

# Public Policies on eParticipation in Austria

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**Abstract.** This paper assesses the status of eParticipation within the political system in Austria. It takes a top-down perspective focusing on the role of public participation and public policies on eParticipation. The status of eParticipation in Austria as well as of social and political trends regarding civic participation and its electronic embedding are analysed. The results show a remarkable recent increase of eParticipation projects and initiatives. A major conclusion is that eParticipation is becoming a subject of public policies in Austria; however, the upswing of supportive initiatives for public participation and eParticipation goes together with ambivalent attitudes among politicians and administration.

**Keywords:** eParticipation, eDemocracy, institutional actors, public policy, government initiatives

## 1 Introduction

The aim of enhancing public engagement by offering electronic tools includes the vision that ICTs have the potential to reinvigorate democracy, to be a useful remedy against declining voter turnout and increasing disengagement of citizens from politics and political organisations. But foremost, as stated by the United Nations' eGovernment survey, eParticipation "is one tool that enables governments to dialogue with their citizens. By enhancing government's ability to request, receive and incorporate feedback from constituents, policy measures can be better tailored to meet the needs and priorities of citizens" [1:58]. eParticipation denotes initiatives implemented by institutional and administrative actors as well as political activities initiated by civil society. Our paper takes a top-down perspective focusing on the policy framework related to civic participation and eParticipation in particular. The central research question is: how are eParticipation and its significance for public policy evolving in Austria? This links to theoretical assumptions of a reinforced role for civic participation along with changing forms of governance towards "interactive governance". The methods used for the empirical investigation include a review of the relevant literature, research reports, government documents and websites, complemented by personal communication with national experts in the field. After a sketch of the actual state of eParticipation in Austria section two outlines recent social and political trends regarding civic (e-)participation. Section three focuses on main institutional actors and policy initiatives in eParticipation, before section four summarises the main conclusions.

## 2 The Status of eParticipation in Austria

During the past ten years, the Austrian government has made considerable efforts to modernise its public administration and other state institutions with an advanced information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure and online services. This has brought a leading position in eGovernment in Europe [2]. However, the focus has certainly been on administrative functions [3] while initiatives that aim at deploying electronic channels for public participation are still in their infancy. Online information services were the first to be implemented [4]. These have some relevance for political involvement of civil society as public information is essential for exerting citizen rights and enabling democratic participation. On the whole, also an earlier study on eDemocracy [5:3] pointed out that the eGovernment strategy had disregarded the electronic support of democratic processes. Interactivity tests by sending e-mails to political parties and members of parliament were disappointing. More recently, Fuchs [6] found that still e-mail practically remains the only online communication channel offered by national government and parliament. Among the political parties merely the Green Party's website provides a blogportal and the Social Democratic Party invites to online discussions on issues such as the ongoing reform of the Austrian education system.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to parties other interest groups and issue based initiatives have discovered the advantages and used various forms of eParticipation earlier. NGOs like Greenpeace Austria or Attack Austria offer tools like mailing lists, discussion boards, wikis, blogs and ePetitions. Filzmaier [5:12] notes that in early 2000 online platforms played a key role for organising civil protest movements against the coalition of the Conservative Party with the so-called Freedom Party. Since this time, Austria also experienced various forms of negative eCampaigning (satirical e-cards, mail bombings, fake websites). According to Mahrer and Krimmer [7] there were still only a limited number of Austrian eDemocracy examples, some of them initiated as local pilot projects in the academic sector. Currently, activities in the field of eParticipation and experiments with pilot applications are significantly expanding.

Traditional media do not play a major role in the promotion of eParticipation. Nevertheless, the Austrian public broadcasting service ORF provides online fora for discussion on topics of public interest.<sup>2</sup> Until recently, the role of the private sector in eParticipation has largely been restricted to being a partner in the development of standards and applications and a contractor for specific competences [8:125pp.]; e.g. the Austrian Federal Computing Centre is important here. As far as civic initiatives are concerned, the election to the national parliament in September 2008 has triggered some new eParticipation projects. Generally speaking, administrative and civil society initiators as well as academic researchers are major driving forces in eParticipation.

