



ON-LINE POLITICS AND VOTING: OVERCOMING THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT?

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Abstract

The advance of digital technology in the field of politics in the last 20 years has raised the expectations about enhancing the potentials of the long dominant model of representative democracy. The need to reinvigorate the overall political process was talked about since the first signs of decline in the civic engagement in the second half of the past century. In the meantime, technological gadgets, and, especially the great versatility of Internet applicability have indeed contributed for better communication between the political elites and their people and for sharing the information on the unprecedented level. Yet, the key challenge still seems barely touched: how to provide meaningful participation of the politically awakened individuals in the decision-making processes within the states.

In the article we offer a brief survey of the European and USA achievements in the field of e-voting and Internet-voting in order to show how the political, technical and security concerns are still prevailing in the debates thus undermining the trust in the new modes of casting the votes. Also, we present the results of the survey done with 120 students in the Republic of Macedonia and their considerations about the eventual Internet voting in the country.

Applying the descriptive and analytical methods we would argue that the immense possibilities for using Internet in politics are far from being exploited, so the initial miscalculation and failures should not discourage the communities from observing new pathways for improving the unavoidable digital component of democracy.

Keywords: Internet, digital technology, e-democracy, e-voting, citizens

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Introduction

Debates about the inherent limits of democracy (Crozier, Huntington, Watanuki, 1973) and decline of the West as the prime promotor of this political system have been occasionally circulated by the prominent authors in the past (Spengler, 1926). One of the biggest concerns is ever decreasing number of citizens who are part of the political processes which directly correlate to the decline in membership of the civil networks (Putnam, 1995). Despite the fact that in the meantime no other type of political system was elevated to the level of a systemic challenger, the future shape of democracy is uncertain. According to some scholars two juxtaposed trends are important: first, slow, but, steady loosening of the links between the citizens and institutions which provoke the crisis of democratic legitimacy and accountability, and second, the rise of digital information and communication technologies (ICT) as a potential tool for amending some shortages in democracy (Coleman, Gotze, 2001, 4-5).

Throughout political history it was important to narrow the gap between the electorate and the elected politicians. As the time went by, it started growing into the biggest obstacle for overcoming the democratic deficit. Almost twenty years ago British economist Cairncross (1997) wrote about the “the death of distance” where she forcefully elaborated the impact of telecommunications and Internet on our lives and society. The United Nations identified a strong empirical correlation between the country’s information and communication technology (ICT) diffusion index and its income and human development level as measured by the United Nations Development Program (Prasad K. 2013, 189). The Digital Revolution and its by-product the Information Society brought about changes in the way how the people communicate with each other and with their political representatives (Rostiashvili, 2012, 11). Nowadays, the phenomenon described more than a decade ago as cyber or netpolitik is familiar virtually to everyone. It is certainly not true that netpolitik, unlike realpolitik, deals only with moral legitimacy and societal value, but, the assumption that after the agricultural revolution that had to do with the quantity of food, the industrial revolution which was fueled by the quantity of capital, we are witnessing the information revolution changing the world with the quantity of information is – correct (Bollier, 2003, 2-3).

World Wide Web and Democratic Gap

As with many other buzzwords in the social sciences e-democracy is commonly used term, but, with the very wide range of meanings. Definitions extent from a minimalist one when citizens have electronic access to the government information and interact with the government officials and the more substantial one, where e-democracy implies a more active citizen involvement and their ability, either directly or through their representatives, to govern themselves and their communities (Noris in Tuzzi et al. 33). Anyhow, a number of definitions uphold that e-democracy involve the use of ICT in support of the democratic decision-making processes. Obviously, the key component is how and to what level citizens are engaged. In this regard the OECD report identifies three approaches: first, information, as one-way relationship in which government delivers information to the citizens; second, consultation, or two-way correlation in which citizens provide feedback to the government and third, active participation when citizens are engaged in defining the process and content of the policy making. In spite of their proposed equal standing in setting the agenda, responsibility for the final decision should rest with the government (Macintosh, 2004, 1-2).

