

Chapter 2.4

An Explanatory Approach to the Political Uses of ICT Initiatives for Participation: Institutions, Context, and Characteristics of the Actors

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ABSTRACT

Political actors use ICTs in a different manner and in different degrees when it comes to achieving a closer relationship between the public and politicians. Usually, political parties develop ICT strategies only for electoral campaigning and therefore restrain ICT usages to providing information and establishing a few channels of communication. By contrast, local governments make much more use of ICT tools for participatory and deliberative purposes. These differences in usages have not been well explained in the literature because of a lack of a comprehensive explanatory model. This chapter seeks to build the basis for this model, that is, to establish which factors affect and condition different political uses of ICTs and which principles underlie that behaviour. We consider that political actors are intentional and their behaviour is mediated by the political institutions

and the socioeconomic context of the country. Also, though, the actor's own characteristics, such as the type and size of the organization or the model of e-democracy that the actor upholds, can have an influence in launching ICT initiatives for approaching the public.

INTRODUCTION

More than a decade has passed since the invention of the World Wide Web, based on the global development of the Internet, and, although it has spread very quickly throughout our personal lives, the marketplace, and civil society, it is not developing so fast in crucial areas of the political realm. Political actors, such as parties, or political institutions, such as parliaments or governments, are reluctant to use the Internet widely for connecting with or approaching citizens. Neverthe-

less, in public administration we can see a steady use of the Internet in order to provide services and information to the public and reduce the procedures that citizens must carry out. In addition, at the local level, at least in Europe,¹ public authorities are launching ICT initiatives much more than parties or parliaments for contacting their citizens and engaging them in the affairs of the municipality.

However, even public administrations and local governments are not using the Internet as extensively as the business sector, the organisations of the civil society, or individuals in their social and personal relationships. It seems that public authorities and political structures are lagging behind in the technological transformations that are affecting the private sector and relationships among individuals. So what are the reasons for this lesser use of ICTs among political actors and inside political institutions? Few studies have been carried out to answer this question. Some authors assert that there are a number of elements ranging from organisational to cultural elements that hinder the assimilation of new technologies by political actors and institutions in contrast to private companies. Political parties and representative institutions such as parliaments are more centralised, less flexible, older, and much less dependent on the “customer-citizen” than many companies in the private sector (Kippen & Jenkins, 2004; Prats, 2005), and all these trends greatly hinder a successful integration of new technologies. Society, business, and communications have changed, among other factors, because of a wider Internet usage, but the core institutions and actors of the political system are still using primarily old technological artifacts and do not appear to be very willing to transform their unidirectional relationship with the public.

Many more studies comparing the efficient integration of ICTs in business and society with the difficulties for their deployment in the representative political system are needed. Yet, it is also very important to discern why some political

actors use the new ICTs much more frequently than others. This search for an explanation is not just of academic or scientific interest, but is also of interest to politicians, public-sector officials, or development professionals who need to understand what the constraints and factors favouring deployment of ICTs are. Technicians, politicians, or activists interested in developing ICT initiatives in a transformative way for democracy must be informed of the costs and benefits of that usage and of the incentives and hurdles that they may come across.

We suspect that similar factors to the ones considered above (organisational, cultural) are affecting differences in political uses. We also know, due to the large accumulation of knowledge in the analysis of collective behaviour, political institutions, and human agency, that the political actors’ behaviour could be analysed as intentional and, at the same time, structured by political institutions and the social and cultural context.

To this effect, the main goal of the chapter will be to introduce the basic elements for the construction of a model that explains the differences in Internet usage by different political actors. These basic elements are a number of variables that must be taken into account when attempting to explain these differences in behaviour. We will not be drawing up a complete detailed model, but rather we will provide an outline of the variables that conform the structure for explanation. We leave the definition of the interactions inside the model and the very construction of the model itself for further studies. Our contributions are to bring out explanatory variables not before considered in ICT literature, to compare the variables already studied in the literature, and to think about the constraints, incentives, and opportunities that political actors face regarding ICT developments.

Internet usages vary within each country and from country to country, and they can change rapidly. In addition, the search for explanations is very difficult since contagion and diffusion of the political uses of ICT among countries and

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