Despite the initial state of eParticipation in Austria, significant steps taken at government level signal the turn to an advancement and a more strategic coordination of both offline and online citizen engagement. Three such initiatives deserve special mentioning: the *Democracy Initiative of the Austrian Federal Government* with the online platform "entscheidend-bist-du.at" (YOU are Decisive) launched in early

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<sup>1</sup> See [http://www.gruene.at/blog\\_portal/](http://www.gruene.at/blog_portal/) and <http://mitreden.spoe.at/index.php?>

<sup>2</sup> See <http://futurezone.orf.at/>

2008;<sup>3</sup> the *Standards for Public Participation* elaborated by an inter-ministerial working group and adopted by the Council of Ministers in July 2008;<sup>4</sup> and the implementation of a *Working Group on E-Democracy and E-Participation* within the Austrian Federal Chancellery in 2006.<sup>5</sup>

## 2.1 Direct Democratic Rights and Political Participation

A look at the institutional and legal frameworks can help to understand the role of public participation and the potential for eParticipation in the Austrian political system. Austria is a representative democracy with direct democratic elements and a federal system of government. Political culture is characterized by a tradition of top-down political communication and consensus democracy with strong co-operation between major economic interest groups and the state, known as "Social Partnership". The Austrian constitution includes participation rights and provides for direct democratic procedures, namely petitions, referenda, and official opinion polls. Which legal regulations apply to a participation process depends on the actual case in question [9:13]. Participation processes can take effect at the level of policies and legislation, in planning activities and program development and in concrete projects. Examples of Austrian acts and statutes that feature arrangements for public participation include trading regulations, the statute on water and waterways or the individual provinces' statutes on land use.

In 2003, the so-called "Österreich-Konvent" (Austrian convention) was convened to decide upon a reform of the Austrian Federal Constitution. Propositions on extending plebiscitary components – like strengthening the position of citizens' initiatives in referenda and official opinion polls – have been declined [10:113]. However, some important parts were agreed upon to be implemented. Direct democratic rights were extended by reducing the minimum age for participating in referenda and public opinion polls to the age of 16 [11]. With respect to inclusion and legal equality Schaller [12:77pp.] stresses the need to extend the entitlement to vote as well as the right to participate in referenda, petitions and public opinion polls to a wider portion of Austrian residents, about nine percent of which are currently excluded because they do not hold the Austrian citizenship [12:68pp.].

Several studies have researched the actual extent and forms of public involvement of civil society in Austria [13, 14]. Recently, Walter and Rosenberger [15] described the historical development of participation in Austria and compared it with international data. They differentiate between voter turnout, elite-directed activities (e.g. working in a political party) and elite-challenging forms of participation (e.g. signing petitions, protest). This classification "provides a differentiation between the affirmative, hierarchically structured, and representative elite-directed, and the confrontational, egalitarian, and self-determined elite challenging forms of political activity" [15:10]. In comparison to other Western European countries Austria records high

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.entscheidend-bist-du.at/>

<sup>4</sup> See [http://www.partizipation.at/standards\\_oeb.html](http://www.partizipation.at/standards_oeb.html)

