

Political participation in the Internet age: factors and conditions

Elmira I. Avzalova

Kazan Federal University, 420008, Kazan, Kremlevskaya St., 18. Department of Political Science,
Russia

Email :global@ores.su

Abstract

The application of the system approach and the structural and functional method allowed the forms of Internet participation of citizens in politics, the main factors and conditions determining the possibility of participation of citizens in politics through the Internet to reveal. As a result, the most important areas of legislative regulation should be the provisions of free dissemination of information, including information on the activities of public authorities. We can conclude that an important condition for Internet participation of citizens in the political process stemming from the peculiarities of the regime is the position of the political elite.

Key words: Internet, communications, participation, political process.

Participación política en la era de internet: factores y condiciones

Resumen

La aplicación del enfoque de sistema y el método estructural y funcional permitieron las formas de participación de los ciudadanos en Internet en la política, los principales factores y condiciones que determinan la posibilidad de participación de los ciudadanos en la política a través de Internet para revelar. Como resultado, las áreas más importantes de la regulación legislativa deben ser las disposiciones de libre difusión de información, incluida la información sobre las actividades de las autoridades públicas. Podemos concluir que una condición importante para la participación de los ciudadanos en Internet en el proceso político derivado de las peculiaridades del régimen es la posición de la élite política.

Palabras clave: Internet, comunicaciones, participación, proceso político.

1. Introduction

The widespread of the Internet is an irreversible trend of the modern world, which has affected all spheres of society, including politics. With the penetration of the Global Network in politics, new channels of communication between government and society appear; new forms of participation of citizens in the political process arise. The participation of the society in the exercise of power is an important attribute of the democratic system; this guarantees the accounting and realization of the interests of citizens, and determines the importance of researching the conditions and factors for the emergence of a new type of political participation - online participation (Internet-participation) that can be defined as a form of political participation through Internet resources.

2. Methods

The theoretical and methodological basis for researching Internet communications in politics is the work of the information society theory founders: (Bell, 1973; Masuda, 1983; Toffler, 1980; Grossman, 1995; Davis, 1999; Morris, 2001; Corrado and Firestone, 1996; Chadwick and May, 2003; Schwartz, 2001). The application of the system approach and the structural and functional method allowed the forms of Internet participation of citizens in politics, the main factors and conditions determining the possibility of participation of citizens in politics through the Internet to reveal. The system method allows considering the political participation of citizens in the Global Network as an integral system influenced by environmental factors and conditions. The structural and functional method was applied to examine the peculiarities of the forms of Internet participation as a set of stable relations and interrelations between the elements of the political system in the conditions of introducing Internet resources. The application of the typological method is conditioned by the need to classify and consider the main forms of Internet participation of citizens in the political process.

3. Results and discussion

Internet participation is a special type of political participation and is characterized by a mobile and relatively organized nature: it overcomes time, geographical and cultural restrictions; group integration is increased irrespective of the place of residence, what allows one to react instantly to emerging political problems. Also, Internet participation makes it possible to involve governmental and non-governmental structures, political parties, political leaders, traditional media, and international organizations to a greater extent in solving important social problems; this contributes to the formation of feedback between public authorities and society.

Modern political practice makes it possible to identify various forms of political participation in the Internet. As Voinov and Pavlyutenkova noted, "Typology of forms of political participation by means of Internet resources can be proposed by analogy with traditional approaches in the theory of political participation for the analysis of political actions in the real political life of citizens" (Voinov and Pavlyutenkova, 2018: 15). Accordingly, researchers identify conventional and nonconventional forms of political participation. Conventional political participation is built in accordance with the rules of law that regulate the participation of people in politics under this regime. Unconventional participation, while remaining within the law, violates these norms and is expressed in direct action, bypassing the system of representation of interests. Voinov and

Pavlyutenkova (2018) refer the following types of activity to the conventional forms of political participation in the Internet:

1. Voting in Internet elections, conferences, referendums;
2. Creating and replicating political information through blogs, websites, online newspapers, etc.;
3. Fund raising in support of a party or movement;
4. Participation in discussion of political problems in blogs, on websites, in teleconferences of political parties (movements), Internet communities, and public authorities.

Unconventional forms include:

1. Hacker attacks to websites of citizens, portals of state authorities, political parties, and others;
2. Political provocations as black PR technologies (creation of sites-clones, distribution of knowingly false information).

According to researchers, political protest should be singled out among the forms of political activity of citizens in virtual space, excluding political violence in contrast to nonconventional forms.

