The impact of ICTs on EU governance. How can the democratic deficit benefit from online-based participation?

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To be presented on the 5th ECPR Graduate Student Conference
3 – 5 July 2014, Innsbruck

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Abstract

The research analyses the impact of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) on European Union’s participatory governance. The White Paper on Governance (2001), together with other relevant EU policy documents determined a shift in EU rules, processes and behaviour towards democratization. This encompassed two main political strategies, namely: opening up policy making to participatory governance and communicating Europe to citizens in a more efficient way. After more than ten years of experience, this study tests the relevance of this new scenario from the perspective of Internet democracy. In doing so, it addresses the utility of online-based processes and tools, and inquiries whether they work for strengthening functional representation. To answer these questions, the study generates empirical data on the interplay between digital politics and policy dynamics within the European Commission and the European Parliament. The data collected will benchmark EU institutions' e-participation mechanisms against three principles of good governance: openness, effectiveness and accountability. The discussions above contribute to the debate on the EU’s democratic deficit and the European Public Sphere.
I. Background

*If the Internet ultimately enables dialogue across borders and publics, it does so only if there are agents who make it so and if they eventually create transnational institutions whose ideals seek to realize a transnational public sphere as the basis for a realistic utopia of citizenship in a complexly interconnected world.*

(James Bohman, 2004)

In recent years, liberal political systems have run into turbulence in terms of citizen’ satisfaction with democracy. This has been shown by public opinion surveys and indicators measuring attitudes, beliefs and behaviour patterns across all European and Western societies. Among other implications, this situation translates into an ever-growing mistrust in political leaders and institutions, declining party membership, increasing public disengagement, and low electoral turnouts. To this last extent, Norris (2011: 220) states: “Elections are the most common way for people to express their political preferences, and the half-empty ballot box is taken as the most common symptom of democratic ill health”.

In a time when, paradoxically, strong support is given to democratic ideals in Western societies (Wiklund 2005: 248), both policy-makers and scholars have focused their attention on improving the identification of the origins of disenchantment, which threatens institutional paralysis. The explanations offered to this challenge have been plural and diverse (Dalton 2004, Norris 2011, Pharr & Putnam 2000), so have been the potential solutions. These range from revolutionary proposals on democratic renewal (see Laclau & Mouffe 1985) to evolutionary theories (see Barber 1984, Cohen 1989, Fishkin 1991, Pateman 1970), which propose alternative perspectives of representative democracy intended to re-legitimize political processes and bring citizens closer to institutions.

In spite of normative theories of democratic renewal developed not only in the academic field but also in policy forums, political discourses and media outputs, electoral participation and other conventional forms of public engagement have progressively lost momentum in the last decades. However, the spread of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has brought about new instruments for defining a path of improved democracy and participation. Internet-enabled social mobilization, for instance, has been contemplated as a new citizen space for expressing dissent, for collaborative creation or for crowd-inspired political initiatives. Also, public administrations may increase transparency and accountability by using the Net, at the same time as hold successful experiences of decentralized political management and multi-stakeholder governance. According to some scholars, these online-based dynamics could re-establish the link between citizens and elected public officials and improve institutional performance (see Street 1997, Barber 1998, Hoff et al. 2000).
However, voices such as Sunstein’s (2001) and Shapiro’s (1999) claim that the high hopes for electronic democracy seem to have faded. After more than a decade of experience in the development of e-governance and e-democracy many questions remain unanswered about whether the Internet can significantly empower people in participative and democratic processes. Also from a sceptical position, Dahlgren (2001: 48) argues that, in terms of public engagement, the Internet does not change people so much but it just tends to allow them to do “what they usually do, but do it better”; and that in all likelihood few people become political information junkies via the Net, except they already were before. From Bohman’s perspective (2004), if optimist commentators from the 1990s took for granted that technology itself was constitutive of new possibilities, 2000s pessimists made the opposite error of holding institutions fixed. For the author, the Internet might well contribute to democratization, but only if relevant socio-political agents use technology for introducing the institutional “software” that construct a deliberative ethos.

