



Success factors in designing eParticipation initiatives



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ABSTRACT

Electronic participation (eParticipation) refers to the use of Information and Communication Technologies to enhance political participation and citizen engagement. During the last few years, eParticipation researchers have focused on analysing the field, investigating the main challenges, studying different initiatives, and proposing relevant evaluation criteria. However, current literature lacks comprehensive studies for understanding the factors influencing success when designing eParticipation initiatives. The main aim of this paper is to determine a concrete set of success factors to be considered when designing an eParticipation initiative. For this purpose, we review the literature on eGovernment success and on eParticipation success and evaluation, and we conduct a European-wide survey and desktop research amongst eParticipation practitioners. By comparing findings from the literature and the practitioners' research, we thereafter construct a proposed model of eParticipation success factors. The model includes 23 success factors and specific activities associated with each factor. We anticipate that our model will be useful to both eParticipation researchers and practitioners interested in the design of eParticipation initiatives.

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1. Introduction

The persistent problem of fluctuations of citizens' political interest and trust in modern democracies has been widely discussed over the last two decades (Hendriks, 2009; Miller & Listhaug, 1998; Newton, 1999; Van de Walle, Van Roosbroek, & Bouckaert, 2008). Phenomena of political alienation and dissatisfaction of the public have been observed (European Commission, 2013; Lyons & Alexander, 2000) both amongst younger

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(Snell, 2010) and older populations (Jennings & Markus, 1988) of western societies. Literature suggests that political trust and dissatisfaction are interconnected, and that the declining political trust is a consequence of citizens' dissatisfaction from political leaders and political actions. However, it is also supported that declining trust is not merely a reflection of dissatisfaction but also a powerful cause of it (Chanley, Rudolph, & Rahn, 2000; Hetherington, 1998), implying thus a downward spiral phenomenon.

Literature further suggests that fluctuations on political trust and engagement are generally dysfunctional for democracy (Schyns & Koop, 2010; Van de Walle et al., 2008). Different solutions have therefore emerged, such as pursuing more participatory forms of democracy, citizen-centeredness and enhanced citizen empowerment (European Commission, 2006; McHugh, 2006). In fact, recent research shows that social forces such as the development of strong bonds and the sense of community exert positive and significant effects on political efficacy and political trust (Anderson, 2010). At the same time, the recent advancements of information and communication technologies (ICT) and the successful application of these advancements to other parts of social and business lives paved the road for harnessing similar benefits also in the governance and democracy field (Coleman & Götze, 2001; Mambrey, 2004). Research suggests that using the internet to interact with government and to improve policy participation can have a significant positive effect on restoring public trust (Moon, 2003; Parent, Vandebek, & Gemino, 2004). Thus, electronic government (eGovernment) and electronic participation (eParticipation) can be seen as a means towards restoring political trust and citizen satisfaction in western democracies. Although the exact boundaries between eGovernment and eParticipation are not clearly defined in the literature, eParticipation is widely considered as a part of eGovernment and quite often an eParticipation initiative is implemented as part of an overall eGovernment implementation and strategy. This approach is also adopted in this paper.

In recent years, the potential of ICT to increase political participation and to address the growing democratic deficit has been the subject of academic debate (Breindl & Francq, 2008; OECD, 2003). Scholars suggest that technology alone cannot provide a solution and that in-depth analysis of the eParticipation field is needed. In Europe, different approaches have emerged exploring this multidisciplinary field from multiple perspectives (political, social, technological, procedural, etc.). These include a characterisation framework by Macintosh (2004), a domain model by Kalampokis, Tambouris, and Tarabanis (2008), a literature review by Sæbø, Rose, and Flak (2008), an eParticipation analytical framework (Smith, Macintosh, & Millard, 2008) and other efforts for scoping the field, the research challenges and gaps (e.g. Aichholzer et al., 2007; Macintosh & Coleman, 2006; Macintosh, Coleman, & Schneeberger, 2009; Tambouris, Liotas, Kaliviotis, & Tarabanis, 2007). Over the last years, eParticipation research has been systematically funded in Europe providing the opportunity to pilot test a number of participatory tools and practices in different countries and settings. Between 1999 and 2010 the European Union has funded more than 35 eParticipation research projects with a total budget of over 120 M€ (Tambouris, Kalampokis, & Tarabanis, 2008).

At the same time, governments and local/regional authorities in Europe have started implementing eParticipation initiatives of different aims and scale. For example, an analysis of eParticipation initiatives and state-of-play across Europe is provided by Panopoulou, Tambouris, and Tarabanis (2009) and Tambouris et al. (2012) whilst national-level studies for Germany and the United Kingdom have been published by Albrecht et al. (2008) and Kearns, Bend, and Stern (2008) respectively. According to these studies, most initiatives in Europe focus on providing information, deliberation and consultation facilities with their scope and technical implementation varying significantly between simple polls and complex consultations. Most initiatives target the local and national levels with results indicating a more productive activity at the local level. Finally, most initiatives operate as an alternative, additional communication channel targeting mostly at "legitimation" rather than active citizenship (Tambouris et al., 2013). Despite the differences in the quantity and type of eParticipation implementations in different European countries, results from the aforementioned national studies (Albrecht et al., 2008; Kearns et al., 2008) seem to agree on a few universal conclusions: (a) several lighthouse projects exist in different European countries in an otherwise fragmented, underdeveloped landscape consisting mostly of one-off initiatives such as pilots and trials; (b) there is a need for more wide-spread offerings that are also better integrated with public institutions; (c) current good practice should be highlighted and promoted in order to ensure wider take-up and inspiration; (d) although numerous descriptive reports on individual initiatives exist, there is still a lack of comparative empirical analyses, evaluations and longitudinal studies. According to Albrecht et al. (2008, p.5), this lack is the reason why "well-founded empirical, representative and generalizing statements concerning the effects or success factors of eParticipation are still not possible".

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