



The eParticipation Network 

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European Research Workshop

Mapping eParticipation

White Papers

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Overview

The research community is involved in many efforts to understand political participation in the Internet age and to broaden and deepen citizen participation in the political decision making process by using information and communication technologies. Advances in research in this area involve not only IS researchers but researchers from other disciplines such as communications, sociology, political science and political administration. In addition the field is an applied field which interests many government practitioners and political interest groups. This workshop sets out to co-ordinate these diverse research initiatives and to help scope this cross-disciplinary area.

This is an exciting and challenging research area which requires a novel combination of technical, social and political initiatives. The white papers in this workshop address many of these issues.

Objectives

This workshop uses the following objectives to map the emerging field of eParticipation:

- ◆ to facilitate close and sustained co-operation between eParticipation researchers from different academic disciplines in order to improve the multidisciplinary quality of research and understanding,
- ◆ to assess and compare research already made on eParticipation in cities, regions and countries across Europe,
- ◆ to identify eParticipation research challenges for both researchers and government, and
- ◆ to structure the core research themes and related concepts as a taxonomy or ontology.

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eParticipation: Time to Take Stock?

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Abstract

The emergence of eParticipation as a field of academic research is laudable insofar as it aims to investigate people's engagement in civic society. Few would dare to suggest that anything less than democracy is acceptable for cyber citizens of the twenty-first century, and any effort which aims to enable Europe to better address its democratic deficit deserves support. However, in the rush to employ information and communication technologies (ICTs), the epistemological, ontological and ethical assumptions which underpin their use often go uncriticised. Similarly absent from public discussion is the issue of whether the models of representative democracy which eParticipation is designed to reinvigorate should themselves be questioned insofar as they reflect an elitism inherited from eighteenth and nineteenth-century political thought.

Keywords

eParticipation, Ireland, ICT, democracy

1. Ireland and eParticipation

Ireland's information-society policy is at a critical juncture. Information-society development certainly has elements of the fable of the "Emperor's New Clothes": government understanding appears to be premised on hope and hype, promoting technical idolatry rather than questioning best use or developing robust indicators or evidence of social and civic benefits. The assumptions underpinning eGovernment, eInclusion, eBusiness, ICT and schools and eLearning initiatives ostensibly appear to be ad hoc, overtly technologically deterministic and positive about the transformative qualities of ICT. The story has not, thus far, been one about improving social democracy or eParticipation, and cynics may argue that the aspirations have little basis in reality: despite Ireland's quest to be the premier knowledge economy and society in Europe, still less than half the Irish adult population have used the internet. A stock take is timely.

2. Connection or disconnection?

Public perception of both technology and democracy in Ireland is influenced by a huge disconnection between politics, technologies and democratic processes. Debate about the public sphere is hindered by dichotomous messages about good/bad government and good/bad technologies. On the one hand, Ireland's recent economic success and its political economy are heavily influenced by and reliant on the expansion of software and multinational technology companies, which are responsible for major employment growth – a 'technology good' scenario. On the other hand, political scandals and public tribunals of inquiry in recent years have exposed widespread incompetence and corruption in planning, tax, policing, health and legal and financial services. The distrust generated has led to a 'bad politics/poor government' scenario, and a lack of confidence in government eParticipation initiatives, fuelled by high profile failures of multi-million euro schemes such as eVoting and ICT systems in the healthcare and police services. Such schemes have tended to attract more media attention than successful schemes such as the revenue online service or the several local authorities which are running online schemes, indicating people's willingness to engage in eParticipation. For example, a flagship, nation-wide local eGovernment initiative 'Mobhaile' (Irish for my town) has been designed specifically to combine eGovernment, eParticipation and community formation [1]. The good/bad scenario has yet to unfold.

3. Time to take stock

How, therefore, do we align such dichotomous perceptions with changing democratic processes in Irish society for the better? If eParticipation supported the thriving informal, subversive civil society activities in the world of bloggers and online discussion forums, would it be more successful? Or should the use of technologies that support a more structured and formal debate be encouraged? The slow roll-out of national ICT infrastructure projects, and the current political and popular inertia to information society "push", represents a unique opportunity to reflect on how ICT might be better used as tools for social, cultural and civic participation. Our research goal is to challenge the overtly optimistic accounts of technologies as the

starting point for democratic revitalisation, and explore some of the contradictions between claims for revolutionary, positive change in civic participation and eGovernance, and continuities in structural inequalities. We need to avoid the situation where the extent to which people engage with the relevant technologies itself becomes the measure of success of eParticipation: eParticipation must not become its own justification, with little or no reference to its social context. Until we address these contradictions and place equal emphasis on developing and understanding social and technical infrastructures, we will not be able to develop meaningful measurements of the benefits, and threats of ICT to democratic participation and civil society.

4. Conclusion

The empirical questions of how to support democratic processes and how precisely to measure benefits must be grounded in more fundamental questions regarding the nature of democracy itself. Such observations should not be read as attempts to erect barriers to eParticipation: rather they are made with a view towards opening the debate to more fundamental questions regarding the nature of democracy itself and the role which eParticipation can play in improving upon the models of democracy we have inherited. For example, notions of direct democracy have traditionally been eschewed in favour of representative government, but perhaps the time is coming when more direct forms of participation by citizens in the day-to-day workings of the legislature are possible. Such participation could be encouraged from an early age, building social capital and leading to the creation of an identifiable democratic space at individual, community and national levels. However, just how serious we are about eParticipation in Ireland can be gleaned from the recently launched “Taskforce on Active Citizenship” which has been established “to advise the Government on the steps that can be taken to ensure that the wealth of civic spirit and active participation already present in Ireland continues to grow and develop” [2]. That the taskforce has no explicit remit in the area of eParticipation suggests that we are still officially some way from an appreciation of what might be achieved.

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A Multi-Perspective Approach to eParticipation

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Abstract

This position paper outlines Aalborg University's approach to eParticipation in terms of three cross-disciplinary perspectives: 1) politics and organisation, 2) communication and interaction and 3) technology and infrastructure. Each of the three eParticipation perspectives is discussed in terms of its underlying research paradigms, theories, methods and issues, and a three perspective model of eParticipation is developed.

Keywords

eParticipation, cross-disciplinary

1. Introduction

The approach to eParticipation outlined in this short paper reflects the composition of Aalborg University's Centre for Digital Governance (<http://www.egov.aau.dk/>) and the centre's cross disciplinary approach to Electronic Government (Fig 1).



Figure 1. Centre for Digital Governance logo

Three cross-disciplinary perspectives are outlined:

- 1) Politics and organisation (reflecting both the democratic dimension of digital governance and its location in government organisations with particular characteristics and ways of working).
- 2) Communication and interaction (focusing on the roles of computer-mediated discourse, socio-technical interaction and technology-facilitated work in governance), and
- 3) Technology and infrastructure (concentrating on emerging internet-based and mobile technologies enabling governance, and the physical and conceptual infrastructures that underpin these technologies).

eParticipation is discussed in terms of these three perspectives, with particular focus on scientific

perspective (preliminary assumptions; theoretical concepts; theoretical models; research community; disciplines involved, method), eParticipation typologies, research issues and problems studied, and eParticipation challenges and barriers.

2. The politics and organisation perspective

From the perspective of politics and organisation it is assumed that the involvement of citizens in the process of political decision-making and implementation can improve democracy in terms of more responsive and effective democratic institutions. EParticipation is to be seen as one tool among others. However, in highly developed welfare states there is a growing need to find new ways of closing the gap between citizens and political representatives to improve both democratic legitimacy and political effectiveness. EParticipation could be a new and effective tool for collecting information and knowledge from citizen-experts, stakeholders and ordinary citizens as well. Key issues for the research on these subjects are different normative models of democracy (liberal, participatory, deliberative), theories of the effect of participation on politics, theories about media and the public, policy-theory and theories of organization and management. In relation to eParticipation we have worked with a distinction between the supply of e-tools (that may help create new political opportunity structures for citizens) and the demand for (or the use of) such e-tools among citizens. The disciplines involved are political science, political sociology and public management.

Here eParticipation is studied at the local level – in communities, in associations, in welfare-institutions and in local politics and administration. The topics studied include plans and strategies for the use of e-tools in administration and politics as well as various forms of political e-communication. These cover: 1) communication “from above” (Municipal websites and other official and unofficial websites where citizens, members and user-groups can get information about services and policies). 2) communication “within” organizations (digitalization of the administration and of internal communication). 3) communication “from below” (citizens involved in public deliberations via e-consultations, e-voting, e-surveys, e-citizen-panels and e-discussion forums). E-communication is studied in all phases of the political process: from agenda setting through political decision-making to implementation and evaluation of policies.

Problems addressed in these kinds of research include investigating the potential of eParticipation for

improving democratic decision-making and implementation with regard to 1) a more open, transparent and inclusive public, 2) stronger involvement of citizens in public decision-making and implementation, 3) more responsive and effective policy-performance. The methods applied are survey-methods, qualitative interviews with actors on different levels and document readings. Part of the analytical approach is shown in Figure 2.

	Supply of e-tools	Demand for e-tools	Effects on the political process
Public information	Low/high	Low/high	low/high
Public deliberation	Low/high	Low/high	low/high

Figure 2. Analytical approach to eParticipation

To-day, political participation via the Internet plays only a marginal role in the political process. One reason is that eParticipation is neither prioritized by public authorities or by citizens, forming a negative circle. Political representatives should pay more attention to the potentials of the Net for two-way-communication. The political authorities should furthermore pay more attention to securing an effective access of all citizens to the Internet. The lack of access to the Net is still an important barrier for eParticipation. It should be seen as a duty of government to overcome this barrier; in the present situation, the market decides.

3. The communication and interaction perspective

From the perspective of interaction and communication focus is put on the use and meaning of participation technologies. This means that design and implementation of technologies are always studied in relation to a use context. Primary research topics are interaction and communication in both design processes and in designed products. The research is partly rooted in the Scandinavian tradition of systems design and the participatory design school, emphasising the design of systems which contribute to quality in use by developing techniques for users to participate in the design process. The underlying assumption is that democratic or participatory processes in the design of information systems will lead to improved quality in use. Other research traditions include interaction design for interactive systems from the tradition of human computer interaction. Democracy perspectives are found at both an individual level (focusing on the support of individuals in order to make them able to participate, or focusing on the designed product and its ability to let users interact and communicate), a community or organisational level (developing participatory techniques

and processes in order for different stakeholders to participate in design processes) and a societal level (influencing and improving politics in the IT-area). Key-words and theories for this research are participation, design, democracy, learning, politics and power. In relation to eParticipation we have especially worked on the design and evaluation of e-services.

The research focuses on eParticipation at the local level. Primary research areas are public institutions (schools, hospitals, municipalities). The ‘use and meaning’ perspective implies that the focus is on users (rather than institutions or citizens) and on analysis of user interaction with existing technologies and user interaction in the design process of new technologies.

Problems addressed by the research include how to improve interaction and communication in design and use context of information technologies. This is pursued through development of participatory methods for interaction design, development of theories of interactive technologies, development of theories for technology use, development of methods for how to study quality in use, development of theories for use contexts. The technologies studied are primarily owned by public institutions, such as 1) websites/e-services (e.g. e-tax websites, e-service websites from the power industry) and 2) administrative information systems (primarily electronic health records). The approach is simultaneously critical and constructive: eParticipation technologies call for critical reflections on who is setting the stage for participation, who can participate, why, and what does this mean, especially from a democratic perspective. Our position is, however, constructive, which means, that the biggest challenge is to use critical perspectives to construct better processes and products from a democratic and life quality perspective.

4. The technology and infrastructure perspective

From a technology and infrastructure perspective, eParticipation is studied in terms of particular computer applications (such as voting systems, debate forums, eHearing systems) which are usually particular instantiations of already developed technologies (such as chat rooms, geographical information systems, web-logging, group work systems, and decision support systems). Such applications are always dependent on at least two types of infrastructure: physical infrastructure such as the internet or satellites hosting mobile communications, and conceptual infrastructure such as ontological schemes, software protocols, but also citizen registers and voting protocols. Infrastructure is an important area of study because eParticipation cannot normally extend beyond the boundaries of infrastructure: thus eVoting cannot take place in the absence of internet access, or in the absence of a generally agreed and accepted protocol for voting. Thus infrastructure development goes hand in hand with the development of new technologies and applications. The focus of the research is on the development and implementation of

new eParticipation technologies and the infrastructures they are dependent on, but this can take many forms, including software development, method support, system development management and work and use studies. A particular problem in the management of eParticipation initiatives is the diffusion and acceptance of the new applications – many eParticipation tools lie unnoticed and unused on the web. Other development problems concern user involvement (where users are diverse and geographically widely dispersed), strategy and design of eParticipation systems and a range of more technological problems concerning for instance, security, multi-platform access and mobility.

A variety of technologies underpin typical eParticipation applications and some of these and their uses are detailed in Table 1.

eParticipation technologies	Typical Uses
e-voting systems	Efficiency gain or extension of democratic decision-making through voting
Web virtual meeting places (chat-rooms, discussion forums)	Development of virtual political communities as supplement to conventional
Web logging	Political activism on the net
Net-based Computer Supported Cooperative Working	Net-based collaboration in political tasks
Decision support systems	Community decision making in contentious issues
Digital signature	Establishment of citizen identity on the net as right to participate
Mobile and wireless technologies	Extension of access to e-participation beyond pc-and cable based internet
Knowledge technologies	Presentation and analysis of political content
Geographical Information Systems	Visualisation of spatial data, for example in the land use planning process
Ontology and semantic web	Organization of web sites and conceptual organization of participation input

Table 1. eParticipation Technologies and Their Uses

Research in technology and infrastructure in the eParticipation field involves two different types of research communities. The first types of communities are those that directly concerned with computing and the development of computing systems, such as information systems, software engineering computer science, and health informatics. The second type of research

community with an interest in eParticipation are disciplines which target various governance activities which are heavily dependent on technology and technological infrastructures, for instance: land administration, public administration and environmental studies.

