Model of Digital Mediation for Direct Public Participation in Electoral Periods - How Important are the Media?
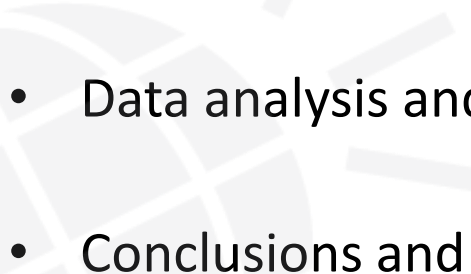
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Outline

- Context

- Problem

- Research Questions

- Objectives

- Methodology

- Model of Digital Mediation for Direct Public Participation During Electoral Periods

- Data analysis and main results

- Conclusions and future work

Context

The current economic, social and democratic conjuncture calls for public participation.

With examples of mass mobilization such as the Arab Spring and protests against the global economic crisis such as the Occupy Wall Street and We Are the 99 Percent, it is safe to argue that Social Media are changing the game of politics.

In recent times we have been witness to a decline of public confidence in the political class in the western hemisphere (*Nye et al., 1997; Castells, 2007b*).
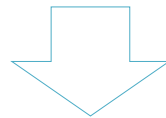
Politicians seek to recover public confidence and foster their engagement and participation through innovative means *(EC, 2009)*.

Recently we have been witnessing the increasing use of the Internet by political agents to disclose their electoral messages (*Livne et. al, 2011*).

Problem

The type of political communication between candidates and citizens, and coverage of election campaigns operated by traditional media, are mostly concentrated in unidirectional communication and do not support an efficient, scalable communication process based on all stakeholders' goals and needs.
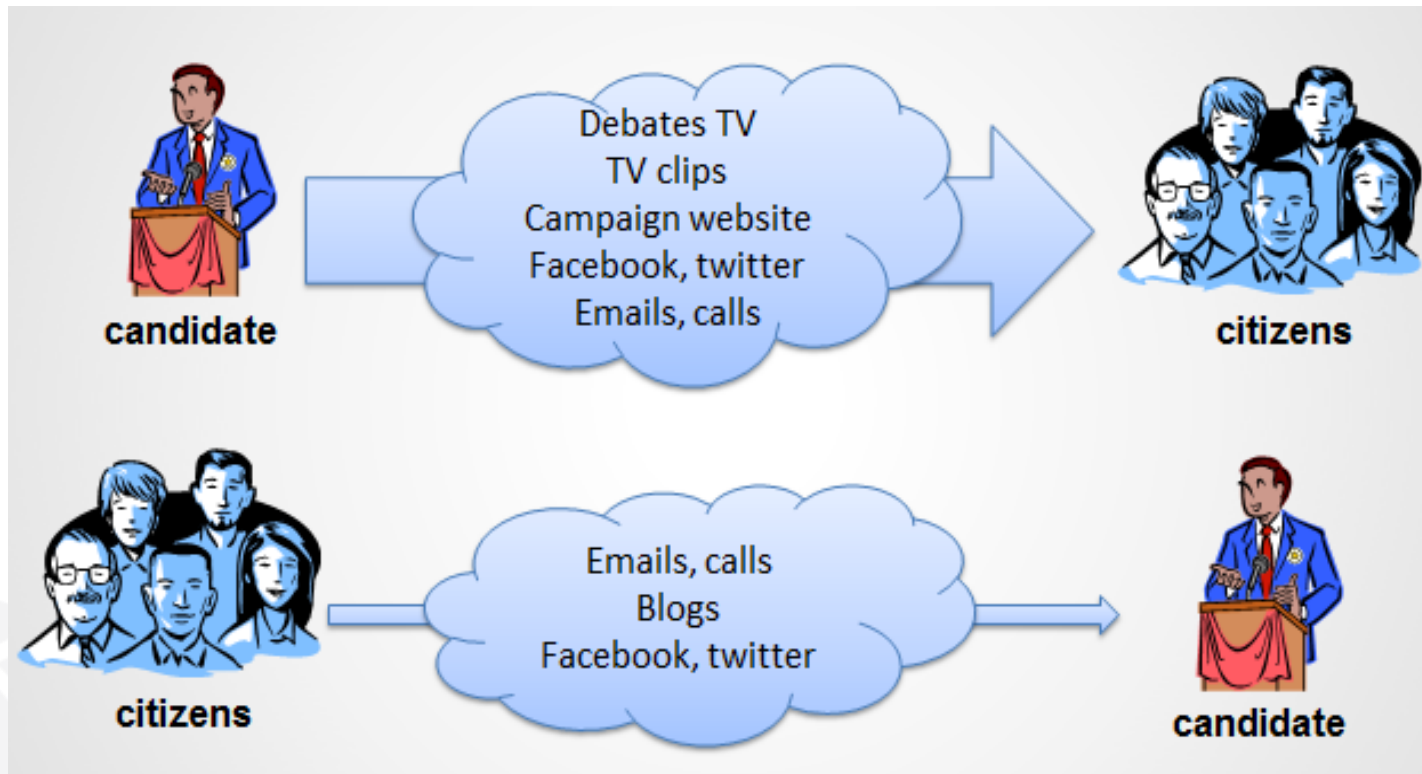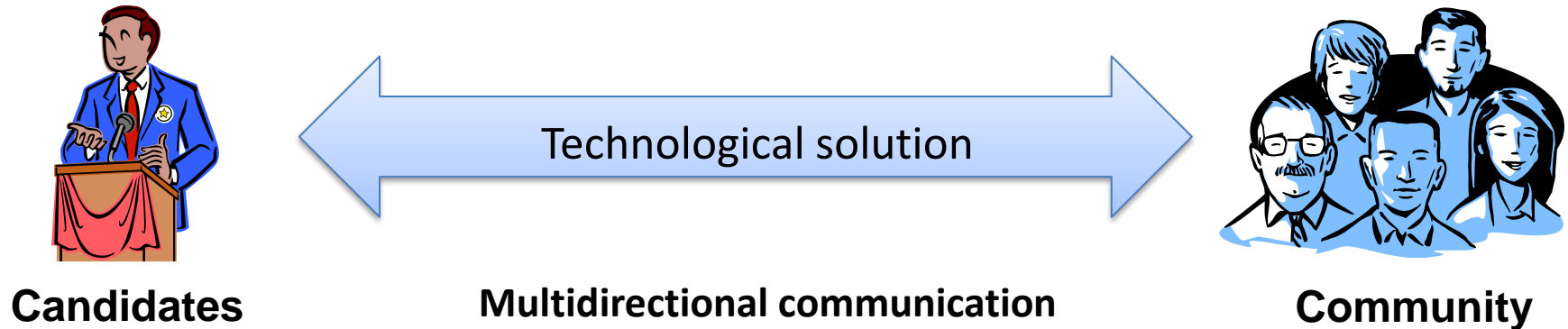