Even though democratic systems at all levels of representation have faced the challenge of the digital revolution to enhance democratic life and regain citizen’ trust in institutions, the nature of their actions change considerably across territories and political tiers. At a supranational level the legitimacy crisis affecting liberal governance regimes turns into an even more puzzling issue, since the complex and distant structure of political entities such as the European Union doesn’t help to diminish citizen’ disillusion with politics nor contributes to public engagement into policy-making (see Follesdal & Hix 2006). According to political commentators and scholars, citizens become critical towards European integration due to the perception of an intrinsic democratic deficit that affects EU institutions and processes. Even though there is not a consensus about the nature of this democratic malaise, public disenchantment with the European project has spread around the continent as shown by peoples’ attitudes, opinions and behaviour.

The absence of a transnational dialogical public sphere where Europeans could form public opinion, develop an intersubjective understanding of politics, and feed back to institutions, has often been identified as a key handicap for European integration. According to Scharpf (1999) the lack of such an overarching unifying communicative space that is congruent with the boundaries of the European Union constitutes one of the main reasons of the ‘triple deficit’ affecting the EU, since it prevents from the necessary development of a sense of collective identity over time. Similarly, Eriksen argues that:

“What hampers democracy at the European level today is the lack of a common, law-based identification and the possibility for a pan European discourse – a single European space – in which Antonio in Sicily, Judith in Germany and Bosse in Sweden can take part in a discussion with Fernando in Portugal and Julia in Spain on the same topics at the same time.”

(Eriksen 2005: 358, original emphasis)

Aware that computer-mediated communication can be an ally of transnational interactivity and a powerful tool for strengthening European cohesion, the EU has developed a
broad governance reform encouraging participatory dynamics while pushing for the incorporation of digital technologies into its political structure:

“[T]he Internet has become an increasingly important method of communication and exchange of ideas. That, in turn, has led to new opportunities for governments, public bodies and politicians to communicate with the people and to enhance the democratic process: the potential for reaching the public through the Internet is almost limitless. It has also created new outlets for people to express their opinions and to feed into the democratic process.”

(European Commission 2007a: 3)

However, literature shows that the impact of this new framework in the political process is contested. Some voices, for instance, claim for a lack of openness of participatory policy-making experiences, arguing only unrepresentative elites get to influence the political process (Pesendorfer 2006); others believe that participatory experiences compromise the effectiveness of decision-making (Lord & Pollack 2010); and some voices even deny any significant effect of these processes on EU’s accountability (Majone 2006, Moravcsik 2002). The main question of this research, which will be thoroughly discussed in the next sections, is twofold. First, it inquires whether the Internet can develop and spread the dialogical nature of the European public sphere in a genuine transnational form. Second, it analyses what mechanisms or “software” are deployed for relating the outputs of public deliberation back to European policy-making, thus contributing (or not) to a democratization of EU politics.

The document is structured as follows. Section II discusses the theoretical claims on the analysis and presents the research questions and hypothesis. Section III develops the research design and the information-gathering process. Finally, the last section summarizes the objectives of the research and highlights some elements for further discussion. In this section, the contribution of the research to the discipline is also explained.

II. Theoretical framework

The democratic deficit of the European Union

The starting point of this research is the concept of European Union’s democratic deficit. For the last years, determining whether there is or not an intrinsic democratic deficiency in the EU based on its constitutional framework has been one of the most active and multi-layered debates regarding EU politics. According to authors such as Kohler-Koch & Quittkat (2013) the structure itself of the European Union imposes substantial limits to democratic representation, to what Follesdal & Hix (2006) add that it also jeopardizes political responsiveness. According to them, the democratic deficit of the European Union can be summarized in five claims, which are based on Weiler et al’s (1995) argumentation. These are: first, European integration has risen the executive
powers and debilitated parliamentary control; second, and very much related to the previous, the European Parliament is too weak; third, there are no real European elections but ‘second-order national contests’ – using Reif and Schmitt’s (1980) terminology – where a low-intensity party competition is at stake; fourth, the EU is too distant from voters, and citizens cannot understand all its complexity nor its functioning procedures; and fifth, because of the non-negotiable neo-liberal regulatory framework of the EU, political parties suffer from a ‘policy drift’ from voters’ ideal policy preferences.

