WEB BASED PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY FINDINGS FROM ITALY

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Abstract This Chapter focuses on Italian public administration's use of web-based experiments in participatory democracy designed to address citizens' questions and needs. The Chapter aims at investigating why, in spite of its massive use, such forms of consultation have been largely unsuccessful. A number of causes are identified for this, including: *(1)* the lack of access to the web from large parts of the citizenry; *(2)* the miscalculation of the costs from public bodies; *(3)* and the inadequate use of ICT in public administrations. The Chapter is divided in three parts. Part I provides informational background on the topic of participatory democracy and e-government. To this end, Part I begins by focusing on the international scenario; it then turns to describing and classifying a number of Italian experiments of online participatory democracy (at the administrative level). Part II introduces and speculates the causes behind the failures of such web-based experiments in participatory democracy. Five reasons are identified: The *first* consists of the scope of experiments in digital participation; the *second* involves the target of participants; the *third* relates with the current state of the Italian digital market; the *fourth* links to the digital divide in public administrations; the *fifth*, and final, argument concerns the budgetary bounds on public bodies. To conclude, Part III of this Chapter aims at, first, understanding why the advent of the large-scale Internet did not fix the democratic deficit of Italian contemporary politics and public administrations; and, second, it aims at speculating on possible future evolutions of web-based participatory initiatives in Italy.

Keywords ICT, Democracy, Participation, Digitalization, Online Democracy, Networking, Online Polls.

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1. Introductory Remarks

Commentators on civil society's activism have always regarded the spread of new technologies enthusiastically. Already in 1841 François-René de Chateaubriand wrote that technological advances could be expected to bring about an international society. Few years before, in 1827, Sismondi in the *Revue Encyclopédique* celebrated the acceleration of communications that brought the disappearance of distances and speeded up the circulation of thought (Sismondi, 1827). In 1999 Scott Kirstner from Wired magazine in the article "Nonprofit Motive" reported: "The new breed of Silicon Valley Philanthropists would make Mother Teresa crunch the numbers" (Kirstner, 1999). The article echoed the excitement that surrounded the spread of the upcoming global-scale use of the Internet. The web, argued the enthusiasts, would provide a low-cost and adaptable "platform" where civil society activists could rapidly acquire information, engage in peer-to-peer conversations, share their knowledge, and therefore maximize the results of their efforts. Flowery dot-org fantasies suggested that an epochal shift was about to be realized. At the national level, the Internet seemed to have the capacity to open up the world to users even in shut-in places, and could erode dictatorships. At the supranational level the promise was even greater. The Internet, it was suggested, would enable civil society actors to operate on a global scale, profoundly impacting on the spread of democratic values in trans-national policy-making.

Undoubtedly the proliferation of the Internet on a planetary scale has

contributed to some of the largest advancements in democracy, social activism and advocacy. The increased availability of high-speed connections, the expansion of mobile-based services, media-rich, real-time data sharing, and voice-data communications have enhanced the potential of civil society. 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 tools. When discussing the most visible results of these transcontinental information flows one might include the Zapatista Movement, the campaign against the Multi-lateral Agreement on Investment (MAI), or the campaign for the development of the International Treaty to Ban Landmines. The former began as an 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.

Meanwhile, online political organizations and petitions platforms attracted millions of members, raised tens of millions of dollars, and campaigned for a vast array of issues. Examples include the U.S. based left-leaning group MoveOn.org and Change.org, the world's large petitions platform with 70 millions users in 196 countries. Also know is the case of Avaaz, an online community involved in campaigning, signing petitions, funding direct actions, emailing, calling and lobbying governments in 15 languages, served by a core team on 6 continents and thousands of volunteers. Avaaz became internationally recognized after the 2007 climate change summit in Bali,

when the delegation of Canada credited it with motivating the delegation's change of position. Finally, smaller initiatives include iPetitions and Petitions Online.

