

E-consultations: New tools for civic engagement or facades for political correctness?

Since the 1990s, public institutions have been increasingly reaching into democracy's toolbox for new tools with which to better engage citizens in politics. Applied uses of new information communication technologies (ICTs), namely the Internet, are expanding the range of instruments within the toolbox. E-consultations are emerging as a popular e-participation practice for advancing civic engagement in public policy making.

This paper critically evaluates how and to what effect political institutions employ e-consultations to bring about deliberative and participatory capital. Existing evidence suggests that though e-consultations provide new opportunities for the formation of new interactive spaces between citizens and political actors and promote cost effectiveness, their impact on the quality of deliberation and policies, however, has been less conclusive (Margolis and Resnick 2000; Coleman and Gøtze 2001). Observers note that outcomes of e-consultation initiatives have been poorly and arbitrarily integrated in the respective policies they intended to inform. Their inclusion has remained contingent on the political will and discretion of the political actors.

In this context we question what new participatory benefits e-consultations do in fact offer or whether they serve as facades for political correctness only in a new space?

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“ The novelty of citizens being invited to the policy-making table does contribute to the creation of interactive spaces between political institutions and citizens unknown before. ”

1 Introduction

Since the 1990s, public institutions have been increasingly reaching into democracy's toolbox for new tools with which to better engage citizens in politics. Applied uses of new information communication technologies (ICT), namely the Internet, have expanded the range of instruments within the toolbox. Thematic listservs, e-consultation platforms, e-polls, political blogs, e-voting, e-petitions, and e-campaigning are a new arsenal of participation tools available to policy makers. Proponents argue that political uses of ICT remove some of the practical limitations of political participation (Budge, 1996:7). They are seen to enable more diversified, deliberative, customised and cost-effective forms of civic participation (Dahlberg, 2001a; Sunstein, 2001; Tolbert and Mossberger, 2006). Unlike traditional print and television media which act as one-directional intermediaries in mass communication, ICT facilitates more direct interactivity and enhanced mutuality between its users (Bentivegna, 2002).

The following paper focuses on the role of e-consultations. It critically evaluates how and to what effect political institutions employ e-consultations in policy making processes. It argues that there is a partial mismatch between normative aspirations under which e-consultations are launched and their actual outcomes. Existing evidence suggests that though e-consultations do form new interactive spaces between citizens and political actors, promote cost effectiveness and contribute to citizens' inclusion in policy making, their substantive impact on policy outputs has been less conclusive (Margolis and Resnick, 2000; Coleman and Gøtze, 2001). Citizens' inputs and policy recommendations emerging from e-consultation initiatives are arbitrarily integrated in the respective policies they intend to inform. Their inclusion remains contingent on the discretionary will of political actors and complexities of the policy making process. This opens the floor for the central question guiding this paper: are e-consultations *new* tools for meaningful civic engagement and substantive inputs for better policies, or are they mere facades for political correctness?

The first part of the paper introduces different types of e-consultation. The second part looks at what is 'special' about conducting public consultations on-line, including some of the underlying normative assumptions that drive e-consultation policies. The third part puts into perspective and critically discusses the extent to which the outcomes of public consultation practice(s) converge with the participatory and democratic value added they envisioned to pursue.

2 Defining e-consultations

E-consultations constitute interactive "tell-us-what-you-think" on-line platforms where ordinary citizens, civic actors, experts, and politicians purposively assemble to provide input, deliberate, inform, and influence policy and decision making. Initiated by political institutions, non-state actors (or jointly), e-consultations vary in approach, goals, selection of target groups, breadth of themes or issue areas, in the use of technical tools and administrative level at which they are launched (Gøtze 2001). They often simultaneously incorporate vertical citizen-to-government as well as horizontal spaces for citizen-to-citizen interactions. The fact that citizens are provided the opportunity to influence policy making processes makes e-consultations distinct from other spaces in the informal virtual public sphere. In informal discursive e-spaces such as virtual communities, topical forums, chat rooms or newsgroups, participants interact as equals and may but do not explicitly seek to wield political influence. The *raison d'être* of e-consultations is to affect formal (institutional) political and decision making processes.

