

# e-Democracy in Flanders

The use of and attitude towards new Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to support citizen participation in government policy – a survey of key stakeholders

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## Management summery

In 2006 Indigov carried out a survey for viWTA (\*) to explore an apparently key question for the future development of e-Participation: how are the different interest groups in society positioned regarding the opportunities and restrictions of using ICT in participation processes and, in a broader sense, regarding the role of (ICT-supported) citizen participation within contemporary representative democracy? Calling on both qualitative and quantitative research methods, the study was based on a broad selection of three groups of stakeholders: (I) the individual Flemish citizen, who may be a member of an organisation; (II) Flemish politicians at all government levels; and (III) the organised societal midfield in Flanders.

The study clearly shows that, for each stakeholder in Flanders, there is a big divide between the current and desired levels of citizen participation in all its forms (information, consultation, active participation, co-decision-making). The importance the different stakeholders attach to these kinds of participation decreases however as one moves up the 'participation ladder' – from informing the citizen, through consulting and active participation to co-decision-making.

The opinions of politicians and the midfield organisations are divided about direct democracy and direct decision-making powers for the private citizen. They do support representative consensus democracy, but more input from the participating citizen is required. New technologies, together with traditional instruments, can contribute significantly, according to each stakeholder. But the instrumental belief of politicians and the midfield in ICT (as an information channel) is stronger than their belief in its democratic potential.

*This report is based on the survey “E-democratie in Vlaanderen, Stakeholderanalyse”, commissioned by viWTA (Vlaams Instituut voor Wetenschappelijk en Technologisch Aspectenonderzoek)*

(\*) viWTA – Society and Technology. This autonomous institute offers content support to Members of the Flemish Parliament on scientific and technology subjects and developments that are relevant for society as a whole.

# I Participation and e-Democracy: Definitions and scanning the literary horizon

## I.1 Selected definitions

Democracy in this study is defined as a political system that organises society and attempts to peacefully solve societal problems and issues. The existence of a democratic or civil culture that builds on and legitimises a formal system of delegation of power is of the essence (Dahlgren, 2000). This delegation of power from a sovereign people to its representatives is the core of our representative, parliamentary democracy.

Representative Democracy means that citizens do not plan and execute a policy in a direct way, but that their political representatives will carry out this task for them through free elections during which they are handed a mandate to embody and execute the will of the people (Dahl, 1998).

An important distinction must be made between a majority-ruled democracy and a consensus democracy (Lijphart, 1999). The democracy of the majority is a pure form of representative democracy whereby the parliamentary majority, as the embodiment of the will of the majority of the people, is allowed to take any decision that may go against the will of the minority.

In the consensus-democracy model, power is shared in such a way that the majority of the people have to take into account the wishes of the minority. The powers to decide within the parliamentary majority are embedded in a series of checks and balances, i.e. correction mechanisms and counterweights.

The most important institutional counterpart of the representative democracy and of a consensus democracy in particular, is direct democracy. Direct democracy implies the active participation of citizens in the decision-making process. This can be through adding subjects on the political agenda (popular initiative), through elections, approving or disapproving binding (or non-binding) legislation (referendum), vetoing legislation that has been voted through (corrective referendum), and so on. Citizens can in this way add their preferences to the political process in a direct and non-mediated way. The people negotiate for themselves and no longer decide through their representatives.

Participative Democracy is not – unlike representative democracy and direct democracy – a certain institutional form that shapes itself as a democracy. By participative democracy, we mean a democracy that offers plenty of opportunities to participate and in which citizens actively use these forms of participation. In other words, with this kind of democracy, citizens do more than just cast their vote at regular intervals – either to appoint representatives or to help with the making of a political decision. It means they also

participate in the political process in other ways, showing their preferences through advisory committees, opinion polls, petitions, parliamentary requests or numerous other forms of participation.

When new Information and Communication Technologies are used to help shape the citizen participation process, we call this e-Democracy.

## 1.2 Four participation phases

Participation is used as a concept in many societal contexts (e.g. education, company works councils, local associations). In this study we look at participation in the political processes of both policy-makers and decision-takers. In principle it is the citizen who participates in different phases of the policy cycle – from creating the agenda to policy evaluation – and he/she can do this at different levels of participation in this political and democratic process (Macintosh et al, 2005; OECD, 2003). In this report we have continually made the distinction between the following phases of the so-called participation ladder (MORI, 2005; Macintosh et al., 2005; OECD, 2001):

Information: the citizen is informed by the government and is kept informed about its policy.  
Consultation: the citizen is consulted by the government and asked to give feedback on government policy.

Active participation: the citizen thinks and acts together with the government to help create definitions of policy issues and their solutions.

Co-decision making: the citizen can directly decide on policy matters.

We can see a hierarchical distinction here, since the next step on this participation ladder defines a more prominent role for the citizen's active participation, involvement and responsibility. The steps of the ladder move up from being informed by the government to a form of partnership with the government. Whether organised or not, the citizen must be actively engaged in providing input, advising, helping to create policy, etc.

