E-Government: from Real to Virtual Democracy

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1. Introduction

In Europe and United States, the use of the Internet and other computer networks in the public sector has sparked a debate about new forms of democracy. This study analyses how the use of Internet technologies by governments to provide services and interact with citizens – so-called e-government – contributes toward the enhancement of democracy.

New communications technologies have always significantly altered the nature of communication between citizens and their governments. For example, the printing revolution, the discovery of radio signals, and the television each in different ways facilitated access to information, and helped citizens to participate in the decision-making process, enhancing democracy.

However, at no other point in history has a communications technology had such a rapid and broad impact on society as the Internet. Unlike previous media, the Internet represents an innovative democratic tool because it allows people to directly interact with the information with which they are presented, regardless of geographic boundaries. Citizens, for the first time in history, may communicate with each other and with government authorities more freely, associate with interest groups more easily, vote online, and (soon) be able to actively participate in all the stages of the decision making process: evaluation of needs, gathering of information, decision taking, evaluation and correction of actions.

Thus, the Net has a number of democratic potentials, including:

- interactivity
- point-to-point and non-hierarchical modes of communication
- low costs to users
- rapidity as a communication medium
- lack of national or other boundaries
- anonymity

Information is the “raw material” of a democratic society and Internet can foster dissemination of information and at the same time increase citizen participation. However, the Internet cannot be considered as a solution for today’s democratic deficit, but just as a tool that can be intelligently used to enhance democracy and citizen participation.
2 Definition of democracy

The root of modern democracy is found in the Greek Athenian political model (V Century BC). The word “democracy” comes from the Greek words ‘Demos’, meaning ‘citizens’ and ‘Kratos’, meaning ‘power’. In other words, democracy means that the whole body of citizens exercises the sovereign power. In fact, in ancient Greece all citizens would gather to discuss issues and they would vote by a show of hands. This democracy was not like those governments we call democracies today, because only adult males were considered fully citizens, and thus had the right to vote. Women, slaves and foreigners could not vote. Even still, although not all persons living in Athens had these political rights, no other democracy in human history has provided such a high level of participation.

Obviously, a system of democracy in which there was “one man, one vote” could work well for small city-states, but was hard to administer when applied to a large empire. Therefore, the step from direct democracy (in which people vote directly on issues) to representative democracy (in which people vote for representatives or politicians who make decisions on their behalf) was inevitable as larger and more diverse societies were established. This probably explains why while Athens had a direct democracy, the Roman Republic had a system of representative democracy. The Roman Res Publica, another root of our modern democracy, had popular assemblies (comitia), in which citizens met to elect officials. Two consuls were elected to serve for one year, and the Senate passed laws.

The concept of democracy has gone during the centuries through changing interpretations. However, the humanistic ideas of the ancient Greeks didn’t die. It became, for example, after some centuries, the base for the constitutions of Italian city-states like Genoa and Siena. Then the transformation process of the agrarian society of the Middle Ages to an industrial society, together with the political ideas of philosophers such as John Locke, Jean-Jaques Rousseau and Thomas Hobbes established the starting-point for modern parliamentary democracy and the party-system. This representative form of democracy answers the problem of adapting basic ideas of democracy, equality and participation, to the size of the new modern national states. Even though in this form the representative system was more spread, citizens still had forms of more direct participation through the right of the initiative and the referendum.

In modern times, a definition of democracy can be found exploring concepts such as citizens’ sovereignty, equality, participation, rule of the majority, and access to information.

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1 A History of Western Philosophy, Bertrand Russell, 1945

2 The word ‘Republic’ comes from the Latin words ‘res publica’ which means ‘public matters’ or ‘matters of state’.

3 The Black’s Law Dictionary define democracy as “the form of government in which the sovereign power resides in and is exercised by the whole body of free citizens directly or indirectly through a system of representation, as distinguished from a monarchy, aristocracy, or oligarchy”.

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This paper uses the concept of democracy based on a definition proposed by Norberto Bobbio\(^4\).

*A ‘democratic regime’ is "first and foremost a set of procedural rules for arriving at collective decisions in a way which accommodates and facilitates the fullest possible participation of interested parties."*\(^5\)

Given the difficulty of finding an absolute definition of the term democracy, Bobbio considers that this concept should be defined on a procedural basis, defining democracy as a procedure in which decisions are taken collectively.\(^6\) Consequently a democratic group is a group that follows two principles:

1) Everybody directly or indirectly participates in decision-making,
2) Decisions are taken after a free majority discussion and deliberation.

Thus, the central issue that this study explores is whether the use of Internet technologies by the governments to interact with the citizens (e-government) can enhance democracy, intending with this term:

- participation,
- equality,
- access to information.

