# Transforming Government through e-Participation: Challenges for e-Democracy.

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**Abstract:** This paper argues that e-Government holds much potential for transforming government activity, and, in respect to representative government specifically, it focuses upon the development of e-Participation and e-Democracy to enhance the responsiveness of the relationship between government and the governed. Recent upheavals across the Middle East - the 'Arab Spring' - have highlighted the importance of not only the citizens' voice but also their involvement in the democratic process. Declining voter turnout and membership of mainstream political parties over the last 50 years have both been cited as being central to the 'crisis in Western democracies' which is argued to have resulted in disengaged and disenfranchised electorates. Previous work highlights significant disenfranchisement of citizens within the democratic processes. How responsive are citizens to the prospect of expressing their views to their elected representatives via e-Democratic means? The paper examines this question primarily by drawing upon the findings of a survey of citizens' attitudes to actual and potential e-Democracy initiatives.

The survey, which collected both quantitative and qualitative data, covered a number of themes including, disenfranchisement, e-Petitions, social media, single issues, influences upon elected representatives and the modernisation of current democratic processes. The results highlight both the extent to which citizens feel disenfranchised and the extent of an appetite for more transparent and empowering political processes via the use of e-Democratic tools.

It is concluded that, in the light of scepticism, not only about traditional democratic systems, but also about the democratic credentials of current e-Participation tools such as e-Petitions, governments need to be *more innovative* in their facilitation of e-Democracy - by actually *harnessing* the flexibility of the Internet in a more creative manner; for instance by revisiting the design of the e-Petition. The paper concludes by probing the possibility that e-Democracy could facilitate the *evolution* of democracy into a more responsive system which actually *improve*s on current systems rather than simply reproducing them in electronic form.

*Keywords: e-Participation, e-Democracy, e-Petitions, disenfranchisement; democratic processes*

## 1. Introduction

In the early days of the Information Age, the Internet was considered by many to be the start of a new world order, which embraced freedom and opened up the door to direct democracy in a manner that was anarchistic in nature (Barber, 2001/2002, p.2, van Dijk, 2006, p. 95). However, writers such as Poster (1995, p. 81) have suggested that the Internet has been constructed in the image of the world as it was known. In doing so, limitations have been placed on the potential to capitalise on the possibilities the Internet offers. Rather than referring to the processes of the pre-Internet paradigm and seeking simply to digitise them - even where there is an attempt to improve efficiency and quality of the experience - more emphasis should be given to creating new processes that explore an innovative approach to improving political engagement and parliamentary representation, thus seeking to address the issue of the disenfranchisement of citizens. Indeed, van Dijk (2006) concludes that the relatively modest achievement of e-Democracy to date is improved access and exchange of

information between the state and citizen, which has the result of making the citizen more independent, in information terms, both from government and the mass media.

E-government allows the governments of countries around the world to provide their services more efficiently, for example, by reducing costs and providing existing services more quickly and comprehensively, but it also provides opportunity to re-conceptualize the very nature of government. This includes transforming relations with citizens, the private sector and other government agencies to promote citizens' empowerment, improve quality of service delivery, strengthen accountability and increase transparency. According to Silcock (2001), "For the first time since the creation of the modern welfare state, there is now a real opportunity to 'reinvent' government" (p. 88). The move towards e-Government presents opportunities to rethink and redesign government processes and the interface between government and citizens, particularly as regards the actual political processes of disseminating government information to citizens and of opening up *two-way* channels of communication between citizens and politicians. Governments are becoming increasingly adept at using a range of electronic media to disseminate information to citizens and many individual politicians also have their own blogs or Twitter sites. However, it is tools such as e-Petitions, e-Polling and e-Voting which offer the potential for *citizens* themselves to become more *actively* involved in an interactive manner which can inform the political agenda.

Previous research based on a survey undertaken in 2010 found that while 80% of respondents considered themselves politically aware, only 31% indicated they were politically active, which suggests that a real interest in politics exists but only a minority are actually engaging, thus calling into question the assertion that apathy per se is the key barrier to political engagement. This theory is further reinforced by the result that only 27% of participants indicated that they did *not* feel disenfranchised. Thus our conclusion was drawn: *disenfranchisement* is a far *greater* problem than political *apathy* (Murton et al, 2010).