From this view, these elements together determine citizen scepticism in Brussels-based decision-making, declining public support to EU institutions and political leaders, and low electoral turnouts in European Parliament elections. However, scholars like Majone (1998) and Moravcsik (2002) defend that there is not any implicit democratic anomaly in the EU since, for the first one, European institutions act as regulatory agencies and so they need to be Pareto-efficient rather than democratic; and for the later, the democratic legitimacy of the EU is achieved through intergovernmental institutions such as the Council of Ministers or the European Council. Hence, as shown by these different perspectives, there is not such thing as a common understanding of EU’s democratic deficit. However, what these views show is the necessity of evaluating EU’s sources of legitimacy from a global perspective based on the fact that political power is progressively being transferred to supranational levels of decision-making.

This global scenario implies “an exponential multiplication of the political sites in which citizens’ interests are at stake” (Severs & Mattelaer, 2014: 35), and so it adds complexity on the mechanisms citizen’s can rely upon to held representatives accountable. If a traditional principal-agent reasoning would assume that a ‘transmission-belt’ of ‘hierarchical and neutral bureaucracy’ would hold executives accountable to the public through the Parliament (Smismans 2004: 7, 12-16), according to Wolff (2013: 68) “[i]t is obvious that this model does not fit multilevel-governance policy making in the European Union”. As a consequence, she argues “the functional representatives participating in policy making also need an accountability of their own.

To this regard, this study focuses on the dichotomy between ‘functional representation’, i.e. the representation of societal groups, and ‘territorial representation’, i.e. the representation of the sovereign Member States. The discussion around this proposal, which is endemic to EU studies, has its roots in Lipset and Rokkan’s (1967) two-dimensional diagram of political contestation – see Figure 1-.. The model confronts the typical international-relations archetype of European integration – from which political struggle takes place along a single territorial dimension (Moravscik 2002, Majone 2006) – to the position claiming that the EU is essentially driven by the functional dimension, based on trans-territorial socio-economic cleavages (Hix 1999; Tsebelis and Garrett 2000, Hooghe and Marks 2001). According to Lindgren & Persson (2011) the European Union has relied on these two different channels of representation in order to ensure that policy-making is responsive to citizen’ views. However, the coexistence of both approaches has proved to be controversial since they have entail different understandings of the sources of democratic legitimacy.
Proponents of participatory governance typically support the functional channel of representation (Kohler-Koch & Quittkat 2013:21). They understand that enhancing public engagement would meaningfully increase EU’s democratic legitimacy, and that policy-making must not only be a prerogative of Member States’ representatives. According to scholars such as Lindgren & Persson (2011) and Kohler-Koch & Finke (2007) this approach to democratic governance has found fertile soil at the EU and has been gradually introduced to policy-making. With the advent of the new millennium, European Commission’s White Paper on Governance took the idea of multi-stakeholder “participation” as one of the main components of governance, and presented specific proposals for opening up the political process to make it more inclusive and accountable (European Commission 2001). Following this perspective, Lisbon Treaty’s article 11 reframed the democratic nature of the Union by defining participatory mechanisms as explicit sources of democratic legitimacy. This measure, which is the culmination of a debate that was deeply undertaken during the European Convention, signified an important shift in EU’s governance framework towards functional representation.

Hence, to close the gap between citizens and institutions and fight back the widespread perception of a democratic deficit, the EU has provided itself with a participatory framework that relies upon the participation of functional societal actors in the political process. As stated in the Minimum Standards for Consultation (2002: 16): “The Commission is committed to an inclusive approach […] which means consulting as widely as possible on major policy initiatives”. However, there is not a consensus about the impact of this policy shift on EU policy-making, nor on the specific mechanisms European institutions should deploy for turning public engagement into and effective practice. Are EU institutions channelling participation in the same terms? Are they obtaining satisfactory results in relation to the quality and the scope of engagement? To what extent are these practices the germ of a European deliberative space able to inform policy-making?
The impact of the Internet on the European Public Sphere

Supporters from the academia of the potential of participation to fortify social cohesion, such as Santos (1998), defend that participatory governance is indispensable for strengthening European identity and overcoming nationalism, one of the main threats to the stability and cohesion of the European project. Although nationalism was expected to weaken progressively under the forces of globalization and the process of growing regional integration, empirical evidence among EU member states such as Germany, Spain, the UK, or Sweden provides no support for this claim (Norris 2011: 109-10). As a reaction to this challenge, participatory governance has been identified as an opportunity for reinforcing European sovereignty. By opening a permanent dialogue between civil society and EU institutions, it is thought a single public space can be consolidated across the continent and the legitimacy of the European Union underpinned.