### 3. E-government actions in Europe and the United States

The term e-Government refers to the use by government agencies of information technologies (such as Wide Area Networks, the Internet, and mobile computing) that have the ability to transform relations with citizens (G2C), businesses (G2B), and other arms of government (G2G). Broadly defined, e-government can include virtually all information and communication technology (ICT) platforms and applications in use by the public sector.

E-Government means better interaction with citizens, and thus governments are turning attention and resources to providing information and services on-line, exploring digital democracy, and using technology for economic development. Evidence for this is found in a recent investigation into governments online carried out by Accenture, summarized in their report “e-Government Leadership: Realizing

\(^4\) Norberto Bobbio is a major Italian philosopher. Born in 1909, Bobbio has emphasized the fundamental, unassailable importance of democratic rights in the modern state.


\(^6\) Che co’è la democrazia? (What is Democracy?) Norberto Bobbio, article available at [http://www.emsf.rai.it/interviste/interviste.asp?id=160](http://www.emsf.rai.it/interviste/interviste.asp?id=160)

3.1 European Union approach

The European Union policy on e-government has been recently synthesized by Mr. Erkki Liikanen, Member of the European Commission responsible for Enterprise and the Information Society, in a speech at a seminar on local e-government in the information society. He stressed that in the European Union, e-government “is a tool not a goal in itself. It should help to deliver better government in at least three ways:

1. e-government should make it possible for citizens to follow what their governments – central, regional and local – do, to participate in decision-making from the early phases onwards, and to verify that public money is being spent well. E-government is a means to realise open government;
2. e-government should help to provide citizens with personalised public services that meet their specific needs;
3. e-government should help public administrations to deliver more value for taxpayers' money by increasing efficiency and productivity”

In other words, e-government in Europe should help democracy to function better through the realization of the open government; should aim to deliver public services in such a way that they are accessible and relevant for each individual citizens and company; and should increase productivity through higher efficiency and better quality services.

In the European Union, the e-government plan is part of the eEurope Action Plan, coordinated by the Information Technology Directorate General of the European Commission. The eEurope action plan has among others the goal of providing e-government for all European countries by 2005.

However, without waiting until 2005, the European countries have already agreed to provide all basic services online by 2002. In fact in Europe, initiatives regarding e-government already exist at national, regional, and local levels. These are complemented by actions carried out at European level: the IDA programme is

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8 Speech made by European Commissioner for Enterprise and the Information Society Erkki Liikanen at the Internet and city conference 'local e-government in the information society' (Barcelona, 21 March 2003). Number of document: SPEECH/03/150


10 An application if this strategy by a member state is the e-envoy office set up by the UK government. Available at http://www.e-envoy.gov.uk/

11 Interchange of Data between Administrations (IDA) is a European Commission driven strategic initiative using advances in information and communications technology to support rapid electronic
supporting interoperability of back-office processes, standardisation and the provision of pan-European services. In order to reach these objectives, the IST programme\textsuperscript{12} is financing research activities on information technologies issues. The IDA portal will also serve as test bed for multi-platform technologies. In this context, machine translation systems to cover the linguistic diversity of European users of such web sites will be used. In addition, the Commission is preparing an initiative to follow up the Communication on creating a EU framework for the exploitation of public sector information\textsuperscript{13}.

Concerning the e-government services offered, in March 2001 the European Council listed 20 basic public services (12 for citizens and 8 for businesses)\textsuperscript{14}:

**G2C - Government to Citizens**
1. Income taxes: notification of assessment
2. Job search services by labour offices
3. Social security contributions (3 out of the following 4)
   • Unemployment benefits
   • Family allowances
   • Medical costs (reimbursement or direct settlement)
   • Student grants
4. Personal documents (passport and driver's licence)
5. Car registration (new, used and imported cars)
6. Application for building permission
7. Declaration to the police
8. Public libraries (availability of catalogues, search tools)
9. Certificates (birth, marriage): request and delivery
10. Enrolment in higher education / university
11. Announcement of moving (change of address)
12. Health related services (e.g., interactive advice on the availability of services in different hospitals; appointments for hospitals)

**G2B - Government to Business**
1. Social contribution for employees
2. Corporation tax: declaration, notification
3. VAT: declaration, notification
4. Registration of a new company
5. Submission of data to statistical offices
6. Customs declarations

exchange of information between Member State administrations. The objective is to improve Community decision-making, facilitate operation of the internal market and accelerate policy implementation. \url{http://europa.eu.int/ISPO/ida/isps/index.jsp?fuseAction=home}.

\textsuperscript{12} Information Society Technologies (IST) (\url{http://www.cordis.lu/ist})


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7. Environment-related permits (including reporting)
8. Public procurement

This list is comprehensive and focuses on the citizen’s need to reduce the distance from the State. The strategy presents an opportunity to Government to effectively tailor the right services to each citizen and business. Helping citizens to better access information, this system will contribute to improve democracy.

