

Decisive Factors for Success or Failure of e-Democracy Initiatives in the Information Era

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Abstract: The context of e-Democracy provides a wide variety of concepts, methodologies, initiatives and case studies. Implementing an e-Democracy project with relevant success involves dealing with a large spectrum of knowledge aspects, the political, the societal, the technological and the managerial being among them. Although there is a plethora of implemented e-Democracy initiatives, the necessity of the depiction of best practices and potential threats in the process of designing, developing, implementing and managing an e-Democracy application is still there. This study attempts to draw significant and reusable conclusions on the decisive factors that are hidden behind the success or failure of an e-Democracy application or initiative, through a combination of literature research and case studies analysis.

Keywords: e-Democracy, e-Participation, Information Era, Digital Governance, Digital Government.

1. Introduction

When the terms of e-Democracy or e-Participation are used in literature, they are usually conceived as sets of practices, methodologies, technologies and activities of online engagement of the public in political decision-making process, in various levels (United Nations, 2016). Policy making process in the relevant e-Democracy initiatives has shifted in the past decades, since there is strong evidence supporting a more citizen-centric model of governance that involves the usage of ICT (Hujran, Abu-Shanab & Aljaafreh, 2020). This is due to the perception that the citizens' involvement is advantageous for the democratic processes in terms of aspects like effectiveness, legitimacy, social justice and others (Fung, 2015).

In order to analyze the aspects of e-Democracy in the context of the Information Era the conceptual model of the analysis should take into consideration the various participatory models, the ICT infrastructure that supports such applications, the organizational or social particularities and the further development of the democratic process. That requires a multilevel approach, since the models need to be studied both theoretically and practically. It also requires a deep understanding of the sociopolitical, the organizational and the technological aspects of the projects. This study aims to extract the different e-Democracy facets' contribution on related applications'

success or failure. It provides a literature review in the aspects of e-Democracy and it also provides discussion, based on case studies, answering the question: “What are the Decisive Factors of success or failure of e-Democracy initiatives that are being mentioned in the literature and in case studies?”.

The study is structured as following: Chapter 2 provides the classified results of the literature review. Chapter 3 analyzes the research methodology that was conducted. Chapter 4 provides the findings from the relevant case studies. Chapter 5 provides the discussion over the case studies. Chapter 6 concludes the study while setting the basis for further discussion concerning e-Democracy. The last Chapter states the references of the study.

2. Literature Review

There are several categorizations of e-Democracy applications. Some of them focus on the participatory models implemented (Lindner, & Aichholzer, 2020). Some others classify the applications on the purpose of their electoral procedures (Wirtz, Daiser & Binkowska, 2018), while others according to their most typical function in citizens' involvement (Aichholzer & Rose, 2020).

The participatory models of the initiatives are classified based on several factors – e.g., the actors (Kassen, 2018), the consensus level (Van Bouwel & Van Oudheusden, 2017), the agenda setting (Lindner, & Aichholzer, 2020). The usual models are the Direct and Indirect, while there are some hybrid models, with the Liquid Democracy model being the most prominent (Blum & Zuber, 2015). Having the participatory model clarified is one of the key aspects of the application.

Once the model is decided, the usage of the initiative defines its type. The most prominent types based on the usage of the initiative are the ones that inform, consult, involve, collaborate with and empower the citizens (Wirtz, Daiser & Binkowska, 2018). The different literature terms concerning each of them are e-Government Portal, e-Discussion, e-Participation, e-Voting and e-Election. Each one of them represents different levels of both complexity and citizens' involvement.

Another aspect of a successful e-Democracy system is its technological infrastructure. Zheng cites that technological means are the mediation tools between citizens and administration (Zheng, 2016). However, even with having the ICT solutions perfectly harmonized with the aforementioned aspects, it is still uncertain that the e-Democracy initiative will be successful. There are managerial, organizational, educational and even ethical aspects that should be considered. One of the most aggregate set of those aspects categorizes them into two groups of prerequisites, technical and political, each containing different levels of necessity (Berntzen & Karamagioli, 2010).

This study does not analyze every one of those prerequisites. Instead, it presents case studies, both of successful and unsuccessful paradigms of initiatives in the context of e-Democracy in order to provide experimental results on best practices and “lessons learned”.

3. Methodology

The research methodology is the one of a case study analysis with a qualitative perspective on the results. The results, meaning the factors emerged from the case studies, pose similarities and

differences with the already existing factors that are mentioned in the literature. The most commonly-mentioned factors lead to some best practices. The methodology examines a wide variety of factors that consequent to either the success or failure. The examination needs to be precise in each situation, due to the heterogeneous nature of the case studies. In some instances, success means more legislative proposals resulting from the initiative, in some others success means more engagement with specific target groups. The selection of the case studies was based on several criteria, namely the need of covering different types of e-Democracy applications, within different regional scope, targeting different range of citizens and having different levels of management.

