Comparing Local e-Democracy in Europe: 
A preliminary report

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Background

Despite the widespread take-up of e-government across the world, surprisingly little research exists that enables systematic comparison of e-participation and e-democracy initiatives between countries. Publications such as the UN’s Global e-Government Readiness Report (2005) provide a powerful overview of the main trends but there remains a significant gap in analysing developments on the ground.\(^2\) This report addresses that gap by analysing e-democracy developments across five European countries. The focus is upon developments especially at a sub-central government level and, most particularly (but not exclusively), upon local government sponsored initiatives.

This report is one of two reports. The research focused not only upon what is happening in Europe but, also, developments in USA local government. Although data collection in the USA differed from the method adopted in Europe, research in the two continents was driven by the same overarching analytical framework. Consequently, the two reports are able to offer a strong analytical comparison. The USA case is explored in a second report, produced by Professor Don Norris.

The main aim of the research was to develop a systematic high level comparison of e-democracy developments in local governments across Europe and the USA. Consequently, the research addressed the following high level questions:

1. What is the range of e-democracy initiatives being developed in the various countries under analysis?
2. How much variation is there between countries in terms of the e-democracy developments and what are the main reasons for these variations?
3. How much variation is there within countries in terms of the e-democracy developments and what are the main reasons for these variations?

The research both provides a stock take of different local e-democracy initiatives in each country and develops an understanding of the factors affecting take-up. In particular, it focuses on understanding the directions that democracy is developing in each locality and the factors affecting it.

Analytical Framework

The focus of the research is on democratic institutions and the ways in which e-democracy is being used as a tool to reinforce, change or develop democracy in particular ways. More than simply examining the range of e-democracy initiatives in different countries, therefore, the research also examined the wider institutional context in which democracy is developing and the direction of change that is taking place. The research takes as its starting point the assumption that e-democracy is not a benign tool but has significant implications for reinforcing or changing democratic practices in a locality. e-Democracy devices may be top-down, in so far as they are developed by governance organisations to structure citizen behaviour in democratic engagement; or they may be bottom-up, in so far as they are instigated and owned by citizens acting collectively to influence public policy. The analytical framework analyses two dimensions:

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\(2\) The one exception is: Lourdes, T., V. Pina, et al. (2006). However, this article only provides evidence based on a website analysis and does not investigate actual initiatives.
1. The type of democratic devices deployed

At a very simple level it is possible to distinguish three main forms of democratic devices: aggregative, negotiative or deliberative. \(^3\) **Aggregative devices**, such as elections, seek to establish the public will by adding up the preferences of all individuals and reaching a majority decision. These devices place great emphasis upon establishing and maintaining political equality. **Negotiative devices**, such as community forums, recognise that there are competing preferences in communities and seek to provide opportunities for different stakeholders to bargain with each other to reach mutually acceptable compromises in policy. **Deliberative devices**, such as a citizens’ jury, recognise that not all people’s preferences are fixed and seek to provide opportunities for ideas to be developed and changed through a process of discussion and deliberation. Although all three devices are normally found in functioning democracies, the interesting question in relation to e-democracy is what emphasis is being placed on these devices through its implementation? In implementing particular e-participation initiatives, policy makers are inevitably affecting the balance between these three types of devices and, thereby seeking to shape the direction in which democracy is developing.

2. The direction of change

It is important to recognise that democracy is not a stable or settled concept: democratic institutions and processes continuously change and adapt in response to changing social, political and demographic trends. In this context, e-democracy initiatives provide tools for shaping democratic change. In implementing e-democracy, project sponsors and other actors are either explicitly or implicitly seeking to:

- **Reinforce** contemporary democratic institutions (e.g. e-voting may be seen as an attempt to reinforce parliamentary style democracy)
- **Change** existing institutions to make them work in different ways (e.g. webcasting may both improve elected member performance and increase transparency)
- **Replace** democratic institutions with new forms (e.g. online bulletin boards may be used to replace out-moded forms of communication with citizens)
- **Develop** democratic institutions (e.g. online forums may be seen as a way of developing new modes of deliberative democracy within or across communities)
- **Extend** democracy by using e-democracy to include groups that are marginalised by conventional institutions (e.g. activities directed specifically at young people, ethnic minorities etc).

