



E-Government and Democracy: Societal Context of Information & Communication Age

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ABSTRACT

Governments around the world with democratic intent are incorporating Information and communication technologies (ICT) into their e-government activities. This trend necessitates the establishment of outcomes and goals to guide such efforts of incorporation of ICT. By utilizing the best practices, technologies, and strategies will deepen democracy and ensure representation and citizen engagement in the electronic age. It is upon this foundation that opportunities for greater online engagement and deliberation among citizens and their governments will demonstrate the value of information and communication technologies in effective and responsive participatory democracy. This paper discussed about research trends and democratic outcomes of E-government.

Keywords: Government, Information and communication technology, Democracy, Online engagement, Democratic outcomes.

1. Introduction

E-Government and democracy, fused together, are one piece of the e-democracy puzzle. Whether it is online campaigning, lobbying, activism, political news, or citizen discussions, the politics and governance of today are going online around the world. What is unknown is whether politics and governance—as we know it” is actually changing as it goes online. From the perspective of each government, civil society, or business organization, it is relatively easy to explore our institutional role in building participatory democracy online. Taking the whole situation into account is the difficult challenge. We are not building in a vacuum, nor are we developing our efforts in a constant environment. In the end, the only people who are experiencing the totality of the emerging democratic information-age are citizens or e-citizens. The democratic institutions of government (including representative bodies and elected officials), the media, political parties and interest groups, as well as citizens themselves, are going online across the world. The question is not - will we have e-democracy? It exists today based on the positive and negative uses of this medium by democratic institutions, non-democratic actors, and citizens. The real question is of knowing where we are and what is possible, what kind of e-democracy can or, better yet, should we build?

Everyday, more citizens use the Internet around the world. More are applying it toward political and community purposes than the day before. Everyday, another government adds a new online feature designed to bring government and citizens closer. As this potential grows, the reality is that what most people and governments actually experience remains little changed. If citizens and governments are

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currently satisfied with the current state of their democracy, there is little incentive to accelerate or invest in efforts that seek to improve governance and citizen participation. However, if there is a desire to improve engagement, the often cost-effective potential of ICTs should be applied toward this goal along with complementary strategies and reforms. As some had mistakenly hoped, the existence of new technology does not necessitate its use nor does it change the innate behavior of citizens, politicians, or civil servants.

E-government already impacts participatory democracy in the following areas:

- Where governments undertake e-democracy/e-participation as well as general civic engagement/consultation policy work and allocate specific resources to such activities.
- Where e-government service delivery efforts and public portal developments reach a high state of development and maturation. This makes it obvious that previous government policy comments about the democratizing potential of the Internet must receive full consideration or be dropped. When complemented by top-level political direction and some manifestation of demand from citizens, e-democracy in government will have significant potential.
- Where civil society led efforts work to establish information-age public spheres or online commons specifically designed to encourage political and issue-based conversation, discussion, and debate among citizens and their governments. The online public sphere needs to play a public agenda-setting and opinion formation role. With proper resources, structure, and trust, it can play a deliberative role in public decision-making.
- At levels of government closer the people. It is well known that people tend to participate if they feel their participation makes a difference. At more local levels of government, the use of ICTs in governance will be easier for a broader cross-section of citizens to see the results of their enhanced participation. Also at this level, citizen-led efforts can have the larger lasting impact on public agenda-setting from the outside.

2. Research Trends

To date, much of the research on the democratic, political, and governmental impact of ICTs has focused on:

- Online activities, particularly comparisons of web site features of political institutions such as campaigns and political parties.
- Development of e-government services from a planning and strategy perspective or a focus on public administration reform.
- Surveys of citizens about their political online activities. These surveys are creating a partial baseline of activities for ongoing measurement. There are far fewer surveys of elected officials, government decision-makers, and political elites including journalists.
- The practices of online consultation or e-rulemaking with an emphasis on best practices and lessons learned.
- Exploring the online public sphere and opportunities for deliberative democracy as applied online.
- Focused to a small but important degree on e-parliaments. Little research is exploring the role of the ICTs in state legislatures, city councils, and other representative bodies.
- Making the institutional amplification argument that may replace the contrived cyber-optimist/pessimist approach to analyzing the impact of the Internet on political behavior.
- Being supported by general new media and Internet research. Research on usability needs to inform e-government development in particular.
- Research compiling —what if speculation continues to be plentiful. The questions being asked are often too general to be useful in the field by practitioners.