Nevertheless, the absence of a broad-based European public sphere is widely recognized (Wright 2007: 1167). According to Eriksen and Fossum (2002: 405), there is not in Europe such thing as a homogenous public sphere to reach to, but a multitude of them that can be separate, overlapping or convergent, and represent national, international or transnational communities. This multi-layered scenario constitutes per se a huge challenge for developing effective communications between the Union and the peoples of Europe. Based on this, Anderson & McLeod (2004) suggest that the democratic deficit of the EU is mainly a ‘communication deficit’. Studies such as de Vreese et al.’s (2006) explain this situation by showing how conventional media broadcasts of European countries communicate EU activities with a national-centred perspective. According to them, traditional media focus first and foremost on the national political debates. In this direction, the Commission points out: “EU issues are mainly seen through national lenses and rarely presented in a trans-national context” (European Commission 2007b: 4). Sharing this view, Schmidt argues:

“The lack of a common European language, a European media or a European public opinion ensures that the communicative discourse comes largely by way of national political actors speaking to national publics in national languages reported by national media and considered by national opinion.”

(Schmidt 2013: 13)

In light of the setback that the European integration process suffered from the negative votes in France and the Netherlands to ratify the Constitution, it was clear that a deep reform with regard to communicating Europe more effectively had to be initiated. The Plan-D for Democracy, Dialogue and Debate that the Commission presented in 2005 underscored, among other measures, that “European institutions […] are often seen as remote and bureaucratic. One of the main objectives […] should be to stimulate a more accurate communication” (pg.3). This document, which marked a new era in EU public communication policy (Michailidou 2008: 346), was intended to rebuild the European identity based on effective communication and real participation. In the same direction, Commission’s White Paper on Communication Policy (2006:2) claimed for an urgent
redefinition of EU information strategies to close the ‘communication gap’ with the citizens. The document argued that “[i]nstitutional communication, though essential and steadily improving, has clearly not been sufficient to close the gap”, and demanded for exploring a “wide range of channels, including the mass media and new technologies such as the Internet” (pg. 6).

With the advent of new technologic improvements and the appearance of Web 2.0 applications, political actors and institutions count on more and better resources for increasing political participation and creating stronger bonds with citizens. This new “architecture of participation” (O’Reilly 2005) is based on the development of ever-interactive websites and platforms that, in spite of using complex software and sophisticated designs, allow both institutions and individual representatives to employ them without external assistance or interference (Vergeer et al. 2013). If the traditional 1.0 e-participation platforms were based on hierarchical organization, one-sided communication logics and static content, the new 2.0 websites adopt bottom-up approaches and more interactive processes through content sharing and online socialization (Jackson and Lilleker 2009).

Due to this ever-growing improvement of Internet-based technologies, the Internet appears as a powerful tool for bypassing the national media and effectively reaching the European public. From a theoretical perspective, scholars such as Bohman (2004) underline the potential of the Internet to facilitate a transnational public sphere, and studies like Wright’s on the *Futurum* discussion forum show that, even with deficiencies, the Internet can serve to create “a single European space” (2007: 1180) that traditional media have proved not able to generate. In relation to, for instance, Internet’s ability for electoral mobilization, recent data indicates that for the European elections online-based platforms have progressively become an important source of information for European citizens, reaching an average of 20% in 2009 campaign (see Anduiza et al. 2012).

Thus, as reflected in several policy documents, the European Union has progressively assumed that ICTs are an important element to strengthen interaction between institutions and citizens. An initial step in this direction was the e-Commission reform program, which paved the way for “modernising the administration and improving its communication and working methods” (European Commission 2000: 8) through the renewal of EU’s Information Technology (IT) policies. In order to open up the decision-making process to get more people and organisations involved, the Minimum Standards for Consultation ratified this strategy by highlighting the potential of online-based consultation tools such as the Interactive Policy Making (IPM) initiative or the Internet portal ‘Your-Voice-in-Europe’. From that proposition onwards, online-based instruments have acquired significant relevance in a wide range of EU decision-making activities.

Nevertheless, the potential of ICTs to develop a genuine European Public Sphere not only depend on the new possibilities offered by technology itself but also on the nature of the democratic experience politicians want to achieve. To this extent, Street notes:
“[I]n arguing about electronic democracy and the potential represented by the Internet, we have to connect various issues through the competing notions of democracy, between those that seek to aggregate preferences and those that aim to create a forum for deliberative decision-making”.