Interestingly, the services offered do not seem to stimulate all the same level of interest in the public. A study made by Cap Gemini and Ernst & Young\(^\text{15}\) shows that in Europe the most used services are those with simple procedures like the job search, income taxes and VAT services; the least used are the health related services, building and environment-related permits.

![Ranking of the basic public services](chart.png)

At the same time, the survey stresses that that in Europe the biggest consumers of e-government services are business, where “on an aggregate level, as shown in the


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graph below, public services for businesses score significantly higher (53%) than public services for citizens (40%)."

The President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, personally embraced the ambitious task of developing the "economy of knowledge" in specific steps during the next decade. Accordingly, the Italian Minister for Innovation and Technology Lucio Stanca has made public the high level of ambitious of the upcoming Italian Presidency of the EU (second semester 2003) in the field of e-government.

In particular proposed future actions for the improvement of the e-government plan are:

**Broadband connection.** Member States should aim to have broadband connections for all public administrations by 2005. Since broadband services can be offered on different technological platforms, national and regional authorities should not discriminate between technologies when purchasing connections (using open bidding procedures, for example).

**Interoperability.** By end 2003, the Commission will issue an agreed interoperability framework to support the delivery of pan-European e-government services to citizens and enterprises. It will address information content and recommend technical policies and specifications for joining up public administration information systems across the EU. It will be based on open standards and encourage the use of open source software.

Interactive public services. By end 2004, Member States should have ensured that basic public services are interactive, where relevant, accessible for all, and exploit both the potential of broadband networks and of multi-platform access.

Public procurement. By end 2005, Member States should carry out a significant part of public procurement electronically. The experience of the private sector shows that reducing costs is most efficiently achieved through the use of the Internet in supply chain management, including e-procurement. Council and Parliament should adopt as quickly as possible the legislative package on procurement.

Public Internet Access Points (PIAPs). All citizens should have easy access to PIAPs, preferably with broadband connections, in their communes/municipalities.

Culture and tourism. The Commission, in co-operation with Member States, the private sector and regional authorities, will define e-services to promote Europe and to offer user-friendly public information. These e-services should be deployed by 2005 and build on interoperable interfaces, use broadband communication, and be accessible from all types of digital terminals.

3.2 United States approach

In the United States, the E-Government Act, a law that could fundamentally change the way the federal government uses information technology to interact with citizens, was signed into law on 17 December 2002. The law will “enhance the management and promotion of electronic Government services and processes by establishing a Federal Chief Information Officer within the Office of Management and Budget, and by establishing a broad framework of measures that require using Internet-based information technology to enhance citizen access to Government information and services, and for other purposes”. In his February 2002 budget submission to Congress, President Bush outlined a management agenda for making government more focused on citizens and results, which includes expanding e-government.

The US e-government initiative is divided in three main clusters:

G2C - Government to Citizens:
1. Free online tax filling;
2. Job search;
3. Social security;
4. Personal documents (birth and marriage certificates, passport applications, driver licence);
5. Immigration services;

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17 Text of HR 2458 available at [http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/z?d107:hr2458](http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/z?d107:hr2458);

18 The official website of the US President’s e-government initiatives. [http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/egov/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/egov/);

19 Data from [http://www.firstgov.gov/](http://www.firstgov.gov/)
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6. Health and related services;
7. Find Government benefits;
8. Student loans;
9. Disaster help;
10. Other useful information (for sales, weather forecast, recreation).

G2B - Government to Business:
1. Comment on federal regulation;
2. Corporation tax;
3. Business opportunities;
4. Registration of a new company;
5. Business laws and regulations;
6. Central contractor registration;
7. Government auctions and sales;
8. Employer ID number;
9. Wage reporting;
10. Subcontracting opportunities;
11. File patents and trademarks;
12. Export portal.

G2G - Government to Government:
1. 2003 Federal Pay Tables;
2. Grants;
3. Background Investigation Application;
4. e-Training Initiative for Federal Workers;
5. For Sale to Government Buyers;
6. FirstGov Search for Federal Agencies;
7. Per Diem Rates;
8. Employee Directory;

The US so called ‘citizen-centred e-government strategy’ plans to improve the quality of the services to the citizens and businesses. The primary goals for the US President’s “Expanding E-Government” initiative are to:

- Make it easy for citizens to obtain service and interact with the federal government;
- Improve government efficiency and effectiveness; and
- Improve government’s responsiveness to citizens.

In particular the following targets have been planned for the next years:

- Simplifying delivery of services to citizens;
- Eliminating layers of government management;

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- Making it possible for citizens, businesses, other levels of government and federal employees to easily find information and get service from the federal government;
- Simplifying agencies’ business processes and reducing costs through integrating and eliminating redundant systems;
- Enabling achievement of the other elements of the President’s Management Agenda; and
- Streamlining government operations to guarantee rapid response to citizen needs.

