



ORIGINAL PAPER

Reinforcing Democracy through Internet and Social Networks Participation: Votes, Voters and Elected Behavioral Outcomes in Romanian Presidential Elections (2014)

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Abstract

The “epidemic” of democracy that “infected” the world and the European countries, corroborated with the evolution of technology and science led to a great challenge, which can be summarized into several questions: how can we use the new communication techniques (such as Internet or social networks) for reinforcing and strengthening our contemporary democracy? How could technology engage a large segment of citizens in meaningful deliberation about regulatory policy issues? How real and efficient is such an attempt to modernize democracy? In this paper I will analyze the necessity of institutional stability, as a basic condition for an authentic reform in terms of re-inventing the civic participation in the policy making process, followed by the valorisation of internet and social networks, as an instrument for participatory democracy. At this point, I will analyze, as a case study, the Romanian Presidential elections from 2014, when the social network played a major role for the victorious candidate, with an attempt to discuss the general application over the Romanian and European society of these techniques. Despite the optimistic references about the future impact of social networks on democracy, we prefer to keep a more realistically perspective, by concluding that Internet and technology are not likely to transform or to revolutionize the rule-making process from local, national or European level, but merely to create a broader connection between citizens and institutions, to mobilize resources in order to acquire a civic culture and to reinforce the institutional stability.

Keywords: *participatory democracy, social networks, Internet, legitimacy, information.*

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Introduction into the field of study

Our democracy should be a “market place of ideas and opinions” (Ravaz, 2006: 29), where the citizens and public institutions freely discuss and analyze the social problems, in order to find and implement the best solutions and public policies. At this point, the good governance (as an autonomous concept from European regulations) is bound by three cornerstones: citizens (as a source of power into a democratic state), the public institutions (as executors of the citizen’s will) and the channel of communication between citizens and institutions. Our study will be focused on this channel of communication which became essentially into a healthy democracy: it facilitates the transfer of power from citizens to political representations (from local, national or European level) and it ensures the permanent communication between them.

The discussion about the channels and tools for reinforcing our contemporary democracy is intimately linked with another hot topic from the European public agenda, the participatory democracy – seen as a remedy for the decline of representation and the low level of citizen’s confidence in the public institutions and representatives. Besides the still very fluid and experimental form of its realizations (Porta, 2008: 15-42), participation implies a variegated spectrum of models and procedures involving different actors and powers (Blondiaux, 2005: 116).

This new tool was created as an isolated experiment in ‘70 at local level and spread as a general tendency of public policy and moreover, as a necessity of nowadays democracy. Participation takes place in contexts of considerable and fairly complex change in public intervention. The policy approaches spreading through many European countries side by side with rescaling processes stress the need to intervene in an incisive, coordinated way in scenarios where problems emerge, emphasizing criteria such as territorialisation/integration and trust in the possibility of mobilizing networks based on sharing and cooperation (Lascoumes, Le Gales, 2004: 42-47). As we are living a decade where the internet is the most convenient market to share and spread ideas, political convictions, social mobilization, we must analyze the role of social networks into the process of governing and its impact on participatory democracy.

Still speaking about democracy... in search of institutional stability

Our aim, through this research, is not to call into question the democracy, in general, or to treat what is a veritable democracy, but merely to analyze the conditions of a stable/unstable democratic institution. Generally, there are two types of approaches about democracy: a procedural and a substantive one. In the Anglo-Saxon literature and in the democratic transitions countries, it dominates the conception about the greater significance of the procedural definition of democracy (Schumpeter, 1977: 57-74). The other approach steps towards liberalism, where the political regime’s connections to the other social spheres are inadequately represented or are totally lacking (Morange, 2009: 59). On the other hand, we can speculate that that the inadequacy of the purely procedural approach is in its inability to pose the question, “What forces would be mobilized, what sacrifices would be made in the name of democracy’s protection?” Democracy cannot exist if it is not based on a belief in the political freedom. In this sense, “the real democracy” is far from being a formal political market which competes for the votes of the citizens. It presupposes the existence of a shared social experience, language, traditions, and way of life. Without this “ethos” there will not be any sense of collective identification nor the aspiration to collective action. Without stable beliefs there will be neither stable institutions nor stable society (Touraine, 1991: 275-286).