unidirectional communication

Research Questions

RQ1: How to engage citizens to participate actively in electoral discussions through digital mediation?

Candidates

Multidirectional communication

Technological solution

Community

RQ2: What is the role of the media in e-participation initiatives throughout electoral periods?

Objectives

- Gather the different actors in electoral campaigns.

- Narrow the communication gap between citizens and candidates (essentially unidirectional);

- Making electoral campaigns more open (through multidirectional communication);

- Encourage citizens to participate actively in electoral debates.

Consume ← Electoral information ✗

Produce/Consume ⇄ Electoral information ✓

Foster citizen participation and improve communication between the main actors of an electoral campaign.

Electronic participation

The concept of electronic participation is intrinsically associated to the concept of public participation and to the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), especially the Internet.

Assumption that technology has the ability to change and to promote citizen engagement in participation initiatives (Saebo et al., 2008).

Public participation

ICT

E-participation

e-participation is not an alternative to face-to-face participation, but a complement.

Methodology: Action Research

- It is appropriate for solving problems of a practical nature;

- It is suitable for implementing innovative initiatives;

- It promotes improvements through change;

- It is collaborative, that is, it provides possibilities of co-operative working;

- It uses a four stage cyclic self-reflection spiral process: planning, action, observation, reflection.

<div align="center">(Hult & Lennung, 1980; McKernan, 1991; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1992; O'Leary, 2004)</div>

This R&D project also presents some of these features: innovative, mostly practical in nature, in which change management had a leading role and where the demand for continuous improvement was a main priority.
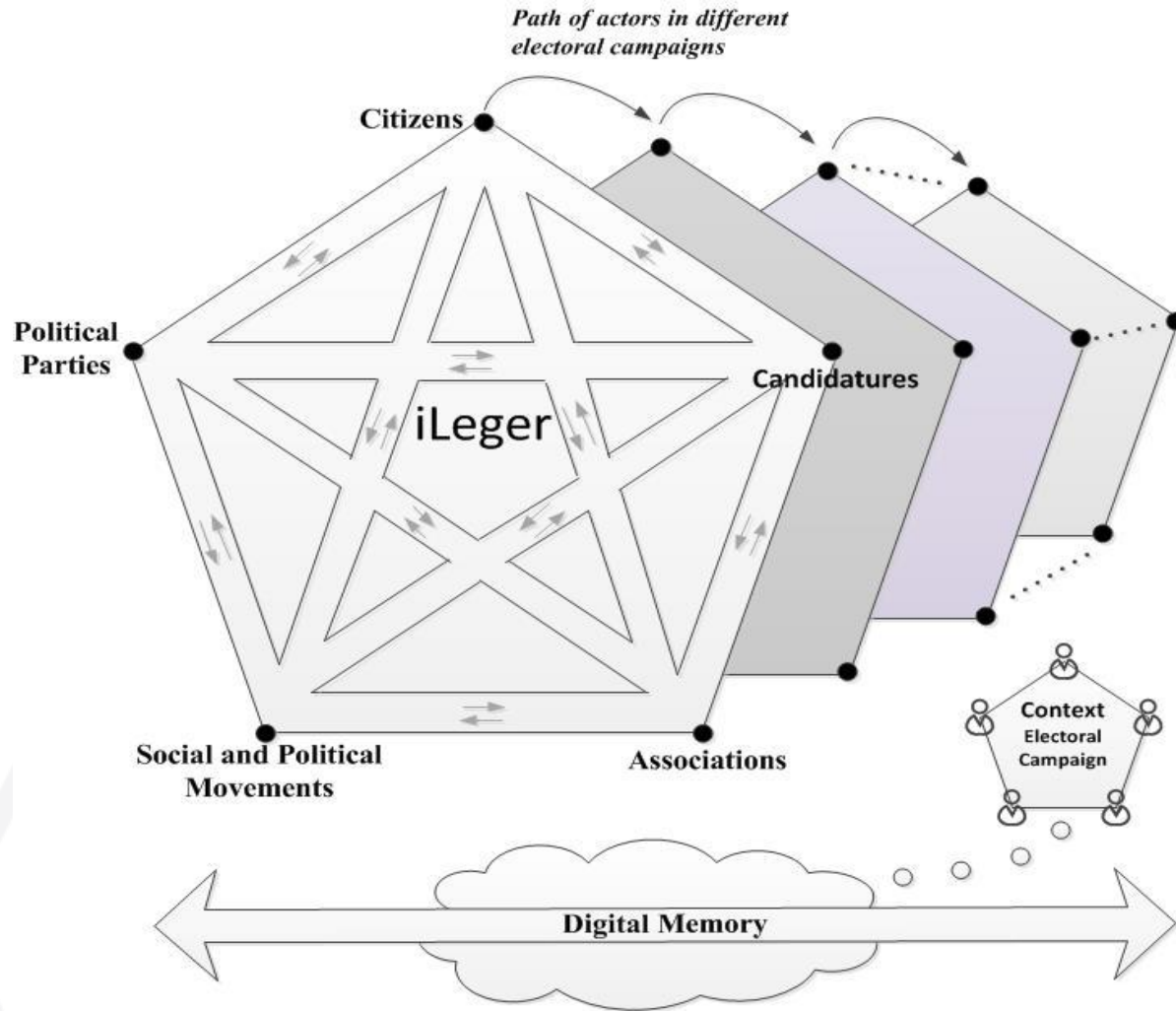
4X
We implemented four cycles of A-R

These characteristics made action research an appropriate methodology for this project

Model of Digital Mediation for Direct Public Participation during Electoral Periods

The digital dimension is implicitly part of the model.
The editor is inherent to the model. It is a neutral element.

