the trouble of organising collective activities if the cause involved is so important to them that they will make every effort to achieve the respective goals. This model arises particularly in cases of participation by affected parties, for example in activities directed against municipal or state plans which impinge on the ownership rights of citizens or which they consider to threaten their quality of life.

Most supply and demand factors, however, are factors which have a long-term effect and

do not explain the enormous fluctuations in the level of political activity, especially in protest activities (cf. Gabriel 2001). This suggests that variable short term circumstances also have an effect. Analytical studies of political interests and participation in conventional activities arrow typically show the importance of elections and election campaigns for the political mobilisation of the population, and studies of the protest activities of the civil rights movement in the USA also clearly show the influence of situational factors (Conway 1995; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993).

Individual incentives and conditions in the political environment interact to stimulate political participation. People who are in unequal starting conditions in this respect tend to exercise their political rights to different extents. The consequences arising from this fact must but be determined empirically in each individual case, but two possible consequential problems are evident. If we regard political participation as an important resource to articulate and enforce political interests and to bind the government to the governed, the above-average participation activities of well-resourced and socially integrated minorities involves the risk that the political leadership could base its decisions mainly on publicly articulated demands, i.e. the interests of the active participants, and that this could lead to dissatisfaction among the inactive citizens. The distance between inactive citizens and the political system and its democratic policy-forming and decision-making processes could be heightened by an additional factor: active participation in political life creates the possibility of developing political competence. It can strengthen the understanding of democratic values, standards and procedural principles, and by this means enhance acceptance of democratic structures and processes. Up to now, empirical participation research has concentrated on the study of the

structures and determining factors of political participation, so there are few empirical studies of the consequences of activity and inactivity, and their results are not consistent, at least in relation to the relationship between participation and the representation of interests (Gabriel 2000). At the very least, the risk of an unequal distribution of the chance to enforce political interests and acquire democratic competence cannot be excluded.

5. Does e-participation solve the existing problems?

5.1 Evaluation criteria

Adherents of electronic participation see it as a means to implement the ideal of participatory democracy under the conditions of modern society. This expectation would be justified if individuals decided to be politically active or remain inactive solely as a result of institutional, organisational or social conditions. But this assumption proves to be empirically inaccurate because individual attitudes also affect decisions for or against political participation. Therefore, the question of whether and under what circumstances the number of politically active persons can be increased by the use of new information and communication technology requires empirical clarification. The following questions are of interest in this connection:

➔ Does the population have access to electronic media and the necessary competence to use the new media?

➔ Is a significant proportion of the population even interested in using new communication technology to influence political decisions?

➔ Does e-participation mobilise previously inactive groups for the political process?

Hardly any useful empirical data are currently available about the use of new media for political purposes, so these questions can only be answered by approximation. However, if we combine the available data with the existing knowledge on the structures and determining factors of political participation, this gives a first impression of the participation *potential* of the new communication media. The following section of this report will explore the conditions, possibilities and limitations of an improvement in participation opportunities through the use of the Internet.

5.2   The access problem

Political participation covers a broad spectrum of activities which take place in various phases of the political policy-forming and decision-making process, fulfil various functions and focus on various target groups. Information and communication technology can fundamentally be used in all areas of policy formation and decision-making, especially in relation to processes which do not rely on direct face-to-face interaction between the participants (cf. von Korff 1999; Burkert 2001).

Like with other forms of participation, the possibility of e-participation depends on the interaction of supply and demand factors which was dealt with above. In addition to the general determining factors for political participation, however, there are other specific restrictions associated with the special characteristics of the media used for participation. On the demand side there are two such factors; the first is access to the Internet, the second is the ability to use the new media competently.

A basic requirement for electronic participation is access to a networked computer, whether it is at home, at work or in public places such as libraries, public authorities, educational institutions etc. According to the NUA surveys, 20.1 million citizens of Germany, i.e. 24.2 per cent of residents of the Federal Republic, had access to the Internet in November 2000. By comparison with the data in the first survey carried out in 1998, a rapid increase had been observed in a period of just 2 years; in January 1998 only 6.3 per cent of the respondents said that they had access to the Internet. Even though the available data show a broad diffusion of the new information and communication technology, this does not change the fact that the majority of the Germans are at present excluded from the Internet or not interested in it (cf. Table 2).

