

DIGITAL PARTICIPATION

THE CASE OF THE ITALIAN “DIALOGUE WITH CITIZENS”

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This paper focuses on the initiative named “Dialogue With Citizens” that the Italian Government introduced in 2012. The Dialogue was an entirely web-based experiment of participatory democracy aimed at, first, informing citizens through documents and in-depth analysis and, second, designed for answering to their questions and requests. During the year and half of life of the initiative roughly 90.000 people wrote (approximately 5000 messages/month). Additionally, almost 200.000 participated in a number of public online consultations that the government launched in concomitance with the adoption of crucial decisions (i.e. the spending review national program).

From the analysis of this experiment of participatory democracy three questions can be raised. (1) How can a public institution maximize the profits of participation and minimize its costs? (2) How can public administrations manage the (growing) expectations of the citizens once they become accustomed to participation? (3) Is online participatory democracy going to develop further, and why?

In order to fully answer such questions, the paper proceeds as follows: it will initially provide a general overview of online public participation both at the central and the local level. It will then discuss the “Dialogue with Citizens” and a selected number of online public consultations lead by the Italian government in 2012. The conclusions will develop a theoretical framework for reflection on the peculiarities and problems of the web-participation.

SUMMARY

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1. Online Participatory Democracy in Italy. Preliminary Remarks

In the last decade Italy has become the center of community-driven, mostly web-based and social-oriented experiments of participatory democracy. Public institutions, both at the central and the local level, as well as political parties and private bodies (i.e. banks, businesses) have introduced various forms of online debate and consultation within their policy-making procedures.

Alongside the classic reasons that might explain this phenomenon – specifically the faster and widespread Internet connections, the explosion of mobile users, and the extensive access to public data – in the Italian case prominence has to be given to the economic crisis and the scandals in which a number of public institutions have been involved over the years. Both gave rise to a widespread discontent towards the public power, and to a general disillusion towards politics. According to the *Istituto Cattaneo* – an Italian think-tank devoted to political analysis – since 1955 the number of political parties' official supporters has halved¹.

The consequences are evident. Two in particular are worth to be mentioned. The first one is purely political and relates to the 5 Stars Movement (M5S) exploit at the March 2013 political elections. This civic party led by former comedian Beppe Grillo has strongly opposed the traditional political parties and leaders. Accordingly, it has promoted the idea of a web-democracy in which every citizen gets the chance to be active part in public decision-making. In July 2013 the M5S introduced its long awaited “electronic Parliament” platform (named “Five Star Parliament”), which allows citizens to vote, comment and even write pieces of legislation².

¹ There were 4,2 millions official supporters in 1955. In 2012 the 4 major parties (PdL, PD, Sel, LegaNord) did not reach 2 millions supporters altogether.

² The site was launched just weeks after 15 members of the Italian parliament had unveiled their own interactive platform, *Tu Parlamento*. The M5S site differentiates itself from *Tu Parlamento* by allowing citizens not only to comment and vote on laws but to also help in writing it. *Here* the report from TechPresident <http://techpresident.com/news/24230/top-tech-politics-developments-2013-so-far>

The second consequence – which is also the most relevant – is the rising role of participatory democracy at the public level. Public institutions have progressively become to experiment new channels of participation or, rather, to reshape old channels of participation into groundbreaking forms.

Indeed, not every practice of web-based participation tells us a successful story. In frequent cases, the “public” that participated in online consultations was a very narrow slice of the entire citizenry. Not rarely, citizens complained because, given the lack of direct access to the web, they felt they were excluded from online consultations. Arguably, while younger citizens show familiarity with the use of Internet, older ones might feel uncomfortable with it, and thus feel discouraged from participating. In other cases the public institutions realized too late how costly and time-consuming such experiments of e-democracy can be, and eventually abandoned it.

Nevertheless, participatory democracy has become a widespread practice in the Italian public administrations, aimed at pursuing three goals. (1) In the first place, it is aimed at encouraging citizens’ awareness towards public governance. (2) Secondly, and in close consequence, it aims at fighting back the legitimacy-deficit by giving access to the widest possible range of stakeholders. (3) Finally, the fulfilment of both goals, namely inclusion and legitimacy, is meant to enhance the effectiveness and the soundness of public policies.