5. Discussion: A Three Perspective Model of eParticipation

Based on the considerations voiced above we can outline an integrative three perspective model of eParticipation reflecting the different disciplinary contributions to this emerging field (see Figure 3).

Participation is regarded here is a form of interaction between citizens and politicians (and other societal stakeholders and stakeholder groups) rooted in communication. This discourse takes place in a political context under (in developed western societies) established democratic frameworks. EParticipation is participation mediated by computer systems, and facilitated by technological and conceptual infrastructures. Government organisations take a prime responsibility for sponsoring and developing eParticipation and eParticipation systems, though this also evolves spontaneously and independently.

6. Conclusion

In this paper we outlined a discussion of the emerging research area off eParticipation based on three perspectives, 1) politics and organisation, 2) communication and interaction and 3) technology and infrastructure. We further developed an integrative model of eParticipation showing how the interdisciplinary perspectives can be used to underpin research in the area.

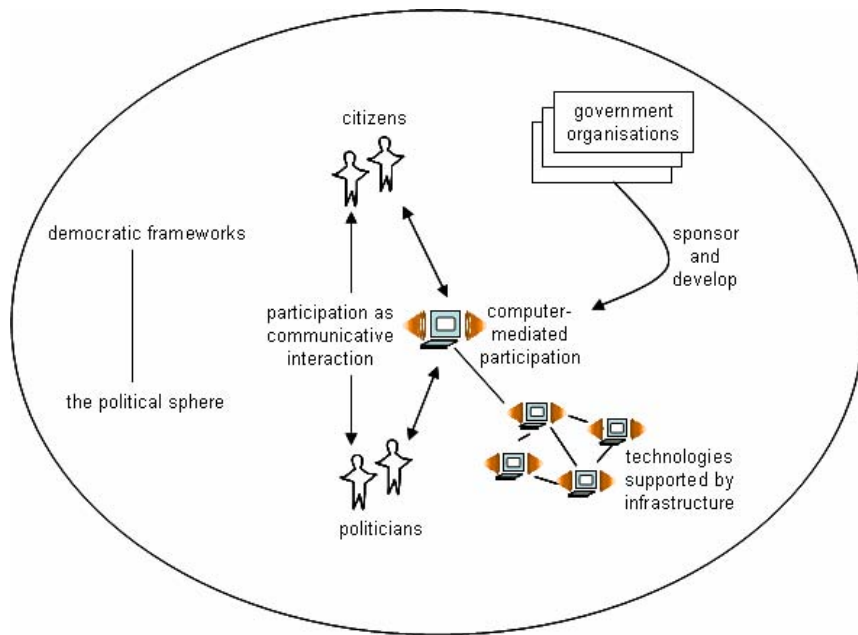


Figure 3. Three-perspective cross-disciplinary model of eParticipation

Towards Understanding eParticipation from an Institutional Perspective

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Abstract

eParticipation has the potential to establish more transparency in government by allowing citizens to use new channels of influence which reduce barriers to public participation in policy making [6]. The practice of eParticipation can therefore expose institutionalized processes and its underlying norms and values. This paper discusses why e-decision making is a challenge and why both e-information and e-consultation may be the preferred methods of eParticipation. Finally the paper discusses why e-decision making may be a catalyst of radical change the policy process in the public sector.

Keywords

eParticipation, e-decision making, e-consultation, e-information, policy making, organizational archetypes

1. Introduction

Countries differ substantially with respect to the extent they develop and integrate tools that support eParticipation in their governance. The UN Global e-Government Readiness Report [16] concludes that although many European countries have an official policy of citizen participation in policy making, they encourage participation but provide limited online mechanisms to do so. The UN reports that only a handful of countries have invested in providing quality participatory services in the sense that it invites citizens to engage in online participation. Only a few countries, (e.g. Denmark and the UK), have operationalized solutions for e-decision making. Governments are responsible for setting agendas and managing processes that encourage e-decision making where citizens are in partnership with government and actively engage in defining both the process and content of decision making [9, 16]. eParticipation involves both e-information (one way relationships where the government produces and delivers information to citizens) and e-consultation (two way relationships where citizens provide feedback to the government). While technology creates new opportunities for public participation, which role eParticipation will actually have in public institutions is still an unanswered question [3, 5, 10].

eParticipation is just one element of digitalizing the public sector, but compared with many other e-initiatives this kind of technology has the potential of creating

interaction between different actors involved in the decision process as well as the potential to facilitate access to the decision process. Institutions try to control these new tools through the definition of the content as well as the participants and their involvement. But the technology does contain some more ungovernable mechanisms as it exposes institutionalized logics of action, and eParticipation is a technological practice which has the potential to change the power composition in political decision making.

2. The potential of eParticipation

eParticipation can be viewed as diffusion of more institutionalized global principles of modern organizations [12]. There is a widespread understanding that the public sector success is related to digitalized processes and procedures, an understanding which creates a pressure on the public sector and where the empowerment of the individual is in focus [12].

eParticipation can also be viewed as a tool that supports the construction of the identity, hierarchy, and rationality of professional organizations within the public sector [2]. eParticipation can reinforce the autonomy of politicians by creating boundaries for the internal and external actors and reveal which themes should be a part of the decision processes. It can allow hierarchies to evolve through the construction of leadership as politicians assume responsibility for their decisions. It therefore has the potential to foment rationality through the definition of specific goals, thereby illustrating the intentionality of action through the measurement of results and accounting for their actions and decisions.

3. Policy making and the environment

Policy making is the result of the evolutionary process of decision-making with the purpose of regulating society. What often characterizes the process of decision-making are the complexities of blurred ends and means relations [8]. It is a challenge and sometimes impossible to develop clear and related ends-means hierarchies. As a result, eParticipation sometimes focuses on e-information and e-consultation. Therefore, the citizens' need for visible consequences of their involvement can reinforce the participative focus on information and consultation, which leads to less influence and involvement in political decision making.

Public organizations can have different levels of uncertainty, which is the difference between available information within the organization and the information that is necessary to make a decision. Dependencies on the environment create uncertainty within the public organization [4]. Though institutions are influenced by their environment, these forces are not only a result of rational pressures for efficiency, but social and cultural pressures to conform to conventional beliefs [13]. The degree of uncertainty that is created influences how much information the organization needs to collect and allocate, and the organizational structure will subsequently develop around these allocated processes.

4. Citizen roles

What would happen if an organization involved with eParticipation experiences inconsistencies in the relation to their environment? Structures, processes and output should reflect their environment but when it faces changes it can result in the decoupling of official goals from actions, structures and decision processes [1]. Since the essence of policy is conflict between different interests and political goals, the effect will often be unclear, complex and unstable [11]. It is therefore important for political actors to give the impression of action [1], and the result can often be that politicians choose goals on the basis of what legitimizes their actions and not on any analysis of what could be done. Therefore, the kind of role citizens will get through eParticipation in these decision processes can be limited to information and consultation.

5. The organizational template

The political institution is continuously contested by actors who try to achieve advantage by interpreting or redirecting the institution in pursuit of their goals [15]. The pattern of value commitments can be competitive as the organizations have complex portfolios of services and institutional contexts may be loosely structured and radical change are more likely [5]. Policy making is the characterized by a low degree of normative embeddedness [5, 15] and the decision processes can be characterized as loosely coupled. This kind of context enables dynamics as well as change and eParticipation solutions may be the mechanisms that reinforce these dynamics in the field. The technology creates a new window between potential actors in the decision process and exposes the nature of policy making. The potential of radical change is then high although it might be evolutionary change [5]. But policy making is at the same time tightly coupled to a prevailing archetypical template within a highly structured field, with institutionalized routines and procedures of policy making as well as participation in these processes and therefore radical change will be unlikely [5].

The prevailing archetypical template of policy making gives power to some groups and not to others [5].

Radical change in the organizational template is closely related to power and power dependencies either enable or suppress radical organizational change [5].

6. Competing logics in eParticipation

Introducing a new technology in the decision process can in an institutional perspective be a tool to reproduce and reinforce existing institutional mechanisms and logics. Existing procedures will come out as a digital version without any change in the procedure. This could be the case of e-information, e-consultation and e-decision making. A central question is how much of the decision process will be exposed in the window and how communication will be supported through the technology and the substance of the communication.

eParticipation operates across different organizational fields, e.g. the political, technical, administrative, civic and news media. Institutional arrangements may impose a dominant logic of action [14, 15] or there may be coexistence between different and sometimes competing logics within a field [15]. eParticipation has the potential of bringing new institutions and associated behavioral logics to interact. It can create a struggle between different logics to form the content and role of eParticipation. This creates the potential of forming a new logic and change within these existing logics.

7. Conclusion

Public organizations and the politicians who are involved in eParticipation will experience a pressure to work through norms of rationality as well as values among citizens. This can be a catalyst for isomorphic processes where the values of citizens will set the agenda. eParticipation has the potential for citizens to create pressure for more involvement in decisions and to simplify the process of decision-making, but the result can be reinforcement of smaller decisions [7] which thereby increases institutional uncertainty. The presence of institutional uncertainty foments actor discretion and unclear routines in policy decision making [3]. When the participative element in eParticipation is centred on e-information and e-consultation, then discretion is in the hands of politicians and not the citizens. In other words, the ability to influence decision making excludes citizens, and is confined to the public organization. But combined with a pressure on empowerment of the individual, an ambiguous organizational template and a process of struggling logics may be a strong driver for change of the institutional arrangements in political decision making.

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Putting eParticipation Research on the Service of Civil Society

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Abstract

eParticipation research needs to become more closely aligned with citizens and civil society needs. The unavailability of eDemocracy systems that are fully adapted to the characteristics and capacities of civil society makes difficult for civic organizations to seize the potential of ICTs to promote civic participation. Since they don't have the capacity and knowledge required to design and build those systems, as much as eParticipation researchers don't have the capacity to experiment, leverage and replicate eParticipation experiences, such an alliance between researchers and civic organizations could prove to be very fruitful. By working crossdisciplinarily, eParticipation researchers will first need to identify civic organizations' needs and then use them as guiding objectives for their research. Evaluation of the results should increasingly consider civil society feed-back. This could probably be the most effective and quickest way to foster eParticipation.

Keywords

civic engagement, civil society, e-Participation research, cross-disciplinarity

In a recent conference hold in Tallinn to commemorate the 5th anniversary of the Estonian eDemocracy project "Today I decide", Prof. Stephen Coleman reflected on the role that governments should play with regard to eDemocracy initiatives:

"If you had asked me ten years ago, I would have said very firmly: 'we need government to take the lead in this area'. I now don't think that anymore. Cause I've watched government trying to do it. I take the view that the best initiatives always come from citizens himself. And the best two things governments can do are: first, get out of the way; second, give them some money. In reverse order." [3]

In a similar way, we could ask ourselves: What role should eParticipation researchers and research institutions play with regard to e-Democracy initiatives? The most candid answer we could possibly give is: first, get out of the way; second, don't take away public money that citizens could better use.

Trying to summarize this reasoning in a positive way, this paper argues that we -the community of eParticipation researchers- should increasingly adopt an innovative attitude for our research: we need to engage

in a new kind of collaboration with citizens and social movements, incorporating their needs as one of our prior research objectives, and thus strive to support their participatory activities and initiatives in a practical way.

This kind of collaboration is currently specially required for the design of new tools and systems for eDemocracy and contrasts strongly with the approach taken so far in most eParticipation experiences, which have traditionally been more aligned with government's requests than with citizens' and civic organizations' needs. At best, citizens and civic organizations are invited to participate in the projects' pilot experiences and to provide some limited feed-back, but they don't usually play a determinant role establishing the projects' objectives, design and evaluation methods.

This tendency to disregard civil society is more extended than what we could initially think. As an example, we could have a look at some recent DEMO-Net's documents, as the presentation that describes DEMO-Net objectives, structure and partner relationships [5, p. 14], where no explicit mention to civil society is included. Similarly, if we recall the objectives of this very research workshop, they aim "to identify eParticipation research challenges for both researchers and government", apparently leaving all other players out of the game. Where has been civil society left?

Our claim on the necessity of a closer alignment of civic organizations needs and eParticipation research is based on some of the special characteristics of the eParticipation field:

- **Barriers to eParticipation** are of different nature and include legal, organizational, political, cultural and technological hindrances [6]. Most of them are extremely difficult to overcome, as participation actually aims to introduce changes in the core of our societies' political and power institutions. Cultural attitudes, on their part, require long periods of time to evolve. Technological barriers should be the ones easier to handle, but to date they have also posed serious challenges.

Most traditional civic organizations are having tremendous difficulties to exploit the potential of ITCs for mobilizing citizen participation [1, 2]. This is primarily because there are no tools available, which are adapted to the capacities, necessities and characteristics of civic participation, and civic organizations don't have the capacity to develop them themselves. It must be noted that most of the technological tools and concepts required to build citizen participation systems are

already available; it's a matter of assembling them in a consistent, knowledgeable and usable way.

Moreover, even if most citizens and established civic organizations initially show some skepticism about the possibilities to use Internet for participation, they are also quick to recognize useful tools and start using them [4, 8]. We cannot afford not to have eParticipation tools available, as they could help to empower citizens and thus foster a generalization of civil society's eParticipation initiatives, which in turn will exercise the pressure required to overcome the other, more resilient, barriers to eParticipation.