<sup>5</sup> See <http://reference.e-government.gv.at/E-Democracy.981.0.html>

turnout rates<sup>6</sup> and a huge proportion of party members relative to the electorate. Whereas it ranks among the top European countries regarding voter turnout and elite-directed activity, it shows comparatively low levels of elite-challenging activity. The authors conclude that "in Austria, hierarchical and institutionalized participation is traditionally more widespread than protest behaviour. This has to be seen as a major characteristic of the Austrian political culture, where political parties have played a comparatively strong role in both politics and society" [15:18]. Nevertheless, Austria has been facing a decrease in voter turnout at all electoral levels (first and second order elections as well as European Parliament elections) and in elite-directed activities during the past 30 years. In contrast, surveys diagnose a significant growth of activities in the area of elite-challenging participation. Thus, Walter and Rosenberger [15:17] assume, "that there is less a decline of participation but rather a shift among different forms of political activity". The analysis on socio-demographic factors shows that the impact of education on political activity is channelled through intervening variables like age, gender and immigrant background: e.g. middle age groups are politically more active than young and elderly people and there is "a weak but significant effect of German as the first language spoken at home" [15:26]. Often women report being less interested in politics and tend to think that they cannot change things through their engagement. Other studies suggest this "disengagement of women mainly refers to a conventional notion of politics" [16:23]. Walter and Rosenberger, however, come to the result that gender does not have a significant impact on political participation in Austria [15:27].

## 2.2 Current Trends

Existing eParticipation offerings from government are still in a developing stage. This is suggested among others by Austria's ranking only 20<sup>th</sup> in the UN's eParticipation Index 2008 [1]. Early examples of citizen participation comprise initiatives like URBAN, an urban development project in Graz<sup>7</sup>, the Viennese urban development project EDEN ("Electronic Democracy European Network"<sup>8</sup>) or the online platform "klasse:zukunft"<sup>9</sup> operated by the Federal Ministry for Education, Arts and Culture. Especially since 2007 many new eParticipation projects including several regional initiatives have been launched; many of them address young people<sup>10</sup>. Some projects have been triggered by significant events such as national elections. An example is

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<sup>6</sup> Since the 1950ies, Austria's average turnout level at national parliament elections comes in second (behind Belgium) with 90.2 percent [15:17].

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.urban-link.at/>

<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.wien.gv.at/stadtentwicklung/eu/eden/index.htm>; see also the digital land utilisation plan of the City of Vienna (<http://www.wien.gv.at/flaechenwidmung/public/>), and discussion boards of the City of Vienna (<http://www.wien.gv.at/index/foren.htm>).

<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.klassezukunft.at/>

<sup>10</sup> Examples are [www.salzblog.at](http://www.salzblog.at) initiated by the City of Salzburg, [www.cyberjuz.at](http://www.cyberjuz.at) initiated by the "Landesjugendreferat" of Upper Austria, [www.jugendbeteiligung.cc](http://www.jugendbeteiligung.cc) initiated by the "Working Group Participation", [www.mitmachen.at](http://www.mitmachen.at) initiated by the Federal Computing Centre, [www.entscheidend-bist-du.at](http://www.entscheidend-bist-du.at) initiated by the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, Arts and Culture and the Ministry of Science and Research.

the online platform "meinparlament.at" (My Parliament) which facilitates direct contacts between citizens and their representatives in parliament. Another site for questions to politicians is "wahltotal.at". A site which allows testing the congruence of one's political profile with that of a specific political party is "wahlkabine.at" (Polling Booth). Already introduced with the national election in 2002, it has become quite popular, attracting over two million individual uses since then. The same function is offered by "politikkabine.at".<sup>11</sup>

As yet there is hardly any data on the number of participants and further socio-demographic characteristics of these projects. An investigation on eParticipation among youth undertaken by the former Ministry of Health, Family and Youth [17] provides an overview on some 40 projects surveyed between 2007 and 2008. The projects fall into three categories of participation: (1) the creation of websites; (2) planning of youth activities; and (3) discussions of political issues. Some projects of the second category included engaging youth via discussion fora, sometimes leading to quite vivid online interaction. However, this was hardly the case with top-down initiated projects. The third category gains increasing importance: e.g., discussion fora in connection with youth parliaments, interactions with politicians on youth-specific issues, engaging young people in developing youth policies in their home towns via wikis, and provision of information on elections and political parties, often in combination with games and interactive elements. Local level projects prevail and a large variety of technologies is employed (e.g. content management systems, weblogs, wikis, geo tagging). The study shows that eParticipation offerings targeting young people have to face strong competition from successful web 2.0 sites and makes it especially difficult for top-down initiated projects.