The e-government services provided help citizens to be better informed on regulations and government activities, and allow them to interact more with the decision makers. In the business sector of the FirstGov.gov website (the federal e-government website) there is an interesting example of interaction between government and citizens. The link ‘Comment on Federal Regulations’\(^{21}\) allows citizens to express their opinion on a specific document and have the Government to take their views into account. However the website does not specify how much influence citizen’s view can have on the decision making process.

4. Participation: how citizens can influence the system

In the Greek agora, it was possible for every citizen to take part in a dialogue about every issue being debated. Today, citizens can participate in e-government affairs in many different ways by:

- Commenting on e-government plans themselves;
- Retrieving information (e.g., accessing information from government websites) or offering information (e.g., through public surveys, focus groups or emails);
- Participating in dialogues, both public dialogues with the government and citizen-to-citizen (C2C) discussion groups hosted by the government.

One of the most promising aspects of e-government is its ability to bring citizens closer to their governments\(^{22}\). In this respect, the Internet is probably the most democratic of the communications means because it can create a seamless way of communication and interaction between citizens and officials of a democratic society.

A good example of the activity of ‘commenting on e-government plans themselves’ is the US e-government experiment in interactive legislation\(^{23}\). The website offers an “experimental attempt to involve the digital citizen-as a partner in the legislative

\(^{21}\) [http://www.regulations.gov/](http://www.regulations.gov/)

\(^{22}\) Among all the discussions created by the Internet revolution one of the most interesting is the one related to the creation of a global cyber democracy

\(^{23}\) Available at [http://www.senate.gov/~gov_affairs/egov/](http://www.senate.gov/~gov_affairs/egov/)
process”. The e-Government Project main page displays the categories of e-Government ideas being offered for consideration. Beside each category, the user can view a list of related individual topics and write comments.

Another example of citizen participation in the decision making process can be found in the E-vote project of the Greek presidency of the European Union\(^\text{24}\). E-Vote is a new experiment to use Internet and new technologies to get more people involved in the discussions and decision-making process of the European Union.

Another interesting project regards the European Union initiative ‘Your Voice in Europe’\(^\text{25}\). The project aims at allowing European citizens to play an active role in the European policy making process. Citizens can participate in open consultations on hot topics and send their comments directly to the decision-making actors. They can take part to the discussion with the on issues crucial for the future of Europe. They can participate in chats with EU Commissioners and discuss current EU affairs. The website is also a tool to exchange ideas and make suggestions on specific subjects.

Innovative media possibilities like these ones have stimulated the old dream of direct democracy or cyberdemocracy. In the US and Europe, a considerable number of advocates actually propose constitutional amendments to institutionalise electronic referenda and even direct popular democracy\(^\text{26}\). In the US, Benjamin Barber in Strong Democracy\(^\text{27}\) was proposing, already in 1984, electronic forums as a means of "enhancing the quality of citizenship and the prudence of popular political judgment".

In the United States the ‘Magna Charta for the Knowledge Age’ was one of the first attempts to create a political theory of cyberspace\(^\text{28}\). The authors of the Magna Charta believe that the central resource of the 21st century would be not material goods, but information, and that this shift will profit not only big business, but the individual as well. They thought that Internet could generate true democracy, understood as direct, and self empowered citizen government. In order to create this political structure they stressed different aspects of political participation among which, their prime concern was to create (virtual and non-virtual) communities as a counter-base to centralized forms of government.

However, talking of an electronic government and citizen participation implies that there is already a government and a citizenship to improve and develop. In the European Union this is not as clear as it could be at the national level. The ‘European citizen’ is in fact still far from being more than just a legal concept. Despite well-established supranational political institutions, and interesting projects of cyberdemocracy like the ‘Your voice in Europe’ project described above, citizens


\(^{25}\) Available at [http://europa.eu.int/yourvoice/index_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/yourvoice/index_en.htm)

\(^{26}\) John Naisbitt, Megatrends (2000) and self-proclaimed "neo-populist,” Alvin Toffler

\(^{27}\) Benjamin Barber, Strong Democracy (1984)

\(^{28}\) Its authors include Alvin Toffler, James Keyworth, a former Reagan technology advisor, Esther Dyson and George Gilder.

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have little in the way of a European political consciousness and are not given much encouragement or facility to engage in a consistent political dialogue with these institutions. Absent a European political culture, we cannot really speak of a European “cyberdemocracy culture”. Hopefully, the pressure of building a European political culture is mounting and European institutions are setting up strategies to overcome this “democratic deficit”. One such strategy is the ‘eGovernment plan’, part of the eEurope plan described above, which aims to ensure that citizens have easy access to essential public data, as well as promoting online interaction between citizens and government.\(^29\)

While interaction can be easily reached through the use of Internet technologies, participation in the decision-making process requires effective citizens input. How important and effective are citizens’ contributions and ideas for decision-makers? The only thing worse than a government ignoring citizens is when a government invites citizen participation and still ignores them. In initiatives like ‘Your Voice in Europe’ or the US experiment in interactive legislation, if citizens are to actively participate, they must perceive the utility of their comments. They need to know that their ideas are heard and considered. This is an old issue brought in a new contest. Citizens always need a motivation to act, i.e. to vote, to send their comments, to interact, to spend time looking for information on the Web. Such motivation comes from a positive acceptance by the government of citizens’ contributions. The Internet can provide the technological support to democratic experiment, but without this motivation these projects won’t be successful.

