

E-Democracy in India

Sara Sinha

This paper will provide a general overview of e-democracy in India with reference to best practices from the literature. The first part of the paper will describe some key concepts and definitions of e-democracy and e-participation. The second part of the paper will briefly discuss what the UN describes as the “digital divide” and the need for e-democracy in India. The third part of the paper will describe the factors that determine e-democracy readiness in India, while the fourth part of the paper will determine what constitutes a measure of quality of e-democracy. Finally, the fifth part of the paper will discuss some existing e-democracy initiatives in India, paying attention to gaps and potential. Recommendations for future e-democracy initiatives will briefly be described in the conclusion.

Introduction

This paper focuses on e-democracy or “electronic democracy” in India and assesses whether it emerged as a byproduct of technological determinism or as an outcome of social and political factors.

The first part of the paper will demonstrate how e-democracy is different from e-governance and how participation occurs.

The second part of the paper will briefly describe why India needs e-democracy.

The third part of the paper will describe the levels of e-democracy as outlined by Alathur, Ilavarasan and Gupta [14] and also attempt to define a measure of evaluation.

The fourth section will discuss the developments that have shaped e-democracy in India.

The fifth section will describe the trend of e-democracy platforms in India and assess certain system gaps and potential. The work of Linders [5] will be used to classify e-democracy initiatives.

The paper will conclude with some recommendations for e-democracy platforms in the future.

The end of an era?

The internet has paved the way for groups to make collective decisions by “collapsing time, space and hierarchy” Linders [5]. Marketing specialists and designers are now increasingly finding that present business models and design projects often require some form of co-production with users, ranging from feedback mechanisms to user-generated ideas or discussions about new features. This “co-production” often occurs over social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

Sanders and Stappers [9] have described a “whole new landscape” involving co-creation and design, where the role of the user is shifted from passive to active. Co-creation refers to a range of different processes, from the user being consulted in the development of a new product or service, to the users generating or initiating their own product or service features, often in collaboration with other users, and at times even transforming

the nature of the product, service or organisation [9]. Some of the organisations engaging in successful co-creation practices include Unilever, IKEA, IDEO and Heineken.

The view that “e-democracy” is linked to such practices and therefore a natural outcome of community awareness and assertion of self-determination, is in contrast to technological determinism. There, e-democracy services are seen as the natural successors of e-government services, a consequence of the availability of a wide variety of digital tools.

This paper takes the view that equal weightage must be given to self-determination theories and technological determinism theories. In fact, e-democracy systems like all systems can lead to consequences or use cases that the system designers had never intended.

When it comes to describing “e-governance” or “electronic governance”, it is important to point out that “electronic” is generally used in a generalised manner to refer to various applications of ICTs for the purpose of improving governance.

Both e-governance and e-democracy fall under the umbrella, e-government. It is worth noting that decentralisation and increased autonomy being granted to certain agencies, is an idea that emerged from New Public Management Practices [3].

Backus [12] draws a distinction between e-governance and e-democracy by describing the information flow. With e-governance, citizens tend to be the recipients of information while with e-democracy, citizens disseminate information to both the government and other citizens [12].

Garson [10] has defined e-democracy as an “umbrella term” in itself, referring to a range of activities where the quality of the democratic process is improved through use of ICTs or “electronic means”. Here, e-participation and e-engagement are described as “mechanisms” of e-democracy [10].

E-participation and e-engagement can be further broken down into community building, deliberative discussions, consultations with government, knowledge sharing using tools such as Wikis and e-petitions, which can be understood as “forums” [14]

Why does India need E-democracy?

The solution to the “digital divide” in countries like India, lies outside hardware investment, including improvement in education and training. It involves acknowledging the wide range of inequalities such as rural-urban gap, language barriers and gender inequality among others that prevent people from receiving the full benefits of government services. The focus in this regard, could be citizen capacity building.

At the same time, the focus of e-government services must have broader goals than service delivery from government to citizens. India is the both the largest democracy and youngest country in terms of the demographic dividend. These demographics make necessary an e-democracy structure that facilitates participation in a way that embodies democratic values and focus on ICT applications that are consciously designed to enhance participatory democracy.

Factors determining e-democracy in India

It is important to look at the factors that enable or contribute to e-democracy in India as distinct from the factors that contribute towards e-governance. Here, participation is considered the key factor.

India has wide ICT potential, embodied in the large number of mobile network subscriptions [11] While the existence of a large number of mobile subscribers does not in itself indicate that new forms of participation are being facilitated, Sundar and Garg [6] have indicated that mobile governance could play a significant role in removing barriers to participation such a low computer literacy and the cost of purchasing computer software and hardware.