In order to fully illustrate such complex topics, and to understand whether and to what extent web-participation is helpful in shaping efficient ways of administration, the paper will initially provide a general overview of online public participation both at the central and the local level. The purpose is to quickly illustrate a few relevant experiments of e-democracy that have taken place in previous years. The central part of the paper will be topical in that it will involve an in-depth analysis of the “Dialogue with Citizens”. The initiative is discussed through its most interesting facts and numbers. The investigation will also revolve on a selected number of online public consultations lead by the government in the same period. Building on the analysis set forth in the first part, the paper will conclude developing a theoretical framework for reflection on the peculiarities and problems of the web-participation. It will also speculate on its possible future evolution in the Italian scenario.

2.1 Experiences of Online Participation at the Central Level

The number of online public participation’s initiatives that took place at the central level during the last decade is wide. Two are particularly illustrative. The first is named “*Burocrazia diamoci un taglio!*” (it can be roughly translated into “let us cut the red tape”). The second has been called “*LineaAmica*”.

Burocrazia diamoci un taglio! was started by the Ministry of Public Affairs in 2009. In almost 2 years (the consultation

ended in 2010) 504 citizens posted their opinions and critiques. Participants were equally distributed on the territory: 40% from North-Italy, 29% from Center-Italy, and 34% from the South. The large part of them was public officers (35,6%). Another 20,7% were workers from the business sectors, 17,6% professionals, and 7,8% entrepreneurs.

Participants were entitled to post their opinions and critiques, but they could also make proposals. While the former focused on the taxation system, the construction industry and the welfare system (not by chance, all these topics are closely linked with the professional background of the participants), the latter were almost entirely dedicated to the excessive amount of red tape.

The consultation had a specific goal: to translate the most noteworthy ideas into law (which actually happened with 2 decree-laws approved in 2012: “*Semplifica Italia*” and “*Italia digitale*”)³.

LineaAmica, which describes itself as “the front office of the Italian public administrations”, was created in 2009 as a spin-off of FormezPA – The Centre for Services, Assistance, Studies and Training for the Modernization of the Public Administration. FormezPA is a recognized association, with legal personality in private law and subject to the control, supervision and inspection powers of Italy’s Presidency of the Council of Ministers – Department for Public Administration.

During 4 years of activity almost 900,000 citizens addressed *LineaAmica*. Similarly to the former case, the geographical distribution is overspread. Men (48,3%) and women (51,7%), mostly aged 30-60 (74,4%), have contacted *LineaAmica* from Central (30%), Northern (20%) and Southern (15%) regions. The large majority still uses the telephone (84%). Yet the number of citizens using the web is growing (12,8%). According to a recent official press release, since 2009 more than 5 millions citizens visited the *LineaAmica* website and, following the suggestions received from the citizens, 480.000 tickets were opened⁴.

Differently from *Burocrazia diamoci un taglio!*, the suggestions were not translated into norms. They were rather threatened on a case-to-case basis. As already mentioned, *LineaAmica* was designed and implemented to be a multi-channel contact center of the Italian public administration. The main goal is not to consult the public opinion on specific topics, but to provide information and assistance to citizens that deal with the public administration.

³ See Decree-Law n. 5/2012 and n. 179/2012

⁴ See further details here:

http://www.formez.it/sites/default/files/monitor_2013.pdf

2.2 Experiences of Online Participation at the Local Level

Also regional and municipal administrations increasingly rely on the web as a forceful tool to communicate and negotiate with local communities. The main difference from e-participation at the central level is that regional and municipal administrations have rarely replaced the traditional channels of consultation with new forms of online participation. They rather sided it.

There are of course many possible explanations to this difference. The main reason, however, is that the large majority of Italian municipalities is not yet digitalized. A recent survey from Confartigianato – a Confederation that represents more than 700.000 businesses and entrepreneurs belonging to 870 sectors – has highlighted that only 928 out of 8000 Italian municipalities interacts with the public via the Internet. Not surprisingly, in the European ranking of public digital services Italy scores poorly, second to last. Wired magazine in 2013 released the results of a poll underlining that 62% of Italians have never interacted online with Public Administrations. Another 52% declared to ignore the meaning of “e-democracy” or “digital agenda”.

This explains why mayors and municipal councils are not confident in replacing traditional channels of participation with new ones. They are rather in favor of the hybridization arising from the combination between new and old forms of participation.

