

IMPACT OF WEB 2.0 ON POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

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Abstract. This article gives an overview of how political players and governmental institutions in the USA, UK, Germany and Switzerland adapt and institutionalize Web 2.0 applications to increase political participation and counter the progressive abstinence of people from political processes.

1. Introduction

An increasing number of political players are harnessing the technological potential of Web 2.0 for a broad range of political participation. At the same time a growing number of governmental institutions are implementing web-based media in their attempt to reduce transaction costs and counter the increasing abstinence of people from political processes.

In this context, Web 2.0 can be defined as a set of innovative technologies, applications and values that have the potential to support online participation [1]. The adaptation of Web 2.0 applications is based on the fact that they can be used at no or only little cost, require less and less technical skills and enable the user to actively broadcast to many other users. Some examples of Web 2.0 applications are social networking sites like Facebook, corporate or personal blogs, sharing sites like YouTube or wikis like Wikipedia.

These preconditions and the aim of political actors to increase political participation have resulted in a variety of e-participation projects. In this paper we will take a closer look at some of these existing practices⁴ to answer the question how Web 2.0 impacts political participation.

The results are part of an ongoing research project. Within the scope of the project we address the issue from different points of view.

2. Top-down and bottom-up e-participation projects

The OECD defines that democratic political participation must involve the means to be informed, the mechanisms to take part in the decision-making and the ability to contribute and influence the policy agenda [2]. E-participation projects enable this participation online.

When examining the Web 2.0 landscape according to its political potential to add value to democratic political participation, the relevant sites can be divided into two main categories: The ones that are built or owned top-down by official political actors such as governments, parliaments or administrations and the ones built or owned bottom-up by citizens.

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⁴Practices on national level of the USA, UK, G (these countries are within the top 20 countries in the UN e-participation index) and CH.

Next to the categorization in top-down and bottom-up sites, e-participation platforms can also be distinguished by the level of user participation. Osimo [1] describes four types of Web 2.0 usage i.e. levels of participation: producing content (which makes about 3% of all internet users), providing ratings and reviews (which makes about 10% of all internet users), using user generated content (which makes about 40% of all internet user) and a more passive role of those who do not deliberately want to use Web 2.0 applications, but still provide input that is transformed to service for other users.

Important to note: Web 2.0 applications enable the exploitation of the activity and knowledge of active as well as passive users. This means that political actors could even build innovative services based on the engagement of the more passive users. For example, reading an article on a website could provide input for the "most read" section of the site [1].

In the following chapters a selection of representative top-down and bottom-up e-participation platforms, will be presented according to their role in democratic political participation.

2.1 Top-down information and transparency creation

By making governmental information accessible on their websites, administrations comply with the democratic need of transparency. Information is delivered in different facets and on different topics.

According to a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, 48% of internet users in the US have looked for information about a public policy or issue online with their local, state or federal government and 46% have looked up what services a government agency provides [3]. The governmental website number10.gov reveals that in 2010 the site had already a monthly average of 706,273 unique users [4]. This fact indicates the interest of citizens in such information.

New attempts of informational openness, however, go even further than just providing processed information by promoting the "open government". The American and British governments have opened thousands of machine readable federal datasets to the public on their open data portals⁵. The goal of these platforms, besides more transparency, is the promotion of innovation, competition and economical effectivity [5].

User statistics provided by the American data.gov portal reveal, that since the launch of the portal in 2009 over 1,7 m visitors came to the site and 652,412 documents were downloaded. This has resulted in a variety of new applications and mashups created by citizens and third parties without having to wait for governments to structure the information [6].

2.2 Top-down contact with the electorate

Although almost all administrations worldwide have an online presence, only few of them provide Web 2.0 tools and applications to interact with citizens or allow them to give feedback. In this respect the executive administrations of the United Kingdom and USA do a good job, figuring worldwide among the top 6 on the UN e-participation performing index [7]. British and American governmental portals⁶ go as far as to aggregate different Web 2.0 applications such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or Flickr to strengthen the community. This

⁵<http://www.data.gov/>; <http://data.gov.uk/>

⁶<http://my.barackobama.com/>; <http://www.number10.gov.uk/>

signals the will to give all citizens different forms of participation tools to stay connected and embed them in different levels of participation.