E-consultations are also more formal and structured than discussions in the informal virtual public sphere. They tend to have a set duration, agenda, employ the use of moderators, with topics for discussion pre-defined by the host. Given that it is government agencies that in most cases initiate e-consultations, relationships among participants are seen to be asymmetric where the actors involved - politicians, policy experts, citizens - differ in their level of authority, expertise and access to decision-making processes. Arguably, as it will be later discussed, these implicit structural dynamics distinctly influence the e-consultation process.

2.1 Types of e-consultations

There are five common types of e-consultations. The simplest involves *question and answer discussion forums* integrated within an existing government website. Here citizens are invited (by initiators) to post their views, questions and concerns, and receive feedback from respective authorities. Q & A forums can take place synchronously (in real time) or asynchronously with pre-moderation and lag time between responses where views posted are pre-read by a designated moderator. A good example of the synchronous kind are the

'diskussionforen' hosted by the German Bundestag¹ or the 'webchats series' in the UK² where a selected MP (or a group of) is pre-scheduled to interact with and directly answer questions posted by the public on-line.

On-line polls are the second type of e-consultations offering quick snapshots or measurements of civic temperature on a specific public issue. Examples of more elaborate e-polls or e-surveys include those utilized by the EU Commission as part of the Your Voice e-initiative³ while the more simpler one-shot polls commonly appear as a standing sub-feature on government websites.

E-petitions or on-line testimonies are another form of e-consultations which enable citizens, individually or in a group, to table issues, complaints or requests directly to the government. Though intended to serve as a bottom-up participatory tool spontaneously initiated by citizens, e-petitions sites have also been hosted by governments. UK government's popular 10 Downing Street and the European Parliament's petitions initiative, for example, offer such online spaces⁴.

E-panels are more sophisticated versions of on-line consultations. They invite a (self-selected or recruited) sample group of citizens – a panel – to provide and exchange their views via on-line discussion forums, online surveys, live chats, single polls or votes centered around a common topic or policy initiative. Unlike traditional citizen forums or polls, e-panels facilitate both horizontal (citizen-to-citizen) interactions as well as vertical (citizen–decision maker) consultations, offer expert opinion on targeted issues and simultaneously solicit citizens' input into decision making processes.

The last but perhaps the most commonly associated with e-consultations are *editorial* consultations where citizens and representatives of civil society are invited to comment, usually in the form of moderated on-line discussions followed by formulated, consensus based or also single entry recommendations on targeted policy documents. Most of the time editorial e-consultations are called upon in agenda setting or policy formulation stages of the policy process⁵.

Another growing trend points to e-consultation initiatives combining two or more, or all of the above elements in the form of a comprehensive website portal – a one stop shop – devoted to a specific or multiple policy campaign(s) with multi-level interactive features targeting various audiences at once. These can be stand alone or form a part of a longer-term series of on-going consultations, such as the already mentioned EU Commission's consultation portal *Your Voice*, the UK government's *Tellparliament*, or the City of Bristol's *Ask Bristol* e-initiatives⁶. E-consultations are also increasingly being held in pre-, post-, or in combination with off-line participatory events and combine diverse technologies. Madrid City Council's *Madrid Participa* project⁷ and European Parliament's Citizens' Agora are good examples of multi-pronged participatory initiatives.

2.2 Practical Benefits of E-Consultations

Being given the opportunity to provide feedback and to influence the political process outside the electoral cycle is a distinct feature of public consultations. But what is the value added of doing so on-line? Or in Bimber's (1999) words, does the medium matter? The following section discusses some of the practical benefits as well as normative pretexts under which e-consultations are launched.

Convenience, expediency and flexibility

For government institutions, Internet promotes efficiency and effectiveness through the reduction of transactional costs (Tolbert and Mossberger, 2006). For ordinary citizens who have their own lives with

1 www.bundestag.de/forum/index.htm

2 www.number10.gov.uk/news/webchats

3 http://ec.europa.eu/yourvoice/consultations/index_en.htm

4 petitions.number10.gov.uk; www.europarl.europa.eu. Between 1985 and 2004, the EP received a total of 17,823 citizen petitions, about 1500 annually; most were claimed in the areas of social affairs and the environment (www.ena.lu).

5 European Parliament's *Citizens' Agoras* combine both on and off-line platforms and seek to institutionalize a structured dialogue with 'Europe's many voices', and for MEPs to receive inputs for their reports drafted in parliamentary committees. Held in Brussels, Citizen Agoras invite up to 500 participants from civil society organizations. The preparatory phase (i.e. drafting of base documents) is conducted on-line followed by two-days of in-person meetings. (www.europarl.europa.eu).