At the 'active participation' level, we frequently see a distinction between 'advising' and co-producing – depending on whether the citizen's input in the government policy process is seen to be binding or not (Edelenbos & Monnikhof, 2001; Loyens & Van de Walle, 2006).

The citizen acquires powers to decide by himself at the 'highest level': here he can take binding political decisions and responsibility for the ultimate decision does not only lie with the government. The different forms of participation have different objectives and consequences. But in every case, the most important effect and the ultimate function of participation is to convey political preferences from the people to the political decision-makers.

## 1.3 Toward new forms of democracy?

Political participation plays a vital and complementary role in a representative democracy.

This role can be clearly seen following the recent changes in representative and participative democracy in Flanders and elsewhere. Research in Flanders shows that the public now has less confidence in the institutions and the workings of a traditional representative democracy. A second trend, marked by an increase in the numbers of undecided voters, is the lower level of interest in traditional forms of political participation, such as party membership (Putnam, 1995, 2000). As a result of the lower numbers and the looser affiliations with voters at all levels, including the midfield, parties have become less of a member movement and less anchored in society. This in turn has reduced their legitimacy as the intermediary between the citizen and government. For the same reasons, the representative role of the midfield can no longer be guaranteed.

A countermovement has created a more critical citizen who is able to voice political preferences in new means and ways and is able to engage in politics in an active way, expressing his concerns outside more formal opportunities to participate (Norris, 1999; 2002; Stoll & Hooghe, 2004). More traditional forms of participation are becoming less important and are being replaced by other, more loosely formed and flexible forms of political participation (e.g. silent marches, ethical consumerism, e-mail petitions). These are equally important in conveying political preferences to the government. They also have an important democratic effect, by deepening and broadening their base.

It is in this framework that ICT reaches out with new electronic channels and tools to support the citizen in his quest to participate in policy and political decision-making processes. New technologies can be implemented at each of the abovementioned participation levels to help the citizen participate in government policy. e-Democracy is therefore about providing information in an electronic format, e-Consultation and e-Participation processes and forms of direct democracy whereby citizens make decisions by means of electronic discussions and voting. However, the question here is how stakeholders of the representative and participative democracy in Flanders take democracy into account and to what extent Flanders has a viable framework for e-Democracy.

## 2 Stakeholder research: Attitude towards e-Democracy

### 2.1 Reference framework of the survey

In the spring of 2006, Indigov used a combination and integration of qualitative and quantitative analytical methods – with representative samples of each stakeholder group – to check stakeholders' perceptions of and attitudes towards participation and e-Democracy.

The research questions centred on five major themes.

1. What is the general view of representative and participative democracy in Flanders?
2. Is there a need for participation? What are the current levels of participation in policy and what levels would people like to have?
3. To what extent can ICT drive e-democratic processes? What are the possibilities, restrictions and net effects?
4. What are the current interests, user experiences and satisfaction levels for the existing instruments for participation?
5. Is there interest in Flanders in building e-Democracy and is this supporting base large enough for each of the different stakeholders?

The qualitative research part comprised two focus groups of in total 25 citizens, in-depth interviews with Flemish MPs and political party staffers, and in-depth interviews with representatives of traditional midfield organisations and newer social groups.

The quantitative research part was made up of surveys with representative samples of the three stakeholder groups: (1) a direct mail survey with a representative sample of the Flemish population; (2) an online survey with all politicians with a mandate at the federal, regional and provincial level as well as a sample survey from Flemish local councillors; (3) and an online survey with representatives of large, traditional organisations to small, young organisations from different sectors of the societal midfield.

A total of 655 citizens, including Internet users and non-Internet users, completed the questionnaire. This covered their attitude to and use of ICT; their visions and expectations with regard to participative and representative democracy; and their personal experience, interests and attitudes with regard to traditional participation, which is not supported by ICT, as well as new, electronic means and instruments of policy participation. A further 371 politicians and 84 midfield organisations took part in this research.

## 2.2 Results of the survey

### 2.2.1 General views of representative and participative democracy in Flanders

The survey supports the view that the majority of citizens, politicians and midfield organisations in Flanders support the traditional model of representative consensus-based democracy. This is true for the citizens and certainly includes the politicians. But it is also true for the midfield, which, considering its intermediary role, believes that democracy by consensus is a fundamental given.

Support for the representative system in which politicians are elected to represent the citizen, and take decisions in their place, is not unanimous. One in four citizens believe it is not up to the politicians they elect to take policy decisions by themselves. Large minorities in the citizen group (29%), politicians (39%) and the midfielders (34%) believe moreover that citizens should have a direct say in policy-making. Some voices also call for majority democracy, direct democracy and direct decision-making powers for the citizen. From our research, there is evidence that direct democracy is driving a wedge between the parties concerned. Citizens and politicians hold different opinions on the matter. The midfielders defend their position, although the newcomers in this groups will fight for more direct power for the individual.

In spite of support for the representative-consensus model, the mutual trust of different stakeholders or institutional partners supporting the democratic political system is not a clear given or a position that is guaranteed to last. Citizens have clear expectations when they mandate politicians to represent their interest through midfield organisations and to air certain opinions via the media.