This framework provides an analytical overview with which to compare very different cases from various European and US cities. Evidence drawn from different tools and contextualised to take account of different national circumstances can be compared using this framework to develop a meta-analysis of e-democracy developments in Europe and the USA. In this report the focus is particularly upon the European experience.

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Method

To explore the themes developed in the analytical framework, a method was devised that enabled an exploration of local e-democracy initiatives in five countries – the method has been developed to enable further country studies to be added over time, thereby facilitating the development of a growing database of local e-democracy experience that can be systematically compared over time.

The method involved a specialist analyst in each country identifying the main local e-democracy initiatives taking place in that country. The analyst then interviewed key experts associated with each initiative, using a structured interview template. In addition, the analyst produced an overview of developments in their country, highlighting the key themes and issues that had emerged from the interviews. It is these reports that form the basis of the analysis which follows.

Five countries were selected as providing a broad cross-section of the e-democracy experience. Ideally, it would be good to cover all 25 European Union states plus those that are currently in the process of negotiating entry to the EU. However, within the time and budgetary constraints, the five countries selected cover a number of dimensions that are normally taken into account when comparing local democracy in Europe including northern and southern European countries, and both old and recently acceded EU countries. In addition, in selecting the countries the team were particularly keen to find contrasting experiences of democratic development and those that have already developed a reputation for e-government or e-democracy. Consequently, the five countries selected were:

- **Estonia** – represents a Nordic commitment to new technologies – a small country but with material commitment to and reputation for innovative e-government and e-democracy.
- **Hungary** – represents a recent accession EU country (2004) spanning a significant territory.
- **Spain** – represents a major southern EU country with a substantial commitment to (and experience of) local democracy.
- **Switzerland** – represents one of the leading European countries on e-democracy (especially e-voting) but outside of the EU.
- **United Kingdom** – represents a major European Union country (in economic and population terms) with a substantial commitment to e-government and e-democracy.

The collection of data in these countries took place between April and June 2006, although some of the initiatives analysed had been in existence, or had occurred, some time before these dates. In total, 49 cases were analysed in the five countries,

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4 The criteria used for this selection is included as Appendix 1
including both the most prominent examples of e-democracy in each country and a combination of ‘typical’ and ‘unusual’ examples of e-democracy initiatives.

Data collection was premised on the need to understand not only the range of initiatives that are underway or have taken place in each country but also the institutional context. Consequently, the analytical framework was operationalised through a series of more specific topic headings and questions that formed the basis of the ‘expert interviews’:

1. Basis of initiative
   - Who initiated the project? (Type of actor: political leader, citizens, civil servant, private sector) and was it bottom-up or top-down?
   - When was it initiated?
   - How was it developed from the initial idea?
   - How does this initiative relate to other democracy initiatives in the area (both online and offline)?

2. Management
   - Who had overall responsibility for the project (position etc?)
   - What partners were there and what were there roles?
   - Were there other key actors?
   - How was the project financed?
   - What plans are there for sustainability/follow up?

3. Focus
   - What technologies were used?
   - What was the focus of the initiative (e.g. a neighbourhood, a particular group of citizens etc)?
   - What policy issues were the subject of the initiative?
   - How was participation in the initiative promoted?

4. Lessons (where relevant)
   - What problems did the initiative encounter (e.g. central/regional government support, finance, legal barriers etc) and how were these addressed?
   - Were there any specific financial or technical constraints which inhibited the development of the initiative?
   - What factors provided political support for the initiative?
   - How did the local government address the digital divide issue (citizen's access to the relevant technologies) / What understanding does the municipality have of citizens' access to the relevant technologies (digital divide issues)?
   - What (if any) are the demands/expectations from citizens for such initiatives?

