

Chapter 8.18

Scenarios for Future Use of E-Democracy Tools in Europe

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ABSTRACT

Many ICT-based tools for supporting democratic participation that have been developed with public funds and applied in pilot projects have not yet achieved large-scale outreach. Optimists still believe this will happen; sceptics doubt. This paper starts from the assumption that technological development and diffusion are largely influenced by socioeconomic conditions. It develops a contingency model for e-democracy tools and applies the scenario method for differentiating the future context of these tools. It is based on the results of a research project that described possible futures of European e-government in general and e-democracy in particular on a 10-year time horizon by using the scenario method and inputs from European experts on e-government. Out of three different scenarios, possible and plausible futures of e-democracy are described in order to

analyse robust technologies that are expected to be used in all three scenarios.

THE RESEARCH QUESTION AND APPROACH

Recently, former EU Commissioner Erkki Liikanen expected new information and communication technology (ICT) to provide a great push for the participation of citizens in political decision processes (2004). These technologies can make participation cheaper and more effective on the side of the citizens as well as on the side of the administration or political bodies. Others are more sceptical about the impact of technologies and stress the relevance of societal, economic, and cultural factors for the future development of democratic participation (Coleman, 2003). There have always been technological utopians and optimists and social science-based technologi-

cal sceptics. When governments are requested to invest in platforms and tools for e-democracy and/or to launch funding programs for technical support of local processes, these scholarly differences are not very helpful. Of course, nobody is able today to predict the use of ICT in democratic processes 10 years from now with a high degree of certainty. Technological predictions have turned out more often to be false than true.

In this paper, a more differentiated approach is chosen to analyze the future use of e-democracy tools. Instead of applying a yes or no dichotomy, we develop a contingency model with a set of context factors that are considered to have some influence on these developments. Assumptions about the future constellation of these context factors are derived by the scenario method. These scenarios are not predictions. They have been developed to contrast different developments and, thus, to define a space of possible futures. In order to analyze the future use of ICT in democratic processes, the use within each of the scenarios can be compared. By identifying communalities and differences in the use of ICT, finally we can analyze the robustness of the technological tools (i.e., their context sensibility) and provide a more profound answer to the question of whether, depending on different social and economic conditions, the kinds of e-democracy tools will vary in the future or only the kind of application of basically the same tools. In the latter case, investment and program definition decisions would be less risky today.

The concept of a contingency approach was developed in organisation theory in the late 1960s and stressed the fact that organisations develop differently and adopt different structures, according to differences in their environments and other characteristics, such as size, technology, and so forth (Kieser & Kubicek, 1983; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Pugh, Hickson, Hinings & Turner, 1969). A contingency model starts with defining the dependent variables that are to be explained or predicted, then looks for the

relevant factors influencing their development, and finally, checks whether relevant contextual factors might intervene or influence both sets of variables. The dependent variables in our subject area are e-democracy tools and their use, which are described in the following section. The influencing or context variables are differentiated into the specific context for democratic participation and the broader socioeconomic context for which the scenario method has been applied. The contingency model, the scenario approach, and the role of e-democracy tools within these scenarios are presented in later sections. This article also discusses the robustness of the e-democracy tools by comparing the three scenarios.

E-DEMOCRACY TOOLS

Electronic democracy and digital democracy are rather recent terms for which a generally agreed definition has not yet been found (Coleman & Götze, 2001; Hague & Loader, 1999; Jankowski & van Selm, 2000; Tsagarousianou, Tambini & Brian, 1998). We define e-democracy in this context similar to Hacker & Van Dijk's (2000) definition of digital democracy, as the use of ICTs (mainly the Internet, and mobile technologies) and CMC (computer mediated communication) to enhance active participation of citizens and to support the collaboration between actors for policy-making purposes without the limits of time, space, and other physical conditions in democratic communication, whether acting as citizens, their elected representatives, or on behalf of administrations, parliaments, or associations (i.e. lobby groups, interest groups, NGOs) within the political processes of all stages of governance. According to Tsagarousianou (1999), electronic democracy consists of three components: information provision, deliberation, and participation in decision making.

A wide range of ICT applications for citizens' participation has emerged over the last

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