

E-Democracy and Local Government – Dashed Expectations

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INTRODUCTION

This article examines the impact of information and communications technologies (ICTs) on electronic democracy at the local government level. It concentrates on measures taken by local governments in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom to transform their relationship to citizens by means of e-democracy. The emphasis on democracy is particularly important in an era when governments at all levels are said to be facing a democratic deficit (Hale, Musso, & Weare, 1999; Juillet & Paquet, 2001).

Yet, as this article argues by means of an examination of the available evidence in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, e-democracy has failed to deepen democracy at the local level, this at a time when local government is said to be becoming more important in people's lives (Mälkiä & Savolainen, 2004). The first part of the article briefly summarizes the arguments on behalf of the growing importance of the city as a major locus of economic and political activity. It then discusses how e-democracy relates to e-government in general. Next, it discusses the normative relationship between two models of democracy and ICTs. The article then reviews the evidence to date of e-democracy at the local level of government in the aforementioned countries. Finally, it discusses why e-democracy has not lived up to expectations highlighting the dominance of neo-liberalism.

BACKGROUND

It has become commonplace to observe that we are living in an era of unprecedented changes affecting all aspects of our lives, societies and the global order. Changes in technology, particularly ICTs, are frequently identified as being pre-eminent (Webster, 2001). The impact of technology is particularly noticeable on globalization. Within an environment in which the borders of the state become increasingly porous and the economy becomes organized on a global basis globalization has become "associated with 'hollowing out' nation states as powers are transferred upwards to international organizations, devolved

downwards to more local governments, or dispersed to markets" (Gibbins, 2000, p. 675).

Moreover, no longer is governing confined to the structures and processes of government. Instead governance invites us to consider the "whole range of institutions and relationships involved in the process of governing" (Pierre & Peters, 2000, p. 1). The complexities of governance and the necessity of interacting with a wide range of networked social actors means that without ICTs modern governance would be difficult, if not impossible. Modern governance, then, is closely connected to e-governance, defined by Zussman (2002) as "no more and no less than governance in an electronic environment. It is both governance of that environment and governance within that environment, using electronic tools" (p. 2). Within this networked system of governance and e-governance there is e-government. E-government represents, as Zussman notes, a terrain, the public sector – including its institutions, people and processes that utilize electronic tools in the operations of government and in the provision of services to and engagement with the public. Within e-government there is e-democracy.

GLOBALIZATION AND THE RISE OF THE CITY

In an age of economic globalization and instantaneous flows of information some argue that the economy and politics are being organized at a global level, disembodied from, if not superior to, place (Castells, 2000; Harvey, 1989). Others, however, disagree arguing there has been an increased emphasis on the local. Saskia Sassen, for example, notes:

Economic globalization has mostly been represented in terms of the duality national/global where the global gains power and advantages at the expense of the national. ... Introducing cities into an analysis of economic globalization allows us to reconceptualize processes of economic globalization as concrete economic complexes in specific places. (p. 205)

Moreover, as Beaugard and Bounds (2000) argue, when one combines the rise of “city-regions as the primary economic units in the global economy ... with the lessened identification of peoples with nations and the devolution of state policy to the local level, an urban citizenship begins to make sense” (p. 247). The rise of the city and the existence of a democratic deficit, speak, then, to the potential, if not need, for local governments to use ICTs to create new discursive spaces at the local level, the level of government closest to the people (Delanty, 2000).

This, admittedly, is an optimistic argument. However, before the potential of ICTs to deepen democracy within cities is examined, it is necessary to explore the relationship between e-democracy and e-government along with the relationship of information technologies to models of democracy.

E-DEMOCRACY AND E-GOVERNMENT: NEW TOOLS FOR GOVERNANCE

As a part of e-government, e-democracy is intended to bring local governments, like all governments closer to the people. That said, e-democracy is nestled within the more general phenomenon of e-government which, in turn, is emblematic of the transformation of the public service in terms of its culture and organization as a consequence of the increasing diffusion of ICTs. (Ho, 2002; Layne & Lee, 2001; Moon, 2002; Norris & Moon, 2005). E-government represents a move away from the traditional bureaucratic paradigm with its emphasis on hierarchy, formality, command and control structures, and inward focus. The e-government paradigm is known for its flexible management, horizontal structures and processes, and for being outward-looking (Ho, 2002). It is thus said to be well suited to an era of networking and governance with its emphasis on users and citizens as empowered partners in governance. (Anttiroiko, 2004)

E-government implicitly rests on enhancing two aspects of the legitimacy of government. On the one hand, e-government is promoted because it can improve government performance and delivery of services, output legitimacy. On the other hand, it is promoted because it can provide additional means by which citizens can become engaged in the process of governing, that is, input legitimacy or e-democracy.

In turn, these two aspects of legitimacy are closely linked to a telos of e-government, linear phases claimed to culminate in more robust political participation. The most elementary of these linear phase models has three stages, those of static information, transactional services, and online communities. (Lenihan & Hanna, 2002) The provi-

sion of static information is the stage at which cities, for example, post information about the city. The second stage, transactional services, is interactive between the government and users permitting service and financial transactions. The third stage, e-democracy, our concern here, culminates in active citizen participation, online communities, which could include citizen-to-public official exchanges, or horizontal citizen-to-citizen dialogue.

MODELS OF DEMOCRACY AND ICTS

While the first two stages are commonly depicted as emphasizing the improvement of government performance, all stages can potentially enhance democracy, not just the third stage. For example, the provision of information is a vital aspect of democracy providing transparency and ensuring government accountability. In fact, for the two main models of democracy considered in this section, pluralist and deliberative democracy, the provision of information is an important, but, albeit, not the only, requisite.

According to the pluralist model of democracy, articulated by Dahl (1967) and Schumpeter (1950), citizens do not participate directly in making decisions. Rather, they exercise influence through competing interest groups whose leaders negotiate and bargain with one another and decide on their behalf. Individually, citizens participate directly and infrequently by means of elections where they judge the performance of government and make rational choices among the representatives of political parties.

Clearly there is a close compatibility between pluralist democracy and ICTs. As Norris (2003) notes “new technologies multiply and fragment the access points for information, communications, and interactions between group representatives and public officials” (p. 5). In this sense, then, ICTs contribute to the pluralization and fragmentation of society and groups who can use these tools to organize and make demands upon government for improved policies and services.

By and large, few analysts of e-democracy view it as a means of promoting pluralist democracy (Barber, 1999; Chadwick & May, 2003; Hale et al., 1999). Rather, they extol the virtues of e-democracy as facilitating deliberative democracy as a remedy to the shortcomings of contemporary democracy, especially, the decline in public trust in political institutions and politicians along with declining voter turnout (Juillet & Paquet, 2001; Kearns, Bend & Stern, 2002).

For proponents of deliberative democracy a deeper form of democracy than pluralist democracy is required. According to Yankelovich (1991):

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