The first step of the methodology is to search the literature and credible Internet sources in order to understand the e-Democracy landscape and the initiatives that concern it. More specifically, studying the e-Democracy models, the ICT usage, the main actors and the prerequisites, the research process is enhanced with indicators. The examination of each case study should be conducted according to these indicators. Having the case studies analyzed, the next step includes the gathering of the most common factors that lead to success or failure and present them. In this scope there are also presented some best practices and some “lessons learned” from failed initiatives, as stated in similar literature studies. Finally, this study sets the ground for future research initiatives, providing holistic view of exemplary e-Democracy case studies that could guide future attempts.

4. Results and Analysis

4.1 The Case of mitmachen.at

The first case study is this of mitmachen.at. The project was project led by the Austrian Federal Computing Centre with the aim of getting young people to participate in a political discussion about important topics (Edelmann, Krimmer & Parycek, 2008). The project was innovative and provided a “Four phases” model. Those phases were: Information and communication, where the participants were informed about the schedule and the topics while being able to rate them and to propose their own ones, Analysis, where experts evaluated the participants’ contribution and provided some concepts, Validation, where the concepts were posted in the project’s site, and participants could evaluate them, and, Publication, where the final results were presented in the Parliament (Edelmann, Krimmer & Parycek, 2008).

The results were positive from both the participants and the experts. It engaged the young Austrians, it fulfilled the expectations of the experts and the Parliament took into consideration the results of this project, announcing the initiation of other similar projects. The mitmachen.at project stands as a helpful example of how an e-Democracy project should be executed. Starting with a clear model for the participatory system, mainly representative, having a well-defined e-Discussion type, aiming for a specific target group and with proposed but not exclusive topics it reached out its goals and provided the Parliament a clear view of the participants' opinions. Furthermore, the technological infrastructure was used without unpleasant surprises and provided a steady discussion platform where the results are visible even today.

4.2 The Case of osale.ee

Osale (osale.ee) was Estonia's one-step e-Participation portal covering two basic fields: the citizens' engagement on draft legislation and the crowdsourcing of new policy proposals. The main participants were the Government Office, several Civil Society Organizations and citizen engagement coordinators. Osale targeted three kinds of users: government officials, organized interest groups, and individual citizens.

The project faced significant challenges. Officials' reluctance (Toots, 2019), insignificant awareness amongst the citizens, initial coordinators leaving position, new government policies that did not favor e-Participation, a competitor system and other reasons led to its termination (Praxis Center for Policy Studies & Pulse, 2015). Aside those events, there were also some not so definite factors. The absence of clear goals, the system's structural arrangements, the non-adoption of new technologies, such as smart phones or social media, were some of them. Another factor concerns the public sector itself. The system was not designed to face such complexity, regarding the administrations and their processes. That complexity affected the users' consultation, since the system did not include simple, citizen-friendly content. Additionally, the lack of political support, the lack of the cultural maturity and the vague regulatory context also posed challenges.

What is crucial in studying the Osale's case is to understand the initiative for what it is. A socio-technical system with involvement in the democratic process. In such systems, the combination of technological changes, social directions, public administrations' processes and political and cultural shifts might raise difficulties.

4.3 The Case of abgeordnetenwatch.de

The German parliamentary monitoring website abgeordnetenwatch.de is an online platform where citizens can monitor their representatives, ask them questions and sign petitions (Korthagen, & Dorst, 2019). In 2016 there were recorded over 1.5 million users, over 193,000 questions – 80% of them being answered (Parliamentwatch, 2015). Its model includes interaction between the citizens and the Parliament members and not the citizens between each other. Both the quantity (Edwards, de Kool & van Ooijen, 2015), and the quality (Albrecht & Trénel, 2010) of the questions in the platform are considered advantageous towards the communication between the citizens and the representatives. The transparency, the reshaping of the representative system and the increase of the citizens' involvement in politics are the major benefits from using the system (Pautz, 2010).

Overall, the initiative was successful. It assisted the citizens in the creation of the culture demanding transparency, accountability and communication concerning the politicians. However, the citizens were not actually involved in the policy making process, partially because of the parliamentary system of Germany (Korthagen, & Dorst, 2019). Another challenge that the initiative faced is the political reluctance to openness, more specifically for lobbying (Korthagen, & Dorst, 2019). This initiative is an exemplary case of succeeding in the provision of a functional system with a strong adoption from citizens, but facing difficulties in persuading the political establishment to follow its vision.