A further application area of growing importance is eParticipation in environmental issues. A recent study identified a dozen of such projects [18], many of them stipulating mandatory participation from civil society. Most of them targeted the general public, some the organised public and included formal as well as informal procedures. The majority of eParticipation cases are initiated by public administration and political institutions; invitations to participate mainly concern subjects at a strategic level, less often at concrete project levels; the dominating form is consultation and very often discussions among participants are intended as well. Outcomes contributed to opinion formation on behalf of decision-makers, only in some cases they were implemented in policy decisions. No justification was provided for non-consideration and evaluations of eParticipation were generally missing.

A general problem is the lacking overview on eParticipation possibilities and integrative tools for accessing political information on the Internet. This lack is not the only factor impeding electronic public engagement. Barriers to the use of eGovernment as well as eParticipation are connected to socio-demographic factors concerning political participation in general (see section 2.1) and to technology-specific aspects and digital divides in particular. In Austria the divide due to the lack of area-wide broadband access has received special attention. In 2003 a federal broadband initiative has been launched with support by similar initiatives at provincial level. An aver-

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<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.meinparlament.at/>, <http://wahltotal.at/> and <http://politikkabine.at>

age of 55 percent of households had a broadband connection by 2008,<sup>12</sup> but strong imbalances between urban and rural areas persist [19:42]. Another initiative ("eAccessibility") deals with problems concerning people with special needs [20:12]. Austria has committed itself to the implementation of guidelines developed by the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) which envisages that all websites of public administrations are accessible to people with disabilities. In April 2007, the Austrian Federal Chancellery and all Federal Ministries have launched an accessibility survey in order to report on the situation in this area [21].

A separate strand of eParticipation which has been a research subject and a field of pilot projects in Austria for already a number of years with proponents in academia, IT industry and politics is eVoting [22]. Starting in 2004, working groups of the Ministry of Internal Affairs particularly discussed legal and technical aspects as well as international developments and experiences. eVoting is not part of the existing electoral law in Austria, but has been applied in specific sectors such as the Austrian Chamber of Commerce and the Board of Listeners and Viewers of the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation. In May 2009 eVoting was offered as an optional channel for the casting of votes at the election to the Austrian National Students Union and aroused a controversy on trust and security issues.<sup>13</sup>

### 3 The Austrian Policy Framework for eParticipation

#### 3.1 Actors Promoting eGovernment and eParticipation

At the EU-level eParticipation is closely interlinked with policy documents on eGovernment. Also in Austria the domain of eGovernment has become a major driver to explore new tools based on ICT for involving citizens in public debate and decision-making. The overall coordination of eGovernment policies and activities lies within the competence of the *Federal Chancellery* in Austria. The *platform "Digitales Österreich"* (Platform Digital Austria) operates as a strategic umbrella of an elaborated organisational structure providing for central coordination across all levels of government. Its top management level is represented by the CIO of Federal Government, the head of the Federal ICT Strategy Unit and the speaker of the Platform. The *E-Government Working Group* organises the cooperation of federal, regional and local authorities. The *E-Government Innovation Centre* (EGIZ) serves as a competence centre for innovative technologies and solutions. A number of organisations contribute to implementing eGovernment and eParticipation respectively. The *Austrian Federal Computing Centre* (Bundesrechenzentrum – BRZ) offers solutions for eParticipation and has initiated various pilot projects [23]. The *Working Group on E-Democracy and E-Participation*, an inter-ministerial and expert forum at the Federal

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<sup>12</sup> See statistic "Haushalte mit Breitbandverbindung 2008 nach Bundesländern", Download: [http://www.statistik.at/web\\_de/suchergebnisse/index.html](http://www.statistik.at/web_de/suchergebnisse/index.html)

<sup>13</sup> See <http://papierwahl.at/>

Chancellery contributes to drafting an eDemocracy strategy.<sup>14</sup> The *Data Protection Commission* is responsible for privacy issues. The *Secure Information Technology Centre* (A-SIT) is in charge of the Citizen Card for identification and authentication of citizens in online procedures.

