

Introduction of e-Participation in Switzerland:

Impact of transparent policy-making and of the empowerment of citizens

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This research study aims to evaluate whether issues related to transparent policy making and to the empowerment of citizens hinder the introduction of e-Participation in Switzerland. Case studies selected for the analysis are e-Voting and the SmartVote application. Results show that a favorable attitude on the part of public officials is crucially important for the uptake of e-Participation, and that public authorities have a contradictory mission in that they must act as guarantors of the rule of law, while also being flexible and responsive in their interactions with citizens.

Keywords: Transparency, Citizen-centric Government, Citizen Participation, Digital Democracy

1 Introduction

Public sector reforms marked by approaches such as the New Public Management and its advocacy of the transfer of private practices to the public sector, or Democratic Governance, with its emphasis on transparency and on the participation of citizens in public affairs, have redefined relations between citizens and public administrations. Citizens now find themselves in changing roles. They are addressed as clients, customers, users, or partners (Villeneuve, 2005). Yet the perception of a citizen as a client and as a partner at the same time leads to a dichotomy in that, as “clients,” citizens expect efficient and quality delivery of public services, and public administrations are in the position of acting as the providers of these services. As “partners,” in contrast, citizens are supposed to be the equals of public officials and have the right to coproduce public policies. The role of public administration thus changes from that of the guarantor of efficient public service delivery that aims at strengthening the trust of citizens to that of the actor that entrusts citizens with decision-making power based on the provision of information and anticipation (Villeneuve, 2005).

Electronic forms of interaction between citizens and public authorities, such as blogs, forums, or electronic polling, meet the objectives of reforms aimed at redefining the role of citizens in relation to public authorities. The *raison d'être* of electronic participation (e-Participation) is “to increase citizens’ abilities to

participate in digital governance, including participation in the political process and the transformation of digital government information and services” (Sanford and Rose, 2007: 408). The focal point of e-Participation is therefore the empowerment of citizens in regard to policy making and to public affairs in general. The willingness of governments to empower citizens seems to depend on the stage of the process. To date, most e-Participation experiences have been conducted in the phases of agenda setting, policy preparation, and policy evaluation. The participation of citizens in the other two stages, decision making and policy execution, is generally more controversial. Depending on the views on democracy that a country holds, public authorities are more or less willing to delegate powers to citizens in the latter stages. Participatory democracies seem to be generally more inclined to involve citizens in actual decision making (Van Dijk, 2012).

Transparent policy making and e-Participation are closely connected and go hand in hand, in that transparency is one of the most important factors influencing the success and the practical utility of e-Participation channels. Arguments advocating e-Participation are identical with those promoting more transparent policy making. The first aim is to increase the accountability of public servants to citizens in order to enhance trust in government. The second aim is to provide information to citizens, which is necessary for them to make informed decisions and therefore to participate meaningfully in public policy making (Pasquier and Villeneuve, 2007). E-Participation can, however, go beyond the scope of transparency by not only supplying citizens with information on public policies but also giving them an opportunity to cocreate them. In this sense, interactions between governments and citizens consist of three fundamental stages: provision of information, consultation, and the active participation of citizens in political decision making (Gramberger, 2001). Zikkis et al. (2009) describe the phases of a democratic process as acquiring information, forming an opinion, and making a decision.

With these introductory remarks in mind, the next chapter presents the research problem and the methodological approach. The principal objective of the study was to evaluate the pertinence of the connection between transparency, citizen empowerment, and e-Participation within the framework of specific Swiss case studies: electronic voting and the SmartVote application. An overview of the main findings is presented in the third section. Discussion points along with an estimation of the importance of the results for further research are highlighted in the last, fourth, section.