- **Synergy building potential** is enormous. This collaborative approach will, in fact, prove very fruitful for eParticipation researchers, as we will be able to benefit from the civic organizations' capacity to autonomously experiment with, leverage and replicate eParticipation experiences. By putting ourselves on the service of civil society and contribute with our eParticipation know-how to the design of eDemocracy processes and systems that are flexible, sustainable and, in short, adapted for generalized use by citizens and civic organizations, we can actually influence them, so they can be more easily used in our research [7, p. 23]. By helping to create our object of study, we'll be able to further increase our knowledge about it, refine our hypothesis, our experimental approach, etc.

- Because of **Internet leveraging and replicating capacities**, these synergies would increasingly reach society as a whole. Getting the eDemocracy tools and processes in the hands of civil society is just one first step, but it could act as a catalytic for further developments. The current situation on the eParticipation field somehow resembles the one of computers before the first Graphical Operative Systems –specially, Windows– were made available to the general public: no wonder only geeks were using computers at that time; no wonder they are used everywhere now.

To finalize, I'd like to summarize the most important implications of this collaborative approach on our eParticipation research practices:

- **Increased emphasis on applied and practical research** is required, so that civil society needs are satisfied. We need to progressively think more in terms of tools and processes, in terms of sustainability, flexibility and reusability, in terms of impact and utility of our research.

But this is actually nothing new. The eParticipation collaborative approach does not mean doing different things, but rather rebalancing their significance. If we consider that our ratio for “Theorizing / Opportunistic evaluation / Purposed experimentation / eParticipation tools development” could currently be 40/35/15/10, we could well try to attain a healthier 20/25/35/20 ratio.

- **Cross-disciplinary teams and research:** inputs and know-how from different disciplines (sociology, political sciences, systems engineering, etc.) are all required, not to be added but to be multiplied; these teams must be able to melt different perspectives and forge innovative

approaches and solutions. Their members have to be able to communicate with each other –not such an easy task as it could seem– and with civil society representatives.

- **Alliances with civil society representatives** need to be an integral part of our research agenda. We have to consider their needs –conscious as well as unconscious– as part of our research objectives and keep continuously open to their critics and suggestions. Finally, they should play a determinant role on the evaluations of the projects results and its dissemination.

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From participatory budgets to e-participatory budgets

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Abstract

Participatory budgets constitute an attempt to allow citizens to take part in public budget decisions and are becoming increasingly popular all over the world. However, there has been little use of ICT in these experiences. We describe a framework to support e-participatory budgets, an implementation of the framework and an experiment with such implementation.

Keywords

Participatory budgets, Negotiation analysis, eNegotiations, eDemocracy.

1. Introduction

Participatory budgets promote citizen participation in deciding and approving how part of a public budget is spent, mainly in municipalities. They constitute a budget allocation approach based on dialogue and citizen participation, which diverges from the current predominant representative model in which citizens choose representatives for several years, with practically no other direct opportunity to influence council policies, see [1,2] for complete descriptions.

Though previous experiences are mentioned, the most well-known is that of Porto Alegre. Since then, participatory budgets have become increasingly popular in many other municipalities, all around the world, with more than 250 implementations, possibly for the following reasons:

- A greater legitimization of investment decisions, due to the inclusion of citizens in determining investment priorities.
- An approximation of investment decision making to citizens, with the consequent educational process: when a citizen learns that his demands have a cost, he understands and shares the importance of politics. Participants evolve, from saying *am going to request* to saying *I am going to decide*.
- Making public investment decisions publicly, so that politicians understand that they were chosen to represent citizens' interests and not to practice clientelism or political patronage.
- A greater transparency in public expenditure. In an effort to make public spending more transparent and equitable, participatory budgets serve as an instrument

to re-direct local policies for the benefit of all citizens and protect their civil rights.

There are, however, several criticisms to be made, stemming from the experiences undertaken in such processes. From an ICT point of view, we appreciate that, except at a few experiences which use discussion fora to collect suggestions for project proposals, there is little use of new technologies, as processes are based on discussion and physical meetings, and preferences are usually established through voting, very frequently just by raising hands. From the point of view of the little decision technology employed: no formal modelling of preferences of citizens is undertaken and no use of formal negotiation or group decision support tools is used. To sum up, there is little decision methodology available.

For that reason we have developed a methodological framework to support participatory budget elaboration, which we view as a group limited resource allocation problem, in which citizens attempt to maximize their own budget value in view of multiple criteria, subject to other possible constraints.

2. A framework to support participatory budget elaboration

Our framework includes the following phases:

1. **Preparation phase.** The problem is structured before a final list of proposals is identified. In this phase, we structure criteria, elaborate an initial list of projects, together with their associated costs and technical features, and identify constraints. This is done by technical staff as a seed document for discussion.
2. **Discussion and consolidation.** Participants propose new projects and criteria, supervised by a facilitator to consolidate a final list of proposals.
3. **Preference communication phase.** We extract the participants' preferences through their value function to guide the negotiations. As a byproduct, we may determine the optimal budget for each participant.
4. **Negotiation phase.** Negotiations are conducted through a supported posting system. Participants will be able to make

offers and discuss them through a forum associated with each offer. Participants are allowed to vote in favour or against each offer. The offer with higher percentage of acceptance among participants will be proposed for implementation, after a post-settlement, if this percentage is sufficiently high. Otherwise, no offered budget will be globally accepted.

5. **Voting phase.** If the previous negotiations fail, a voting session allows for choosing a budget. We use approval voting over the projects to compute the winning budget, although other voting schemes could be used.
6. **Post-settlement phase.** It could happen that the winning voted budget or the agreement reached in the negotiation phase is jointly improvable, that is socially unacceptable. In such cases, participants should try to improve it in a negotiated manner, through a scheme designed to converge to an efficient solution. For that purpose, we use a modification of the Balanced Increments Method, [3, 4].

Note that if all the participants' preferences are known, a solution through arbitration can be adopted: a budget will be chosen among many possible feasible and efficient budgets, to be implemented as a binding joint decision, trying to incorporate some principle of equity and fairness. We believe that the implementation of an arbitrated budget would be looked on as an imposed budget. For that reason, we prefer to support a negotiation process and, in case negotiations fail, voting.

The method chosen to conduct the negotiation phase allows participants to make offers and send text messages to discuss them. We propose to use an electronic forum to support communication. This forum allows the reduction of the number of communication channels among participants. The messages are sent to the forum which is accessible for the rest of participants. Participants will make offers that include their desired projects. This task can be facilitated by incorporating warnings when the inclusion of a project, in the offer, does not satisfy some constraint. Participants vote in favour or against each offer. In addition, each participant's value function can be used to support him privately in the participatory budget negotiation process, allowing for the evaluation of the received offers.

3. PARBUD: A web based implementation to support participatory budget elaboration

We have implemented several versions of the above framework in PARBUD, a web-based system to support e-participatory budget formation. PARBUD plays a mediator role, as a neutral external helper, which gathers confidential information from participants allowing a

FOTID (fully open truthful intermediate disclosure) framework. The FOTID communication framework implies, for us, that participants may confidentially reveal their preferences to the system, the intermediary. Therefore, the system will know the true preferences of all participants and participants' preferences will not be disclosed to counterparts. The FOTID framework enables to detect whether the outcome is dominated and, in such a case, improve it in a negotiated manner suggesting efficient and equitable budgets for possible acceptance based on the knowledge of the participants' preferences and some concept of fairness, until one is jointly accepted.

Rather than using physical meetings with voting-by-hand mechanisms (the standard old fashioned practice), PARBUD promotes virtual meetings in which participants can discuss the problem and explore the consequences through an integrative methodology, confidential revelation of preferences to the system, and mediation for conflict resolution. PARBUD supports problem structuring, preference modelling, problem solving for each individual, and allows for conflict resolution through negotiation and voting mechanisms if necessary. A post-settlement module allows to check if the outcome is inefficient and to improve it in a negotiated manner. See [5] for system details.

4. Experiments

We have conducted several local experiments with PARBUD, referring to elaborating departmental budgets, with a number of lessons learnt which have been used to improve usability of PARBUD. We are currently negotiating with several Spanish townhalls, already undertaking 'physical' participatory budgets, the use of PARBUD in the near future to undertake e-participatory budgets.

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A Method for Consensus-Based Collaborative Authoring

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Abstract

The creation of political programs and constitutions is often a strongly authoritarian process, where initial texts are proposed and change is only possible by a lot of effort. Wiki-technology¹ does provide an easy way for collaborative authoring, but the process of agreement is not technically supported. A consensus-based method to support collaborative authoring in a defined process is proposed here.

Keywords

e-democracy, computer-supported collaborative work (CSCW), voting, semantic web, socio-technical process

1 Introduction

The traditional creation of political programs and constitutions is often perceived as non-democratic by the members of the process since time constraints put limits to the consensus that can be reached. On the other hand, internet technologies support collaborative work even if participants are located at different places and contribute at different times. The prominent example of such a collaborative effort is the public encyclopedia *Wikipedia*. However, consensus is not supported by the wiki-technology. Without respective policies and their enforcement, Wikipedia could not have had such a success².

Being socio-technical in nature, the internet-supported democratic creation and evolution of constituting texts requires technical and organizational support that goes clearly beyond existing solutions.

Wikipedia, on the one hand, has a proper organizational framework for the achievement of consensus with fundamental policies such as the *Neutral Point Of View (NPOV)* established. Some of those policies actually became social norms for the contributing users of Wikipedia. However, conflicts and

controversies occur regularly, cf. [6], requiring even the blocking of the entry by administrators if normal consensus on Talk- and Discussion-Pages does not succeed.

Other movements and organizations such as the semantic web initiative and the open university support the achievement of consensus among agents and web sites technically³, but with little or not impact for the average internet user.

The approach presented here is directed towards providing a tool for collaborative democratic text creation, that is easy to use (like Wikipedia) and provides technical support for consensus-finding. It should be strong enough to be accepted and successfully applied for the resolution of political conflict.

2 Consensus-Based Process

The following method for the establishment of consensus is proposed:

- The text is structured into a set of sections, which can be organized by a hierarchy or interlinked like a hypertext.
- The support and non-support of each section is tracked, i.e. the participants can choose between support and non-support and their choice will be open and can be changed at any point in time.
- A section can only be edited by its author, but an alternative section can be added to any existing section at any time. If several alternatives exist, only one of those can be supported.
- Only the section with the maximum support among a set of alternatives will be shown as part of the organization structure⁴, i.e. hierarchy or hypertext.

³by providing tools for Ontology Engineering and Argument Mapping.

⁴All ingoing links of the structure will point to the new alternative, outgoing links of non-active alternatives can be looked up separately.

¹A technology for collaborative authoring, which is also used by *Wikipedia*, cf. e.g. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki>

²The success of Wikipedia is documented by e.g. [2]

Note, that support for a section is not secret. The names of all current supporters are always visible, thus providing a strong environment for the evolution of consensus.

Elements and variations of this system can be found in existing web sites, such as <http://www.kuro5hin.org/>, where the articles with most votes are featured, or <http://www.adjute.com/>, where multiple continuations for stories can be proposed and the one with maximum support gets actually added to the story. However, the method proposed here has not yet been applied and evaluated for the support of democratic processes.

Additional elements can be added to the proposed method according to the needs of the democratic process, e.g.:

- Supporting the author of a section by allowing for a discussion thread per section.
- Improving a section or the entire collection of sections that is currently in the structure by assigning revision tasks to individual participants, as e.g. on <http://oooauthors.org/>.
- Maintaining a model of possible conflicting alternatives and alternative sets of sections, i.e. alternatives that cannot possibly be or should be at the same time in the structure.
- An argument-framework, e.g. an IBIS-System [3], for the transparent modeling of the connection between different sections, i.e. *goals* and *measures for their achievement*.
- A rating of the quality of contributors and contributions may be added, cf. e.g. [4].

3 Use Cases and Evaluation

A prototype for the proposed method has been created based on Drupal⁵, but without implementation of anonymous voting (which is not required). A political group in Germany is currently testing it. Appropriate use cases for evaluation can also be found in the context of the DEMO-net network of excellence.

For evaluation, all actions need to be anonymously archived. In addition to conventional web-mining, (temporal) social web-mining [7] [1] and text-mining [5] should be applied for the co-analysis of community and text evolution. Electronic questionnaires may complete the analysis.

⁵Drupal is an open-source content management system with an extendible modular structure, cf. <http://www.drupal.org>

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Partecipa.net: Institutions, education experiences and tools for students' Democratic Participation

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Abstract

The experiences of citizenship education promoted by the Legislative Assembly of Emilia-Romagna Region meet the digital technologies of Partecipa.net, giving birth to an innovative e-Democracy project which aims to make young people aware of democratic participation themes.

Keywords

Education, e-Democracy, students, participation.

1. The Project

Starting from 2005/2006 School Year, the Legislative Assembly of Emilia-Romagna Region has proposed to its students a two-year educational course dedicated to democratic participation themes which, during 2006/2007 School Year, will be completed by digital interaction practices developed within the Partecipa.net project.

The Partecipa.net project (www.partecipa.net) aims to test methodologies of participation to regional policies and services management at all institutional levels and is coordinated by the Emilia-Romagna Region in reply to the public advice of Ministry for Technological Innovation regarding the selection of initiatives for digital citizenship development. Within the Partecipa.net project, the Assembly has the following objectives: 1) increasing the information sharing among students, 2) promoting debate among young people, 3) obtaining proposals and ideas from students taking part to the educational initiatives proposed, both offline and online, 4) testing participation methodologies also thanks to the integrated action of different Institutions.