5. **Equality: e-inclusion**

As the Internet will soon be the dominant means for enabling ready access to government information, services and processes, in principle everyone should have easy access to information and communication technologies. Unfortunately, the reality is that only citizens with computers, modems, computer and language skills, Internet connections, etc. are at present able to use information technologies and thus participate in e-government initiatives. Even if connections were made available in public places, shopping centres and libraries, this would not eliminate the difference between those with and those without these resources. The gap between citizens who have Internet access and those who do not (the so-called ‘digital divide’), brings the risk of creating a new social exclusion. In fact, those who cannot use information technologies for lack of money, education, PCs, and credit cards, will become increasingly excluded from the rest of society. Thus, governments should consider strategies to allow every citizen to use information communication technologies in order to be part of all e-government strategies.

A 1998 American study on the digital divide was among the first to raise the possibility of a growing information underclass.\(^30\) It suggested that the technology

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gap was not simply a reflection of the choices made by individual households but rather that poor neighbourhoods and some rural communities lacked the necessary infrastructure available in affluent and more populated areas. The study concluded that an inequitable distribution of information technologies could lead to “a concentration of poverty and a de-concentration of opportunity”.

The technology gap could also even impair the exercise of constitutional rights like freedom of speech, the right to vote etc., which is why for the new e-government services to contribute most effectively to enhancing democracy, the digital divide issue needs to addressed and solved.

IT knowledge, language skills, and good public infrastructures are all elements that would help to reduce the divide between the “haves and have nots”. However, bridging the digital divide is not an easy task. It means, in fact, more than just giving everyone access to a PC and the Internet. Successful programs must create new opportunities for those who are traditionally isolated from government programs, in particular poorest, immigrants and the elderly.

A pure market approach will not be sufficient to help everyone to participate in the Information Society; some government initiatives will be required. In order to solve the problem, or at least to improve the situation, the European Countries have undertaken various actions, which can be classified as follows:

- General actions to promote communication and information infrastructures;
- Specific actions to promote infrastructure through the creation of public internet access points;
- Education and training actions;
- Information-based actions, including alternatives to electronic means;
- Accessibility actions aimed at specific groups: disabled, seniors, women, the underprivileged and people with long term illnesses, etc.

Even though some progress has been made, in addition Europe has to deal with the problem of the huge disparity between member states. In the Netherlands, for example, 60% of the population are online compared with 10% in Greece. Sweden and Germany have over 50% penetration, while the UK comes fourth in the EU league table with around 46% of its population online.

At European Union level, several actions have been undertaken to harmonise Internet penetration. In particular, the “eEurope 2002 – An Information Society For All” initiative, with the aim of “ensuring that Europe can reap the benefits of the Information Society in a cohesive and non-divisive way” has already delivered major


32 Analyst firm IDC data available at http://www.idc.com/

33 Available at http://europa.eu.int/comm/information_society/eeurope/index_en.htm
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changes and has increased the number of citizens and businesses connected to the Internet. This initiative intends to ensure equal access by Europe's citizens, to promote computer literacy and crucially to create a partnership environment between the users and providers of the systems based on trust and enterprise. Its ultimate objective is to bring everyone in Europe - every citizen, every school, and every company - online as quickly as possible.

eEurope has its strongest emphasis on the social implications and opportunities arising from the revolution in information technology. In fact, the Action Plan clusters the individual action lines around three key objectives:

1. A cheaper, faster and secure Internet
   - Cheaper and faster Internet access
   - Faster Internet for researchers and students
   - Secure networks and smart cards

2. Investing in people and skills
   - European youth into the digital age
   - Working in the knowledge-based economy
   - Participation for all in the knowledge-based economy

3. Stimulate the use of the Internet
   - Accelerating e-commerce
   - Government online: electronic access to public services
   - Health online
   - European digital content for global networks
   - Intelligent transport systems

A new ‘digital’ opportunity for the inclusion of socially disadvantaged people and less favoured areas could be the creation of the Public Internet Access Points (PIAPS).

In Europe the creation of PIAPS has already started, with the usual differences from state to state as the graph below indicates.
In order to allow everybody to use e-government services, disabled and people with special needs should have an improved access to public websites. To reach this goal, in October 2001, the European Council adopted a resolution on e-inclusion\(^{34}\) and a further resolution in March 2002\(^{35}\) stating that Member States should speed up their efforts in implementing the 'Web Accessibility Initiative' guidelines\(^{36}\).

