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China's E-Democracy in Information Age

Abstract: E-democracy is a new type of democracy in Information Age. At first, the paper discusses the definitions of democracy and e-democracy, and then the paper analyzes the advantages and problems of E-democracy in China. Finally the paper investigates the future of e-democracy in China.

Keywords: E-democracy, Information Age, China

I. Definition of electronic democracy

Greece is the cradle and the birthplace of democracy, the word "democracy" emerged in Athens in the 5th century BC. The modern English word "democracy" originated in ancient Greek "demokratia", which literally means "people's rule or governance."

Democracy can be divided into direct democracy and representative democracy. Direct democracy is also called "pure democracy" which came out in ancient Greece in the 5th century BC. Direct democracy is a form of governance in which people make their decisions for themselves, rather than without going through representatives and legislatures. People may exercise their political rights directly.

Since modern time, representative democracy began to play important role. In representative democracy, the decisive authority is vested in people, usually on the basis of election. Representative democracy also combines a number of elements of direct democracy, such a referendum.

E-democracy (electronic democracy, also known as digital democracy, cyber democracy) refers to the use of information technologies, communication technologies and strategies in political and governance processes. E-democracy is a kind of direct democracy which

emerged in Information Age.¹ In 1940's, people began to use computer. The emergence and popularization of computers in the late 20th century has completely changed our way of life. The emergence of computers has also led to the third technological revolution; many changes have taken in information technology, biological engineering, new materials technology, marine technology. These new technologies are fundamentally changing our social and economic life.

E-democracy is a new mode of political participation, people may express their political will through Internet, as electronic voting, electronic forums and e-campaign. E-democracy aims for broader and more active citizen participation enabled by the Internet, mobile communications, and other technologies in today's representative democracy, as well as through more participatory or direct forms of citizen involvement in addressing public challenges.

According to Secretary-General of the International Telecommunication Union Hama De Tuai, International Telecommunication Union, up to January, 2011, the total number of Internet users worldwide has reached 2 billion, the number of mobile phone users reached 5 billion. The world's total population has more than 6.8 billion people, that means almost 1/3 people in the world are Internet users.

In March 2011, China's mobile subscribers has reached 680 million. According to Recently published "China's annual comprehensive report on the Internet 2009-2011" , during 2007-2011, China's Internet value-added market growth is slowing, but remains above 30% annual growth rate, the total Internet users will reach 0.6 billion at the end of 2011. That means about half Chinese people have the opportunity to experience the charm of the Internet.

¹ The Information Age, also commonly known as the Computer Age, Digital Age or Information Era, is an idea that the current age will be characterized by the ability of individuals to transfer information freely, and to have instant access to knowledge.

II. The advantages of E-democracy and its problems

1. The advantages of E-democracy

E-democracy as a new form of democracy in information age which has some advantages that traditional representative democracy cannot compare. Chinese Internet users have reached some 600 million, ranking first in the world, online media and communication platform for the rapid rise of all levels of government launched the official website for Internet users to provide a public platform for expression and political participation. Internet users can directly express their own views on public affairs, Internet users' political participation enthusiasm continues to grow, and become more and more influential. China's Constitution gives people the right to freedom of expression, and the emergence of the Internet BBS (Bulletin Board System), providing an important channel for ordinary people to express their opinions.

The advantages of e-democracy, mainly as follows:

(1) Information disclosure, sharing of resources.

The advantage of e-democracy is that it has the full benefit of information sharing. Government departments have rich information resources, if the information resources are opened to public and used fully and effectively, it will bring significant social, political and economic progress.

Since electronic-government (e-government) emerged during 1990's, information sharing has been enhanced. E-government is digital interaction between a government and citizens (G2C), government and businesses/commerce/eCommerce (G2B), and between government agencies (G2G), Government-to-Religious Movements/Church (G2R), Government-to-Households (G2H). This digital interaction consists of governance, information and communication technology (ICT), business process re-engineering (BPR), and e-citizen at all levels of government (city, state/province, national, and international).²

² See: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E-Government>

According to United Nations Economic and Social Council, e-government, by means of information and communication technology to improve efficiency, enhance government transparency, improve fiscal discipline and the quality and public policy decision-making.

Essentially, the term e-Government or also known as Digital Government, refers to 'How government utilized IT, ICT and other telecommunication technologies, to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness in the public sector'.³

Case: "SARS incident."

SARS (Severe acute respiratory syndrome) is a respiratory disease in humans which is caused by the SARS coronavirus (SARS-CoV). There was one near pandemic, between the months of November 2002 and July 2003, with 8,422 known infected cases and 916 confirmed human deaths (a case-fatality rate of 9.6%) worldwide being listed in the World Health Organization's (WHO) 21 April 2004 concluding report. Within a matter of weeks in early 2003, SARS spread from the Hong Kong of China to rapidly infect individuals in some 37 countries around the world.⁴

During the SARS epidemic--the official reaction or lack of it to SARS had already created much controversy on the Internet. This incident led to the great political progress in the democratic process. China established a complete set of press spokesman for "SARS" from central to local government.

(2) The equal participation and freedom of expression. E-democracy provides citizens with more freedom and equality of political participation. In cyberspace, everyone can be equal to the exchange and access to information; everyone can express their political views and opinions freely.