3. Democratic Outcomes

Each evolutionary ICT practice and tool needs to be considered in the context of democratic goals (more is

good, more effective is even better). The democratic goals to connect to e-government efforts and practices include:

- Trust and Accountability
- Legitimacy and Understanding
- Citizen Satisfaction and Service
- Reach and Equitable Access
- Effective Representation and Decision-Making
- Participation through Input and Consultation
- Engagement and Deliberation

3.1 Trust and Accountability

The decline in the public's trust in government is a widely known global trend. It is of great concern to governments and those working to strengthen civil society. Accountability is the simple notion that governments and civil servants can be held accountable for their actions, processes, and outcomes. E-government can help build trust between government and citizens. Building trust between governments and citizens is fundamental to good governance. ICT can help build trust by enabling citizen engagement in the policy process, promoting open and accountable government and helping to prevent corruption.

ICT strategies and applications seeking to achieve the many democratic outcomes identified in this paper may contribute to an overall increase in government trust, but with the state of cynicism about government, results may be hard to measure. Applications that deliver accountability and access to information along with efficiency and convenience will win citizen approval. Therefore, the way forward is to adapt e-government solutions by adding accountability features that directly address the more comprehensive and expanded goals of e-government. The building of democratic trust via e-government can also be complemented by efforts that leverage existing trust in government to increase citizen comfort with the usage of the service transaction components of e-government. Use of e-government is not necessarily what caused this increase in trust, but it is a factor worth exploring in future research. In the end, increasing people's confidence and trust in government through e-government is an outcome worth measuring and pursuing.

3.2 Legitimacy and Understanding

E-Government provides an opportunity for governments to explain and demonstrate their legitimacy and provide basic civic education online that will increase citizen understanding of the responsibilities of government. The online provision of easy to read - How it works information about government functions, programs, and its legal structure along with related links to reliable, up-to-date information, and elected official and government leaders is essential. This educational content could be grouped to form a Democracy section available from the main governmental portal. Profile linking to a nation's founding documents such as their constitution and laws might seem dry, but this helps provide a context for the legitimacy of government. Along with links to official sources across government, civic education content can be shared in a user-friendly mix of text, images, sound, and video for students and the general public.

One indicator of e-government and democracy success will be the increased understanding online users gain about government. To effectively participate in your government you need access to the ground rules, including information on the proper way to make freedom of information requests that go beyond what governments share online at their discretion. Without these seemingly mundane information components in place, efforts to encourage deeper public participation will lack the necessary foundation.

3.3 Citizen Satisfaction and service

The service and convenience benefits of e-government are widely touted. If deployed to create useful

administrative knowledge on user satisfaction, e-government can help governments avoid problems and set priorities. Increasing citizen satisfaction and service is the bridging outcome between traditional e-government projects and online efforts to promote participatory democracy. At a minimum, governments need to design their online transaction services and information portals such that they gather structured input and useful feedback. While governments do not compete with other government websites providing the same service, they are competing for citizen time and attention among the millions of other online options citizens choose from everyday. Governments also need to be mindful that established media brands and online portals are the main source of online political news and links from those sites to government source materials can bring in desired citizen eyeballs (web site visitors).

On the road to measuring citizen satisfaction is the intentional generation of a demand-function for e-government. Tools such as web site surveys and comment forms, telephone surveys of the general public and registered site users, comment forms generated at the completion of a transaction or query, page-based content rating options and focus-group meetings with diverse or target user groups can all be used to generate ongoing input and an essential sense of demand.

3.4 Reach and Equitable Access

The e-participation efforts of government need to reach people to be effective. This is but obvious, but it is for those governments that have limited the promotion of their initial online consultation experiments by avoiding profile links from their government's main portal. Many governments are concerned over negative attention that might come from a less than successful effort. Governments, unlike other organizations, have an obligation to provide equitable access to their services and democratic processes. For example, people who are unable to vote in person are often given absentee voting options to promote greater equity. Universal access to the Internet is still many years away in most of the world. The digital divide is often cited as a reason not to proceed with political participation projects online due to the lack of access by a significant portion of the population.

The reality is that whether a country has 5 percent or 50 percent of its population online, it has some form of e-democracy working today. In less wired countries, e-democracy exists in an institutional form with the role of non-governmental organizations, the media, universities, and government organization at the center. Waiting for the digital divide to close will eliminate the opportunity to build social expectations for civic uses of the Internet while the medium is still relatively new.

3.5 Effective Representation and Decision-Making

From the functions of representative institutions to enhanced decision-making within government, ICTs can make political processes more efficient and hopefully more effective. Compared to online campaigning and e-government in general, one of the least studied areas is ICT use by parliaments, legislatures, local councils and their elected members and staff. What these institutions do online will be the cornerstone for attempts to strengthen citizen participation in the information age. While the role of the Internet in voter education is extremely important, governance happens year round.