Table 2: Proportion of the population with access to the Internet in selected states, 1998 to 2000 (figures in percentages)

Point in time	D	DK	F	I	NL	S	UK	H
1/98	6.3	12.9		2.2	8.3	14.9		
3-5/98	7.3	16.0	6.0	4.1		27.0	9.0	2.0
10-12/98	8.7	34.0			7.8	33.0	18.0	
3-6/99	10.0			8.0	13.7	40.9		5.0
7-10/99	12.1	35.5	12.9				21.2	
11-12/99				15.9		44.3	23.7	
2/2000					28.5			
3-5/2000	19.4		15.3	19.1			32.5	6.4
8-10/2000	21.7	43.1		20.8	43.8	50.7		
11-12/2000	24.3	48.4		23.2	45.8	56.4	33.6	7.2
Growth rate (per cent)	386	352	255	1545	518	385	333	36

Source: NUA surveys (http://www.nua.com/surveys/).

Current data from a survey of 19,690 citizens in Germany carried out in May 2001 by TNS EMNID largely confirm the information of the NUA surveys and also provide additional details. According to these figures, the number of Internet users in Germany in May 2001 was about 25.9 million, and a further 7.4 million were classed as potential users. On the other hand, there were 36.7 million Internet refusers. The higher figures in comparison with the NUA data are partly due to real diffusion processes. The NUA publication gives no details about the sample quantity used for the survey, so deviations resulting from sampling errors cannot be completely excluded[2]. But whichever data we refer to, in one point they lead to a unanimous conclusion: At present, only a minority of the population in most Western democracies have access to the Internet, and in an international comparison Germany has a relatively weak ICT infrastructure.

But if we consider the rates of changed observed between 1998 and 2000 in the various countries, this relativises the impression conveyed by the current data; in all highly developed, democratic societies in the Western hemisphere there was a rapid expansion of access to the Internet in this period. This process was especially marked in Italy where the growth rate reached a factor of 15, but the growth was also pronounced in all other countries listed in Table 2 – except Hungary – ranging from a factor of 2 in France to a factor of 5 in the Netherlands. Germany takes a medium position in this respect.

Like political participation in general, Internet participation is not only determined by the demand but also by the supply structure. A survey published by the German Institute of Urban Affairs shows that the Internet contains numerous entries for public institutions,

2   The data reported in the Eurobarometers 46 to 53 (1997-2000) differ more strongly from the data reported here. Systematic faults and sampling errors certainly play a role here, because the size of the Eurobarometer samples is largely around 1,000.

political parties, trade unions, professional associations etc. which could fundamentally be used as a focus for political participation[3]. As the local level is especially suitable for an expansion of direct citizen participation, particularly because many services are offered at this level which are relevant to the population, it is especially interesting to study the Internet presence of German local communities. A study in this area led to the following result: "German local communities are increasingly turning to the Internet. Some of them have already achieved a really professional level, others have simply put a passive business card on the Web and many are still considering what they should do."

A review of all 14,000 German local communities shows that only a third of them are represented on the Internet at present. Whereas larger local communities already present themselves on the Internet, small local communities especially – with exceptions – are lagging behind. There is also a clear difference between West and East[4].

A survey of 130 towns and cities carried out by Difu in November and December 2000 shows the diffusion of modern information and communication technology in the municipal administrations much more clearly (Grabow 2001: 10 f.): all local communities in the survey had a PC network in 2000 (1997: 92 per cent), 88 per cent of the staff were connected to the network (1997: 48 per cent), 46 per cent had Internet access (1997: 1 per cent). The technical requirements for e-participation are thus not yet fully in place everywhere either on the supply side or on the demand side, but the situation has drastically improved over recent years and is likely to improve still further. Especially in small and medium-sized local communities,

an innovative leap in quality and quantity can be anticipated in the foreseeable future.

Although the technical infrastructure in the e-participation market is still insufficient on both the supply and the demand side and this creates an extra access barrier in addition to the existing structural barriers to political participation, the political significance of this fact should not be overestimated, at least in the medium and long term. The availability of new communication equipment has grown so rapidly over recent years – similar to the spread of the telephone and television in earlier times – that the population of Germany can be expected to have universal access to the Internet in the relatively near future. This will overcome the structural barriers that still exist. This point will probably be reached sooner in public administrations, political parties and professional associations than in private households. However, the local community administrations in the Difu survey nevertheless saw major obstacles on the path to a virtual town hall. Not all technical problems have been solved by a long way, and many responsible persons point to a lack of money and personnel and a lack of the appropriate legal provisions (Grabow 2001: 12 ff.). But even though there are competence and supply gaps in the medium term, the rapid technical progress of recent years gives no cause for exaggerated pessimism. But the participants on all sides, both in the population and among the political decision-makers, must realise that it is a long way from universal Internet access to broad e-participation.