2 Research design

2.1 Research problem

The very notion of transparency is nowadays being redefined with the possibilities for the publication of documents and the continuous provision of information that advanced technologies offer. Due to the recent progress in the field of communication technologies, public administrations are able to publish documents and updates on their activities online, continuously, and in real time. Interested citizens can access these information sources at any time from any place. Governments may strive to increase their transparency in order to remedy the crisis of representative democracy (Akrivopoulou, 2013), reverse the trend toward decreasing trust in public authorities (OECD, 2013), regain legitimacy (Zouridis and Bekkers, 2000), and generally answer to citizens' growing discontent with their political representatives (King et al., 1998). The empowerment of citizens via electronic interaction channels is among the most important measures targeting these issues. Similar tendencies can be observed also in Switzerland. However, despite indicators such as the level of technological development and access to technologies that rank the country among the most "connected" in the world (OECD, 2012) and underline the country's readiness to replace or complement traditional communication channels between citizens and government with electronic ones, the existing potential has not been capitalized on. Switzerland is ranked far behind other Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries in terms of e-Participation development (UN, 2014).

Electronic participation tools that enable citizens to be continuously, or at least more promptly involved in public affairs demand that politicians constantly take citizens' wishes into account, thereby disrupting the usual waves of engagement based on the election cycle. In the electronic environment, citizens can interact with public officials in a more informal way via means such as discussion forums or blogs. The nature of interactions therefore becomes more horizontal and egalitarian, instead of vertical and bureaucratic. As a consequence, the introduction of new technologies represents a major political question (Macintosh et al., 2009) and an important challenge to the continuation of "politics as usual" since it demands from public officials that they redefine their relation to citizens and consequently also their role in their local administration. In this connection, a question presents itself: are Swiss public administrations ready or, rather, willing to enter into a more equal relationship with citizens via electronic interaction channels? At first glance, it seems that Switzerland, with its high trust in government (OECD, 2013) and an established system of direct democracy, which already substantially empowers citizens in regard to public policy making, should be a model pupil for the introduction of e-Participation.

One of the factors that explains the comparative underdevelopment of e-Participation in Switzerland, however, seems to be the reluctance of public authorities to foster transparency. In fact, certain telling signs exist that point to the reluctant attitude of Swiss authorities. First, there is the comparatively late introduction of the Swiss Freedom of Information Act (FoIA, 2007) and its lack of retroactivity. Second, a culture of secrecy is embedded in the Swiss political system and is still manifested in the legislative process. Third, the public has displayed its lack of interest in the activities of public administrations.

Pasquier and Villeneuve (2007) cite the general culture of secrecy as one of the traditional reasons for the public administrations retaining information. In the Swiss context, an important transparency-related shortcoming of the legislative process is the obscurity of the preparliamentary phase, in which legislators consult with different stakeholders, interest groups, political parties and federal offices. Typically in the Swiss political system, there is a search for a wide consensus on upcoming policy before the parliamentary phase begins. This approach is rationalized by the desire to avoid the direct-democracy phase, during which laws approved by the parliament risk being challenged in a referendum (Kriesi and Trechsel, 2008). Consultation procedures do not fall under the scope of the FoIA and to date have stayed largely opaque. Additionally, with the increasing polarization of attitudes between public authorities and interest groups, for example, in the social policy sphere, consultations tend to be more informal and therefore even less likely to become public than in the past (Kriesi and Trechsel, 2008).

Before the FoIA's entry into force in 2006, different federal departments and offices were worried about the increased workload that might result from the processing of a higher number of document access requests. These concerns were not borne out, however, since the number of requests stayed low and did not cause a remarkable burden for the institutions (Holsen and Pasquier, 2010). If we relate this observation to the high trust in government that typifies the Swiss political system, we might hypothesize that the higher the trust in government, the lower the interest of the population in public affairs, in the sense that citizens trust their government and therefore do not think it is necessary to continuously supervise its activities. In this connection, the question that must be answered is whether the Swiss tradition of direct democracy influences the perception of transparency in Switzerland. Are the shortcomings of transparency actually the consequences of direct democracy?

2.2 Case studies

2.2.1 Electronic voting

Electronic voting, or e-Voting, represents the most visible and the most prominent e-Participation initiative that has been introduced in Switzerland. Since the first three pioneer cantons started to test their respective electronic voting systems in

2004, e-Voting has become one of the priority e-projects of the Swiss government, and is currently being introduced in 13 out of 26 Swiss cantons. Three e-Voting systems are currently under testing in Switzerland. An important difference between the three systems relates to the respective development strategies (Swiss Federal Chancellery, n.d.). The system used by the canton of Geneva was developed internally, under the supervision of the administration itself. The cantonal administration owns the technology and retains all rights to it (Canton of Geneva, 2015). As for the other two systems, their development was outsourced to private companies. In the canton of Neuchâtel, e-Voting is one of many services provided by the cantonal administration online. This packet of electronic services is referred to as Guichet unique (Canton of Neuchâtel, 2015). The third e-Voting technology was originally developed by the canton of Zurich, but is nowadays used by several cantons that form the so-called Consortium (Canton of Aargau, n.d.).