6 www.ec.europa.eu/yourvoice; www.tellparliament.net; www.askbristol.com

7 Since 2004, Madrid City Council has provided inclusive and cost effective e-voting options for Internet and mobile phone users, but also to non (technology) users during its local citizen consultations; to date 22 consultations on diverse local issues involving more than 3.5 million citizens have been implemented, www.madridparticipa.es.

multiple activities and responsibilities, the incentives for e-participation lie in the practical convenience of on-line communication. The immediacy of communication, 24/7 access (if household Internet access available) and location flexibility is assumed to enable citizens to engage, reflect, edit and respond on issues in their 'own time'. This is not possible in conventional town hall meetings which require travel, physical presence at a specific location and the communication immediacy of talking, listening, reflecting, responding fast and being on the spot. Even a simple act such as sending a letter to one's MP requires add-on tasks like buying a stamp and going to the post office or a mailbox. In this sense, online communication is seen to eliminate some of the practical steps inhibiting political participation.

Enhanced interactivity

Unlike traditional print and television media which act as one-way intermediaries of public catchallism, Internet applications enable multi-level (one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-one) and more direct modes of communication. Online, users become simultaneously authors, dispatchers, receivers, and controllers of communication. By reducing the storyteller or the middleman, on-line communication contributes to the disintermediation of the communicative process (Bentivegna, 2002) and thereby enhancing interactivity and mutuality (ibid.; Margolis and Resnick, 2000). In the case of e-consultations, the Internet platform allows a level of reciprocity and engagement that would be difficult and costly for government institutions to initiate off-line. Moreover, customization and diversification of communication applications to the specific needs of both the sender and target audience(s) is useful in the political arena (Sunstein, 2001). On-line, innovative forms of public outreach can be designed targeting large or special audiences such as the physically disabled, youth, rural populations or other minorities with special needs who would be otherwise excluded from such interactions.

Face-less interface

Proponents argue that on-line consultative spaces provide advantages for deliberation. The on-line environment allows for the elimination of visual social cues which tend to constrain ideal speech situations in face-to-face deliberative settings (Gastil, 2000). In real life, our reading of racial, gender, physical and socio-economic background cues forms our perceptions about others. These influence our formed judgment, stereotypes and prejudices which can in turn negatively affect with whom and the way we interact (Wallace, 1999). The on-line environment offers a face-less interface seen to reduce participants' reliance on social context clues and inter-personal discrimination based on status (Gastil, 2000).

Virtual interactions are equally seen to accommodate different communication skills. By requiring face-less interface, written inputs rather than physical presence, on-line communication removes the 'inhibiting effect' of awkwardness and shyness that prevents some people from speaking in larger group contexts (Wallace, 1999; Dutton, 1996). Thus by eliminating certain communicative barriers, the on-line environment is seen to offer favorable incentives for deliberative discourse as well as for the participation of those who would otherwise be excluded.

Normative pretexts

In addition to their capacities to remove practical barriers to participation, e-consultations are guided by normative pursuits aimed at remedying some of the democratic deficits in status quo political processes. Among such first pursuits is the promotion of citizens' right to free and equal access to information about the political agenda whereby citizens can oversee the actions and inactions of public authorities and thereby hold them accountable. By allowing citizens the convenience of 24/7 on-line access to government documents and by opening up the policy making process to public scrutiny, democratic principles of *transparency* and *accountability* are seen to be actively upheld.

Feedback and mutual learning

Closely linked to the first premise, e-consultations' facilitation of public input and reciprocal feedback between the government and the governed is also assumed to enhance *democratic legitimacy* and *better policies*. The feedback mechanism is theoretically an important component in the mechanics of legitimate democratic processes. It facilitates the reciprocity of raising and responding to validity claims (Habermas, 2005: 384) and thereby enabling behavioural (input-response dynamics) modifications and cumulative improvements to the system as a whole. If maintained, feedback mechanisms prompt corrective behaviour and a series of "diminishing mistakes". Conversely, if feedback mechanisms function poorly, cumulative mistakes within a system may become greater (Deutsch, 1966: 88-90). Following this logic, with politicians and citizens being a part of the same (political) system, enabling reciprocation of feedback via such instruments as e-consultations

should in principle yield more informed policies, thus foster mutual learning and cumulative improvements within the policy-making system as such.