The most notable examples are provided by the participatory budgeting (widely known as processes of democratic decision-making in which citizens decide how to allocate parts of a municipal budget) and by the network of municipalities (local committees where public and private actors debate issues of solidarity and cooperation)⁵.

While authors have already discussed the former cases to a great extent, only a few have shown interest in the growing experiences of the “Open Municipalities”. Appeared for the first time in 2011, the Open Municipalities follow the idea that Openpolis originally applied to the Italian Parliament. Openpolis

⁵ Other two noteworthy examples include the regions of Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna. In 2010 Tuscany has introduced a new legal framework for civil society’s participation. The law, largely inspired by the French system of the *débat publique*, promotes the engagement of individuals, businesses, and non-governmental organizations within the decision-making processes concerned with environmentally or socially impacting subjects. While the consultations are held under the responsibility of an independent administrative body, the law heavily relies on the web to inform the citizens and get their feedbacks on the on-going consultations. Also, in 2010 Emilia-Romagna has opted for a model of consultation that builds upon the construction of a network of private and public actors to whom the administration asks to cooperate in order to increase the inclusiveness of decision-making processes. Again, Internet is crucial to the functioning of the whole system. Also a number of municipalities are experimenting the use of social networks to interact with citizens and provide them useful information on urban-planning, mobility, cultural happenings, and social activities.

is a not for profit association founded in 2006 that develops and implements projects to enable free access to public information on political candidates, elected representatives, and legislative activity. The data are extracted from Italian public administrations' websites, and then made available for free to citizens and the media. Openpolis has rapidly turned into a civic observatory on Italian politics, allowing experts and ordinary people to shape their own view. The project currently monitors more than 225.285 politicians, and it includes more than 17.348 official declarations. Almost 19.000 users access and share the information available on its website on a regular basis.

Open Municipalities is aimed at making the local governments and political-administrative activity more accountable to citizens. It draws on official political-administrative data provided by the municipality itself. Data are disseminated in an open format. Citizens are entitled to check the activity of local councils, to track a decree or a law, and to monitor the activity of majors and local politicians.

The goal is not only to increase the opportunities for dialogue between citizens and their representatives in central and local governments, but also to contribute to constantly and effectively pressure on local governments and individual politicians. It is for this reason that the municipalities that adhere to the initiative are invited to let citizens post their opinions and comments online.

3.1 The Search for Legitimacy

The “*Dialogo con il Cittadino*” – literally “The Dialogue with Citizens” – has been introduced by the government lead by Mario Monti early in 2012.

According to the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) there are three types of e-democracy interaction: (1) *first* is one-way information provision; (2) *second* is a two-way relationship where citizens have the opportunity to give feedback on specific issues; (3) *third* is a partnership relationship whereby citizens are actively engaged in policy-making⁶. The Dialogue can be placed between the second and the third type. It let citizens to give feedbacks, but it is also aimed at engaging them in policy-making.

One main reason motivated the introduction of the Dialogue, and it is one of legitimacy. Since the government begun its mandate, in November 2011, its leading philosophy has been that of encouraging citizens' participation into policy-making. Indeed, this was particularly important for a government that couldn't rely on direct legitimation from political elections. The government was in urgent need to be perceived as accountable and “democratic” from civil society. The choice to open a new

⁶ See OECD, Engaging Citizens in Policy-Making: Information, Consultation and Public Participation, PUMA Policy Brief n. 10/2001, available at <http://www.oecd.org/governance/public-innovation/2384040.pdf>

channel of participation based on the web offered a viable solution to rapidly increase the democratic legitimacy and accountability of the governmental action.

Undeniably the European Commission was a source of inspiration. As it is known, the government had close links with the European establishment. To begin with, the Prime Minister had served as European Commissioner from 1994 to 2004. Also, crucial roles in his cabinet were assigned to formerly European officers. Most of all, the government was aware of the European Commission's efforts to promote citizens' participation in order to contravene the critiques about its legitimacy and democratic stance. Many examples were taken into consideration: the deliberative opinion poll "Tomorrow's Europe" (which polled 3,600 European citizens about the future of Europe), the European Citizen's consultations, and the multi-media websites such as Radio-Web Europe or the online forum Debate Europe launched in 2006 and 2005, respectively⁷.