There seems however to be a problem of trust – not in the system as such, but rather in the institutions and the people that participate in it. One third of all citizens (31%) have no faith in their politicians' ability to work for the general good. Up to 45% of all citizens are of the opinion that midfield organisations no longer represent the citizen, but only themselves. Just 15% disagree with this position.

As for politicians, it seems that citizen participation delivers clear signals, feedback and ideas (using the citizen as a sounding board). But midfielders remain an important partner, perhaps even the most important partner for checking the implementation ability of policy measures. However, even if politicians and the traditional midfielders do support each other in the decision-making process, they also have critical things to say to each other. For instance, 37% of politicians are convinced that midfield organisations do not represent the citizen. Yet 34% of the midfield organisations say citizens cannot rely on politicians when they claim they serve the greater good.

Media organisations are criticised on all fronts for their execution of an essentially democratic role. The majority of politicians (64%) and midfield organisations (59%) believe that the media do not mirror public opinion correctly; respectively 56% and 59% disagree with the position that the media inform the public correctly.

Trust in the workings of a representative democracy is not absolute, because the citizen is too often not in the picture. One of the main conclusions of this research is that 64% of all citizens, 43% of all politicians and 48% of the midfield organisations believe the citizen does

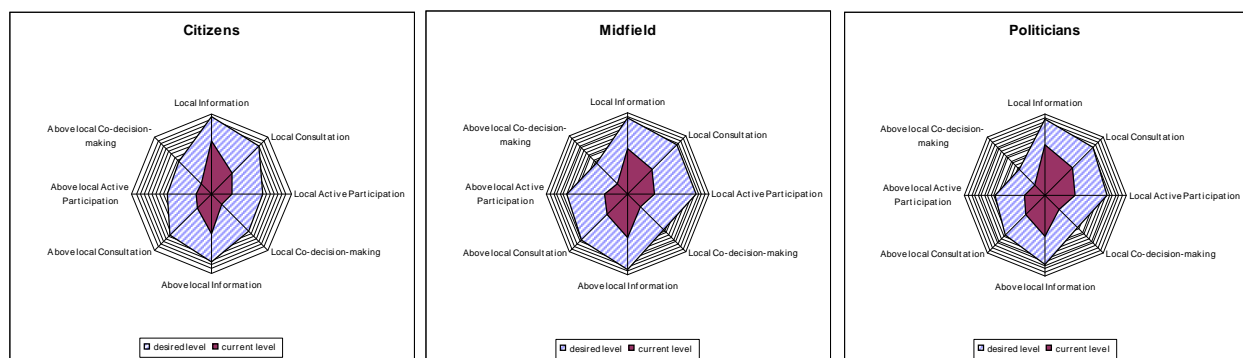
not have enough influence on policymaking. A mere five percent of the citizens, 31% of the politicians and 16% of the midfield organisations disagree with this opinion. There is no standard answer to the question of whether citizens really must have a more direct say in policy-making; we only concluded in this study that practical reasons make this difficult to achieve.

There is a general consensus though that citizens not only have to be more actively involved in the political policy process but that they need to become a real ‘actor’ in this process, an active policy partner instead of a passive policy subject. This will oblige politicians to be far more responsive, since we cannot ignore the conclusion that more than half of all citizens (55%) believe that it makes no sense to pay more attention to participation – because no one seems to listen to the public voice of citizens in the first place.

The research found that traditional representative-consensus democracy gets grassroots support from the majority of all parties concerned. There is acknowledgement of the fundamental importance of citizen participation as an extra element in the representative system. Most people believe that ICT is a useful tool (not an objective as such) to help shape this participatory component.

## 2.2.2 The need to participate: Current and desired levels of policy participation

The graph below shows on a score from 0 to 10 the importance accorded by citizens, politicians and midfield organisations to citizen participation at the local level and higher up, and to what extent this participation exists today. The research thus makes the distinction between the phases in the participation ladder of informing, consulting, active participation and co-deciding.



**This graphs highlights four main findings:**

- There is an immense gap between the desired and current level of participation, whatever its form (information, consultation, active participation and co-decision making), according to each group of stakeholders.
- Active Participation is more important at the local level than at any higher level, i.e. when the personal interaction of the citizen is very strong (close to his/her working and living environment).
- The desire to participate decreases as one climbs the participation ladder, going from informing, consulting and active participation to co-decision making.

- The midfield organisations and the politicians have higher expectations than citizens of participation. But it is the citizens who are least satisfied with the current situation.

Everyone is convinced that the level of information is an essential condition for participation. Informing the citizen is an absolute top priority for all stakeholders. Politicians and midfield organisations rate the importance of information at the local government level at 9.3 out of 10. The citizen needs to be well informed about policies, but there is still much work to be done to achieve an accessible, user-friendly and understandable way of informing everyone. The four out of 10 score shows that citizens believe that above local government levels score below par.

