iLeger: A Digital Mediation Proposal for Participative Elections

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Abstract. Web 2.0 and, more recently, Social Media, created new forms of social behavior and political engagement. This paper presents a proposal for digital mediation for direct public participation during electoral periods. Mediation is implemented by a web application based on social media principles, *iLeger*, specifically designed to gather voters and candidates in a shared deliberative space. Interaction and collaboration between these key stakeholders is supported through questions, answers, suggestions, comments, votes and live debates. With this proposal it is intended to contribute to narrow the communication gap between voters and candidates, make campaigns more open and encourage citizens to become involved and participate in electoral debates. This paper includes results of a case study about the Portuguese Parliamentary elections held in 2011 and conclusions derived from the use of *iLeger*.

Keywords: Elections, Campaigning, eDemocracy, eParticipation, Deliberation.

1 Introduction

Today, the Internet is a tool that shapes lives in many respects. For some, the Internet is an open source of information, and for others it is a means by which they manage their bank accounts, shop and use public services. Most real life activities already have an online equivalent. Following this trend, the field of public participation has seen a growing integration of ICT and the Internet, leading to the concept of electronic participation - eParticipation [1].

Recently, uses of the Internet are becoming relatively more interactive and user-oriented. The Web 2.0 and more recently the rise of Social Media have not only created new playing fields for communication and self-expression but also new forms of social behavior as well as societal and political engagement [2]. Today, social websites such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, LinkedIn, Wikipedia and Flickr have millions of active users. With examples of mass mobilization such as the Arab Spring and protests against the global economic crisis such as the We Are the 99 Percent (*http://wearethe99percent.tumblr.com/*) and Occupy Wall Street (*http://occupywallst.org/*) movements, it is safe to argue that Social Media are changing the game of politics. In the literature review about Social Media and participation, Effing and colleagues state that Internet use by citizens is also becoming more social and participatory [3]. They furthermore argue that a key factor of Web 2.0 and Social Media is participation.

Growing numbers of citizens interacting with networked digital devices converts the Internet into an important communication medium in electoral disputes with clear differences from campaigns based on traditional media. According to [4], the real democratic contribution of online campaigns consists of exploring the Internet potential for interactivity and take electors from their role of passive mere spectators

Nevertheless, considering, in electoral campaigns, either general online tools such as blogs, Internet campaign sites of the political parties, email, newsletters, or more traditional media covering TV broadcasts, debates, telephone calls, door-to-door contact or town hall speeches, they are mostly concentrated in unidirectional communication and do not support an efficient, scalable communication process based on all stakeholders' goals and needs.

After observing the traditional type of political communication and media coverage in electoral campaigns, a preliminary important research question emerged: How to engage citizens to participate actively in electoral discussions through digital mediation?

In order to address this question, we consider that it would be useful and desired to develop an application that unites, in a single, neutral and regulated place, the stakeholders in the electoral process, so as to allow structured and multidirectional communication between them. Such solution would take the

form of an eParticipation tool and take into account the requirements and needs of the main actors: voters and candidates. On the one hand it would enable citizens to become clarified on the most important questions and problems of society and, on the other hand, enable candidates to be aware of citizens' ideas and main concerns by the general community in different governance topics (education, health, economy, justice, and so on).

As a result, we propose a Web application, *iLeger*, specifically designed to gather, during the election period, voters and candidates in an election in a shared deliberative space. With this application it is intended to narrow the communication gap identified between these two key stakeholders, make campaign representatives increasingly open to discussions with the electorate and convert the elector - from the traditional role of information consumer – into an agent with the capability to intervene and produce information.

ILeger is integrated into the project *Liberopinion* (*http://www.liberopinion.net*) which aims to create a technology platform in the field of participation and Social Media, with emphasis on interaction between users. Currently, the platform Liberopinion consists of two applications, the one described in this paper, *iLeger*, and *Governmeter*, which is intended to monitor the performance of governmental activity. In summary, *Governmeter* is a web application based on the principles of eParticipation, specifically designed to monitor and discuss, objectively and independently, the government activity and new laws at national, regional or local level. In a first stage, *Governmeter* is mainly focused on three aspects: the evolution of conjuncture indicators, the government objectives and government measures.

