Political Participation and Democracy in the Information Age:
Effects of ICT- based Communication Forms between the Authorities and the
Citizens on Traditional Channels of Participation and Democracy.

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Abstract

The main trends concerning the traditional channels of participation are reduced voting turnout, reduced participation in political parties, stable participation in associations and increased citizen contact.

The influence of ICT based form of communication on the relations between the authorities and the citizens are heavily influenced by the role of the citizens designed by the authorities.

If the citizens are treated as customers the authorities are pursuing a consultative model focusing on creating an effective administration. The flow of information is uni linear; however, if the role of the citizens is a citizen's role the administrative system pursue a participatory model. The information society produces frames of actions for the society, yet it is the role planned for the citizens that create the opportunities for E- Democracy. Based on these interaction models we assume effects on turnout in elections and on citizens' role and activity in traditional channels. This paper is a theoretical contribution.

Key words: Political participation, traditional channels, citizen's role, information age, ICT bound communication forms, democracy.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to make a contribution to our knowledge of how ICT based communication influence the traditional channels of political participation and E- democracy.

It is important to be aware of possible effects of new forms of communication in the information age.

1.1 Internet

The Internet user statistics show a growing trend. The % of the population using the Internet is 16.6 % in the world total, but contains variations from 69.4 % (North America), 67.4 (Norway) and 3.5 % (Africa) [23].

The various forms of interactions are found in E- government, E- Democracy, and Teledemocracy by methods such as e- mail and web sites.

1.2 E- Government

"Electronic government comprises the use of ICT to deliver public services to citizens and business. It entails the transformation of public services to citizens using new organisational processes and new technologies. The aim of E-Government is to make government services more accessible, more "customer – focused", more relevant to citizens and more responsive to their needs. "It is also regarded as playing a crucial role in promoting greater citizen involvement in civic and democratic matters", [9].

The general user requirements are flexibility, accessibility, quality and security [7].

Examples on E- Government:

The winners of the European e-Government Awards in 2007 were as listed below:

- Netherlands with *HoReCa 1*
- Norway with *Mypage*
- France with *Besancon.clic*
- Germany with *German Administration Service Directory*
- Italy with *online Police Station*

HoReCa 1 is a one stop shop for hotels, restaurants and café licences, which makes it easier for entrepreneurs to start a business in this sector. This project is an excellent example of how to promote new SMEs in the service sector through the integration of 18 different national procedures governing business development.

Mypage

The web portal is a self service citizen's portal containing more than 200 public services. It attracted more than 400 000 users in the first 4 months.

It is a user-defined and secured citizen portal, on which users can carry out personalized public e-services in one place and on demand. Citizens can also control information about themselves held by various public authorities.

Besancon.clic

This project has been reducing the digital gap by financing IT- equipment in the region. Computers donated by firms have been rebuilt in a centre for

disabled workers. Recipients have been primary schools and hospitals, associations, retirement homes and, since 2006, some schools in Senegal, through the distribution of an e-Book pack to all the pupils in the third year of primary school (CE2). Common training courses between Besancon and Dakar universities are currently being considered, as well as an exchange network. The e-Book pack consists of a computer with a digital workspace and the installation of public multimedia access points in every neighborhood. Computers use open source software, which is downloaded from servers located either in the data processing department of the city council or in schools for external sites.

The German Administration Services Directory

The project lists electronically available E-Government services, which fulfils an important need in terms of creating a secure and reliable communication infrastructure, based exclusively on open Internet protocols and allowing for cross-organizational, paperless processes. Since 1 January it has helped more than 5,200 German civil registration agencies to save more than €1 million per month. Worldwide, it is one of the first and largest standardized Service Oriented Architecture (SOA) implementations in the government area, and was made possible through unique cooperation between the various levels of government and sectors in Germany.