The Legislative Assembly will also be able to make use, in addition to the cooperation of our Region's Teachers and Students, of fundamental partners such as the Specialised University Course on Public, Social and Political Communication at University of Bologna (www.compass.unibo.it), the Faculty of Education at University of Bologna (www.scform.unibo.it), the Faculty of Political Science at University of Bologna (<http://www.spbo.unibo.it/spbo/default.htm>), CAMINA

(www.camina.it), IRREER (www.irreer.org) and LANDIS (www.landis-online.it).

2. The Regional, National and European Context

As regards the use of information technology within the Legislative Assembly's educational offer, it's worth mentioning that the information choices made are not going to replace, but rather to sustain, strengthen, expand and innovate scope and modalities of participation activated by the legislative Assembly through traditional channels and places [6]. From this viewpoint, the project combines perfectly with the contents of the new Statute of the Emilia-Romagna Region, stating that the Region acts for asserting participated democracy and permanent confrontation with society organizations, as well as the principle of maximum transparency and circulation of information, also guaranteed by the use of computerized means of communication [9].

Secondly, the process which has been started, goes back to and widens the theoretical approaches whose applications showed to be particularly efficient at a European level. For example, it resumes the tripartition of citizens' participation level among information, consultation and participation outlined by the 2001 OECD study [5]. The same can be said for experiences and documents such as "E-Democracy in Practice. Swedish Experiences of a New Political Tool", a Swedish Government's document which supports the need to promote, also through the Information Computer Technology, forms of real "civic initiative" able to influence the political agenda [10] (here comes the importance of education institutions and, first of all, of schools within the process of making young people aware of the democratic themes). Other starting points for reflection are the DEMO-net project (www.demonet.org) which aims to strengthen technological and scientific knowledge linked to digital participation, and the RAISE project (www.raise-eu.org) which intends to evaluate European citizens' consciousness, acceptability level and real use of the results of the European research for regional and urban sustainable development.

In addition to the above mentioned scientific planning context, there are three more reasons which spur the

Legislative Assembly to promote participation processes and, in particular, the use of information technologies for making young people aware of the democratic frame. First of all, and apart from some few exceptions, the panorama of the experiences of citizens' participation services, taken as a whole, appears to be still not much developed in Italy, especially if we consider those e-democracy activities exclusively addressed to School and University students [3]. Moreover, although many studies have been carried out on the role played by the Internet within the economy of political communication [2], there is undoubtedly the need to better study in depth the empirical knowledge of the role played by the new technologies within the actions taken to make young people aware of the democratic context [7, 8]. Finally, nobody can deny the strong attraction information technology has on the new generations, making us think about students' need for more opportunities and democratic participation structures based also on virtual contexts and capable to involve them in a special way, both at an informative/educational level and at a level of mere entertainment [1].

3. Methodology

Starting from 2006/2007 School Year, the Partecipa.net project will include in the Legislative Assembly's website an e-Democracy Kit made up of an integrated set of interactive forms which will allow people to receive, for example, targeted information directly to their e-mail address, participate to surveys, receive professional advice by experts, participate to forums moderated through the Delphi [4] method able to help young people to understand and manage conflicts whose discussion could be at deadlock risk.

The e-Democracy Kit will be in turn completed by an educational process divided into five different but synergetically linked phases.

1. In the information and consultation phase, after taking arrangements with the Legislative Assembly for the development of a visit or a training period, teachers and students can download from the Legislative Assembly's website, educational materials on the subject selected and subscribe to targeted newsletters using the Partecipa.net Kit. Thus, targeted classes can be organized already at school, leaving students free to study in depth the themes each of them considers more interesting.

2. In the education phase, real meetings take place in the Legislative Assembly, as well as, in the case of training periods, experiences in territory's realities. Moreover, students can ask questions to experts using the Partecipa.net Kit. The answers given to the questions asked by each student will be personalized and private, as well as visible only to the asker.

3. In the working-out and participation phase, students are involved in the development of contents regarding the themes which have been studied. In this phase, there can be exchanges of views both physically during visits and training periods at the Legislative Assembly and

virtually through online forums and surveys, supported by the specially provided Partecipa.net information platform and moderated by skilled and qualified staff in relation to the relevant theme.

4. In the output creation phase, the process ends by means of a written proposal which sums up knowledge and experiences students have learnt during the educational programme. This document can be: 1) a proposal of legislative change/updating relative to a specific issue or reality of the territory which is considered insufficiently developed or inadequately represented; 2) an updating of the definitions present in the publication "Glossary for a Participated Democracy", which is a monographic glossary of terms relating to politics, society and democracy, the definition of which has been in part written by the students who took part to the educational activities of the Emilia-Romagna Region during 2005/2006 School Year.

5. In the evaluation phase, each school evaluates what students have learnt according to principles of school autonomy. Moreover, the experiences made during the School Year are presented and analyzed in a Final Meeting organized by the Legislative Assembly and the Regional School Bureau of Emilia-Romagna. During the meeting the contributions of all schools and partners taking part to the initiative are collected and evaluated as a whole.

This process is an important means of making students materially experience a customizable participating methodology which pays attention to its need for knowledge and, mainly, which adapts itself to the educational needs of each single class. In order to specifically ensure the involvement of all participants and allow an access as easy and immediate as possible to the new technological tools, all participants to the project, teachers included, will have the opportunity to use specific communication products, such as multimedia CDs, publications, diaries of the visits made, gadgets, etc., which can represent not only an added value to educational activities, but also catalysts/spreaders of the leading values of the project: dialogue, participation, integration, innovation, education, listening, transparency and confidence.

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Envisaging Points of Access for Favours Participation

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Abstract

Concepts like “good governance” have introduced a new perspective to the introduction of information technology in the public sector. The efficiency rationale has been integrated by other values and applications for supporting participation which can be seen in this perspective.

The proposal of this work is not to consider the singular individual at the centre of the participation process, but rather to underline the role of points of access as instruments for connecting citizens to higher levels of the decision making processes. Points of access could, at the same time, constitute a map for the introduction of information technology allowing for the integration of the modalities of participation.

Keywords

Good governance, points of access, trust spreaders, ICT, abstract systems.

1. From government to “good governance”

Simplifying, government can be seen as the sum of public bodies in charge of: 1) providing services to citizens and companies; 2) planning and policy implementation and 3) organizing procedures and human resources in order to put into practice points 1) and 2) [1]. However, this definition does not take into consideration the fact that new actors are involved in the public goods management. The term governance [3, 6] is used to represent this situation in which both planning and policy implementation, on the one hand, and service provision, on the other hand, see an active role of non public actors. The so-called public-private partnerships serve as examples for this proposal.

To define governance as “good governance” [6] is particularly helpful for the sake of this paper, as it underlines the role played by an environment in which the social, political and economic priorities are shared to a large extent by that of society.

2. “Good governance” and ICT

The focus, now, is to see how the introduction of information and communication technology (ICT) has modified this discourse. In other words, has the e-government phenomenon been influenced by new forms

of governance and by “good governance”?

So far, ICT has been introduced in the public administration for supporting activities represented by points 1) and point 3) mentioned above. The so-called front office (point 1), and back office (point 3) have been the objects of significant investments and many applications have been introduced following the efficiency rationale. This managerial perspective has contributed significantly to the introduction of ICT in public administration.

Focusing on governance and mainly on “good governance” implies a diverse approach for developing e-government. In this case, public administration does not play a central role in the introduction of ICT and the managerial perspective is integrated by other perspectives that take into consideration elements like legitimacy, accountability, justice and participation.

In recent years this new trend has emerged, and issues raised by “good governance” have been objects of interest in the field of e-government. In particular, the introduction of ICT has been considered promising for improving the exercise of democratic processes and political participation. However, it seems to view citizens as indistinct subjects, and offers them a tool with which to participate in social and political activities. There is the impression that the main issue is to design devices able to support participation and naturally citizens will take advantage of them. Nevertheless, it is not always like this. Even though it is unquestionable the potential of ICT to favour this activity, it is mainly organized in a collective way and not by singles. Political parties and trade unions are the typical examples of organizations through which participation takes place in the political arena.

In this understanding, the objective, here, is to consider citizens as members of a network of social relationships rather than in their singularities. This requires seeing citizens as potential players not only in organizations like political parties or trade unions but also in cultural, voluntary and trade associations, sport clubs, charities, and parishes etc. In this way, the focus shifts from citizens to organizations and institutions that give form to the so called civil society.

3. Point of access and trust spreader as instruments for increasing e-participation

However, can the participation phenomenon be studied more fruitfully, changing the focus from singular citizens to their institutions and organizations?

As suggested by the terms “governance” and “good governance”, government of public goods is a complex question and lends itself to an analysis of the different interests at stake. In this proposal, Giddens [2] maintains that modernity is characterised by the fragmentation of previous more totalizing institutions. In this understanding, even recent institutions like political parties are losing their role of representing interests in favour of social movements and local councils that concentrate on very particular issues. Always, according to Giddens [2], in a situation like this, the role of the so called points of access is fundamental. Points of access have been defined as those elements that connect laymen or groups of laymen to representatives of abstract systems. That is, instruments that establish interactions between inexperienced individuals and expert systems and their organizations. In other words, an active participation in political and social life is encouraged having at its disposal the points of access which are able to interact with social and political systems (abstract systems).

The concept of trust spreaders [4] can contribute to define the role played by points of access. Trust spreaders are those individuals or institutions, both public and private, that are already trustworthy and therefore they certify the trust of other individuals and institutions. These spreaders consent to reduce cognitive and emotional uncertainty, increasing a general feeling of trust. In this way, links between diverse social networks are possible and contexts characterised by isolation can be bridged.

However, how is it possible to individualise points of access and trust spreaders? Institutions and organizations which characterise a civil society could play an important role in this. In some sense, they are vehicles for organizing citizens' will, desire and interests towards a higher level of the decision making process. Citizens can take advantage of these institutions and organizations which form a civil society, as they can feel part of and can recognize them as potential places for establishing transactions and interactions.

In this understanding, the introduction of ICT could take into consideration the presence of these points of access as mediators for developing participation to social and political activities. Moreover, not only these activities can take advantage of the diffusion of ICT, based on the mapping of points of access, but users can also take advantage of these points for the provision of public services as they can be seen as a kind of one stop shops.

4. Conclusion

The so called “good governance” outlines new perspectives in the introduction of ICT in the public sphere. In this way, the efficiency rationale is integrated by other values, giving it the opportunity to put into practice a wider range of solutions such as applications for supporting participation. Participation which, in this case, is not seen as an activity executed by singular

individuals, but as an activity mediated by points of access or trust spreaders. Due to the unifying role played by these points the development and the diffusion of ICT could be a favourable influence which enhances participation activities.

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Elite Support for eParticipation - What Does it really Mean?

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Abstract

What do elites really mean when they show positive attitudes towards increased citizen participation? In this paper we look closer into the issue within the field of eParticipation in urban planning. We conclude that the location in the structure of power affects the perception of participation, that planners have an instrumental approach to participation, that planners prefer 'talk' rather than 'action' and, finally, that eParticipation initiatives are primarily framed within existing institutions.

Keywords

Workshop: 'Mapping eParticipation'. Participation, democracy, planning, elite, attitudes

1. Introduction

What we are witnessing today is a somewhat paradoxical development where citizen participation is often furthered by political elites. In the wake of several symptoms of crises for democracy – declining voter turnout, diminishing membership numbers in political parties etc. – a growing number of public authorities are looking for new means to make citizen participate. By some commentators new 'democratisation policies' (Montin 2005), in which eParticipation is becoming increasingly important, are regarded as important signs of revitalisation and change. Others are more suspicious of the initiatives introduced: What do elites really mean when they display positive attitudes towards increased citizen participation? Are they aiming for more 'power to the people', or are they aiming for involving the public as accomplices to elite policies? The aim of this paper is to contribute to a critical discussion about what is meant by participation in general and eParticipation in particular by local elites. In doing so we will draw upon a survey questionnaire mapping the support for e-participation in the field of urban planning, targeting planners in the 290 Swedish local governments during the spring 2006.

2. Conceptions of democracy

In order to shed light on the direction in which digital public life is headed, many empirical researchers have constructed ideal-typical models of democracy intended

to work as links between traditional theories of democracy and new electronic manifestations. These models make it possible to relate statements and actions concerning the new technology to different democratic values. Since the models represent different political ideals, they also promote different ideas on how ICT can be used in order to develop democracy. The framework used here also emphasise the distinct social and political *locations* of different discourses about democracy. What divides democracy into distinct objects is considered as a matter of location in the structure of power. Those who are incumbent are more likely to adopt a defensive posture towards social change and concern to protect existing institutions from excessive and 'uncontrolled' participatory input (Blaug 2002).

Table 1. Two types of democracy

	Incumbent Democracy	Critical Democracy
Relation to institutions	Preserve	Challenge
Citizen participation	Institutionalised (voting as most important) and instrumental	Co-ordinated collective action for and good in itself
Politics	Private in nature, instrumental in purpose	Public (deliberative) in nature, empowering in purpose
Effectiveness	Through institutions	Through personal commitment (in networks)
Threats	Excessive uncontrolled participation	Suffocation by institutions
Source: Adapted from Blaug 2002		

By identifying different ideal types of democracy, the incumbent and the critical, we can see that democratic intentions may be antagonistic and strategically opposed. This can be further pointed up by comparing the general discourse on eParticipation with that of normative planning theory. While the critical discourse of eParticipation is emphasising the potential for altering the balance of power between outside challengers and established institutions, sometimes even envision the

abolishment of intermediary bodies, the democratic discourse of normative planning theory usually takes the planner as a point of departure (cf. Allmendinger 2002). Citizen participation in planning is often perceived as an activity best handled within the existing institutions of planning. In addition, participation is generally seen as an activity justified by its potential to strengthen the foundation of planning decisions. This means that the view of participation in planning is more closely related to incumbent than to critical democracy.