Consultation gets a high approval rate at the local government level (the score here is six out of 10, while it is 5.8 out of 10 at the higher levels). More and more citizens disengage however when they are asked to perform more active forms of participation that require more involvement and more responsibility: active participation scores at the local government level are 5.2 out of 10, while the higher levels are rated 4.4 out of 10. In addition, growing numbers of politicians, and to a lesser extent the midfield organisations, tend to become less involved when there is a genuine project requiring dialogue and discussion with citizens – situations that are intended to allow citizens to think about and work on policy problems and solutions.

It is the midfield organisations that have the biggest expectations for citizen participation, according to the survey score. Politicians as a group also have higher expectations than the citizens themselves. It is important to take into account the significant gap between people with higher education and active ICT/Internet use and the lower skilled and less affluent group who do not use Internet, as well as the gap between different groups or types within the other stakeholder environments (e.g. female politicians are often much more open to participation and discussions with people than their male counterparts).

Citizens are most critical of or have a negative attitude to the current level of government participation: scores are average concerning the current options for consultation (2.1 out of 10) and active participation (1.6 out of 10). In fact the discrepancy between desire and reality is most extreme among midfield organisations. Compared to other stakeholders, politicians have higher estimations of the current level of citizen participation.

From the slowdown seen in the participation ladder for 'co-decision', it is clear that both politicians and midfielders will step back if participation is to be defined as direct decision power for the citizen. Nonetheless, within both political and midfield groups there are less traditional groups who will strive for direct participation and the application of direct democracy wherever possible.

A similar image of 'co-decision' can be found at the citizen level. As a group, citizens are 'active participants' and 'co-deciders' and so they will find participation channels that suit the group. This does not mean that the citizen wishes to have more direct decision-making powers or to be stronger than the other stakeholders. For example, both citizens and politicians give the same rating to the importance of co-deciding (4.5 out of 10), while midfielders are the most outspoken proponents of this (5.4 out of 10). Moreover, one can see a certain paradox here. For the highly educated, socially active citizen – who in principle favours citizen participation – has reservations about direct decision-

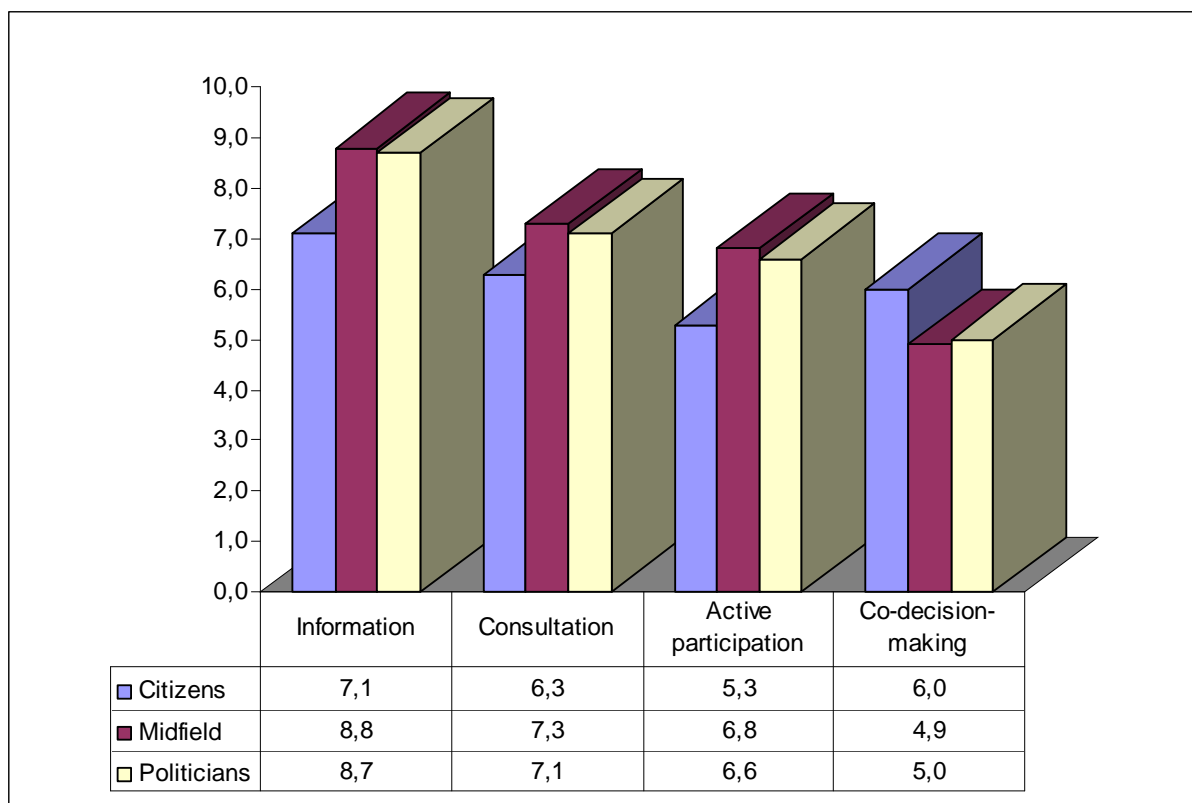
making powers being given to citizens. This reticence – which stems from the obstacles and dangers they believe are inherently present in this – is mostly due to the conflict between the ‘power of numbers’ or the ‘dictate of the (small) mathematical majority’ and the quest to reach a consensus (via dialogue and group formation) that takes minority interests into account.