Deliberation

The third normative pursuit associates public consultations with *deliberative democracy*. Deliberation unlike other forms of discourse, proponents argue, catalyses the articulation of conflictual preferences within society motivated by discursive exchanges and genuine consensus formation based on moral, rational, practical judgement, mutual respect and social learning (Dryzek, 1990; Habermas 1984, 1991; Fishkin, 1991; Gutmann and Thomson, 2004). Able to transcend geographic barriers and to accommodate large or specifically targeted groups more efficiently, e-consultations are envisaged to be a step closer to the concept of a virtual agora where ordinary citizens, politicians and experts, who are normally aligned within rigid power-structures, can engage in public debates under one (virtual) roof.

Civic Education

In addition to offering conducive conditions for convenient and inclusive communication practices, e-consultations are also seen as opportunities for civic education. During the e-consultation experience, participants are commonly encouraged to tap into additional resources via customized links and prepared on-line materials to access information about policy issues or topics being discussed. Acknowledging that participants may come from different educational and knowledge backgrounds, enabling the same access to information allows citizens to fill in their informational gaps, to participate on an equal footing and eliminate voter ignorance (Fishkin, 1993). Moreover, informed citizens have been observed to be better equipped to enrich public opinion, increase political attentiveness, make better choices (Dahl, 1989) and contribute to the formation of social capital necessary for a healthy democracy (Dewey, 2004; Putnam, 2000; Callan, 1997). In this sense, e-consultations offer a comparative advantage to their off-line versions where the provision of documents in paper format is costly, organizationally consuming and possibly omitted altogether if budgetary concerns arise.

3 Putting e-consultations into perspective: A meaningful participatory tool?

In summary, proponents above have argued that e-consultations are expected to provide functional and deliberative communication benefits, enhance civic inclusion and citizen-government interactivity, contribute to civic education, inform policies and thereby make public policy making processes more transparent, accountable and legitimate. However, the e-democracy rationale is based on three gross assumptions. First, it assumes that placing the above constellation of actors (citizens, representatives, experts) in consultative settings will by default result in both representatives and the represented listening and learning from each other. It further assumes that effectual deliberative exchanges between politicians and citizens occur and that asymmetry of power and expertise vested in these interactions will not surface and stand in the way. Lastly, it presupposes that through civic inclusion, policies will actually be better. Using evidence from literature as well as e-consultation practice, the following section critically evaluates these underlying assumptions and discusses the realities facing e-consultations vis-à-vis their normative aspirations.

Cost effectiveness and functional benefits

Existing literature and research (though still in its inchoate stages) is cautious when evaluating the value-added(s) of e-consultations. On the one hand, it confirms that on-line consultations do offer functional benefits such as process facilitation, cost-effectiveness and expediency to both governments and citizens (Tolbert and Mossberger, 2006). When compared to e-mail or mail-in replies for example, e-consultations have enabled policy makers to analyze responses faster and allow more efficient sharing of information among participants (Defra, UK: 2004). Commitment to the usage of e-consultations at policy level is also gaining ground as authorities at all levels of government are resorting to their use. In response to the increasing pressure since the 1990s to adopt new approaches to emphasise citizen involvement both upstream and downstream in decision making (OECD, 2001), the opening of policy making processes to the scrutiny of civic inclusion is a fairly new phenomenon. In this sense, it can be argued that the use of e-consultations by governments has contributed to the emergence of a new practice in citizen-government relations and public policy making. However, the question still remains, to what effect?

Deliberation

When the performance of e-consultations is evaluated in view of its deliberation, mutual learning and policy impact effects, the results (so far) are more precarious. As noted earlier, proponents envisioned that e-consultations will not only improve the frequency of government-citizen interactions but also their quality. According to a UK study (Coleman and Ross, 2002), which evaluated ten completed e-consultations, effective deliberative discourse among participants failed to materialize. Instead of forming more rational, informed and factually based arguments, most participants' contributions and exchanges involved opinion-based statements. The e-consultation environment thus failed to provide a more conducive environment for deliberation than its off-line counterparts (Ibid).

