Evaluation Framework for Assessing E–Democracy Policy

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INTRODUCTION

E-democracy, defined in this chapter as "the use of information and communication technologies in democratic processes," covers a range of methods by which governments and communities engage with each other. This includes a variety of activities that support public participation in democratic processes, such as electronic voting, online consultation, Web-based discussion forums, electronic petitions to Parliament, using the Internet to Webcast parliamentary debates, and digital polling and surveys.

E-democracy is a fairly recent and evolving field, with rapid developments at both practical and conceptual levels. Innovative projects and initiatives are being introduced in many different countries, but this process is rarely guided by a comprehensive policy framework or informed by systematic evaluation. In 2001, an OECD review concluded that "no OECD country currently conducts systematic evaluation of government performance in providing information, consulting and engaging citizens online" (OECD, 2001 p. 4).

Writers in the field have noted that the evaluation of e-democracy initiatives has not developed as quickly as public debate about the potential impacts, that evaluations are rare to date, and that there is no consensus on appropriate evaluation methodologies (Grönlund, n.d.). Examples of publicly available evaluations include the Scottish e-petitioner system (e.g., Malina & Macintosh, n.d.; Malina, Macintosh, & Davenport, 2001) and online consultation (e.g., Smith & Macintosh, 2001; Whyte & Macintosh 2000, 2001). Macintosh and Whyte (2002) have produced "a tentative interdisciplinary framework of evaluation issues and criteria" for electronic consultation. An OECD report (2003) lists evaluation issues for online engagement. However, overall there are few resources to guide evaluation in the e-democracy area to date.

BACKGROUND

The government of the State of Queensland (Australia) is internationally acknowledged as having a particularly active e-democracy agenda and has trialed and evaluated a number of digital democracy initiatives. These initiatives were introduced within the context of an explicit e-democracy policy framework and subsequently evaluated under a comprehensive evaluation framework. The case study below sets out this evaluation framework.

CASE STUDY: QUEENSLAND'S E-DEMOCRACY EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

The evaluation framework described in this case study provided for an assessment of Queensland's overall e-democracy policy, as well as individual initiatives (such as online consultation and e-petitions) introduced under the overarching policy framework. It takes into account evaluation dimensions of effectiveness (the extent to which designated objectives are achieved), appropriateness (to the particular policy and operating environment), equity of access, quality of service, efficiency, sustainability, and process enhancement.

Evaluation Context

Given the emerging nature of e-democracy and its underlying knowledge base at this time, there is no definitive set of evaluation criteria or widely acknowledged outcome standards applied across the range of e-democracy initiatives being introduced worldwide. This evaluation framework is grounded in generic evaluation dimensions relevant to reviewing government programmes, for example,

national performance standards for provision of government programs in Australia (e.g., SCRGSP, 2004) and acknowledged policy good practice dimension (e.g., Henderson, 2000). However, the evaluation framework also allowed for a reasonable level of flexibility, so that emerging needs of decision-makers and implementers could be incorporated.

E-democracy provides additional avenues for participation and is not a complete answer to disengagement. Because is limited by many of the same factors as other engagement processes that are not specific to the medium (such as public disinterest or declining levels of trust in elected governments) success needs to be considered in this context, that is, what e-democracy contributes or value adds above traditional engagement processes. The evaluation framework therefore assessed outcomes relative to off-line processes rather than against a standard of full engagement.

Examining the success of e-democracy initiatives means taking the views of diverse stakeholders into consideration, including individuals and organisations in the community who have used it, those for whom it is relevant but who have not used it, providers of the service, key decision-makers, and other influential individuals and agencies with an interest in the process or its outcomes. The evaluation framework is built around input from multiple sources, including users, community non-users, and key informants such as the officers responsible for its delivery or accountable for its outcomes.

Evaluation Purpose

The evaluation framework provides for a variety of purpose, specifically to:

* Assess the extent to which specific e-democracy initiatives meet their objectives and contribute to outcomes of the wider e-democracy policy framework
* Examine whether e-democracy initiatives provide an appropriate and sustainable approach in the Queensland context
* Assess the extent to which current e-democracy initiatives increase access among those in the community not reached by traditional engagement methods
* Determine the level of user and stakeholder satisfaction with the quality of e-democracy initiatives
* Assess whether the e-democracy initiatives provide a cost effective approach
* Identify ways in which e-democracy initiatives could be enhanced

Key Evaluation Questions

* **Effectiveness:** Do the initiatives deliver intended outcomes? To what extent are designated objectives met
* **Equity:** Is there equitable access to the benefits of the initiatives
* **Quality:** What is the level of user and stakeholder satisfaction? Are relevant benchmark standards met
* **Efficiency:** Do the initiatives provide value for money
* **Appropriateness:** Are the e-democracy initiatives appropriate for the Queensland context at this time? Do they provide a relevant response to identified needs and/or opportunities in this area
* **Sustainability:** Do the initiatives provide a durable and generalisable approach to achieving the desired outcomes
* **Process:** How can the current initiatives be enhanced to provide better outcomes

Information Needs

To address the evaluation questions above requires information on:

* Extent and manner of use (addresses effectiveness considerations)
* Range of users (addresses equity considerations)
* User and stakeholder satisfaction (addresses quality considerations)
* Input costs relative to outputs (addresses efficiency considerations)
* Relevance to need and/or opportunities given Queensland's policy and operating context at this time and the extent to which similar initiatives have resolved these elsewhere (addresses appropriateness considerations)
* Level of stakeholder support and operational/policy barriers to continuity (addresses sustainability considerations)
* User and stakeholder perceptions about design and operation generally (addresses process considerations)

Information Sources

This information is collected through a range of sources appropriate to the information required, including:

* Statistics obtained from routine operations (e.g., usage rate, user profile)

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