

**EUROPEANS AND THEIR ONLINE ENGAGEMENT
IN POLICY-MAKING: HAVE GOVERNMENTS MANAGED
TO FOSTER CITIZENS' INVOLVEMENT THANKS
TO THE INTERNET?**

**MARÍA ROSALÍA VICENTE
AMPARO NOVO VÁZQUEZ**

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**EUROPEANS AND THEIR ONLINE ENGAGEMENT IN POLICY-MAKING:
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THANKS TO THE INTERNET?**

María Rosalía Vicente*
Amparo Novo Vázquez**

Abstract

In the last years governments have implemented several initiatives in order to take advantage of the potential of the internet to actively engage citizens in the process of policy-making and, thus, to overcome the traditional barriers observed in the offline context, those being, that the most advantaged socio-economic groups are the most likely to get involved. This paper addresses whether these online initiatives have been successful in reaching the aforementioned goals.

Results show that digital skills and online networks are key elements to explain citizens' use of the aforementioned governments' tools for participative policy-making. Nonetheless, public initiatives seem to have been little successful till now in engaging citizens through the internet since the participation patterns online mirror the divides observed in the offline context. Interestingly enough, there is some evidence that points out that citizens might be using these online tools to express their disappointment with public policies and authorities.

Keywords: internet; information and communication technologies (ICT); e-consultations; e-government; digital skills; policy-making

JEL codes: Z58; C25; L88

Corresponding author: María Rosalía Vicente, Applied Economics, University of Oviedo, (3006), Spain. E-mail: mrosalia@uniovi.es

*Applied Economics, University of Oviedo.

** Sociology, University of Oviedo

1. Introduction

The development of the information society in the European Union has gone along with the efforts made by public authorities to incorporate information and communication technologies (ICT) in the public sphere at all levels (local, regional, national, and cross-national).

While the initial focus of such efforts was on the online delivery of public services, it has gradually widened to take advantage of the potential of ICT, and specially of the internet, for enhancing the participation of citizens in the process of policy-making as part of the strategy to improve the quality of governance in Europe (Europe Commission, 2001, 2003, 2007, 2010).

Not only is the internet an easy and low-cost way for governments to disseminate information on public issues but also it provides them with tools to get direct and timely feedback from citizens without the mediation of political or social representatives as well as to express their views and discuss on public issues (OECD, 2001).

Several initiatives have thus been implemented to assess the opportunities offered by ICT for citizens' public/policy engagement. The range of actions implemented by governments is large: in some cases, they have limited to facilitate an e-mail for contact; meanwhile, in other cases, more sophisticated tools have been developed to support citizens' online discussions or to gather their feedback on particular policy topics of interest. In this sense, the European Commission's website "Your voice in Europe" (http://ec.europa.eu/yourvoice/index_en.htm) provides access to several online tools which allow Europeans to join online discussions on public issues, contact political representatives, and give their opinions on certain matters for which European institutions require feedback, among others. Nonetheless, some skeptical voices have been raised regarding the actual use of these tools and the benefits they might provide (Quittkat, 2011).

Literature in this field has largely focused on supply side, that is, on the analysis of the initiatives implemented by governments to foster citizens' online participation in public issues and decision-making processes (Efpraxia et al., 2012; OECD, 2001, 2009; Quittkat, 2011; United Nations, 2012); meanwhile, much little is known on the users' side. Research has generally addressed the

issue of citizens' online engagement in public matters from a broad perspective which does not pay attention to the origin of these activities: whether in citizens' or in public authorities' initiatives.

Within this context, this paper attempts to fill this gap in research by providing some answer to the following research question: Who is participating in the online initiatives implemented by public authorities? Empirical evidence will be shown for the case of the current 28 member states of the European Union by using microdata on Europeans' engagement in online public authorities' initiatives.

The contributions of this paper are then threefold. In the first place, it focuses on the use of government online participatory tools by citizens, an issue that has been little addressed in prior works. Then, cross-country evidence is shown, compared to previous research which focused on individual countries. Finally, the present analysis makes possible to draw a very up-to-date picture on the European situation since the database refers to a quite recent period.

The paper is organized as follows. Next section presents a literature review. Then, data, methodology and variables are described. Finally, results are presented followed by some concluding remarks.

2. Literature

With the widespread diffusion of the internet, it has become a central issue how to use it in order to foster citizens' involvement in policy-making. Such matter has been addressed both from the supply and demand perspectives.