Reinforcing Democracy through Internet and Social Networks Participation...

The widespread democratic progress started in the western European countries since 1970 and in the Central and Eastern ones, after the falling of the communist regime, in the end of 1989. In recent years, especially after 2000, demands of political freedom, representation, participation and accountability resonated in various regions. But while there is an emergence of a general consensus on the desirability of democratic societies, there has yet to be a profound understanding on the means to bring about democracy and entrench it. The question as to how democratic systems in various countries are established often remains dominated by the response that democracy is only possible under certain cultural, economic and social conditions, which are not universal. In order to assess the possibility of democratic practice and to fully comprehend the mechanisms which nurture the development and maintenance of democracy, it is important to encourage the generation of new knowledge which questions the prevailing paradigm and which will endeavour to show that democracy can be nourished everywhere despite the different traditions and cultures which ground societies. There are, in fact, two basic democratic values which stand as twin pillars of the entire democratic value system: competition and participation. These twin basic values have been formulated most markedly in the works of Robert Dahl, but many eminent political scientists have agreed upon the equal importance of these basic values: namely, both the competition of elites and the active participation of the whole population in the political process. It has been sometimes formulated in its simplest version as the principle of free election, but sometimes other terms have also been used for these two basic values. There is broad agreement, however, that these values are the fundamental requirements of all democratic politics, albeit with a distinction between direct and indirect representative democracies. In the realm of civil society, where direct democracy dominates, participative and cooperative values play decisive roles in the formation of associations and the motivation of their collective actions; in macro-politics, according to the rules of representative democracy, competitive or adversarial rules are decisive and shape the majority decisions, although in the developed countries consensus and compromise are becoming more and more important in conjunction with the minorities right for veto in the vital matters (Dahl, 1971: 7).

Equally, economic development raises income levels, improves access to education and nurtures an independent press, which will then lead to a civil society mature enough to foster democracy. Also, it is important to build a society in which anyone with aspirations can receive a qualitative education. In such a society, government corruption and lack of transparency in policy-making are rectified, and good governance achieved (Discourse at Democracy Forum II). And the cornerstones for all these values are the stable democratic institutions, which sustain a coherent system, where the economic and democratic values may coexist and enhance the social development. We can characterize the democratic institutions through all cases of democratic interaction which include formal and informal norms which are practiced as procedures that are embodied in temporary structures or constant organizations (Tiryakian, 1991: 165-198). In contemporary complex societies they carry out the critical functions of mediating, uniting and representing social interests. Their *stability* means first and foremost a stabilization of expectations, demarcation of temporary limits for actors' planned, goal-directed and rational action (Vladimirov, 1997: 5). Having in mind these aspects, we can assume by opposite, that institutions' weakness is their inability and/or inefficiency to function the way they have been established. Besides, in the new democracies there is a very real danger of perverse institutionalization which manifests in the existence of the so-called tutelary powers and reserve domains of power (Valenzuela, 1992: 57-104). Hence, the

elimination of all other institutions, practices and expectations which are not compatible with their functioning has a critical significance for democratic institutions' stabilization. Institutions are always established as a response to certain social needs. This is the natural historical avenue for their emergence (Malinowski, 1960: 22-40). However, the opposite way is also possible – the deliberate creation of new institutions which will help the formation and the verification of new needs. This option for institutions emergence from top to bottom could be effectuated in two ways – the evolutionary reformatory and the revolutionary ones. H. Schelsky believes the stable change is the way of reforming institutions because it does not immediately demolish the old institutions and rules but changes them gradually. In his view, the revolutionary elimination of all old institutions leads to “overloading” the new ones with meeting the still existent old needs and thus destabilizing them (Schelsky, 1952: 15-17).