## 2. Overview of current e-Democracy and e-Participation initiatives

There are a considerable number of initiatives and provisions to further e-Democracy in many countries. Indeed, in this research the survey sample went viral and was thus international. However, given the primary delivery channels, respondents of three nationalities predominated (UK, Australia and Slovakia). As such, given space limitations, this paper must necessarily limit its coverage to some very brief background regarding developments in two of these three countries (UK and Australia) regarding which there are already many informative studies (egs. Lindner & Riehm, 2009, and, Palmieri, 2007).

The UK: e-Petitions websites are the closest the UK has come to implementing any form of e-Democractic facility at the national level. These were first made available on the Downing Street website by Tony Blair's Labour government. In February 2007 an online petition against road pricing on this website attracted over 1.8 million e-signatures. This e-Petitions system was suspended in April 2010 and was replaced with a new HM Government-run facility in August 2011. It was pledged that any petition attracting at least 100,000 signatures would be considered for debate in Parliament.

Since this new website has been launched, the petition gathering the highest number of signatures reads: "Convicted London rioters should loose [sic] all benefits" with circa 250,000 signatures. Despite the apparent popularity of this petition, it has not been tabled for a debate in Parliament. It is reasonable to suppose that the brevity of the petition and the failure to set out a reasoned argument for the action, as well as the spelling mistake, belies the reactionary, ill-considered nature of this petition, which makes it easy for Parliament to dismiss its validity. A debate *has* been successfully triggered by an e-Petition requesting the full disclosure of documents relating to the Hillsborough Disaster, which resulted in full compliance with the motion of the petition. However, the most supported e-Petition (with 170,000 signatures) is currently that which urges the dropping of the contentious Health Bill; however, at the time of writing (early March, 2012), the government is still refusing to schedule a debate on the issue despite the Prime Minister pledging that such support would ensure one "whether we like it or not" (Chand, 2012). Incidentally, two of the authors of this paper submitted their own e-Petition to the site in May 2011 requesting that the site be redesigned in order to allow people to indicate whether they were 'for' or 'against' each petition. This was summarily

rejected by the site's administrators who claimed that a similar petition existed, although they did not point towards it and it could not be found.

Australia: The Australian Bureau of Statistics' most recent report into Household Use of Information Technology (2011), found that nearly three-quarters of Australian households have broadband, and the apparent impediment to greater Australian e-Participation in e-Democracy was low income. The proportion of households in the highest income quintile with Internet access was 95 per cent, whereas in the lowest income quintile it is only 55 per cent. Furthermore, the proportion of people who access the Internet increased as educational attainment level increased; 95 per cent of those with a Bachelor degree or above accessed the Internet.

With this apparently privileged access to e-Connectivity it would be reasonable to assume Australian e-Democracy uptake would be considerably higher than most. Some successful examples of Australian not-for-profit e-Democracy uptake sites include, the National Forum, launched in 2005, a dedicated site for petitions to be presented to any Australian parliament; and Open Forum, which is an independent collaborative think-tank built around an interactive discussion website, hosted and moderated by Global Access Partners (GAP). It provides a platform for focused dialogue on social, political, economic, ecological and cultural issues and challenges.

## 3. Methodology

A survey was designed to capture people's attitudes to, and, experiences and expectations of, e-Democratic tools. The survey consisted of 20 questions capturing both quantitative and qualitative data. The main themes covered include respondents' experiences and expectations of using e-Petitions, whether respondents had contacted their elected representatives, their views as to how politicians should take note of the results of e-Petitions, views on democracy and e-Democracy and the role and expected roles of technologies in democratic processes. Likert scale questions were widely used to capture greater granularity of views and an open question was used to enable respondents to put forward any other views on the topics covered in their own words.

Following a pilot exercise, the survey was primarily distributed via channels in three countries: the UK, Australia and Slovakia. Given our aim to ascertain the views across multiple political systems, it was deemed appropriate not to put any geographical boundaries on the sample. Consequently, the responses are not likely to be truly representative of any specific nationality, but they do provide a window into the views of a diverse set of citizens. However, although significant differences between the 3 primary national groups are not at this stage immediately apparent, the survey is still open and we plan to include a comparative analysis in a future paper.

