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# The opinions of the pre-service teachers about e-democracy in Turkey

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## Abstract

Today, Internet has a widespread position in the world and the usage of electronic environments in the context of governance was begun. Because of the important role of e-democracy processes in 21<sup>st</sup> century and importance of the social studies pre-service teachers in training active citizens, in this study opinions of the social studies pre-service teachers about e-democracy are presented. The data has been collected from pre-service teachers through interviews. The data has been collected from pre-service teachers through interviews.

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## 1. Introduction

Development of the technology is changing the interactions between citizens and government. Practices related with e-democracy constitute the essential part of those interactions. E-democracy is understood as the use of Information and Communications Technologies in democratic political and governance processes (Parvez and Ahmed, 2006). Through e-democracy citizens make their societal decisions in various ways with the use of ICT. Participatory public decision making is an important element of e-democracy. Besides, geographical barriers reduce by computer mediated communication. Through the internet, citizens may get easy access to governmental data and information sources. They can find programs and regulations in the web-sites of the governmental bodies. Internet polls and online surveys are accepted practices to get a quick impression of public opinion regards societal issues (Graft and Svensson, 2006). Via e-mail and discussion lists citizens become more active in democratic debates. Besides, there is some attempt towards building virtual cities which will enable citizen participation through the use of high technology in a variety of activities (Hudson-Smith, Evans and Batty, 2005).

Today, Internet has a widespread position in the world and the usage of electronic environments in the context of governance was begun. Citizens and governments interactions continue in online. It was not restricted only with getting information about governmental subjects, citizens take the advantages of some services and even they can vote through technological devices. Also, economic transactions take place over the net (Hudson-Smith, Evans and

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Batty, 2005). Besides, governments use web sites for demands and recommendations of citizens (Thomas and Streib, 2005). So, it is possible to define e-democracy as the transfer of citizen's opinions and complains to governmental bodies, about issues that concerned with the whole society. Citizens express their opinions about governmental process and they participate to administration actively in this way. It is possible to use the same method in paying taxes. But, according to Saglie and Vabo (2009), the Internet largely serves to activate people who are already politically active and widens social and demographic divisions.

E-democracy means the process of the participation in societal decisions with the usage of information and computing technology. Electronic voting is the ideal form of this process. But, there is some debates about this case. For example, some people think that, electronic voting prevents consultation and voting becomes a mechanic choice in the process of e-democracy (Kim, 2008). With e-democracy projects it was aimed to increase the transparency of the political and democratic processes, to promote citizen participation in the governing process and to recreate a sense of the public sphere online (Peart and Diaz, 2007).

In USA and in developed European countries public participation via Internet or other technological devices is in the foreground especially in this decade. Citizens in USA, can file taxes, pay fines, renew driver's licenses and register vehicles in online environment (Tillett, 2000; Verton, 2000). Citizen's capability of using phones, PCs and Internet to access government information is important in this process. US federal government believes that to save time and money, reduce bureaucracy, make the government more responsive to the needs of citizens and expand opportunities towards digital economy e-government services are necessary (Gostyla, 2000). Bristol is the first to have developed an online consultation finder. The council has developed an e-citizens panel (Hilton, 2006). And in New Zealand, there were some attempts towards an e-government that would allow anyone anywhere to obtain information, to complete transactions and to communicate with their elected representatives (Deakins, Caves and Dillon, 2001). A longitudinal study about these attempts indicates their success and increasing sophistication of local authority websites (Dillion, Deakins and Chen, 2008). But in Turkey there are less practice and less studies about e-democracy and about the opinions of citizens about it. In this study, it was tried to present the opinions of the social studies pre-service teachers about e-democracy. Because, social studies is a lesson related with citizenship and e-citizenship is a new form of citizenship. So, the practices about this concept may develop through the activities of these teachers.

### *1.1. Aim*

Because of the important role of e-democracy processes in 21<sup>st</sup> century and importance of the social studies pre-service teachers in training active citizens, in this study, opinions of the social studies pre-service teachers about e-democracy are presented.

### *1.2. Problem and Sub-Problems*

The main aim of this study is to determinate to the opinions of social studies pre-service teachers about e-democracy. In the context of this aim, the following questions were asked:

1. What are the opinions of the pre-service teachers about the positive and negative aspects of e-democracy?
2. What are the opinions of the pre-service teachers about e-democracy practices in Turkey?
3. What are their opinions towards the role of social studies teachers in e-democracy process?

