Chapter 10

E-ENABLING THE MOBILE LEGISLATOR

Democratizing E-Government?

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter considers the importance of ‘e-enabling’ elected representatives to support their legislative role, and relates that firstly to their roles as representatives of constituents and civil society groups, and secondly as actors in political parties. The Introduction considers legislators ICT support as a gap in e-governance development, and outlines a current project, eRepresentative, which is addressing European assemblies’ needs to provide web-based mobile services to support their elected members. Recent literature portrays an increasing pace of change in European assemblies, but with parliamentarians mostly adopting new ICT tools of their own accord rather through strategic development by political parties or parliamentary administrations. The chapter describes the rationale for the eRepresentative project goals and requirements; to enable legislators to get personalized, specific, filtered data ‘anywhere, any place and anytime’; to collaborate with each other and appropriate stakeholders, securely and conveniently, and influence the legislative process in a timely and convenient manner. Interim conclusions focus on the research questions emerging from the organisational change issues likely to affect usage of a pilot service in the five participating assemblies.
1. INTRODUCTION

The apocryphal complaint of disaffected electors is that they only ever see their elected representatives during election campaigns. Recent innovations in mobile and security technologies in principle offer elected representatives an opportunity to connect with the people they represent and other actors involved in policy making, at mutually convenient places and times and with relevant information to hand.

Yet considering the long standing concerns about public disengagement with the political process, a student of the e-government literature might be forgiven for objecting that ‘you only see politicians around here at election times’. The e-government and e-democracy field has a growing literature on e-enabled public services, e-voting, online policy consultation and e-rulemaking, and an ever-expanding number of cases to draw on. Similarly the use of the Internet for electoral campaigns has seen a surge of interest in the last decade, much of it drawing on U.S. examples. However elected representatives are mainly considered as beneficiaries of such tools rather than as users of them or as actors in other aspects of the legislative process.

This chapter considers the importance of ‘e-enabling’ elected representatives to support their legislative role, and relates that firstly to their roles as representatives of constituents and civil society groups, and secondly as actors in political parties. The literature review following this introduction first considers definitions of e-government, e-democracy, e-enabling and e-governance – and frames the need for ICT support in terms of the latter.

A critical awareness of how such terms are used is important for our topic, as can be seen from the following:

“ICTs provide new opportunities for government to receive feedback from, and consult with, individual citizens directly during policy-making - without the mediation of elected politicians or civil society organizations” (‘Citizens as Partners: Information, consultation and public participation in policy-making’ OECD, 2001, p.56 emphasis added)

This definition could be taken to mean that elected politicians’ roles as intermediaries between people and state should be re-engineered away, in favor of more direct exchanges between online officials and interest groups. Whether or not it does, it draws into sharp relief the need to consider whether and how elected representatives’ roles actually benefit from ICT ‘support’ for policy-making.

Despite much recent work by parliaments to e-enable the legislative process, support for elected representatives appears to lag behind government-led initiatives in e-voting, e-participation and e-government.