e-Democracy in the European Union: potential and challenges

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The Committee on Constitutional Affairs adopted the report by Ramón JÁUREGUI ATONDO (S&D, ES) on e-democracy in the European Union: potential and challenges.

The report noted that it is important to regain citizens' confidence in the European project and e-democracy tools can help foster more active citizenship by improving participation, transparency and accountability in decision-making, and reducing the so-called European “democratic deficit”.

Potential and challenges: Members underlined the potential benefits of e-democracy, which is defined as the support and enhancement of traditional democracy by means of information and communication technologies (ICT), and which can complement and reinforce democratic processes by adding elements of citizens’ empowerment through different online activities that include, amongst others, e-government, e-governance, e-deliberation, e-participation and e-voting. However, Members made it clear that **e-democracy alone does not ensure political participation**, and that a non-digital environment to pursue political participation of citizens must also be addressed in parallel to e-democracy.

The report noted the importance of e-voting and remote internet voting as systems able to widen citizens' inclusion and facilitate democratic participation, especially in areas that are geographically and socially more marginalised.

Members encouraged the use of e-participation as a key characteristic of e-democracy, encompassing three forms of interaction between EU institutions and governments on one hand, and citizens on the other, namely:

- e-information,
- e-consultation,
- e-decision-making.

The report pointed out the challenge of responding to the citizens' concerns regarding use of online democracy tools. It stated that addressing **security concerns and guaranteeing privacy are of paramount importance** for building citizens’ trust in the emerging digital political arena.

Proposals on improving the democratic system by means of ICT: Member States and the EU are encouraged in this regard to:

- provide educational and technical means for boosting the democratic empowerment of citizens;
- integrate the acquisition of digital skills into school curricula and lifelong learning, and to prioritise digital training programmes for elderly people;
- develop networks with universities and educational institutions to promote research on and implementation of new participation tools;
- deliver affordable and high-speed digital infrastructure, particularly in peripheral regions and rural and economically less developed areas;
- invest in targeted programmes which promote ICT education and e-participation for women and girls;

- promote, support and implement mechanisms and instruments that enable the participation of citizens and their interaction with governments and EU institutions, such as crowd-sourcing platforms.

The European Parliament is urged, as the **only directly elected institution** of the European Union, to **take the lead in reinforcing e-democracy**.

Online platform: the report called for an online platform to be created so that members of the public can systematically consult it before the European legislator takes decisions, thus being involved more directly in public life. It is important to simplify and accelerate the bureaucratic requirements relating to this and of making wider use of ICT, e.g. through digital platforms and other applications compatible with mobile devices.

Increased participation: Members underlined the need for **more ample information for citizens** on the existing e-participation platforms at EU, national and local level. They called on the Commission to expand and develop e-participation in the mid-term review of the Digital Single Market Strategy to be launched in 2017, and to promote the development and funding of new instruments connected with e-citizenship of the European Union.

Stressing that the development of e-administration should be a priority for Member States and the EU institutions, Members welcomed the Commission's ambitious and comprehensive e-government action plan, for which proper national implementation and coordination of available EU funding will be key, in synergy with the national digital agencies and authorities.

The Commission is called upon to provide an **independent assessment or consultation of public opinion regarding online voting**, with an analysis of its strengths and weaknesses, as an additional option for citizens to cast their vote for consideration by the Member States by the end of 2018.

Members called on the political groups in the European Parliament and the European political parties to **increase opportunities for public discussion** and e-participation.

Data protection: the report stressed the need to protect, as a matter of priority, privacy and personal data when using e-democracy tools and to foster a more secure internet environment.

Lastly, Member States are encouraged to adapt and update legislation to address on-going developments, and fully implement and enforce existing legislation on hate speech, both offline and online.