On the supply side, efforts have focused on describing the best practices in the field as well as to measure the extent to which governments worldwide are implementing online tools that facilitate citizens' engagement. The OECD was among the first to move in this direction with an early report in 2001 in which it surveyed governments' online initiatives. In particular, it was found that most of the attention was paid to the provision of online public services, while the use of the internet to get feedback from citizens or to actively engage them in policy-making was not a strategic objective in the information society plans of most countries at that moment (OECD, 2001). The United Nations have been

also analyzing the “capacity and the willingness of the state in encouraging the citizen in promoting deliberative, participatory decision-making in public policy and of the reach of its own socially inclusive governance program” (United Nations, 2014). With this aim, they have built their so-called e-participation index which “assesses the quality and usefulness of information and services provided by a country for the purpose of engaging its citizens in public policy-making through the use of e-government programs” (United Nations, 2014).

On the demand side, that is, in what regards citizens’ as users, special attention has been paid to whether the internet would facilitate bridging the offline divides that have traditionally been observed in citizens’ participation or whether it would exacerbate them. In this sense, political scientists have long been observing that citizens’ offline participation is largely shaped by the resources they have: thus, the more income, educational attainment, age, and connections they have, the more likely they are to get involved; likewise, men tend to engage more than women (Armingeon, 2007; Brady, Verba & Scholzman, 1995; Kaase, 1989; Milbrath & Goel, 1977; Norris, 2002; Parry, Moiser & Day, 1992; Teorell, Sum & Tobiasen, 2007; Verba & Kim, 1978; Verba et al., 1995). Significant evidence has also been found on the importance of citizens’ interest in politics as explanatory factors of participation (Armingeon 2007; Dalton, 2008; Pattie & Seyd, 2003). Likewise, the political and institutional context matters for citizens’ to actively engage in public decision-making processes (Eisinger, 1973; Kriesi, 2004; Kriesi, Koopmans & Duyvendak, 1995).

Regarding citizens’ online participation in public policy issues, it is worth highlighting that a large body of literature has developed in this field over the last few years. Researchers have approached such issue from a broad perspective which covers a wide range of different participatory activities, from discussing political issues in an online forum and expressing opinions online on political or public issues, to signing an online petition and taking part in online consultations, through donating money for a candidate or political party. However, to authors’ knowledge no single paper has specifically addressed citizens’ online involvement in the participatory initiatives implemented by public authorities.

In addition, there is no clear evidence on whether the internet is bridging the aforementioned resources-related divides in citizens' engagement. While Krueger (2002) finds that those with lower incomes are more likely to engage online and that education does not exert any statistically significant effect, Best and Krueger (2005) and Hansen and Reineau (2006) show evidence that education and income-related divides in offline participation also reproduce in the online context. In contrast, Aduiza et al. (2010a) find that neither education nor income matter. Moreover, there is no clear evidence on the effect of gender, age and networks to explain whether citizens engage online in public and policy issues (Anduiza et al., 2010b; Best & Krueger, 2005; Effing, Van Hillegersberg & Huibers, 2011; Krueger, 2002; Saglie & Vabo, 2009). In this context the only consensus seems to arise on the importance of citizens' interest in politics and their digital skills: hence, those who engage online tend to be highly interested in politics (Anduiza et al., 2010a,b; Best & Krueger, 2005; Krueger, 2002) and to have a high level of digital skills (Anduiza et al., 2010a,b; Hargittai, 2002; Krueger, 2002).

3. Data, methodology and variables

3.1 Data

The data used in this analysis comes from a survey custom-made for the European Commission with the aim to collect information that allowed to understand the use of e-government services across Europe (European Commission, 2013b,c). This paper then uses a secondary data source.

The population in the survey referred to internet users according to Eurostat's definition (those individuals aged from 16 to 74 years old who accessed the internet in the last three months) across 32 European countries, those are, the current 28 members of the European Union (EU28), plus Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, and Turkey. Nonetheless, the focus of this paper is the EU28. In each country a representative sample was collected by taking into account Eurostat's figures on the national composition of the population of internet users by age, gender and regional distribution at NUTS1 (European Commission, 2013c). Sample size per country was about 1,000 respondents

except for Croatia, Cyprus, Luxembourg, and Malta, each with about 200 respondents. This leads to a total sample of 24,961.

Information was gathered by means of an online panel survey approach during the last two weeks of November 2012 (European Commission, 2012). Individuals were contacted by e-mail and invited to participate in the survey which was to be filled online.

The online questionnaire included questions to assess the different online activities carried out by European internet users, with special attention to their engagement in those participation activities implemented online by public institutions. In particular, internet users were asked whether they had used the internet during the last 12 months to contact political representatives, to consult policy documents or decisions, to participate in online consultations, or to contribute to public collaborative platforms.

The questionnaire also gathered information about the frequency of these online activities (not once; at least once, but not every month; at least once a month, but not every week; at least once a week, but not every day; every day or almost every). Nonetheless, most respondents answered they had done it “at least once in the last year” or had never taken part in this kind of activities; therefore, the answers to these questions have been re-coded into yes/no answers.

3.2 Econometric model

As just mentioned the variables of interest, citizens' participation in the initiatives implemented by public authorities, are binary, then the most appropriate methodological framework relies on discrete choice modeling; in particular, probit models are used.