Citizens will engage their representatives in governance when they feel they have a stake in the political outcome, if they think their voices will be heard, and where they feel their input matters. While it is generally accepted that many citizens do not currently have a stake, ICTs can be used to bring citizen input and deliberation into representative political processes. These processes have direct political power and authority. They are not simply an external exercise or academic experiment. Therefore connecting ICT-enhanced participatory democracy to representative processes may be the most effective path toward deepening democracy through e-government. As e-government efforts as a whole increase the technological and communication strength of the executive, the lack of corresponding investment in the

ICT infrastructure of representative institutions, processes, and members may significantly change the role of representatives as well as the view public holds about their power and influence.

3.6 Participation through input and consultation

The Internet and ICTs can be used in structured ways to gain input from citizens. They can be used in substantial ways to consult with citizens. ICTs can be used to give citizens a voice and if the government is willing, be heard. A significant barrier to e-government efforts that enhance online participation are bureaucratic fears of quantity over quality. The scarcity of time faced by citizens is a challenge for civil servants as well. Without structured ways to gather, evaluate, and respond to public input online, there will be diminishing value received or perceived with each additional public comment. Achieving greater consultation with value-added citizen input is the area of the most considerable e-government and democracy activity in the executive or administrative branch of government.

However, as governments seek to establish online consultations along side their traditional public consultation activities, they must support basic citizen input. Deepening democracy requires a 24 hours a day x 7 days a week commitment to informal two-way electronic communication between citizens and their government. Consultations are normally designed based on the policy priorities of government. Citizens, on the other hand, contact government based on their own agenda or needs. In order to measure an increase in citizen perceptions that their input was valued or measure the government's sense that online consultations are useful, both the administrative priority and technology needs to be put into place. If governments find online consultations useful, they will work to create better experiences for citizens. This can increase the substance and value of citizen submissions.

3.7 Engagement and Deliberation

Governments should encourage a strong ICT-infused civil society where citizens, NGOs, and businesses engage in vibrant public life and play an active role in directly helping governments meet public challenges. Building from consultation, governments can host or support efforts which promote greater deliberation among citizens on important public matters. Deliberation will have its greatest value if established on a foundation of broad online citizen engagement across the whole of civil society. Deep online engagement, perhaps not deliberation, is at the heart of people's online experience in their private and business life. The potential for the public sphere online, where people become citizens online is an area of increasing interest. An emerging concept take the tool of online consultation and deliberation designed for policy input and applies them toward public implementation or output. It points toward government taking a public facilitator role among stakeholders and interested citizens who want to directly help government meet a public challenge within the context of established policy. Supporting this kind of civic engagement may provide the fiscal justification for investing in the tools of consultation based on their dual use potential.

4. Concluding Remarks

In the end, information-age democracies must be able to accommodate the will of their people. Democratic outcomes should be directly connected to future e-government efforts and funding. I illustrated a number of case examples that demonstrate the value of democratic intent supported by effective ICT tools and strategies. We can deepen democracy and become more participatory with ICTs. This is about the reality of the new media, not just its potential. Will the current exceptional practices become universal practices? Answering this question will be a challenge for the new generation of democracy builders.

Summarizing the challenge:

- Democratic necessity does not guarantee the use of ICTs based on their demonstrated or potential value. While governments may react to outside changes in their political environment due to ICT

use in society, those in power need to decide in the interest of their society to bring ICTs into the heart of governance. Only in rare cases will ICTs wash over non-adaptive political systems.

- The use of ICTs in democracy does not guarantee their success or a positive impact. Faults in adaptation to local conditions, culture, law, and implementation with follow through are real challenges.
- Success in one country or government agency does not guarantee its spread or its sustained use even when clear value is demonstrated. Elections happen. New leaders often shift their political priorities and approaches.
- However, the value of the universal spread of ICT practices and strategies that address democratic necessities is immense. The tenuous nature of democracy requires continuous improvement and sustained enrichment with the newest tools available.
- Therefore, one needs to articulate the necessity, demonstrate and document success toward desired democratic outcomes, and work deliberately to ensure its spread.

Based on a country's or a community's democratic structure and history, each generation of citizens and leaders must build their own democratic experience and spirit. The previous generation saw their political systems and practices dramatically altered by mass media. The next generation has the democratic opportunity to use ICTs to help them meet public challenges and promote human and social development. To this end, building momentum is more important than achieving quick success in order to ensure democracy in the information-age.

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