

Towards a smart democracy: increased trust in political leaders

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Abstract

Among the objectives of the present paper we can mention finding an answer as to how the democracy has been changing in order to adapt to the contemporary world and to the contemporary needs. How can technology help us, and how can technology make the distance between the people and the elites or those in power become smaller? Prior work includes papers by Walters (2011) and Scholl & Scholl (2014), discussing the way that electronic, or smart governance can lead on to a new dimension of democracy, that of smart democracy. Hofstede's (2011) cultural dimensions will also be used. The approach will consist of the cultural dimensions of individualism, rising worldwide, and that of lowering power distance, as the world tends towards liberal democracy as an ideal form of government and on the wish towards people becoming equal. The results show that there is more trust in the political leaders with a smart democracy tools. As the information is laid bare through technology, there may be less worries about corruption and manipulation. Among the Implications, we can see an improvement of the liberal democracy with adapting it to the needs and opportunities of the world today. The value of the paper consists in understanding the dimensions of individualism, low power distance and liberalism through the use of technology. Technology helps against the fears of people of corruption, which has been the driving force of protests in Romania quite recently. While these seem general ideas which have been around throughout history, they are achieving a new dimension within the smart city, where we have a higher level of security due to the presence of web cameras for surveillance, and where all systems of bureaucracy and politics, have become openly available due to the possibilities offered by technology.

Keywords: individualism, liberalism, low power distance.

1. Introduction

The issue of trust in political leaders is a major one in today's world. Various leaders competing for elections try their best to bring about the voters' trust. This can be a difficult task once the voters have been deceived in their expectations regarding their previous choice of candidates. However, we could claim that this is the way elections and the voting process goes. Voters get various illusions regarding the candidates' promises, and then they start hoping again with their vote for the following elections.

Nowadays, we do not rely on the politicians' speeches and on their public image to witness the way they are inspiring trustworthiness to us. Trust in political leaders includes several traits, such as, first of all, honesty, related to indeed placing the interest of the people at the centre of their activity, regarding especially their life standards, and second, responsibility, which is related to the means through which they solve various issues such as dealing with the country's budget and with the possible debts to other countries. The political leaders are also expected to ensure the safety of their citizens in cities in their country.

The issues of trust and safety have been adapted to our contemporary, highly technologized world, under the form of smart cities, where institutions, public transport, parking services, stores, and almost all areas in the city all benefit from webcams which are believed to help prevent theft and other crimes.

While technology presents us citizens with means of monitoring through webcams to help prevent various crimes, and, thus, ensure our safety in big cities, this supervision system poses various questions regarding our personal privacy. We are being reassured that everything is a matter of GDPR, and that the personal data will not be used in an abusive manner. Some countries have been reported of becoming safer and with a declining rate of crime, due to the webcam supervision system.

All information about the way various institutions work and use the budget that is available online for public consultation is supposed to ensure lack of suspicions and expose everything in an honest manner. Citizens can feel that political activity is always under control, and then they can understand political leaders as acting simply as managers of the citizens' and country's situation, fulfilling their duty, which is very clear. Political leaders may not, from this point of view, be suspected of hiding anything, or of using the country's resources for their and their family's personal use.

However, this is not necessarily enough to reassure citizens of the good intentions of the political leaders. Citizens may have much too high expectations and then they can be disappointed regarding other areas of the activity of political leaders, such as, for example, raising the salaries for certain professions. Not even the benefits of high technology can solve all issues that preoccupy our society.

All the same, the issue of trust still remains one of the most significant aspects in the relationship between citizens and political leaders.

1.1. Literature Review

The smart city is focused on the keyword of technology, if we look at its definition, and on the way that technology can be used for aspects such as its being suitable for communication, data processing and sharing of information, but also for making the city sustainable, in managing its issues such as pollution, and production of energy, functioning of various services, institutions and elements of infrastructure, among which, democracy [1].

