

E-Democracy Policy in Queensland

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INTRODUCTION

The term e-democracy has tended to be used interchangeably in the literature with e-governance or e-government, and these terms have been described as “being in a constant state of definition, redefinition, and evolution” (Riley, 2002). For the purpose of this article, e-democracy is seen as one facet of a wider use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the business of government, where the focus is on increasing citizen participation in the public decision-making process rather than using ICTs to deliver government information, programs and services, to make financial transactions electronically, or to enhance government internal administrative practices such as record-keeping.

E-democracy has been variously defined, described in one report as “easier to recognise than define” (Kellner, 2004). New terms have also been coined, such as m-democracy—“m” for mobile, addressing mobile communication technologies separate from electronic processes such as the Internet that are more commonly used for e-democracy (Brucher & Baumberg, 2002). The case study that follows proposes a simple definition: “E-democracy refers to the use of information and communication technologies in democratic processes.”

E-democracy covers a wide range of activities that support public participation in democratic processes, including electronic voting, online consultation, Web-based discussion forums, electronic petitions to parliament, using the Internet to Webcast parliamentary debates, and digital polling and surveys. Clift (2002a) lists the leading e-democracy practices as e-mail notification as an active information dissemination tool; online public hearings and consultations; ICT use by members of parliament for electoral engagement; digital recording and availability of public hearing recordings and materials; and ICT-enabled local civic deliberations and global networking.

BACKGROUND

Historically, e-democracy has emerged in many countries, driven by a number of factors including a need to address declining levels of public trust and confidence in government and increased public expectations for governments to be responsive, accountable and effective. ICTs provide an excellent medium for engagement between citizens and government in terms of capacity to reach to a wide audience, timeliness, accessibility, convenience, and efficiency of information exchange.

E-democracy is a fairly recent phenomenon internationally, and is undergoing rapid developments at both practical and conceptual levels. It is an evolving area and for that reason, there is no comprehensive body of knowledge that agrees on what e-democracy is intended to deliver, or even how it is defined. According to recent reviews and practice discussions (e.g., Riley, 2004), there is no single-agreed approach to how e-democracy will eventually take form. There is certainly no established policy base to guide development and implementation. In fact, some in the field have argued that it is yet too early to have a comprehensive policy about e-democracy, and that governments should introduce e-democracy as an ongoing series of projects or initiatives instead (e.g., Chen et al., 2002). Clift (2002b) notes that while a government e-democracy policy is not necessary to provide useful online democracy services, high level policy direction serves to accelerate and deepen second and third generation applications and a strong e-democracy policy with specific measurable goals is essential to promote long-term progress. Morison (2002), in a Northern Ireland executive briefing paper on e-government, suggests that the introduction of an “e-democracy charter” should be considered.

In a recent overview of e-government and e-democracy, the United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs (2003) *World Public Sector Report 2003: E-*

government at the crossroads surveyed approximately 190 member countries and found that only 13 (8%) have direct/clear statements or policy encouraging citizen participation. These policies do not necessarily address e-democracy explicitly.

Some countries are currently in the process of establishing formal policy for e-democracy. For example, in June 2002 the UK government published a consultation paper *In the Service of Democracy* (HM Government & Ukonline, 2002) outlining a possible policy on e-democracy and calling for public submissions. A report on the consultation process and its outcomes has been posted (HM Government & Ukonline, 2002), however the government's response is still to be published (E-Government Unit, n.d.).

To date, the state of Queensland in Australia appears to be the only place where e-democracy initiatives have been introduced within a formal policy framework by state government. The case study below describes the policy framework and lessons learnt from a review of that framework after two years of operation.

CASE STUDY: QUEENSLAND'S E-DEMOCRACY POLICY

The Queensland Context

The state of Queensland has a small population of approximately 3.7 million spread over a widely decentralised area of around 1.7 million sq km. In this context it is particularly important that more innovative and accessible avenues are made available to its residents (particularly those living in rural and remote areas) to have the opportunity to have their say on matters that are important to them and their communities. In Queensland,

people's access to a computer and the Internet has been steadily rising with over 63% of the adult population having access to the Internet or email at home when surveyed in May 2003, making the use of ICTs for democratic engagement a reasonably accessible option for the majority of residents.

The Queensland government is internationally acknowledged as having a particularly active e-democracy agenda and has trialed and evaluated a number of digital democracy initiatives. It is the first and possibly only government to have introduced digital democracy projects within a comprehensive published e-democracy policy framework.

The 2001 E-Democracy Policy Framework

Queensland's *e-democracy policy framework* was released in 2001 and three specific initiatives—e-petitions, Internet broadcasting of parliamentary proceedings, and online community consultations, were progressively put in place over the next 18 months. Online polling was introduced in mid-2004 with the government making a prior commitment to legislative change to implement the outcome of the first public poll. The policy framework has been revised to take account of new and emerging technologies beyond the Internet. This new framework reaffirms the Queensland government's commitment to using new and emerging ICTs to improve community outcomes and will guide further initiatives currently being developed to integrate digital democracy more fully into wider community engagement practice and government decision-making processes.

The key features of Queensland *e-democracy policy framework*, introduced in 2001, are shown in Table 1.

The policy was informed by developments in the field. Lessons learnt from the international body of knowledge

Table 1. Key features of Queensland's 2001 e-democracy policy framework

- A specific definition of e-democracy, centred on Internet use
- An explicit commitment by government to using Internet technology to strengthen representative democracy in Queensland
- Specific acknowledgement that it is the government's responsibility to expand the channels of communication to reach as many citizens as possible
- A clear statement that e-democracy processes will complement existing forms of consultation
- A commitment to addressing key issues of equitable online access, responsiveness, privacy, security and authentication
- A reporting protocol for government's response to citizen input
- Reference to specific standards for addressing privacy and information security
- Links to related government policies, such as the *Queensland Communication and Information Strategic Plan*
- Introduction of the e-democracy initiatives on a trial basis to be evaluated after two years
- A commitment to continuing to explore e-democracy and the opportunities provided by new technologies.

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