5. Evaluation
   - What were the main achievements of initiatives?
   - What criteria have been used to evaluate the initiative (e.g. degree of participation, responsiveness of decision-makers, citizen satisfaction etc)?
   - What initiatives are emerging as a result of this one?
As the analysis which follows will show, this framework provides a rich level of detail about local e-democracy experiences in the five countries. From this evidence it is possible to paint a broad picture of how e-democracy is developing in Europe.

Institutions, devices and democratic sequencing

This paper is premised in an institutional understanding of democracy. Democracy works through the establishment, maintenance and development of particular institutions: institutions structure behaviour and provide incentives for political actors to behave in particular ways. Democratic institutions are not static: as a recent Council of Europe Green Paper on the future of democracy argued:

…in order to remain the same, that is to sustain its legitimacy, democracy as we know it will have to change and to change significantly – pace de Lampedusa – and this is likely to affect all of Europe’s multiple levels of aggregation and sites of decision making (Schmitter, Trechsel et al. 2004)

Institutions have particular characteristics:

- They are sets of rules, both informal and formal (rules of the game) – democracy works not only because of formal rules (e.g. election rules, Freedom of Information Acts etc) but also through informal norms or rules (e.g. activities of political parties, the media etc).
- They embed/ reflect power relations - rules create patterns of distributional advantage (Knight 1992);
- Complex institutional environments shape particular institutions - diversity in democratic institutions exists as a consequence of overlap and learning between tiers of government and so on
- History matters – democratic institutions are shaped by their ‘inherited world’. Past political processes and experience shape existing institutions and determine the legitimacy of particular democratic devices. Institutions are also governed by path-dependent processes, making it increasingly difficult to change direction once particular devices or processes are selected (Pierson 2000). The implementation of new technologies provides an opportunity to break path dependency (a critical juncture) and shift paths.

Democratic institutions ‘work’ by shaping the behaviour of political actors: politicians, civil servants, interest groups, and individual citizens. The rules of the game do not determine outcomes (think of a game of football), but they do provide the framework within which actors select and pursue their strategies. Institutions provide a set of specific constraints and opportunities for the practice of democracy.

The assumption is that, in implementing e-democracy, stakeholders are seeking to affect democratic institutions: either by changing them or by reinforcing them. The tools of e-democracy tools are, in effect, devices for realising particular democratic values (transparency, political equality and so on). However, it is not the devices themselves that deliver democracy but, rather they in which they are sequenced that matters (Saward 2003).

What might e-tools do for democracy?

Despite the hyperbole that often surrounds e-participation and e-democracy, the range of applications and their intended effects are actually quite limited. The effects
can be captured along two dimensions. First, there is the extent to which devices are seeking to affect the institutions of representation or citizenship:

**Representation** – e-democracy devices may support or enhance the mechanisms of representation (for example, e-voting) or improve the functioning of representatives (intranet websites). They may also serve to enhance the transparency and accountability of elected representatives or public administrations (through Blogging, webcasting of meetings, online newspapers, publishing minutes and records on the web and so on).

**Citizenship** – e-democracy devices may also be used to support more participatory forms of citizenship, whether through consultation devices (e-panels, e-consultation and so on) through to deliberative mechanisms (such as online forums) or ‘bottom-up’ initiatives that seek to support the development of citizen action (from e-petitioning devices through to supporting community organisation online).

These two points are not necessarily in competition with one another. Indeed, the institutions of representative government are wholly dependent upon concepts of citizenship. Moreover, the different points do not capture homogenous concepts. At its most simple, the distinction between Schumpeter’s ‘realist’ view that leaders and representatives should be left to govern between elections (Schumpeter 1943) and theories concerned with more participatory (Pateman 1970) or communitarian (Etzioni 1995; Tam 1998) forms of democracy provide a useful contrast. More recently, concerns with the ‘deliberative turn’ in democratic theory (Dowding, Goodin et al. 2004) have provided other ways of conceptualising political engagement that emphasise political learning through dialogue. However, it is the relationships between these two extremes and the emphasis that particular devices are giving to different actors that is important. The tools of e-democracy may be seeking either to support existing relationships between citizens and the institutions of representative democracy, or indeed, to change fundamentally, this relationship.