Cantons selected for the present case study are those of Geneva, Aargau, Neuchâtel, and Berne. The choice was guided principally by the differences in e-Voting technologies that the respective cantons use. While Geneva and Berne employ the system developed by the canton of Geneva, the canton of Neuchâtel uses its own technology, and the canton of Aargau is the Consortium e-Voting project leader. An interview was also conducted with the e-Voting project manager at the Federal Chancellery.

2.2.2 SmartVote

The most important function of the SmartVote application is assisting voters in the selection of candidates that best match their own preferences. Adequacy between candidates' and voter's preferences is assessed based on a comparison of answers provided by both the candidates and the voters to a list of questions from various policy domains. The utility of SmartVote resides principally in the provision of information to citizens and in the "correction" of their votes (Gasser et al., 2010). According to the estimations of Lau and Redlawsk, 75 percent of people nowadays cast their votes incorrectly, that is to say, not according to their real preferences (Lau and Redlawsk, 1997). In recent years, SmartVote became an important election assistance tool, with about 80 percent of candidates in both federal and cantonal elections having created SmartVote profiles (Gasser et al., 2010).

2.3 Methodological approach

The methodological approach used in this study consisted of two principal parts. First, a literature and report review was aimed at identifying the most important characteristics of the selected case studies that relate to the research question. Second, empirical data was obtained from semistructured interviews with public managers responsible for e-Voting projects in the selected cantons and at the Fe-

deral Chancellery. Additionally, an interview with the founder of SmartVote was conducted in order to assess the attitudes of candidates toward transparency that were manifested in relation to SmartVote.

3 Overview of the main findings

Data obtained from the interviews suggest a number of conclusions. The most important ones can be summarized under three headings: 1) the attitude of public officials is a crucial factor influencing the uptake of e-Participation; 2) public administrations now have a dichotomous role that is a consequence of new phenomena in present-day society; and 3) the impact of e-Participation on citizens' interest in politics and on voter turnout has not been discerned in Switzerland in the framework of the selected case studies.

3.1 Public managers as crucial actors

Participants' comments from the interviews point at the decisive role that favorable attitudes on the part of public officials play in administrations' uptake of new technologies. A comparison of the approaches of managers of e-Voting projects in different cantons revealed that cantonal administrations differ in their stance toward technologies and toward innovations in general. However, these differences do not follow linguistic borders, and therefore cannot be justified on the basis of cultural differences between the German and the French cantons. It seems that they are rather caused by the diverse priorities of project managers in regard to e-Voting systems. The canton of Geneva presents itself as a pioneer of electronic voting in Switzerland and emphasizes the importance of transparency and trust for ensuring the success of e-initiatives. This attitude is reflected in the development of the e-Voting system and in the openness to the interaction with citizens. The cantonal administration allows citizens to consult the source code of their e-Voting technology, and in the near future, plans to shift to an open-source development scheme. The approach of "security by obscurity" has thus been overcome in Geneva, and a new dogma of transparency has been established in regard to electronic voting (Ch. Genoud, personal interview, April 10, 2015). It is clear that the introduction of technologies, especially in connection with the act of voting, is a delicate matter and that security risks do exist. However, the population will more readily accept these risks if the public administration has been transparent all along. Trust in systems such as electronic voting is extremely fragile in the sense that if a security breach occurs, the system gets quickly discredited in the eyes of people (Ch. Genoud, *ibid.*).