The issue of smart city is strongly connected to the type of democracy adapted to them, namely smart democracy. It is a topic of actuality and relevance to all citizens and all members of political life, which has been and is being frequently discussed in mass media and in academic research.

Nowadays, we can speak about e-governance in a smart city [2]. This research also brings about a significant question with respect to the access to and use of technology, which is available to any citizen right now, namely whether or not technology unites us or, on the contrary, draws us apart, while referring to "The pervasive reach of electronic data and media," which "can help bind the disparate elements of a community together as much as it may seek to disperse them" [2].

However, we could claim that this issue has been about in large cities even before the high-rate use of technology nowadays. People from all over the country, at least, if not from

other parts of the world as well, would gather in a big city and then it would be difficult for them to relate to one another, mainly since they were so different. Large cities would also lead to feelings of isolation and alienation, as families and friends would remain in other cities or rural areas, while only the young generation members would move to the city and start a new and more comfortable life there.

Another issue has been brought about to the aspect of communication, which is implied to be among citizens or among citizens and political leaders: “a balance” should, ideally, “be achieved where both physical and virtual realms enhance the unique character of particular locations” [2].

Communication among citizens and political leaders can be regarded as occurring through the events political leaders such as the representatives of the city halls and others organize in the city for their citizens with the occasion of various holidays and celebrations, such as Christmas and Easter fairs, which include decorations for the special occasions, such as festive lights. This is an example of concrete action which citizens can directly and clearly benefit from.

Other researchers refer to “a tightly interconnected global society,” to which “democratic self-governance in 21st century market economies apparently needs to develop new institutional formats and novel mechanisms” in order to adapt to this state of affairs [3].

What is self governance? The term is understood as referring to “the exercise of authority over oneself – whether that is at the individual, organization or national level – without outside interference” [4].

The structure of the smart, as well as democratic, form of government relies on “actionable and omnipresent information along with its underlying technologies,” since these models of governance “foster smart, open, and agile governmental institutions as well as stakeholder participation and collaboration on all levels and in all branches of the governing process” [3].

We can see how the structure of the smart government is portrayed as placing emphasis on the relationship between citizens and political leaders. While we may think that this has been a necessity, at all times, and that this is all that we could sum up for political activity to be about, we can see how the focus is on a relationship of collaboration, and not on one of authority, namely that of the political leaders, over the citizens, those that are supposed to obey those in power.

With respect to the relationship with authority, the general move at world level is that tending towards equality in all areas of life. Supranational organizations are focused on promoting equality through democratic values, accepting diversity and not discriminating anyone on grounds of ethnicity, lifestyle, personal values, and cultural mindset.

Judging by this state of affairs, the approach relying on Hofstede’s cultural dimensions [5], namely that of high vs low power distance, which refers to a tense or more relaxed

relationship with authority, at all levels, political, educational, in schools, at work and within the family, is very relevant. High power distance means that individuals should do as they are told by those in a higher position than them, while low power distances implies that there is the possibility of negotiation and of suggesting solutions, and discussing on equal terms to those in a position of authority whose role is, ultimately, to organize a certain group, institution, or state.

According to research, there is the notion of “implicit smart politics,” a genre of politics which is “not subjected to a real process of political institutionalization,” and which is “strongly diffused among the various social actors” [6]. Since smart politics is not institutionalized, it “may favor the excessive power of economic-financial and technological actors” [6].

This may be since, as much as we believe everyone has access to technology in an equal measure, some areas may have poorer signal or even poorer possibilities to own gadgets allowing access to the Internet.

2. Materials and Methods

The democracy is considered the most suitable form of government nowadays, since it is adapted to the needs of the mindsets of today’s people. We are living in a world where individualism, or the focus on the interests of the individuals, understood as separate from being subsumed to the interest of the entire community [5], has been on the rise at world level [7]. The rising individualism comes with the rise in the situation regarding the economic conditions [8], and, on general, with good and comfortable living conditions [9].