In contrast to these findings, Jensen's (2003) research found that in structured political e-forums participants are more prone to better justify their claims and are more serious about their participation. Structural aspects such as the use of moderators (Hurrell, 2005), requirements for self-identification as opposed to anonymity (Janssen and Kies, 2005: 321), the provision of relevant, user friendly orientation materials before e-consultations and a code of (discursive) conduct, have additionally shown to improve conditions conducive to deliberation. Janssen and Kies (Ibid.) further observed that in e-settings where participants thought they would have an impact on the discussions and where issues were linked to participants' everyday lives, participants were "more ready and willing" to spend time in elaborating and justifying their claims and engage more actively. In view of these observations it can be argued that the mere holding of public consultations on-line without the relevant structural adaptations will not guarantee better conditions for deliberation as initially assumed.

Raising false expectations

In addition to the mixed findings on deliberation effects, others have observed that though political institutions' use of e-consultations has become more widespread and sophisticated over time, the quality of meaningful interactions between the government and citizens via these new instruments has not (Löfgren et al. 1999; Coleman and Gøtze 2001). Officials' failure to actively participate in the e-consultations they launch (Coleman and Ross, 2002) and this undermines the expected dynamics of mutual learning and reciprocity. Arbitrary (if any) practice of reporting back to citizens on how their inputs were incorporated as policy advice is an issue most countries are still grappling with (Gøtze, 2001; Hurrell, 2005). The speed and convenience of on-line consultations equally serves as a double edge sword as it generates expectations of quicker feedback from the government and continued participation in respective initiatives. While most e-consultation websites acknowledge peoples' inputs through automated responses, what happens to peoples' policy recommendations once inside the "belly of the beast" is less transparent (BBC, Coleman, 2007).

Insufficient post-consultation structural readiness

The UK government for example has been very successful in launching the *10 Downing St. e-petitions* initiative and stimulating civic participation by receiving signatures from over three million UK citizens (approximately 7% of the British population). By e-participation standards this rate of participation is commendable. However, due to the fact that petitions do not currently have a constitutional grounding, the expectation raised by the initiative – that petitions filed will influence debates in the House of Commons - is misleading. In effect, this well-intended initiative merely provides an online alternative through which citizens can express their complaints and preferences more expeditiously. It also opens a dialogue and a sense of accountability, however limited, between the government and the citizens. At the same time, the current structure leaves little room for guaranteeing "a direct line of causation from a petition to a policy change" (BBC News, 2007).

Similarly, the EU Commission – a proactive user of e-consultations -- is equally struggling to identify a process through which inputs generated during e-consultations could be effectively integrated into its policy proposals. Though the heads of EC directorates receive regular reports with citizens' recommendations, a systematic mechanism for processing and reporting back on what is done with the information is still lacking (Boucher, 2008). The European Parliament, however, is more prepared in this regard. Recommendations arising from the *Citizens' Agoras*, "serve not only MEPs in their own reflection but are also brought to the attention of Parliament's committees and/or the other European Union institutions concerned" (www.europarl.europa.eu). For processing petitions, the EP has a standing committee and formally specified set of procedures under Rule 192 in the *Rules and Procedures of the European Parliament*. The effectiveness of this process, however, would require more thorough verification and research.

In view of the above observations (though in dire need of stronger, future empirical backup), if institutions and their representatives a) fail to fully participate and b) do not have the relevant structures in place to effectively report on the way civic inputs (they invite) are channelled as policy advice into the policy-making process then justifications for e-consultations being a meaningful participatory tool tread on thin ground. In other words, if

citizens' preferences are not taken into account in *actual terms* toward policy outcomes then the very exercise of providing such opportunities for interest articulation are futile (Dahl, 1989).

These considerations lead some skeptics to question the extent to which governments' on-line initiatives serve more as political "presentations" (Margolis and Resnick, 2000: 17) or marketing "showcases" (Bentivegna, 2002: 58) rather than genuine attempts to improve the quality of their engagement with citizens. Others warn against political tokenism "where politicians *tokenistically* adopt all kinds of e-initiatives, such as online consultations and discussion fora, but retain existing structures of policy formation, so that the public's input is 'worked around' by powerfully entrenched institutions. Engaging the public in policy-making, they explain, is a transformative process comprising a model of two-way governance which is incompatible with a political culture of bureaucratic elitism" (Coleman and Gøtze, 2001). Margolis and Resnick (2000) further diffuse e-enthusiasts' optimism by arguing that e-participation initiatives have so far failed to be the locus of new politics in revitalizing citizenship and democracy. Instead, ordinary politics in all their complexity and vitality have colonized virtual reality by making it "resemble the real world". E-participation initiatives have therefore attributed nothing 'new', but rather preserve the top-down *politics as usual*.