Regarding the commitment of political actors towards implementing new concepts of digital democracy, empirical studies suggest some sceptical views on the current state in Austria and on its prospects. Mahrer and Krimmer [7] found a high level of scepticism towards eDemocracy among members of parliament from all political parties. Objections were formulated as concerns about unequal conditions, security and privacy issues, and potential manipulation. Politicians were well informed about different concepts of eDemocracy but very actively opposed it. Pretending that "the ordinary citizen was 'uninterested' in politics and 'unqualified' to participate" [7:36], politicians tended to oppose change on different grounds in collective agreement. The study concludes that the scepticism against enlarged citizen engagement "is driven by the fear of a lasting loss of power for the political elite when supporting e-democracy" [7:38]. Another research project [24] investigated the Austrian discourse on eGovernment and its democratic potential. Analysing the process of the Austrian E-Government Act, Bargmann [8:113] found that even though the European Commission points out the aim of eGovernment to enhance democratic processes and to improve the development and implementation of government policies, this aspect has been neglected in the Austrian political debate. Most of the political parties seem to have delayed this topic to an undefined future point in time; only the Green Party criticised that the chance to include elements of participatory democracy and to develop public information has been passed up.

Contrary to these indications of a neglect of options for public engagement and barriers to its advancement, initiatives in some sections of government in Austria point towards a supportive attitude. Policy developments at European level were certainly major stimuli. In particular, the *Renewed EU Sustainable Development Strategy* [24] stressing involvement of citizens as well as involvement of businesses and social partners as policy guiding principles, together with principles of Good Governance [25] had an influence. The linkage between sustainable development, governance and greater involvement of the civil society has been established in the Austrian Strategy for Sustainable Development of 2002 [26]. In the same year a *Strategic Group on Participation*<sup>15</sup> was set up on the initiative of the Ministry of the Environment and the Austrian Society for Environment and Technology (ÖGUT). The group aims at promoting awareness of participation in the public eye and among decision-makers in politics, public administration and business. It elaborates participation strategies for policies, especially those relevant to the environment and to sustainability. An important recent step was taken with a project by order of the Federal Chancellery and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management: An inter-ministerial working group in co-operation with chambers, NGOs and external experts elaborated a manual on '*Standards for Public Participation*' [26, 27]. Approved by the Council of Ministers in July 2008, it is to serve as a practical guide for public administration officials.

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<sup>14</sup> See <http://reference.e-government.gv.at/E-Democracy.981.0.html>

<sup>15</sup> See <http://www.partizipation.at/index.php?english>

Also in the context of law-making at the federal parliament there are developments towards some form of eParticipation [28]. While law making has been transformed with the implementation of the eLaw workflow system<sup>16</sup>, including the promulgation of laws on the Internet, the process of evaluating draft legislation still lacks an electronic consultation environment. Options for extending participation in the legislative process supported by electronic tools are being studied. They include the question of suitable designs for eParticipation in the legislative process, in particular on bills proposed by ministries [29] and reflections on political rationales as well as functional requirements of an electronic platform for evaluating draft laws [28:49pp.].