Considering the effects of the nascent forms of direct democracy related to the World Wide Web, the most evident one is situated in the area of the information exchange. Haider is right to highlight the power of Internet as an “information enabler” (Haider, 2009, 1). But, more information does not necessarily imply higher quality of the decision-making process since the conditions for transforming information into the political action have to be in place beforehand (Dijk, 2013, 6-7). If the technology stays as the sole enabler in the field, it certainly is not going to be a solution for the modern challenges of democracy. In order to have better access to information and, even more, to amplify the effects of using ICT through consultation and public participation, one report proposes the integration of the traditional offline with the new online tools (OECD, 2003, 9).

Crucial challenge is to go beyond the traditional one-way model of service delivery from the government to the citizens and to use the feedback from the people through the digital media. As Coleman plainly put it: instead of citizens simply paying their taxes online, they would be able to participate in a public debate about how their taxes are spent (Coleman, Gotze, 5). But, exactly, the participation is “highly problematic” whenever it comes to the concrete implementation models because participation should not be an end in itself (Tuzzi et al. in Cammaerts, Carpentier, 2007, 34). The peoples’ voices should not be only heard of, but, more importantly, taken into account.

Supporters of digital democracy are sure that all the gaps of modern democracy can be filled by the use of ICT and in due course “facilitate a quantum leap” in democracy (Backer in Rostiashvili, 12). While recognizing the ICT’s role in today’s politics we are still away from the point when the citizens’ participation in the decision-making processes will be substantial (Rostiashvili, 13). Many scholars would agree that major problem of democratic reform is how to sustain citizens’ mass deliberation and incorporate it into the political process (OECD, 2003, 28). One model of doing it is by combining the top-down perspective - citizens’ access to information and reaction to the government-led initiatives and bottom-up perspective, when the people are “emerging as producers, rather than just as consumers of policy” (Macintosh et al. in OECD, 29-30).

Internet: Panacea or Only a Tool?

Perhaps like no other global medium in history the Internet triggered polarized views about its potential, influence and limits concerning the engagement of citizens and their connection with the public policies. Arguments are divided about the “good” versus the “bad” effects of the Internet usage. On one side of the rift are those who believe that Internet leads to the more intensive and better social relations by adding another channel of communication, while others argue that Internet use can be socially isolating since the time spent on the web is often taken at the expense of other social activities, including the political ones. This “displacement model” indicates the zero-sum effect with the time on Internet allegedly reducing the period available for face-to-face social activities (Nie, Hillygus, 2002, 2). Or to reformulate the



thesis using the words of Nie and Erbring: “the more time they spend using the Internet the more they lose contact with their social environment” (2000, 5).

The very notion of information being able to flow unrestricted over the borders is splitting the people into two categories: cyber-libertarians and cyber-utopians (Gaser et. all, 2014, 123). In the first group are those convinced that the power of Internet should soon mark the end of the state sovereignty and rise of the specific subtype of “information sovereignty”. In their view, technology has given the citizens a chance to leave political communities based on geography and join digital communities based on shared interests. On the other side, cyber-utopians are emphasizing the still unchallenged state control over the physical telecommunication infrastructure and quote the recent study that over a third of all Internet users experienced some form of filtering (Gaser, 128). Similar arguments, at times, followed by oversimplification are observable in the discussions between the so-called digital enthusiasts and digital sceptics. Enthusiasts are confident that the computer networks will contribute to the more informed citizens and increase their political participations and impact by a simple click of a mouse. Extreme view among them believe that Internet is changing the balance of power between citizens and the “power barons” and soon will make legislatures and other governmental bodies irrelevant, thus allowing the direct democracy (Levine in Hayduk, Mattson, 2002, 121). Grossman had even put forward the utopian idea about the “electronic republic” where the government decision-making from the few in the power centers will be extended to the many like in the city-states of ancient Greece (Levine in Hayduk, Mattson, 2002, 122).