(Street 2007: 37-38)

Similarly, Bohman (2004) argues that the Internet can facilitate a transnational public sphere but that its practical existence is dependent on the agency of citizens who must create it through their participation and deliberation. According to him, this “reflexive agency of actors within cyberspace [is] required to create the software that could transform networks into publics that make use of its many-to-many distributive processes of communications”. Hence, from Street’s (2007) and Bohman’s (2004) understandings of the public sphere, two elements can be underlined: first, dialogical experiences depend very much on the relationship between the public sphere, the political structures and the decision-making processes they relate with. Second, the characteristics of participants, its attitudes and behaviour may also be determinant in order to reach the habermasian ideal of public sphere as a rational-based dialogue where political will formation takes place (Habermas 1996).

Thus far, European Union’s strategy as regards access to deliberative forums and the appropriate feedback relation with institutions hasn’t been comprehensive but very much settled in ad hoc bases:

“[T]he benefits of being open to outside input are already recognised. However, until now, there has not been a Commission-wide approach on how to undertake such consultation. Each of the departments has had its own mechanisms and methods for consulting its respective sectoral interest groups.”

(European Commission 2002: 3)

However, aware that the relation between the Public Sphere and EU bodies and institutions should be more consistent, European Commission’s policy documents such as the Minimum Standards for Consultation (2002) propose a wide-ranging strategy that tackles, among other things, the debates about access and feedback. To the first one, the document states that “[e]very individual citizen, enterprise or association will […] be able to provide the Commission with input” (pg. 11), even though it adds that target groups should be clearly defined a priori, and that access can be limited for practical reasons. On the question on feedback, it is argued that “[c]ontributions will be analysed carefully to see whether, and to what extent, the views expressed can be accommodated in the policy proposals” (pg. 21), and that the decision will be accompanied with an explanatory memoranda with an explanation on how the results were taken into account.

Hence, European Commission’s position in 2002 showed congruence with the shift in favour of opening-up decision-making to functional representation that the White Paper on European Governance introduced one year before. However, their approach to partic-
ipatory democracy was based on holding EU institutions as privileged intermediaries, deciding not only about the participants but also about the impact of deliberation to policy outputs. This perspective, which is consistent with Habermas understanding of the public sphere overlapping with the political realm, contradict other approaches to participation that claim the modern public sphere to be “self-consciously seen as being outside power” (Taylor 2002: 114), and so not having to be evaluated solely in relation to decision making. More than ten years after EU’s official position was set, several questions need still to be answered about its deployment and the consequences for participatory governance. Has this strategy worked in terms of contributing to legitimize European Union politics? Has it been a consistent approach across EU bodies and institutions as initially expected? How the development of new online-based technologies has altered this original setup for participation?

**Research questions and hypothesis**

This study is aimed at analysing whether the European Union relies upon citizen engagement for increasing the legitimacy of policy-making. Even though the European Commission led a significant policy shift towards participatory governance with the White Paper on Governance in 2001, there is a need of a thorough assessment on how that strategy was further developed not only by the Commission but also by other key actors of EU policy-making such as the European Parliament. As the literature shows, there is not an agreement on what are the constituencies of EU’s democratic deficit or what reforms are needed for strengthening legitimacy at the EU level. By opening up policy-making to citizens, the EU is expressing a commitment with some basic principles of good governance such as accountability, transparency, openness or participation. However, in order to determine the real implications of this approach, there is a need to clarify the relation with other good governance principles such as effectiveness of policy-making and coherence between EU bodies and institutions. To this regard, the first and the second research questions of the study are aimed at determining:

**q.1:** to what extent has participatory governance substantially transformed EU policy-making through the incorporation of new processes and mechanisms that reinforce the ties between the public sphere and the institutions?

**q.2:** to what extent are the European Commission and the European Parliament similarly compromised with participatory governance? Do they frame citizen engagement in the same terms? How coherent are their strategies?