³ Jeong Chun Hai @Ibrahim. (2007). Fundamental of Development Administration. Selangor: Scholar Press.

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Severe_acute_respiratory_syndrome.

On the eve of "two sessions" (NPC and the CPPCC) in 2009 and 2010, Premier Wen Jiabao went to Chinese government network and Xinhua network, made online exchange with Internet users.

In the online interview, Premier Wen Jiabao and netizens discussed the price trend, employment situation, housing, education and health care reform and other issues people concerned. On February 27, 2011, Premier Wen Jiabao went to Chinese government network and Xinhua network again, listened to voice of the people.⁵

Before China National People's Congress issues new law, it may ask the public for comments. So, it provides an opportunity for public to participant national legislation. For example, after the eleventh Meeting of the Eleventh National People's Congress reviewed "Tort Law of People's Republic of China (Draft)", the NPC Standing Committee published the draft to public, all citizen may access to China National People's Congress Network (www.npc.gov.cn) to make comments, or send comments to the NPC Standing Committee Legislative Affairs Committee directly.

Web space provides a wide range of expression for citizens' democratic appeal. E-mail, electronic bulletin board (BBS), instant messaging (IM), blog, Podcast, Flash become mainstream of political participation. During the "two sessions"(NPC or the CPPCC), people actively participate in "online government", they express their opinions on some public issues through the online forums. Citizens express their views through internet, participate in discussion and then influence government decisions. Diversified and convenient expression of the network provides possibility for citizen's political participation, and strongly boost "grassroots" democracy.⁶

⁵ See: Beijing Times, 2011 -02-27.

⁶ Chen Boli, Xu Xingui: Network democratic expression of political considerations ,see www.fyfz.cn.

E-democracy to enable citizens to enjoy more freedom of speech, communication between the Government and the public become more direct, more convenient, more equal, increased public's political participation interests.⁷

E-democracy greatly improved the transparency of government work, help to strengthen public supervision, anti-corruption, and enhance the public's sense of political responsibility.

Case: "Sun Zhigang incident."

On March 20, 2003, 27-year-old Sun Zhigang died in the medical clinic of a detention center in an area of south China that depends on migrant labor. Sun was a Wuhan university graduate and fashion designer who had gone to Guangzhou to work. Three weeks later, as he walked to an internet bar, police asked for his temporary living permit and his identity card. He had not applied for the permit and he had forgotten the ID card. His residence permit (hukou) was with his family in Hubei. He called his friends to bring his ID card. Three days later, a friend called his family to tell them of the death. Sun's family reported the information to investigative reporters at Nanfang Dushi Bao (Southern Metropolitan Daily) in Guangdong, Internet activity soon skyrocketed, hundreds of thousands of messages, with help from Sun's friends and outraged sympathizers.

This case embodies the power of e-democracy and led to abolish the "urban vagrants and beggars in detention and repatriation measures" issued by the State Council in May 1982.

2. The problems of e-democracy

However, e-democracy also has some problems due to its virtual characteristics, such as false information, user's non-rational speech, and violations of personal privacy, etc.

⁷ Zhu Xiao Bin, "Electronic democracy " deconstruction of traditional democratic renewal, Shandong Agricultural Management Institute 23, 2007 No. 1

(1) The false information.

As the virtual character and concealment of Internet, therefore, the information spread on Internet is hard to identify. Meanwhile, the Internet also has some ulterior motives deliberately create some false information to mislead Internet users.

(2) Invasion of privacy.

As the publisher of internet information is often not easy to find, so some people on the network interested in exposing someone's privacy and "human flesh search", which may cause infringement of the privacy of citizens.

(3) Digital Divide.

E-democracy still meet technical and practical problem, one of the problems is “digital divide”. “Digital divide” means that due to different situation, as race, gender, age, living in city or countryside, income, education, etc., people using the tools of modern information and communication means and ability may vary.⁸

E-democracy is limited democracy. Chinese Internet users has reached 600 million, but compare to the whole population, it is still small. The lower classes, especially the poor underclass, they are lack of the necessary conditions for participating in e-democracy. The main groups involved in e-democracy must be the middle class and upper class society, therefore, we cannot simply say that Internet users represent the majority of members of society.

III. The future of e-democracy in China

In order to increase e-democracy and rule of law in China, we should pay attention to the following aspects.

1. To draft a more unified and standardized information technology rules, such as “Electronic Authentication Law” and “Government Information Disclosure law.” Electronic

⁸ Wang Xiangmin, "On electronic democracy", SOUTHERN FORUM, no. 2, July 2003.

authentication is the most essential aspect of the validity of electronic authentication; it will guarantee the safety of e-commerce transactions between the parties. For “Government Information Disclosure Law,” Government Information Resources should provide complete and duly information to public, so citizens can better understand the information, and rationally participate in discussions and decision-making.

2. To create a better network environment, strengthening and improving communication between government and citizens. Government departments may understand the real situation, problems and difficulties through dialogue, and then try to solve the problems, and promote social harmony and stability.

3. To analyze and process user’s comments timely, guarantee the right of the people's supervision, improve the relationship between government and citizens.

E-democracy is a new type of democracy in information Age, it has problems and it is not perfect, but we still have reason to believe, with the continuous improvement, e-democracy will have a bright future.

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