Another criterion for etymologizing the forms of Internet participation in politics is the criterion of institutionalization. Institutionalized forms of Internet participation include formalized and organized types of Internet participation of citizens in the process of making political and managerial decisions. Such forms are characterized by the defined rules and norms of behavior. In the countries advanced from the point of view of informatization, such forms can be directly embedded in the decision-making process of public authorities. The non-institutionalized forms may include self-governing and self-organizing forms of Internet participation, in which there is no regulation of standards of conduct. As a rule, non-institutionalized forms arise spontaneously, as a quick response to current political events. Based on the criteria of institutionalization, it is possible to propose the following independent typology of forms concerning Internet participation of citizens. The institutionalized forms of political participation in the Internet include:

- 1) Internet voting (elections, referendums, online conferences, Internet surveys). An example of the successful use of the Internet in the electoral process are the e-voting systems in the UK, Estonia, Brazil, the Philippines, intended for conducting interactive elections via the Internet.
- 2) Legislative initiatives, petitions, appeals, participation in the drafting of political decisions, political programs, local budgets (for example, the project Russian public initiative is an Internet resource created to locate citizens' initiatives and vote on them);
- 3) Creation of sites, blogs, chats, forums, online newspapers and magazines with a political focus;
- 4) Virtual congresses of parties, and also teleconferences. For example, during the presidential election in the USA in 2000, nearly 600,000 people visited the sites of two candidates during congresses of the Republican and Democratic parties in the United States.

Among non-institutionalized forms, one can distinguish:

- 1) Mobilization of citizens for political actions through flash mobs, rallies of protest or support, or strikes. Internet communications have become a tool for mass action in Moldova, Iran, Egypt, and Tunisia;
- 2) Hacker attacks on websites and portals of state authorities, political parties, citizens, and also cyberterrorism;

3) Political provocations and activities aimed at worsening the image of political actors.

Thus, political Internet communications between a state and society become the determining conditions for political participation. However, for the success of the development of networked civic activity, special conditions and factors must exist. One should understand that the factors determining the effectiveness of Internet participation of citizens in politics are the driving forces, the reasons that determine the nature of Internet participation, that is, the factors which answer the question why, for what purpose are citizens participating in the political process via the Internet? The key factors that determine the Internet participation of citizens in politics are the interests of the main actors of the political process. Interest of citizens is conditioned by the desire to achieve account and implementation of their interests in decisions of public authorities, and also distrust of representative bodies, officials and the institution of elections. The interest of public authorities is due to the objective process of complicating the organization of socio-political structures requiring the introduction of new effective channels of interaction both between departments and citizens (for example, to provide public services with the least time, material and bureaucratic costs), the desire to organize dialogue forms of communications with citizens to ensure public support and effective decision-making.

Factors should be distinguished from the conditions - the circumstances that determine the possibility of Internet participation of citizens in the political process (what influences the possibility of such participation?). Researchers identify various circumstances that may limit the implementation of the positive potential offered by political Internet communications. Golovko (2018) draws attention to the problem of information inequality: for example, only 5% of the population has computers in their personal property. In addition, one of the most important problems in modern and (especially) Russian society is the low computer literacy of the population. Indeed, the World Wide Web in Russia has a relatively small audience: the main Internet users, including recipients of electronic public services, are groups of certain age, usually they belong to the urban population. Despite high growth rates, the Internet does not cover most of all possible consumers, especially those with low incomes. A researcher Toffler and Future (1970) focuses attention on the disunity of state information resources. Foreign researchers also distinguish political costs: the loss of the image by politicians or public authorities in case of failure, problems related to the lack of coherence between the goals of different organizations, as well as the personal interests of employees of these structures.

Considering the peculiarities of the Internet, Lizin (2018) points out to a number of factors that limit the communitarian prospects of the virtual community:

- Anonymity (this most important attribute of Internet communications) by its very nature is an unfavorable environment for the growth of such communal qualities as mutual trust, mutual respect, and mutual responsibility;
- Social pressure is an intangible normative resource of face-to-face communication, which plays an important role in the development of social solidarity and responsibility of members of the real community. The underlying mechanisms of striving for encouragement and avoiding condemnation do not have a direct link to the content of information exchange between individuals, and are largely irrational;
- Instability of relationships, the absolute ease of changing the circle of communication, the churn of the personal composition of virtual communities as opposed to real communities, the fluidity of which composition has natural geographical and institutional constraints.

The weak development of leadership in political Internet communications is noted as one of the problems of the introduction and functioning of this area. The introduction of e-government systems into the policy of Internet communications and e-government systems based on them is fairly considered in foreign literature as a process of transforming traditional institutions of power. Now it becomes clear that e-government is much more than just a matter of communication: on the contrary, it implies the transformation of the government corresponding to our usual understanding. Indeed, the introduction of new network political communications may require the reorganization of the existing system of power relations. Such a transformation cannot be achieved by the state apparatus alone. To do this, a strong leadership, which is committed to this idea and competent in these matters at the political level is needed. We can say that the use of Internet communications in politics requires not even a single leader, but a cohesive group of professionals who are experts in this field. To achieve full-scale operation of new technologies, at all levels and branches of governmental power there should be such statesmen who not only realize the importance and value of new technology, but also are determined to actively and fully implement reforms.