## 4. Presentation and Analysis of Results

Out of 330 responses 263 fully completed the survey (81%) with the remaining missing some questions out (as indicated in the results figures below). There was a gender bias in the responses with 73% of the respondents being male. Background information included the occupations of respondents: these were mainly professional or students.

Overall, many of the results show the majority of respondents to feel disengaged, bypassed or disenfranchised, by current democratic processes. However, just over 50% of respondents had signed an e-Petition (Fig.1)

| Fig. 1: Qu. 5: Have you ever signed an e-Petition (i.e. an online petition)? | | |
|---|---|---|
| Answer Options | Response Percent | Response Count |
| Yes | 50.9% | 168 |
| No | 45.5% | 150 |
| Don't Know | 3.6% | 12 |
| *answered question* | | 330 |

| Fig.2. Qu. 6: If you answered 'No' to the previous question, please state the main reason why you have never signed an e-Petition: | | |
|---|---|---|
| Qu.6: Answer Options | Response Percent | Response Count |
| I don't have ready access to the Internet | 1.0% | 1 |
| I dislike giving out personal details to e-Petition websites | 6.2% | 6 |
| I haven't come across one | 56.7% | 55 |
| I haven't come across one that I felt strongly enough about to sign | 36.1% | 35 |
| Other (please specify) | | 9 |
| | answered question | 97 |

Of those who answered the follow-up question, 57% reported that they have simply not come across an e-Petition. However, this still means that only 17% of the entire sample (55/330) *had not* come across one which could indicate that e-Petitions already have a *substantive* profile on the Internet. Indeed, it is apparent that considerably more respondents had actually already signed an e-Petition (168) than have ever contacted their elected representative or MP (111): see Fig.5.

| Fig. 3. Qu.7:  Petitions (including e-Petitions) are anti-democratic because they only ascertain the numbers FOR the motion of the petition, not those against. e-Voting, is therefore preferable. | | |
|---|---|---|
| Answer Options | Response Percent | Response Count |
| Definitely agree | 11.7% | 31 |
| Mostly agree | 34.7% | 92 |
| Neutral | 32.1% | 85 |
| Mostly disagree | 13.2% | 35 |
| Definitely disagree | 8.3% | 22 |
| | answered question | 265 |
| | skipped question | 65 |

With 46.4% agreeing that current e-Petitions are 'anti-democratic' makes some case for e-Polls as a better alternative whilst only just over 20% (21.7%) actually disagreed, the results show a range of responses. This is some indication though that e-Petitions, particularly their current design (which simply reproduces the traditional version), are not seen by the electorate as being a particularly progressive vehicle with which to engage citizens in e-Democracy.

| Fig  4: Qu.8: How likely are you be to express political views on social media such as Twitter and Facebook? | | |
|---|---|---|
| Answer Options | Response Percent | Response Count |
| Very likely | 10.6% | 28 |
| Somewhat likely | 24.2% | 64 |
| Don't know | 5.3% | 14 |
| Somewhat unlikely | 26.8% | 71 |
| Very unlikely | 33.2% | 88 |
| | answered question | 265 |
| | skipped question | 65 |

The results in Fig. 4 indicate that a fear of surveillance could be a limiting factor for e-Democracy, prompting questions of how the values of the secret ballot might be replicated in the digital world. Indeed, fears over the anonymity of online voting were expressed by a number of respondents, for instance: *"None[sic] can be sure that online data can be deleted or even transformed. Therefore, it is possible [for] an electronic vote to be corrupted or used against the voter. Moreover, there probably is not enough security online for such actions to occur. Lastly, it may harm your online profile long-term, if you comment or post something online."* However, there are encouraging indications that developments in software encryption techniques could address such concerns by simultaneously providing identity verification and privacy protection (see for example Diaz et al, 2008).

| Fig 5: Qu.9: Have you ever contacted your national elected representative (e.g. your MP)? | | |
|---|---|---|
| Answer Options | Response Percent | Response Count |
| Yes, by letter or telephone | 14.7% | 39 |
| Yes, by the Internet only | 12.1% | 32 |
| Yes, by the Internet AND by letter or telephone or in person | 15.1% | 40 |
| No | 55.5% | 147 |
| Don't know | 0.8% | 2 |
| Other (please specify - eg. in person/face-to-face only) | 1.9% | 5 |
| | *answered question* | 265 |
| | *skipped question* | 65 |