The online Police Station

This project was launched on 15 February 2006 as the world's first online police station. The website allows citizens to seek general information, download forms and make online complaints about computer crimes. In addition, it is possible to receive valuable advice, interact with experts and report illegal conduct and events directly on the web. The police station is the point of reference in the event of difficulties. To date over 700,000 Italians, 38,000 Europeans and 21,000 visitors from the rest of the world have used the Online Police Station and members of Interpol and other EU police forces have show resounding interest in developing the model further (http://www.epractice.eu/document/3917).

1.3 Other examples: some portals for citizens

We have mentioned the Norwegian Mypage. Denmark has a citizen page (borger.dk), which gives the citizens on request various information on a lot of subjects linked to work life, going abroad, transport, police, etc. In Sweden the National Incurrence Company has started a SMS service to make it easier for the customers to get in contact

with the company. The Swedish taxation authority has an online service for the citizens (www.skatteverket.se). The Norwegian taxation authority has opened up for ordering income tax forms by SMS. 18 % of all requests linked to tax forms have come from SMS requests. In The European Union the policy is to promote the development of E- Government and as a consequence open up for M - Government (Information Society Benchmarking Report, 2005).

Electronic Government seems to develop in stages with cataloguing information online and transactions being completed online at later stages- the greatest advancements has taken place in G2B (Government to Business) relationships [20]. Since its introduction in 1992, **the Web** has been expanding rapidly [18]. The public Web of June 2002 contained 3,080,000 Web sites or 35 % of the Web as a whole. Public sites accounted for approximately 1.4 billion Web pages. The Web encompasses digital resources of many varieties beyond plain text, often re-combined into complex multi- media information objects [17]. The web sites are a new and important channel from the citizens to the public authorities [22].

The e-mail traffic has skyrocketed to 171 billion messages (Spam rises to 71 %) (Radicati Group may 2006) and it is expected to continue to grow.

1.4 Teledemocracy

Teledemocracy has its technological origin linked to satellites, fiber optic cables, and interactive television and computer networks. The concept focuses on the remote practice of democratic activities.

We think the concept of Teledemocracy has it origin in specific experiments with electronic opinion polls, a concept which originated from before the Internet appeared.

The term *Teledemocracy* encompasses the use of particular technologies in a problem-centred manner and interacting between government and citizens", [13].

In traditional voting behaviour the drivers are linked to level of education and other socioeconomic factors whilst the drivers of Internet voting are linked to Internet use and competence [6]. Experiments over the last years show the potential of Teledemocracy as it has doubled the turnout in American elections [13].

1.5 E- Democracy

The concept of e- democracy emerged together with the Internet and has to a large extent the same meaning as Teledemocracy. And the term *E-Democracy* seems to originate from [10], and

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interprets democracy narrowly as voting procedures with statutory structural arrangements.

The motives for increasing the engagement of citizens in the policy – making process: "To produce better quality policy, to build trust and gain acceptance of policy, to share responsibility for policy – making, the ability to visualize policy, to give citizens the means to supervise government and policy implementation" [16].

A known definition of the concept: "We define digital democracy as a collection of attempts to practice democracy without the limits of time, space and other physical conditions, using Information Communication Technology (ICT) or Computer – Mediated Communication (CMC) instead as an addition, not replacement for traditional analogue political practices" [11].

Four generic models of e- democracy made possible by ICT have been described as:
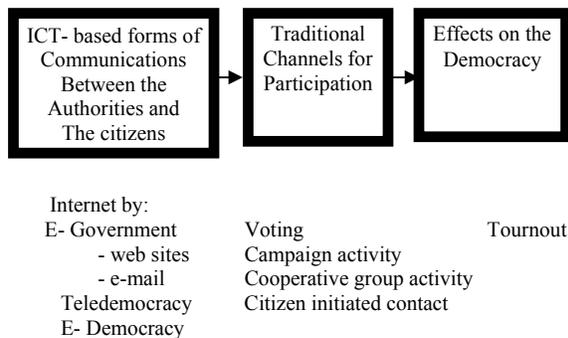- The electronic bureaucracy model
- The information management model
- The populist model
- The civil society model [13]

2. The research question:

How has the development of ICT- based forms of communication between the public authorities and the citizens influenced the traditional channels for political participation, and what could this mean for the democracy? And what is the influence of ICT- based forms of communication on the relations between the authorities and the citizens?

