

# Electronic Democracy

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| Engagement range                              | Inform/Consult   |
| Difficulty level                              | Easy   |
| Cost  | Medium (\$1,000 - \$10,000) to High (over \$10,000)  |
| When might you use it                         | To showcase product, plan, policy<br>To discover community issues<br>To communicate an issue<br>To develop community capacity  |
| Number of people required to help to organise | One-three, depends on the audience size and level of complexity  |
| Time to organise                              | Medium (six weeks to six months) to long (6-12 months)   |
| Size of audience                              | Large (over 30)  |
| Issues/resources to think about               | Commercial and not-for-profit online service providers; Public library online facilities; Private online facilities, including internet; Volunteers with technical knowledge and understanding |
| Innovation level                              | Low to Medium  |

## Description

Electronic democracy seeks to embrace existing and emergent media sources as a forum for allowing members of the public to express opinions and seek to influence decision-making within their community, state, country, or globally. Media sources that may be used for the processes of democracy include television and radio, but the internet is the main way that electronic democracy can be seen in action.

While electronic democracy is more an ideal than a reality, electronic democracy is generally discussed in theoretical terms. Participation using the internet through email, online voting and access to information on websites are widely used participatory tools. People can use email or websites to register their opinions on proposed developments, on environmental impact statements, and so on. Television and radio stations can set up websites that record listener voting on issues, or to register the major community issues for a particular demographic of the community. These findings can then be reported as a measure of community attitudes and issues, increasing the chance that these opinions will be taken into account in government or industry's planning and decision-making processes.

Community groups can also develop electronic democracy projects using commercial or not-for-profit on-line servers to develop the technical information infrastructure needed to set up web pages, email list administration, etc.

## Objective

- To engage more members of the public in expressing their opinions on a website, via email, or through other electronic communications options, in order to influence planning and decision-making.

## Desired Outcome

- Increased number and diversity of people who exercise their democratic rights through comments sent to decision-making bodies with regard to proposals and issues.

## Uses/Strengths

- Creates a virtual public space where people can interact, discuss issues and share ideas.
- Allows citizens to participate at their own convenience.
- Can reach a potentially large audience readily.
- Facilitates interactive communication.
- Costs little to set up.
- Disseminates large amounts of information effectively and without distortion.

## Special Considerations/Weaknesses

- May exclude participation by those not online.
- Results can be manipulated therefore results of polls should be carefully considered.
- Needs a core group of dedicated volunteers (5-15 depending on the scope and scale of activities).
- People can become disillusioned if the project is 'over-hyped'. Keep expectations realistic.
- Encouraging electronic conferencing among participants in an interactive forum ensures that the project moves beyond broadcast to build an on-line, participatory open space.
- Email lists with many active subscribers generate so much information that they drive people away.

## Step by Step Guide

1. Set up a core group of volunteers/ participants interested in developing e-democracy, seeking people with a diverse mix of skills and experience.
2. Explore and use existing opportunities for contributing individual and group opinions on, or information about, specific issues including feedback on websites, tele-voting, on-line dialogues, and using the feedback options on online government services. Provide search engines with sufficient data (from broad categories such as 'offshore fishing' to specific categories such as the name of the area (e.g. 'Bateman's Bay') to see what other information/opportunities are available).
3. Set up your own website providing information about your organisation, links to other sites that may provide background information.
4. Develop a clear and concise mission or purpose statement to form the basis of public interest and awareness through wide distribution.
5. Keep your site well organised and up to date. Use standard HTML formatting to make the site as inclusive as possible.
6. Provide details of subscribe/ unsubscribe procedures.
7. Include new email contact details in your public email lists so that you can report up-to-date information those who have registered an interest, and also invite them to add their signatures to submissions, alternate proposals, etc.
8. Set up your own on-line dialogue through your website. Counting the number of people who visit the site can provide useful data for authorities who need to know how many people are concerned, or what kinds of issues are of concern to the community.
9. Investigate whether government news groups offer newsgroup space for local electronic democracy projects. Newsgroups provide the core of information exchange and global topical discussions.
10. Don't forget to let the traditional media know about your e-democracy project. An article in the news (radio, television or print) will let people know of your project and its address.