### 3.2 Policies on eParticipation and eDemocracy

Specific policies addressing eParticipation in Austrian political practice are just about to be initiated. In June 2008, the *Working Group on E-Democracy and E-Participation* within the Federal Chancellery has released a position paper on "E-Democracy & E-Participation in Austria" [30] which accomplishes first clarifications on basic topics of eParticipation like different forms, potentials and questions of its institutional embedding. It provides a set of suggestions and recommendations serving as starting point for developing a national eParticipation strategy. The objective is not to install plebiscitary, direct democracy or to compete with the representative model of democracy, but to complement it and to foster civil society participation according the ideal of the "interactive state" [30: 4pp.]. The model stands for an evolutionary transformation of governance from a monolithic state to a pluralistic networking with the business sector and civil society. The future is seen as "governance webs" delivering public services and also forming political processes. Participation in the narrower sense is understood as making use of (at least) two-way communication, i.e. consultation and cooperation. Most current eParticipation initiatives<sup>17</sup> go beyond merely providing information and offer participation via discussion fora, weblogs, and opinion polls. Nevertheless, the projects are hardly ever connected to actual political decision-making. The position paper emphasises the necessity of multiple channels of participation [30:18]. These should also help to adjust the strong media concentration in Austria. Furthermore, e-tools are seen as complementary to formal procedures. Synergies with already existing eGovernment services shall be sought, e.g. with the Citizen Card [30:19pp.]. The '*Standards for Public Participation*' and the '*Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member states on electronic democracy*'<sup>18</sup> offer some input when elaborating an eParticipation strategy comprising principles, measures and instruments (the latter document has been produced under the Austrian chair of CAHDE, the Ad hoc Committee on eDemocracy of the Council of Europe).

National policies such as Austria's Strategy on Sustainable Development or the implementation of the EU directive on establishing a framework for Community action in the field of water policy are another field of activities where eParticipation is get-

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<sup>16</sup> See [http://www.parlament.gv.at/SK/VLESESAAL/PUBLPD/ERECHT/2006-04-18\\_Publikation-Englisch.pdf](http://www.parlament.gv.at/SK/VLESESAAL/PUBLPD/ERECHT/2006-04-18_Publikation-Englisch.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> See table of Austrian participation projects in the Federal Chancellery's "Portal:EDeM", [http://www.ag.bka.gv.at/index.php/E-Participation\\_Projekte](http://www.ag.bka.gv.at/index.php/E-Participation_Projekte)

<sup>18</sup> See [http://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user\\_upload/bmeia/draft\\_Reco\\_as\\_adopted\\_08114.pdf](http://www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user_upload/bmeia/draft_Reco_as_adopted_08114.pdf)



ting relevant. Mandatory civic participation is stipulated at various levels, including strategy, program and project levels, and invites the support by electronic means. The "Common Declaration on the Local Agenda 21 in Austria" enacted in 2003 stimulated a multitude of local and regional participatory processes aiming at sustainable development, including the use of electronic tools in various forms.

The active Government Programme for the period 2008-2013<sup>19</sup> contains plans for initiatives in advancing eGovernment and the chapter on state and administrative reform envisions increased citizen orientation. However, as regards the legal situation in Austria, there are no specific policies setting out citizens' rights in eParticipation.<sup>20</sup> Various policy measures had relevant catalyst or infrastructure functions for the implementation of eParticipation: The *E-Austria in e-Europe Programme (2002)* by the Federal Chancellery is the Austrian equivalent to the European Commission's e-Europe initiative. The *Decision on Electronic Law-Making (2001)* aimed at facilitating and accelerating Austrian law-making by implementing a completely electronic process for creating legislation. A number of initiatives have been launched earlier to foster diffusion of and equal access to ICTs, e.g. the *Information Society Action Plans* of 1997 and 1998 which started to define a legal framework for the information society and aimed at implementing new public information services. The *Information Society Programme* had addressed the topic of eDemocracy for the first time. More recent activities include the *Austrian electronic network (AT:net) initiative (2007)* supporting the introduction of innovative services and the further diffusion of broadband access, the survey on barrier-free web accessibility [21], and the *Internet Offensive*,<sup>21</sup> initiated by the Federal Government in 2008.

The recent government initiative "Entscheidend-bist-du" (YOU are decisive) aims at raising interest in politics and democratic involvement. Measures to increase awareness of the various electronic forms of political engagement include the support of eVoting by the science ministry. The whole initiative was launched in 2007 as an accompanying measure of the reduction of the minimum age for participation in elections to the age of 16 and lies in the hands of the Ministry of Science and Research together with the Ministry of Education and Culture.<sup>22</sup> One of the various types of measures within this initiative, a so called DemoLAB, has been explicitly dedicated to eDemocracy and involved the Minister of Science and Research in discussion with college students.

