

Chapter 8.29

The E–Mancipation of the Citizen and the Future of E–Government: Reflections on ICT and Citizens’ Participation

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author considers the notion of the e-mancipated citizen against the background of current trends in social and political participation of citizens. The role of ICTs in shaping these new forms of civic engagement is discussed and the implications of these developments for e-government and e-governance. This chapter argues that in exploring this new frontier, e-government risks seem to take the wrong direction. Up to now, government largely seems to ignore actual developments in citizens’ participation that are taking place both in the off-line and online worlds. In this chapter these trends were brought together under the headings of sub-politics and life-politics and their political character was described mainly in terms of the “empowerment” of citizens.

INTRODUCTION

In the current discussions on e-government we can observe a growing awareness of the need to develop a more citizen-oriented perspective towards policy making. The e-government discourse assumes that modern citizens are well-informed, educated and thus rational, self-assertive individuals. They are quite capable of framing and expressing their needs and goals and they are more and more inclined to critically assess government policies and to be actively involved in the process of policy making. Moreover, modern citizens now use information and communication technologies (ICTs) to inform and organize themselves, to scrutinise government actions, and to bring specific issues to the attention of policy makers. In this view the modern citizen is therefore truly

“e-mancipated.” An example of this discourse can be found in the OECD-publication entitled, “Citizens as partners”:

“Citizens are increasingly demanding greater transparency and accountability from their governments and want greater public participation in policies that affect their lives. Educated, well-informed citizens expect their governments to take their views and knowledge into account when making decisions on their behalf. Engaging citizens in policy-making allows governments to respond to these expectations and, at the same time, design better policies and improve their implementation” (OECD, 2001:9).

The last sentence illustrates how much a citizen-oriented perspective has become the cornerstone of a debate on “good governance.” However, looking a bit more closely at this debate, it becomes clear that not only the happy occasion of the rise of the e-mancipated citizen has stimulated governments to rethink their principles of good governance. The renewed interest in the citizen results also from market mechanisms in the public sector, which has pushed governments and public organisations to shift from a bureaucratic and supply-oriented perspective to a more dynamic and flexible demand perspective, involving notions such as customer friendliness, flexibility, efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery. From this perspective, the e-mancipated citizen is conceived of primarily as a critical customer who wants to be served well. Moreover, the focus on citizens in the current government discourse can be explained by serious worries about an ever declining voter turnout at elections, falling membership of political parties and a loss of confidence in public institutions that is increasingly shown by citizens. This problem is commonly referred to as the “crisis in democracy” or the “democratic deficit.” This crisis tends to endanger the legitimate position of governments in representative democracies and therefore has forced governments to think

of ways to strengthen their weakened relations with citizens. In the e-government debate there is a slightly desperate tendency to look towards ICTs as the “killer app” for restoring the more or less troubled relationship between citizens and government and to cope with an apparent loss of legitimacy. The e-government and e-governance rhetorics hammer on the unequalled potential of ICTs to improve transparency, accountability, responsiveness, efficient and customer friendly service delivery and the active involvement of citizens in the decision-making process.

While the notion of the e-mancipated citizen is quite central in this discourse, it is more complex as it may look at first sight. Especially when focusing on “active participation”—as we will do in this paper—the e-mancipation of citizens is rather problematic. Although there is an undeniable tendency towards self-realization and freedom of individual choice among citizens, it is much less evident that this has also increased their willingness to actively participate in decision-making processes. The assumption that modern citizens expect governments to take their views into account and want to be included in policy-making processes is largely contradicted by the striking lack of interest in government policies and politics that citizens have shown over the last decades. Moreover, in spite of the ever increasing access of citizens to ICTs, there is virtually no sign that ICTs have led to any serious improvement of the engagement of citizens in political processes.

How can we understand this paradox of the e-mancipated citizen who is not the least bit interested in actively participating in policy- and decision-making processes? To answer this question, in this chapter the notion of the e-mancipated citizen is considered against the background of current trends in social and political participation of citizens. Furthermore, the role of ICTs in shaping these new forms of civic engagement is discussed, as well as the implications of these developments for e-government and e-governance.¹

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