Similarly, the Digital India campaign in 2014 led to developments regarding technical infrastructure. While this could be seen as an application of e-governance, the idea of creating “digital universal literacy” which addresses the “electronic” part of e-democracy [7]

Important to the discussion of e-democracy in India, is the application “MyGov.in”, devised by the Government of India, which invites citizens to contribute to government services with ideas and opinions. Mishra [15] has described in detail how participation occurs on the MyGov.in platform - through joining groups, participating in group discussions with other members, consultations with the government regarding specific policies and the crowdsourcing of ideas including for logos, taglines and visions. Despite being a government initiative, MyGov.in can be categorised as an example of e-democracy, e-participation and e-voting.

Praharaj et al. [16] have argued that MyGov.in is a good example of a pan-national initiative where diverse populations from across a hundred different cities in India participated and local governments were given the directive to ensure citizen involvement on the platform.

MyGov.in was given momentum by the 2015 “Smart Cities Mission” [16]. The authors describe how local ICT applications facilitated by the central government can especially lead to new forms of community mobilisation [16].

Quality of e-democracy

The work of Linders [5] is useful to assess the type of participation. Linders [5] has classified different levels of citizen “coproduction” or involvement in the design of e-government services based on factors such as design, execution and monitoring.

Broadly, e-participation can be categorised into three types, citizen-to-government, government-to-citizen (government as a platform) and citizen-to-citizen [5].

In order to determine which form is the most qualitative, the definition by the European Council [8] may be considered. The European Council [8] states that a measure of success of e-democracy is the maintenance and enhancement of citizens' trust [8].

Alathur et al., [14] further acknowledge two levels of trust. In the first level, citizens have participated in the decision - making process in a qualitative manner. At the second level, citizens and government share power. This entails a systemic shift of power.

Platforms in India: gaps and potential

A report by the Village Capital and CIIE.CO [18] indicates some trends in India’s e-democracy sector. The report names over 400 “civic tech” organisations. Of the 400, a significant number of organisations operate in the space of urban governance with Janaagraha and Reap Benefit making significant strides with regard to tackling environmental issues and corruption in the administration [17]

Others such as Civis are focused on engaging the quality of participation by citizens and empowering citizens in decision-making by allowing users to engage in e-consultations with the government. Platforms such as Neta and NextElection use technology platforms to allow citizen-users to hold elected government officials accountable.

Alathur et al. [14] have assessed the quality of e-democracy and the relationship between “quality participation” and “citizen empowerment” and found a link between political and legal empowerment and citizen participation. They have also stated that E-democracy activities are also primarily the domain of the upper and middle classes [14].

Overall, Alathur et al. [14] state that e-government is not moving in the direction of e-democracy, citing a number of issues, including poor management, unclear aims and requirements and political reasons.

“ICT enabled participation opportunities” are often unsuccessful from a qualitative standpoint as they “lack effective mechanisms for focused discussion, with confidence and professional management seen as essential to participation [14].

Toots [13] who has made a case study of Estonia's Osale.ee e-participation system, describes e-participation systems as being of both “political” and “socio-technical” in nature, which makes these systems more complex.

The systems have to grapple with both end-user and stakeholder objectives, as well as having to sustain interaction over a period of time, and ensuring that the system interactions are in accordance with the intended objective by the designers [13].

Therefore, keeping in mind the major e-democracy

developments in India and the challenges described by Toots [13], it may become natural for citizen-to-government and government-to-citizen initiatives which involve being consulted and informed [5] to become the dominant trend in e-democracy platforms. Platforms that have been successful in onboarding and sustaining user engagement such as Civis, Neta and NextElection usually involve citizens acting either as “watchdogs” or as consultants with the government.

If the government is involved, it is usually easier to convince the end-user of the rewards or benefits of their participation, arguably because the needs of the end-user, in this case the citizen, and the stakeholder, in this case the government, are easier to identify and more homogenous.

Democratic governments usually have one goal, to get reelected, whereas individual citizens may have different political beliefs, but can come together as social or political groups with the common goal of holding the government accountable.

By contrast, citizen-to-citizen initiatives often have the challenge of divergent interests among the citizen-users, who have various different goals, beliefs and desire to participate. Moreover, rewards to participation, such as policy changes are rare, unless the initiative is able to mobilise enough citizens who are committed to one cause, and who will eventually function as a political group or social organisation.