The conditions for the new democratic institutions' stability could generally be grouped according to the feature “internal/external” to the political system. The new and still consolidating democracies are also characterized by the typical for the developed democracies internal dilemmas: (i) danger of political parties' oligarchization; (ii) transformation of politically concerned citizens into politically disinterested “free riders”; (iii) cyclic recurrence in government changes which leads to unstable majorities; (iv) functional autonomy and interdependence with the other primary institutions; (v) dependence on the international context (Schmitter, 1994: 57-74). Despite the fact that as if each of us understands the harmful consequences of institutional instability, “assuming control of a particular institution and extending its formal powers becomes a new form of political contestation in consolidating democracies” (Zielonka, 1994: 87-104). Its overcoming presupposes meeting of certain conditions which are almost identical with the above-mentioned external dilemmas. First, calming down the political conflict to the extent of reasonable concessions which are needed for stabilizing the formal power of state institutions. The consensus among the political parties which is necessary for the successful consolidation has three dimensions: consensus on (i) ultimate values; (ii) the rules of the game, and (iii) the specific for the time being governmental policy. According to G. Sartori, the first type of agreement helps consolidation but does not have crucial significance because the second type of agreement is the fundamental prerequisite for the successful democratization. The third one is just part of the problems every democratic government faces (Sartori, 1999: 67). The second important condition of democratic consolidation is the management of social conflicts. The most important ones today are connected to the redistributive role of the state. That is why democratic consolidation requires the institutionalization of all distributive and re-distributive conflicts. The strong pressure for immediate consumption on the one hand, and the necessity of restrictive budget policy on the other hand, requires first of all a stable and explicit social “pact” with the trade unions (Mainwaring, O'Donnell, Valenzuela, 2000: 82).

Third, an equally important condition for the successful democratic consolidation is the legitimation of the new regime both legally, ideologically and morally through the new values, language, symbols, or in other words, through the new democratic “ethos” (Vladimirov, 1997: 8). It is only the strong legitimization of the new democratic power that could stand up to the social and economic crises which are characteristic for every major transformation. The desire and the necessity for institutional stability, as a framework for healthy and stable democracies, is intimately linked with a stable legal order, with a continuity in public policies. The expressed political orientation is an attempt by the civil society to “ground” abstract democratic and economic values through uniting

Reinforcing Democracy through Internet and Social Networks Participation...

them with the real practical problems of everyday life. This new civil consciousness is much more democratic in purely practical terms because it is a manifestation of people's desire for stable democracy (Vladimirov, 1997: 9-10).

The role of social network in finding a democratic stability

In the last decade we observe a growing and spreading tendency all over the globe, starting with the earliest ages and involving even the most conservative elders, to spend a lot of time and to live on social web sites. Thus, the media, in general, and the internet in particular become a market of ideas, of observation and participation on different degrees of personal involvement to different social, political, environmental, etc. problems and disputes. Social web is essentially a place of relationship and, as such, it can be lived in diverse, complex ways. It is a place where weak bonds typical of post-modernity (Granovetter, 1998: 22-41) originate, are fed and dissolve, not according to criteria of separation and clear distinction from offline dimension, but rather according to a sense of continuity, of constant connection with it, as the recent literature has outlined (Castells, 2009: 55).

“Social, relational capital expansion that social media offer to people has an important impact on the way of feeling and behaving as a consumer (see the concept of prosumer or consumeractor and the development of participating advertising), as well as of feeling and living the territory as “citizen”, that is to say on the way of tackling themes of general interest and interact with public institutions: the possibilities of increasing information and of expressing publicly one's opinion without intermediaries, increasing mainstream logics (citizen journalism), of sharing thoughts and initiatives which translate in some case in movements, in political actions (often in contrast to something or someone), of creating communities operating on the solidarity side” (Ducci, 2011: 11).

The international doctrine (Bodin, Crona, 2009: 9-15) has identified the existence of social networks as a common and important denominator in cases where different stakeholders have come together to effectively deal with different social, economical or environmental problems, sometimes the role of internet and social networks being more important than the classical institutions, even if these ones are functioning in conditions of stability and transparency. As a matter of consequence, interaction in social networks influence the way that citizens participate and exercise their democratic role because it creates opportunities for individuals to gather information about politics that allows them to live beyond personal resource constraints, thereby supporting the political activity of many people. Additional analysis shows the substantive and theoretical importance of such interaction by explaining how it is distinct from the effect of social group memberships and how it enhances the effect of individual education on the probability of participation (Mcclurg, 2003). The social networks have the advantage that it could be a perfect place to initiate or to transfer from the real life initiatives on different fields, in order to disseminate on a large scale and to give the possibility for those who were usually not heard, to express themselves and to have a clear opinion and perspective on a social or political topic.