To a lesser extent, it might be argued that the search for democratic legitimacy was also aimed at "shielding" the technical government from politics. The strategy behind the Dialogue was to gather people consensus, in order to strengthen its choices and overcome traditional political parties' opposition (i.e. the abolition of public funding to political parties).

3.2 Expenditure Restraints and the Impact-Factor. A Web Based Endeavour

The idea to open a new channel of e-participation had to be measured against the need to contain costs. This explains why the Dialogue was an entirely web-based experiment. It was the only solution to offer real-time information at low or no cost.

As already argued by many scholars, public administrations can reduce its costs through the web⁸. The School of Management of the Polytechnic Institute of Milano in 2012 estimated that the introduction of a system of electronic payment, the full implementation of e-procurement, and the digitalization of the management and conservation of administrative acts, would allow Italian public administrations to save €20 billion in 3 years.

Besides the expenditures restraint, a second non-negligible advantage coming from the usage of the web relates with the impact-factor. Thanks to the web (including the social media) the governmental press office could promptly inform

⁷ See FISCHER-HOTZEL, A. (2010), Democratic Participation? The Involvement of Citizens in Policy-making at the European Commission, *Journal of Contemporary European Research*. Volume 6, Issue 3, pp. 335-352. Available at: <http://www.jcer.net/ojs/index.php/jcer/article/view/314/229>

⁸ See WANG, X; BRYER T.A. (2013), Assessing the Costs of Public Participation. A Case Study of Two Online Participation Mechanisms, *The American Review of Public Administration*, 2009. In their study the authors demonstrate a nonlinear relationship between administrative costs and participation quantity and the absence of a direct relationship between the costs and participation quality.

citizens (and traditional media) about government's decisions through a large variety of documents: in-depth analysis, position papers, and a series of frequently asked questions. All these documents were published and regularly updated online.

Citizens (as well as media) have shown a positive response. During the first quarter of 2012, the so called "startup phase", 150,537 unique visitors visited the web-space that hosted the Dialogue. The trend remained steady in the following 2 quarters. Overall, at the end of the year, 486,368 unique visitors had accessed the website. A fair result, if compared with traditional online media. The Dialogue web-space could rely on an average of 1332 unique visitors/day, while online newspapers in 2012 have been visited by 6197 visitors/day (+4,5% compared to 2011)⁹.

4. Thematic Sections

The press office of the government harvested the web-traffic data (i.e. the average time of visit, and the type of information sought) on a regular basis. Once a topic gathered specific attention (by the media as well as by the citizens), a dedicated section was created on the website. Such sections – named "thematic-sections" – collected a large amount of data, including general information, info-graphics, charts, as well as any other informative tool that could be useful to the scope of knowing deeply a specific topic.

Exemplary to this extent are 3 thematic-sections: the first focused on the spending review process, the second on the TAV (the high-speed train connecting Italy to France), and the third was dedicated to youth policies. The spending review section was opened in concomitance with the online public consultation started by the government in May 2012 (more details will be given later).

The TAV section was created after the protests from local communities against the construction of the infrastructure connecting Italy to France. An independent study commissioned in 2011 had revealed that only a few municipalities were directly opposing the project. The large majority favored it; or it rather had a neutral position. The study highlighted how the intense media coverage of riots had created a false perception in the public opinion. In people's thought almost everybody – including representatives of the government – opposed the project.

The TAV section was born with the aim to better inform (rather than persuade) the public opinion. It contained detailed information on the project, its costs and deadlines, and of course full details on its environmental impact. The problems were analyzed against the benefits arising from the realization of the project. Of particular interest was a document signed by the

⁹ The majority of Italians, however, still prefer to read traditional newspapers (4,5 million copies sold per day). For further information See FIEG (Italian Federation of Media Editors) 2012 Annual Report – available at http://www.fieg.it/upload/studi_allegati/Slides.pdf

special commissioner of the Government, Mario Virano. The document replied to the objections moved by the activists opposing the implementation of the TAV. In few and simple words the document revealed that many of the concerns raised by the activists were unproven.