Some scholars demonstrate that the level of penetration of Internet leads to the higher levels of democracy; others warn that the web might have an adverse effect on democratization because Internet empowers not only the citizens, but, the Governments to “monitor its people better and prevent free speech”, as well (Best, Wade, 2009). In the past decade public perception was created that Internet is force for democratic change based on its perceived role in the popular uprisings in the world starting from the “color revolutions” in the former USSR and ending with the Arab Spring. However, the loyal supporters of this thesis do not take into account the subsequent course of development in the same countries when authoritarian tendencies backfired despite the unhindered access to Internet (Faris, Etling, 2008, 65-66). What is beyond doubt is that the Internet does possess specific “generative possibilities” to bring people together for conversation, commerce, political engagement or action (Zittrain, 2008, 148).

In this context is important to differentiate between the two dimensions of the Internet effect over the political processes: horizontal within the government, and vertical when citizens interact with one another and with the government. While Internet offers new communication lanes between the citizenry and the authorities, it is not as good in improving processes among the government institutions (Faris, Etling, 65-66). The situation is worse with the authoritarian leaders who obstruct the free speech and democratic movements with the same rigor - online and off line. Of course, democratic governments behave differently, so judging the impact of Internet is always attached to the specific context in the democratic polity. Basically, it is safe to say that in all instances Internet should be considered as a politically neutral tool at the disposal of dictators and democrats alike (Faris, Etling, 70-80).

In principle, the social media do offer innovative opportunities for the political actors, political institutions and for the public to interact with one another (Clarke, 2010, 1). Potential political benefits from the use of the social media are: fostering greater pluralism in political discourse; enabling citizens to become more effective political actors; building trust in the public institutions and politicians; helping legislators to better represent citizens and governments to better serve the public needs. In the group of the potential risks the most prominent is the danger to construct the so-called surveillance state which would allow the people in power to breach privacy rights en masse (Clarke, 4-9). In the not so distant 1984 Barber alerted that the use of technology could easily weaken the sense of face-to-face cooperation or confrontation and increase the danger of elite manipulation (1984).

E-voting: Capabilities and Legitimacy

A minimal definition of e-voting is the usage of electronic means to mark a ballot paper, while Internet voting is electronic voting which involves casting a ballot via the Internet (Goldsmith, 2013). An umbrella definition would be that the E-voting embraces casting a ballot via a broad range of electronic telecommunications technology, including the Internet, mobile phones, cable and satellite television and computers without internet connection (Gibson, 2001, 564). If the Internet voting is subtype of an electronic voting, then, what is the demarcation line between the two? Electronic voting is performed by the computers installed in the polling stations, not connected to any network, while the Internet voting is executed in the unsupervised environment (Caporusso, 2010, 55). In most cases, the e-voting in both forms is applied in the two crucial procedural phases: when casting and when counting the votes (Al-Khouri, 2012, 26).

Since 1982 voting by electronic machines on the European continent was used for the legally binding elections, but, despite the increased interest it is still not widespread (McGaley, Gibson, 2006, 2). It was in use in Ireland and Netherland, but, in both states was revoked by the political parties due to the low level of trust in the technology. Switzerland, UK, Spain, Portugal and Italy have promoted limited trials without the legal effects; Belgium and France are in the process of deploying electronic machines (Caporusso, 2010, 55). Internet voting on the global level was applied for the first time in 2000 in the official political elections in the USA, as a pilot project in several states aimed at the voters overseas. Since, a dozens of other countries have been through the same experience. Estonia in 2005 became the first country in the world to organize the nation-wide elections when the voters were offered the alternative to cast their vote over the Internet (Breuer, 2006, 2). Estonia is still leading the field since the country had already in its portfolio several nation-wide elections via Internet in the past 10 years. In other parts of the world, United Arab Emirates developed their advanced I-voting system with biometric smart cards (Al-Khouri, 2012, 25); Australia, Canada, France, Mexico and Switzerland use Internet voting in parts of their territories; India and Norway have attempted a few trials; Finland, UK and the USA have exercised the pilot projects, but, decided not to continue; Netherlands and Spain have a few successful years, but, they have interrupted their practices (Goldsmith, 2013). In all the countries mentioned the Internet voting system is used as a supplementary channel to the traditional ones for casting the vote.