### 2.2.3 Usefulness of ICT: Possibilities, restrictions and effects of e-Democracy

The graph below shows on a scale from 0-10 how useful citizens, politicians and midfield organisations believe ICT is for empowering citizens to participate in government. Again, depending on the phase of the so-called participation ladder, there is a distinction to be made between informing, consulting, active participation and co-deciding.

In general ICT is considered a highly useful tool for supporting citizen participation in government. Only non-Internet users have a negative attitude to this and reject the use of new technologies (due to the fact they cannot or do not wish to own ICT tools or simply because they state that they do not need Internet).

ICT users among citizens – and first and foremost the politicians and the midfielders – believe that the information part of the e-Democratic process needs highlighting. Many people believe ICT is useful as an information channel. Because of this belief, e-Government and electronic information provision are a government priority. If available government and policy information are to be accessible and user-friendly for all, a thorough structural approach must be adopted. This remains a huge challenge for the near future.



We found more reticence about further steps in the e-participation process, especially among politicians and midfielders. This reticence can be traced to the attitude about the participation format itself (e.g. active participation) as well as to specific and/or negative user experiences. All the same, the use of ICT – thanks to the speed and directness of digital media – is deemed appropriate for organising consultation processes in a more efficient way. But for active processes, which are dialogue and discussion-oriented, ICT is seen as a less appropriate tool.

When it comes to ‘co-deciding’, any perception of the added value of ICT for organising such processes is called into question by people’s perception of the principles. This is catching on less with citizens, who seem to like e-voting behaviour more than politicians do.

Overall there is a genuine belief in ICT’s potential and added value for supporting the democratic participation process. But there are several visible differences between stakeholders. Politicians perceive ICT, and implicitly e-Democracy, more as an additional tool, i.e. with a functional added value in particular (information provider, fast and immediate feedback, a new antenna to pick up citizens’ signals, etc.). Although this image is somewhat blurred by negative experiences, politicians’ perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of using ICT tools could not be viewed as a firm belief in the democratic capacities of ICT and the political debate in electronic format. This underlines that only 43% of all politicians think Internet discussions are an interesting way to see what and how others think. It also shows that only 17% disagree with the position that Internet discussions rarely if ever yield any tangible results.

Take e-polls, where the attitude of politicians is, to put it mildly, ambiguous. Electronic polls offer a functional added value (the signal function), but politicians today are not convinced that e-consultations and e-participation tools are representative.

Midfielders are fairly indifferent about ICT and its use in the participation process, though one can also sense some anxiety among them. More than politicians care to admit, it is the midfielders who are keen to see the bright side of e-Democracy and who view it as a breath of fresh air that can enliven and enrich the societal debate with social and educational results (e.g. more knowledge and respect for other people’s beliefs).

New opportunities for political mobilisation can thus be created. However, the midfield organisations are eager to voice their doubts about the risk of fraud and manipulation in electronic consultations. They also have misgivings about the Internet. Can it be harnessed for a calm debate when the subject matter is policy issues? Do certain groups dominate the digital political debate? And are these discussions taking place between people who share a common denominator? From our interviews with representatives from the midfield, we could clearly detect their concerns about the impersonal and individual nature of electronic media use. We also noticed a certain level of resistance to this kind of behaviour, because a midfielder is above all a place for a social process (debate, consensus-building).

Citizens clearly have the strongest belief in ICT’s democratic potential. But there are still differences, because of the divide between those who use ICT and those who do not, as well as the unbelievers. Internet users give ICT a score of six or seven out of 10 for its ability to support consultation and participation processes; non-users rate this at 4.5 out of 10. The majority of people aged 60+ and those who left school aged 15 – who in total make up 47% and 70% respectively of the population of non-Internet users – are against e-Democracy.

The digital divide is above all governed by age and education; it is also the biggest obstacle to e-Democracy.

Overall, stakeholders expect citizens to participate more actively through the use of ICT (more in-depth democracy). At the same time, stakeholders do not necessarily see ICT as something able to attract more people to the policy-making process (broadening democracy). A lingering fear remains about excluding certain groups.

In the end, stakeholder opinions are divided as to the ability of e-Democracy to help close this divide or potentially increase the gap. But everyone agrees that citizen participation requires multiple channels. e-Democracy is much more than just the Internet. It also includes the use of interactive digital television and possibly other technical channels to reach a larger audience.

e-Democracy does not affect the basics of the political policy-making process or fundamentally change the role of the different stakeholders. Nor will it give the citizen a greater role in the policy-making process. Will the role of the midfielders be diminished? The study's conclusion is that this is not the case.

The use of ICT will not speed up the policy-making process for citizens and politicians, leaving intermediary organisations out of the game. For politicians, the midfield is an essential partner and for citizens it is an important intermediary channel for speaking out and participation. ICT use will create new opportunities for the midfield organisations to reach out to citizens and to mobilise them, in order to put pressure on the policies of the day.

