

Internet and Democracy

Module 3- Tech-Policy Initiatives in Advanced Democracies

I-Voting in Estonia

The discussion on the proposal of Internet voting (i-voting) in Estonia began around 2001 when the ministry of Justice announced the intentions to introduce e-voting in the country. The main objectives behind this project was to build user friendly and effective public sector mechanism with the help of ICT and to stop the decreasing participation in political activities by making elections more attractive and accessible for the people living outside the country.

The debates in parliament on this issue covered both technological issues and ideological concerns. I-Voting in Estonia began in local level elections in 2005 and it was later on implemented in Elections for both National Parliament and European Parliament.

The long term objective of introducing e-voting in Estonia was to make elections more cost effective. But a number of expensive pre-requisite arrangements were needed such as public key infrastructure and authentication of digital signature. It also required legal framework and technological solutions.

I-Voting in Estonia

In this system, the Estonian voters are allowed to cast their ballots from any Internet connected device from any corner of the world. It is different from all other models of electronic voting being used in other countries and it is more cost effective and less complicated.

The voters can cast their vote by log in into the system with the details of their ID card. The identity of the voter is automatically removed before it reaches for counting to maintain the principle of secrecy and anonymity.

To ensure that voters are not forced to vote for any specific person or party in the absence of supervisory authority, the voters have been allowed to vote any number of times in the pre-voting period. The last vote is considered as the final vote for counting.

Digital Democracy Commission- UK (2015)

- The DDC was set up by the Speaker of House of Commons to recommend the framework and targets of digitalization of Parliamentary activities to enhance people's participation in legislative procedures. It aimed to register the modern day expectations of the people from the representative democratic system and found that “digital is only part of the answer.”
- “Over the past 25 years we have lived through a revolution – created by the birth of the world wide web and the rapid development of digital technology. This digital revolution has disrupted old certainties and challenged representative democracy at its very heart. With social media sources such as Twitter, blogs and 24/7 media, the citizen has more sources of information than ever before, yet citizens appear to operate at a considerable distance from their representatives and appear ‘disengaged’ from democratic processes. The jargon and practices of the House can be alienating and the sheer weight of information about politics, now available, can act as a wall, keeping the citizen out of the mysterious world of Westminster.”

Digital Democracy Commission- UK (2015)

It identified a number of barriers in people's engagement with Parliament.

- First is the lack of understanding about how the Parliament functions and how one can participate in it.
- Second was the complicated legal language used in Parliamentary activities that most of the people are not able to understand.
- Third was the difficulties people face in finding the information they are looking for on government websites.
- Fourth was the growing sentiment of the people about Parliament not being relevant anymore.
- Fifth was the feeling that their voices do not matter for Parliamentarians in the process of policy making.
- Last was the lack of opportunities to be able to involve in the activities of Parliament. The DDC offered a number of recommendations to overcome these barriers.

Digital Democracy Commission- UK (2015)

The DDC outlined five main targets and various recommendations which were supposed to be a route map for the British Parliament to meet these targets:

“By 2020, the House of Commons should ensure that everyone can understand what it does.

By 2020, Parliament should be fully interactive and digital. The newly elected House of Commons should create immediately a new forum for public participation in the debating function of the House of Commons.

By 2020, secure online voting should be an option for all voters.

By 2016, all published information and broadcast footage produced by Parliament should be freely available online in formats suitable for reuse.

The official record of debates in the British parliament should be available as open data by the end of 2015”

Digital Democracy Commission- UK (2015)

The Commission recommended that the website of the British Parliament should use more infographic and visual data as it will help in broadening the access and understanding of the content.

It acknowledged that while intellectual rigour in parliamentary reports and other official documents is essential, it might act as a barrier in people's engagement because of lengthy and complicated structures.

Another significant recommendation of this commission was to make House of Commons fully interactive with a digital model in which people can ask questions to ministers directly and share their views on the provisions of laws under consideration for formation and amendment.

It asked the Select Committees to be more visible and active on social media platforms and invest on online advertisements to make people aware of their work in order to involve the new audiences in policy making processes.

For the citizens who are digitally excluded, it recommended to build local channels of support to engage with the policy makers.

Digital Democracy Commission- UK (2015)

It recommended that “Parliament, working with the Government and other stakeholders, should introduce, by the end of 2016, a new set of online tools for drafting, amending and publishing legislation which are easier to use, and provide open data about bills and amendments.” It was recommended to identify the areas in which a digital-fresh approach can lead to more efficiency and effectiveness.

It proposed the creation of ‘Cyber Chamber’ or ‘Open House’ as a new digital forum for public participation in debates and discussions. It should be followed by the implementation of online voting as an option for all the voters in elections by 2020.

The Commission further emphasized on the need of fresh and bold curriculum on voter education with special focus on profile and knowledge of Election Commission. The Commission asked the Parliament to provide all the published information in downloadable forms by the end of 2015 so that citizens can re-use it for knowledge and research purposes.

It suggested that the definitive guide to parliamentary procedure and the audio-visual coverage of the activities in Parliament should also be made freely available on digital platforms.