In contrast to Figure 5, it is interesting to note that more people have signed an e-Petition (Qu.5) in the relatively short time they have been available, than have ever contacted their political representative by whatever means.

| Fig. 6: Qu.10: Once they are elected, which of the following do you think elected representatives take into account most when deciding how to vote in parliament? Please rank your top four answers in order (1 being the most important to them). | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Answer Options | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Rating Average | Response Count |
| Their constituents | 28 | 26 | 42 | 48 | 2.76 | 144 |
| Their party political leadership | 126 | 46 | 24 | 15 | 1.66 | 211 |
| Their party's election manifesto | 19 | 50 | 33 | 30 | 2.56 | 132 |
| The mass media (principally the press and television) | 10 | 55 | 45 | 32 | 2.70 | 142 |
| Their own views and beliefs | 42 | 35 | 48 | 34 | 2.47 | 159 |
| The views of the public as expressed via Internet channels e.g. e-Petitions and social networks | 7 | 13 | 19 | 24 | 2.95 | 63 |
| Labour unions | 3 | 14 | 19 | 16 | 2.92 | 52 |
| Business and corporate lobbyists | 25 | 41 | 36 | 28 | 2.52 | 130 |
| Single issue and campaign group lobbyists | 9 | 21 | 14 | 13 | 2.54 | 57 |
| Mass street demonstrations | 7 | 13 | 16 | 19 | 2.85 | 55 |
| Other (please specify) | | | | | | 12 |
| | | | | | *answered question* | 265 |

The Question (10) as to which of 10 different influences elected representatives take into account most when deciding how to vote in Parliament produced some very interesting results, especially when average rating is analysed. The strongest influence by a distinct margin was their party political leadership, with an average rating of 1.66). 'Their own views and beliefs' (2.47) and 'Business and corporate lobbyists' (2.52) were second and third. However, 'Single issue and campaign group lobbyists' came a close fourth (2.54).

Near to the bottom of the influences (in 7th position out of 10), with a rating just 2.76, came 'Their constituents' which again is an indication of disenfranchisement amongst the electorate in that, once elected, the very large majority of respondents clearly felt that their views had little import on their representative. Indeed, 80% of respondents did not think that constituents were the most important influence on elected representatives. Moreover, with views expressed on 'Internet channels' such as e-Petitions and social networks being rock bottom in last place in terms of influences, it may be concluded that e-Democracy has a long way to go in terms of being an important influence on elected representatives. However, as the next result (Fig. 8) demonstrates, there is a clear desire amongst respondents that their views as expressed via e-Democratic means should be taken a lot more seriously by those they elected to represent them. A number of the qualitative responses (Qu.20) voice this interpretation, with the following being not untypical:

*"Government by representatives has grown too far from the 'will of the people', and the representatives have become responsive to money, power and to actions which will perpetuate the power. The people need more control. We need to re-think government completely to get closer to democratic ideals."* and*, "Governments only pay lip service to public participation using the internet. They like to be seen doing something but at the end of the day basically ignore what their constituents really want."*

Question 11 asked whether, " If it could be established through e-Democratic means that more than 50% of the voters in a constituency wish their MP to vote in a certain way, MPs should be forced to do so, even if it means going against their party's leadership." Almost 64% agreed that MPs should be *forced* to vote as instructed by their constituents (even if this meant going against their Party leadership). This can be understood as a powerfully expressed message in support of a move towards a more direct democratic system, with only a little over 14% actually disagreeing with such compulsion.

In Oct 2007, David Cameron (now UK Prime Minister) stated that: "When we look at our democracy, we are still stuck in the dark ages." Only 16% disagreed with this statement (Qu.12) again underlining the appetite for change in our political system.

| Fig. 7 Qu.13: I am more interested in supporting campaigns on 'single issues' (e.g. environmental issues, EU membership) than I am in being a member of a political party. | | |
|---|---|---|
| Answer Options | Response Percent | Response Count |
| Definitely agree | 25.9% | 68 |
| Mostly agree | 37.3% | 98 |
| Neutral | 22.4% | 59 |
| Mostly disagree | 11.4% | 30 |
| Definitely disagree | 3.0% | 8 |
| | *answered question* | 263 |
| | *skipped question* | 67 |

Fig 7. is also interesting in that it apparently indicates how attitudes to politics are changing with 63% of respondents stating that they were more interested in single issues than in being a member of a political party. Only 14% actually disagreed that single issues were not of greater interest to them.

