

Chapter 16

How do French Municipalities Communicate on Citizen Involvement?

The Success of Participatory Democracy in France

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ABSTRACT

The chapter updates a former study on digital communication at local level in France in 2006. The goal is to analyse the explanatory factors which influence the digital communication of municipalities on participatory democracy. Why are there municipalities which communicate more on these resources than others? It is important to compare the situation of these municipalities in 2006 and in 2012 because there was a power shift after the last municipal election in 2008. The focus will be on municipalities of more than 30.000 inhabitants as they have the possible resources to support a digital strategy. A quantitative method was used to select the variables which affect the communication on participatory tools. In other words, the article deals with the way politicians promote citizen engagement at local level through updated websites.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the advent of web 2.0 technologies (Barber, 1998), many politicians promoted a new citizen engagement based on a high level of information (Chung & Chatfield, 2011). In France, the political debate at the local level has been strongly affected

by the necessity of a closer link between local representatives and electors. Some politicians promoted the idea of neighbourhood democracy (Behrer, 2003). French mayors used this repertoire by elaborating an image of local leaders acting closer to the electors (Premat, 2006-2007). Since 2001, mayors have been communicating on par-

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ticipatory democracy (Hatzfeld, 2005). The local e-governments included different interactive possibilities: chat, e-forums, internet conferences and social networks (Becker, 2001). Previous studies showed that mayors used electronic instruments to reinforce their legitimacy (Premat, 2008). A first quantitative study made in 2006 concluded that the creation of electronic participatory tools (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2004) renewed the image of local elites and was not necessarily linked to a new generation of politicians (Dewoghélaère & Premat, 2007). The age of mayors was not an explaining factor as many old mayors adapted themselves to the evolution of practices. The struggle for a better image is quite important for those who have the most positive impact in the public opinion. Factors such as the career of mayors, the age of mayors, the municipality size (Larsen, 2002) and the territorial configuration (Elias, 1991)¹ were taken into account to explain the use of electronic resources.

The set of data can be updated after the political shift of 2008 at municipal level to see if there is a significant evolution. Does the ideology of mayors have an influence on the way they communicate on participatory tools? The study deals with municipalities which have more than 30.000 inhabitants in France as they have an updated website with detailed information. France has around 36.700 municipal governments but 90% of them have less than 500 inhabitants (Hoffmann-Martinot & Wollmann, 2006). What does the digital strategy depend on? It is possible to infer from this study how local governments renewed their websites (Scott, 2005) in order to promote participatory instruments and citizen engagement.

2. STATE OF THE ART

There is a distinction between local e-government and e-democracy. The local e-government refers to the digital interface between local authorities

and citizens. “E-government is not an end in itself. It is at the heart of the drive to modernise government. Modernising local government is about enhancing the quality of local services and the effectiveness of local democracy” (Raynsford & Beecham, 2002, p. 5). The need for an efficient e-government grew with the use of computers by local administrations (Jaeger, 2003). The first studies on the question were made in the U.S. with an analysis of the services provided through internet to citizens. In September 2001, 56% of U.S. households had computers; they were just 42% in December 1998 (Hauer et al., 2002). The promotion of e-government was all the easier as most of citizens were connected to internet. Different studies were made on e-government in Europe and in Asia at the beginning of the years 2000 (Howard, 2001; OECD, 2003; Holzer & Kim, 2004).

The relation between local democracy and local e-government has been examined since the beginning of 2000. The e-government was regarded as a way of enhancing the opportunities for citizens to debate with each other (Fishkin, 1995). As a matter of fact, there was a common point between democracy and efficient management (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004). E-government was introduced in the early 1990s as a way of modernising the public administration (Moon, 2002; Rose, 2005). According to Graafland-Essers and Etedgui’s (2003), the e-government has three aspects: government to citizen, government to business (Backhouse, 2007) and government to public authorities. The third aspect will be dealt with in this article as local authorities have to include more and more citizens in order to act (Carrizales, 2008). E-democracy focuses on electronic votes or tools which allow citizens to express a political opinion (Altman, 2011). Some tools are really interactive (digital forums) whereas others are more informative (Wojcik, 2003). According to Lawrence K. Grossmann, e-democracy replaces the antique model of direct democracy as well as

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