In general, the electronic voting is distributed more in Europe than in the USA but, the matter of the fact is that almost everywhere a certain level of skepticism about this voting mode do persist (McGaley, Gibson, 2006, 3). According to the Council of Europe Recommendations, the pre-requisites for integrity and public trust in the e-voting are a few, but, rigid: secure, reliable and efficient process, technically robust, open to independent verification and easily accessible to voters (CoE, 2004). As the past experience of Estonia testified the I-voting system should not have had high level of legitimacy if not trustworthy on three critical levels: political/ legal legitimacy; voters' transparency; and system transparency (Maaten, Hall, 2008, 32). Another role-model to be followed was developed by Switzerland where all main factors were put in place: support on the highest level by the relevant political actors; gradual approach and involvement of multidisciplinary teams tackling personal data information, system security, sociological aspects and the organizational questions (Chevallier et al, 2006, 55). In the same context, especially important are two lessons from Netherlands: first, once trust in the voting system is lost it is difficult to win it back, second, if the e-voting is well implemented in one country it does not mean that it is suitable for others (Loeber, 2008, 29). Finally, inextricably linked with the trust complex is the so –called digital divide, particularly visible in the rural areas. About its sub-layer, digital literacy polling in Switzerland has rightly voiced concern over the fact that only two thirds of its electorate are experienced Internet users (Gasser, 2010, 5).

Traditional vs. New Voting Practices: Pros and Cons

Some authors optimistically announced that the electronic voting will have a “revolutionizing effect on democracy” by reducing costs and limiting errors made by voters and the administrations. But, more importantly, they argue that virtually unlimited access to the online information will empower voters to build more informed opinion and eventually make more qualified choice (Caporusso, 2010, 56). On the other side of the pool are the “old fashioned” experts who tend to see an online voting as a kind of “betrayal” of traditional voting practices which, allegedly, is increasing the social isolation of the citizens (Caporusso, 2010, 56). The truth is that if the system is well accepted by the voters and candidates it can be cost effective, deliver faster and more reliable results and be “greener” option of casting the ballot (Mellet , 2010, 3). Even more, the most valuable potential of information technology in democracy would be to strengthen the public sphere by multiplying “information resources, channels of communication and networking capacity” for national and international policy groups and political parties (Norris, 2002, 2).

Studies show that the Internet voting underperformed regarding the expectations that this technology would increase the voter turnout. The empirical data is unambiguous: the existing literature on the subject either did not test this hypothesis, or indicate that the I-voting is not contributing to the turnout level (Oostveen, Besselaar, 2009, 357-358). Similar conclusion is given in the report of the UK Cabinet Office which is precise that the electronic voting will not solve the problem of the voters' turnout (in Oostveen, Besselaar, 372). Thus far, the most comprehensive overview in this regard is offered by Norris who compared 70 national elections in the 1990-ties in 25 post-industrial societies with established tradition of political rights and civil liberties. Her main conclusion is that dependent on the context this type of voting could even be negatively associated with the turnout (Norris, 2002, 9). In other words, the electoral turnout is not related to the voting method, but, much more to the viable policy alternatives and the quality of the candidates on the ballot (Norris, 2002, 7). Lastly, one European study suggested that the drivers of the Internet voting are neither age, gender, income level, education nor the political affiliation, but, mainly confidence of the people in the new technology and in one's own computer skills (Chevallier, 2006, 61). Some surveys present even one intriguing fact: mostly in favor of electronic elections are the people who are already politically mobilized (Kenski, 2005).

Survey – Sample, Results and Discussion

Survey was done in 2014 in Skopje with 120 university students aged 20-22 years, 69 females and 51 male (see Table1)(Fig. 1). Most of them (94) reside in the capital Skopje or in the cities with more than of 5.000 inhabitants, the rest of 25 in the communities with less than of 5.000 people (Fig. 2). The predominant number (110) were coming from the families with above the national income average per capita in the Republic of Macedonia, and only 10 students were below that threshold (Fig. 3). Strong majority (101 student or 84%) were active on Internet on the average (at least one hour per day online) or more, only 19 were below that average or not connected at all. (Fig. 4)

Skepticism towards the voting online is evident among the examinees since 55.8% are against this voting mode to be applied in their country (see Table 2). Their most cited arguments were: weak technical support and infrastructure on the national level; poor or no access to Internet in the rural areas; ICT ignorant parts of the electorate; danger of proxy voting, especially within families; and possibilities of hacking the program and thus altering the election outcome.