This is not, however, the revolution celebrated by the fanatics of a digital democracy. At the supranational level, the vulgate of a widespread, democratic, decentralized and virtual network of non-state actors capable of promoting global values is little more than fable. Supranational activism has not given birth to the non-hierarchical and self-organizing meshwork sketched by Harcourt (Harcourt, 2003), nor has it generated the virtual communities described by Howard Rheingold as "caretakers of electronic public space" (Rheingold, 1993). At the national level, the spread of the Internet has neither increased the trust in politics nor has boosted citizens' engagement in political life. The figures speak for themselves: the turnout in democratic elections across the world has, on average, declined in elections to national parliaments between 1980-84 and, again, 2007-2013. It has been calculated that, on average, turnout declined by ten percentage points across both Western and Eastern democracies (Clarke, 2013). Further, the level of trust in political parties has dwindled since 1990. From 1990 to 2006, those who reported having a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in political parties across the world dropped from 49% to 27% (World Values Survey, 2014). In Europe between 2002 and 2010 the proportion of Europeans that reported being dissatisfied with politics rose by 12 percentage points, from 31% to 43%. Membership to political parties declined accordingly, especially in Europe. In the last decade a steep decline has been experienced

in almost all major European democracies, including UK (-70%), Norway (-62%), France (-52%), Germany (-38%), Switzerland (-41%), Belgium (-30%) and, indeed, Italy (-37%) (Van Biezen and Poguntke, 2012).

Trends relating to other avenues for political engagement are equally concerning. The case of Trade Unions is representative of this phenomenon. Since 1980, the proportion of salary earners that are trade union members has dropped in all but two cases across 22 nations surveyed by the OECD. On average, Trade Union membership in these countries declined by 14 percentage points (OECD, 2014). Between 1990 and the late 2000s, decreases were also reported in matters such as the willingness of individuals to engage in activities such as signing a petition or attending a demonstration. Those who reported that they might, or have already, signed a petition, dropped by 20 percentage points, from 76% to just over half, at 56%. Over the same period of time, those who said they had or might participate in a political demonstration dropped from 62% to 51% (World Values Survey, 2014).

In the light of these data, a number of problems can be introduced regarding the use of digital democracy from public institutions (both at the political and administrative level). Two are the concerns of greater importance. First: is digital democracy concretely addressing the problem of citizens' engagement in political life? Second: provided that digital participation may increase citizens' awareness, how do we define its usage a "proper usage"? In other words, how do public administrations know that experiments in digital participation are turning into successful outcomes? Is there a reliable

way to classify results? As the following Paragraph will explain in further details, this Chapter aims at speculating on these issues, providing a few preliminary answers, with specific regard to the Italian scenario.

2.   Political   Parties,   Public   Administrations   and   Digital Inclusiveness in Italy

The same trends described in Paragraph 1 of this Chapter have emerged in Italy. The current Paragraph is therefore focused on the Italian case, and specifically on the use of digital democracy by Italian public powers. Let us start from a basic information: over the last 20 years, the economic crisis, the corruption scandals and the government's inability to make structural reforms have fuelled anger and public demands for a voice in all levels of decision-making. According to the *Istituto Cattaneo* – an Italian think-tank devoted to political analysis – the number of political parties' official supporters has halved in the last 50 years (IC, 2013). In 1955 there were an estimated 4,2 million political supporters. In 2012 the number of supporters for the 4 major parties (PdL, PD, Sel, LegaNord) did not reach 2 million combined. Citizens' alienation from political parties – a trend that increased strongly after the judiciary intervened against political corruption during the "*mani pulite*" (clean hands) campaign in the 1990s – also negatively affected participation in not-for-profit and social associations. As 14% of the adult population (7 million people) is currently active in volunteering (50% of them at least once a week), their number has registered a constant

decline. Almost 1 out of 2 (43%) Italians is not socially engaged in any way, while another 17% declares no interest in the public sphere (ACLI-IRES, 2006). Even the number of subscribers to consumerism association has decreased by 16% since 2010 (I-Com, 2014).

In order to contravene such phenomena, political parties born in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, and public administrators, have progressively turned communication from a centralized and top-down approach into a bottom-up, and inclusive, approach. The former have heavily relied on "digital inclusiveness" as a means of protest against traditional politics and its apparatus. Public administrations, in turn, have invested in developing digital participation, as a form of "social reporting", or as an attempt to empower people to debate policy proposals.