We have made a simplified model in order to describe our research questions:

Model 1. The research questions

Internet by:
E- Government   Voting   Tournout
   - web sites   Campaign activity
   - e-mail   Cooperative group activity
Teledemocracy   Citizen initiated contact
E- Democracy

2.1 ICT- based forms of communications

Governments who try to be more responsive to the governed could work through various forms of interactions linked to the Internet as E-Government, portals for citizens, Teledemocracy and E- Democracy.

2.2 The electronic bureaucracy model

It refers to the electronic delivery of government services. "The goal of this model is to allow for easier, quicker, and cheaper transactions with government on behalf of businesses and citizens and to reduce, over time, the size of the public sector" [21]. We see this model as similar to the E-Governance concept earlier described. There is a trend in electronic services to reduce the citizen to a consumer and that the offer is close to an electronic government shop [21].The more political roles as voter and especially as an active citizen are not supported by the authorities, the less competence linked to these aspects could be expected by the citizens. This could represent a challenge for the democracy [21].

We can divide citizens' visits to government web sites into three categories: E-Democracy, e-commerce and e-research [22]. A growing number of citizens are choosing to connect with their government via Internet [17, 22].The Internet do now serve as a major new link between society and government [21].

The data are from 1998; however, it tells us that national authorities have approximately three times as many web operations as the political parties in a lot of countries including the Nordic countries [18]. The main challenges of public web sites are; to outline a clear statement of purpose [8], [15], good meta-data (data about data), good contacts for feedback and update information, clear statements and adequate provision for confidentiality and privacy of personal data, liability, and copyright, access for disabled users, availability of publications in both electronic and print format [8].

2.3 The information management model has more effective communication, bridgeing individual citizens and decisions makers [13]. "Using multimedia such as touch-screen kiosks in public places (libraries, shopping malls) or personal computers from home, citizens can obtain government information or send messages to their representatives or government agencies" [13].

2.4 The populist model enables citizens to register their views on current issues in electronic town hall electronic meetings [13]. This model may be used to create public agendas by for instance television companies and other groups [13].

2.5 The civil society model refers to the transformation of political culture, and it can be appreciated only within the context of the transformations brought about by communication technology. Its goal is to strengthen connections between citizens and promote a robust and autonomous site for public debate [13].

2.6 The traditional channels

The main traditional channels are [1]:

- Voting in national organized elections
- Participation through parties
- Participation through associations
- Direct action
- Civil disobedience

3. What are the main trends concerning participation within the traditional channels?

3.1 Voting

The turnout in both local and national elections is steadily decreasing [19], [1]. In most European countries the turnout has declined during the last century and in United States the turnout in Presidential elections has stabilized on 50 %. The decrease in election turnout has happened both in national and especial in local election during the 1990's. In Norway the turnout in national elections in 2001 was 75, 5 %, the lowest since 1927. At the local elections in 2003 the turnout was 59%, which is the lowest since the 1920's [2]. Most of the explanations regarding decreasing turnout and variations in turnout have been explained by political mobilization and demobilising.

3.2 Participating in political parties

Political parties are steadily loosing members, and in Norway the share of party members have decreased from 16 % in 1980 to 8 % in 2004 [2], [1].

3.3 Participating through associations

The portion of the Norwegian population participating in voluntary organizations has been quite stable in the 1990's. The trade unions and the sports organizations seem to have had an increase, but the political parties do have a decrease in memberships during the 1990's [2].

3.4 Citizen- initiated contact

In Norway the form of participation increasing the most is direct contacting, i.e. citizens contacting politicians. The portion of the Norwegian population that had contacted a local councillor during the last four years has risen from 9 % in 1985 to 25 % in 1999 [3]. Level of education is an especially important variable in order to explain this form of participation together with political self-reliance [3]

3.5 Civil disobedience

This concept incorporates two items; civil disobedience as participating in illegal protest activities and strike [1].The number of industrial actions do vary and show no clear pattern. And we do not have data at hand for development in the 1990's.

