

Chapter 11

UK E-Voting: A Lost Opportunity for Participatory Democracy

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ABSTRACT

This chapter evaluates the UK government strategy to promote electronic voting through the public policy process as an integral part of the e-government agenda to enhance participatory democracy. It argues that the formulation of the present policy is flawed as it lacks a diffusion strategy to enhance the likelihood of policy adoption. The electoral modernisation policy arose from concerns regarding the falling voter turnout at elections and is being introduced via local authorities through a series of voluntary pilot schemes. If issues influencing local authority pilot participation are not resolved e-voting may be permanently rejected by local elected representatives and so will not be available to citizens. This author identifies variables influencing pilot participation and suggests a revised public policy model incorporating selected diffusion concepts at the formulation stage of the linear policy process. The model is used to propose recommendations to enhance the likelihood of voluntary adoption of a policy introduced by central government for voluntary implementation by local government.

INTRODUCTION

The etymology of the word ‘democracy’ reflects its definition in Greek, ‘demos’ means people and ‘kratia’ means rule. Democracy is still evolving and one core point is whether it means popular power with the citizens engaged in self-regulation and rule, or whether it is a means to legitimate decision-making

by representatives (Held, 1987). This divide serves to illustrate the different approaches to the idea of participation. One is regarding direct democracy where citizens have direct participation in governmental decision-making and the second where there is a separation of the people from their government by a system of representative democracy. The pluralist notion of encouraging citizen involvement found favour with participatory democrats who accepted the notion of checks on the representa-

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tive body by making it regularly accountable to the community. In a modern democracy ‘power’ has come to mean the rule of the people which in reality means popular accountability and influence through representation and political parties (Parry and Moyser, 1994). To-days democracies reflect Weber’s and Schumpeter’s realist stances whereby candidates struggle for political office and voters can either accept the candidate’s bid or reject it. The people choose their leaders then leave them to make decisions.

Voting is the “primary means by which most citizens contribute to collective decision-making in a democratic polity” but many citizens feel that the formal machinery of democracy no longer offers them the opportunity to influence government decisions (Birch and Watt, 2004, p64; RFT, 2006). The Rowntree Reform Trust (RFT) (2006) introduce the possibility of “quiet authoritarianism” where as a result of the failure of a large part of the population to engage in political activity, policy is made by a small clique and government is not held to account by the public, thereby general elections become “empty rituals.” They also note with disquiet that democracy only exists because it offers the citizen a voice in matters which concern them and “when this collective voice is not being expressed efficiently democracy is threatened” (p35).

Political participation lies at the heart of democratic politics, and it has been suggested that through participation citizens learn to exercise the skills of democratic citizenship (Kelleher and Lowery, 2008). Despite the decline in the basic act of participation, voting, in this modern pluralist society there appears to be increased activism via pressure or interest groups resulting in citizens identifying with groups rather than the whole community (Hindeness, 2000). There is a danger that the members of these groups will forget that they are citizens of a wider society and so will not vote (RFT, 2006). This problem was recognised earlier by Held (1987) and Crick, (2002) who recommended addressing this issue by

developing new models of participation, as public participation is the “mechanism of democratic government” (p54).

The policy of electoral modernisation is one of the ways the UK government hopes to encourage an increase in political participation. It is an integral component of the UK government’s e-government agenda the objectives of which broadly mirror those from across the EU, particularly those agreed in the e-European Action Plans of 2002 and 2003 and the resolution on the Implementation of the e-Europe 2005 Action Plan (2003), to achieve an e-economy in Europe harnessing ICT to increase democratic participation, capable of a modernised service delivery based on customer needs (Pleace, 2008). As a requirement for modernising public administration, the UK government aimed to establish e-enabled service provision by 2005 which it hoped would stimulate participatory democracy by increasing voter numbers at subsequent elections (Electoral Commission, 2003; Nixon and Koutakou, 2008).

This chapter presents the argument that there are weaknesses in the formulation of the UK’s electoral modernisation policy. The UK central government does not appreciate the need to incorporate diffusion concepts into the policy process to enhance policy design and thereby increase the likelihood of policy adoption. The argument is based on research into the pilots of e-voting which took place in 2003 and 2007. The UK government has chosen to implement e-voting through the public policy process with local government acting as the conduit through which to introduce the new voting methods. Local authorities are elected bodies, subordinate to the UK central government, administering local services in accordance with Parliamentary statutes (Wilson and Game, 2002). They can choose whether to participate in the e-voting trials and 2003 saw the largest pilot programme with 59, out of almost 400, authorities taking part. Fourteen of those trials included Internet voting (Electoral Commission, 2003). However, local authority

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