A large majority (77%) agreed that the Internet has a central role to play in the modernisation of our democratic system, only less than 7% did not, thus indicating the huge latent potential of e-Democracy for increasing the engagement of the electorate in the political process? Indeed, 80% believed that the Internet had already given more people a political voice (Qu. 17.)

| Fig.8. Qu.18: I would be more likely to vote if I could do it online (including via mobile phone). | | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Answer Options | Response Percent | Response Count |
| Definitely agree | 29.2% | 77 |
| Mostly agree | 23.5% | 62 |
| Neutral | 20.5% | 54 |
| Mostly disagree | 9.8% | 26 |
| Definitely disagree | 17.0% | 45 |
| | *answered question* | 264 |
| | *skipped question* | 66 |

As to the increased likelihood of voting if it could be done online including via mobile (Fig.8), although 53% agreed, 21% were neutral, 27% disagreed and thus the result represents a diverse range of opinions.

## 5. Discussion

The results clearly indicate an appetite for some substantive form of e-Democracy and it is clear that current initiatives are not delivering their full potential. For instance, the findings indicate that the respondents are unequivocal in believing that, once elected, the biggest influences on MP's voting behaviour are those of their party political leaders, business and corporate lobbyists and their own personal beliefs as opposed to the views of their own constituents including those expressed via Internet channels.

The findings also indicate that citizens are substantially more interested in being heard on 'single issues' than they are in being members of mainstream political parties (and thereby of accepting the 'all-in-one package' policies of traditional party politics.

Within the wider debate from the literature some of the issues identified in the survey responses also emerge. At a global and international level, Guibernau (2001) identifies the dilemma between global and political integration and the range of challenges of governance. Key to Guibernau's perspective is the need to manage the diversity of needs and for democratic participation from citizens. In similar vein, Dahl (2000) asserts that concepts of democracy are complex and that identifying what an 'ideal democracy is' is not an easy task.

Bellamy and Taylor (1998) explore issues of re-engineering the government machine and how new technologies stimulate organisational change. They also explore the changing relationship between governments and citizens, and the natural extension towards consumerism of political events and issues. 'Citizen consumers' want a voice and this is set to change the concept of citizenship and democracy in the information age. Citizens have more means than before to hold governments to account (1998, p91). Previously, holding governments to account was the domain of the press: "since few ordinary citizens have the knowledge, ability or time – or even the inclination – to go in pursuit of official information, whereas it is an important function of the press to do so on their behalf" (Wraith 1977, p49). Times have changed, and the ability of citizens to explore and scrutinise much government data online enables citizens to take on board the roles previously associated with the press in holding governments to account. There are vastly more citizens than members of the press. Indeed, we seem to be at a significant time in history for open systems of government (Lathrop and Ruma, 2010). Indeed, as one respondent asserted: *"The internet, facebook, twitter and other media have created a greater transparency of government as many events and situations cannot be "covered up" or ignored as these media have empowered the people/constituents."*

Peters (1986) identifies the key point of political agenda setting and who has the power to set the agenda: "Establishing an agenda for society...is a manifestly political activity, and control of the agenda gives substantial control over ultimate policy choices". Although agenda setting is complex where different arenas have different power groups, this paper argues that, even if the individual citizen is largely left out of the agenda setting loop, they could still have the ability via for instance *constituency e-Polls*, to indicate their preferences to their elected representative in an auditable and quasi-formal system.

In the light of scepticism, not only about the party political system, but also about the democratic credentials of current e-Participation tools such e-Petitions, governments need to be more *innovative* in their facilitation of e-Democracy - by actually *harnessing* the flexibility of the Internet in a more creative manner; for instance by revisiting the design of the e-Petition. Primarily, this could involve replacing them with e-Polls so that participants could indicate whether they are 'for' or 'against'. This change would thus serve the interests of both voters and politicians by utilising the flexibility of the Internet in order to *enhance* the democratic process (rather than merely gauging support for only one side of public opinion. In practice it is surely the quantitative gap *between* those 'for' and 'against' which should be of greater interest to government). Furthermore, the participative nature of e-Polls, could help to address the disengagement from the democratic process which has often been cited as a contributory cause of anti-social and criminal behaviour; for instance research into the English riots of 2011 found perceptions social and economic injustices, discrimination and lack of respect. (Reading the Riots, 2011). Finally, if the summary arguments for and against each e-Petition were to be found in one place then it is more likely that people will consider *both* sides of the argument before signing: thus e-Polls would be a far more democratic mechanism than mere e-Petitions (which inherently encourage people to only think about one side of the argument). Further, a link could then be added to a social networking site so that people can debate the issue and be exposed to those with differing opinions.