The theme section dedicated to the youth-policies was the most successful. It started as an informative focus on the “Grow Italy” decree, that had introduced a new article into the Italian Civil Code providing incentives for business start-ups (called “Simplified Limited Liability Companies”) ran by young entrepreneurs. It quickly turned into a portal that included all the youth-related initiatives from the government, as well as from other public and private institutions. Through a partnership with a radio channel focused on youth issues, the section set up a series of interviews with public administrators that were working on youth policies (the Ministry of Labour was also interviewed). Three reports were published and, overall, hundreds documents, videos and analysis were uploaded.

5.1 The Digital Dialogue

The most innovative part of the Dialogue, however, consisted of the opportunity for citizens to write to the government, and to receive answers to their concerns and questions.

Albeit the Italian law already provides for the presence of institutional front offices dedicated to the public, nothing similar had been tried at the governmental level. Citizens have always used to write to the Prime Minister or to the government. However, neither an official contact nor a dedicated service had been implemented before. Interaction with civil society instances was provided according to the political will of the government in charge and, as a general rule, only few letters and e-mails were answered.

The Dialogue quickly became the government official front office. Albeit initially supposed to offer only basic and one-time information, it progressively developed into something very close to a proper dialogue. Once citizens became accustomed to this service they started to write uninterruptedly. Also, they begun to share complex opinions, to share files, to ask for detailed information and, eventually, to engage the government into a real conversation.

During the 18 months of life of the project roughly 90.000 people wrote (approximately 5000 emails/month). Citizens wrote mostly from Northern regions (45%, compared with 24% from Central regions, 18% from Southern regions, and 8% from islands). A small percentage - 5% in total – wrote from abroad. Typically, citizens were aged 35-50, with no significant differences in gender.

On specific occasions the flow of messages drastically increased. Peaks were reached in 3 different occasions. The first was the reform of the pension system, approved by the

government in early 2012. The second was the reform that introduced severe cuts to public expenditure. The third relates with the “Marò case”, involving two Italian marines facing trial in India for allegedly killing two local fishermen.

5.2 The Answering Time

Approximately 10 officials were dedicated to the Dialogue: 50% full time, 50% part time. Part time officials focused on the informative content of the Dialogue. They worked on the Frequently Asked Questions, drafted the monthly reports and occasionally dealt with journalists interested in knowing additional information about the Dialogue and its specific aspects. Full time officials’ main task was to read and to answer every single message received.

On this regard, the office followed a policy based on two principles: (1) first, to give answers to everybody who wrote (except, of course, spam and offensive messages). (2) Second, to answer within 3 weeks from the reception of the message. The deadline was chosen after the European Code of Good Administrative Behavior¹⁰. According to Article 12 (Courtesy) of the Code: “*The official shall be service-minded, correct, courteous, and accessible in relations with the public. When answering correspondence, telephone calls, and e-mails, the official shall try to be as helpful as possible and shall reply as completely and accurately as possible to questions that are asked*”. According to Article 14 (Acknowledgement of receipt and indication of the competent official): “*Every letter or complaint to the institution shall receive an acknowledgement of receipt within a period of two weeks, except if a substantive reply can be sent within that period*”.

In the first quarter of 2012 69% of the messages received through the Dialogue was answered within 3 weeks from its reception. Overall, at the end of the year, 95% of the messages received had been answered.

Indeed, in some specific cases the time elapsed between the receipt of a message and the answer took longer than 3 weeks. This happened when the topic addressed by the citizens referred to an ongoing decision from the government, or had political relevance. In such cases the office decided whether to procrastinate or give only an interlocutory answer.

Exemplary to this extent was the decision not to support the candidature of the city of Rome for the 2020 Olympic games. In the weeks antecedent the decision, hundreds wrote asking for more details or to give support to one or another solution. An interlocutory answer was then provided. In the letter, citizens were informed that the government was working on the issue and that it would soon take a decision.

¹⁰ See

<http://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/en/resources/code.faces#/page/1>

5.3 The Filing System

Originally the Dialogue had no filing system. The incoming messages were not classified by topic. After a few months, when a number of recurring issues had been identified, a complete classification was introduced. Messages were classified according to the following list: family, business, youth-policies, fiscal reform, digital agenda, incentives for the Southern regions, welfare, cuts to public expenditure, Europe, bureaucracy, defense, work, and justice.