Finally, a very recent indication of increased attention to eParticipation in public policy concerns the awareness of information barriers mentioned earlier. Up to now there has been no overview on eParticipation offerings and citizens lack information on opportunities for engagement in matters of public interest. This barrier is supposed to be reduced as the Federal Chancellery has taken the initiative in creating an integrative portal for eParticipation offerings.

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<sup>19</sup> See <http://www.bka.gv.at/DocView.axd?CobId=32965>

<sup>20</sup> A number of relevant legal documents refer to eParticipation more generally, such as the *E-Government Act (2004; 2008)*, the *Electronic Signature Act (2000)*, the *Data Protection Act (2000)*, the *Information Re-Use Act (2005)* and the *Environmental Information Act (2004)*.

<sup>21</sup> See <http://internetoffensive.at/>

<sup>22</sup> See <http://www.entscheidend-bist-du.at/?pg=content2&id=3>

## 4 Conclusion

This paper aimed at assessing the status of eParticipation in Austria from a top-down perspective, focusing on the policy framework and emerging public policies on eParticipation. It intends to offer a tentative assessment of relevant developments against the background of changing forms of governance which has to be followed by further, more directed and thorough analyses.

A major outcome is that citizen participation and eParticipation in particular have been playing a marginal role within the Austrian political system with its culture favouring governance by state and corporatist actors. But both public participation as such and participation in electronic ways seem to be gaining increased importance in public policies in more recent years. The enhancement of public participation by principles of good governance and in policy documents such as the Austrian Strategy for Sustainable Development of 2002, the establishment of a Strategic Group on Participation with support by the Ministry of the Environment, the approval of 'Standards for Public Participation' by the Council of Ministers in 2008, the preparation of a national eDemocracy strategy and a recent governmental democracy initiative aimed at young people are signs that participation plays an increasing role for government. At the same time this does not mean that eParticipation and citizen engagement are promoted throughout government as research has also shown rejection of citizen participation by politicians and public administration officials.

While Austria's political institutions have been laggards in experimenting with and adopting eParticipation, in comparison with forerunners like the USA or the UK, Italy and Germany in Europe, there are a number of recent initiatives and projects, particularly in the field of youth participation and participation in environmental issues. Institutional actors actively dealing with eParticipation and promoting it, respectively, include those responsible for eGovernment around the Federal Chancellery, the Federal Computing Centre, and ministries such as those for Agriculture and Environment, Education and Culture, Science and Research. The Working Group on E-Democracy and E-Participation at the Federal Chancellery drafting an eDemocracy strategy is a further indicator that eParticipation has become a subject of public policy in Austria. However, it has to be noted that the recent upswing of supportive initiatives for public participation and eParticipation go together with ambivalent attitudes among politicians and administration. Overall, a hesitant attitude among policy-makers towards eParticipation still prevails and indications of a gradual change towards a more "interactive governance" style are patchy rather than a coherent policy change.

Given the initial state of eParticipation initiatives in Austria, a systematic evaluation of results and consequences has not yet been conducted. From available evidence only first trends and some lessons can be outlined. As our collaborative research within the EU-funded Network of Excellence DEMO-net<sup>23</sup> showed, some patterns are shared with other countries: Experimenting, testing and learning are still in the foreground; top-down initiated projects often have problems to attract larger numbers of participants; information dissemination and gathering, rather than deliberative forms of participation and integration into decision-making, prevail. At what pace, in which direction eParticipation will develop and which functions to which extent it will fulfil,

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<sup>23</sup> See <http://www.demo-net.org/>

e.g. regarding two poles such as instilling democracy through greater citizen empowerment or keeping the growing potential of elite-challenging citizen activities within the limits of representative democracy through greater acquiescence with government policies, is still open.

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