

Module 4 – How to advocate and engage with policy makers
 Practical examples of online democracy and some best practices

Estonia

Upon gaining independence in 1991, Estonia showed all the signs of becoming a success story: the former Soviet state was rapidly transformed into an independent democratisation with high rates of economic growth. This achievement is often observed alongside its extraordinary devotion of national resources to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Within the last decade, the Internet penetration rate in Estonia has increased from 28.2% in 2000 to 75.1% in 2010 and over 90% in 2017. With a population well versed in Internet usage, many of the public services were then moved online. The entrance of ICTs in the political sphere is a nascent phenomenon that is currently being researched by sociologists and political scientists alike.¹

Based on many indices, Estonia is one of most wired countries in the world with a very high Internet penetration rate and a well-serviced ICT infrastructure. The European Union study of online public e-services ranked Estonia eighth in the EU for online sophistication of its public sector services, and fourth for online service availability with more rapid growth than the EU average². Although official statements suggest that the implementation of e-government and e-democracy in Estonia are due to long term planning, many scholars recently have shown that the process is in fact more heterogeneous than previously thought. At the local level, a digital divide, disparities in access to the Internet based on income and education, can be observed as the capital city Tallinn has a larger proportion of sophisticated users. In seeking a more participatory form of democracy, the Estonian government set up the online platform Tana Otsustan Mina (Today I Vote - TOM) in 2001. After media hype but failing to capture local participation, the website was shut down to be succeeded by Osale.ee in 2008.³

The dream of revolutionizing representative democracy is what attracted the attention of many political scientists and scholars, tempted to follow the Estonian model and hoping to implant the same e-seeds in other countries. Some examples are the United States [3], Spain [18]) and, at supra-national level, the European Union's ambition in the construction of Intelcities.⁴

Best practices from Estonia:

[Rahvaalgatus.ee](http://rahvaalgatus.ee) – enables citizens to compile and send collective addresses – with at least 1000 digital signatures – to the parliament of Estonia. Also, to follow whether your proposal will be turned into a draft act.

1 Wen Jian – Evaluating the E-democracy Dream: A Case Study on Estonia, p.1.

http://www.academia.edu/3021965/Evaluating_the_E-democracy_Dream_A_Case_Study_on_Estonia

² <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/eu-egovernment-report-2016-shows-online-public-services-improved-unevenly>

3 Wen Jian – Evaluating the E-democracy Dream: A Case Study on Estonia, p.1.

http://www.academia.edu/3021965/Evaluating_the_E-democracy_Dream_A_Case_Study_on_Estonia_p.1

4 Ibid, p.2

[Rahvakogu](#) – The People’s Assembly, an Estonian grass roots initiative designed to find solutions to political sore spots.

[i-Voting](#) – Internet voting, or ‘i-voting’, is a system that allows voters to cast their ballots from any internet-connected computer, anywhere in the world.

[Participatory Budgeting](#) – Participatory budgeting (PB) is a different way to manage public money, and to engage people in issues of local government. Tartu was the first city in Estonia who experimented with PB.

Iceland

Iceland is well positioned to utilise e-democracy practices as it has one of the highest household Internet penetration rates in the world at 95 per cent in 2012 (Statistics Iceland, 2012). Until recently, however, Iceland had received a relatively low ranking in relation to its participatory eGovernment development. In 2010, the United Nations’ e-participation index ranked Iceland at 135th. A rapid increase in online engagement initiatives saw this placing jump to 26th in 2012. Through the use of ICT and particularly social media, the Icelandic Council approached the general population inviting them to offer their ideas as to what the new constitution should contain. Signalling a shift to an open and participatory nature of representative government, the consultation offered responsive and ongoing opportunities for involvement between citizens and the council, and between citizens. Every week for approximately four months, the council posted a draft clause on its website (see <http://stjornlagarad.is/starfid/>). Citizens could comment on the website, join discussions on the council’s Facebook page and Twitter profile, or submit their views via written letter. Members of the Constitutional Council posted videos on YouTube and used Flickr to show photos of the council at work. Council meetings were open to the public and streamed live via the website and Facebook page.⁵

The Icelandic case signals that governments are beginning to recognise the need to address external threats, perceived or otherwise, on parliamentary and elected representation through more open forms of government, with greater emphasis placed on public involvement through the use of ICTs. While the reform is still unresolved, the Icelandic constitutional process was innovative. It nods towards a more transparent relationship between citizens and governments that recognises the potential for citizens to be empowered at the centre of political debate, rather than be spectators. Iceland therefore offers a useful example of the way that government-led online participation practices can be employed in order to address changing democratic understandings and expectations. In this instance, power was dispersed to the public, including the Constitutional Council. However, the decision ultimately remains with Althingi (the Icelandic Parliament).

⁵ Julie Freeman, Sharna Quirke – Understanding E-Democracy, p.147, <http://www.jedem.org/vc/index.php/jedem/article/download/221/182>