4. What is the influence of ICT- based forms of communication on the relations between the authorities and the citizens?

One important view has appeared from research. The effects of ICT- based form of communication are dependent of the qualities of the interaction and the objectives of the authorities [6].

If the authorities mainly focus on quantitative improvements and efficient service delivery combined with reduced costs (the managerial model) [4] the citizen's role change from citizens to customers. The flow of information is uni linear from government to customers or customers to government, but weight is laid on improving flow of information within government [4].

If the authorities pursue a consultative model, they can ask for opinions and reactions to be better able to provide more efficient administration. The citizen's role is the customer role in this model as well, moreover, the flow of information is uni linear in this model too, but the focus is not that specific when it comes to internal efficiency [4].

In a participatory model the role of the citizens changes from customer to citizen's role. The citizens are invited to participate in decision-making processes, and all relevant information is available. The flow of information is discursive and complex: citizens to citizens, citizens to government, government to citizens [4].

Of these three models the Managerial model is the one that frame the discussion of E- Government [4]. There seems to be a trend when it comes to electronic services from the government to reduce the citizens to a consumer role, and to reduce

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aspects linked to the citizens' role as voter and being a contributor to policy making [21].

Table 1. Our assumptions concerning the connection between type of ICT interaction and traditional interaction models.

Traditional channels for participation	Managerial model	Consultative model	Participatory model
Voting	Reduced turnout because of consumer role	Reduced turnout because of consumer role	Increased turnout because of citizens' role
Campaign activity	Increased need since passive consumer	Increased need since passive consumer	Reduced need since active citizens' role
Cooperative group activity			Increased need since reduced costs
Citizen initiated contact	Increasing	Decreasing	Increasing

4.1 Assumptions

With a managerial model the citizens' role are the role of a consumer. The citizens have the role of a consumer. The citizens are supposed to be passive and this role reduces the interests of the citizens and the turnout at election is reduced. Campaign activities from the authorities will increase as a response to passive citizens. Since the voting channel has reduced significance, the citizens initiated contact towards the authorities will increase.

Thus, if we use a consultative model the citizens do still have the role as consumers, but the focus of the authorities is not so specific on efficiency. The turnout at elections is reduced, and the campaign activities from the authorities will increase since the citizens are passive consumers. Citizens initiated contact is decreasing.

Moreover, with a participatory model the citizens are having a citizen's role. This role promotes citizens to participate in elections and the turnout will increase. Campaign activity from the authority will decrease since the citizens are having a more active role. The need to join cooperative group activity might increase with increasing competence and motivation in the group of citizens.

4.2 Effects on democracy

The turnout is a sign of how important the election is regarded by the electorate.

Experiments based on ICT solutions over the last two decades with televoting have shown significant positive effect on the turnout at elections [13]. The reduction in costs linked to voting by ICT may explain this phenomenon.

Research indicates that democracy is best taught by practicing it and that many young people are comfortable using new information and communication technology. However, design of an E- Democratic system is critical to the success of engaging young people and also educating them about democratic decision making [14]. The designed role of the citizens is crucial.

4.3 Effects of ICT on the relations between the authorities and the citizens

ICT can reduce the costs of citizen involvement in government affaires; it cannot increase citizens' satisfaction with government activity without reforming the bureaucratic organization, regularly structure, and managerial capacities of public sector [5].

The effects of ICT based form of communication on the relations between the authorities and the citizens are dependent on the organization of the relations and the role given to the citizens. If the authorities organize a managerial model the citizens' role are close to a consumer role. Reduced turnout, increased campaign activity and increased citizens' contacts.

On the other hand, if the authorities organize a participatory model they might expect increased turnout, reduced campaign activity, and increased citizens' contacts.

4.4 Effects on democratic institutions

The potential of E- Government blurs the distinctions between executives and legislative functions by creating opportunities for citizens to have direct political influence upon public bureaucracies in ways that have not existed before [4]. In general this could constitute a challenge to the manner of operation of these democratic institutions.

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