Chapter 21
Method and Lessons from Evaluating the Impact of E-Participation Projects in MOMENTUM

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ABSTRACT

Decreasing election turnouts and citizens' disinterest in democracy galvanized the European Commission (EC) to co-fund a set of e-participation pilot projects. During the runtime of the program, and in particular after the last projects ended in 2010, policy makers at European level were keen to know how well this funding program performed. Hence, the EC also initiated a project called MOMENTUM with the aim to monitor and evaluate the progress and impact of the projects. MOMENTUM designed and performed a systematic comparative analysis of the projects. This chapter presents the impact evaluation framework, which is based on methods of evaluation from empirical research, thereby also reflecting programmatic contexts of the projects. The evaluation framework grounds the interplay of elements of a holistic e-participation solution: the participation process, the topics to discuss, the policy supported, and the technology and tools deployed. The authors present results of the evaluation and demonstrate how attention on the interrelations of these issues affect users' perception and motivation to participate in an e-participation endeavor. Insights show that the method developed can lead to useful and usable impact analysis and evaluation results. The survey results provide valuable clues to the behavioral intention of the civil society to use e-participation tools and applications. These findings provide not only information on whether and how far the monitored projects are successful but also why they succeeded or failed and how they can be improved.

INTRODUCTION

With the intention of re-engaging the social capacity of citizens in politics and democratic decision-making, the adoption and integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in e-participation processes was high on the agenda over the last half decade. For example in 2006, the European Commission (EC) launched the 'eParticipation Preparatory Action' to spur innovation and to support pilot projects to demonstrate how the deployment of ICT may simplify the participation of people in decision-making and in legislation formation processes. In three calls throughout 2006 to 2008, 21 pilot projects were co-funded to demonstrate how ICT deployment in e-participation may contribute to better legislation. Beyond these pilot projects co-funded by the EC, a vast amount of e-participation projects were initiated by individual States (see e.g. (Panopoulou et al 2010), (Panopoulou et al 2009) for a detailed overview). These pilot projects were expected to achieve considerable impact to counteract the democratic deficit and the disengagement of citizens in political discourse. Another impact expected from the projects was to make the legislation formation process more transparent, participative, effective and efficient, especially when it comes to citizens engaging at European level law-making and policy decision-making, where 21 pilot projects were co-funded.

The increasing number of e-participation projects also called for investigating how successful such initiatives are. Evaluation and monitoring of e-participation projects is gaining momentum as the success of such e-participation endeavors still falls short. Different evaluation methods have been proposed in literature for evaluating e-participation initiatives (see e.g. (Macintosh and Whyte 2008), (Aichholzer and Westholm 2009)). Along the 21 pilot projects in the eParticipation Preparatory Action of the EC, a support action called MOMENTUM[1] was co-funded by the EC to monitor and evaluate these projects. To investigate whether projects along the initiative of the EC achieved the overall aims, we developed a comprehensive method to perform the evaluation in MOMENTUM. The method is based on existing evaluation frameworks for e-participation (Macintosh and Whyte 2008) (Aichholzer and Westholm 2009) as well as on evaluation theories and concepts put forward e.g. by (Rogers 2003) (Davis 1989) (Cody-Allen and Kishore 2006) or (Venkatesh et al 2003). Since most of the 21 projects monitored developed an e-participation system (either a fully-fledged platform or at least an application) for supporting the legislation process, the main–and most tangible–results of the e-participation projects were their pilots. In consequence, the evaluation framework departs from existing e-participation platforms. The paper at hand further presents results from applying the evaluation framework to the 21 e-participation projects. A reflection of lessons learnt and recommendations directs towards future research needs in the field.

The remainder of the paper is as follows: Next section presents the background for the evaluation framework. Related theories and evaluation frameworks have been investigated to set the ground for a common understanding of success, and hence impact, of e-participation projects. Existing evaluation methods are outlined and on this basis, the evaluation framework is put forward in the subsequent section. The framework consists of indicators and a set of measures to perform the success and impact evaluation. Thereafter, results from the evaluation of 21 e-participation projects are presented to show the application of the framework. We draw recommendations and lessons from the evaluation, including needs for future research in the field, and conclude with a reflection of the objectives of the paper and its contributions.

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