However, the mere provision of Web 2.0 tools and applications does not account for more political participation. But here again a survey by the Pew Research Center concludes that citizens are actually using Web 2.0 technology for a more direct contact with their representatives. It states, that 15% of internet users watched a video on a governmental website, 13% of internet users read the blog of a government agency or official, 5% of internet users followed or became a fan of a government agency or official on a social networking site and 2% of internet users followed a government agency or official on Twitter [3].

Statistics provided by the UK governmental website number10.gov support the findings that citizens do use the provided tools, at least for information seeking. Number10.gov has 1,7 m followers on Twitter, by 4 of May 2010 their Flickr photos were viewed 1,216,833 times and on November 2009 their YouTube video views passed the 4 m mark. It is important to note that remarkable political actions increase traffic on such websites. On 12 March 2010, for example, French President Sarkozy visited Downing Street No 10. On this day 150,000 visitors came to the website, which was the peak of the month [4].

Efforts to attract people to the website have to be undertaken constantly. A comparison of March and April figures shows a drop of users of almost 60% because advertising on the website, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr was restricted in April in with the guidelines for periods of General Elections [4].

Besides seeking information, citizens also take a more active role. 23% of the surveyed internet users in the US have "contributed to the online debate around government issues" for example by posting a comment on a governmental social networking fan page or blog, uploading a video or commenting on a governmental issue [3].

German and British governments also allow for a more active role and transparency with their e-petition system⁷ thus giving the citizens a campaign tool. These governments provide online tools which allow the petitioner to make his petitions public for other citizens who can sign them online [8]. There are some remarkable cases where these online services managed to mobilize large masses: One of the biggest petitions in Germany against censorship in the Internet, for example, was signed by 134,000 people. The mobilization of people to sign the e-petition can be seen as a signal of an evolving movement of "Digital Natives", ready to fight for a political cause with other instruments than the classical political ones; a movement that normally would not participate in the traditional party-guided political process [9].

Statistics from the British e-petition system show that in the first year over 29,000 petitions had been submitted and over 5.8 million signatures, originating from over 3.9 million different email addresses, were collected [10]. The amount of signatures has since risen to over 10 million [11].

Although the site can be called quite popular, high medial popularity and the positive quantitative participation rate are not matched by the quality of the petitions. Often the tool was used for mere protest and real deliberation was missing [12]. Furthermore, "one of the biggest problems with the Number10 e-petition scheme is that it bypasses parliament,

⁷<https://epetitionen.bundestag.de/>; <http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/>

meaning that there is little obligation to follow through on the campaigns raised" [11]. Also the German system, although acclaimed, faces some criticism concerning security, effectivity and usability [13].

2.3 Bottom-up encouragement of political discussion

In the US blogs have become a relevant source of political information. They have established themselves as a more or less independent power along mass media [14]. Some of the popular political blogs are The Huffington Post or Dailykos⁸.

In contrast to the US, in European countries the political blogosphere is less influential, popular and active, at least so in Switzerland and Germany. This could have different reasons: Schmidt points out that the relationship between parties and individual political candidates is different in the US than it is in Germany. Also the pressure to find and mobilize followers and financial resources for political campaigns is much bigger in the US. This again fosters personalized websites [15].

Political blogs do not only induce political participation by informing the citizens, they also allow for deeper participation by offering comment functionalities, herewith giving voice to a wider public opinion. Moreover, a survey of blog readers suggests that blog readers are involved in a range of participatory activities, both online and offline, such as attending a political meeting or sending an email to a politician [16].

2.4 Bottom-up monitoring of authorities and politicians

There are some remarkable examples of bottom-up initiatives which generate transparency and facilitate responsiveness of politicians. Online examples for such initiatives are the American website PolitiFact⁹ or the German website abgeordnetenwatch¹⁰. On PolitiFact reporters and researchers from The Times rate the accuracy of statements of political actors on a Truth-O-Meter and look at the constancy of public officials. Further, they keep track of more than 500 promises the President made and rate their progress on the Obameter [17].