An e-Voting project leader from the canton of Berne, which uses the technology developed by the Geneva administration, admits that the transparency factor was decisive in the canton's choice of the system. In fact, the use of the Consorti-

um technology was considered at first, but it was rejected on the grounds of a development strategy based on outsourcing (M. Zaugg, personal interview, May 26, 2015). In regard to the decision a canton makes on the internal or the outsourced development of e-Voting technology, it can be argued that this strategic choice already points at different attitudes toward transparency. Although transparency was not a priority for the Consortium initially, the e-Voting project manager states that the public will be able to consult the source code of the application starting later this year, similarly to the canton of Geneva (T. Wehrli, personal interview, April 22, 2015).

E-Participation, which is understood as the participation of citizens in decision making, signifies an important redefinition of the roles of citizens and of public administrations. Since electronic tools that empower citizens weaken the role of public officials, the willingness of the latter to introduce them is decisive. However, it is not solely the technologies that will improve relations with citizens or increase the interest of people in politics. On the contrary, it is the public administration that first has to decide what type of relations it wants to have with the citizens. Reforms have to be carried out consequently in accordance with this vision. Thus, it is primarily the public administration itself that has to be convinced of the usefulness and benefits that these technologies can bring (Ch. Genoud, *ibid.*).

All interviewees agree that e-Participation and technologies in general are a way of making public administrations more modern and flexible, instead of rigid and hierarchical. The majority of interviewees were in favor of the electronic provision of information, but were rather skeptical toward the more regular participation of citizens in policy-making processes and toward the transfer of power to the public in general. In fact, all interviewees opposed the possibility of involving citizens in public policy making via electronic means, with the exception of the SmartVote founder, who also emphasized the importance of the quality of interaction between citizens and public administrations. Currently, a number of Swiss authorities at both the federal and the cantonal level are present on social media. However, these communication channels do not, for the most part, serve to facilitate meaningful interaction with citizens, but rather promote the activities and public policies backed by the authorities. He mentions that an important shortcoming of current electronic channels is the lack of “meaningful discussion about real problems” (D. Schwartz, personal interview, May 7, 2015).

3.2 Dichotomous mission of public administration

Apart from the positive effects of transparency on people’s trust in government and on providing better information to citizens, public officials realize that there are limits to being open about the activities of public authorities. They are aware that e-Voting systems have to be protected against misuse and that the public administration has a formal role to play in society. The dichotomy that is referred

to in the title of this chapter points to the contradiction between the traditional role of public administrations and the demands for a more flexible, responsive, and efficient public sector that arise as a consequence of present-day societal changes. Traditionally, public authorities acted principally as guarantors of the rule of law and of the continuity of states. However, this role is not compatible with a technologically advanced, rapidly moving global society. Public administrations are therefore forced to balance rigidity and continuity with openness and reactivity. The nature and structure of public administrations make them predisposed to hierarchy and to following defined procedures. Nurturing more direct and informal relations with citizens, as well as being open about their activities, is not something that comes naturally to public institutions. In fact, such bodies are not meant to be innovative or creative; rather, they are supposed to be symbols of state stability and continuity (Ch. Genoud, *ibid.*).

Another important obstacle to the introduction of electronic voting identified by the representatives of all cantons is the cost of the project. In the current circumstances, in which e-Voting does not even partially replace traditional vote casting methods, this voting system is a “luxury” in that it represents surplus costs to the established election procedures. While eligible citizens do have the option to vote electronically, they still receive all voting materials by mail. The costs of each vote are therefore magnified by the costs of e-Voting. It is envisaged that the next stage of the project will involve replacing analogic material with request-based electronic delivery (M. Zaugg, *ibid.*; P. Fontana, personal interview, May 6, 2015). Electronic voting will therefore only become profitable when public officials achieve the elimination of the overlap with analogic voting channels, for example, based on requests from voters who can choose their preferred voting mode. Interviewees admit that the bottom-up introduction of electronic voting and the development of three different e-Voting systems was not economically rational, but that, at the same time, this strategy allowed them to select the most suitable system.

3.3 Impact on voter turnout and interest in politics

Several of the interviewees believe that additional e-Participation tools that would allow citizens to directly participate in different phases of policy making processes are not needed. They justify this claim on the grounds of people’s low interest in politics. However, they also claim that the demand for electronic voting exists even though the effect on voter turnout has not been observed. The interviewee from the canton of Geneva believes that the weak impact of the e-Voting system on voter turnout is caused by the limits on the number of people who are allowed to vote electronically. Since the e-Voting project in Switzerland is still in the test phase, there are restrictions on the percentage of voters who may cast their votes electronically. The effect of electronic voting on voter turnout therefore cannot be accurately determined (Ch. Genoud, *ibid.*).