2.1. Support for eParticipation among Swedish urban planners

Will the rise of the Internet influence planners' predominant attitudes towards participation, and strengthen the values of critical democracy? One finding of the attitude survey is that virtually all of the officials supported the use of eParticipation in planning (94 percent to a large or fairly large degree). This indicates that Arnsteins (1969) proposition that participation has achieved an unassailable status of motherhood, apple pie and spinach – 'No one is against it in principle because it is good for you' – holds for the online environment as well. At the same time, almost 80 percent of the respondents oppose that citizens should participate directly in decision-making. Planners still prefer 'talk' rather than 'action', having positive attitudes towards dialogue and deliberation, but not willing to give the public any real decision-making power.

Table 2. eParticipation support as technological reorientation, beta and sig.

	eParticipation Support	
	Beta	Sig.
Confidence in ICTs participatory potential	.352	**
External pressure on Internet presence	.245	**
Relative importance of eParticipation today	.192	**
eLeadership involvement	.129	*
Adjusted r2	.365	

* = Sig. .05 ** = Sig. .01

That support for the use of eParticipation does not mean new values (at least not yet) is supported by table 1 and 2, examining whether the predominant values, attitudes and beliefs within the group of eParticipation enthusiasts are distinctive from the broader group of planners. As table 1 show, eParticipation enthusiasts feel more demand from society and the city leadership to make use of the Internet in planning, they are more confident in the participatory potential of technology and they value the eParticipation experiences they have had so far higher. Table 2, on the other hand, shows that eParticipation enthusiasts do not have a distinct set of attitudes concerning the planning profession and the meaning of participation. This evidence confirms that elite support for eParticipation can be interpreted as a technological rather than an ideological reorientation. Compared with the broader group of planners,

eParticipation enthusiasts do not lean more strongly towards a critical or participatory view of democracy.

Table 3. eParticipation support as ideological reorientation, beta and sig.

	eParticipation Support	
	Beta	Sig.
Valuation of expert knowledge	-	
Valuation of experience – based knowledge	.178	*
Valuation of public dialogue	-	
Valuation of direct citizen participation	-	
Adjusted r2	.027	

* = Sig. .05 ** = Sig. .01

3. Conclusions

- The location in the structure of power affects what is meant by 'participation' and 'eParticipation'.
- Planners have an instrumental approach to participation: it should contribute to better planning decisions.
- Planners prefer 'talk' rather than 'action', having positive attitudes towards dialogue and deliberation and negative attitudes towards direct citizen participation in planning decisions.
- eParticipation initiatives are primarily framed within existing institutions, which support incumbent rather than critical democratic approaches to citizen participation.

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Overcoming Linguistic Barriers in Accessing Legal Information

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Abstract

Public Sector Information is crucial for democratic and civil life: user-friendly and readily available information will increase the participation of citizens in the democratic process, and, within the EU, access to legal information will increase the consciousness of EU citizenship.

The focus of this contribution regards the access to legal information by non-jurists users, who are not able to state clearly the information they need and are only interested in reaching general knowledge or in searching, the strictly prescriptive part of legislation. Moreover a multilingual a multicultural social perspective requires crosslingual tools to support an effective access to public information. The role played by semantic tools, such as linguistic and formal ontology in improving real access to legal information is analysed, starting from an European project recently concluded.

Keywords

Access to information, Normative knowledge, Multilingual issues

1. Accessing Public Sector Information

In exercising its duties, the public sector collects, collates, creates, stores and disseminates huge quantities of information: financial and business information, legal and administrative information, geographical, traffic, tourist information, etc. As a consequence, the public sector can be considered the biggest resource of raw material for the creation of value-added information content and services. This is very important for both citizens and businesses who can greatly benefit from this type of information released on the Internet. In the citizen perspective, PSI is crucial for democratic and civil life: user-friendly and readily available information will increase the participation of citizens in the democratic process.

Complaining with the indication of the EU Directive 2003/98/ on the re-use of public sector information, generally, policy-makers in Europe accept the concept that more PSI should be given to citizens in order to improve their participation in a modern democracy. The 'knowability' of the data involves the usability, that is the ease of use by which a user can access the data via all

available technologies, taking into account his or her physical, psychological and cultural conditions. The rapid growth of Internet usage has stimulated Member States to re-examine their policies in this area and some governments, jointly with private operators, have already taken the initiative to systematically build a "soft" infrastructure, consisting of databases, metadata and basic service functions as a platform for the future development of digital services to citizens.

A first step is the definition of a consolidated and shared standard framework: notwithstanding differences in similar information between regions and between Member States, technical standards can help the Europe-wide access, including XML guidelines, metadata standards, Semantic Web Technologies and searching architectures. Among them, the *LegalXML* initiative aims at allowing unified access to legislative information in EU wide dimension (www.ittig.cnr.it/legws/index.html).

A further step in the specific field of legal information is to join practical/technical solutions for accessing information with a further 'social' perspective of allowing citizen to access in an 'understandable' way legal, mainly legislative, information. In many countries public institutions have promoted projects aimed at improving the availability of legal information on the Web and the *free access* of information [2]. In addition, it is necessary to explicit the semantic aspects carefully so that the search is driven by a meta-description which keeps univocal references to the text, since the non-expert user has no precise idea of what he is looking for, and uses general terms of common language rather than specific legal concepts; A descriptive model of contents may point out both the typologies of regulative functions and the categories of the addressees, and which would allow to overcome linguistic barriers [6].

2. Cross-lingual access to legal information

Beside a monolingual environment, EU information is at a crossroad: paper has lost its significance, coverage of documents has moved from core legal stuff (e.g. documents of the Official Journal) to all EU documents and multilingualism is more challenging than ever.

Cross-lingual effective access to EU legal information requires advanced linguistic interpretation of search queries and appropriate links to powerful lexical tools. At the present, the most prominent EU thesaurus is *Eurovoc* (<http://europa.eu/eurovoc/>) [1]. Eurovoc is a

multilingual thesaurus – a controlled vocabulary – covering the policy fields of the EU. It provides a means of indexing the documents in the documentation systems. The latest version (4.2) exists in 18 official languages of the European Union. Eurovoc has a hierarchical structure with inter-lingual relations. As the focus is on socio-economic issues, depth in law is quite low and the structure is not appropriate to EU law. Moreover, because of the lack of semantic precision in hierarchical and synonymy relations, it is mainly suitable for retrieving *related* terms.

The EU funded eContent project LOIS (Lexical Ontologies for Legal Information Sharing, EDC 22161, 2003-2006) (www.loisproject.org/) [3] aims to remedy this semantic lacuna by means of the development of a multi-language legal thesaurus, whose structure is based on existing de facto standards for semantic thesaurus construction: WordNet is a lexical database which has been under constant development at Princeton University; EuroWordNet (EWN) is a multilingual lexical database with wordnets for eight European languages, which are structured along the same lines as the Princeton WordNet. Both thesauri are organized around the notion of a *synset*. A synset is a set of one or more uninflected word forms (lemmas) with the same part-of-speech that can be interchanged in a certain context. A synset is often further described by a gloss, explaining the meaning of the concept. Synsets can be related to each other by semantic relations, of which the most important are hypernymy/hyponymy (between specific and more general concepts), meronymy (between parts and wholes), antonymy (between semantically opposite concepts) and role. Cross-lingual equivalence relations are made explicit in the so-called Inter-Lingual-Index (ILI). Each synset in the monolingual wordnets has at least one equivalence relation with a record in this ILI. Language-specific synsets from different languages that are linked to the same ILI-record by means of a synonym relation are considered conceptually equivalent. Based on the Euro-WordNet framework, the main task of Lois is the development and connection of 6 legal WordNets (Italian, Dutch, English, German, Czech and Portuguese). The database currently holds 8,500 synsets, which originate from EC Community definitions, national legislation and lexical data bases, which conceptualizes general language entities pertaining to legal theory and legal dogmatic.

Compared to Eurovoc, the LOIS knowledge base has relatively precise synonymy and hierarchical relations, so that it is more suitable for retrieval purposes and also includes all WordNet semantic relations, in order to contain more semantic knowledge on the meaning of a concept and to detect polisemy. LOIS is specifically aimed at the legal domain, whereas Eurovoc has a broader scope (European policy issues).

The semantic connotation of Lois allows not only the dynamic application in the searching process as a means of conceptual query expansion, but also a deep and refined semantic description of content in the (metadata) editing phase, capable to express sense distinction, polysemy disambiguation and context dependence and to check ontological consistency [4] [5]. Based on the consolidate methodology set up during the project development, the current goal is the semi-automatic expansion of the lexicon, based on the integration of the bottom-up strategy described above with a top-down validation, in order to expand the coverage and to enhance the structure of the overall model.

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Digitalization of Danish Party Membership?

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Abstract

Danish parties have adopted new information and communication technologies (ICT) and thereby introduced new online party activities facilitated by these new technologies. However, the application is still limited and the online participation of party members is not substantially changing the character of party member participation. Nevertheless, even though limited, the application of ICT does make a difference. Most members who are active online are also active offline but some otherwise passive party members are mobilized by activities facilitated by ICT. Consequently, the application of ICT has an impact on the amount of party activity. Furthermore, the representativeness of party member activity is affected by the application of ICT - the age representativeness is ameliorated, whereas the education and gender representativeness are exacerbated. In sum, the application of ICT within Danish parties has an impact on the character of party member participation, even if it is limited. This opens up for a discussion of the extent to which ICT affects the traditional concept of party membership.

Keywords

ICT, political parties, participation

1. Parties and party member participation

Political parties provide a unique linkage between the people and their representatives through their role in elections. But parties have also traditionally provided a classic channel of participation. Declining membership figures [4, 6, 11] indicate that this channel of participation is declining or at least changing. The purpose of this paper is to analyze whether and how the introduction of new information and communication technology (ICT) within Danish political parties changes the character of party member participation.

Cyber optimists would argue that ICT improves and enlarges participation whereas cyber pessimists would argue that ICT either does not make a difference since it is 'preaching to the converted' [2, p. 6, 7], or that it even results in enlarged political gaps. This is analyzed on the basis of two

questions: first, to what extent are party members participating in traditional party activities and party activities facilitated by ICT? Second, do activities facilitated by ICT have an impact on the characteristics of participating party members?

Notwithstanding that the field of research in the application of ICT by political parties is a rather new phenomenon there has been substantial research within this field. Most of this has analyzed how parties apply the ICT in the electoral arena, focusing upon parties', candidates' and parliamentarians' virtual campaigning and websites.

Though to a lesser extent, the application of ICT within party organizations and online participation of party members have also been focused upon. The analyses have either focused mostly on online participation, as in Pedersen and Saglie's [10] analysis of the use of ICT by the various organizational strata within Danish and Norwegian party membership organizations on the basis of mail surveys conducted in 2000/01. Or the analyses have been based on online surveys of single [12] or a couple of parties [5]. Hence, focus has not been on a comparison of the character of offline and online party member participation on the basis of a mail survey including both passive and active party members from a large range of parties, which is the modest aim of this paper.

2. The Danish case and data

The impact of the application of new ICTs on the character of party member participation is assessed on the basis of the Danish case, which is well-suited for a study of online political participation in post-industrial societies. In an international comparison, Denmark is among the countries where the largest share of the population is online [7, p. 76]. Danish parties are using the Internet to disseminate information and communicate with voters and members, and a relatively large proportion of the electorate uses the Internet. In November 2001 (at the time of the membership survey applied here), 70 percent of the population in Denmark were online [3, p. 5]. The Danish parties included in this analysis are the eight parties represented in parliament in 2000.

The paper is empirically based on a postal survey of rank-and-file Danish party members conducted in 2000-2001 [1, 9]. In the three largest parties, 1,000

members were drawn; in the other five parties 800 were drawn. The response rates vary from 60 to 80 percent; the overall rate is 68 percent.

Focus here is upon the impact of new ICTs on the character of party member participation in 2000. One potential problem is that the data is outdated due to the rapid expansion within the field of new ICTs; however, the strategy is nevertheless pursued.

First, a unique and attractive set of data is available. Contrary to newer online surveys of party members, the mail survey of Danish party members enables a more solid comparison between traditional, offline activity and online activity because it includes questions on both kinds of activities. Hence, it is possible to conclude more firmly on the difference between members participating offline and online.

Second, the survey enables the inclusion of a large range of parties thus providing a more comprehensive analysis of the impact of the application of new ICTs on the character of party member participation. In addition, it is possible to examine whether the ideological differences of the parties make a difference to this impact.

Third, it could be argued that if the analysis of the impact of the application of ICT reveals that it made a difference already at this initial stage, the impact would be expected to be larger now due to increased application. Obviously, the Internet population has expanded since 2000, as has the parties' application of the new technology, thus sustaining an argument about normalization. However, since far from all party members are participating online in 2006, there is no reason to believe that the character of online participation found in 2000 does not continue to reflect the character of online participation in 2006.

Finally and notwithstanding the three arguments above, this study provides a benchmark from which to compare future developments in the impact of the application of ICT on the character of party member participation.

3. Making a difference ...

3.1 ... in the amount of party member participation?

The analyses reveals that in 2000/1, at the time of the party member survey employed in the analyses, the application of ICT does make a difference, even if limited. Most of the members that are active online are also active offline. Hence, party members attending traditional party meetings – the officeholders within the party organization in particular – participate more online than do other members. Yet, some otherwise passive party members are mobilized by activities facilitated by

the ICT. Hence, it may be argued that the application of new ICT does have an impact on the amount of party activity.

3.2 ... to the type of party members participating?