As the European Commission underlined in the Minimum Standards for Consultation, participation needs to effectively serve the quality of decision-making for what it can never be an open-ended or permanent process that endangers the efficiency of the political process (2002: 11). This document also argues “a situation must be avoided in which a Commission proposal could be challenged in the Court on the grounds of alleged lack of consultation of interested parties. Such an over-legalistic approach would be incom-
patible with the need for timely delivery of policy, and with the expectations of the citizens that the European institutions should deliver on substance rather than concentrating on procedures” (2002: 10). As these statement shows, tensions exist between participation and effectiveness of policy-making in EU’s understanding of public engagement. Also, studies such as Michailidou’s conclude that:

“[T]he Commission still appears to vacillate between an informational and a participatory line of action. This inevitably impacts not only on the implementation of the EU’s public communication strategy but also on the conceptual framework that shapes the Commission’s political outlook on the future of the Union (representative vs. participatory democracy).”

(Michailidou 2008: 362)

Based on this potential conflict of interests in EU’s deployment of participatory governance and the existent tensions between the principles of good governance, we therefore hypothesise:

**h.1:** Participatory mechanisms at the EU level not to have a transformative impact upon legitimation of policy-making but to be top-down oriented, as well as very much constrained by the institutions but not controlled by the public sphere itself.

Also, we assume that the democratic deficit may not have the same significance for an institution such as the European Parliament than for the European Comission. Whereas Parliament’s legitimacy comes from the European elections, the Commission it is not a directly elected political body. By opening up decision-making to participation, the Parliament may not need to strengthen its legitimacy relying upon the same principles than the Commission. Thus, if the former may put the emphasis in communicating well its functioning and policy decisions so as to increase knowledge and transparency of the political process, the later may look for a reinforced legitimation of its decisions through opening up to consultation and giving voice to those affected by a specific policy. Hence, we hypothesise:

**h.2:** European Commission’s and Parliament’s participatory governance approaches not to be coherent, since we expect the first to use public engagement to ultimately increase turnout in elections and the second to legitimize its political proposals against other EU institutions.

The relation between EU institutions and the European public is certainly affected by the transnational nature of the European polity. As argued before, the complex and distant functioning of EU policy-making has been often understood as an important handicap for reducing the gap between citizens and institutions in terms of trust and legitimacy. The key role that traditional mass media play at the national level in connecting the public sphere with the political domain is not equivalent at a supranational level. According to Haug (2008: 4) “there is no reason to assume prima facie that the mass media actually constitute the ‘master forum’ of a public sphere” and research indicates that the
mass media remain tied to the meso-level public sphere organised around nation-states. With the advent of Internet-mediated communication technologies, new opportunities have been identified for developing a genuine European Public Sphere that overcomes the pitfalls of traditional communication. Hence, the Commission states:

“Increasingly, experiences show that the Internet has become an important forum of political debate. If the Commission intends to play an active role in moderating the debate on the Future of Europe it should explore the use of every interactive communication medium that can facilitate this debate.

(European Commission 2005: 10)

To this regard, the third research question of the study is aimed at determining:

**q.3:** what is the role given to internet-based participatory mechanisms developed by EU institutions? To what extent is the Internet contributing to pull together a fragmented European Public Sphere so as to generate a ‘discourse of discourses’?

According to Smith (2009: 25), “[r]esearch indicates that the EU suffers from a connectivity deficit […] meaning that emerging publics at the micro-level may lack means of connecting to the strong publics at the macro level, and vice versa”. Due to the characteristics of the Net for bypassing institutional, organizational, geographical and other sorts of constraints, scholars and policy-makers have been increasingly emphasising the potential of e-communication for underpinning the link between citizens and EU institutions. The emergence of Web 2.0 technologies and its effects upon webpages, social media or weblogs (whether institutional or not) arise multiple and innovative possibilities for facilitating a dialogue between the public and the political spheres. As an example, Facebook specialist Elisabeth Linder argues:

[T]he last time Europe had elections, in 2009, Facebook had one hundred million active users. Today, we have 1.2 billion active users. Those people are checking their mobile phones all the time, looking at news feeds and interacting to high degree on Facebook. People who own smartphones check their phones 150 times a day. That is a huge opportunity for people to get engaged in politics.