In more detail, *iLeger* combines in a neutral and civilized single space the key stakeholders in an election, the candidates and citizens, and promotes multidirectional communication between them. Interaction and collaboration is supported through questions, answers, suggestions, comments, votes and live debates. *ILeger* was recently tested in the Election of the Chairman of the Portuguese Medical Association (*http://om.ileger.sapo.pt*) and used in partnership with the largest Portuguese Web portal (SAPO – *http://www.sapo.pt*), property of Portugal Telecom, in the Portuguese Presidential Election of 2011 (*http://presidenciais.ileger.sapo.pt*) and in the Portuguese Parliamentary Elections of 2011 (*http://ileger.noticias.sapo.pt/legislativas/2011/*).

This paper is structured as follows: Section 2 describes some eParticipation initiatives during electoral periods and the major functionalities of the *iLeger* Web application. Section 3 presents the results from a case study about the Portuguese Parliamentary Elections held in June 2011. Section 4 includes lessons learned, topics for future research and conclusions.

2   Digital Mediation and Elections

Several online initiatives have been made available to help citizens clarify the issues and proposals by the different candidates. A known approach presents a questionnaire to citizens covering different issues, make a statistical comparison with the candidates' stances and derive the candidate that best matches the user answers [5]. This does not allow the citizen to communicate and submit questions to any of the candidates. The questions formulated are based in the electoral program as defined by each candidate and does not provide any basis for interaction. Other websites comparing the different candidates' proposals in several topics also exist [6].

On the other hand, another approach seeks to close the communication gap between citizens and politicians [7]. The list of political representatives, as well as election candidates, is displayed and it is possible for citizens to submit questions and for the politicians to answer. However, the website is designed around each political representatives and does not seem to provide neither a scalable solution when the number of questions increase, nor a direct comparison of candidates' answers to the same question and debate around the question and answers.

In [8] it is described a participation initiative by José Serra, a candidate to the Brazilian presidential elections of 2010. In summary, during the first round of elections, the campaign of José Serra launched an online communication platform with the objective to build a collaborative government plan, which enabled to gather contributions by citizens, specialists and other parties interested in political issues relevant to Brazil. To this end, several forums were created and classified according to the country region and topic being addressed. In [9, 10] is analyzed, from the perspective of eParticipation, the successful presidential campaign of Barack Obama during the 2008 elections. These approaches are essentially directed to involve the citizens around a particular candidature and do not bring together in a single space the set of candidates and citizens for multiparty communication and sharing of ideas and opinions among them, the purpose of the application presented in this paper.

The U.S. Politics on Facebook page (http://www.facebook.com/uspolitics) highlights the use of Facebook by politicians, elected officials, and political campaigns. In 2012, Facebook and NBC

established a partnership and broadcasted live in http://www.facebook.com/uspolitics?sk=app_201387976576727 the Republican Presidential Debate. For this event, citizens were invited to submit questions in advance to the candidates. A selection of those questions was then used during the debate in addition to the questions from the moderator, David Gregory. The selection criteria for the submitted questions was not public casting therefore doubt about how were these questions chosen. Another limitation has been recognized on the information organization level since there were no defined topics to frame the questions submitted by the citizens. Lastly, citizen submissions were limited to questions and it was not foreseen that citizens submit ideas or suggestions.