The organisation Reap Benefit, with a strong community focus is a good example of what Linders [5] classifies as “citizen-to-citizen DIY government.” However, it should be noted that urban governance initiatives do not necessarily go to the second level of the qualitative measure of e-democracy proposed by Alathur et al. [14] wherein citizens and government share power.

Communities must be granted the power to “self-organise” by the government and monitor their own functioning. Moreover, participation must not be designed in a manner where the government is able to out-source government functions such as the management of public services, to citizens.

While this makes much more difficult the operation of “e-democracy platforms”, the creation of citizen-to-citizen communities for determining public policy or “DIY (Do-it-yourself) government” [5] is necessary to meet quality standards for e-democracy.

Using the landmark, Right to Information Act of 2005 which emerged as a campaign by the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), which in English translates to the Labourer Farmer Empowerment Organisation [2] as a benchmark, it seems that citizens are able to mobilise towards a common goal when the goal is political. Globally, the founders of the participatory platform DemocracyOS in Argentina, recognised the need to found a political party titled Partido de la Red (Net Party) and directly engage in the political process [1].

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper puts forward two broad recommendations for e-democracy platforms. The first is that it is worthwhile considering whether the “political” aspect needs to be emphasised in citizen-to-citizen DIY government.

The second is a whole new approach to outcomes, wherein

participation in itself, is seen as an outcome instead of as a means. More participation in the context of democracy could lead to more capable citizens making more informed decisions.

Acknowledgment

Citizen OS

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not represent those of Citizen OS or any organisation or legal institution.

References

1. A. Serna. Partido de la Red and DemocracyOS. Re-imagining Democracy in the Internet Era. *Americas Quarterly*. (2015). Retrieved from <https://www.americasquarterly.org/fulltextarticle/partido-de-la-red-and-democracyos/>
2. C. for Internet & Society, N. Shah, S. Abraham, G. Wright, Open Government Data Study: India. *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2012), doi:10.2139/ssrn.2071605.
3. C. P. Lee, K. Chang, F. S. Berry, Testing the Development and Diffusion of E-Government and E-Democracy: A Global Perspective. *Public Administration Review*. 71, 444–454 (2011).
4. Civis. Retrieved from <https://www.civis.vote/>
5. D. Linders. From e-government to we-government: Defining a typology for citizen coproduction in the age of social media. *Government Information Quarterly* 29, 446–454 (2012).
6. D. K. Sundar, S. Garg, M-Governance: A Framework for Indian Urban Local Bodies. *Proc. Conference on Euro mGOV 2005*, July 10-12, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK, 395–402 (2005).
7. Deloitte & Assocham India. (September, 2015). E-governance and Digital India
8. Draft Guidelines on E-Democracy in the form of a toolkit. European Committee on Democracy and Governance. Council of Europe. Retrieved from <https://rm.coe.int/cddg-2019-11e-guidelines-e-democracy/1680991d76>
9. E. B.-N. Sanders, P. J. Stappers, Co-creation and the new landscapes of design. *CoDesign*. 4, 5–18 (2008).
10. G. D. Garson. *Public Information Technology and E-governance: Managing the Virtual State*. Sudbury, MA, Jones and Bartlett. P.18. (2006)
11. Internet users in India to rise by 40%, smartphones to double by 2023: McKinsey. (April 2015, 2019). Retrieved from <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/tech/internet/internet-users-in-india-to-rise-by-40-smartphones-to-double-by-2023-mckinsey/articleshow/69040395.cms?from=mdr>
12. M. Backus, E-governance and developing countries: Introduction and examples. *Research Report*. 3 (2001), p. 51.
13. M. Toots, Why E-participation systems fail: The case of Estonia’s Osale.ee. *Government Information Quarterly*. 36, 546–559 (2019).
14. S. Alathur, P. V. Ilavarasan, M. P. Gupta, in *ACM International Conference Proceeding Series* (2011), pp. 11–19.
15. S. S. Mishra, Testing the antecedents to e-democracy towards citizens’ happiness: a structural equation modelling approach to ‘MyGov’ initiative, India. *International Journal of Public Administration* (2019), doi:10.1080/01900692.2019.1669051.
16. S. Praharaj, J. H. Han, S. Hawken, in *Procedia Engineering* (Elsevier Ltd, 2017), vol. 180, pp. 1423–1432.

17. Village Capital and CIIE.CO. (2019).Catalyzing Civic Tech in India. Retrieved from <https://ciie.co/pdf/Catalyzing%20Civic%20Tech%20-%2010.15.pdf>

First A. Author *Sara Sinha*