Online members are less representative of voters in regard to gender than other members. Whereas the female share among voters is half and among members is close to a third, they comprise less than one-quarter of the online members. The gender representativeness imbalance is therefore exacerbated. The age representativeness, on the other hand, is ameliorated with the online category of party members. Online members are generally younger and thereby compensate for some of the discrepancy between voters and members in general. Due to activities facilitated by the application of new ICTs, parties are able to appeal to the younger members not otherwise attracted to party activity. When it comes to education, online members are more likely to have acquired a university degree than other members.

4. Conclusion

Danish parties have adopted ICT and thereby introduced new online party activities facilitated by these new technologies. However, the application of ICT as of 2000/1 is still limited in Danish parties and the participation of party members is not substantial.

The analyses show that party members active offline account for the majority of the online activity, but that ICT does activate some people not active otherwise. Hence, both cyber optimists and cyber pessimists might find support for their arguments.

Furthermore, the analyses illustrates that men, younger members and members with more formal education are more inclined towards online activities than other party members. Assessing the representativeness of the party members compared to the voters at large reveals that the representativeness of party member participation is improved in regard to age but skewed when it comes to gender and education.

This raises a discussion of whether and how parties apply ICT in order to sustain, re-establish or even enhance their role as channels of participation and hence the concept of party membership. To be a party member has traditionally been characterized by party meeting attendance, leaflet distribution at elections and social activities – or passivity and hence only the payment of dues [9]. This calls for a discussion of (potential) changes and development in the concept of party membership following the

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Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the Public Sector: The Danish Case.

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Abstract

According to a number of international studies, Denmark is presently one of the leading countries when it comes to e-government. At the same time the Danish Government, the Ministry of Finance and several interest groups have high expectations, that ICT can streamline public administration and strengthen democracy. Electronic Case and Document Management Systems is one of the key pillars of "Project e-Government". In general Electronic Case and Document Management Systems are considered as a tool for re-engineering internal structures and organizational activities. Moreover it has a potential for serving as an interface between constituents, citizens, and businesses to officials in government. In this perspective Electronic Case and Document Management Systems can be seen as a tool to improve the goals of e-participation.

Keywords

E-government, Document Management Systems, democracy, information technology.

1. Introduction

According to several international studies, Denmark is currently one of the leading countries when it comes to e-government¹ [4, 7, 9]. The Internet accessibility has nearly exploded and today almost 90 % of the Danish population has Internet access either at home or at work [5]. Furthermore it is a political ambition that Denmark shall be "World Champion" when it comes to

digitalizing of the public administration. This has led to the establishment of a "Digital Taskforce" in 2001 with the purpose of furthering the digital reorganization of the public sector (www.e.gov.dk). The past years have also witnessed extensive changes in the ICT infrastructure and a growth in public investments in ICT [1].

At approximately the same time as the Internet had its popular breakthrough up through the 1990's, e-government began to play a significant role. The 1970's and 1980's had witnessed some experiments with ICT both in Denmark and abroad with reference to improvement of efficiency in the public sector but it was not until the 1990's that digitalization gained a solid ground [9]. The background for this can shortly be described as a result of increased demands for modernization and making the public sector more efficient on the one hand and the citizens' wishes for more and better services on the other. This paved the way for digital solutions to meet this joint pressure. E-government is thus from several perspectives seen as an unexpectedly simple solution in the modernization of the public sector [10].

Extensive ICT investments in Denmark in recent years have not surprisingly brought about great expectations that ICT can increase efficiency, secure a better service to the citizens and enhance political participation and transparency. The central administration, leading consulting agencies, and several interest groups have had high hopes that ICT can reorganise and make effective the administrative processes and at the same time strengthen democracy and heighten the quality of service and facilitate the citizens' access to information from the public sector.

Though expectations have been high, it seems as if the realisation of the potentials is less great. International studies have proposed that ICT in many public sectors has not delivered the value expected and that the digitalization of the public sector does not tend towards a revolution – rather it favours a strengthening of the existing organizational structures [3, 8]. Kraemer and King find that despite the extensive changes in ICT infrastructure and massive economical investments in e-government projects, ICT has still not shown itself as a catalyst for administrative reforms. "...it continues to be a useful instrument of administrative and incremental change, but it is no more capable today of bringing

¹ E-government has been variously defined in the literature. For the purpose of this paper E-government refers – "to the use by government agencies of information technologies (such as Wide Area Networks, the Internet, and mobile computing) that have the ability to transform relations with citizens, businesses, and other arms of government. These technologies can serve a variety of different ends: better delivery of government services to citizens, improved interactions with business and industry, citizen empowerment through access to information, or more efficient government management. The resulting benefits can be less corruption, increased transparency, greater convenience, revenue growth, and/or cost reductions." (www.worldbank.org/publicsector/egov/definition.htm). Other labels than e-government have also been used – such as e-governance, one-stop government and online government [2].

about institutional change and administrative reform than it was fifteen years ago”[8].

2. Electronic Case and Document Management Systems

The aim of this project is to analyse the Danish Municipalities’ experiences with Electronic Case and Document Management System which is one of the most significantly pillars of the ”Project e-Government” in Denmark [6]. It is assumed that Electronic Case and Document Management Systems will entail large rationalization gains, streamline information managing, improve management information, heighten efficiency in the work processes and contribute to a better service for the citizens. The hopes are high especially at municipal level, since this is the place in Denmark where the majority of the public resources are administered.

Discussions concerning Electronic Case and Document Management Systems pay in particular attention on how to improve e-administration and deals with aspects that involve the re-engineering of internal structures and organizational activities [11]. These aspects will also be included in this research project. Additionally this study also contributes with a democratic view. Electronic Case and Document Management Systems has a potential for serving as an interface between constituents, citizens, and businesses to officials in government. In this perspective Electronic Case and Document Management Systems can be seen as a tool to improve the goals of e-participation. It will be investigated if – and if so how – the implementation of Electronic Case and Document Management Systems in Danish municipalities changes the *external* interaction patterns. How does it influence the interaction between public sector and citizens? Such changes associated with ICT should increase transparency but can it also result in some negative effects? And how does digitalization influence the overall quality of the case handling? Are the citizens given access to their own cases on the Internet? And is the possibility utilised if so?

3. Research Design

The first part of the research (taking place in the summer of 2006) depends on an electronic survey designed for top managers in all 98 municipalities in Denmark. The survey covers questions about the political and administrative organization of the municipalities as a result of a recent extensive reform where the number of municipalities has been dramatically reduced from 275 to 98. At the same time questions are posed to the way the new municipalities positions themselves to central challenges of the digitalization of the administration and how the information technology is utilized in the interaction with citizens.

The second part – and the weightiest – is based on a multiple case study in some specific municipalities. Based on the above mentioned survey two cases will be chosen. The purpose is to secure variation between the

cases in relation to how far the municipalities have come in the digitalization process. The case method means that the chosen cases cannot be used for generalizations in statistical terms but instead in analytical terms [12]. In the study of the selected cases both qualitative and quantitative data are used. It consists of the completion of semi-structured interviews with key-informants at top management level and representatives from street-level-worker level. Furthermore accessible and relevant documents and information from the selected case-municipalities will be used.

The project is too recently commenced to give any empirical answers. But it is a central premise for the empirical focus of the project that the large public investments in ICT (e.g. Electronic Case and Document Management Systems) should be followed by systematic knowledge in stead of merely assumptions about the outstanding qualities of the systems. Equating e-government and automatic gains in terms of a better, cheaper and more democratic public sector is too simple and this paper wishes to distance itself from that view.

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Investigation of eParticipation in Environmental Protection and Sustainable Development of the Czech Republic

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Abstract

There is presented the research project *ComFrame - Analysis and Design of Communication Framework within International Environmental Information Systems* funded by the Ministry of Environment of the Czech Republic, which is solved by the Masaryk University in collaboration with the Czech Environmental Information Agency and European Projects & Management Agency, which coordinates the DEMO-net project in the Czech Republic¹. It belongs to a set of eEurope projects of Lisbon strategy of European Union. It monitors environmental communication activities and eParticipation of four target groups (*public administration bodies, academicians, public and businesses*) of the Czech Republic within national and pan-European environmental information systems. There are discussed preliminary results of the investigation of eParticipation and the communication framework for environment protection and sustainable development to meet the European Union required public access to environmental information.

Keywords

eParticipation, DEMO-net, communication framework, environmental information system

1. Introduction

The key question of eParticipation sounds: „*Which technologies and procedures could lead to more simple an effective communication among public and public administration bodies*“¹. How to design services to all citizens to have the chance to participate in decision making process and they have all accessible information (required to their decision) at arm's length. It is necessary to think both technical questions (devoted to Information and Communication Technology – ICT) and also social and economic questions to find optimal solution. The research team of Masaryk University (MU) and European Projects & Management Agency (EPMA) are solving the above questions. We issue from the following approach in solving our research project

ComFrame - Analysis and Design of Communication Framework within International Environmental Information Systems:

- Analyzing possibilities, which are provided by current ICTs to achieve objectives of the *ComFrame* project. The number of today used technologies is enormous and there are often used totally different standards and procedures in the same situations.
- Monitoring currently developed technologies, methods and standards. Presently there is a stormy progress in field of ICT in many branches. The impact of new technologies on citizens of EU could be very strong. The support on the part of Semantic web or Speech recognition software will certainly change approach how people will communicate in future. This change will cause the transformation of communication. This change will cause transformation of communication principles between citizens and the public administration.
- Observing and evaluating technologies in dependence on their contribution to increase eParticipation, but not only from the view of technological benefits, i.e. to search such technological solutions, which increase the efficiency of citizen cooperation with public sector institutions.
- Developing ICT tools and methods for the evaluation of eParticipation with respect to their contribution in technological and participation sphere. In both cases there is necessary to compare various technological attributes, which are very often different from each other. This heterogeneity makes comparison of technological alternatives quite difficult.

2. The legislative framework of eParticipation in environmental sector

We have started the *ComFrame* project with analyses of eEurope initiatives, legislation and standards, where EU fundamental legislation acts are e.g. *COM (2004) 757 final, Challenges for the European Information Society beyond 2005, SEC (2005) 717, i2010 – A European Information Society for growth and employment, COM (2006) 45 final Interoperability for*

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Pan-European eGovernment Services, IDABC², etc. Very important role play further *Directive 2003/4/EC* (replacing older one 90/313/EEC) *on public access to environmental information* and *Aarhus convention*³. The new aspects brought the *Directive 2003/98/EC, on the Re-use of Public Sector Information*, which should be applied in EU member states by July 2005. This directive provides a harmonized legal framework that can improve the possibilities to re-use public sector information.

The main objectives of the above legislative framework are the simplification and the unification of the access to the environmental information on one hand and the support of public participation in all three key relations on the other hand. They support communication in eParticipation like:

- *Information*: one way relationship where government (public administration) bodies produces and delivers environmental information for citizens.
- *Consultation*: two way relationships where public provide feedback for government bodies. Government bodies set the agenda and manage process environmental protection.
- *Active participation*: partnership with government bodies in which citizens active engage in defining EIA process and content of decision making.

They enlarge the part of public to participate in decision making processes in sustainable development. The best tools for this enlargement are ICT, particularly Internet.

3. Main objectives of the research project ComFrame

When creating eParticipation standards for environmental communication framework in the Czech Republic it will be necessary to strive for a common understanding and consensus. The support of eParticipation in the environmental sector depends on the Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Informatics and Ministry of the Environment (MoE) of the Czech Republic with respect to the technical issues concerning interchange, reuse and persistency of environmental information. The consensus between them should have been found not only for the format and structure of monitoring, processing and presenting environmental information and decisions, but also for the their information content, meaning and management. The proposed standards in the *ComFrame* will allow target groups (public administration bodies, businesses, academicians and public) better eParticipation in

²European Interoperability Framework for pan-European eGovernment Services. Version 1.0. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities

³UN/ECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters ("the Aarhus Convention")

environmental sector, i.e. to seemly interoperate and interchange environmental data and information for eDemocracy processes in environmental protection and sustainable development of the Czech Republic.

There are the *ComFrame* project objectives:

1. *The interoperability framework proposal* with respect to infrastructure, terminology, processes, methods and ICT tools (to be included into national eGovernment, eBusiness standards) for eParticipation in environmental protection processes and sustainable development of the Czech Republic.
2. *The proposal of efficient communication methods and tools* for four main target groups (public, administration bodies, academicians and businesses) with international environmental sources and systems (development of communication framework for EIONET and particularly Internet).
3. *The identification and analysis of eParticipation in environmental protection* (particularly information needs) of target groups (what, where, how [form, services, time,], ...).
4. *Standardization of communication (interoperability) framework with European environmental information systems* supported by EU (e.g. 7 Framework R&D program, EEA, EIONET, etc.), UNEP and OECD.

The time table of solving the *ComFrame* project was divided into several phases (Hřebíček 2005, Hřebíček et al 2006, Hřebíček/Ráček 2006): the *analysis of target groups* (July 2005 - June 2006), the *analysis of interoperability framework* (July - December 2006), the *proposal of an interoperability framework* of the Czech Republic (January - December 2007).

4. Preliminary results of the analysis of target groups

Objectives of the first phase of the *ComFrame* project covered the long-term framework specification of relevant cooperation, identification of informational needs and eParticipation of particular target groups in the Czech Republic. During brainstorming and consultations with selected representatives of particular target groups were chosen regions of the Czech Republic (Vysočina, Jihomoravský, Moravskoslezský). It was developed special questionnaires which were sent to more than 6000 informants by e-mails, but the number of returned responses was lesser (1773, i.e. around 30%).