ILeger is a Web Application designed and developed from the ground up to meet the needs and stakeholders goals in the electoral process, considering the two major groups of citizens and candidates. As illustrated in Figure 1, it consists of five main areas: questions from the citizens and corresponding answers from the candidates, proposals and ideas from the community, citizen surveys, the candidates´ electoral program and finally live debates. The editor is responsible for managing the platform, users and participation events.
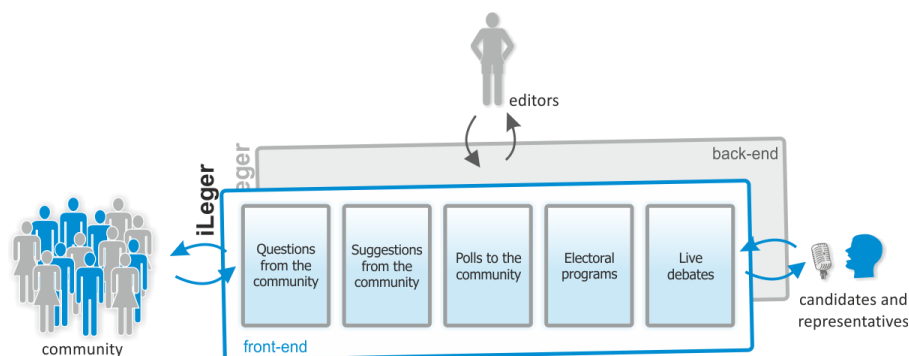

Figure 1 - Functional structure of *iLeger*

In relation to user registration and access to the platform, by default, each user must be previously registered on the platform and have to login to take advantage of key capabilities such as submit questions, suggestions, comments and voting. If the user is not logged in, it is only possible to view the contents of the application. Nevertheless, it is possible to configure *iLeger* for different settings so as to enable interaction by non-registered users. For example, there is a setting in which non-registered users can vote but cannot introduce content and other that allows voting and content introduction. In the latter configuration, the only limitation to unregistered users is the lack of email notifications and additional features known from social networks such as following user and the access to a public profile.

By default, all the content submitted by citizens is subject to moderation [11] according to the platform Terms of Use. When the user registers himself or herself in the platform, it his mandatory to accept these Terms of Use. The actions of the candidates, on the other hand, are not moderated. The platform is configured to support different settings for moderation. For example, it is possible to publish directly all content, i.e. disable moderation, or moderate only entries denounced by the platform users. In order to encourage participation, citizens are permitted to request anonymity for all content submitted to the platform.

We believe that online social networks will be increasingly important for communities and citizens. We considered from very important to provide *iLeger* platform with social networking features at an early stage. Therefore, a registered user can follow other users registered on the platform, and see all the questions, suggestions and comments made by those users. All registered users have a profile area with personal information such as contact information, links to their social networks and personal blogs. In the public profile, the user activity as well as the associated social network in *iLeger*, i.e. followers and followed users, are displayed.

Seamless integration of the platform with existing social networks is also of paramount importance [12]. For this reason, and as a first step in that direction, it is possible for a citizen to publish his questions and proposals to Twitter and Facebook directly from the platform. Thus provide a more open interface to foster participation of enhanced opinion voice, as it augments the scope and potential impact of each individual's participation.

At the moment, *iLeger* can be configured regarding the type of interaction of candidates. *iLeger* is foreseen to be used in two scenarios: with or without direct interaction by candidates. With interaction, the candidates have an access account and are responsible for the introduction of content, allowing direct communication with other users. In the absence of candidate interaction, *iLeger* can still be used to identify key issues and suggestions from voters, as well as their views on the key issues about the

election. The editor can also publish information about the candidatures for citizens to analyze and comment.

3   Case study: the 2011 Portuguese Parliamentary Elections

iLeger was used in partnership with SAPO, the largest Portuguese Web portal and property of Portugal Telecom, during the Portuguese Parliamentary Elections held in June of 2011. It covered the last two weeks before the elections, from 20 May to 3 June.

The version of *iLeger* used in these elections was configured so that users had to be registered in order to submit content (questions, suggestions and comments) and vote. All written content submitted by citizens was thus subject to moderation. Representatives of the different candidatures only participated in live debates, which in this last case did not require prior registration before participation.

For user (citizen) registration, the single sign on (SSO) mechanism from our partner was used. This way, users already registered on SAPO could log in to *iLeger* without the need for new registration. We recorded 290 distinct users who have logged in, that is, who were enabled to submit written content and vote. Statistics extracted from Google Analytics showed that during the two weeks 21.486 unique users visited *iLeger* (total of 44.777 page views). The logged in to (unique) visitors ratio amounts therefore to 1,3%.