Once a message was delivered into the government inbox, a preliminary screening provided to remove the spam (approximately 10% of the total). Messages were then classified according to the above list. Over time, some officials specialized on specific topics. The practice taught that it was faster to assign recurring topics to the same officials (which, in turn, could catch up more easily on the updates). The remaining topics were equally distributed among other officials.

Those topics that were addressed the most concerned the reform of the welfare and the pension systems (addressed by 30% and 18% of the citizens, respectively), the new tax on the house (14%), the youth policies (10%), the spending review (7%) and the norms for businesses (4%).

Each official drafted a number of answers floating between 100 and 150 per week. In order to ease the workflow and further expedite the answering time, pre-formatted models were drafted. Overall, 100 models were available. Indeed officials were always encouraged to give answers tailored on citizens' requests and to avoid cutting and pasting pre-formatted models. Yet models were useful to the extent that contained all the main information on a given subject, thereby reducing the time for research.

6.1 Online Public Consultations. An Overview

In concomitance with the Dialogue the government organized a number of public online polls to consult citizens about issues of particular importance. Each consultation allowed a defined period during which members of the public could submit comments.

The first consultation came as a result of the indecision of the Council of Ministers about which solution to adopt on the issue of the legal value of the university degree. The consultation had a discrete success and the government decided to replicate it with other topics. Overall 11 consultations were held in 2012.

The table below summarizes the key-elements of each consultation and, specifically, the duration, how citizens' opinions were acquired, and the support of social media.

Consultation	Duration	Participation	Social Media
Legal Value of the University Degree	30 days	Online	X
Spending Review	8 days	Online	X
European Digital Agenda	35 days	Online	X
Italian Digital Agenda	35 days	Online	X
Internet Principles	44 days	Online	X
Administrative Action	59 days	E-mail	-
Guidelines for Naval Shipping	89 days	E-mail	-
Horizon 2020 Italy	30 days	Online	-
Energy Strategy	46 days	Online + e-mail	-
Administrative Simplification	58 days	Online	-
Culture	1 day	Online	-

As shown by the table, the range of variation among the consultations is high. The duration ranged from a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 89 days. Social media (and, particularly, Twitter and Facebook) were used to support the consultation in nearly half of the cases (40%). In almost 90% of the consultations citizens sent their opinions through a website. Yet, in 2 cases the consulting institution decided to create an e-mail address. In the consultation on the energy strategy both the website and the e-mail address were available. Interestingly, none of the consultations set a minimum number of citizens to consider the consultation successfully concluded. This is the main difference from similar initiatives such as the US “We the People” (that in January raised the threshold for an official response to 100,000 signatures, from 25,000)¹¹.

The range of variability proves the absence of a common policy on online consultations. Ministries have consulted citizens in full independence from others. On the one hand, this has helped to understand which solutions worked better and why. On the other hand, however, it has prevented a uniform practice.

It is exactly for this last reason that the government in November 2012 drafted a series of guidelines to be used for

¹¹ When the site launched in September 2011 the threshold was 5,000 signatures, but that was soon raised to 25,000.

future online public consultations held by central public administrations. The project was interrupted because of the fall of the government in December, and the subsequent elections. In June 2013, the new government has launched an online public consultation on constitutional reforms. The website hosting the consultation (and the staff that is working on it) draws directly from the project elaborated in 2012¹².

6.2 The Spending Review Case

The consultation on the Spending Review deserves further scrutiny. It was the consultation with the highest participation rate: 151,536 citizens wrote their opinions.

The initiative was part of a more structured attempt by the Italian government to trim State expenditures and administrative costs. The aim was to cut €4.2 billion from state spending. In a first moment the government appointed a corporate turnaround expert, Enrico Bondi, to oversee the review. It then opened the online consultation. It was decided that the task force led by Bondi would single out for consideration the most salient suggestions sent by citizens.

The thematic section of the government website was visited by 550,566 unique visitors (nearly 45% of total access to the government website) in 28 days of the consultation lifespan. The flow of messages increased on given days. On Thursday 3rd it reached 26,673 messages, and from that moment on it kept above 20,000 messages/day. Citizens submitted an array of complaints, from throwing out uneaten hospital food to leaving the heating on during the summer. But the most recurrent theme focused on the outlay required to maintain Italy's political class and their related cost, like chauffeured cars and privileged pension plans. The responses reflected the growing frustration of those who felt overtaxed toward elected representatives, whom many perceived as having placed their own interests before those of the public good.