Students in favor (44.2%) emphasize an easy access to the network and convenience of voting for elderly, disabled and people in diaspora; avoidance of the tense situations and violence in the polling stations; faster and cheaper counting of votes; neutrality of Internet as a tool, as opposite to many individuals involved in the election administration; increasing voter turnout among the young generations.

Responses within the four categories (gender; residence; income; and Internet activity) do not show statistically significant deviation from the main framework of the survey's results (Fig. 5, 6, 7 & 8).

Concluding Remarks

The Athenian agora in a modern guise should not be contemplated as the only point of departure because the original was neither democratic nor inclusive (Coleman in OECD, 148). If the goal is to enhance democracy using the ICT we should analyzing the promise of Internet through its two competing mechanisms: first, it definitively enables infinitive range of ideas and perspectives, second, the people almost naturally tend to “balkanize” creating numerous online communities which are not mutually connected (Levine in Haydok, Mattson, 2002). One research study even indicates that the use of ICT in the public sector might strengthen the existing power relations and instead of “deinstitutionalization” or institutional renewal to get institutional adjustment (Homburg, 2005, 496). It is too optimistic to say that ICT nowadays is becoming increasingly relevant for the political systems, but it do pose a challenge to the model of representative democracy and to



a certain extent, is opening the space for more intensive horizontal exchange of information and participation of individuals (Tuzzi, Padovani, Nesti, 32).

If not feasible to “merge the spirit of ancient Athens with the technology of twenty-first century” when everyone will communicate with each other (Hilbert, 2007, 38), what is attainable? It is safe to say that direct democracy is out of reach since it is not sufficient to have only technical possibilities to connect the people. In the same time, direct control, influence or manipulation by the authorities cannot be ruled out (Hilbert, 78). What is evident in the world today is the rise of the new information class of individuals and organizations that are well equipped and trained to gathering, presenting and at times, if necessary, manipulating information (Schonberger, Lazer). The winning strategy would be to build on the emerging new, hybrid types of democracy which combine the virtual and real political engagement of the people (Zuniga et al. 2010, 45). It goes without saying that we are already witnessing the decentralization of power stimulated by the plurality in the electronic information networks (Hilbert, 49). Quick and radical shift from the representative to the Internet-based democracy is not likely in the foreseeable future, but, the mixed model of democracy with the elements of both, is certainly in the making (Anttiroiko, 2003, 127).

Regarding the e-voting with all the formidable challenges of technical and political character ahead it is not surprising that the number of countries experimenting with it is still marginal. Even the world leaders like Estonia are taking the incremental instead of revolutionary approach (Spucher, Haenni, Dubius, 270). The traditional voting systems are not going to disappear for years to come, but, the processes of advancing digital democracy and its component, e-voting are irreversible. The future of democracy would belong to the “smart mobs”, consisting of people who do not know each other, but, are able to act together in shaping responses to the fundamental questions confronting our civilization (Rheingold, 2002, 191).

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Table 1. Social Profile of Students

Social profile of students		Examinees	Percentage
Gender	Male	51	43%
	Female	69	57%
Total		120	100%
Residence	Urban areas	94	78%
	Rural areas	26	22%
Total		120	100%
Income level	Above national average	110	92%
	Below national average	10	8%
Total		120	100%
Internet activity	Average	101	84%
	Below average	19	16%
Total		120	100%

Table 2. Question "Are you in favor of online voting in your country?"



