

Chapter 18

E–Democracy: An Enabler for Improved Participatory Democracy

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ABSTRACT

In the 21st century, the ability of citizens to participate in online democracy is a key issue for governments in the developing nations because of its attendant benefits. Information and Communications Technology (ICT) facilities support the establishment of electronic interaction between citizens and the various organs of government. Towards this, a variety of efforts have been made, and many systems have been developed, but few attempts have been made to combine more than one mode of access for e-Democracy system. It is difficult for people with visual impairment to be involved in issues of governance and communicate with government representatives such as public office holders. For these people, having access to an electronic means of communicating with these representatives is necessary as a way of enhancing participatory democracy among the citizens. In this chapter, the authors propose an access method for e-Democracy system using Multimodal SMS, Voice and Web (Multi-SVW) system. The system was implemented using VoiceXML and PHP for the user interfaces and MySQL as the database. The system was evaluated using cognitive walkthrough strategy. The results of the usability evaluation suggest that the prototype Multi-SVW application presented in this chapter has “good usability” based on the total mean rating. The system provides accessibility options to citizens who are able-bodied and citizens who are blind or vision impaired as a way of promoting digital citizenship.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the major concerns of governments all over the world is the persistent reduction of citizens' involvement in participatory democracy. This arises largely from lack of confidence in the democratic process and to a greater extent the apathy that exists between the elected representatives and the electorates. The heart of democracy is the freedom of the people to freely choose those who govern their affairs; the right to interact regularly with their representatives; the right to make contributions to issues that affect them in their localities; the power to renew or to change such managers at regular elections; and the right to expect accountability from the elected officers. These have been largely absent in developing countries (Ayo et al., 2008). Furthermore, the physically challenged persons, particularly the visually impaired have been relegated to the background in these areas. This group neither has a forum to air their views nor hardly any avenue to cast their votes.

Citizens' participation in governance has always been a major challenge for many democracies particularly in the developing countries. There is dearth of organized platform or umbrella under which the opinions and views of the citizens could be properly and adequately expressed and channeled to the government. Societal vices such as corruption and other forms of electoral manipulation are some of the issues discouraging the electorate from active involvement in government (Ayo et al., 2008). Some of the delimiting factors to participatory democracy include the fact that:

- i. Opinions, views, ideas, or suggestions of the average electorates on issues pertaining to governance are not sought or heard.
- ii. Access to public media like television, radio and newspapers as a medium of expression for the people is far-fetched and not affordable by most electorates.

- iii. Petitions made to government by members of the general public are treated with levity, negligence and gross irresponsibility.
- iv. Accessibility to e-Democracy online resources is a major concern to most users in the developing nations.

A very promising attribute of e-Government is its ability to connect citizens through ICT (e-Citizens) regardless of location and time. E-Citizen entails the ability to provide citizens with details of public sector activities; increase the input of citizens into public sector decisions and actions; and improve the services delivered to the generality of the populace. Mobile devices have been the most widely used electronic gadgets with about two-thirds of the world population in existence. Accordingly, it becomes a good platform for enhanced participatory democracy.

Mobile government (m-Government), referred to as mobile e-Government, involves the deployment of government's services and administration on mobile devices. There are iBusiness, iCommerce, iVoting, iGovernment, etc. if the platform of implementation is the Internet, while transactions on the platforms of mobile telecommunication devices are prefixed with 'm', such as m-Business, m-Commerce, m-Government and m-Democracy, as the case may be (Ayo, 2009). The web is assuming a central role in the way government and its citizens share information, hence it has been adopted as one of the major media for supporting democracies. To encourage wider participation in democracies, mobile communication devices need to be employed, and these are devices such as portable handheld devices (cell phones, mobile phones, personal digital assistants (PDAs), pagers, palm top computers, etc) used for sending information between remote locations (Azeta *et al.* 2007).

The convergence of small and inexpensive mobile devices has brought to the fore, the concept of mobile computing and ubiquitous computing. All models of ubiquitous computing (also called

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