Tele-democracy: how ICT is refreshing politics in Europe

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Evidence of declining levels of voter participation in Europe, a lack of interest in political processes, and lack of trust in political parties – all these factors might suggest compelling reasons for pessimism about the future of participatory democracy and the legitimacy of elected leaders and institutions. But a closer examination of trends supporting democratic engagement – especially those using new technologies – reveals a much more positive picture of European democracy.

Tele-democracy is the use - by those with power over resources or those seeking such power - of ICT-supported ways of influencing political processes and outcomes. These actions are situated in a concrete public space and relate to particular choices, i.e. things that matter to people.

Whilst national agencies and governments in Europe are rapidly adopting ICT-enabled communications and commerce, this paper will show that some of Europe's city councils have been swift to adopt tele-democracy. Some thirty-one cities are included in this research. The paper then considers the opportunities for using tele-democracy to strengthen national and international governance systems.

It is not surprising that innovation in the form, function and content of democracy should occur more in cities than at a national level. After all, it was Europe's city-states which evolved democratic forms of governance and from which representative democratic structures grew. The Irish philosopher Edmund Burke was one of the first to appreciate that it is the *little platoons* of community-level organisations that are the life-blood of nation states. These were the bodies later termed *schools of citizenship* by de Tocqueville and celebrated in liberal societies as locally-based Jeffersonian democracy.

Two factors continue to explain why cities act as incubators for innovation in democracy. Firstly, face-to-face dialogue is easiest with people who reside nearby (local councillors and officials); and, secondly, whilst mega-policy issues matter to people, for everyday life it is *local* services which tend to be of most immediate relevance. One positive message from anti-globalisation protests is the re-emergence of the importance of localism and the preparedness of the private, public and third sectors to come together with innovative solutions to local problems. Seen from this perspective, tele-democracy is an opportunity to re-populate politics with people (not only or even mainly at times of elections), especially around issues associated with those services and policies which directly affect citizens.

Promoting active citizenship at local level

Working with the TeleCities organisation, the University of Edinburgh was able to explore the use of tele-democracy in 31 European cities, from 14 states, with a total population of almost sixteen million people. The cities were: Amaroussion, Antwerp, Barcelona, Bologna, Bremen, Camden, Espoo, Helsinki, Heraklion, Huelva, Katowice, Leeds, Lewisham, Linköping, Liverpool, Lyon, Manchester, Marseille, Munich, Münster, Næstved, Nice, Nisko, Norwich, Ostrava, Ronneby, Sheffield, Siena, The Hague, Valenzano (Bari) and Vienna. Both qualitative and quantitative data was gathered and is available from www.teleciteis.org or the author.

Only 12 cities (39%) see electronic voting *per se* as a priority, whereas 72% see using tele-democracy to involve citizens in shaping services and policies as a priority. Most began innovating in tele-democracy around 1995 and by 1999 had sophisticated systems of interaction with citizens, with 84% (24 cities) expecting tele-democracy significantly to change their ways of working, structures, procedures and processes. Some 40% claimed to have already changed as a result of tele-democracy. On average, the cities were found to be employing seven people on tele-democracy initiatives.

A key medium is email use to suggest service changes and for data-gathering on satisfaction levels. 30 of the cities view tele-democracy as a dimension of an 'eEurope information society', with only nine having to change legal procedures in order to expand tele-democracy (though over 70% found more training necessary). About every city surveyed was in the process of introducing digital signature and e-identities. 69 percent see provision of public access as the main financial cost of tele-democracy, with technological mixes varying between kiosks (Vienna); community centres (Lewisham); email address for each citizen (The Hague); iTV (Bologna); and mobile telephones (Barcelona). Many cities have simply amended their existing ICT databases and data-mining systems to accommodate and promote tele-democracy. Even small cities find that public consultation sites receive over 1,000 hits per day. For larger cities, the hit rates are greater than those of major private sector ecommerce sites. At the time of the survey, little robust cost-benefit data was available, but, significantly, 83% of cities believe that tele-democracy has helped lower costs and improve services.

Amongst other noteworthy findings, seventy-four percent (23) of cities believe that tele-democracy strengthens rather than weakens traditional political processes, and 45% say they expect the mediating role of parties and lobby groups to increase as a result of the new online facilities

The technology supporting electronic voting exists and will undoubtedly feature in moves to increase electoral participation at national and local levels, especially as key issues are identified and resolved. However, it is interesting that 'active citizenship' at a city level has been framed more in terms of shaping services and policies than actual voting. The implications are potentially significant: tele-democracy appears to be strengthening rather than weakening the public service ethos. So far, there is little evidence that it is weakening the role and standing of political parties and pressure groups.

Prospects for tele-democracy

Only a third of cities believe that tele-democracy can, of itself, help to overcome social exclusion, yet 76 percent of cities have policies which target particular social groups (young, old, excluded, women) with tele-democracy initiatives. At a city level, it is important that tele-democracy initiatives (and initiatives in e-learning and tele-care) do not disenfranchise those without ready access to ICTs in the form of PC and the Internet. With lower voting levels (and adverse publicity about some voting procedures in the US, for example) there is likely to be increasing use of tele-democracy in elections in Europe. Mobile telephone and broadband-enabled interactive television are more 'democratic' technologies than the PC, and it is these platforms which are likely to support the expansion of tele-democracy.

It was municipal officials rather than politicians who acted as respondents for this research; perhaps it is not surprising that they are cautious about commenting on the effect of tele-democracy upon political parties and politicians. Evidence from 'anti-globalisation' protests suggests that ICTs are now widely used by special interest groups and wider social movements seeking to by-pass existing political parties. The technology is unlikely to be the decisive factor here: rather, the sustainability and success of Europe's political parties will depend upon how they respond to the challenge of tele-democracy by using the technology to enrich their *own* engagement with voters. It will be interesting to see how international politicians (at an EU level, for example) or local and special interest groups might use tele-democracy to reshape the political landscape.

Already tele-democracy has been used in a large number of consultative exercises in Europe. Some, using location-based technologies, have consulted over complex planning and transportation matters. But what about full-scale referendums or plebiscites? These become less expensive and more easily run with tele-democracy. This in turn raises complex issues of the level of trust between the political elites and electors. Higher participation rates and the frequent interrogation of citizens undoubtedly improves legitimation and more cities are likely, therefore, to use referendums on controversial policies. Citizen-initiated referendums may diminish the power of parties and result in illiberal or ill-conceived propositions, as can initiatives by politicians. No tiger gives up its claws without a fight and it is unlikely that national governments will favour more referendums, especially when – as in recent Euro votes – the voters come up with the 'wrong' answer.

The more likely scenario is that national and international politicians, parties and interest groups will seek to form and mobilise public opinion using virtual-communities which seek to emulate the remarkable participation rates in recent television shows that invite viewer voting.

The information and communications technology revolution is already showing that technology-pushed solutions can be unexpectedly reshaped or rejected (mass use of SMS, low success of broadband-enabled products). In part this is because old habits are

difficult to unlearn and because social groups use technologies in unpredictable ways. So it is impossible to offer a clear prediction for how tele-democracy will affect e-governance in the long-term. All we can say with reasonable certainty is that its impact will be shaped primarily by the readiness of local administration, national governments and ICT companies to engage in 'bottom-up' initiatives, through the 'little platoons' so applauded by Edmund Burke.