The democracy has been placed in opposition with totalitarian types of government, compared to which it can be considered, at all times, “the best form of government” [10].

We could relate democracy to a large sense of freedom and personal choice of action. The intervention of the state in the citizens’ personal lives is not considered desirable at any time during history.

The wish towards equality, at least in the Western world, and to the breaking up of hierarchical social order has appeared once the Medieval Ages social structure was dissolved. Afterwards, a bureaucratic order of society based on relationships not of hierarchical difference of status acquired from birth, but based on social contract, such as the one between employer and employee, followed. The hierarchy is based on a business-type of structure, yet both employer and employee have their own, specific rights, mentioned in the work contract and based on established law.

Nowadays, citizens have equal rights established by law. There are no more aristocratic individuals, who are aristocratic based on birth, and lower working classes, once again, established by birth. Nowadays, everyone needs to work in order to gain their existence. Of course, some earn more than others, but the social hierarchy is not fixed and unmovable. Starting from Victorian times, the social hierarchy has been subject to easier social mobility. Previously, social mobility was condemned, as the belief that everyone had his

or her right place already established by God and by birth and which could not be changed, was held. Becoming rich from being poor was regarded, by society, with suspicion, leading even to believing that uncorrect, unethical means had been used. The United States of America represented a fresh perspective when they claimed that everyone going there, to be part of the Gold Rush, or simply willing to start a new life, could become anything they wanted. Individual freedom allowed them to be part of a spectacular rise from being poor and unknown to becoming rich and a celebrity. This was a radical break-up with the fixed mentality of the Old World.

We can see, in the way the world has progressed in mentality regarding status, from high power distance to low power distance societies in general. Nowadays, we value democracy and liberalism to a high extent, and do not tolerate authoritarian forms of government.

Liberalism could be defined as “the belief that the freedom of the individual is the highest political value” [11]. The high rise of technology and its presence in our lives enhances this feeling. Nowadays, the masses appear to judge harshly the political leaders making use of dishonest means and corruption, as they protest against such behaviour on the part of political leaders. Mass media stirs their actions of protest. People may have come to believe that technology nowadays, mass media included, appear to reveal the truth behind the scenes of political activity. However, various scandals may prove to be unfounded, exaggerated, or part of other rival political groups’ action to ruin the popularity and the public image of a certain political leader or political party.

Together with the use of technology, we expect equality among citizens to be on the rise, accompanied by the manner in which they establish dialogue with the political leaders. Through voting, the citizens already have a certain degree of choice over their lives, yet, to what extent can they be sure that they can trust the system, regarding the extent to which the results are presented in an honest way and are not, actually arranged? Mass-media has contributed to plenty of suspicions, and the Internet can be used spread various news and information that can undermine the trust in political leaders and in their activities.

We may have acquired an ideal form of lifestyle, that which is based on personal expression of opinion. We, as citizens, expect to be taken into account with our opinions, and with our suspicions regarding certain political leaders. We are given the most of freedom of speech, as well as right to safety and even privacy, if we want, to post online our opinions regarding the activity of certain political leaders. We can post these opinions anonymously or under a pseudonym on online forums, online social media for our friends to see, under various posts on online social media, and as comments related to online articles. While we satisfy our needs for self-expression, however, the results of the expression of these rights are not available unless we count other citizens sympathizing with us and agreeing with our opinions. The question that comes to the fore is related to what extent we can actually change anything as citizens. What power do we have to expose what we believe to be the truth about certain political leaders which we feel have failed our expectations and their own promises?

The answer to such a question remains open, for both usual democracies and smart democracies. The power of decision and influence the citizens have over their chosen

political leaders remains unknown, practically, while, theoretically, we are supposed to have, as citizens, our say with respect to choosing the political leaders we judge as best suited to carrying out our interests.