Second, the distinction between devices that provide communication and those that seek to enhance interaction is important. Much of the same technologies recur here, but it is the way in which they map against the other dimension that adds value to this distinction.

**Communication** - at its most simple, the internet and other new technologies provide the opportunity for public bodies to communicate more effectively with citizens. Devices here might vary from enhancing democratic education among particular citizen groups (such as young people) through to enhancing transparency by improving access to information, webcasting meetings and so on. It may also include opportunities for politicians to communicate with citizens and, indeed, the opportunity for citizens to contact public bodies (e.g. through e-voting).

**Interaction** – this other end of the scale clearly involves communication but it implies a more reflexive and iterative approach to communication, in which technologies facilitate two or more actors to engage in a dialogue. Online forums clearly sit at this end of the scale but other activities, such as participatory budgeting or those that facilitate community development are also significant here.

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between these two dimensions, with some illustrative examples of technologies. These examples, however, are illustrative only.
Depending upon how the devices are used (and sequenced) may affect where they are placed on the matrix. Blogs, for example, may be very interactive and may also lead to great levels of citizen debate.

Figure 1: Examples of e-democracy initiatives

Communication
- e-voting
- Online information
- Webcasts
- Cllr blogs

Representation
- e-consultation
- Micro-democracy

Citizenship
- e-petition

Interaction
- Online community development
- Online community action
- Online forums

Analysis by country

Having established the basis for comparison, this section will now provide brief portraits of local e-democracy developments in the five countries. In doing so, the focus is on both identifying the main trends that emerge in those countries and relating them to the main issues of change in each country. A concluding section will develop a comparative overview. The analysis is limited, in some countries, by the number of cases available. This limitation, however, reflects the availability of projects to analyse and, therefore, is instructive in its own right.
Estonia

Estonia is interesting because it has pushed the e-government agenda very hard over the last decade. There are some important conclusions on e-democracy, however, which show that a strong e-government infrastructure may be a precondition in supporting wider e-democracy initiatives but it is not a sufficient precondition.

Figure 2: Country analysis - Estonia

1. e-voting has been the major e-democracy development in Estonia – this is led primarily at central government level
2. There are no well known local government e-democracy initiatives. However, where they are happening, they are normally explicitly linked to wider e-government initiatives – there seems to be an emphasis upon comprehensive initiatives
3. Data provided by the e-Governance Academy shows that 30% of towns and 25% of rural areas have online forums
4. There is an explicit understanding of sequencing – e.g. Today I Decide (EST 1) which follows a five stage process: idea submission; 14 days of comments; revision; vote; ministry (for response)
Hungary

One of the larger countries to accede to the EU in 2004, Hungary has a large number of very small local governments (out of a total of 3,127, nearly 55% have populations of less than 1000 citizens – although there are 9 cities of 100,000+).

Figure 3: Country analysis - Hungary

1. e-Democracy is a low priority at a national level
2. For most initiatives, e-democracy is an add on to existing or developing e-government initiatives
3. There is a big emphasis in using the internet to enhance transparency
4. Middle-sized local governments seem more likely to adopt democratic innovation than the large cities
5. Online forums are the most popular and well known initiatives, although take-up in most of them is fairly low.
6. There seems to be a strong emphasis upon developing citizenship and engagement, through projects that support education, online take-up and deliberation
7. Sponsorship of e-democracy initiatives appears to rest particularly with press and communication departments – perhaps suggesting that it is primarily a communications exercise?
8. The green number initiative is a good example of how quickly technological innovation can become redundant or obsolete
Spain

Spain has been engaged in a number of offline participation experiences. This experience is, to some extent, replicated online – note the large number of forums.