Toward the same goals, in the United States, the ‘Section 508’ project\(^{37}\) is the cornerstone of the New Freedom Initiative, which was launched in February 2001. This initiative addresses gaps in access to technology, society and the workforce for the disabled, also with the implementation of the 'Web Accessibility Initiative' guidelines. In particular, it requires that Federal agencies' electronic and information technology be accessible to people with disabilities.

Another important element that needs to be considered when making an e-inclusion analysis is the content of the website. For example, given the language diversity in Europe and in the United States, full access to government services could be possible only by providing multilingual content and making it available on various platforms. An example of it is the Belgian federal website\(^{38}\), which is available in four languages.

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34 OJ C 292 of 18.10.2001

35 OJ C 86 of 10.04.2002

36 Available at [http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG10/](http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG10/)

37 Available at [http://www.section508.gov/index.cfm](http://www.section508.gov/index.cfm)

38 Available at the address [www.belgium.be](http://www.belgium.be)
Access to information: how transparent and accessible are public institutions?

Internet is an ideal medium for gaining public access to government information. Clear and accessible information can increase citizens’ awareness and knowledge and can allow them to better participate in the decision-making process, enhancing democracy.

With the spread of the Internet, the importance of well structured e-government website will become even more evident. As the survey below shows, for example, in the United States 65% of citizens expect to get government information or services available online. If we consider only the Internet users, the percentage increases to 82%, and this will grow in the future. This should be a clear incentive for government to go online as soon as possible.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If you need information from a government agency, would you expect to be able to get the information or service from the agency's Web site?</th>
<th>All</th>
<th>Internet Users</th>
<th>Non-Internet Users</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes, would expect</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, wouldn’t expect</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Survey, September 2002
Sample=2,062 adults. 1,318 Internet users. Margin of error is ±2% for full sample and ±3% for internet users.

Making it easier for people to collect public information will facilitate participation and thus democracy. An interesting experiment in using the Web to overcome barriers in campaign information has been put in place by the League of Women Voters Education Fund, the so-called Democracy Network (Dnet). It’s goal is to “increase voter understanding of important public policy problems, allow candidates to debate their positions in an ‘electronic town hall’ before on-line audiences, reduce the pressure on candidates to raise campaign funds, foster greater civic participation and interaction between voters and candidates, and create new online political communities”\(^{40}\). The website offers a one-stop shop for a multitude of non-partisan information and a good database.

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\(^{39}\) Available at http://www.state.tx.us/

\(^{40}\) DemocracyNet (DNet), available at http://www.dnet.org/index.htm, is an interactive website designed to improve the quality and quantity of voter information and create a more educated and involved electorate
Are e-government websites really effective in providing citizens the information they need? The following chart shows how useful Internet is for US users to satisfy their information needs. Most of the time searchers in these categories find what they want—more than 70% in all categories, including government.

In Europe, a survey carried out by the European Union[^41], shows that 50% of people interviewed consider easy access to information very important for the success of an e-government strategy. However, language barriers can be a strong obstacle to the accessibility of websites, even if well designed and exhaustive. That’s why the official website of the European Union[^42] is available in all 11 official languages. In addition, the Parliament, with a very big effort, is providing its basic information in all 11 languages plus the 12 languages from the accession countries. Of course in this case a very big investment and an important maintenance is needed, but it is a challenge that a government with such a diverse range of users must tackle.

Even compared with other ‘technological’ communication means, for example the telephone, today the Internet is often the preferred way to get information. In the survey below, 39% of citizens in USA would prefer the Internet over the telephone, and 58% of Internet user are more likely to look for information over the Internet than using the phone, or going in person to the office. These figures are certain to increase, as even more people will use the web to be informed.


[^42]: Available at [http://www.europa.eu.int](http://www.europa.eu.int)
Given these data, the use of communication and information technologies to deliver information to the public should be a priority for every government. In order to deliver the best service to the citizen government website should:

**Make government information easier to get**
The ability to search the particular website is a fundamental tool. In this regard, one important new development has been the creation of online service portals. These are a big advantage for ordinary citizens because they reduce the need to log on to different websites to order services or find information. Instead, citizens can engage in "one-stop" shopping, and find what they need through a single site that integrates a variety of government websites. Another way government websites can connect citizens with their government is by enabling them to cater the available information to their particular interests, for example by personalising the website or allowing users to register to receive updates. The ability to register to receive updates regarding specific issues is known as “push technology”. With this feature, a web visitor can input their email address, street address, or telephone number to receive information about a particular subject as new information becomes available.

**Publish key government information online**
One of the largest frustrations for many citizens is sorting through vast amounts of information to find useful, high quality, timely material. Contact information and access to updated publications and databases are necessary to citizen access to information and enhance democratic accountability. Thus, there should be a careful selection and review process in which government managers and scholars review material to be put online, selecting those that meet high standards. In particular, citizens should be generally able to find on the web all key information that is available offline.