Proof of concept – iLeger platform

It gathers in a single neutral and regulated place the key players in an electoral campaign, allowing through multiple participation events a structured and multidirectional communication between them.
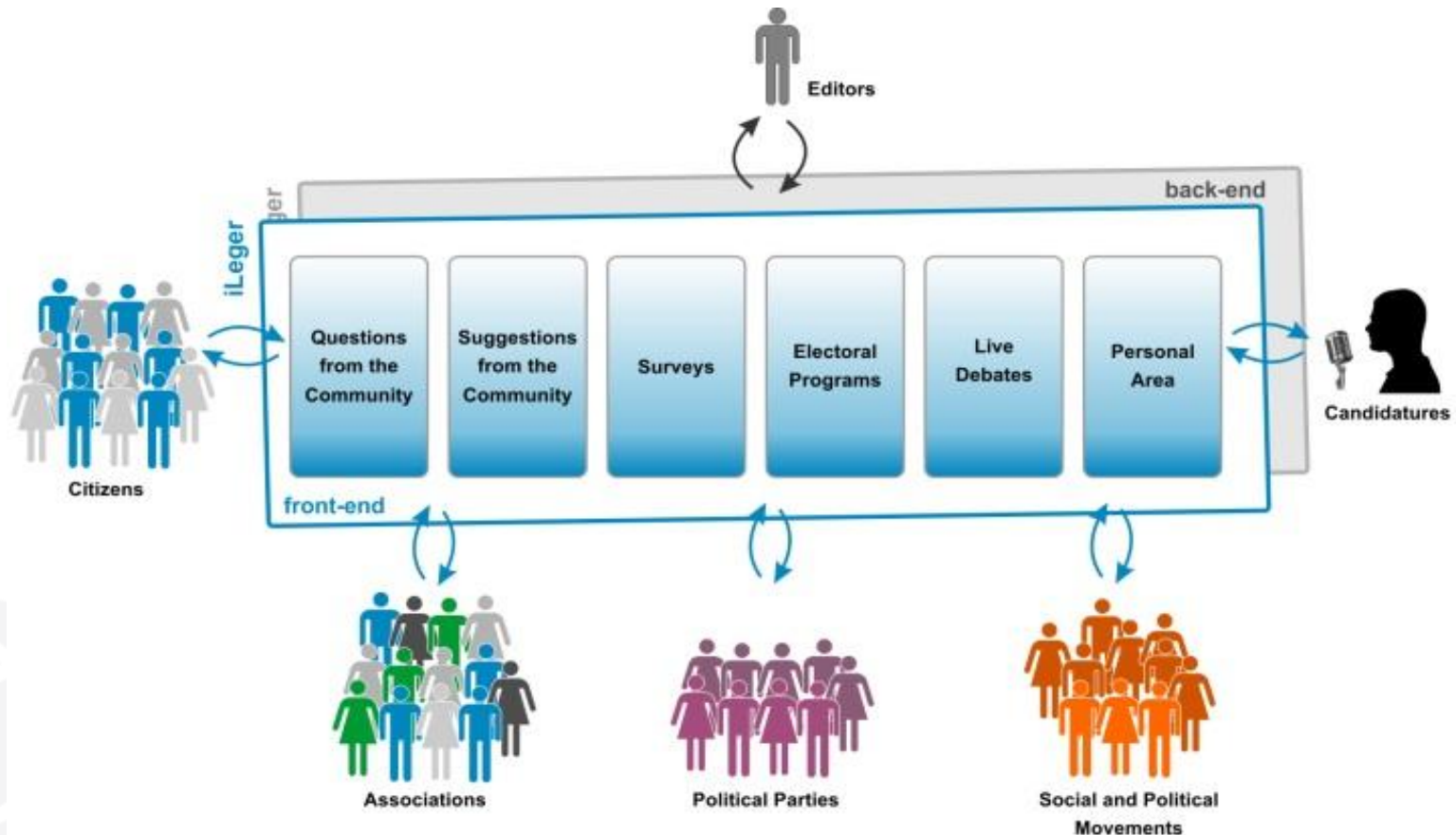
Usage experiences

| Election	Month	Year
Parliamentary Elections in Portugal **(iLeger)**	June	2011
Portuguese Presidential Elections **(iLeger)**	January	2011
Elections for Head of the Portuguese Medical Association **(iLeger)**	December	2010
Local Elections in Portugal **(Liberopinion)** Test in VISEU	October	2009
Parliamentary Elections in Portugal **(Liberopinion)**	September	2009

Main results – number of visits

Electoral Campaigns	N.º Candidates	N.º Visits	NUV	NUVL	Pct. UVL	Pct. Visits days LD
Parliamentary Elect. 2009	5 of 16	N/Av.	3012	380	11,2%	N/Ap.
Municipal Elect. 2009 (Viseu)	2 of 5	N/Av.				N/Ap.
Head Medical Association 2010	2 of 4	388	131	39	22,9%	N/Ap.
Presidential Elect. 2011*	6 of 6	27996	23375	947	3,9%	46,6%
Parliamentary Elect. 2011*	7 of 17	21237	18213	290	1,6%	91,4%