The examples are numerous. The 5 Stars Movement (M5S) – a grassroots initiative led by comedian-turned-activist Beppe Grillo – has strongly promoted the idea of a web-democracy in which every citizen gets the chance to play an active part in public decision-making. In July 2013 the M5S introduced the "electronic Parliament" platform (named "*Five Star Parliament*"), which enables citizens to vote, comment and even write pieces of legislation. These initiatives, however, remain primarily confrontational protest movements. Although they mobilize hundreds of thousands of people for their purpose, in contrast with "public participation", they explicitly distance themselves from the political domain. The M5S electronic Parliament was launched just weeks after 15 members of the Italian Parliament had unveiled their own interactive platform, *"Tu*

Parlamento". Few months prior, the Government led by Mario Monti had attempted to build up a relationship with the public through deliberative strategies like public consultations and the introduction of the "*Dialogue with citizens*". The latter was an entirely web-based experiment of participatory democracy aimed at gathering feedback about specific initiatives and designed to address citizens' questions and requests (and feature their voices in decision-making processes). Further, Italian public administrations have increasingly used public online polls to consult citizens about issues of particular importance. More than 16 online consultations were held between January 2012 and January 2014. In April 2014 the Government announced another broad online public consultation concerning the spending review process. Not accidentally, during the last elections, held in early 2013, the large majority of candidates opened an account on social networks aiming at engaging with discussion and confrontation with citizens.

3.   The Success of Web-based Participation

However, as is the idea at the basis of this Chapter, not every practice of web-based participation has been successful. Public institutions experimenting with online participatory democracy initiatives have faced several problems. In frequent cases, the "public" that has participated in online consultations has represented a very narrow slice of the entire citizenry (*e.g.* according to the report on the 2013 online consultation on

constitutional reforms, participants shown 78% more chances to have a PhD degree than the average Italian). Not uncommonly, ordinary citizens (prominently from remote areas) have complained because the lack of direct access to the web has left them excluded from online consultations. This could be explained by the fact that, while younger citizens show familiarity with the use of Internet, older or less technologically savvy people may be less comfortable with it, and thus feel discouraged from participating.

The problem does not just stem from the age gap, but more generally from the lack of digital culture within the Italian population. According to Wired magazine 62% of Italians have never interacted online with Public Administrations. Another 52% still ignore what "e-democracy" or "digital agenda" means. Similar figures are presented in the 2014 Report from Observa Science Society (ObservaScience, 2014): 3,7 out of 10 Italians (37%) have never used Internet or a personal computer (the European average is 20%).

In other cases the public institutions have realized too late how costly and time-consuming such experiments of e-democracy can be, and eventually abandoned efforts. A recent survey from Confartigianato – an Association that represents more than 700,000 businesses and entrepreneurs belonging to 870 business sectors – reported 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.

Such failures leave unanswered a number of questions regarding the profitable use of digital channels from public institutions (political parties and public administrations) to foster citizens' awareness and participation in public policies. Indeed, as highlighted by the European Institute for Public Participation, pressing issues, such as justice, election laws, and the reform of the central State would benefit from a more extensive inclusion of citizens (EIPP, 2009). However, there remains a great deal to be done in terms of developing methods aimed at co-designing public policies, improving the quality of digital participative processes and, above all, fostering a culture of participation. The shift from consultation to decisions taken on the basis of a deliberation with and among citizens still seems to be very far from the culture of politicians currently in power.

The following section is divided in two parts. Part I aims at describing and classifying a number of Italian experiments in online participatory democracy (at the administrative level). Each case is briefly illustrated in its main characteristics, both quantitatively and qualitatively. In a number of cases the information were available and the websites of the initiatives under scrutiny. In other cases, however, the data presented are not available to the general public. They have been harvested chiefly through interviews with key public officials. Part II of the Chapter turns to speculating the reasons behind the failures of these web-based experiments of participatory democracy. Among these reasons three are considered of particular relevance. *First* is the fact that the entire process of "e-democratization" in Italy is still in its infancy; *second* is the fact that it this process, as Paragraph

2 explained, born primarily out of discontent and protest and it still maintains, to a certain degree, this approach; *third* is the fact that Italian public administrations are still timidly using digital technologies.

3. A look at the Past: A Few Examples of Online Participation in Italy

In the last five years, there were numerous examples where online participation systems have been utilized in Italy. Among the most memorable cases is "*Burocrazia diamoci un taglio!*" – BDT. The Ministry of Public Affairs started BDT in 2009. In almost 2 years (the consultation ended in late 2010) 504 citizens – 40% from North-Italy, 29% from Center-Italy, and 34% from the South – posted online their opinions and critiques. Participants were invited to post not only their opinions and critiques, but also to present policy proposals. The former focused on the taxation system, the construction industry and the welfare system (it is not by chance that 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. BDT had a specific goal: to translate the most noteworthy ideas into law (which actually happened with 2 decree-laws approved in 2012: Decree-Law n. 5/2012, named "*Semplifica Italia*", and Decree Law n. 179/2012, named "*Italia digitale*").