## **2. Method**

The data has been collected from pre-service teachers through interviews. The researchers interviewed with seven (3 female, 4 male) pre-service teachers who were studied at the department of social studies during 2009/2010-fall term.

## 2.1 Data Collection

The data has been collected through standardized open-ended interview questions (Yıldırım&Şimşek, 2004). The questions were prepared by taking into consideration the aim, problem and sub-problems of the study. Questions in the draft version were investigated according to the congruity with the aim and realization of the same purpose. By the views of the experts the final draft has been prepared. The questions in final draft have been prepared about the understandings of pre-service teachers about e-democracy and the usage of technology in democratic process, especially in Turkey.

Because of aim in the fashion of determination participants' point of views and opinions about research subject, interview was selected as data collection method. Interview is most appropriate data collection method to collect data about others opinions and perceptions and to present different and variety point of views (Patton, 2002, 341-348). Semi-structured interviews were the main tool of data collection. Each participant was interviewed individually at a time and place convenient for them. To compare the responses of participants, same questions were asked to all participants.

## 2.2. Research Field

Social studies pre-service teachers (7 people) who enrolled at Marmara University Social Studies Education department in 2008/2009 Spring term formed the research field.

## 2.3. Sample

Sampling selection has been done through easily accessible sampling method. Due to being cost effective and the opportunity to study on acquaintance sample group, this method has been chosen.

## 2.4. Data Analysis

The data was analyzed by establishing codes and themes. The data's which collected by standardized interview forms are transmitted to computer and its' descriptive and content analyzes were done.

Each interview was audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Interview transcripts were analyzed through inductive qualitative data analysis methods. Once all interview transcripts were coded individually line by line with low-level or open codes, categories were created based on the similarities and differences among codes (Patton, 2002). To ensure the credibility of the findings, the data analysis process for every interview transcript was carried out by three researchers independently and the results were compared.

## 3. Findings

### 3.1. *The Opinions of the Pre-Service Teachers about the Positive and Negative Aspects of E-Democracy*

When we asked their opinions about e-democracy and connotes of the concept of e-democracy, the social studies pre-service teachers, at first they explained their views about democracy. For example freedom, tolerance and equivalence are reflected at first. We understood that, they have a few knowledge about e-democracy and its' application. All of the participants stated their unawareness about this concept. But, when gave some examples about e-democracy practices around the world, they recalled something. For example, the participant with code PST 1 explained his/her views towards e-democracy as following: "*Freedom of thought, freely expression of the views in online environment and sharing documents without any obstacle. I think they are some dimensions of e-democracy*". We understand from this statement that, e-democracy is matched with freedom by social studies pre-service teachers. According to them, learning to tolerance, getting opinions about different views, effortlessness and speed and having a voice about governmental issues are the positive respects of the e-democracy practices. They agreed about this phenomenon but their opinions are varied about the negative sides of this concept. Some of them (2 persons) stated their opinions as there is any disadvantage about the e-democracy practices. Because everyone has right to sharing opinions about the governmental services and they use this via internet in the context of e-

democracy. For example, the participant with code PST 5 stated his/her opinion like this: *“Internet is a libertarian environment. People express their views without giving any information about their identity. When they see that, they have an opportunity towards pronounce their voices to governmental bodies and they think that, they can make a contribution in the administration process of their country.”* Besides, there are pre-service teachers (4 people), which stated the negative sides of the e-democracy. Especially, they mentioned their fears about the objectivity of web-sites. They thought that, those web-sites might use by some people who are the partisans of a group. This opinion pointed out the mistrust of the pre-service teachers. At the same time, they stated their opinions that, there are lots of people who have not access to Internet; so, the results of e-democracy practices could not reflected the opinions of whole community. When we examined the web sites which the social studies pre-service teachers visited, we saw that, they use the web-site of the Ministry of the Education generally, and they use it for the aim of getting information. Besides, some of them (3 people) use the web-sites of the local governments and they declared their views and complaints about the services of those bodies. The participant with code PST 3 explained his/her e-democracy experience like this: *“I work part time and I get information about my social security charges on the website of the Social Security Institution. Especially the call centers are very useful. And I use those web-sites for the aim of getting knowledge about my country.”* From this statement, we understood that, pre-service teachers use the governmental web-sites for different aims.