Distribution of examinees		Yes		No	
		Number of examinees	Percentage	Number of examinees	Percentage
Gender	Male	28	23 %	23	19 %
	Female	36	30%	33	28 %
Total		64	53 %	56	47 %
Residence	Urban areas	54	45%	40	33%
	Rural areas	14	12%	12	10%
Total		68	57%	52	33%
Income level	Above national average	63	53%	47	39%
	Below national average	5	4%	5	4%
Total		68	57%	52	43%
Internet activity	Average	57	47 %	44	37. %
	Below average	11	9%	8	7 %
Total		68	56 %	52	44 %

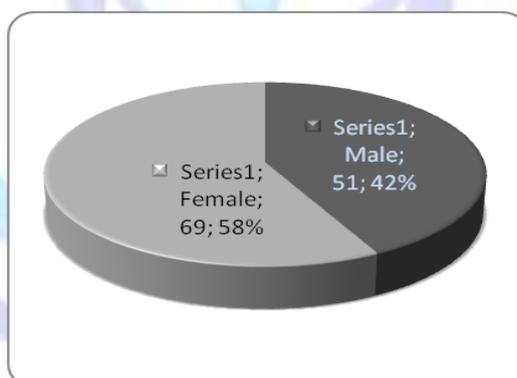


Fig. 1. Distribution by gender

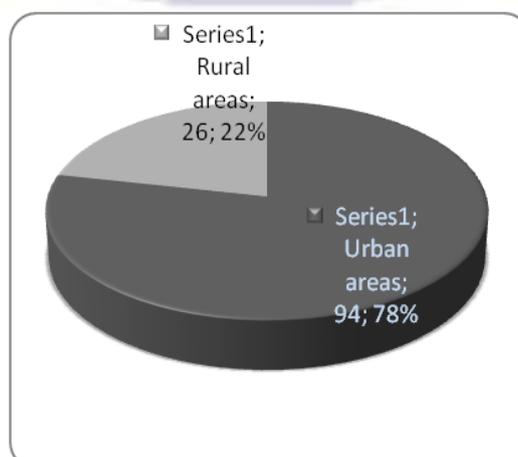


Fig. 2. Distribution by residence

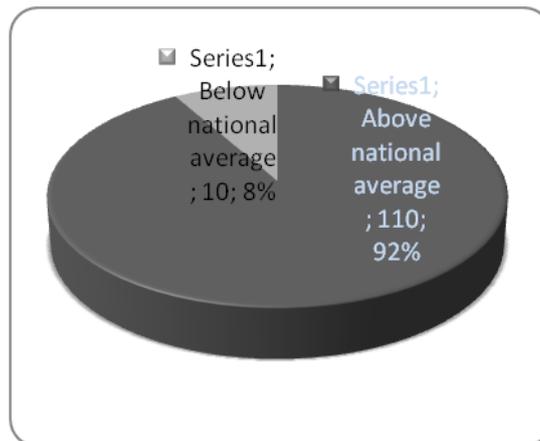


Fig. 3. Distribution by income level

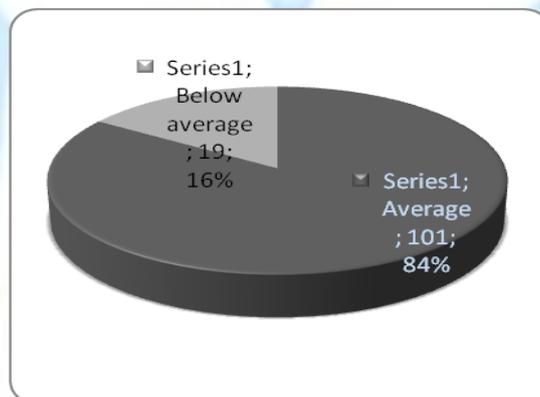


Fig. 4. Distribution by internet activity

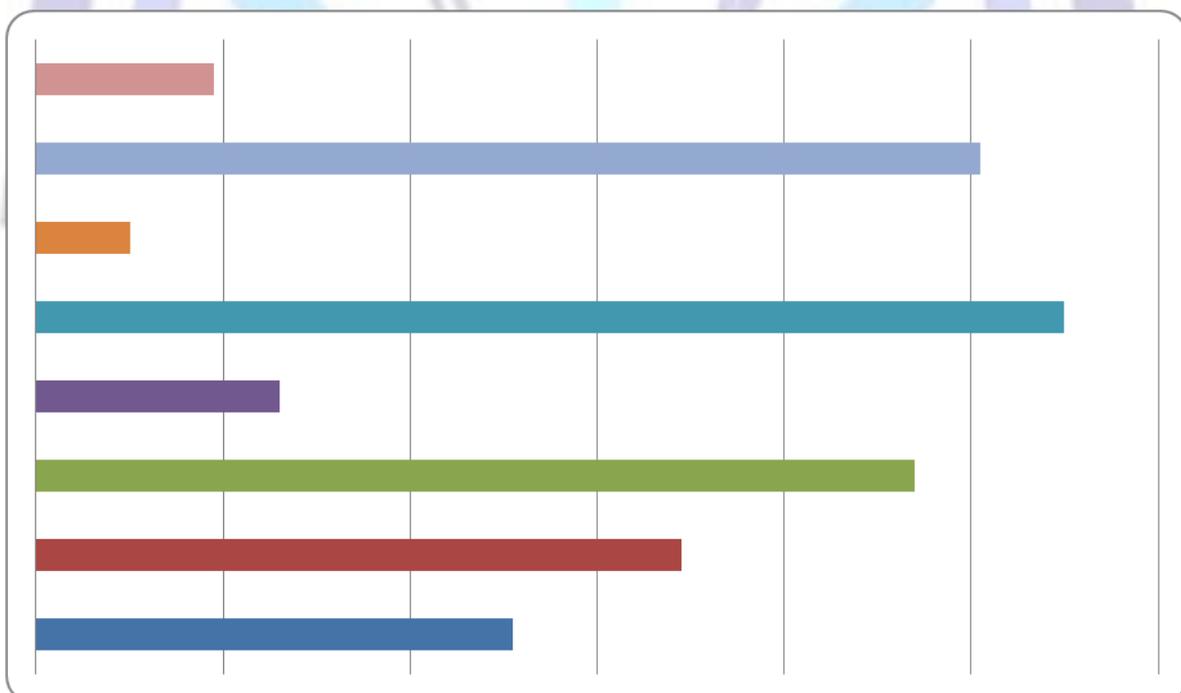


Fig. x – Visual representation of Table 1 – social structure of the examinees

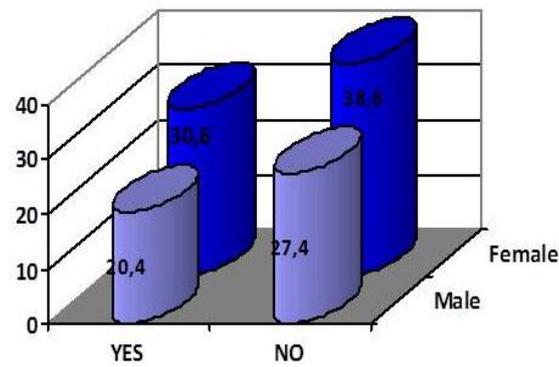