While it can be assumed that we have all the right to information and even more opportunities regarding the chosen political leaders through the Internet and through technology in general, there are still some drawbacks. For example, there is the drawback regarding privacy in a smart city, which may lead to the danger “to transform cities into Orwellian dystopia” [12]. This sensation may be had due to the supervision systems available by means of webcams, as well as through the “urban-scale of intelligent sensors,” and through using the payment of a fee for using “a smart city service, and implicitly” by having a citizen’s “trading his/ her privacy for the service provided [13], [12]. Privacy is believed to be “one of the preconditions of democracy [14]; [15] [...]” [12].

The right to the protection of sensitive personal information, as well as to personal data, has been ensured through supranational organizations’ rules and laws such as the GDPR. This is one example of the way in which the EU seeks to support the ideals of democracy in the member countries.

The democracies can be seen as facing, even if they are considered the only form of government that is acceptable nowadays, as facing a crisis, from the point of view of trust: “Citizen trust has been eroding over the last decades, posing difficulties in engaging citizens in democratic participation, thus tearing on a pillar on which democratic society rests” [16].

Even if, through democratic means, and coupled with the idea of smart cities, we can have, as citizens, access to information regarding the activity of political leaders, and the way life in a smart city, meaning in a highly technologized city goes, we may still wonder as to how reliable the information given is. A question that arises immediately, is how has the information to be publicly be shared been filtered? Has there been a selection of the information to be presented for the public, and according to which criteria? It can be tempting to think that, once we have surveillance systems, and all data is stored and used when needed, car thefts and various crimes have declined, as the thieves can be found right away. Similarly, we may be tempted to think that the activity of political leaders can be laid bare for public consultation and, thus, nothing can be hidden any more. Yet, once we are suspicious, or once our suspicions have been underlined by others’ comments and proofs given online regarding political leaders, trust remains an issue. What is more, technology can have its failures and not work properly, which can give rise to even further suspicions, and actions taken to hide various aspects in the activity of the political leaders.

While “crime reduction, security, and urban governance” [17] are issues specific to smart cities and sound positive, and could be considered in the direction of improving safety and organization in the city with the help of technology, these can still be questioned. One of the questions that comes to our mind could be related to whether all areas in the city are under webcamera surveillance, and whether or not pickpockets can be monitored at all times. Political leaders should have all this in view, since the quality of life of citizens may depend on how safe they can feel in the city when they realize that at the mall, in the street,

or in a store, with all surveillance systems, they can still be robbed of their wallet. It may be difficult for them to access the recordings of the webcam and, even more so, it may be difficult for the police to identify the thieves if they have their head covered with a cap or face covered with a scarf, or if they are not present in their database. Eventually, there may not even be any recordings at all, function of the area where the robbery took place or of how crowded the place was.

Once citizens go through certain situations which are unpleasant for them, they may lose their trust in the safe environment and conditions of living in the city the political leaders may ensure. This is one concrete situation which can significantly erode trust in political leaders, and the relationship between them and the citizens may suffer.

No matter the organization and the promises of high technology, it is concrete situations which can lead to questioning the competence and interest of political leaders to actually improve the citizens' living conditions. Besides the example of safety in the city with respect to pickpockets, we can have the example of whether or not the paid parking system through an application or through text messages works. Once there are errors, and once citizens are taxed for more or fined in a dishonest manner, they may lose trust in the way that their smart city works. Additionally, once the system of scanning the card on public transport does not work and citizens are fined, this is considered by them a detail which relates to the responsibilities of political leaders, at national level or local level, such as at City Hall representatives' level.

Otherwise, leaving aside the direct contact of citizens in their daily lives with smart cities' possibilities, big deeds on the part of political leaders such as building highways and promising good relationships at international level may not even be seen by all the citizens, if they are not directly involved or affected by them in a direct way.