5.3   The motivation problem

It is an established fact in everyday experience that not everybody makes use of the available institutional and technical opportunities. This also applies to political life:

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3   http://www.kommunalweb.de/
4   http://www.golem.de/02106/14458.html

in principle, all members of a political community can cast their votes in elections and thus influence the choice of candidates for positions of political leadership, they can send petitions to parliament, appeal to the courts to enforce their interests and much more. But political reality does not reflect this; only a small proportion of the population use the available participation rights, and even the simple act of voting in elections has become a minority phenomenon in some system contexts.

If we ask what access to the Internet implies for political participation, three facts must be considered:

➜ Even if access to the Internet in general is assured, this does not mean that exchange of information via the Internet is suitable for all political purposes. The advantages of electronic travel timetable information are obvious; this is not quite so self-evident for income tax declarations.

➜ Even if political use of the Internet is possible and sensible, and actually takes place, this does not necessarily say anything about its suitability as a medium for political participation. Paying dog tax is definitely less sensitive than transactions such as electronic elections or votes.

➜ Even if all technical and institutional requirements were fulfilled to enable the population to participate directly in political policy formation and decisions, the political decision-makers may not necessarily be willing to offer the population the appropriate participation opportunities, and the population may not always be interested in making use of the available opportunities. Not everybody who uses e-mail at work will be willing to use e-mail to communicate with a member of parliament.

In addition to overcoming technical and institutional barriers, it is therefore important to motivate the participants in the political process to use the various possibilities for electronic participation, and in particular to decide which specific forms of political participation the Internet is suitable for and which forms are unsuitable. The difference between ability and willingness is certainly not trivial, but the available information on this problem is only fragmentary, so little can be said about its practical and political relevance.

There is, however, some available information about the willingness to use the Internet as a medium for political participation. Let us start with the supply side this time: the Difu survey of November and December 2000 which has already been mentioned clearly shows the discrepancy between the technical potential and the motives of the suppliers. As many as 49 per cent of the local community representatives in the survey considered that improving communication between politics on the one hand and citizens and businesses on the other hand is a very important task, only very few regarded this goal as less important. Almost as many advocated the ideal of "Promoting cooperation and participation in the municipality" (47 per cent). But the proportion who regarded increasing participation opportunities as a very important task is significantly lower (33 per cent). On the whole, however, the activities associated with the collective term "virtual town hall" had rather different priorities, especially improving the information and services offered (Grabow 2001: 5 ff.).

A similar picture is apparent among citizens, about 39 per cent of whom expressed interest in using local community services via the Internet (e-services). This is almost 60 per cent of the respondents who showed an interest in the use of electronic communication media. Twelve per cent of the potential users of local community services via

the Internet would also be willing to pay for the use of electronic services. But only twelve per cent of respondents were interested in activities with participatory potential such as participation in virtual debates with politicians, which corresponds to approximately 25 per cent of the potential Internet service users (Table 3). Like on the supply side, the dominant interest at present is in electronic services, whereas only a small proportion of the respondents are interested in electronic participation opportunities using new technology. In the interpretation of these data on political participation, it must be taken into account that the subject of the study is a "soft" political activity, and that its function as a means of political influence is not clear. However, it seems informative to compare the available data about the participation potential of new media with data about general participation, i.e. not mediated by new media. Here, it transpires that a maximum of three per cent of West Germans report regular contact with politicians, and between 12 and 31 per cent report occasional activities of this type (Gabriel 1999a: 452 ff.). Compared with the corresponding conventional form of participation, interest in e-participation is very low, and in the short term there is no indication that the relatively easy opportunity to contact politicians via the Internet lowers the threshold to political activity in any way.

Table 3: Interest in the use of various Internet services in Germany, 1997.

	Interest	Willing to pay
Virtual contact with politicians	12	3
Discussion on work-related and private subjects	16	3
Reading domestic and foreign newspapers	18	5
Virtual visit to a museum	18	6
Receiving and sending e-mails	19	7
Bank transactions	23	7
Product information	25	7
Looking for a job	30	9
Advice on health	30	13
Training/education programme	33	19
Travel preparations	33	9
Calling on local community services	39	12
N	2000	

(Question: "I will now mention some examples of services which can be obtained by using one of these communication networks, for example via the Internet, a computer or Teletext on the TV. Could you please tell me for each of these services whether or not it would interest you. Would you also be willing to pay for it?