Fig. 5. Distribution of the examinees by gender

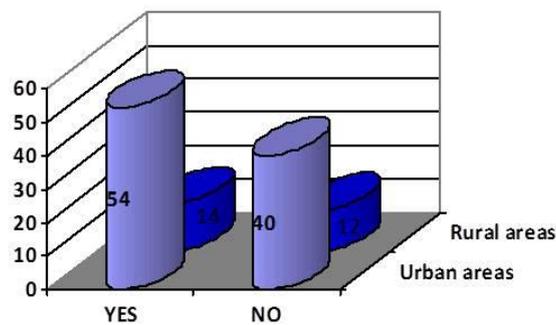


Fig. 6. Distribution of the examinees by residence

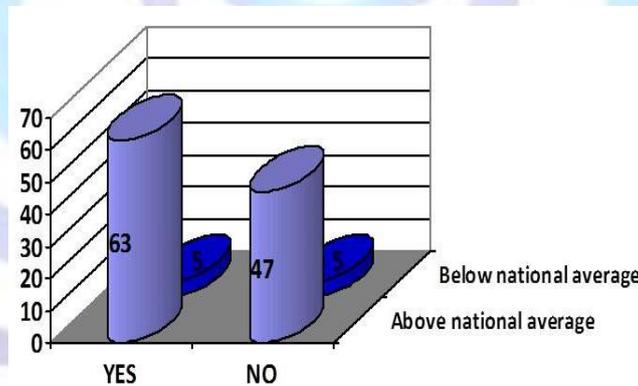


Fig. 7. Distribution of the examinees by income level

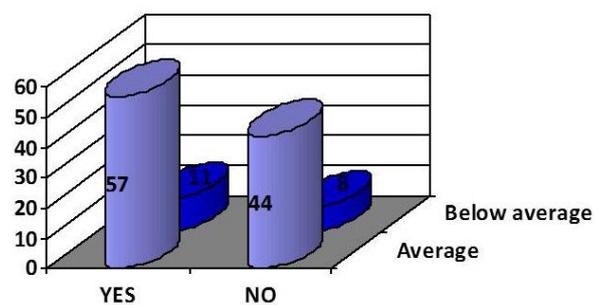


Fig. 8. Distribution of examinees by internet activity

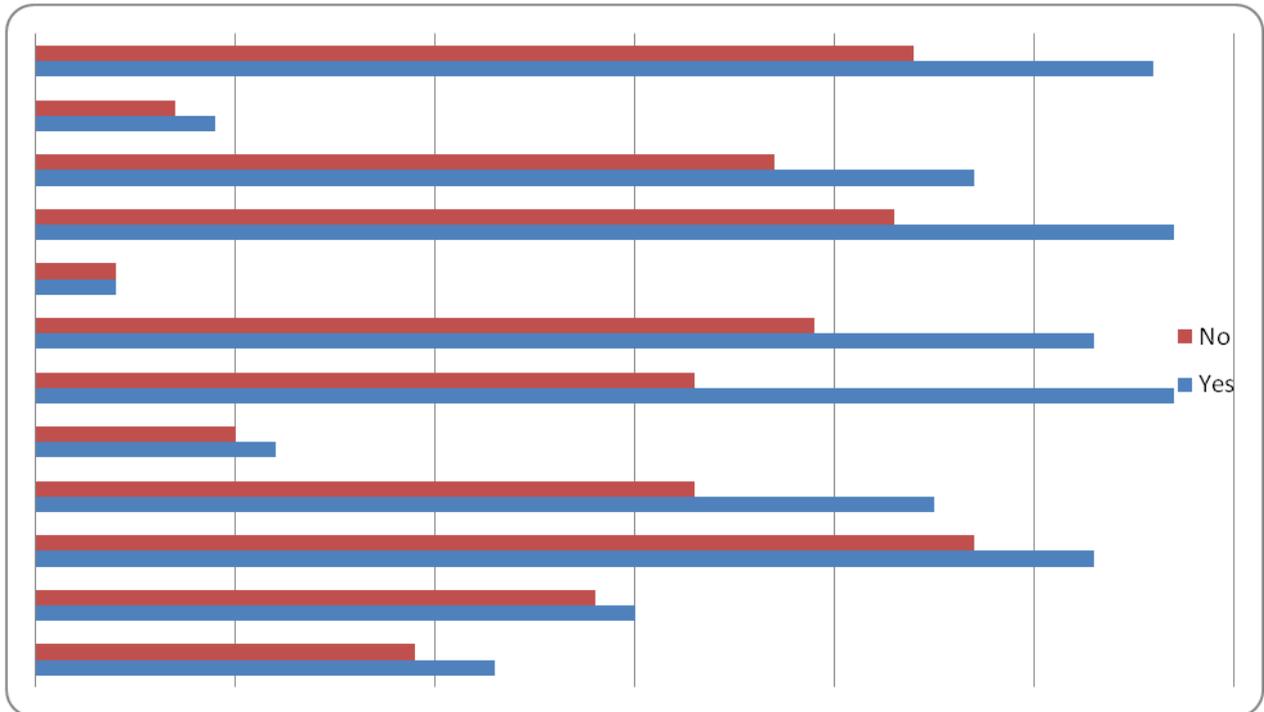


Fig. x – Visual representation of Table 2 – social structure of the examinees per answer