In this context, it can be said that an internet user (i) will engage in online public initiatives if the utility derived from this activity (U_{i1}) is higher than the utility of not doing it (U_{i0}). Assuming that these utilities are linear functions of the decision-maker's attributes, X , and an additive error term, ε , it can be written that:

$$U_{i0}=X_i\beta_0+\varepsilon_{i0} \quad (1)$$

$$U_{i1}=X_i\beta_1+\varepsilon_{i1} \quad (2)$$

Let us define a dichotomous variable, Y , so that $Y_i=1$ if the i th internet user participates and $Y_i=0$ if he does not. Then the probability that the i th internet user participates in online governments' initiatives would be expressed as:

$$P(Y_i=1)=P(U_{i1}>U_{i0})=F[X_i(\beta_1-\beta_0)] \quad (3)$$

where F is the cumulative normal distribution function of the error term, which leads to the estimation of a probit model.

3.3 Variables

In this paper, Europeans' engagement in the participatory activities and tools implemented online by public authorities is analyzed through the following four binary variables: (1) having contacted any political representative at the local, regional, national or European level by e-mail; (2) having read policy documents or decisions; (3) having participated in online consultations on policy issues organized by local, regional, national or European governments; (4) having participated in collaborative platforms (for example: to alert the administration about service malfunctioning, etc.).

In order to determine whether the factors influencing each type of participation are the same or not, separate probit regressions are run.

The set of explanatory variables includes, in the first place, individual' socio-demographic features: age, gender, employment status, and educational attainment. A quadratic term is included for age in order to check whether it has non-linear relationship with the use of online government's tools. Unfortunately, the survey does not provide information on individual's income. Nonetheless, it is known the region where he lives. Hence, regional Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita is used as a proxy of individual's income (Eurostat, 2012).

Then, a measure of individual's level of digital skills is included. Following previous research (Anduiza et al., 2010b; Best & Krueger, 2005; Krueger, 2002), this measure is built as the mean of the number of different online

activities carried out by the individual. A set of 12 online activities is taken into account.

A dummy variable on whether the individual participates in online social networks is also included in the probit regressions.

Finally and in order to take account of cross-country differences in institutional and political environment, the following variables are included: the e-participation index developed by the United Nations (2012) which have been previously mentioned in section 2, the percentage of national population highly interested in politics, and two variables which measure the percentage of national population who report trusting European and local/regional authorities, respectively. The latter three variables come from the Eurobarometer 78.1 which collected information on European attitudes towards public institutions and their interest in politics, among other issues (European Commission, 2013a).

4. Results

Table 1 shows the results of the probit estimation on citizens' participation in the online initiatives implemented by public authorities. Before running the estimations, it has been checked whether there could be any multicollinearity problems, especially, between GDP and the variables included at country level (UN e-participation index, the percentage of population who trust authorities and that of those highly interested in politics). Multicollinearity seems not to be an issue in this case.

Results show that there is a negative and statistically significant association between the use of online governments' tools and age. Hence, as age increases the probability to participate online decreases. Nonetheless, such a relationship is nonlinear since the square term of age is also found to be statistically significant.

It is also found that women are significantly less likely than men to get involved in any of the analyzed participatory activities. Note that the coefficients associated to being a woman are statistically significant at the 1% level.

Table 1. Results of the probit regressions on citizens' participation in the online initiatives implemented by public authorities. Coefficients and t-statistics

	Contact political representatives by e-mail	Consultation of policy documents or decisions	Participation in online consultations on policy issues	Participation in collaborative platforms
Age	-0.025*** (-4.40)	-0.007 (-1.32)	-0.026*** (-4.99)	-0.028*** (-4.63)
Age ²	0.000*** (3.73)	0.000 (1.93)	0.000*** (4.86)	0.000*** (3.94)
Unemployed	-0.170*** (-4.53)	-0.167*** (-3.87)	-0.089* (-2.36)	-0.075* (-2.38)
Inactive	-0.103** (-3.19)	-0.133*** (-4.24)	-0.053 (-1.82)	-0.105*** (-3.32)
Student	-0.180*** (-5.19)	-0.062 (-1.68)	-0.111** (-2.69)	-0.133*** (-3.92)
Women	-0.243*** (-12.39)	-0.209*** (-11.05)	-0.192*** (-9.34)	-0.250*** (-13.22)
Upper secondary education	0.160*** (5.93)	0.274*** (8.23)	0.211*** (5.46)	0.150*** (4.53)
Higher education	0.315*** (11.44)	0.549*** (20.33)	0.229*** (6.40)	0.222*** (7.34)
Users of online networks	0.331*** (12.35)	0.276*** (9.70)	0.364*** (12.18)	0.428*** (13.04)
Digital skills	1.350*** (18.56)	1.356*** (17.51)	1.393*** (17.50)	1.379*** (17.61)
Regional GDP per capita	0.196** (2.82)	0.118 (0.79)	0.103 (0.71)	0.052 (0.53)
UN e-participation index	-0.090* (-2.01)	-0.030 (-0.77)	-0.103 (-1.61)	0.066 (1.42)
Trust in regional/local authorities	-0.359 (-1.40)	-1.446*** (-5.23)	0.044 (0.10)	-0.833** (-2.97)
Trust in the European Union	-0.837* (-2.24)	0.248 (0.49)	-0.798 (-1.27)	0.130 (0.33)
Interest in politics	-0.008** (-3.27)	-0.006 (-1.23)	-0.006 (-1.24)	-0.003 (-0.80)
Constant	-1.996** (-2.85)	-1.309 (-0.88)	-1.294 (-0.90)	-0.666 (-0.69)
N	24,961			

