Digital democracy in Switzerland: direct democracy at its best or needless luxury?
Point of view of public administrations

Tereza Cahlikova, PhD candidate, IEPHI, UNIL
Thesis supervisor: **Prof David Giauque**, IEPHI, UNIL

Digital democracy:
"The use of digital media to mediate and transform the relations of citizens to governments and to public administrations in the direction of more participation by citizens" (van Dijk, 2010).

RESEARCH QUESTION: Why has the potential of digital democracy in Switzerland not been capitalized on?

Contradiction between the tradition of direct democracy and the high level of technological development in the country on one hand and the comparative immaturity of digital participation tools on the other.

Potential of digital democracy in Switzerland
o Partial or complete digitalisation of existing direct democracy instruments;
o Introduction of new participative electronic tools that would empower citizens in regard to public policy making.

The fact that direct democracy is one of the pillars of the Swiss political system would imply that public institutions will not be opposed to the empowerment of citizens in regard to public policy making. However, it is evident that there is a number of obstacles to the introduction of digital democracy that are caused by different factors. These are both internal and external to public institutions. Their importance will be analysed from the point of view of public administrations, which is often neglected in the literature concentrating rather on citizens' attitudes.

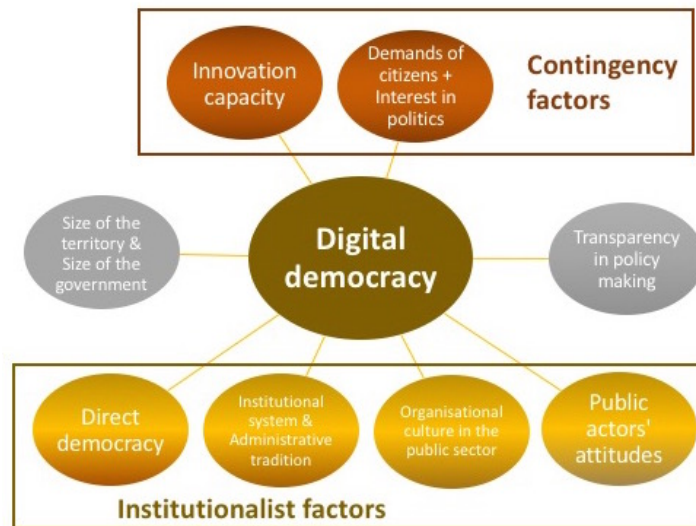## Principal theoretical concepts
Contingency theory – external contingency factors impact on the organisational structure, the objective of every organisation is to find a "fit" between its structure and contingencies (Child, 1972; Donaldson, 2001).
Institutionalist theory – organisations mimic structures of well-established institutions or of the institutional system, importance of path dependency and institutional isomorphism (March & Olsen, 1983; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scharpf, 1997).
Which of the two theories explains better the process of (non)introduction of digital democracy in Switzerland?
Theory of change (Bohm, 1980; Morgan, 1996)

Analysis model with explanatory variables

PRELIMINARY RESULTS (exploratory interviews)
✓ Attitudes on the part of public officials are a crucial factor for the uptake of digital democracy;
✓ Contradictory mission of public administration: necessity to balance the role of the guarantor of the rule of law with flexibility required by present-day society;
✓ Digital democracy tools that would enable citizens to participate on public policy making are considered redundant due to low interest in politics and the related perceived lack of need for them.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH
Adaption of citizen participation methods to the reality of today's dynamic and technologically advanced society. If public administrations do not keep up with the latest trends, they will be considered out-dated and obsolete. Citizens might feel left out from the practice of democracy if they are not allowed to communicate with their representatives via technologies that they interact with on daily basis.

Methodological approach (essentially constructivist)
Explanatory variables will be analysed using one or the combination of the following methods:
o Document analysis;
o Semi-direct qualitative interviews (approx. 40) to be conducted in 2016 and 2017.
Choice of interviewees: politicians, policy-makers and technological specialists in federal departments and offices.
o Comparative analysis aimed at identifying best practices of other countries (Canada, tbd).

Unil | Université de Lausanne
LAGAPE - Laboratoire d'Analyse de la gouvernance et Action publique

Contact
Tereza.Cahlikova@unil.ch
Géopolis, bureau 4529
Tel.: +41 21 692 32 06

References
1) Bohm, D. (1980). "Wholeness and the implicate order." Rooteledge & Kegan, Londres; 2) Child, J. (1972). "Organizational Structure, Environment and Performance: The Role of Strategic Choice" Sociology 6(1):1-22; 3) DiMaggio, P. and W. Powell (1983). "The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational cost explanation." Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization 4(4):305-336; 4) Donaldson L. (2001). The contingency theory of organizations, Sage; 5) March J. G. and J. P. Olsen (1983). "The new institutionalism: organizational factors in political life." American political science review 78(03):734-749; 6) Morgan, G. (1996). "Unfolding logics of change: Organization as flux and transformation." Images of Organizations; 7) Scharpf, F. W. (1997). "Games real actors play." Actor-Centered Institutionalism in Policy Research 55; 8) Van Dijk, J. (2010). Participation in Policy Making. Study on the Social Impact of ICT, European Commission.