(Elisabeth Linder, 2014: interview by James Crisp)

Based on these assumptions, we hypothesise:

**h.3:** participatory governance implemented through online-based tools and mechanisms to have greater impact upon the development of a genuine European Public Sphere than traditional “offline” participatory processes.
III. Research design

In order to answer the abovementioned research questions, we will conduct a comprehensive analysis of both the European Commission and the European Parliament. The reasoning behind this stance is we could therefore compare functional participatory dynamics aimed at both allowing: 1) citizen’ engagement through the ideological channel of representation (i.e. individual citizens express themselves in accordance with their own socio-political positions); and 2) citizen’ engagement through the corporate-based channel of representation (i.e. interest groups express themselves in accordance with their collective preferences). We are not taking into consideration the third institution involved in the ordinary legislative procedure for the adoption of an act, the Council of the European Union, since it responds mainly to the intergovernmental logic based on giving voice to Member States. Thus, for the purpose of our analysis, we narrow the scope to Lipset and Rokkan’s (1967) horizontal dimension and consider the Council as an institution serving first and foremost the territorial or vertical dimension. Therefore, by comparing the Parliament and the Commission, this research will scrutinize EU’s new governance framework with regard to different approaches to political transformation, namely: the reliance upon participatory democracy, the deployment of internet-based processes and mechanisms, and finally the adaptation of EU’s public communication strategy to a transnational European Public Sphere. Thus, the study will analyse the steps that both institutions have done in this direction since the launch of the White Paper on European Governance in 2001. However, emphasis will be put in the sixth and the seventh legislatures of the European Union (i.e. 2004-2009 and 2009-2014), since this will be the timeframe for the empirical analysis¹.

The objective is to determine whether or not the European Commission and the European Parliament are equally counting on participatory governance to tackle the democratic deficit of the EU. For analysing this, different types of information will be taken into consideration, namely: previous academic works on the subject; policy documents relevant for this matter that affect/come from one or both institutions; and interviews to political officers belonging to responsible administrative units. By doing this, we will determine both the saliency of participatory governance within each institution’s political framework (i.e. how much attention has been given to public engagement), and also the way participatory governance has been framed. The output will be a map of all the elements holding up a threefold EU governance reform based on the incorporation of new technologies, new communication channels, and new participatory mechanisms to policy-making. The methodology used for this purpose combine both a qualitative technique based on text analysis and a more quantitative one based on content analysis. Thus, if the former relies upon identifying relevant narratives from the documents and the interviews, the latter allocates categories based on the a priori definition of a set of indicators. With these double criteria, the study aims to reduce the impact of coder bias.

¹ European Commission’s and European Parliament’s evaluative reports and/or follow-up documents that appear after the timeframe of the study but relate to the activities taken forward during that period of time, might also be taken into consideration for analysis.
The indicators we will use for taken forward the analysis and answer the research questions are aimed at: 1) determining the type of participation through the nature of communications between institutions and the public, which vary across “top-down” or one-way, “bottom-up” or two-way, and “network” or three-way; 2) defining the autonomy of participants (and so of the public sphere) by measuring the level of ‘receiver’ control, which can range from a 0-10 scale; 3) discerning the type of the public to whom communications address to, which vary across general, strong or segmented; 4) determining whether deliberative forums are designed for impacting policy outcomes by identifying its rationale, which can be problem solving, re-legitimizing, or decoupling; 5) stating the deployment of the Internet and digital mechanisms in participatory strategies of both institutions. Hence, the first four indicators constitute our independent variables whereas the last one acts as a dummy variable that will allow us to differentiate between online and offline oriented participatory cases. With regards to case selection, we will use a most-similar method were cases differ on the outcome but are similar on various factors that might have contributed to that outcome (Gerring 2008: 668).

In order to test hypothesis h1 we will use indicators 1 and 2, which constitute a model for measuring interactivity. This schema was first developed by McMillan (2002), who was able to operationalize Kiousis’ (2002) understanding of interactivity as a “dialogic process”, whence it should not be conceived as a binary notion but as a continuum. In further research, Ferber et al. (2007) enriched this framework by creating a six-part model, which is the one used in this study -see Figure 2-. As stated by them, communications can happen in three different directions (i.e. one-way; two-way; three-way), which at the same time vary according the autonomy of the participants, or using McMillan’s (2002) words, the level of receiver control. By merging in a single matrix both dimensions, six communication modes are determined, ranking from the unidirectional “monologue” to the networked “public discourse”. In order to explain how these normative proposals will be applied to participatory mechanisms, examples have been assigned in Figure 2.