**Provide multiple channels for contact with government**
E-mail capability is a very important feature of an e-government website. If a user cannot email a person in the particular department other than the Webmaster, or can

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The next time you need information or services from a government agency are you more likely to go to the agencies Web site, call it on the telephone, go to the agency in person, or write a letter?</th>
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<td>------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Go Online</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use the phone</td>
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<tr>
<td>Go in person</td>
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<tr>
<td>Write a letter</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ni/A or don’t know</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project Survey, September 2002. Sample=2,092 adults, 1,318 internet users. Margin of error is ±2% for full sample and ±3% for internet users.*
merely look at information on a government website without being able to contact the department regarding his opinions on issues it is facing, the potential for two-way interaction is thwarted. Through message boards, citizens and department members alike can read and respond to others' comments.

7. State of the art in Europe and USA at March 2003

Overall, in Europe and in the United States e-government has made good progress. However, the definition of government and hence of e-government widely used is still too often based on the “patron-client” model, where government is intended as the “service-provider” and citizens are considered as “customers” of these government services. A clear indication of this is found in all the e-government websites analysed until now. Even the more advanced and interactive websites still give little opportunity for the citizen to influence Government’s decisions. The website ‘Your Voice in Europe’ for example gives an idea of how ICT can technically enhance citizen’s participation and thus democracy; however the influence of citizens’ inputs in the decision making process is still quite low.

Consultation of interested parties is fully in line with the European Union's legal framework, which states, “The Commission should [...] consult widely before proposing legislation and, wherever appropriate, publish consultation documents”. However, as the European Parliament stated in its Resolution on the White Paper on Governance: “Consultation of interested parties [...] can only ever supplement and never replace the procedures and decisions of legislative bodies which possess democratic legitimacy; only the Council and Parliament, as colegislators, can take responsible decisions on the context of legislative procedures [...]”. The guiding principle for the Commission is therefore to give interested parties a voice, but not a vote.

Thus, citizens’ inputs could support the decision-making process, but not change the direction of the decision. An example is the adoption of the Nice Treaty. This has now been adopted in all Member States, but has been approved by less than one-third of the electorate in the most ‘EU positive’ country, and in Ireland voters had to vote twice in referenda, because the first time the results were negative. What would have happened if ‘your voice in Europe’ had given a voice, and a vote, to European citizens on similar issues?

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43 Available at [http://europa.eu.int/yourvoice/index_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/yourvoice/index_en.htm)

44 Protocol (N° 7) on the application of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, annexed to the Amsterdam Treaty.

45 The ‘White Paper on Governance’ is available at [http://europa.eu.int/comm/governance/white_paper/index_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/governance/white_paper/index_en.htm)

46 Available at [http://europa.eu.int/comm/nice_treaty/index_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/nice_treaty/index_en.htm)
In the United States the situation is not different. The firstGov.gov initiative\(^{47}\), although providing easy access to information and offering to citizens the possibility to interact with the different agencies, still does not provide them with a channel with which they can influence government decisions. Citizens are still considered as passive users of government information.

8. Conclusion

A ‘democratic regime’ is "first and foremost a set of procedural rules for arriving at collective decisions in a way which accommodates and facilitates the fullest possible participation of interested parties." Thus, participation, equality, and access to information are basic tools through which democracy can be established and enhanced.

E-government proponents have long believed that new technologies and the Internet in particular can be used to enhance the way we are governed and the way in which we interact with government. It has been argued that the Internet will be able to reinvigorate the stagnating institutions of our democracy by ushering in a new era of citizens’ involvement, government transparency and administrative efficiency. However, the exploitation of these democratic potentials will not happen by itself. There is nothing automatic about the marriage of technology and democracy. New technologies offer the possibilities for governments to become more responsible to the will of the people, to work and make the democracy work better than before, but at the same time governments’ acceptance and implementation of this new political system is required laws and regulations must create the backbone of a new political architecture in order to provide citizens with new decisional powers. Thus, whether or not the new technology nurtures democracy will depend not only on the quality of our technology, but also on the character of our citizenship.

On the structural and technological side, we already have relatively good access to government information, and more activities are put in place in order to provide better services. The nature of the Internet, which gives governments the ability to publish vast amounts of information cheaply and gives citizens an easily accessible way of interacting and transacting with governments, means that it holds important promise for the way in which we are governed and the way government operates. From the citizen side, this interaction regards usually only the request for an information or the provision a non-binding opinion regarding an issue. Now we need to slowly move toward a more mature “both-way communication” where citizens virtually interact with the decision makers.

Moreover, a dialogue between representatives and citizens would make politicians more accountable and responsive. From one side this could be seen as a loss of political power, but on the other hand, the politician would gain a greater knowledge of his or her electorate’s wishes, and thus be able to retain a greater proportion of votes by acting in accordance with them. With effort, it should be possible to overcome entrenched political resistance to change.