Target audiences were split into four groups: *administration/government* (national, regional, local government bodies and municipalities), *businesses* (large companies, small and medium enterprises, banks, etc.), *academicians* (students, educators, scientists, etc.), and *public* (people, journalists, NGO). Investigated target groups respected initial splitting, but citizens were investigated personally as the separate group. The special web portal of the project was developed (<http://www.cba.muni.cz/mkr>), where you can find more information.

The statistical analysis of questionnaires showed that all groups of informants still feel serious mistrust of information found in Internet. The biggest problem is with the credibility of information, what is actually significant problem. Another problem is brought by the security and the privacy of information.

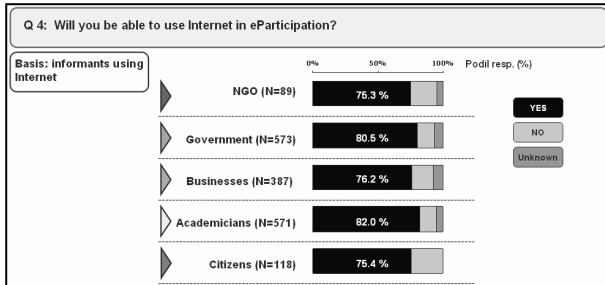


Figure 1. Informants preference of the source of information

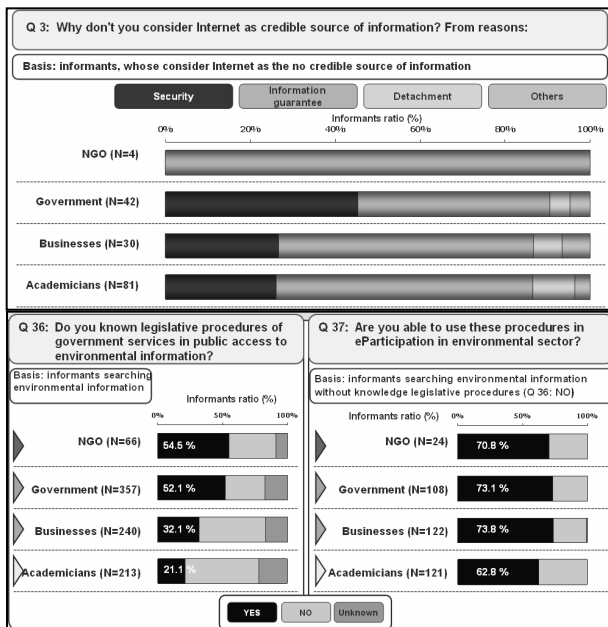


Figure 2. Credibility of information for informants using Internet

We investigated also informant's capability to process information in the foreign languages (English, German, French, etc.). The majority of them preferred mother language (Czech) during searching for information. Non-government organisations, businesses and academicians have much greater ability to looking for the documents written in various languages (particularly English). In this field of knowledge of the foreign languages is the public administration also behind all other target groups.

It follows from questionnaires that nearly 80% of informants are prepared using Internet in eParticipation, but less number of citizens (75,4%) will be able to use Internet in eParticipation in the Czech Republic, see Fig.3.

The knowledge of legislative procedures and government services in public access to environmental information was insufficient particularly at businessmen

and academicians. However interested informants thought that they are able to use government procedures in eParticipation (Fig. 4), but only 58,2% of them were satisfied with government provided services in eParticipation with respect to environment protection and sustainable development, see Fig. 5.

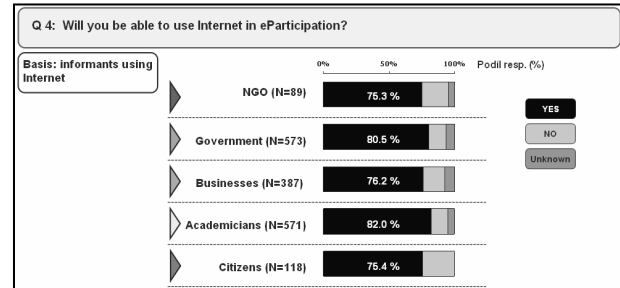


Figure 3. Ability of informants using Internet in eParticipation

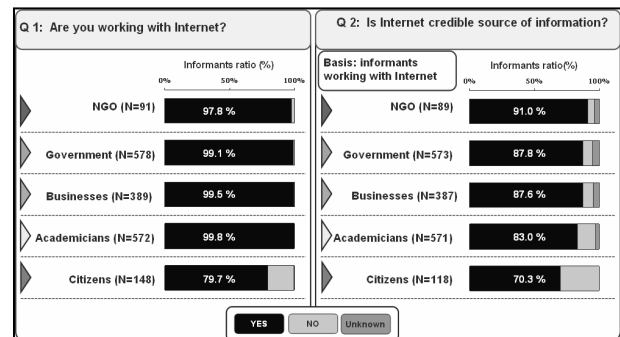


Figure 4. Ability of informants using legislative procedures in eParticipation

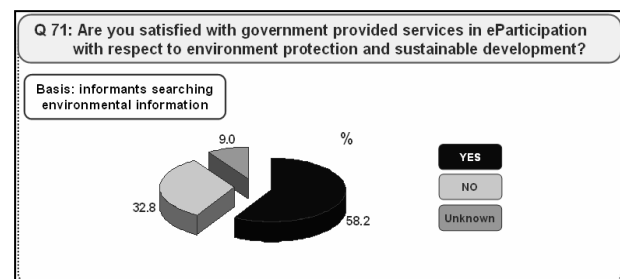


Figure 5. Informants satisfied with government service in eParticipation

Interesting results were brought by questions concerning about using Open Document Format (ODF). The best capability working with this new eGovernment technologies have citizens together with non-government organizations, but public administration bodies together with academicians and businesses didn't fall out well. It is bad result particularly in the context of public administrations with regard to institutions that should be open to citizens and use the most open form of communication.

The better results brought questions concerning about Portable Document Format (PDF) which can be used by the most of informants. Nevertheless differences in the capabilities of citizens and other target groups are still significant. These differences in the usage of PDF and ODF are most likely caused by the fact that for the

individual citizen is much easier to adopt the new technology. This is the positive result for eParticipation. In addition, the public administration only reflect demands of public and when it is not enough people whose are using for example ODF then reaction from the side of public administration correspond this situation

5. Conclusions

Both research projects, *ComFrame* solved at Masaryk University and *DEMO-net* leading in the Czech Republic by EPMA, could create a good basis for integration of research in a field of eParticipation and for strengthening of eParticipation in the real life of civil society [4].

We see here the promising role of ICT if used for the relevant model of eParticipation according to the level of maturity of civil society. DEMO-net project will deal deeper with different research issues in the area of eParticipation, including standardisation issues, such as standards for on-line moderation, ontology for semantic webs, metrics for deliberation, for data sharing etc. [3].

We would like to take in mind the specific recommendations, outlined during different level discussion of eGovernment research policy challenges, which highlight the need to develop research content and organizational issues. These include, on the content side: *communicating research; shifting from a focus on operational research towards examination of the impact of eGovernment implementation, continuing to focus on European strengths, whilst also learning from other regions.*

In order to reach the excellence in the area of eParticipation research, we need to seek for the best results of the implementation of new ICTs in the process of transformation of public administration and the whole society, which requires the integration of effort of different scientific researches, including socio-political disciplines and ICT research, but also the dialog of distinct stakeholders.

We will focus on the new ICTs in our future research in the second stage of the ComFrame project. They could bring new approaches for information exchange, for support of communication between public and public administration and for support of active participation of citizens in decision making. Among these incoming and perspective technologies can be placed for example:

- Natural language technologies.
- Speech technologies.
- Text mining technologies.
- Ontology.
- Semantic web services.

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Some Issues Connected with the Threats and Opportunities for eParticipation in the Czech Republic

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Abstract

All the European countries strongly support development of information and knowledge society on the governmental level because knowledge is supposed to be an absolute need for the next sustainable development of all the countries. At the same time they want to involve citizens in public deals so they provide information and electronic services on Web sites to let people more easily participate on governmental decisions. Land plans of large territorial units are given as an example in the case of Pardubice Region. In any case, eParticipation needs citizens with some basic computer and Internet skills - a digital literacy which is still not so common. Digital literacy of the citizens of the Czech Republic is very low so a strong attention must be paid to education of the citizens. The low level of digital literacy is surprisingly a problem of people of all ages. This is the reason why some impacts and results of the Czech state information policies on citizens are briefly described, more specifically results of Czech Statistical Office surveys, results of impacts of State Information Policy in education at the selected high schools in Pardubice, and one attempt to overcome impacts of digital divide on old people and children living in children's homes (forest houses).

Keywords

Digital divide, information society, eParticipation, indicators

1. Introduction

Inclusive European Information Society and support of growth with respect to the ideas of sustainable development belong to strategic aims of EU stated in its policy “i2010 – A European Information Society for growth and employment” [7].

Importance of information and communication technologies (ICT) for regional development has been deeply studied and it's importance is obvious. The whole country, region, micro region or municipality can be understood as a region. Theoretical works identified four main phases of influence of ICT on regional development [11], [13].

2. General Situation in the Czech Republic

Along with EU, Czech Government has supported development of ideas of information society since 1999. The first Czech policy “Czech State Information Policy - The Road to an Information Society” was created and accepted by the Czech Government in the same year. It was the main document concerning building information society in the Czech Republic. Electronic government, electronic communication of inhabitants with the public officials, electronic commerce and equal access of all the people to information belonged among the aims of the Czech State Information Policy [6].

A new strategic document – “State Information and Communications Policy e-Czech 2006” was adopted in 2004. The policy considers both EU priorities and specific needs of the Czech Republic. The main priorities are [5]:

- Secure and accessible communication services,
- Information literacy of the population,
- Modern public administration services available online,
- A dynamic environment for development of e-business.

According to the both policies there has been a strong support provided to schools with focus on the primary and secondary schools. Internet connection, computers and teachers training courses were provided by Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports during last few years.

So, there has been a strong support of development of information society on the governmental level in the Czech Republic since 1999.

On the other side, there are real possibilities of citizens and electronic services available for them. Real situation in regions and activities of various regional authorities and non-governmental organizations should be considered as well because regions and municipalities are closer to the citizens.

To allow measuring development of information society and comparing situation in various regions (e.g. countries), many statistical indicators has been introduced, e.g. [1], [2], [12].

Situation in the Czech Republic is observed by means of some indicators by Czech Statistical Office (CSO) and by some other organizations. Evaluation of selected indicators was done to find out the progress of the development of information society in the Czech Republic. However, only short time series are available, data come from various sources and data are collected

according to different methodologies. Mostly, data from inquiries were used. According to the available data only approximately 1/3 of Czech households is equipped with a computer and even less of them has an Internet connection. There is not a clear dependency between average salary and equipment with computers. Men use computers more often than women. Young people use computers and Internet significantly more often than old people. Most of the users use Internet only for communication and as a source of information. Shopping, banking and eGovernment services are not so often used. Concerning number of Internet users the results of CSO and inquiry done for Ministry of Informatics Czech Republic (MI CR) slightly differ.

In according to the study [4] digital literacy belongs to the significant problems in the Czech Republic. Surprisingly, 50% of Czech citizens has never used a computer. A low digital literacy is a problem of a population of all ages in general in EU. Even 10% of people aged 16 – 24 in EU has no basic computer skills.

3. Examples from Pardubice Region

The Pardubice Region belongs to the smallest regions in the Czech Republic. It occupies an area of 4519 km² and has more than 505 000 inhabitants. Regional Authority of the Pardubice Region tries to provide all information and some electronic services on its Web site as it is given by the laws and demanded by the citizens. Citizens, tourists and businessmen can find a lot of useful information on Web sites of the regional and municipal authorities.

Land plans of large territorial units (the Pardubice Region in this case) can be given as an example of an attempt to involve citizens in local government decisions. Citizens can download new plans in advance from the Web site of the Pardubice Region. Then they can take part in the public discussion and state their comments and suggestions so they have a chance to influence the land plans before they are adopted. There is a strong need to involve citizens in the process of land plans adoption because land plans can significantly influence the quality of life, prices of estates, etc. in a region. But citizens still need an equipment and some skills to be able to get all the information including geographic information (maps) which are provided in an interactive way.

One research was dedicated to evaluation of impacts of State Information Policy in education in Pardubice. So, an inquiry was done at selected high schools in Pardubice. Pardubice is a city with almost 100 000 inhabitants, it belongs to the largest cities in the country and it is a regional (county) town. According to the results, both high school students and teachers are not fully satisfied and some imperfections were identified (e.g. bad software, low interactivity of lessons, low authority of schools to make decisions, low number of lessons dedicated to ICT).

Next activity in Pardubice region was focused on two groups of citizens which belong to the people threatened

by digital divide – to old people living in welfare facilities and children living in foster houses (children's homes). Computers with Internet access were provided to these facilities in the Pardubice region in the beginning of year 2006 to let both children and old people learn how to use computers and Internet. After some time an inquiry was done to find out the first results of the project. Children learn faster how to use computers but the possibility of use of Internet significantly improved life of both children and old people. They can more easily communicate with their families and make new friends so they do not feel so isolated from the society.

4. Conclusions

Along with all the EU countries the Czech government strongly supports development of information and knowledge society and involvement of ITC into people's everyday life on the governmental level. This support has been expressed in two state information policies. Due to this strong support it could be expected that involvement of ICT into everyday life will be fast. It could be expected that participation of citizens in governmental decisions would increase along with easier access to information and electronic services as well. But according to the results of the first surveys and inquiries it seems that the process of involving citizens in public deals by means of electronic ways of communication is not as fast as it could be. As it was shown, regional activities are very important; they can significantly contribute to the whole process because municipality and region are closer to the citizen's concerns on one side and regional and municipal authorities can significantly improve citizen's opportunities by means of pointed projects on the other side.