In October 2013 the Italian government launched a second consultation – linked with BDT – entirely dedicated to the top 100 administrative procedures that, according to those who would take parte into it, had to be

given priority in the upcoming agenda of administrative simplification. A total of 1953 participants – 1428 citizens, mostly professionals in the business sector and civil servants, aged 35-54, and 525 business enterprises, typically (60%) of small or medium size – indicated which administrative burdens were perceived as the most troublesome. Participants pinpointed the Internal Revenue Service, the construction sector, the health care system and the labor market as the top priorities to be simplified.

Also a remarkable example from the recent past is *Linea Amica* (Friend Line). Described as "the front office of the Italian public administrations", *Linea Amica* 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). During 4 years of activity almost 1,5 millions citizens addressed *Linea Amica* to ask for information on public services. Men (48,3%) and women (51,7%), primarily aged 30-60 (74,4%), have contacted *Linea Amica* from Central (30%), Northern (20%) and Southern (15%) regions. The large majority used the telephone (84%). Still, an increasing number of citizens contacted the service through the web (12,8%). According to the official information released by Formez, since 2009 more than 5 millions citizens visited the *LineaAmica* website (Formez, 2013).

4.1 The Dialogue With Citizens. The Startup Phase

A noteworthy example of online participatory experiments is the "*Dialogo con il Cittadino*" – literally "The Dialogue with Citizens" – introduced by the government lead the Mario Monti Government in early 2012.

The Dialogue was developed for two main reasons. The first involved the search for legitimacy. The Government was in urgent need to be perceived as accountable and "democratic" by civil society. The creation of a new web-based channel of participation offered a viable solution to rapidly increase the democratic legitimacy and accountability of the governmental action. In that sense, the Government drew inspiration from the European Commission's efforts to promote citizens' participation in order to address the critiques about its legitimacy and democratic stance. To this extent, 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, as well as the online forum Debate Europe, launched in 2006 and 2005 respectively, were examined (Fischer-Hotzel, 2010).

The second part of the strategy behind the Dialogue aimed at "shielding" the technical government from politics. The idea involved gathering the consensus of the people, in order to strengthen its choices and overcome traditional political parties' opposition (i.e. the abolition of public funding to political parties).

The third motivation for the Dialogue was that it was the only solution that offered real-time information at low or no cost. In this regard, it might be useful to remember that the Monti Government was appointed during a critical stage for the Italian, and European, economies. The web enabled the government to promptly inform citizens about decisions choosing through a large variety of documents (i.e. in-depth analysis and position papers) at almost no cost (Reda, 2013).

Citizens (as well as media) have responded positively to the Dialogue. During the first quarter of 2012 (let us call it the "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 were visited by 6197 visitors/day (+4,5% compared to 2011) (FIEG, 2012).

4.2 The Maturity Phase

The Dialogue quickly became the official front office of the Government. Although initially established to offer only basic and one-time information, it progressively developed into something very close to a proper conversation. Let us call this second phase, "the maturity phase". 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 in 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. 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.

Messages were classified according to a list of topics. Among those topics that were addressed the most there were the reform of the welfare and the pension systems (addressed by 30% and 18% of the citizens, respectively), the abolition of the new tax on the house-property (14%), the youth policies (10%), the spending review process (7%) and the adoption of a new comprehensive normative system for businesses, startups and entrepreneurship (4%).

5. Online Public Consultations

In concomitance with the Dialogue, the Monti 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 idea was so successful that consecutive governments have developed the habit of consulting citizens online on a regular basis. Over a 15 months period the two Prime Ministers that have succeeded to Mario Monti (Enrico Letta and Matteo Renzi, respectively) have already sponsored 8 online consultations.

Overall 11 consultations were held in 2012. At the beginning, the range of variation among the consultations was 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 process in nearly half of the cases (40%). In almost 90% of the consultations citizens sent their opinions through a website. In 2 cases the consulting institution also 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 before the consultation successfully concluded. This differs from similar initiatives such as the US-based "We the People" campaign (that in January 2014 raised the threshold for an official response to 100,000 signatures, from 25,000). Table I summarizes the key-elements of the consultation held by the Monti government 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
Administrate Action	59 days	E-mail	-
Guidelines for Naval Shipping	89 days	E-mail	-

(Source: Italian Government website)

Of particular interest is the consultation on the spending review process. To date, this has been the consultation with the highest participation rate: 151,536 citizens wrote their opinions. 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, but it always 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 by elected representatives, whom many perceived as having placed their own interests before those of the public good.