The evolution of web technologies has led to important changes: everything that happens on the public scene (at local, national, European, international level) is immediately on the webs and social network, all the institutions and political personalities have public accounts to share their activity, experiences and ideas. Internet it is a fertile field to have a relational administration, more transparent, closer to the citizens, more reliable and less expensive in order to obtain the administrative information. “The debates,

the dialogues taking place on institutional blogs, on facebook, through twitter, the possibility of creating and downloading images and videos engender an unparalleled dynamism. This make it possible not only to bridge the gaps between institutions and citizens, to create more familiarity, but also to catch what is called the citizens' humus by institutional players, to notice the different positions and opinions regarding administration initiatives or choices, on the way" (Ducci, 2011: 21).

Since the 90's, when the internet boosted and until now, we came to have scientific concepts such as e-government or e-democracy. In 2005, the UN-sponsored World Summit on the Information Society defined e-governance as "the development and application by governments, the private sector and civil society, in their respective roles, of shared principles, norms, rules, decision-making procedures, and programs that shape the evolution and use of the Internet".

It is shown that significant differences in governance processes and outcomes can be expected among networks experiencing structural differences in terms of density of relations, degree of cohesiveness, subgroup interconnectivity, and degree of network centralization. Furthermore, the review shows that none of these structural characteristics present a monotonically increasing positive effect on processes of importance for resource governance, and that favouring one characteristic likely occurs at the expense of another. Thus, assessing the most favourable level and mix of different network characteristics, where most of the positive governance effects are obtained while undesired effects are minimized, presents a key research and governance challenge (Bodin, Crona, 2009: 53).

The change of the "sense of position in communication" (Boccia Artieri 2012: 448-468), the valorization of relation and participation concept in social web seem to create the conditions for a real change of perspective: the citizen's transformation from observers, accustomed with a top-down way of making politics and implementing public policies, into a participant, a generator of creating and spreading institutional information (Ducci, 2013: 432), and moreover, a contributor to the implementation of public policies at local, national or European level. In fact, if the concept of civic participation tends to modify with regard to the past, it expands assuming unheard features, because of pushes "from the bottom", at the same time an undergoing process is evident at public institutions which have started to use social web in order to favour a bigger transparency, participation, but above all to establish a dialogue and cultivate relations with citizens (Ducci, 2011: 12).

Case study: Romanian presidential election from 2014

In November 2014, Romania raised the attention of the European Union's Member States with the Presidential election, characterized by a large mass mobilization (especially from Romanians living abroad), with a campaign strategy took especially on the internet (mostly on Facebook) and with a new civic spirit, which proved a big capacity of regeneration of Romanian society, spread as a wave on the internet, especially among youth and perceived as a strengthening of Romanian democracy.

After many years of silence mixed with fury and anger against the governants, on November 2014, the Romanian people (from inside and outside the country) used their right to vote as a weapon for redefining the spirit of liberty against the arrogance of a general trend for making politics, and moreover, has coagulated a civic spirit, unseen in the society since December 1989. Maybe for the first time after the entry into European Union, Romania can be presented as a positive example to the other member states for its civic culture, that defied any statistic, polls and even the most optimistic expectations of

Reinforcing Democracy through Internet and Social Networks Participation...

the “powerless citizens”. The case fact is that on the second electoral tour, Mr. Klaus Iohannis won with a turnout of 62%, against Victor Ponta, the Socialist prime minister who was the front-runner in all the opinion polls and ran a fiercely nationalist campaign. The difference was immense, because in the first round of elections the classament was inversed, Mr. Iohannis has had only 30.4% and Mr. Ponta took 40.4% of the voters. At this reversal of situation contributed the social media and its strategy on Facebook, which makes him the most popular European politician, overcoming Angela Merkel, David Cameron or Vladimir Putin as Facebook likes and followers.