* Events performed in partnership with SAPO portal; N.º Candidates – Number of candidates; N.º Visits – Number of visits to *iLeger* platform; NUV – Number of unique visitors; NUVL – Number of unique visitors logged in the platform; Pct UVL – Percentage of unique visitors logged in the platform during the events; Pct Visits Days LD – Percentage of visits during days of live debates

The potential of the media to attract the stakeholders (citizens and candidates) in the electoral campaign into online participation (columns "NVU" and "N.º Candidates").

The importance/impact of short-term and live events on the number of visits to the platform (Column "Pct. Visits days LD").

Main Results – number of visits
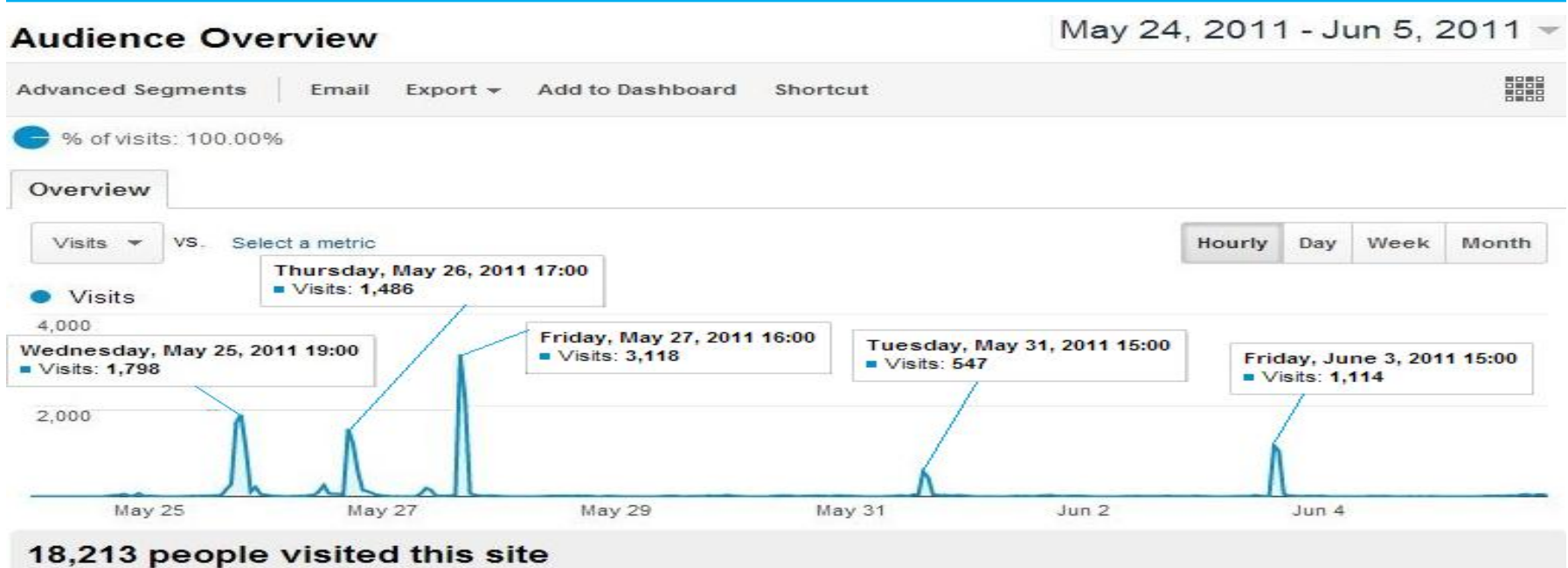
The peaks of the number of visits correspond precisely to the (five) days where live debates took place. In the remaining days of the electoral campaign, the number of visits was much lower in comparison.
25 Mai 2011 – 1 LD (5455 visits); 26 Mai 2011 - 1 LD (4293 visits); 27 Mai 2011 – 1 LD (5966 visits); 31 Mai 2011 - 1 LD (1352 visits); 3 Jun 2011 – 1 LD (2353 visits)

The maximum of the visits in the days of live debates occurred during the hours in which the debates took place and the period surrounding it. For example, on May 25, 2011, the number of visits reached its daily maximum around 19:00, when the live debate with a political representative was being held.