The range of variability demonstrates that the absence of a common policy on online consultations. Ministries consulted citizens in full independence. It is exactly for this last reason that, in November 2012, the Government drafted a series of guidelines to be used for 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.

As it has been already said, in June 2013 the Government led by Enrico Letta launched two large online public consultations. The first was dedicated to constitutional reforms; the second addressed the topic of foreign investments in the Italian market. In both cases the website hosting the consultations (and the staff that worked on it) drawn directly from the project elaborated in 2012. As far as the first consultation is concerned, two questionnaires were available. To the first, a shorter version, 131,676 citizens answered. Another 71,385 answered to the longer version of the questionnaire. The second consultation was linked to the Report "*Destinazione Italia*". This consisted of 50 measures whose goal was to reform a broad range of sectors, from tax to employment and civil justice to research; and to develop investment-focused policies to promote Italy at the

international level. The consultation was opened right after the presentation of the Report, in order to give to Italian citizens, foreign business communities, business associations, trade unions and experts at various levels a say on its contents. The Government committed to translating these opinions into the Report, and thus into provisions and laws and to begin monitoring their implementation on a weekly basis.

6. An Ineffective (Digital) Democracy. Scopes and Target of Web-Based Participatory Experiments

Having described the most relevant experiences of digital participation in Italy, this Chapter will now turn to Part II, aimed at evaluating the success of such initiatives and expound the reasons behind its underwhelming result. Five reasons will be considered in evaluating the still-ineffective digital democracy in Italy. The *first* and *second* reasons involve the scope of experiments in digital participation and the target of participants, respectively. A *third* reason relates with the current state of the Italian digital market; a *fourth* links to the digital divide in public administrations; the *fifth* argument concerns the budgetary bounds on public bodies.

Let us start from the scopes and the target of web-based participatory experiments. Although the press has given considerable (and, in general, positive) attention to digital democracy initiatives promoted by the Italian governments, critics have argued that these initiatives have been promoted mostly for political or electoral purposes. Also when digital participation

has been promoted by public administrations other than the government, the aim, as perceived by many, was that of a "social reporting", rather than a truly attempt to empower people's voice within policy-making.

As a consequence (and, at the same time, a substantiation) of the partial success of experiments in digital democracy it might be relevant to consider the target of participants. According to the trend registered in many of the Western democracies the number of people connected to the web is in constant growth and so, it is assumed, is their willingness to participate in policy-making. As shown by the Digital Democracy Survey from Deloitte, for instance, the so called "digital omnivores" in the United States – those consumers who own a trio of tablets, smartphones and laptops – have continued to grow, driven by the proliferation of new platforms and increased device adoption (Deloitte, 2014). Deloitte classifies as digital omnivores one third (37%) of U.S. consumers, a 42% growth over the previous year. A growth indicates the report, which has been driven by continued tablet adoption (33% increase from 2012 to 2013) and, to a lesser extent, smartphone ownership (18% increase).

Italy is no exception to this trend. Almost 62% of Italians are connected to the web, with an average 9 percentage points increase per year. Increasingly, Italians are connected through smartphone (+10% from 2011 to 2012) and tablets (Censis, 2013). Nevertheless, Italy is still suffering from a significant gap between the portion of population who is connected and is actively engaged with the web, and the still considerable number of citizens that either are not connected to the Internet, or that do not engage

in any form of online activism, including forms of digital democracy. As already mentioned, the 2014 Report from Observa Science Society notes that 3,7 out of 10 Italians have never used Internet or a personal computer. According to another think-tank devoted to research on politics and society, Demos&PI, 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.

7. A Market in Backsliding and the Digital Divide in Local Administrations

Let us move to the third and fourth reasons. The third reason that might explain the limits of web-based participatory initiatives in Italy relates to the Italian digital market. In 2013 this has shown a considerable backsliding, with a loss of 4,4 percentage points compared with the previous year. According to the 2014 report from Assinform – the national association of ICT companies operating in Italy – the Italian digital market is now worth a total of 65,2 billion Euros, having registered a reduction in growth of 1,8% per year since 2009. Over the same period, ICT worldwide has growth an annual average of 3,8% (3,5% in North America, 6,6% in Asia, 5,8% in

Latina America). Investments on ICT in relation to GDP in Italy is 4,8%. The European average is 6,5%, with Germany at 6,8%, France at 7,0% and Uk at 9,6%. In essence, Italy invests on ICT 25 billions per year less than Europe.