\(^{47}\) http://www.firstgov.gov/
But what are the potential benefits of giving European citizens a bigger influence on the decision-making process? In the future we could explore the idea of having Europe-wide referenda in a website like ‘Your Voice in Europe’, which could give people the chance to make a choice, and express their opinion over the future directions of European policy. Citizens could, for example, put a new legislative issue on the agenda in policy areas of EU competence. This would give people an opportunity to debate what the Union's policies should be. We should also investigate to put forward the idea of a more direct citizens’ participation in the European Convention. All this changes will need complex technical and administrative procedures, which will require important back-office reorganizations. To have a real e-government solution that gives real benefits, there should be one interface, one portal through which citizens can deal with government. However, as e-government and e-services policies mature, the focus of attention should shift from simply providing access to services in electronic form to actively managing take-up and usage of these options by the public. Consequently, all government sector agencies should put in place appropriate management information to regularly monitor usage of their websites and electronic services, and to 'play back' this information to the content providers and divisions responsible for originating Web materials and Internet services.

Reform of public administration is necessary so that the back office, all the inter-department work and administration are done seamlessly. Public administrations need to be reformed so that they work online, cut down hierarchies and make it easier to consult each other.

Combating the digital divide, giving better access to government information, encouraging virtual cities and local cyberdemocracy, developing virtual agoras and parliaments, planning the transition to voting via the Internet, electronic government and administrative back-office reorganizations: these measures would help the European Union to optimise its mechanisms of governance, to strengthen and deepen European democracy, and to involve the citizen in political life. This will help the development of service-oriented administrations, whose offices are effectively structured around citizens needs and would help turning the European Union from a Union of States in a Union of citizens.

48 http://european-convention.eu.int/
## Recommendations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elements of e-government that can enhance democracy</th>
<th>Problems and barriers encountered</th>
<th>Recommended actions</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| Access to information                             | Difficulty in finding the right information | • Simplify deliveries of services to citizens  
  • Provide useful and updated information online  
  • Use easy and attractive interfaces  
  • Increase the use of push technology |
| Access to information                             | Information mismanagement and reluctance to share among departments and government agencies | • Increase public management awareness on the importance of e-government services  
  • Reduce competition among departments  
  • Increase co-ordination between government agencies  
  • Use of XML to increase data interchange capacity |
| Access information                                 | Lack of capacity to manage IT projects by lower level of Governments (Regions, Towns) | • Train public managers that will work on IT projects  
  • Back-office reorganization |
| Access information                                 | Lack of human resources to support e-Government services | • Provide multiple channels for contact with government  
  • Back office reorganization |
| Equality, i.e. e-inclusion                         | Lack of necessary infrastructures | • Improve and modernize infrastructures  
  • Create harmonizing policy guidelines  
  • Increase the creation of Public Internet Access Points (PIAPs) |
<p>| Equality, i.e. e-inclusion                         | Technology and infrastructure cost | • Increase competition among ISP and telephone companies in order to decrease |</p>
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<tr>
<th>Equality, i.e. e-inclusion</th>
<th>Unequal knowledge of Internet Communication Technologies among citizens</th>
<th>prices</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increase citizen’s awareness</td>
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<td>Educate citizens to the use of Internet technologies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Equality, i.e. e-inclusion</td>
<td>Language barriers</td>
<td>Multilingual One-shop portals</td>
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<td>Use of automatic language translation software</td>
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<td>Equality, i.e. e-inclusion</td>
<td>Disabilities and handicaps</td>
<td>Use alternatives to electronic means</td>
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<td>Use supportive technologies</td>
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<td>Implement the Web Accessibility Initiative guidelines</td>
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<td>Participation in the decision making process</td>
<td>Difficulties in interactivity between Citizens and decision-makers</td>
<td>E-mail capability on governmental website</td>
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<td>Use newsgroup and bulletin board</td>
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<td>Use groupware technologies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participation in the decision making process</td>
<td>Lack of confidence in citizens</td>
<td>Increase trust and security</td>
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<td>Use digital signature and encryption for sensitive data and communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participation in the decision making process</td>
<td>Doubts and resistance by leadership</td>
<td>Educate government managers to the use of Internet technologies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participation in the decision making process</td>
<td>Lack of institutional support</td>
<td>Back office reorganization</td>
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<td>Government change management</td>
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<td>Creation of a new political architecture</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participation in the decision making process</td>
<td>Lack of interest by citizens</td>
<td>Enhance ‘both ways of communication’ between Government agencies and citizens</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Give citizens’ opinion more decisional power</td>
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</table>
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http://www.egovlinks.com/world_egov_links.html

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http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/GSSI/foreign.htm

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http://www.excelgov.org/

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http://www.egov.it/egovie/index.html

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