Main results – number of visits

Again the peaks of the number of visits correspond to the days where live debates took place and the maximum of the visits in these days occurred during the hours in which the debates took place and the periods surrounding it.

10 Jan 2011 - 3 LD (5552 visits); 11 Jan 2011 – 2 LD (5207 visits); 17 Jan 2011 - 1 LD (2293 visits)

In the days SAPO advertised *iLeger* participation events more than usual (7 and 20 January), occurred 37.7% (10550) of visits to the platform, suggesting that disclosure and advertising of events can have a positive impact on visits to the platform.

Main results – participation

Electoral Campaign	NUV	Votes	Entries outside live debates				Entries in live debates	Pct. Entries in live debates
			Questions	Suggestions	Comments	Total		
Parliamentary Elections 2009	3012	N/Av.	125	45	12	182	N/Ap.	N/Ap.
Municipal Elections (Viseu) 2009		N/Av.	36	1	7	44	N/Ap.	N/Ap.
Head Medical Association 2010	131	70	28	N/Av.	5	33	N/Ap.	N/Ap.
Presidential Elections 2011	23375	8443	253	201	48	502	972	65,9%
Parliamentary Elections 2011	18213	1464	116	59	N/Av	175	2976	94,4%

* NUV – Number of unique visitors to *iLeger*

The impact of live, short-term events in initiatives of e-participation in electoral periods (Column Pct. Entries Live Debates).

Users were not required to be registered on the platform to submit content into live debates.

The strong user participation during live debates may have been due to the removal of the registration requirement.

Main results – summary

Three aspects from this analysis stand out:

- – The potential of the media to attract citizens and candidates;

- – The positive influence of short-term and live events, both in visits and in active participation.

- – The positive impact of promotion and advertising of e-participation events in the number of visits to the platform;

Conclusion (rq1: how to engage citizens…)

Participation tools based on the Internet and Social Media, if properly used, have the potential to contribute significantly to reversing the current alienation of citizens from electoral debates.

The main focus must be primarily on participation and the people (taking into priority, citizens and candidates) rather than on technology.

The problem of e-participation is not just a matter of technology but also of an issue of social shift to a more open and collaborative culture.

The results of the five experiences, with the use of *iLeger* suggest that short-term and live events, and the direct involvement of Media can facilitate the citizen participation.

"It is critical to develop a culture where there is the will for a clear commitment for the political representatives become part of any e-participation initiatives"
(Macintosh, et al., 2009)

Conclusion (rq2: which is the role of Media in…)

The Media can play a very important role as:

- They have a great potential to promote e-participation initiatives and get the people together (both citizens and politics) in order to truly participate;

- They have their own big user communities with online experience;

- They can also provide a set of political analyst's experts that can contribute to the discussion quality.

"Media support is vital to citizens mobilization, and in cases where such support do not exist, the participation level remains low". (Mambrey, 2008)

"… the communication and information related with politics is been made in the Media space. Outside of the Media sphere there is only politic marginality". (Castells, 2007)

Recommendations (good practices)

- Involve in project, concept and development of the technological solution the different actors in the participation initiative;

- Choose as the main promoter for an e-participation initiative, a person/institution with the best potential possible to gather people, to promote the initiative, and that can be able to stimulus participation (the Media have the best potential on this) and to grant editorial quality and neutrality;

- Provide information to users in order that they can discuss and debate all the issues with the maximum knowledge possible and provide meaningful contributions;

- Define in a clear and concise way the usage terms for the digital platform. The best way is to invite the users to create such terms in a collaborative way;

- Reduce to the maximum, the necessary resources to participate (in this context, short timed events and live events are the winners and extremely efficacy);

- Promote candidates feedback for the community members contributions;

- Make a resume (info graphics, report or new) with the most important contents and contributes of each participation event.

Future work

Functionalities to improve or develop:

- Workflow and staff management to support the candidates;

- A library area for each participation event, to support users;

- Optimize the platform to be used with mobile devices;

- Check if there is a requirement for implementing a reputation mechanism based in the *Gamification* theories;

Topics for research:

To use *iLeger* without moderation and compare the results with other e-participation platforms designed under the concept of liquid democracy such as open source liquid feedback software and Adhocracy

Open question: *What is the impact of mechanisms of digital mediation in participation?*

Thank you

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