#### 2.2.4 Interests, user experience and satisfaction with the participation tools

The different stakeholders have little or no knowledge and user experience when it comes to e-Democracy. But citizens show great interest in some tools, especially those who have Internet and wish to participate in the process. Among Internet users, 65% have a reasonably high to very strong interest in Internet polls and surveys. Almost half of the group is also interested in e-petitions. But when it comes to Internet forums, that level of interest drops to 27% of the Internet population. Electronic and non-electronic equivalents, e.g. paper-based or e-mailed petitions, are rated as equally valuable. Many people are still unfamiliar with e-participation, especially full-option interactive instruments such as online discussion forums or chat sessions about politics and policy-making. Moreover, satisfaction with both traditional and electronic tools is somewhat low.

Politicians, in relative terms, have more experience and have a keen eye for traditional participation tools designed for information and bonding, such as information sessions. But here they express only an average satisfaction. When it comes to new electronic tools, their enthusiasm dips when these tools move toward (inter)active participation. One in three politicians show a mild interest in online polls, while 37% say they have a strong or very strong interest in them.

As for online discussion forums, 28% of all politicians are reasonably interested while 20% are (very) strongly interested. They have limited experience of consultation and participative tools in the online world. Satisfaction scores here remain low and some politicians have a low perception level of e-Democracy. Negative experience with existing tools such as online

forums, where debates sometimes end up in mudslinging, colour their perception of e-democracy. Politicians struggle to see the added value of electronic debate.

A similar perception can be seen in the midfield organisations, though they do not mention so many negative experiences. Newer social organisations and groups that are actively engaged in citizenship and participation believe in ICT's potential for citizen participation.

### 3 Conclusions: is there a base to support e-Democracy in Flanders?

From the report it transpires there is a support base for e-Democracy in Flanders with different stakeholders. But that base is only present in specific groups within the different stakeholders.

One cannot say that all sections of the population support e-Democracy. And the same can be said about politicians and the midfield organisations. Within each stakeholder group, there are important differences in attitude and expectations about participation and e-Democracy. Based on our research and the scale of the cluster types, we have distinguished several types: one in five citizens and one in three politicians will immediately respond to the concept of e-Democracy. In general, a slim majority of citizens and politicians is open to citizen participation and the use of ICT to achieve this objective.

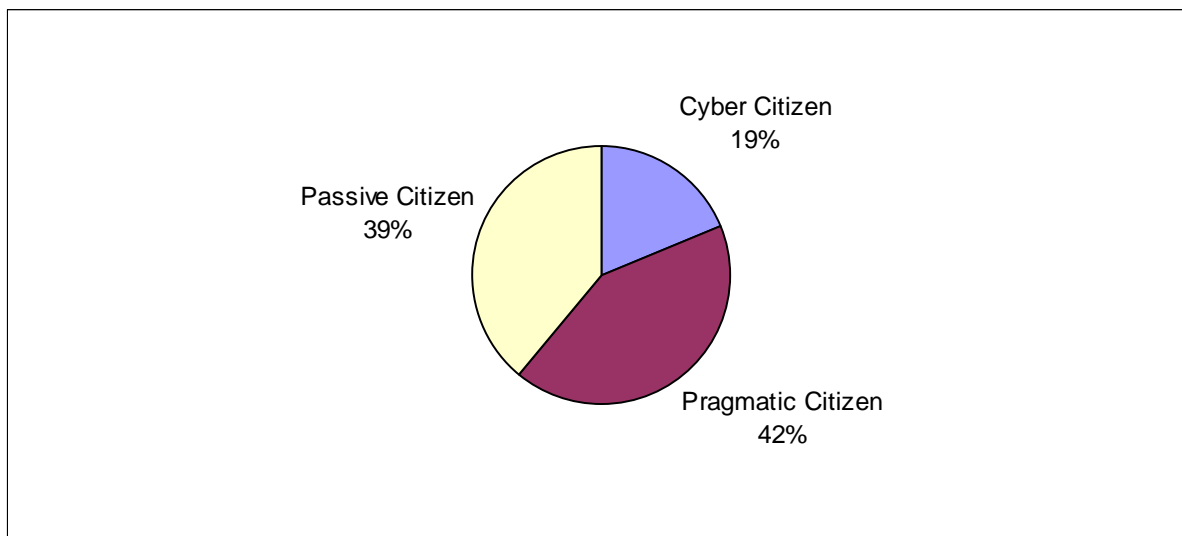
#### 3.1 Citizen, participation and e-democracy

e-Democracy is not a priority for Flemish citizens. This conclusion summarises earlier reports in which e-Democracy is not seen as a hot issue when it comes to defining a citizen's expectations for e-government.

From the research, we can define three distinct types of citizen when it comes to participation/ICT. In the short term, the 'Cyber Citizen' is most keen on e-Democracy initiatives. This type represents 19% of the Flemish population. Here we find strong support for e-Democracy, participation is high on the agenda and ICT is seen as a very useful tool for organising this. But this group also voices strong dissatisfaction with the current participation levels.