Offering a more measured approach, Bimber (1999) points to a transitional, incremental and soft rather than revolutionary effect of e-initiatives in the political arena. He argues that as availability, skills and familiarity with new technologies increase, so will the positive distribution of their impact. Following Bimber's explanation, the current missing links in the way e-consultations are handled could then be attributed also to their novelty. Rather than pursuing symbolic tokenism, political hosts may in fact have genuine intentions in hosting e-consultations but are as yet inexperienced in setting up proper institutional structures and mechanisms to manage the full process.

Inclusion vs. better policies and decision-making

The third assumption presumed by e-consultation enthusiasts is that institutionalising civic inclusion in policy making will by default make the respective policies better. But what is exactly meant by 'better' policies and how can the 'better' be effectively measured? Habermas contends that the growing need to open up the policy and decision making processes to citizens' participation is a countermeasure to the emergence of pluralism and a solution to the 'problem of legitimation'. However, legitimacy, he argues, can only spring from a democratic process that grounds a reasonable presumption for the rational acceptability of outcomes (2005: 386). In other words, *better* here can be taken to mean more procedurally legitimate processes via the inclusion of civic voices and facilitation of transparency in public policy making. However, in Habermas' view, the legitimacy of a democratic process can only be boosted if the outputs (i.e. civic inputs) of the leading process are accepted. Not rhetorically or symbolically, but *rationally*. This further raises the question, does citizens' engagement in e-consultations in the form of discussions and formulation of recommendations, but with the ambiguity of what is done with such inputs, contribute to policy legitimation? Or alternatively, can e-consultations without policy impact satisfy conditions for meaningful on-line participation?

In addition to the question of impact, and without going too much into rhetorical polemics, the normative pretexts for e-consultations, whether effectiveness is desired and how tokenism is to be prevented, requires further unpacking and specification. How much participation is enough, by whom and for what measurable effect in order to satisfy the conditions of procedural legitimacy? When can we conclude that meaningful civic participation has taken place?

4 Evaluating the impact of E-consultations

The last set of questions raises another question we have still not asked - what determines whether an e-consultation is successful? This question can be also rephrased -- what impact do e-consultations have on the political processes they intend to affect?

The conceptualization and measurement of e-consultations' success or impact on political participation and policy making, however, has been unfortunately limited (Coleman and Gøtze, 2001). Assessments of e-democracy initiatives, not to mention of e-consultations, have not developed as quickly as public and academic debates about their potential benefits (Whyte and MacIntosh, 2002). In practice, the focus has been more on evaluating the procedural 'how tos' than on e-consultation 'thereafters'. Though more conceptual work validated by empirical research is still needed, the following section offers four possible considerations when evaluating e-consultations: the classical cost-benefit assessment, soft vs. hard impacts, participation from within or outside the system, and, lastly, realistic expectations due to complexity of the policy making process.

Cost-benefit assessment involving objectives versus outcomes analysis is one classical tool for various evaluations. While for simpler and smaller scale e-consultations conducted at the local level this may be an effective tool, for large-scale consultations which involve multiple activities simultaneously targeting multi-level outcomes and objectives such analysis may prove to be more challenging to execute. Because consultations concern social processes, involve human beings and occur on-line, a more comprehensive set of considerations need to be taken into account. Smith (2008) for example proposes a benefit-stakeholder approach where, in addition to instrumental cost-benefit analysis, who benefits, short-term/long-term benefits, and political culture (do e-consultations travel well across cultures?) elements are considered. Meanwhile Janssen and Kies (2005) identified more diffusion oriented indicators such as the visibility of consultations in greater public space by allowing media coverage of the consultation.

Tracing the extent to which civic inputs have altered initial policy intentions is another way of evaluating the impact of e-consultations. However, some would argue – namely proponents of deliberation and civic (democratic) education - that impact on policy is not entirely necessary. There are valuable benefits other than impact on policies to be gained in the process. Attitudinal changes and shifts in participants' preferences as a result of becoming better informed are valuable outcomes of well designed deliberations (Fishkin, 1991). Taking part in deliberation where interactive social learning and exposure to new perspectives which citizens may not have obtained otherwise, in this sense, constitute an end in itself. These *soft* (rather than *hard* policy) impacts are seen to contribute to civic mindedness, better understanding of public issues, and to citizens making better choices (Habermas, 1984; Gutmann and Thomson, 2004; Dryzek, 2000).