The goal of abgeordnetenwatch is to systematically provide the political profile of politicians and representatives. Some volunteers have started this project in 2004 for the parliament of Hamburg. Two years later, in 2006, the platform has been extended with information from the national parliament (Bundestag), and there is tight cooperation with the German government. According to the website 400,000 visitors per month are counted. The politicians, too, can profit from the platform. It is a simple and economic means of engaging in public relations to strengthen their profile and publish their political positions and opinions [18]. This project can be compared with other international projects such as writetothem, hearfromyourmp, theyworkforyou and direktzurkanzlerin¹¹. But this platform is more than a mere information database. It also allows citizens to address questions to their representatives, or just rate the answers given by the representatives who normally don't hesitate to answer back. Because the dialogue is also published on the website, it generates more transparency and accountability

⁸ <http://www.dailykos.com/>; <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/>

⁹ <http://www.politifact.com/>

¹⁰ <http://www.abgeordnetenwatch.de/>

¹¹ <http://www.writetothem.com/>; <http://www.hearfromyourmp.com/>; <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/>;
<http://www.direktzurkanzlerin.de/>

since the politicians' answers are binding [19]. Furthermore, the platform allows to monitor representatives voting behaviors and their engagement in additional businesses.

In Switzerland information about political candidates can be found on the voting application advice smartvote¹². The platform gives voters some degree of orientation about the political profile of each candidate and helps them to make their final decision about which candidate or party they should vote for. A study conducted in 2009 points out that of the 375,000 smartvote users almost "40% declared that the use of smartvote had a decisive or at least slight influence on their decision to go to the polls"[20]. Furthermore, smartvote could in some cases improve the information basis of its users and motivate them to engage in discussions about political issues, political candidates and parties.

2.5 Bottom-up formation of pressure groups

Platforms such as MoveOn, Avaaz, in the US or Campact in Germany¹³ gained a lot of members and are successfully organizing campaigns with remarkable political impact. Moreover these new types of organizations, which have established themselves along traditional media-, party- and NGO systems, allow citizens to participate in political causes [21].

These campaigning websites usually communicate via email. Newsletters are sent to the activists to inform them about new actions and campaigns and the different possibilities to participate (petitions, demonstrations, etc.). But the newsletters are not only sent to mobilize and inform their members, they are also meant to be spread to other potential activists.

The success of these campaigning platforms can be defined in different ways:

First, the ability to acquire members, maintain them and keep them active. MoveOn and Avaaz note up to 5 m members each. The German counterpart Campact can rely on more than 200,000 members which is a remarkable basis to start campaigns. However, these figures have to be interpreted with caution, since it is not clear how many of the members are actually active. These sites build long-term commitment by embedding different Web 2.0 tools into the main platform. Best practices are Twitter or Facebook. Via these tools friends of friends are mobilized to register on the platform and so generate a viral growth. Furthermore, friendships, which are cultivated on other platforms, can be continued on the platform, which dramatically enhances the community-idea. In addition (automatically generated) these sites keep the community active by recommending members to connect with other members (with same interests or same domicile) on the platform.

Second, the option of different levels of participation. Normally, users can sign e-petitions, donate small amounts of money, send e-mails to representatives or just rate, share and tag articles they read. These are easy online activities users can perform with barely any effort. There is also the possibility to participate in offline activities, such as demonstrations. However, far less members participate in offline activities. In the case of MoveOn this is 10-20% of the members. Interestingly, these are not composed of core activists but of rotating first timers [22].

Third, the ability to influence the political agenda when windows of opportunities open up. In the case of Campact, before mobilizing them, they ask their members if the issue is of any

¹²www.smartvote.ch

¹³<http://www.moveon.org/>; <http://avaaz.org/en/>; <http://www.care2.com/>; <http://www.campact.de/campact/home>

interest and if they would participate. If 1,000 or more members affirm, action is taken. So the agenda is really set from below. Furthermore, campaigns are only organized for topics which are currently on the political agenda and the mobilization of citizens can potentially change the political result. This happens mainly when the public opinion does not correspond to the way government is expected to act [21]. However, although these kinds of pressure groups could influence the political agenda, at this point we cannot say how many actions actually were successful.