Figure 4: Country analysis - Spain

Some of the well known participation experiments, such as Madrid Participa, have not been that successful in attracting widespread participation (0.56% of relevant population). Nevertheless, this experience does not appear to have dampened local government’s enthusiasm for experimenting with e-participation.

1. Two initiatives are specifically promoting e-democracy: Ciudadanos2010.net – allows proposals to be elaborated; Consensus – consultation and citizen organisation. Both seem to offer a ‘comprehensive’ e-government and e-democracy solution for local authorities.
2. Note the role of EU funding and private enterprise (including NGOs) in developing these initiatives
3. There is a noted mismatch between the tools offered to citizens and politicians willingness/ability to engage with them.
4. e-voting is being developed in a number of autonomous regions, especially for referendum purposes – criticised for high cost and low impact
5. e-tools are being used to support participatory budgeting processes (sequencing) rather than to lead it.
Switzerland

Switzerland is interesting for a number of reasons. First it is outside of the EU but has very close relationships with it. Second, the country’s emphasis upon direct democracy seems to have a significant impact upon the focus of e-democracy.

Figure 5: Country analysis - Switzerland

1. Strong emphasis upon e-voting and learning from it
2. Big central government support for e-voting initiatives (funding 80% of costs for many of the experiments)
3. Other e-democracy initiatives are focused especially upon improving responsiveness of public services (through e-counters)
4. Other e-democracy initiatives are largely absent.
United Kingdom

Local e-democracy in the UK has received significant central government funding (primarily for English local authorities) in the form of the Local e-Democracy National project (£4.5 million – around 6 million Euros). This investment has clearly affected the direction of e-democracy development. However, this project investigated projects from beyond this programme if work, as well as high profile developments within it.

Figure 6: Country analysis – United Kingdom

1. A high emphasis upon initiatives that communicate information
2. Especially strong on consultative techniques – even those that are citizen initiated (e.g. e-petitioner)
3. e-Participation is conceptualised primarily as engagement of individuals rather than groups/interests
4. There are some NGO and commercial providers but they are at risk of being squeezed out by state actors – organisations such as My Society are undertaking important roles in terms of creating new forms of mediation
5. Blogging seems to be particular trend among many politicians – despite the fact that most seem to be read by only a few constituents
Conclusions: some broader trends in local e-democracy

Is e-democracy making a difference to local government in Europe? There is a wide range of initiatives under way, many of which are far more nuanced than can be reported here. However, it is possible to point to some significant trends that are observable from the five countries analysed here.

1. Change or reinforcement?

Superficially, e-democracy initiatives appear to be supporting widespread change in both the nature and style of democracy. There are more deliberative tools available than ever before. However, beneath the surface there appears to be a great deal of continuity. Many e-democracy tools appear to be addressing perceived problems in the host country’s democratic institutions, reinforcing them rather than changing fundamentally the balance. In Switzerland, e-voting further supports notions of direct democracy. In the UK, consultation remains high on the political and e-democracy agenda.

2. Online and offline

Despite the reinforcement argument, there appears to be little relationship between existing offline forms of political engagement and participation and contemporary e-democracy initiatives. Most are implemented in isolation from offline initiatives but have more relationship with other e-government policies.

3. Barriers and resistance to e-democracy

There remain significant barriers to e-democracy, especially resistance among key political actors. This problem reflects, in part, tensions between competing conceptions of democracy. However, there is also a significant question around how much citizens really want from democracy and whether the tools on offer really ‘scratch where citizens are itching’.

4. Evaluating e-democracy

Establishing the impact and success of e-democracy initiatives remains elusive. Across the five countries there is a temptation to use take-up as a measure: a metric which has a simple allure. However, there is a general reluctance to examine the wider implications of initiatives and the extent to which they are achieving more implicit goals around change or reinforcement of particular democratic values.