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Development of Democracy in Kazakhstan through eParticipation?

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Abstract

Similar to most of the other successor states of the Soviet Union the Republic of Kazakhstan is characterized by a low level of democracy. Beside technological progress and economic opportunities the development of the Internet since the 1990s also raised the hope for political changes by means of this technology. The democratization of the published opinion, the support of administrative processes (e-Government) as well as a kind of electronic democracy („e-Democracy“) were envisaged. By now a new research field is currently emerging: eParticipation, ICT-supported participation in government processes. We intend to examine if and how eParticipation will be able to support the democratic development of a country whose middle class is currently growing. Questions to answer are: how could an eParticipation infrastructure look like? Which technical, judicial, and administrative aspects have to be considered, and how can eParticipation influence the real political processes and the development of society?

Keywords

Kazakhstan, eParticipation, democracy, development, politics, society

1. Introduction

It has been often stated that today the world has been changing faster and more dramatically than ever before in human history. Accordingly, the institutions that regulate and affect human lives adapt to these developments. While some countries can be considered as mature democratic societies which are often busy with demographic changes and economic challenges (http://earthtrends.wri.org/searchable_db/index.php?theme=10), others are currently struggling to build up structures that would allow their inhabitants to decide on every aspect of their lives only now.

One global region that has experienced a political and economic revolution some 15 years ago is Eastern Europe, turning this area into a highly interesting research field relevant for the topic addressed in this paper. Similar to most of the other successor states of the Soviet Union the Republic of Kazakhstan – the country we focus on – is characterized by a low level of democracy (For 2003, Kazakhstan was rated -6 on a (-10): Strongly autocratic, +10: Strongly democratic scale. http://earthtrends.wri.org/searchable_db/index.php?step=

[countries&cID%5B%5D=95&theme=10&variable_ID=509&action=select_years](#)). Democracy theory often assumes that a strong middle class, or bourgeoisie, dominates and protects the democratic institutions and processes in order to enforce its interests such as freedom of expression and coalition; economic liberty and protection of property; a fair justice, independent courts; and social and political plurality.

As for Kazakhstan, a number of criteria indicates a lack of these elements, mainly due to its previous history as part of the Soviet Union, the short period of independence, and – in contrast to other former Soviet republics like the Baltic states – a missing democratic tradition. For example, the former head of the republic's Communist Party and current president Nursultan Nazarbayev has been leading the country since its independence in 1991, being among the globally eldest heads of states in power. Further characteristics identified are the absence of a significant parliamentary and non-parliamentary opposition; of free and fair elections of parliaments on national, regional and local levels; of independent newspapers, magazines, radio and TV networks, as well as institutions of the civil society such as non-governmental organizations, foundations, grass-root initiatives, trade unions, and professional associations.

2. Research on eParticipation

Beside technological progress and economic opportunities the development of the Internet since the 1990s also raised the hope for political changes by means of this technology. Two topics are to be mentioned: On the one hand the democratization of the published opinion through easily publishable and accessible online papers, newsgroups, and, more recently, blogs. On the other hand, the support of administrative processes (e-Government) as well as a kind of electronic democracy („e-Democracy“) were envisaged (The German „Speyerer Definition von Electronic Government“ defines Electronic Government as ICT-supported business process execution in regard of governing and administration. See www.foev.dhv-speyer.de/ruvii/Sp-EGov.pdf). As for the latter, the idea was to support, replace, or even enable crucial political processes such as public debates, the formation of pressure groups, and elections over the Net. A main target were supranational organizations said to be insufficiently legitimized (A sample platform is operational at www.world-parliament.org). On a national

level, e-Democracy was intended to allow for referenda or eventually replace regular elections; this however currently rather seems to be an utopistic idea due to a number of reservations and constraints: the missing political intention, the loss of the symbolic action of voting publicly, the general access to voting machines, identity issues, and so on. Finally, such mechanisms require the existence of democratic institutions and mechanisms.

Along with these two areas a new research field is currently emerging: eParticipation. Within this context, we define eParticipation as employing Information and Communication Technologies within politics in regard of participatory, selforganized democracy and grassroots communication and discussion processes. Participation means that technologies, resources, organizations, and skills enable humans to design and manage their social systems all by themselves and to develop collective visions of a better future so that collective intelligence can emerge [2]. However, the human abilities and ways of using such technologies for political communication have to be taken into account as well. eParticipation might be interpreted as electronic version of the civil society which in developed democracies provides a significant input for political decision-making. In such countries, every political project – on national level as well as down to any rural infrastructure plan – is monitored by numerous pressure groups that provide their input in regulated processes and publish their positions in generally available or own media.

3. eParticipation in Kazakhstan

Several e-Government initiatives and projects have already been launched recently, or are being planned according to the Kazakh government (http://www.unipotsdam.de/db/elogo/ifgcc/index.php?option=com_content&task=category§ionid=11&id=274&Itemid=93&lang=de_D). Thus, taking these facts and the above presented scale into account we are eventually able to identify the topic of interest relevant for the addressed research area. We need to examine if and how eParticipation will be able to support the democratic development of a country whose middle class is currently growing. How could an eParticipation platform in Kazakhstan look like? Which technical, judicial, and administrative aspects have to be considered? How can ICT systems be secured and the participants' identity be confirmed? Which platforms and applications would be reasonably implemented, and how can eParticipation influence the real political processes and the development of society?

An appropriate method for our examination is the Empirical Content Analysis [3]. We assume that a growing number of eParticipation activities will emerge in Kazakhstan over the next years. In order to evaluate the development of this area in the concerned country we will monitor and measure the respective elements within the ICT-based environments during a predefined period of time. An approach is necessary that allows to analyze

over time if an eParticipation infrastructure would improve participation opportunities. This particularly includes web sites, information portals, mail, guest books, newsletters, online surveys, mailing lists, discussion boards, chats, Wikis, blogs, cyberprotest tools, online petitions, and online protest campaigns. We also need to examine the possible implications on legislative process: how are laws passed up to now, does any change occur? Do citizens currently have the possibility to participate in the law making and decision making process? Beside that it might also become necessary and useful to conduct personal interviews with key stakeholders inside and outside the country who contribute to these activities.

Based on this data we will conduct an analysis of the changes and evaluate the results which will allow us to describe the development of eParticipation in Kazakhstan. We intend to answer such questions as:

Which prerequisites for eParticipation tools and technologies are already fulfilled?

How many and which kinds of citizens are interested in political and eParticipation activities?

Which influence can eParticipation activities take on political decision-making?

Which level of interaction exist between eParticipation activists and members of the members of institutional bodies?

Which aims do eParticipation activists intend to reach?

In regard of our analysis we also need to pay attention for the social implications. We need to distinguish between elites and the so called ordinary population and their respective access to resources. The Kazakh society is currently undergoing significant changes. While the Soviet government followed a politics of russification, the leadership of the new independent state of Kazakhstan intends to create a genuine national identity. Another relevant aspect is the development of population that is changing due to the current economic boom. Thus for our topic we need to examine which individuals have the resources, time and interest to spend time with eParticipation or generally political participation, and who has the interest and ability to grow as political leader. Finally we will also need to address the cultural implications. We need to examine the legacies of ancient Kazakh traditions and their influences on the current society, particularly in regard of access to political and economic resources [1].

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Towards an eParticipation profile of Austria

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Abstract

At the heart of the European Network of Excellence DEMO_net is a broad concept of eParticipation. Exploring the practical role and applications of various forms of eParticipation in Austria reveals a somewhat mixed picture: on the one hand rather low priority for eParticipation in official political culture (government and parties) in the past, and some increase of interest more recently; on the other hand a variety and growing number of electronic services and eParticipation initiatives among civil society and intermediary organisations. These forms of practising democracy online include discussion boards, campaigning, petitioning and voting activities. A tentative explanation for the current eParticipation profile points to factors such as a tradition of top-down political communication and consensus democracy, government priority on economic goals, low citizen pressure for more participation, together with an increasingly e-experienced society and active innovation promoters.

Keywords

eParticipation, Austria, government, civil society, discussion boards, deliberation, eVoting

1. Multiple forms of eParticipation

Opinions forming on public issues, engaging in political communication and participating in political processes have become ICT-supported in various forms. Practices and the use of tools and methods are often summarised by notions such as digital democracy or eParticipation. The European Network of Excellence DEMO_net (see <http://www.demo-net.org>) uses this concept in a wide sense, so as to integrate various forms and dimensions of practising politics online [6, p. 1] [7]. They extend to the three basic forms of representative, plebiscitary and grassroots politics and hence include such different categories as online deliberation, consultation, campaigning, petitioning and voting. Moreover, directly related aspects of such participatory practices such as online service delivery, information access or electioneering can be seen as integral components. In the following, empirical evidence on various forms of eParticipation will be identified and analysed on the basis of a literature review and some primary research in order to assess the current eParticipation landscape in Austria.

2. eParticipation offerings by political institutions

Government and parliament

Austrian government has made considerable efforts to modernise its public administration and other state institutions with an advanced ICT infrastructure and online services. In the most recent European benchmarking study Austria takes a top position in eGovernment by high levels of full online availability of basic services for citizens and businesses [3]. As shown by Aichholzer [1, 2], online information services were the first to be implemented and these have some relevance for political participation. Public information is essential for exerting citizen rights and enabling democratic participation – remember Thomas Jefferson calling information “the currency of democracy”.

However, as regards Austria’s eGovernment strategy as a whole, up to now the focus has certainly been on administrative functions [10]. Efforts were mainly concentrated on making the government machinery more efficient and online-service based. A study on eDemocracy [4] confirms this view of the Federal Chancellery’s strategy, adding that it was “not to support democracy” and complaining “still a lack of interactivity and of opportunities for political participation” (p. 3). Also a most recent analysis [5] finds that e-mail practically remains the only online communication channel offered by national government and parliament. The Green Party is one of the exceptions providing also a web-based discussion board.

A more recent initiative has been taken by the Federal President of Austria with the website “Digitale Hofburg” (<http://www.digitalehofburg.at>): it is meant to become a place of future dialogue, a role model for a new quality of citizen participation on ICT-related political issues.

The Austrian Parliament has been expanding its mainly information oriented online services on MPs, agenda, minutes, background materials etc. since the mid nineties [11]. An assessment by Filzmaier [4] found time fitness and support to navigate on average and criticised the existing lack of interactivity and barriers to get in contact with representatives. However, quite recently the parliamentary office is exploring appropriate systems for ePetitioning to be implemented. At the level of regional parliaments Upper Austria has been innovative in offering live streams of parliamentary sessions via Internet. On the other hand a recent study among policy-makers and heads of IT-departments in 30 larger

municipalities shows an increasing interest in offering eParticipation tools at local and regional government levels [9]. The existing eParticipation offerings from government to date, however, are still rather mediocre. This is underlined among others by Austria's ranking only 24th in a recent United Nations study [12] based on an international comparison of eParticipation indices.

Political parties

All parliamentary parties have web sites since the late nineties and eCampaigning had started in 1999. Filzmaier [4, p. 12] notes that these changes remained largely unresearched and that in early 2000 online platforms played a key role for organising civil protest movements against the coalition of the Conservative Party with the so-called Freedom Party. Since this time Austria also experienced various effects of negative campaigning (satirical e-cards, mail bombings, fake web sites). The report includes disappointing results of tests of interactivity by sending emails to political parties and MPs, underlining the fact that opportunities for online interactions with political parties are at a very low level.

3. Points of crystallisation for eParticipation among civil society

Organised interest groups and citizen initiatives

In contrast to parties other interest groups and issue-based initiatives have discovered the advantages and used various forms of eParticipation. NGOs like Greenpeace Austria or Attac Austria offer tools like mailing lists, discussion boards, wikis, blogs and ePetitions [5]. A particular field of advanced activities concerns eVoting. Legal preconditions for eVoting have already been established for elections in the field of interest organisations and chambers. Three major eVoting pilots have been accomplished: national elections to the Austrian Student Parliament and to the Chamber of Commerce in 2000; and an eVoting-test with 1800 participating students in the election of the Federal President in 2004. A further test will be executed at the national elections in October 2006 among Austrian citizens living abroad (see <http://www.e-voting.at>). Experts from the academic and industrial IT sector play important roles as innovation promoters here [8].

Another form of eParticipation concerns citizen initiatives such as one in Vienna against street pollution by dog excrements. It gathered 160,000 supporters online within three months for a petition directed at Viennese government. Other citizen initiatives also organise themselves via Internet platforms on major planning projects at local level.

Online political discussion boards

As Winkler [14, p. 174] notes, the number of eParticipation projects with a deliberative nature is still

low in Austria. However, the Austrian Media Analysis 2005 says that 13 % of the responding Internet users are experienced in chats, newsgroups or discussion boards. A case study of a major political discussion board provides in-depth information [5]: 'politik-forum.at' is online since spring 2003, has 25 sub-boards, 2,300 registered users and a total of 80,840 postings. The sub-board on national politics reveals a divide concerning the activity of posters, a relatively high degree of interactivity, comprehensibility, normative rightness (netiquette), factual truth and rationality. Most of these results are supported by similar studies such as [13]. Weaknesses and points of grievances concern the lack of more complex arguments and problematic political world views among a minority. Fuchs concludes that the "potential for constituting a digital agora" is there, "but this has not yet been realized" [5].

4. Tentative explanations for the mixed picture

Attempting a brief conclusion, the following factors seem to contribute most to the current profile of eParticipation in Austria [4, 5]: a tradition of top-down political communication and consensus democracy; government priority on economic goals; low citizen pressure for more participation; a high level of Internet access; an increasingly e-experienced society still undergoing learning processes in online communication; and increasing activity by innovation promoters in special fields of eParticipation.

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