Low voter turnout is in general not considered problematic by the interviewees. They give several explanations for this trend. To name a few, turnout has been traditionally low in Switzerland due to a large number of popular votes that take place frequently and relate to different topics that may not be of particular interest to voters. Additionally, citizens may have the impression that even if a scandal occurs or an unwelcome public policy comes into force, they have the right to launch a referendum or a popular initiative, and will therefore have the last word (Ch. Genoud, *ibid.*). The SmartVote founder moreover emphasizes that a lack of civic education may contribute to people's low interest in public affairs. An interesting point that he raises also concerns the impact of changes in society and in lifestyle marked by the everyday use of portable technologies. Young generations, which are usually the first ones to be targeted by campaigns aimed at increasing voter turnout, might feel neglected by public authorities who are not willing to approach them via communication channels with which they grew up (D. Schwartz, *ibid.*). The importance of e-Participation is crucial in this regard.

4 Discussion & further research

The present study aimed at evaluating the attitudes of public officials toward transparency and citizen empowerment via electronic means within the framework of specific case studies: the introduction of e-Voting in Switzerland and the SmartVote application. The main results highlight the crucial importance of favorable attitudes on the part of political actors for the uptake of new technologies. Issues such as technological equipment and skills are no longer serious obstacles to e-Participation in Switzerland. Factors that hinder the introduction of this system can be found rather on the part of public officials, who express overall reluctant attitudes toward the possibility of transferring more decision-making powers to citizens via electronic means. The approaches that public administrations have taken toward fostering transparency differ among the cantons studied here, with certain cantons attributing more importance to this factor than others. Another important conclusion is that there is a dichotomy in the roles that public administrations are supposed to play. Nowadays, it is necessary for Swiss public administrations to find equilibrium between formality and responsiveness, that is, to balance the contradictory pressures for security and flexibility. An important obstacle identified by all interviewees is the cost of the e-Voting project. Further research into the cost issue would be beneficial, as it would allow for the assertion of whether the lack of funds represents a significant obstacle to the introduction of e-Voting in the cantons that have not yet joined the project. Additionally, the lack of comparison between the attitudes of public officials from the cantons that have introduced e-Voting and those that have decided against the system constitutes an important shortcoming of the present study.

Zusammenfassung

Diese Arbeit präsentiert die Resultate einer wissenschaftlichen Studie, die das Ziel hatte, zu evaluieren ob eine transparente Gesetzgebung und eine Ermächtigung des Stimmbürgers die Einführung des e-Participation in der Schweiz hemmen. Als Fallstudien für diese Untersuchung wurden das e-Voting sowie das SmartVote ausgewählt. Die Resultate zeigen die entscheidende Rolle der Regierungsbeauftragten und deren Einstellung gegenüber des e-Participation, sowie die Bedeutung der widersprüchlichen Aufgabe der Behörden, die sowohl den Rechtsstaat vertreten müssen, gleichzeitig jedoch eine flexible und reaktive Interaktion mit den Stimmbürger gewährleisten sollen.

Schlagworte: Transparenz, Bürgerzentrierte Regierung, Bürgerteilnahme, Digitale Demokratie

Résumé

Cet article présente les résultats d'une étude qui vise à évaluer si les exigences de transparence des politiques publiques et du transfert du pouvoir vers les citoyens empêchent l'introduction de l'e-Participation en Suisse. Les études de cas choisies sont l'e-Voting et l'application SmartVote. Les résultats soulignent l'importance des attitudes favorables de fonctionnaires publics pour l'introduction de l'e-Participation et l'existence d'un dilemme relatif à la mission contradictoire des autorités publiques qui doivent garantir la stabilité et, en même temps, être réactives dans les contacts avec les citoyens.

Mots-Clé: Transparence, Gouvernement centré sur le citoyen, Participation citoyenne, Démocratie digitale

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