Citizens were invited to submit and vote on questions on different topics to create the ten most voted questions, the top 10, to be posed simultaneously to candidates during a live debate held in 31st of May in *Instituto Superior de Ciências Sociais e Políticas* (ISCSP). The Institute for Social and Political Sciences - ISCSP, one of the Technical University of Lisbon units, is a school aiming at education and research in the areas of Social and Political Sciences. In total, three participation events were created for this purpose. Each one of them was assigned a deadline for submissions, 30th of May, and a different topic: economic growth, social state and foreign aid. It should be noted that given the economic and financial context of Portugal at that moment these were the dominant topics addressed during the electoral campaign.

To this end, registered citizens submitted questions and voted for their relevance. In total the moderator accepted 107 of the 116 questions, yielding thus a rejection rate of 8%.

The debate held in ISCSP was moderated by the director responsible for the news channel of online portal SAPO and, through a partnership between SIC TV News channel and SAPO, it was broadcasted live in *iLeger* over an online streaming channel. The ten most voted questions in *iLeger* were used in the debate and were answered by each of the political guests. Figure 2 illustrates the broadcasting of this debate using the area in *iLeger* intended for live debates.

Figure 2 - Live debate transmitted over an online streaming channel in *iLeger*

Highly reputed politicians have acceded to participate in this initiative, including parliamentary leaders and politicians that became part of the elected government as ministers.

Additionally, in the second week of campaign six live debates were conducted, one with each candidature. Each debate lasted an hour and a half. Over the six debates there were 3779 entries submitted in the form of questions or comments. However, by restrictions of time and moderation, only 133 of these entries were addressed by candidatures. Users were not required to be registered in *iLeger* to take part in live debates.

It is important to note that, according to Google Analytics, from the 21.486 unique visitors over the two weeks, 19.419 entered *iLeger* for the first time during the live debates, demonstrating the interest of citizens to participate in live events of short duration. In Figure 3 it is shown the number of *iLeger* visitors between 20 May and 3 June 2011.

Figure 3 – Number of *iLeger* visitors between 20 May and 3 June 2011

We believe that the high attendance level during the days of live debates was due to prominent and frequent advertisement of these events in our partners' homepage. This demonstrates the importance of advertisement and awareness among the electorate and general population required for the success of this kind of events. We consider that the media, both traditional and online, have a very important role when pushing forward citizen-based participation initiatives such as this one.

Over the two weeks of campaign registered users submitted a total of 50 suggestions, with 9 rejected by the moderator. In this section of *iLeger,* the editor created three simultaneous events for gathering user suggestions on what they would do if they were: the German Chancellor, the president of IMF (International Monetary Fund) and the president of the European Union. The editor assumed that these roles as decision-makers had a major role in any foreign aid program to Portugal.

Overall there were 299 votes on questions, 92 votes on suggestions and 1073 votes on the 15 questions of the survey.

It is also interesting to note that, without taking into account the live debates, from the 290 users who have logged in, 156 have submitted written content (116 questions and 50 suggestions) or have performed the action of voting on the questions, suggestions and inquiries. This indicates that, as illustrated in Figure 4, approximately 54% of the users that logged in, participated actively in *iLeger*.
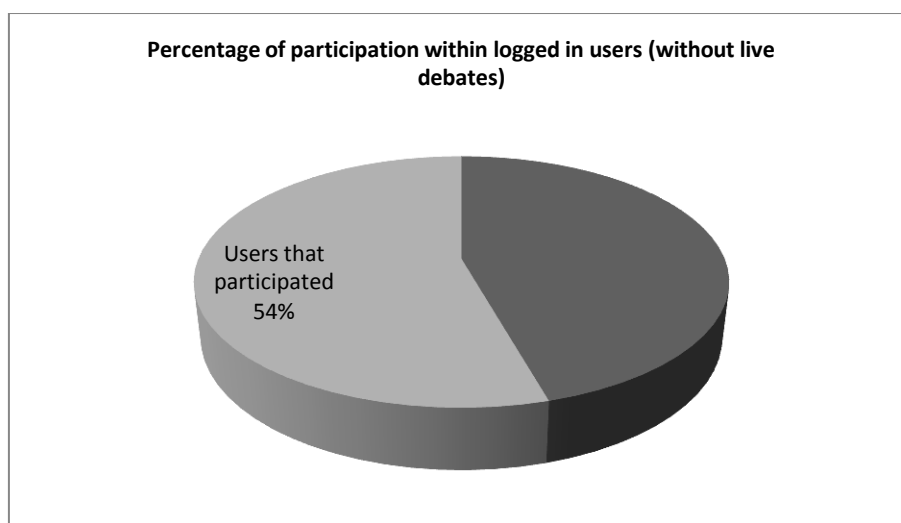