Source: Eurobarometer 47.0 (1997).

5.4 What groups use ICT technology for political purposes?

It is an established fact in empirical research that newly developed forms of political influence are particularly used by well-resourced social groups which are well integrated into society, i.e. by well-educated citizens with higher incomes, by people in jobs connected with politics, by men and by members of voluntary organisations. This

insight is like a thread running through all research to date: it is found in the analysis of activities related to elections and political parties in the 1950s and 1960s (Milbrath and Goel 1977; Verba, Nie and Kim 1978), in the analysis of political protest (Barnes/Kaase u.a. 1979; Jennings, van Deth et al 1990) and in more recent studies of participation in public petitions and referendums at the local community level (Gabriel 1999). The hopes of a number of academics, politicians and activists that expanding the opportunities for participation could mobilise groups remote from politics and encourage them to participate in the political process have not so far been fulfilled.

Such optimistic expectations have also been associated with the introduction of electronic democracy, but they are not supported by empirical analysis. Instead, the determining factors for e-participation are structurally very similar to those for traditional forms of participation. The very small group of persons who express an interest in virtual discussions with politicians consists of an above-average proportion of people in higher educational groups, managers and managerial staff and male population groups. It is interesting, however, that after checking the level of education and job status of these respondents, the typical effect of age on political participation seems to be weaker, so that the differences between age groups become statistically insignificant. In the 15 to 24 age group, which normally has a far lower proportion of active participants in political life than the middle age groups, the level of participation almost reaches the value which was observed for the 45 to 54 age group. It therefore seems possible that young people may be drawn into the political process more by the use of new information and communication media. Not unexpectedly, this effect does not apply to the oldest group of respondents. In fact, they are hardly interested in using the new media as a means

of political influence (Table 4). Of the variables considered here, job status and educational qualifications seem to be the factors which correlate most with an interest in virtual discussions with politicians; age loses its force as an explanatory factor when compared with the other variables in the model, which again underlines the deviation from other insights of participation research which has already been mentioned. An analysis of the effects of social integration is not possible with the available data, nor is it possible to analyse the influence of political factors such as political interests or a sense of political competence (cf. Verba and Nie 1972). However, it seems fairly improbable that consideration of these factors would make it necessary to overturn the statements outlined here.

Seen in the wider context of participation research, two things are clear: firstly, e-participation is subject to the same factors as political participation in general, but secondly these factors are no stronger than they are for other, conventional forms of participation. Even if – on the basis of the data available here – all relevant factors are maintained at a constant level, a quarter of managerial staff are nevertheless interested in participation-oriented use of the Internet or Teletext, and the respective figure for respondents with good formal education qualifications is just over twenty per cent.

This contribution does not aim to analyse the opportunities and limitations of e-government, it merely covers an extract from the wide range of possible ways to use new information and communication technology for political purposes – i.e. its use as a means to achieve a more effective and widespread use of political participation. Particularly in relation to the integration of political participation via the Internet, however, it could be revealing to compare the background of interest in e-participation with the interest in using local community services via the Internet. This is

based on the assumption that the use of such services opens the way to e-participation. For this reason, the analysis shown in Table 4 was also carried out for the interest expressed in the use of local community services via the Internet.

Table 4:   Factors determining the use of e-participation in Germany, 1997 (figures as a percentage of interested persons).

	N	Uncorrected	Corrected
Education ended at age ...			
up to 15 years	290	7	10
16 to 19 years	782	13	14
20 years and over	285	30	21
Eta/Beta		.17	.10
Sex			
Male	670	17	15
Female	687	12	13
Eta/Beta		.08	.03
Age			
15 to 24 years	163	10	11
25 to 34 years	355	17	17
35 to 44 years	313	18	17
45 to 54 years	300	15	14
55 to 64 years	184	7	9
65 and older	42	7	9
Eta/Beta		.11	.08ns
Work situation			
Self-employed	109	13	11
cf. Salaried employees	230	28	25
Salaried employees/civil servants	178	10	11
Labourers	515	13	14
Homemaker	187	8	11
Without employment	139	10	11
Eta/Beta		.19	.14
R^2		.05	

(Question: "I will now mention some examples of services which can be obtained by using one of these communication networks, for example via the Internet, a computer or Teletext on the TV. Could you please tell me for each of these services whether or not it would interest you. Would you also be willing to pay for it?