Moreover, the Prime Minister used a large amount of semi-legal tools in order to ensure its success in election: the Government that he conducted adopted an emergency ordinance that allowed the political migration of local representatives; he adopted some popular fiscal reform for several budgetary categories before the elections, as a stimulative to gain their votes; he tried to control the exercise of the right to vote from Diaspora (where it was well knows the dissatisfaction of the electors toward its campaign) by establishing an insufficient number of polling stations in most European countries. Thousands of Romanians from abroad were queuing for hours at overcrowded embassies and they were unable to express their vote because of a faulty organization of the electoral process. Unfortunately, the negative experience of the first round of election (November 2nd 2014) didn't lead to a better organization for the second one. A series of solidarity protests were organized in the country, as a sign of support for Diaspora, which led to the resignation of the Foreign Minister – as an only “remarkable” solution for solving this problem.

The images seen on TV and internet with thousands of people waiting for hours to vote encouraged more voters at home. In parallel, these unforgettable and unforgivable experiences related to the expression of a fundamental right, were speculated by the victorious candidate and by its campaign staff, that led a strong social media campaign and hashtags (such as #yeslavot, #alegeri2014 and #diasporavoteaza) supported by Romanian personalities from different fields, music, sport, business, etc, that sprang up across several social platforms, with the aim of raising awareness of the importance of going out to vote. Regarding the social media campaign, it was organized by a team of young, which found collaborators in every foreign city where there were problems in the first election round, so that the information, images and videos with impact on people can be uploaded on social network on a real time.

From a managerial and strategic point of view, the target was to attract young aged between 18-35, as regular users of Facebook, and to influence them to be supporters of the candidate Iohannis, by sharing and posting different information on their personal profiles, by gaining their confidence and involving a lot of enthusiasm in the messages delivered on-line. As more that 7 million Romanians have profiles on at least one social network and more that 70% of those one were active daily, the campaign was focused on the development of the civic participation through internet and social networks, by delivering simple and clear messages that could attract persons not involved in politics, but who, instead, could disseminate those messages. For the first time in Romanian history, because of the huge mobilization in on-line and the use of social networks as source of information and mobilization, the virtual victory of a candidate was transposed into a victory in election. The most surprising fact is that none of the persons involved into the on-line campaign has ever done such a thing before.

One other surprising thing about this presidential election is that on a European ground scored by extreme nationalism (as it has been seen in recent European or national election – see the French example), on a very conservative Romanian electorate towards

aspects such as religion, family, ethnicity, the internet and the message disseminated on social networks wiped the fact that Mr. Iohannis is a protestant and descendent of Saxons and with no kids. These aspects were object of denigration, came from the other side, but which finally didn't have an impact on the electorate.

Beyond optimistically approaches...

Although it is very convenient, starting from few positive examples, to generalize that the application of technology and the so-called e-democracy to the rulemaking process will strengthen our democracy, we must release the theoretical optimism and analyze in depth if the internet and social networks are capable to create a strong democracy, or just to expand the information and to create channels of communication between citizens and/or institutions, without no clear influence over the quality of the democracy. The rule-making process and furthermore, the e-rulemaking process are very complex and dependant on multiples variables, so that significant barriers between citizens and public institutions will still persist, despite the desire of both parties to strengthen the connection in order to re-enforce the democracy through technology. Most ordinary citizens in Europe are disengaged from politics and from the rule-making process. Moreover, depending on the economical degree of development, not all national administrations are functioning according to a good transposed e-transparency and ordinary citizens are not so interested to follow on social networks or on web-sites the daily activity of national or European institutions. In the absence of strong emotions, impact campaigns, personal or group interest, citizens are not very motivated to participate because civic participation suppose active "citizens who have imaginatively reconstructed their own values as public norms through the process of identifying and empathizing with the values of others" (Barber, 2003).

E-rulemaking holds much greater promise for expanding the pluralist process so that a larger group of experts and interested organizations can help inform regulatory decision-makers. If e-rulemaking accomplishes this goal, its impact will be more incremental than revolutionary, but over time it will enable government to make better regulatory decisions (Coglianese, 2007). At the moment we cannot surely affirm that Internet and social network leads to a stronger democracy, but at least, to strong information of citizens. From information to real political participations of citizens to the rule-making policy there are a lot of variables such as education, motivation, civic culture, the specialized knowledge requisite to a meaningful participation and the desire of public authorities to fully valorise the potential of technology, in terms of costs and efficiency.

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Reinforcing Democracy through Internet and Social Networks Participation...

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