Figure 4 - Percentage of participation within logged in users (without live debates)

In these elections *iLeger* was primarily used to identify key issues and suggestions from voters, as well as their views on the key issues of the election. Through live debates, it was also possible to obtain a better insight of the viewpoint of representatives of the candidatures regarding the 10 questions most voted by the citizens in the first week as well as other live questions. By comparing the viewpoints, the citizens will have additional information about the candidates´ position on the important issues, helping them decide for their best candidate.

4 Conclusion

In the use of Web communication tools to reach voters on general elections, there has been major investments by political parties and corresponding candidates on Weblogs, social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, MySpace, and on dedicated websites through which the candidates attempt to present their positions and their electoral program.

In this paper an approach based on digital mediation for supporting direct public participation during electoral periods is proposed. More precisely, it is proposed a Web application based in Social Media principles, *iLeger*, specifically designed to gather voters and candidates in a shared deliberative space. The main objectives consist of contributing to narrow the communication gap between voters and candidates, making election campaigns more open and encourage citizens to participate in electoral debates.

Although we strongly believe that participation tools based on the Internet and Social Media, such as social networks and the application presented here, will be increasingly important in election campaigns and, if properly used, have the potential to contribute significantly to reversing the current alienation of citizens from election debates, it is argued that the main focus must be primarily on participation and the people (citizens and candidates) rather than on technology.

In view of the results and experiences with the use of *iLeger* in the election of the President of the Medical Association, the Presidential and Legislative elections of 2011 held in Portugal, and in light of feedback received from some of the actors involved in these elections, when faced with the research question "How to engage citizens to actively participate in electoral discussions through digital mediation? ", it was still not possible to reach a conclusive answer. Nevertheless, from the results of *iLeger*, we concur with the statement in [13, 14] that the problem of eParticipation is not just a matter of technology but also of a social shift to a more open and collaborative culture.

It is expected that candidates and other political representatives take advantage of Internet ubiquity and shift their main focus from traditional media in favor of Web 2.0 and Social Media for their electoral and communication strategy and spend more time and human resources to promote and participate in initiatives that bring them closer to citizens.

In regard to results from the use of *iLeger*, we consider that in participatory initiatives like this one broad advertisement is a key factor for its success. It was clearly noticeable that whenever an ad about an initiative in *iLeger* was published in our partner homepage the number of visitors increased considerably (about 90%). The partnership with one of the major online media agency in Portugal was also an important enabling factor for attracting politicians to participate.

Hence, it is considered that the media can play a major role in eParticipation initiatives. They have already a large community of users and visitors with some habits of participation, e.g. by comments to the news. On the other hand, they possess an established group of experts and analysts who can greatly contribute to a high quality of debates. Journalistic experience can also be an advantage to ensure a high standard of quality for the editorial content introduced. Nevertheless, it is of paramount importance that the editorial content published in the platform remains under absolute political neutrality.

Another important contribution from our experience concerns the editorial management of this kind of applications. The traditional user of the Internet seeks constantly new content. Thus, it is considered that citizens (and politicians) should be invited to participate in events of short duration and about the news of the moment. Media are in a privileged position to become the major information curator [15] of platforms dedicated to eParticipation.

Finally, the following question is left open for future research: What is the impact of mechanisms of digital mediation in participation?

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