E-democracy and public participation:
a global overview of policy and activity with case study

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This talk outlines the results of a recent review of the status of e-democracy policies and initiatives within the Queensland, Australian and international context. Background research can be classified into 4 main areas:

- **Policy Frameworks** (OECD, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), GOL (Government Online International Network))
- **Political forms of democracy** (participatory (ie. direct) vs representative vs deliberative)
- **Psychological and social participation issues** (deliberation, group-think, decentralisation of decision-making including social issues of equity, education, trust and uptake (digital divide))
- **Technological issues** (including infrastructure, readiness, security, access, cost, privacy, verification, open source)

Our work explored key innovations and developments in relation to the following e-democracy areas:

- webcasting
- e-petitions
- consultation online
- e-voting
- e-polling
- **public net-work** (facilitation approach (reciprocal exchange of information) to public administration)
- **other participation initiatives**: referenda, public hearings, opinion surveys, deliberative polls, negotiated rule making, consensus conferences, citizen’s juries/panels, public advisory committees, focus groups and electronic town halls.

In general the research reviewed indicated that future e-democracy directions are likely to focus around decentralisation of e-democracy initiatives, greater e-democracy research and evaluation, system design and usability, rapid changes in technologies and associated legal, privacy, security and identity issues as they relate to the broader e-government context, digital divide issues and government deliberation and decision-making processes.

For the present workshop, emphasis is given to e-participation initiatives, and a range of the extant forms of e-participation is briefly indicated with examples. A note of caution is sounded concerning an uncritical migration of face-to-face participation to electronically mediated equivalents – these may have different properties and qualities in the public mind (Rowe and Gammack, 2004).
The second part of the talk details a case study of a local government portal development in an Australian city. This was the pilot site for the eventual site ourbrisbane.com and the initial requirements were identified through extensive community consultation.

The case study focused on the attitudes and preferences of the community (residents, businesses and the “third sector” or community groups, using pilot interviews, paper and online survey and a three-part evaluation phase following a period of operation. The portal structure was well designed but populating it with content raised issues of cost and ownership. Participation features were offered, but with little initial community support, with information and transaction features being more popular features. Some reasons for this were identified, which exclude digital divide, but include preference for, and satisfaction with, face to face and existing methods, some initial mistrust, and a resistance to framing by a government host. An evaluation after a period of operation however has shown good community takeup, with the government providing feedback on participation. Although without, as yet, full community participation as envisaged, and some ongoing issues of cost and maintenance, the process is proving effective, though some moderation of content is required. An approach attempting to reconcile top down (government) requirements with bottom up community requirements leading to a sustainable model for community development and maintenance is discussed: a paper is available with full details¹ (Gammack and Goulding, 2004).

References


¹ the volume is available from https://www.it.murdoch.edu.au/catac/proceedings04.html