Determine the Workload of the Structural Implementation of E-Democracy: Local Government Policy Issues, Policy Cycle and Styles of Citizenship Combined

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ABSTRACT

ICT applications are powerful tools for increasing involvement of citizens in public policy-making, and as such a sound investment in better public policy. Citizens are inclined to participate more often if governments use digital tools. This paper describes preliminary research conducted at the municipality of The Hague (The Netherlands). The research categorized the issues using the policy cycle and styles of citizenship. Results show the treatment of issues by the city council and its committees over the course of 3 years. After correcting the numbers the findings show that a Dutch city with a population of around 450,000 inhabitants is run using approximately 300 democratic issues per annum. In the case of the broad adoption of e-democracy with full digital support for current democratic activities that would mean setting up and maintaining those 300 democratic dialogues online. The research shows that around 60% of this city’s inhabitants might be interested in participating on some of the democratic issues. This research also revealed a marked difference between the population of The Hague (the seat of government) and the general population, which might indicate that democratic participation is sensitive in its context and would have to be determined in each city again.

Keywords: Digital Participation, e-Democracy, Local Policy-Making, Policy Cycle, Public Agenda Issues, Styles of Citizenship

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Context

This preliminary exploration grew out of an interest in the future of e-democracy. The large-scale practical adoption of e-democracy that is to be expected creates many questions that are not yet asked or answered. Based in The Netherlands, we wanted to research the practical consequences of the adoption of e-democracy when each and every one of the 430 Dutch municipalities would structurally enrich all their democratic processes through digital

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support. How many democratic issues should be active in a municipality at any one time? Who would be interested in digital participation on those issues and what type of support would they require? Should such digital support be consistent over different municipalities, possibly adding to the legitimacy of government? What is the magnitude of such an endeavour, would it require extra people and would enough funds be available? The aim of this preliminary research is to take a first step towards providing answers to these questions.

We found a lack of available underlying research that could assist in the predictive planning of e-democracy. While it is assumed that e-government will see continued development and possibly widespread adoption, current research focuses on issues such as conceptual context, the process of development, the various tools available, the transformation of government and the possible effectiveness of such applications. There is little or no research that prepares government organizations with actual practical and predictive planning.

1.2. E-Government Development

The widespread and global development of e-government has been addressed by many institutions, including the UN, in their reports on the civil society (2001, 2003, and 2005). Several parties describe the stages of development for e-government (Gartner, 2000; The United Nations, 2001; Layne & Lee, 2001; Janssen & Van Veenstra, 2005; Al Hashim & Darem, 2008). Those models of development may have information management (Gartner, UN & IBM) or technical management (Janssen & Van Veenstra, 2005) as their angle, but all models assume growth in use, size and quality of e-government infrastructure and applications, often implicitly. The new research agenda’s described (Codagnone & Wimmer, 2007) identify ‘research into e-participation’ as one of the 13 trends and mentions the ‘broad realization of e-participation’ but does not designate the magnitude of the practical application of e-democracy as an area of interest.

1.3. E-Democracy: Is Democratic Decision Making a Constant?

This research adopts a narrow focus and looks at existing policy development processes within current government: what would it mean when a municipality adopts e-democracy throughout its existing processes? The research is exploratory and preliminary in that it seeks to outline the validity of a viewpoint and an approach. The viewpoint is that most democratic processes exist for a reason, such as running a city or a state. Performing that task requires a certain number of issues that have to be decided upon. The question is whether the number of democratic issues in a process such as running a city is a relative constant. It is an interesting question: when that would be the case, adding e-democracy might possibly change the dynamics of the process and the quality of the outcome, but it would not dramatically increase the number of issues decided upon. The approach that this research tries to develop is using the entries on the municipal agenda’s to gauge to amount of democratic issues, and use life style research to gauge possible interest in the population. It is the first in a series that in the coming years tries to develop a model that may allow municipalities to assess the necessary investment required to support its core democratic process and answer the question whether democratic decision-making within a certain context is a constant.

1.4. Research Question

The widespread adoption of e-democratic tools and applications throughout government will require an extensive effort and investment in time and tools. Our research aims to outline those practical requirements: what would the broad adoption of e-democracy require for current democratic processes? Although the exploratory research is simple, the aim is to create a model that allows municipalities to determine the possible workload of broad digital support for democratic processes. Such a model would be based on at least two aspects: the number of
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