Figure 2 – Six-part model of interactivity

![Six-part model of interactivity](image-url)
To systematize the analysis on what type of public have access into participatory experiences developed by the European Parliament and the European Commission, Eriksen’s (2007) categorization will be used as indicator 3. As this scholar argues, general publics are those “communicative spaces of civil society on which all may participate on a free and equal basis and, due to proper rights entrenchment, can deliberate subject only to the constraints of reason”; strong publics, those “legally institutionalised and regulated discourses specialised in collective will formation at the policy centre”; and segmented publics, those “policy networks constituted by a selection of actors with a common interest in certain issues, problems and solutions” (Eriksen 2007: 32). Even though the distinction between general, strong and segmented publics will be the main instrument for analysing access and openness to the public sphere, other approaches might be used as a complement. For instance, Keane’s (2000) differentiation of micro-, meso-, and macro-public spheres; or Fraser’s (2005) distinction of imagined, political, communications and stakeholder communities (see Smith 2009, for the best collection).

Indicator 4 establishes communication’ rationales, meaning the “particular direction of transformation or theories of change that an initiative wishes to enact” (Tambouris et al. 2012: 326). Thus, we will discern between initiatives intended to impact specific policy outputs through institutionalized channels, those envisioned to increase European Union’s legitimacy by different means than affecting the decision-making process, and those that are not explicitly connected to EU institutions but are intended to contest the way participation is framed by political authorities (Smith 2009: 27). By doing this, data will be gathered on the feedback loop that relates the European Public Sphere and the European Union. Hence, indicators 3 and 4 will serve to test hypothesis h2.

Lastly, indicator 5 has been designed as a binary variable that will differentiate between online and offline participatory mechanisms in order to determine the significance of incorporating the Internet into public engagement activities. With the purpose of effectively determining how EU’s online-based participatory governance is reducing the democratic deficit, the research will focus on the public reception/assessment of digital engagement mechanisms and processes. For this purpose, interviews will be conducted with citizens and/or organizations involved in the cases that constitute our study. Also, a survey will be conducted using a non-probability, ‘snowball’ type sample. The focus of the survey will be to assess ‘user’ satisfaction differentiating among online and offline participants. By doing this, hypothesis h3 will be tested.

IV. Discussion

The study presented above is aimed at assessing the way in which the European Union tries to engage with European citizens. It postulates that ICTs would help generate a genuine European Public Sphere that bypasses geographical, cultural and other traditional constraints of transnational mobilization through content sharing and online socialization. To this regard, case studies using both approaches will be scrutinized by developing in-depth interviews to participants and also a survey. Based on the data col-
lected, results will show the extent to what the Internet is one major channel for reducing the legitimacy malaise that is often linked to EU’s democratic structure. The study also expects to find significant differences between participatory mechanisms developed by the European Commission and the ones taken forward by the European Parliament. Due to dissimilarities on the democratic nature of both institutions, we assume the rationale behind civic engagement and the targeted publics of participatory mechanisms not to be alike. Finally, in relation to the capacity of participatory governance to transform the mechanisms of EU policy-making and determine the political outcomes of European legislation, the research anticipates a trade-off in favor of efficiency over openness of decision-making. Hence, we assume participatory governance to be more an appealing communicative asset rather than a real transformative procedure.

The topic that we address in this proposal is crucial to further understand the nature of the EU’s democratic deficit and the adjustments that participatory strategies of European institutions could use to meet the parameters of good governance. Normative concepts of EU governance drive both the debate and the decision-making processes in order to regain legitimacy and reduce the gap between citizens and institutions. Although there is no such thing as a true concept of EU governance, we argue that social scientists have to build models that allow operationalizing the theoretical frameworks they develop. Moreover, we also defend that empirical work is needed to test whether some examples of the real world fit different concepts of governance. We believe this is desirable so as to provide the right material to policy-makers to design the suitable policies in any case.

This project aims to offer three specific inputs to the field. The first contribution is to identify the potential of digital technologies to transform EU participatory governance; the second, is to strengthen a broad concept of European Public Sphere that links the functional dimension of political representation with different characteristics of EU governance; finally, the study is aimed at presenting measurable effects on how defining participatory governance in one sense or another serve to stress openness, effectiveness or accountability in EU policies. Since the relation among these outputs may be conflicting and even contradictory, to consider them as autonomous principles may help policy-makers to achieve the expected results when designing a specific policy, and consequently, to contest EU legitimacy crisis with informed and steady political steps. Hence, the research program that is outlined here presents a tentative step in this direction.

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