Note: ***, **, * indicate significant at the 1%, 5% and 10% levels, respectively. The reference categories are the employed, men, primary studies and not users of online networks. The last four variables are at country-level.

Results confirm the importance of individuals' digital skills and their online networks to explain online public engagement. In this sense, both variables are found to have positive and statistically significant coefficients.

Moreover, the evidence found on the effects of individuals' labor situation and educational attainment over their online public engagement points out that the traditional offline participation divides also reproduce in the online environment. Hence, the economically inactive population and the unemployed are significantly less likely to participate in any online initiatives than the employed individuals.

The estimated coefficients for educational attainment indicate the existence of a positive and statistically significant association with online engagement. Thus, results indicate that those with higher levels of education (whether upper secondary or college/university studies) are more likely to get involved online compared to those with primary studies. Such effect is observed for all the participatory activities analyzed.

Income seems to have a very limited association with the online activities analyzed. Hence, e-mailing politicians is the only activity with which regional GDP per capita shows a positive and statistically significant association.

At country level, the UN e-participation index shows a negative coefficient in all the estimations, but it is only significant (at the 10% level) in what refers to using the e-mail to contact political representatives. Such results indicate that, despite the large efforts made by some countries to facilitate their population's participation in policy-making through the internet, citizens have not taken up these innovative yet.

Finally, there is some new evidence regarding the effects of the level of trust in authorities and population' interest in politics. While previous research has generally shown that interest in politics and trust in government are positively correlated with citizens' engagement, results here show just the opposite, that is, a negative association. Hence, population tends to engage less in government' online initiatives in those countries with high percentages of population trusting local/regional public authorities compared to those nations where the level of trust is low. Such result is statistically significant for online consultations and contributing to collaborative platforms. In addition, people

seem to be less likely to participate in government' online initiatives in those countries where the level of interest in politics among population is high.

5. Concluding remarks

Over the last few years it has been widely claimed that governments should take advantage of information and communication technologies not only to provide better and more efficient services to citizens, but also to get feedback from them and to involve them more actively in the process of policy-making. In this sense, several initiatives have been designed and implemented at the local, regional, national and European levels. The range of actions is large: while, in some cases, public authorities have limited to provide an e-mail for contact or to make policy documents available in their websites; in others, they have asked for citizens' feedback through online consultations, or they have created collaborative platforms for citizens-government or citizens-citizens interaction.

This paper has addressed whether such initiatives have been successful in their goal of engaging citizens in decision-making, overcoming the traditional socio-economic divides observed in offline participation.

Results show that the use of government online participatory tools is associated with citizens' digital skills and their online networks, whereas income seems to matter little. Nevertheless, there are significant gaps related to gender and age: older people and women are less likely to take part in these initiatives than younger people and men.

In addition, the old-known divides in participation, related to educational attainment and employment status, also show up in the online environment. Hence, educational attainment is positively correlated with citizens' online participation: thus, the more educated show a higher likelihood to participate than those less educated. Moreover, inactive and unemployed people are found to be less likely to engage compared to those employed, in spite of the fact that the former collectives have lower costs of involvement since they have more free time than those who have a job. In addition, it is observed that in those European countries, where people report to be less interested in politics and not to trust much public authorities, population are more likely to get involved in public and policy matters. This negative association might be indicating that

citizens are using these online tools to express their disappointment about governments and their policies. Overall, the evidence presented in this paper points out that public authorities have been little successful till now in getting citizens involved into policy-making through the new tools offered by ICT. Though this fact might be related, at least to some extent, to the novelty of some of these tools, it is a concern since there is the risk that the online environment keeps mirroring the well-known offline divides in citizens' participation and, therefore, losing the potential of these technologies for overcoming these gaps.

To sum up, these findings are calling for new and further research in this area in order to properly unveil the reasons behind governments' little success so that they can improve their online instruments to effectively foster citizens' participation in policy-making.

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