Deliberation and direct democracy purists, however, disagree with the above contentions. According to them, deliberation in political settings is in principle impossible. For citizens to wield impact through institutional channels linked to state or economic interests is futile. In *formal* spaces where public representatives, experts and citizens interact, relations are inherently asymmetric in authority, expertise, access and leverage to effectively influence decision-making. This associational asymmetry arises in discursive exchanges where conflicting power interests collide and distort communication dynamics in favour of those with power. Deliberation comprised of free exchanges of moral-practical arguments among equals, in formal environments, tends to turn into power vested negotiation and bargaining (Habermas, 2005: 388). Citizens, being on the lower end of the pecking order of power and expertise, not only tend to assume more passive and submissive participatory role in such settings (Button and Mattson, 1999: 625-626) but also come out on the losing side in their capacity to wield influence.

Proponents of institutionalised forms of participation, on the other hand, contend that citizens can be empowered to wield influence and bring about public accountability from within the system. Deliberative interactions are important inside the system as they “can encourage citizens and their representatives to invoke substantive standards to understand, revise, resolve moral conflicts in politics” (Gutmann and Thompson, 2000: 161) and thereby make improvements to the political system. Though participation from within or outside the political system is a perennial question in democratic theory, it is nonetheless an important question to ask when designing e-consultations. What is the optimal way through which public voices can be heard, effective participation attained and how can it exert the relevant amount of pressure on policy and decision making processes?

The *complexity of the policy making process* is another important factor worth considering when casting expectations about what e-consultations *should* and *can* deliver. The lack of feedback on what happens to the policy inputs is one thing and can be fixed. Better reporting after the consultations, and/or the setting of clear and realistic expectations at their beginning for all involved, are two possible solutions. However, the substantive effects of civic inputs on policies are more difficult if not impossible to isolate, even when inputs would be genuinely taken into account by policy makers. A policy making chain involves many steps, stakeholders, budgetary considerations, conceptual complexity, moral conflict, and an inescapable uncertainty about the wisdom of final judgments (Gastil, 2000). All of these intervene in different stages of the policy making process and influence the final policy text. Due to the fact that most e-consultations feature in the beginning stages of agenda setting or proposal formulation stage means that they may undergo a series of modifications. This needs to be explained to participants to prevent unrealistic expectations.

5 Conclusion

Though e-consultations are being increasingly experimented with in political institutional arenas, existing evidence is too nebulous, mostly qualitative and inconclusive about our understanding of e-consultations' effects on the policy process and the extent to which they generate 'meaningful' civic engagement. The field's research novelty is one of the reasons for this. At the same time, the novelty of citizens being invited to the

policy-making table does contribute to the creation of interactive spaces between political institutions and citizens unknown before.

There is less evidence, however, that e-consultations impact reciprocal (government-citizen) learning and policy outputs. Citizens' policy recommendations emerging from e-consultative processes tend to be poorly recognised and are ambiguously integrated in decision making. Feedback on what happens to civic inputs is seldom given. In this sense, the transparency and accountability to be gained from such experiences is undermined. Instead, a politically correct trend of procedurally including citizens in policy processes is proliferated in which citizens are invited to the policy-making table and are consulted, but the extent to which institutions 'learn' and take citizens' inputs seriously in the process is uncertain. Arguably then, e-consultations resemble more facades for political correctness than new meaningful opportunities for civic engagement. However, to fully validate these observations, more empirical, qualitative and comparative research of different e-participatory initiatives over time needs to be undertaken.

Some lessons can also be drawn. By simply hosting e-consultations, it cannot be assumed that legitimacy, transparency and accountability will be automatically achieved. Setting clear, realistic objectives and expectations, and communicating them to all parties concerned is necessary in the planning stages of e-consultation initiatives. Political willingness, political listening, clearly formulated purpose and objectives, effective institutional preparedness and designated lines of authority for processing and responding to inputs, are all essential for effectively implementing e-consultations initiatives (Clift, 2004).

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