Not all the messages were read. The staff examined a total of 80,236 letters (nearly 70% of the total). This percentage was considered adequate to the end of having an overview on the most interesting topics and thus to single out insights for the spending review task force.

7. Social Media

A brief mention to the use of social media is also useful. The same discourse of the Dialogue with Citizens applies here. Italian governments had never used social media before. Politicians had accounts mostly on Twitter and Facebook, for personal use only, and prevalently during the elections. In recent years a few public administrations (the majority at the local level) had opened official accounts on Twitter and Facebook.

¹² See <http://www.partecipa.gov.it/index.html>

The Monti government decided not to engage on Facebook (it was used later by Mario Monti as part of his electoral strategy), but decided to open a Twitter account in order to inform citizens and media on governmental activities. The chart below illustrates the growing rate of the followers during the first weeks of life of the account.



Occasionally the Twitter account was used to inform citizens of the evolution of some online consultations and about the Dialogue with Citizens (for example when the monthly reports were available).

8. Conclusions

This paper has discussed the commitment from the Italian government to the task of developing new spaces for dialogue and confrontation with civil society actors. Focus has been put on the so-called “*Dialogo con il Cittadino*”, an experiment of e-democracy that has taken place in 2012. Both its benefits and problems have been analyzed, as well as the changes introduced during its year of life.

From the analysis conducted in the paper three motives of reflection arises: (1) the first settles on the search for the maximization of profits and the minimization of costs from public institutions engaged in experiments of e-participation. How can a public institution avoid incurring in excessive costs while increasing its transparency and accessibility through online participation? (2) The second considers citizens’ reaction to web participation. Arguably, the more the citizens are given the opportunity to engage in policy-making, the less they will be prone to accept delays or blackouts in communication from the institution. (3) Finally, the third motive of reflection links with the future of e-participation: is this one of expansion or regression?

As for the first question, it might be argued that the success of democracy web-related tools is due to its high potential to address large communities. Opinions diverge on the effective benefits of web-participation tools¹³. Still, authors agree on the

¹³ See C. COGLIANESE, The Internet and Citizen Participation in Rulemaking, in *Journal of Law and Policy*, 1:1 2005, p 33-57. Coglianese argues that efforts to apply information technology to rulemaking will do not

fact that nearly unrestricted access, the ample space of expression, and the possibility of participating anonymously are strong incentives to encourage participation from citizens¹⁴.

The goal of involving as many citizens as possible, however, might not come without severe expenses. This is also the case in Italy. According to Demos&Pi, a think-tank devoted to research on politics and society, 6 out of 10 Italians have an Internet connection at home (they doubled in 10 years: from 23% in 2000 to 58% in 2013). Yet, less than half of those citizens (roughly 40%) are actively engaged online. Also, the level of engagement varies. Demos&Pi distinguishes between the “cives.net” – those who consider the web as an agora for discussion and political confrontation, 25% overall – and the “infonauts”, 15% in total, who prefer to use the web mostly for getting information.

Clearly the scope of public institutions is to engage not only the cives.net and the infonauts, but also the remaining 60% of citizens, which is definitively a costly operation. The case of the Dialogue is explanatory to this extent. Albeit initially fulfilled in the presence of a low budget and with a small staff, it soon led to additional costs due to the need to manage a constant increase in interactions and to deal with emergencies. As a consequence, the staff dedicated to the Dialogue almost doubled in 1 year.

Additional expenses come from the workflow delay. As already argued, a substantial and systematic increase in citizen comments might lead public powers to strive to satisfy those who file comments instead of selecting the policy option that best fulfills the statutory mandate or public interest¹⁵.

There is not a single successful strategy to limit the expenses. Public institutions interested in e-democracy can only decide on a case-to-case basis. The Italian government in 2012 relied on the usage of the web, as well as on what the Aspen Institute has defined “soft power”: namely, the use of a communication built on persuasion through transparency and information, in order to secure public support of interests, values and policies¹⁶.

These concerns introduce to the second dilemma. Undoubtedly the proliferation of Internet on a planetary scale has contributed to some of the largest advancements in social

noticeably affect citizen participation, as these efforts do little more than digitalize the existing process without addressing the underlying obstacles to greater citizen participation.