Ultimately the theme emerging repeatedly from the research is that it is the very *informality* of e-Democracy to date which is the key limiting factor. If it is to take its place in the modernisation of our democratic systems, it needs to become more formalised in the form of legally underpinned structures which cannot be ignored by elected representatives.

The qualitative responses from the survey clearly indicated scepticism about the current systems and thus arguably underline the need for e-Democratic processes to be given more formal influence. The following responses (Qu.20) are broadly representative:

*"Unless and until the power processes that determine who stands for election and decides the party platforms are democratised then the internet will remain outside the process."*

*"E-petitions can be quite problematic, as they are quite passive and I think aren't taken very seriously by legislators or executive."*

## 6. Conclusions

This paper concludes by making four main points:

Firstly, the main findings of this research indicate that there is a real appetite for change in our democratic processes. The respondents seem to welcome the prospect of informing political debate through e-Democracy. There is also expectation that the results of such participation should influence politicians in their decision making. However, it is clear that a sense of disenfranchisement from, and disengagement with, the current democratic system, is prevalent within the large majority of respondents.

Secondly, in the wider context of a year that has seen widespread civil unrest in both democratic and undemocratic countries, it is concluded that a more innovative focus upon the potential of e-Participation and e-Democracy to transform representative government must be pursued. Given that the electorate *does* have the motivation to participate more actively in the political process, the Internet should be seen not as a "technical fix", but rather as a pivotal facilitator: As one respondent asserted: *"I see the use of Internet and technology as a tool not as an ultimate solution. More*

*important is to change system: 1) we need to motivate people so they are more interested in politics 2) better feedback - if politicians broke the promises, lie, next time they don't get to parliament"*

Thirdly, there is plenty of scope to improve both the publics' and the politicians' confidence in the veracity of e-Petitions by developing more robust software to facilitate both identity verification and privacy protection (eg. Diaz et al, 2008). In short, e-Democracy is a profoundly *interdisciplinary socio-technical* endeavour upon which different disciplines (eg. social scientists and software engineers) could (and should?), collaborate much more closely than they have done to date.

Finally, the possibility that e-Democracy could facilitate the evolution of democracy into a more responsive system which actually *improve*s on our current system rather than just reproducing it in electronic form, needs to be further explored. Ultimately, this would entail the design of a system which goes beyond current democratic practices and which attempts to build what might be termed 'democracy-plus'. Central here, is the formalisation of the status of e-democratic tools such as e-Polls and e-Petitions. This is certainly not to suggest a crude direct democracy in which the results of these would be legally binding on politicians, but rather a formal expectation that they must be addressed by them in a coherent and transparent manner. Indeed, apart from a relatively small role for e-Petitions, it can be argued that it is the function of elected politicians to actually set the agenda per se, but critically only in a context in which they are demonstrably (and actively) listening to their constituents' views. For instance, a system could be put in place for each constituency as follows: each motion in parliament on which an MP votes is posted verbatim on their website (perhaps with explanatory/factual notes and resources as necessary); each constituent has verified access to the site and may express their view as to how their MP should vote on the motion. A threshold of say 20% of the constituents might be required? Critically, we are not suggesting that the MP need vote in the way indicated by the verified e-poll of their constituents, but that they should be required by law to provide a written statement on the site as to why they are not doing so. If an elected representative *repeatedly* ignores the views of their constituents over time, say 2 or 3 times over 2 years, then there may be a process assessing the democratic legitimacy of that MP which might ultimately result in their de-selection. It is by the *formalisation* of processes such as this, that the challenge of reducing the disenfranchisement of citizens might be met via the empowering transparency of the e-Democratic resources now increasingly available to *both* governments and citizens.

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