Source: Eurobarometer 47.0 (1997).

A detailed list of the findings shown in Table 5 is not necessary here; the most important information can be quickly summarised: in principle, interest in electronic local community services is subject to the same determining factors as interest in e-participation, but each individual factor is even more important for the potential use of e-services than for e-participation. As a result, the former can be explained better than the latter.

Table 5:   Factors determining the use of e-services in Germany, 1997 (figures as a percentage of interested persons).

	N	Uncorrected	Corrected
Education ended at age ...			
up to 15 years	290	27	34
16 to 19 years	782	48	47
20 years and over	285	59	56
Eta/Beta		.22	.14
Sex			
Male	670	53	50
Female	687	39	42
Eta/Beta		.17	.07
Age			
15 to 24 years	163	52	52
25 to 34 years	355	54	54
35 to 44 years	313	48	46
45 to 54 years	300	46	44
55 to 64 years	184	28	34
65 and older	42	15	27
Eta/Beta		.20	.14
Work situation			
Self-employed	109	55	52
Managerial staff	230	60	54
Salaried employees/civil servants	178	52	51
Labourers	515	45	44
Homemaker	187	22	32
Without employment	139	45	47
Eta/Beta		.23	.14
R^2		.10	

(Question: "I will now mention some examples of services which can be obtained by using one of these communication networks, for example via the Internet, a computer or Teletext on the TV. Could you please tell me for each of these services whether or not it would interest you. Would you also be willing to pay for it?

Source: Eurobarometer 47.0 (1997).

Two interesting individual results are worth pointing out. First of all, there are population groups which already express a majority interest in using e-services, i.e. the self-employed, respondents working in the service sector, respondents under 35, respondents with good formal education and men. A second fact is worth mentioning: the youngest group of respondents takes second place in its willingness to use electronic services, behind the 25-34 age group, and this effect remains constant even when other relevant background variables are considered. This result also supports the assumption that it may be possible to involve younger respondents more in the political process by offering the appropriate Internet services. A first step in this direction could be to provide services via the Internet, because this would interest over half of the respondents under 25. This could be a way to achieve a more extensive use of the Internet, including participation-oriented use.

6. Summary, discussion, consequences

Over the last two decades, but especially in the transition from the 20th to the 21st century, the Western democracies have experienced an upsurge in technical innovation which is comparable in its impact with the invention of printing. New information and communication technology has spread at a tremendous pace; this process has affected almost all areas of social interaction, and even political life. Local community administrations and representative bodies have set themselves the goal of creating the virtual town hall, and at least the large and medium-sized towns and cities have come much closer to this goal over the last five years. Access to the new information technology in the population has also improved drastically, and a good third now have access to the Internet. The speed with which access to the Internet is growing gives grounds to expect that it will only be a question of time before all households are technically equipped to participate in social life by virtual means. Particularly for those who are *willing to participate*, e-participation already offers numerous possibilities for intensive participation in the political process, and there is a wide range of suitable applications. Whereas electronic legally binding decisions still involve serious problems, especially the problem of confidentiality, e-participation is undoubtedly a suitable way of improving the exchange of information between government and the governed, and thus laying an important foundation for a more effective – although not necessarily more widespread – participation of the population in politics. E-participation offers interesting possibilities as a supplement to traditional forms of political policy formation, especially if it is introduced without the ambition of replacing traditional means of access to politics.

Does this mean that the ideal of participatory democracy, which until recently seemed doomed to fail because of the complexity of modern societies, is now closer to its fulfilment? This expectation is not supported by the findings of empirical research. As with almost all traditional forms of political participation, participation through the new media is a minority phenomenon. Even if the access problem is solved in the near future, this will not automatically eliminate or even reduce the typical obstacles to participation in general – the lack of motivation, the lack of resources and the lack of mobilising networks.

There is still a wide gap between the ideal of electronic democracy and the political reality of the Federal Republic of Germany and other democratic states; according to the insights presented in this contribution, the new possibilities for influence arising from electronic participation are mainly utilised by the political "haves", but the political "have-nots" who are remote from political life are not brought much closer by the use of modern technical media. All the indications to date suggest that electronic democracy will be faced with structural problems similar to those encountered by conventional representative democracy: it will probably not be possible to reduce the gradient of power between decision-makers, active participants and the politically inactive. It may, however, be possible to change the situation between the first two groups.

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