### 3.2. *The Opinions of the Pre-Service Teachers about E-Democracy Practices in Turkey*

When we examined the pre-service teachers' opinions about e-democracy practices in Turkey; we saw that majority of them gave answers like *“if technological background prepared appropriately and it will enhance efficiency of democracy, it will minimize the bureaucracy because of the speed of Internet”*. Besides, majority of them expressed their unawareness about the e-democracy practices both in Turkey and around the world. It is an important result because of the characteristics of the sample group. They are among the educated population in this country and they are pre-service teachers in a department which, is related with this concept. So, their unawareness about e-democracy concept and the practices about e-democracy may be interpreted as the insufficiency of the cases about e-democracy. The social studies pre-service teacher with code PST 2 expressed his/her opinions about e-democracy practices in Turkey and s/he said: *“I don't believe that the e-democracy performs in Turkey. We don't communicate with our representatives, we don't send them e-mails, and we don't use the web-sites of the governmental bodies. Even we use them to proclaim our opinions about the issued related with our town or country, in my opinion, our views are not taken into consideration”*. And, the social studies pre-service teachers put forward reasons related with our culture. We know that, culture is an important element in democracy process. According to the pre-service teachers, our obedient character is an obstacle in this process. The participant with code PST 4 said about it that: *“We think that, our governors are doing the best things for us. We don't express our opinions about governmental process and we accept all things which, are done by governors. So, we haven't got a tradition towards participation to the governmental processes. But, in USA and in the European countries people notice their voices.”* But, all of them are hopeful about the new generation. They think that, the e-democracy practices will develop in time.

### 3.3. *Pre-Service Teachers Opinions towards the Role of Social Studies Teachers in E-Democracy Process*

We found out that, all of the pre-service teachers are like minded about the important role of the education and especially the social studies education in e-democracy process. They thought that, these practices develop through education. If we educate our citizens, they will be conscious about the importance of the participation and they will aware their rights in the democracy process. In this context, social studies in an important lesson because of its' aims and the content. Students learn the democracy and its' processes in this course. The social studies pre-service teacher with code PST 1 expressed his/her opinions about it like this: *“Education is a necessary in this process. Especially, we must learn the computer skills at first. We must achieve to being an information society. Social studies teachers must orient the students and they must be models for them. They must teach to respect for different viewpoints and tolerance.”* Also, they (3 people) pointed out that they would put in practice e-democracy with their students. When we interpreted the opinions of pre-service teachers about the role of the social studies teachers in e-democracy process, although their statements as they have been trying to put e-democracy in practice, majority of

them (5 people) did not make an explanation about how they have been doing this. They think that, social studies is necessary, important and its' importance is accepted by developed countries.

#### 4. Discussion

As Graft and Svensson (2006) said, through the internet, citizens may get easy access to governmental data and information sources. Online surveys are used to get a quick impression of public opinion regards societal issues. But when we looked the findings of this study, in the context of Turkey the usage level of them are very low. According to the participants of this study, only the people who have a computer and Internet access can use this opportunity. This result of the study overlapped with the results of the Saglie and Vabo (2009). According to them, the Internet largely serves to activate people who are already politically active and widens social and demographic divisions. But, social studies pre-service teachers are hopeful about the development of this process. They think that, if the problems about education of people and the Internet access, people will go beyond the boundaries of the culture and some characteristic like submissiveness and they will be participant citizens. In this process, the social studies course has an important role and social studies teachers are very important, also.

#### 5. Conclusion and Recommendation

*Practices in Turkey, can be summarized as follow:*

- The pre-service teachers have not enough information about e-democracy and its' application in Turkey.
- Insufficiencies in the context of education and technology are the major obstacles in this process, in Turkey.
- Democracy culture of the country is an important element in e-democracy process.
- Although social studies is an important course in education process of the citizens who are the participant of the democracy, pre-service teachers who will teach this subject in the future have insufficiencies about this.

*In the light of the findings of the study, following suggestions can be done:*

- Seminars about e-democracy practices must be given to citizens by governmental bodies.
- Governmental web-sites and practices about e-democracy must be introduced to citizens.
- Opinions and experiences of the citizens may be examined.

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