Politicians as Patrons for E-Democracy?
Closing the Gap Between Ideals and Realities

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the world, democratic countries, whether old, new, or in transition, are facing innovations in communications and information technology. Especially within developed economies, the challenge toward e-democracy through the digital transformation of democratic institutions has become increasingly evident. With the identification of the notion of the “middleman paradox,” recent research findings have added a new dimension to existing theories on the hesitant evolution of e-democracy, which clearly identifies politicians as an inhibiting factor. Consequently, the research in this paper attempts to explore further this newly discovered phenomenon by presenting theoretical and empirical evidence. The findings of a multiple case study carried out in all 25 EU member countries, based on an adopted exploratory research design, are presented. These findings give more detailed insights on the nature of the middleman paradox and on the ambiguous role of politicians in the further evolution of e-democracy.

Keywords: e-democracy; information technology

INTRODUCTION

For more than 2,000 years, the idea of democracy, which had been originally invented in ancient Greece, had not found favorable conditions to evolve and endure its contests with political systems like centralized monarchy, hereditary aristocracy, and oligarchy. During the European Enlightenment, the 18th century philosophic movement rejected traditional social, religious, and political ideas, and the intellectual foundations of modern constitutional and representative democracy were laid. The promotion of democratic institutions were strongly supported by the ideas of John Locke and Charles Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, who both believed in a republican government based on the consent of the governed (Locke, 1963; Montesquieu, 1952). Montesquieu’s concept of separated and balanced powers...
among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government helped to form the philosophical basis for the U.S. Constitution and, consequently, became a role model for constitutional representative democracies throughout the world.

During the last 250 years, a variety of theoretical models of democracy has been introduced, discussed, supported, and opposed by political scientists and philosophers (Barber, 1984; Dahl, 1956; Held, 1996; Pateman, 1970; Przeworski, 1999; Rousseau, 1968; Schumpeter, 1942). Among the more prominent theoretical concepts of democracy, the concept of deliberative democracy has gained enormous public attention parallel to a declining trust in democratic governments in Western democracies and the global wide-spread of the Internet (Ackerman & Fishkin, 2004; Dryzek, 2000; Elster, 1998; Fishkin, 1991; Habermas, 1996; Shapiro, 2003; Van Aaken et al., 2004).

Linking theories of further evolution of information and communication technology with contemporary theories in the area of democratic governance and democracy created the concept of e-government, describing the use of technology by government agencies to enhance the access to and the delivery of governmental services for the benefit of citizens, business partners, and employees (Heeks, 2001). Around the globe, various different definitions of e-government can be found that generally contain goals of more efficient operations, of better quality of services, and increased and better quality of citizen participation in democratic processes (Andersen, 2004; Grönlund, 2002). Looking at definitions in use, there currently seems to be a shift from government to governance, which rather implies a wider and more social view than government electronic services to citizens. In this paper we follow the approach that clusters e-government research into two different fields.

**E-administration** refers to the transformation of governmental services in order to meet the needs and expectations of citizens and to optimize the internal processes of public administration. This should lead to a reduction of internal processing time, an enhancement of internal communications in the administration, together with cost reduction, the identification of new outsourcing opportunities, the generation of more flexibility, and lower response times of administrative bodies (Heeks, 2002; Mahrer, 2002; Osborne & Gaebler, 1992).

**E-democracy** (also referred to as digital democracy or Internet democracy) addresses the transformation of political systems by means of technology (Agren, 2001; Gisler, 2000; Grönlund, 2002; Merz, 2001; Schedler, 2000) and is generally regarded as a tool for abandoning the representative system for one with a more direct citizen engagement (Becker, 2001; Browning, 2002; Davis et al., 2002; Grönlund, 2001).

By providing substantial empirical evidence, previous research demonstrates that, contrary to the success of projects in the field of e-administration proposed by e-government strategies around the globe, there is a fundamental lack of empirical evidence concerning the effects or even the progress of proposed e-democracy projects (United Nations, 2003). To date, the total amount of e-democracy projects compared to the total amount of e-administration projects within different e-government initiatives is negligible (Agren, 2001; Anttiroiko, 2001; Betz & Bargmann, 2003; Wilhelm, 2000). Facing this imbalance, it is questioned why, with all these initiatives, politicians are only addressing e-democracy as a rhetorical promise as the implementation of e-democracy projects is undertaken.
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