A broader issue is the direction of change. There is no one direction in which democratic change is taking place. Putative deliberative democracy is being supported through online forums and so on but it is often other initiatives that are having more take-up and a more significant impact. This outcome is partly because of the path-dependent nature of democratic institutions and the difficulty in creating change. However, it also highlights the problems of deliberative concepts when applied to reality.
One effect of the technologies, however, is to highlight and, arguably, to exacerbate tensions between different democratic values and principles. In particular, there is a clear tension emerging between concepts of representation (and attempts to use new technologies to bolster it) and varying ideas of more participatory democracy: a problem that has always existed in democratic theory but which is now being played out in real democracies. The implementation of new technologies highlights these tensions.

Finally, there appear to be tensions between individualistic and collective forms of engagement, which are exposed by different e-democracy initiatives. Many initiatives appear to seek a circumvention of traditional institutions of interest mediation in favour of going ‘direct to the citizens’. At the same time, however, there are also attempts to enhance the organisations of civil society and collective action. Moreover, the technologies also have the potential to offer new modes of interest mediation and collective action. The challenge for local democracy is to ensure that what is developed in a top-down form both supports and works with bottom-up developments.
Appendix 1

Criteria for identifying initiatives within each country

The main criterion for identifying initiatives is for the analyst to feel confident that they have an overview of all the main e-democracy projects. Attention should be on the most recent initiatives but it may also be important for initiatives from the last 4-5 years to be explored, especially where they have had a significant impact. Anything before 2001 is unlikely to be of significance to this project, unless it has been carried through to something more contemporary.

Because the aim is to identify the main initiatives in each country, it is important for the analyst to feel free to focus on those that are most representative of that country, rather than to be constrained by specific criteria. However, in seeking initiatives, the analyst should reflect upon the following criteria:

1. Territory

   Where possible, the analyst should identify initiatives from all regions of the country. However, where some regions are notably more developed than others, this should be reflected in the choice of initiatives. The absence of initiatives in some regions (or indeed, a concentration of initiatives in others) may well be a research finding in its own right and analysts should feel free to report such findings where they are confident that they are correct. Any country specific insights or explanations for such variations are also welcomed.

2. Scale

   The focus of the research is on local government rather than initiatives that are occurring primarily at national or regional level. However, we recognise that there is often an overlap between different levels of government, especially in promoting e-democracy initiatives. Analysts should feel free to capture a range of initiatives, from those that focus on a specific neighbourhood through to those that occur across a number of levels or are a collaboration between a number of agencies. Initiatives may also be targeted at particular communities of interest or identity (young people, ethnic minorities etc) – again, these are of interest.

3. Type

   The working definition provided above allows for a wide range of initiatives which both support existing democratic institutions or seek to create new opportunities for political participation or influence. The range of products developed by the UK National Project provides a good indication of the types of initiative we are seeking to uncover:

   Enhancing transparency
   - Improving access to information
   - Webcasting of meetings

   Supporting political activity
   - Developing/supporting councillor (elected representatives) websites
   - Developing councillor blogs
- Local authorities providing online facilities for councillors to hold regular consultations with their constituents

Improving consultation
- online consultation tools (quick surveys etc)
- e-panels for regular consultation
- micro-democracy (text/email alerts on neighbourhood issues)

Facilitating community development
- Offering community online resources
- Tools to allow grass-roots community action groups to come together

Building democratic knowledge
- e-democracy icon to make the democratic aspects of websites more accessible
- online games for citizen education

Enhancing participation
- e-Voting
- online participatory budgeting

This list is a non-exclusive indication of the range of initiatives that we are interested in. Analysts are free to add to the list. Equally, there may be some forms of initiative that are inappropriate or irrelevant in a particular country context. Again, this is relevant as a research finding.
## Appendix 2

### e-Democracy cases

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<td>EST 2 Internet voting</td>
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<td><strong>Hungary</strong></td>
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