A fourth factor to consider when evaluating attempts by Italian public administration to engage citizens online, relates to the digital divide in the public sector, especially in local administrations.

The 2014 Smart Culture & Travel Report examines the development of ICT in 116 municipalities. The report highlights the gap in a number of online services to the public, such as tourism. Although all the municipalities analyzed in the report have a website, the report notes that less than 50% have a page dedicated to tourism, and only 17% a page dedicated to culture. Most importantly, only 14% of the municipalities provide booking services for hotels, while in less than 3% of the cases it is possible to buy museum tickets online. The Report also analyses the use of Social Media by municipalities. 6 out of 10 of the bigger cities have at least a Facebook, Twitter or YouTube account. Yet, only 29% has activated a profile on all those social media. In fact, while 54% has a Facebook profile, 445 and 41% of the municipalities use Twitter and YouTube, respectively.

As reported by the E-Democracy Centre of the Faculty of Law of the University of Geneva, in 2005 16.5% of Regional public administration bodies in Italy had an ICT office, which often deal also with e-democracy initiatives. The highest concentration was found in the Regions of Emilia Romagna and Tuscany. More specifically about the presence of digital

democracy tool from Italian municipalities, the latest data available (Saviano and Iorio, 2010) reveals that only 52,6% provide at least one digital democracy tool. However, 50% of these tools are just very simple and informative (e.g. information contents on the websites or newsletters). Deliberative tools (e.g. forums with public administrators or blogs) are almost nonexistent, as they do not even number 1% of the total.

8. A Matter of costs

Ultimately, the current stagnation of web democracy in Italy is connected with the budgetary restraints in the public sector. Even when public bodies have admittedly relied on the web to engage civil society as a way to maximize the outcomes at almost no cost – as in the case of the Dialogue with Citizens experimented by the Monti Government – budgetary restraints have impeded attempts to view web-participation as a long-term investment. Although initially fulfilled in the presence of a low budget and with a small staff, the Dialogue 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 interest (Coglianese, 2005).

What is particularly striking is the fact that, as argued by many scholars, public administrations could not noticeably reduce their costs through the web (Wang, X.; Bryer T.A., 2009). With specific reference to the Italian case, in 2012 the School of Management of the Polytechnic Institute of Milano 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.

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 trough transparency and information, in order to secure public support of interests, values and policies (Bollier, 2003).

9. Conclusions. Dilemmas of e-participation in Italy

Part I of this Chapter has touched on the intense debates dating from the early phases of the widespread Internet use. As Paragraph 1 of this Chapter has explained, this debate involved academics, media outlets, and politicians, whom believed that the web would herald a new age of democratic participation. Many, at the time, pointed to the web's capacity to host deliberative dialogues amongst large groups of individuals. Others

focused on the capacity of the web to host rapid real-time interactions and described it as a beneficial mechanism for citizens and their political leaders to interact more regularly and openly. The effects, they implied, would be threefold. *First*, citizens would be better able to communicate their needs and preferences to their political representatives. *Second*, having received this input, these representatives would make better decisions that more accurately reflected the will of the people, and citizens, in turn, would develop a greater sense of trust in their political system. *Third*, drawing on the concept of "digital natives" – a term that some have applied to the millennial generation, given the ubiquitous role that ICTs tend to play in the lives of those born from the early 1980s onwards – authors argued that the Internet would prove particularly potent as a means of engaging youth, and thus curb their withdrawal from politics. In the last place, early commentators also welcomed the massive use of technology as an encouragement for the rise of a range of web-based media outlets thanks to which information has become widely accessible to the world population.