The 'Pragmatic Citizen' (42%) will follow when offered a framework, experience and success stories. Participation is important they say, but they make no further comments. ICT is an integral part of their pragmatic lives.

The 'Passive Citizen' (39%) is holding back. He or she may even hold a negative view of ICT. This group comprises the majority of non-Internet users. Such citizens are only marginally interested in helping to shape policies, both through traditional or electronic tools.



Even though the digital divide is closely linked to age and education, it is worth emphasising that this typology of the (electronic) participating citizen crosses the traditional socio-demographic fault lines (e.g. sex, age and education) in a significant way. When it comes to participation in organisations, there is a positive correlation with the interest of the person(s) involved in participating in policy-making: the socially active citizen has fewer qualms about being politically active and has an open and constructive attitude to e-Democracy. Most citizens also believe in linking participation and ICT.

**The ‘Cyber Citizen’ (19%): the innovators and early adopter**

Cyber Citizens are highly interested in politics, are male and over 40, not particularly socially active but rather a mildly active member of a political association, an advisory council or local neighbourhood workgroup. They are ICT-minded and attach great importance to citizen participation in all its forms (local and above, ICT-supported or not, ranging from informing to co-participating). Cyber Citizens believe in the potential of ICT to support democratic objectives. Because of this attitude and readiness to participate, they are one of the most directly accessible target groups for e-Democracy.

**The ‘Pragmatic Citizen’ (42 %): the silent majority**

Pragmatic Citizens are socially active and politically engaged. Relatively speaking, they tend to be female and young (30-50 years old) and have a higher education. They are more-than-averagely active in socially and politically oriented groups, are pragmatic ICT adopters and users with a modestly positive attitude. But they can still be critical, where necessary, of new technologies. Compared to other types, they are fairly happy about the current level of citizen participation. Yet they remain open to (non-)ICT projects that can help strengthen citizen participation in shaping policies. They see ICT as a complementary channel, but are not experimental or innovative. These citizens are open to e-participative projects, but will only sign up to e-Democracy when the recipe has been tried and tested and is proven to add value.

**The ‘Passive Citizen’ (39%): uninterested laggards**

Passive Citizens are less socially active and not inclined to show an interest in politics. They do not have higher education qualifications and are less interested in joining associations. These citizens show no interest in IT and may even have a negative attitude to it. Compared to others, they are often not connected to the Internet. This type of citizen shows little interest in policy-making, with either traditional or electronic tools. There is an expectation nevertheless that they wish to be informed about government policy and also to be heard on local issues that directly concern them. But they also find that these expectations are never met. Neither active participation nor electronic democracy is on the agenda but Passive Citizens’ involvement can be stimulated by efforts to inform and listen to them.

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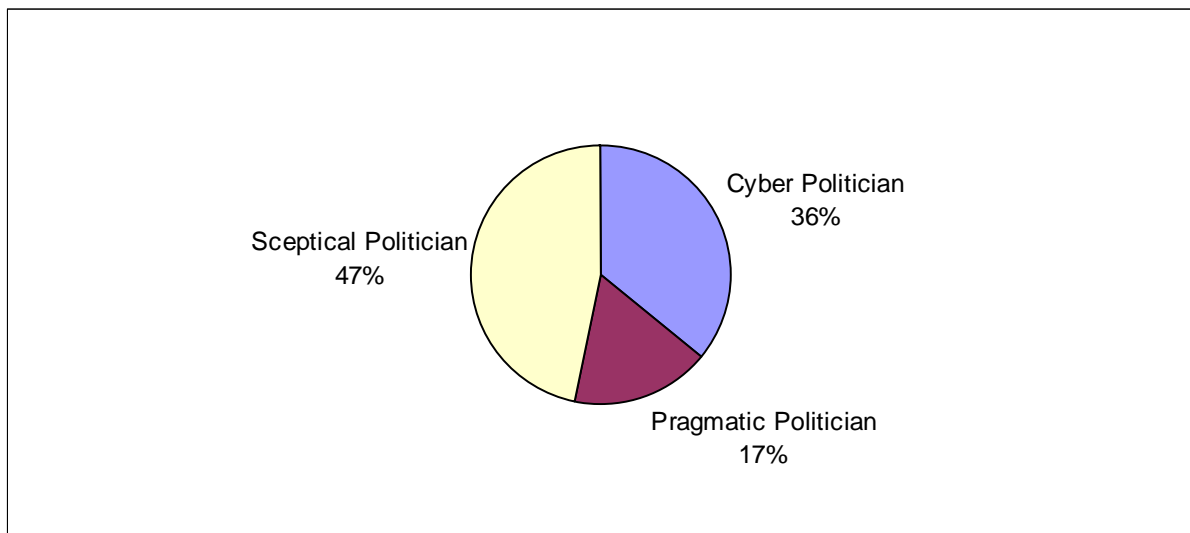
## 3.2 Politicians, participation and e-Democracy

e-Democracy is not high on the political agenda in Flanders. Most politicians have an ambivalent attitude to e-Democracy. Most of politicians say they are very much in favour of a representative democracy in which the politician plays a pivotal role. A significant minority, 31%, believes citizens have enough influence on politics; 26% of politicians have no opinion on the matter. However, politicians are also critical of the current level of citizen participation in government.