3. Results

Once we are speaking of democracy, we are speaking about the personal freedoms and rights of the individuals. These are also associated with the idea that everyone is equal and that there should be low power distance between citizens and political leaders. Technology can be seen as offering equal access to information and to dialogue to any citizen, as well as between citizens and political leaders. Smart cities are correlated with smart democracies, and once city is managed politically through a smart democracy we, citizens, expect to have the right to access all information, which is expected to be made public, regarding the political leaders' activities. In this way we may ensure that they are not stealing from the country's budget and that they are being honest with the timeline of their various plans and promises regarding the citizens' lives in the respective city. Some political leaders may build up their public image on social media and they may engage in dialogue with the citizens, function of how much this is possible. If they are accused by citizens of not being honest, then there would not be much of a dialogue. Likely, the political leaders would ignore the questions.

Democracies, and even smart democracies, may, thus, not ensure the possibility of dialogue between citizens and political leaders, all the more so as the communication becomes

accusing and conflictual. No political leader would engage online in proving and arguing in favour of their honesty. This would be too time consuming, and, besides, citizens would end up, likely, not even being convinced. Once citizens start out a conflictual dialogue, they may be impossible to be persuaded that the situation is, in fact, otherwise. Citizens would continue to believe that they have been deceived and their trust would not be restored easily.

Ideally, smart democracies would have everything transparent, and there would be no suspicions, and nothing to be hidden from the public. The citizens would have access to all the political agenda of the political leaders and to all their activity. However, even if this happened, citizens would still have their suspicions which would be difficult to prove wrong, as this would be a really time consuming process. Besides, how would the citizens know if other persons surrounding the political leaders would not be accomplices and have done their best to hide compromising facts and documents from the public eye?

From this point of view, smart democracies do not differ much from usual democracies, where technology is not used to such a large extent.

Technology remains a simple tool in the hands of both political leaders and citizens. It cannot be expected to show the truth or some lies related to the political leaders' activity.

4. Discussion

One of the main issues is related to whether or not smart democracy can lead to an increased trust in political leaders. Apparently, it facilitates the processes of keeping up all information within anyone's reach, through making it visible publicly. This could be one means through which we, as citizens, may become less suspicious regarding the hidden self-interests of political leaders. However, the question that comes next is how do we know that the leaders are actually presenting the truth and not hiding anything in the respective publicly shown information? Still another question arises from whether or not citizens have, indeed, equal access to technology, so that they can check the facts. Even more so, we cannot ignore the phenomenon of fake news, which can undermine citizens' trust in political leaders or even be used to express the distrust in political leaders by certain citizens. Then, they can influence the others. Therefore, technology is not a reliable solution to the trust or lack of trust in political leaders. It may even raise further doubts, and not make things clearer. Technology is just not anything more than another means of communication. In-person communication, which is still around, does not differ much from technologically-based communication. When we see how much fake information can be circulated online, we can lose our trust in technologically-based communication as well and we may not feel that political leaders' honesty and responsibility can actually be verified through online information display means.

5. Conclusions

We could look at the smart city and smart democracy as an ideal situation, where everything should be going on as best as possible. Yet, we have all had numerous examples in our personal and professional lives as citizens where we dreamt about the benefits of technology, yet, at some point or another, something about it ended up by not working properly. The same can be visible in the case of smart cities, in the ways in which

institutions and payment systems at the bank, in stores, and for public transport can work. This state of affairs can be, in the mind of the citizens, psychologically be blamed on an external side, namely that of political leaders. Political leaders are charged, psychologically by citizens, with a difficult role to fulfill, namely that of ensuring that everything goes on fine in everyday life in the city, regarding the way citizens can use technology and the way that this technology could work at absolutely all times.

Citizens are granted an apparently equal positions to political leaders, since citizens are allowed to express their doubts about the competences of political leaders and to criticize their activity when they feel so. Citizens may be the ones deciding whether or not they would choose again certain political leaders by giving their vote.

We may claim that smart cities and smart democracies are still in progress, and they are still being improved. Meanwhile, trust in political leaders is more a matter of psychology of the citizens and of their personal perception than of rational checking of facts using publicly accessible documents through the means of technology available to us all.

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