The data presented in Part I (and with specific regard to the Italian case in Part II) of this Chapter suggests that the advent of the large-scale Internet did not fix the democratic deficit of contemporary politics and public administration. To begin with, the rise of access to the Internet has influenced neither the voting rates nor the party membership (Bimber, 2001). Similarly, disengaged youth did not become interested in politics because it moved online (Barnard, 2009). Also the extent to which opportunities for online citizen engagement are enjoyed equally by different

segments of the population has been questioned. Those who engage online, it has been noted, are often the same as those that engage offline (Di Gennaro, Dutton, 2006). The Internet, in other words, seems to attract less those citizens that Lance Bennett would describe as "actualizing citizens" – people that are distrustful of traditional forms of authority and are inclined to adopt more privatized responses to changing social circumstances – and more the "dutiful citizens" – to whom involvement in civic life is an obligation to be fulfilled through conventional activities, such as voting (Bennett, 2008). According to this interpretation, Internet might paradoxically broaden the gap between those who are politically active (and would therefore benefit from new opportunities to participate in their democracies via the web) and those that are not.

The basic purpose of Part III of this Chapter is to summarize such dilemmas with specific reference to the Italian scenario. More specifically, from the analysis conducted in the Chapter three motives of reflection arises: *(1)* the first settles on the search for the maximization of profits and the minimization of costs from Italian 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 motive of reflection 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 in Italy: is this one of expansion or regression?

10. Maximization of profits and Citizens' Expectations

Let proceed in orderly fashion. As in the cases of many other European and extra-European democracies, also in Italy the use of web-related tools has demonstrated its high potential to address large communities. Nearly unrestricted access, the ample space of expression, and the possibility of participating anonymously represented strong incentives to citizens for participating. Thus far, however, the Italian public administrations did not attempt to face the issue of costs rationally. In some cases announcements of new online consultations have followed long periods of silence. In March 2014, for instance, the government published a call for experts to be hired in a task force being set up to manage all future initiatives of participatory democracy. The deadline for applications expired in April 2014, but the government did not give any sign to proceed on the creation of the task force. In other cases the Italian administrations have simply decided to postpone any initiatives of web democracy, especially if the estimated costs were too high. Exemplary is the case of the Ministry of public affairs, who announced in April 2014 a broad consultation on the reform of Italian public administration. The consultation lasted 30 days. A brief summary was then published by the Ministry to inform about the consultation and, contextually, the phase of confrontation with stakeholders

was postponed. Given the absence of a unitary approach from Italian administrations on the topic of web-democracy, it might be only assumed that this is currently hinged to the will of each administration. When the spending review process approved by the Italian Parliament in 2013 will enter into force, it might be expected a progressive harmonization of public administrations' budgets and possibly a less varying usage of web participation at the administrative level.

Moving to the second issue one should note that, even if discontinuous, the spread of channels of web-democracy contributed to increase the expectations of Italian citizens in good administrative behavior from public institutions. Initiatives from civil society aimed at supporting public administrations in experimenting e-democracy have increased over the last 2/3 years. The scope is to fill the gap created by public administrations' inactivity in web democracy and the increasing citizens' expectations. Unfortunately, the self-financed nature of these grassroots projects thus far impelled a greater experimentation. Examples include Airesis, a social network created to the precise scope of promoting e-democracy in the public sector, and Openpolis. The latter is a not for profit association founded in 2006 by citizens-activists 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. 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.

11. Future of Online Participation in Italy

Having discussed the issue of the costs of web-democracy and the problem of citizens' expectations, the last dilemma to be addressed relates to the future developments of e-democracy in Italy. The findings of this Chapter seem to indicate that Italian public administrations have a common perception of the basics of online democratic participation. They also share similar problems in dealing with e-democracy (namely: the problem of costs and that of citizens' expectations). As a further – and major – consequence, the experiments of online participation that have been discussed in this Chapter may have good chances of being replicated in very different contexts across the country. This could possibly lead to a common model for online participatory rights. On the one hand, this model draws from the incorporation of shared core fundamental principles into

domestic procedural rules/practices of administrative law. In spite of its relative adolescence, web-based experiments in participatory democracy have a robust collection of projects in general, and can count on a relatively high level of cooperation and coordination amongst and between the different levels of government. Although at the local level there are no explicitly defined government bodies which are directly responsible for e-government or e-democracy actions, it can be considered a progress the fact that, at the central level, all electronic initiatives are still monitored by a single, central, administrative body: the National Centre for Public Administration and Informatics (CNIPA). The role of CNIPA is to stimulate, support and promote ICT usage within national public bodies.

On the other hand, it seems that the success of this process towards uniformity increasingly depends on some sort of higher-level supervision – either from EU, or from international bodies. Not casually, in the Italian case the government has replicated the European model, which has been adopted also by a number of international bodies. 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.

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