4.4 The Case of Finnish Avoin Ministeriö

The online platform Avoin Ministeriö aimed to advocate well-functioning citizens' initiative processes and to support individual citizens' initiative campaigns (van Keulen & Korthagen, 2019). It was used to collect ideas for discussion and give those ideas and initiatives publicity (van Keulen & Korthagen, 2019). This is often referred as crowdsourced lawmaking (Edwards, & de Kool, 2016). The main procedure consisted of five steps: submission of the users' ideas and engagement, creation of legislative proposal based on the ideas, submission to the official website in order to collect at least 50000 expressions of support, submission to the Parliament for consideration and finally the Parliament debates over the proposal. The platform started as a success story. It reached mainly younger demographics, which was a tough goal to achieve (Aitamurto & Landemore, 2016). It led to the legislation changes resulted from a citizens' initiative, namely the one concerning the gender-neutral marriage. That had advantageous impact on the citizens' view towards the platform, since they saw that their opinions mattered to the legislation process (Bria et al. 2014). There were also initiatives that led indirectly to the legislation process, due to their popularity (Christensen, Karjalainen & Nurminen, 2015). The citizens' views on the system were largely (83% to the national election survey) positive (Christensen, Karjalainen & Nurminen, 2015).

However, the platform lost its momentum. The Avoin Ministeriö failed to maintain its service, most likely due to lack of financial support (Heikka, 2015). The lack of legislation expertise from the political personnel was also factor to its downfall. The comprehensive review of that particular case highlights the importance of maintenance of the technological and procedural structure of the initiatives over time and not rely on the initial success.

4.5 The Case of European Citizens' Initiative

The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) is the first supranational instrument of participatory democracy in the European Union (Rose, van Keulen & Aichholzer, 2019). Its goal is to give the citizens the opportunity to participate in the law-making process of the EU through the submission of a proposal. There was recorded only a small percentage of citizens' submissions that gained the necessary signatures, more specifically 3 from the 59 gathered the required 1 million signatures (Rose, van Keulen & Aichholzer, 2019). The instrument included several types of civil society organizations, who promoted or supported citizens' initiatives (Organ, 2014). The procedure of submitting an initiative included European Union's citizens forming a citizens' committee that launched the initiative to the website (Rose, van Keulen & Aichholzer, 2019). One considerable challenge of the instrument is the demanding number of signatures needed, with the procedure of raising the signatures being also expensive, thus creating inequalities between citizens' committees and large organizations (Rose, van Keulen & Aichholzer, 2019). Other challenges like the lack of citizens' feedback, lack of actual legal outcomes and mismanagement concerning the promotion of ECI as well as technical difficulties led to the unremarkable results of the instrument (Rose, van Keulen & Aichholzer, 2019).

Overall, in the period of 5 years, although the instrument assisted the citizens' mobilization, it fell short concerning the citizens' involvement in the legislation process. The instrument has shown great potential in enhancing the European legislation system, but until it resolves the certain aspects

mentioned above it will continue to contribute only to issue-specific discourse and mobilization rather than reshaping the law-making process.

5. Discussion

The case studies reveal a wide set of factors that seem to fall under different categories. It is reasonable to classify the factors under their technological, administrative and socio-political origins. The technological factors seem to be present in both the positive and the negative outcomes of the initiatives. The utilization of new technologies and the maintenance of them are the most obvious technological factors leading to both the success and the failure of the projects. The administrative factors are also prominent in the outcome of the project. Clear goals, appropriate participatory model, specific target groups are only few aspects that are apparent factors. Also, the active involvement of the citizens is also an indicator of the success of the project. Lastly, the political atmosphere surrounding the initiative seems also to be a major factor. Political reluctance in reforms and collaboration pose major barriers in the success of the project. The legal inabilities of the system to transform the results of the e-Democracy initiative to proposals also plays a significant role. However, one last but not easily tackled issue is the failure of some of the initiatives presented to find the needed acceptance from the citizens, which could be considered an aspect more related to the society.

6. Conclusions

The coherent definition of the appropriate e-Democracy model, the application type, the technological specification and the precise purpose of the proposed system are fundamental aspects of the success of an e-Democracy application. That being stated, it is important to take into consideration the societal, administrative and political context where the application will be applied to. The collaboration between the technological specialists, the government administratives, the citizens' communities, the political parties, the media and the relevant scientists is an integral part of the implementation of that kind of initiatives. Academia, Government, Private Sector and Citizens, should cooperate in order to lead our societies into future progress in the context of the decision-making process and the Citizens' awareness and involvement.

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