It must be recognized that the introduction of Internet communications and overall political modernization are impossible without a political will and a determined leader capable of taking responsibility for the transformation in this area. Without support at the highest level, such projects, like any political innovation, may face the risk of losing their former momentum, and the reforms themselves can get bogged down in the contradictions that have arisen. Another important condition for the successful use of Internet communications as a form of civic influence on the adoption of political and managerial decisions, as evidenced by the experience of foreign countries, is the legal and regulatory provision of this sphere. In addition, the most important areas of legislative regulation should be the provisions of free dissemination of information, including information on the activities of public authorities, as well as information protection and ensuring the non-distribution of personal data of citizens.

4. Resume

Thus, researchers identify various conditions that determine the possibility of Internet participation of citizens in the political process. But it is possible to note the conditions of a political nature that result from the essence of a political system of society. In authoritarian systems, it is possible that Internet communications will be used as another democratic wrapper of the real regime, excluding the real participation of citizens in the political process. As the researchers note, although authoritarian states face great difficulties in trying to control their citizens' access to the worldwide network, but China is coping successfully with the democratizing influence of the Internet, both through administrative and technical means.

5. Conclusions

Summing up, it can be noted that political Internet communications between the state and society are becoming the determining conditions for the development of networked civic engagement and political participation. The discussion of many topical problems, without finding an opportunity to be realized within the framework of the usual institutions, goes into a virtual plane. A new type of political participation of citizens is forming, that is Internet participation, creating new opportunities

for citizen participation in the political process. Internet participation is characterized by a mobile and relatively organized nature: it overcomes time, geographical and cultural restrictions; group integration is increased irrespective of the place of residence, what allows reacting instantly to emerging political problems. Modern political practice makes it possible to single out various forms of political participation on the Internet.

The key factors determining the effectiveness of Internet participation of citizens in the political process are the interests of the main actors. Special conditions for social, ideological, financial, technical, organizational, legal and political nature are also necessary. In the conditions of democratic regimes, public authorities are more interested in creating new resources for involving citizens in the political process. However, we are not talking about the complete withering away of representative institutions. In any state, including in the democratic ones, there is a wide network of public intermediaries who are not interested in reducing their influence in the light of new trends. Political parties, the media, other structures of civil society not only have not lost their significance in the new conditions, but also try to use the new opportunities as much as possible, ensuring their presence in the political space of the Internet. Therefore, we can conclude that an important condition for Internet participation of citizens in the political process stemming from the peculiarities of the regime is the position of the political elite, as well as the willingness of both elites and citizens to use the new opportunities provided by Internet communications.

6. Acknowledgements

The work is carried out according to the Russian Government Program of Competitive Growth of Kazan Federal University.

References

BELL, D. 1973. **The coming of post-industrial society: A venture of social forecasting**. Basic Books, p. 528. USA.

CHADWICK, A., and MAY, C. 2003. **Interaction between States and Citizens in the Age of Internet: e-Government in the United States**, Britain and the European Union, Governance. Vol. 16, N° 2: 271-300. UK.

CORRADO, A., and FIRESTONE, C. 1996. **Elections in Cyberspace: Toward a New Era in American Politics**. Aspen Institute. p. 187. USA.

DAVIS, R. 1999. **The Web of Politics: The Internet's Impact on the American Political System**. Oxford Univ. Press, p. 225. UK.

GOLOVKO, O. 2018. **Evaluation of the effectiveness of e-government in the Republic of Tatarstan**. URL: <http://old.kpfu.ru/conf/ek2009/sbornik.htm>, verified on: 18.07.2018. UK.

GROSSMAN, L. 1995. **The Electronic Republic: Reshaping Democracy in the Information Age**. Viking Penguin, p. 290. USA.

LIZIN, S. 2018. **Problems of master data control in the context of integration of automated information systems**. URL: <http://old.kpfu.ru/conf/ek2009/sbornik.htm>, verified on: 18.07.2018. UK.

MASUDA, Y. 1983. **The Information Society as Postindustrial Society**. World Future Soc, p. 419. USA.

MORRIS, D. 2001. **Direct Democracy and the Internet**, Loyola of Los Angeles Law Review. Vol. 34, N° 3: 1033-1053. USA.

SCHWARTZ, P. 2001. **Vote.com and Internet Politics: A Comment on Dick Morris's version of Internet Democracy**, Loyola of Los Angeles Law Review. Vol. 34, N° 3: 1071–1088. USA.

TOFFLER, A. 1980. **The Third Wave**. p. 544. Morrow. Russia.

TOFFLER, A., and FUTURE, S. 1970. **Random House**, p. 505. Russia.

VOINOV, D., and PAVLYUTENKOVA, M. 2018. **Internet Dialogue as a New Form of Political Participation of Citizens**. URL: <http://viperson.ru/wind.php?ID=630496&soch=1>, checked: 20/07/2018. UK.