Generally spoken, bottom-up organizations are more creative in the implementation of Web 2.0 tools for community building and campaigning and therefore pushing interaction between members. As shown before, the American and British governments are adopting a lot from these movements to build a more institutionalized way of participation. Bottom-up organizations thus serve as a role model for the diffusion of innovation from the peripherals of society to the very center of governmental authority.

In Switzerland there is as yet no single well established platform which would encourage political participation. The Swiss government is still evaluating how to implement e-participation forms in the long-term. However, there are a lot of bottom-up ad hoc campaigns, organized with Web 2.0 tools, which can be termed as successful.

One example is the viral video campaign Tagesnews¹⁴, organized by the young sections of the main centrist and left political parties (Junge FDP, Junge SP, Junge CVP), for which an already existing video from the Obama election campaign in the US¹⁵ served as role model. The campaigners wanted to mobilize people to vote for the freedom of movement and residence between Swiss and European citizens (Personenfreizügigkeit)

The idea was to do this in a viral, funny and modern way. So they created a video showing a fake scene of the daily TV evening news. On this scene one would see a demonstration against the one person, who did abstain from voting. The surprising component of this fake video was that every citizen could send it to its friends and type in the respective friend's name. This name would then appear in the video on top of a banner held by the demonstrating people.

A mere 20 hours after launch, already 7,000 email addresses were registered. 70 percent of the viewers came across the video via Facebook. In the end, when mass media had reported about the campaign, 800,000 people had watched the video.

Main factors for success were on the one hand the use of Facebook to start the campaign, the prominent face of a former TV news anchor and the fact that the boulevard newspaper Blick had reported about and linked to the video after a few days. Later, other mass media reported about the story, too.

3. Conclusion

We have looked at some promising initiatives top-down as well as bottom-up that harness the Web for political participation. They either promote information and transparency or allow for campaigning and community building.

¹⁴<http://www.tagesnews.com/>

¹⁵<http://www.cnnbcvideo.com/taf.shtml?hp=1>

It is not the mere provision of Web 2.0 applications that impacts political participation. However, by looking at web statistics it can be concluded that Web 2.0 applications are indeed being used for political purposes. Citizens participate and stay informed by reading news provided by their governments, subscribing to newsletters on campaigning and community building platforms like Avaaz.org or informing themselves about their representatives on platforms like abgeordnetenwatch. Statistics of the illustrated platforms further suggest that citizens are also interested in participating in a more active role, for example by signing an e-petition, sending an email to a politician, rating/tagging an article, donating small amounts of money, commenting on a blog, write to a representative, use open data or take part in an offline campaigning activity. However, activities which ask for a more active role of the user are performed by far less users than activities which require only a low level of participation.

In some cases these activities have a positive impact on political participation. For example, using a voting advice application such as smartvote, can lead the user to actually vote for the recommended candidate. Further, online activities can in certain cases impose new forms of political pressure, for example the e-petition against censorship on the internet in Germany or some campaigning successes from Campact. Yet at this point we have no evidence how often this kind of pressure evolves. It seems that only politically controversial issues could mobilize masses of users.

An overall precondition for participation is, however, an active community management by the providers of the platforms. Users tend to drift away fast as soon as no new information is provided on the platform. This happened in the case of number10.gov during the general elections, when advertising on the different Web 2.0 applications was restricted and visitor numbers dropped by about 60%.

An in-depth systematic analysis and comparison of the available platforms and their long-term contribution to democratic values has still to be undertaken. In our further research we will therefore try to address some of the following questions: How extensively are the different tools used by the citizens? By whom are they used in particular? Who provides them? Do they manage to address new groups of citizens which up to now abstained from participation? And what are the criteria which make these tools attractive and successful to improve the quality of democracy? And of course: We need to know much more about the users of these tools. This information can be gathered both by analyzing their activities on the websites and by user surveys.

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