Flemish politicians believe improvements can and must be made to the quality of the tools for conveying information about government policy through ICT. They also often think that the level of citizen consultation and active participation is below par.

We can distinguish two groups here. Firstly, the traditional proponents of the current model of representative democracy, for whom citizen participation is not a priority (and where forms of direct democracy are almost completely excluded). This group does not have faith in ICT and will maybe only use it as a communication channel. These politicians (47%) are 'sceptical' about the democratic potential of ICT. The other half of politicians think more citizen participation activities are necessary, to reach the level of 'active participation' ('co-decision making' is not an option for this group). The 'Pragmatic Politician' (17%) has a much more negative view of the current levels of participation in the political process. This type is optimistic and open, but also more critical when it comes to the use of ICT – much more so than 'Cyber Politicians' (36%).

Almost all politicians are of the opinion that there should be more focus on ways of improving communications with the citizen. As regards consultation and participation tools, e-Democracy is sailing against the wind when it comes to the perception and current experience of this group.



**The ‘Cyber Politician’ (36%): ICT-minded proponents of citizen participation**

Cyber Politicians can be found in all political parties. They put citizen participation at the top of their agenda, at all participation and government levels. They also acknowledge that much still needs to be done in this field. They are strongly convinced of ICT’s potential to play a role and are very positive about e-Democracy.

**The ‘Pragmatic Politician’ (17%): ICT-critical advocates for citizen participation**

Pragmatic politicians are rarely members of a traditional party and can be found at both ends of the political spectrum. They strongly voice their beliefs in citizen participation, especially at the local level. But among them there is a significant divergence of viewpoint about the extent of citizen participation today. They tend to be open-minded, but look at ICT with a critical eye and define it as an extra means to strengthen the process of political participation.

**The ‘Sceptical Politician’ (47%): traditional followers of representative democracy**

Sceptical Politicians are in general members of a traditional political party, with a local political mandate; they are less inclined to believe in citizen participation (apart from informing the citizen). They will not support participation at levels higher than local government and are against direct democracy. They see ICT as a means to communicate but see no merit in the democratic potential of ICT.

### 3.3 Midfield, participation and e-Democracy

Within the midfield space, newer and smaller social organisations will act more radically and take more critical positions than large, traditional midfield organisations when it comes to the subject of existing representative democracy. Half of all large traditional organisations are against citizens having a direct say or participating, compared with only a quarter of the newer social group who oppose this position.

In general, however, midfield organisations all agree that participation, dialogue, group- and consensus-building, horizontal advisory groups and active citizen participation are the building blocks of any policy-making process. These midfield organisations rightly act as intermediary between citizen and politicians. Yet the divide between expectation and reality about citizen participation is felt more keenly here than anywhere else. With a view to closing the divide, this group believes that ICT is a functional and additional tool. Yet midfielders have not yet integrated ICT sufficiently in their own operational base in terms of the role and functions of ICT.

## 3.4 e-Democracy an open end

The potential for e-Democracy exists for the majority, albeit a slim one, of citizens and politicians in Flanders, according to this research. Overall with these groups, as well as in the societal midfield, we found a conviction that citizen participation is an essential addition: something that can reinforce the representative policy-making process. ICT is potentially a valuable addition to the traditional toolkit for participation. e-Democracy can feed and stimulate the societal debate, form public opinion and assist with the political policy-making process.

In spite of the current interest in new electronic tools, it is clear that people today have limited knowledge and experience of these tools. Current user experience is not very satisfactory in this respect. It is also noteworthy that four in 10 citizens are sharply critical of other means of participation in policy-making (with or without ICT), tend to reject it or take an apathetic attitude to it.

The different stakeholders support the current system of representative-consensus democracy, but are not blind to the shortcomings associated with the position of the citizen and his or her relationship with other stakeholders. Citizens show little interest in the policy-making process and seem not to believe much in the representative role of the other stakeholders. No broad support base exists among the stakeholders for a new participation model, built on more direct forms of (e)-Democracy. Nonetheless, there is a willingness to broaden the role of the citizen in the policy-making process from a subject to a partner, through use of ICT.

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## About the authors

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**Hugo Kerschot** is Managing Partner of Indigov. He realized as communication manager for the Information Service of the Belgian Prime Minister the first public service website in Belgium (early 1995). After passing through a number of internet start-up companies he developed for the European Commission as a Cap Gemini consultant, the web-based survey on Electronic Public Services, the European reference on e-government status measuring. In 2004 he joined Jo Steyaert in the start-up Indigov. Within Indigov he is involved in eGovernment research and strategy development and implementation of eGovernment projects.

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**Indigov** is a spin-off of the Catholic University of Leuven, founded in 2003 by Jo Steyaert. Indigov is a research and consulting bureau that delivers state-of-the-art knowledge and expertise to governments and companies, it combines academic quality and objectivity with creativeness, speed and efficiency. The aim is to contribute to the successful implementation of e-government solutions by using knowledge gathered in academic research.