¹⁴ See M. WINSVOLD, *Deliberation, Competition, or Practice? The Online Debate as an Arena for Political Participation*, in *Nordicom Review* 34 (2013) 1, pp 3-15.

¹⁵ See C. COGLIANESE, *The Internet and Citizen Participation in Rulemaking*, in *Journal of Law and Policy for the Information Society*, Vol. 1, p. 33, 2005.

¹⁶ Soft power that, in turn, is essential to what the Aspen names “Netpolitik”: the exploitation of powerful Internet capabilities to shape politics, culture, values, personal identity and public perception. They further define See D. BOLLIER, *The Rise of Netpolitik: How the Internet is Changing International Politics and Diplomacy*, Aspen Institute Human Studies, 2003.

activism and advocacy. The increased availability of high-speed connections, the expansion of mobile-based services, media-rich, real-time data sharing have enhanced citizens and Non-state actors' potentials. In the age of "global collaboration", information is disseminated online, awareness and engagement are fostered through social networks, and advocacy relies on a heavy usage of web-related tools¹⁷.

One might then argue that, because of the augmented inclusiveness of public bodies, citizens have become more demanding. Participation in public debates has in fact empowered and improved the participants' democratic skills. Experience leads to more severe judgments from citizens. It is for this reason that public administrations interested in consulting citizens online are demanded to constantly train its personnel, to define and to share its best practices, and to define a minimum set of quality standards to be applied to online polls. Albeit unsuccessful, the attempt from the government to define a single model of online public consultation moved exactly in this direction.

The last dilemma relates to the future developments of e-democracy. The findings of this paper seem to indicate that: (1) public administrations have a common perception of the basics of online democratic participation; (2) they also share similar problems in dealing with e-democracy; (3) as a consequence, the experiments of online participation discussed in this paper might have good chances of being replicated in very different contexts across the country.

As it has been already said, this is happening because today public powers share similar needs and tools for gaining legitimacy, provide accountability, and eventually increase democracy. (1) First is the need for increased transparency in public decision-making procedures; (2) second is the obligation to provide, on the record, factual and legal reasons founding their outcomes, both regulatory and decisional; (3) third is the research for more flexible, and less burdensome, administrative proceedings (e.g. either introducing specific regulatory rules, or promoting a private-sector-like approach to public service management, or relying on multiple and overlapping procedures in which the bureaucracy shares its oversight and management powers with the citizens); (4) fourth and final is the research for solutions that, together with enhanced participation and democracy, increase the effectiveness of administrative action.

These trends show that a common model for online participatory rights is developing in Italy, and perhaps in Europe.

¹⁷ Examples are manifold. At the international level, among the most visible results of these transcontinental information flows one might include the Zapatista Movement, the campaign against the Multi-lateral Agreement on Investment, or the campaign for the development of the International Treaty to Ban Landmines. The former was almost entirely a web-based endeavor; the anti-Mai and the Ban Landmines campaigns provide seminal examples of the usage of web-related technologies in raising awareness and coordinating an on-going response by a multitude of actors.

This model: (1) draws from the incorporation of shared core fundamental principles into domestic procedural rules/practices of administrative law; (2) and increasingly depends on some sort of higher level supervision – either from EU, or from international bodies – to insure a sort of uniformity.

In the Italian case, the government has replicated the European model, which has been adopted also by a number of international bodies. It is not by chance that, in 2012, the Italian Council of Ministers introduced the “Community initiative”, enabling citizens to take part in the legislative activities of the European Parliament through the European Commission. This instrument has been issued in response to the member countries’ wish to consolidate the principles governing democracy, by bringing the citizens closer to the institutions and making them “frontline activists” in initiatives and lawmaking.

However, the revolution celebrated by the enthusiasts of a global digital democracy is still far to come. The vulgate of a widespread, democratic, decentralized and virtual network of civil society actors capable of contributing to national and supranational policy-making has proven fable. Thus far civil society’s activism has not given birth to the non-hierarchical and self-organizing meshwork sketched by Harcourt, neither has generated the virtual communities described by Howard Rheingold as “caretakers of electronic public space”¹⁸. In conclusion, the future of e-participation seems one of expansions, yet its problems remain unresolved.

¹⁸ See in particular H. RHEINGOLD, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, MIT Press 1993.