The Challenges of Deliberative Decision Process: An Italian Case

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Abstract. The potential impact of new ICT on efforts to enhance citizen engagement in the policy process is now widely recognized, but the academic research on design, use and evaluation of e-engagement tools is still in its infancy. Through the use of an explorative case study, the aim of this paper is to consider how new ICT tools can be used to reinforce e-democracy and how the design of technology can facilitate citizen engagement. To this intent, we apply a new framework to evaluate the efficacy of some electronic tools used by a specific e-democracy project that involve, with different results, eight Italian Administrations. We have assessed the level of e-democracy developments based on four different dimensions: transparency, interactivity, usability and web site maturity.

Keywords: E-democracy, Transparency, Interactivity, Usability, Web Site Maturity.

1 Introduction

The impact of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) on Public Administration has rapidly risen since governments worldwide embraced emerging technologies as a mean to redesign and modernize archaic bureaucratic procedures [1]. In recent times, in fact, the public sector’s conservative approach to ICT began to change and the organizational management started to recognize the benefits of putting into operation innovative technologies as an approach to change the traditional organization dimensions [2]. In this perspective, the potential impact of new ICT on efforts to enhance citizen engagement in the policy process is now widely recognized. Researchers emphasize how Internet is particularly effective for establishing and maintaining the “weak” ties to sustain civic engagement [3, 4] and Scott [5] argues that municipal government Web sites clearly have the potential to enhance and inform local public-initiatives, whether online or conventional.

However, enthusiastic ideas and projects often failed to produce the expected results as technology is only the basis for new forms of organization and interaction. Some scholars are quite skeptical of the real potential of Web-based public involvement. Golding [6] and Wilhelm [7] suggest that Web sites will do little to overcome...
limited participation among the disaffected, even if access to the Internet continues to increase. Others authors [8] argue that improved access to information will make governments more transparent, but if citizens are deficient in knowledge of or strong commitment to the political process, they will be overwhelmed by the quantity of information. Nie and Erbing [9] worry that heavy Internet use will reinforce social isolation and encumber civic involvement. Chadwick and May [10] conclude that e-governance initiatives in the United States, Britain and Europe have thus far generally reinforced managerialism and do little to open important opportunities for citizens to participate in public debate. Governments need to adapt structures and decision-making processes to ensure that the results of online consultations are analyzed, disseminated and used. Given the special nature of public choice and the special problems that arise in Public Administration, adequate decision requires that public organizations and citizens create a particular model of shared decision making - one that we refer to as inclusive decision making.

Despite the fundamental role that ICT plays in this process, the academic research on design, use and evaluation of e-engagement tools is still in its infancy. Through the use of an explorative case study, the overall aim of this paper is to consider how new ICT tools can be used to reinforce representative democracy and how the design of technology can facilitate citizen engagement. To this intent, we apply a new framework to evaluate the efficacy of some electronic tools used by a specific e-government project that involve, with different results, eight Italian Administrations. In particular, our analysis is focused on the DE.CI.DI. Project case, that aims at promoting e-democracy at a Provincial Administration level. The project involves eight Italian provinces (Genoa, Alessandria, Ascoli-Piceno, La Spezia, Lecce, Pesaro-Urbino, Piacenza and Savona) governing a total of 3.5 million citizens.

The paper is organized as follows: after an introduction to relevant concepts and literature (Section 2), Section 3 introduces the case and the methods used. Section 4 provides an evaluation of the e-democracy process. On the basis of this analysis, some critical reflections are offered in Section 5.

2 Literature Review

The origin of theoretical standings which are at the basis of public participation in the decision making processes of Public Administrations can be traced back to the period falling between the Sixties and Seventies. In that decade, there was a tendency to improve the democratization and legitimacy of public policy [11] through participation, particularly for the decisions regarding the local policies involving all stakeholders. These stakeholders may be defined as “organizations and individuals whose interests are affected by the policy under discussion” [12]. The definition, in other terms, also includes common citizens, that is to say, those “not holding office or administrative positions in government” [13].

In the last decade, a growing number of contributions [14, 15, 16] have repurposed the theoretical debate concerning the participation of stakeholders in public decisions