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Contemporary Ideas in the Framing of a European Policy for E-government

Introduction
Throughout the last decade, the development of electronic government (e-government) has emerged as one of the central reforms in the modernization of public administration, from local government to the European Union (EU) level. This is somewhat surprising since public administration is a policy field that traditionally has been confined to the nation state. In the integration of the EU, member states have generally been unwilling to harmonize issues related to public administration, since nation specific path dependencies in the shape of welfare state regimes and administrative traditions continue to be strong (e.g. Esping-Andersen, 1990; Knill, 2001; Olsen, 2003). Hence, administrative cooperation and reform have remained within the exclusive competences of the member states, with few formal powers of the EU for enforcing implementation.

A European policy for e-government is nonetheless under development, including common strategies, guidelines and standards (European Commission, 2005; 2010a). The European Commission (2011) defines e-government as “…using the tools and systems made possible by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) to provide better public services to citizens and businesses”. The stated aims of e-government are manifold and ambitious: increasing mobility in the Single Market; rationalizing administrative processes of European governments and improving access to and citizen involvement in public services (European Commission, 2010a). It can be viewed as the embodiment of a “super-standard” (Røvik 2000; 2008), that is, a widely popular idea that is portrayed as the solution to a spectrum of problems (Bekkers & Homburg, 2008; Lindblad-Gidlund & Girili-Nygren, 2009). In the practical development of e-government, national governments have also looked to the EU in several respects. National strategies have been shaped by the rhetoric of EU policy (e.g. Government Offices of Sweden, 2008) and national governments have readily accepted common technical solutions and standards developed on an EU level (Criado, 2009; European Commission, 2009). Thus, e-government is a policy field where implementation of EU policies is occurring at a faster pace than within any other policy area with similar (weak) EU competences (Criado, 2009).
With the member states’ traditional unwillingness to harmonize public administration in mind, these developments present a puzzle for which we, for several reasons, need to develop a better understanding of. The most obvious reason is that e-government tends to be an expensive reform: the implementation of ICT involves the investment of public resources, which in turn can create strong lock-in effects (Markus & Robey, 1988, Dunleavy et al, 2006). Consequently, there is a risk that certain fundamental values and ideas embedded in the formulation as well as implementation of e-government, intentionally or unintentionally, become cemented (Olsson & Åström, 2006). This paper thus takes off from the assumption that technology cannot be separated from the social processes that surround it. Technology carries little meaning beyond its social context; it is in the dynamic interaction with this context that technology, through certain notions and ideas, is given social meaning (Markus & Robey, 1988; Orlikowski, 1992). According to this logic, it becomes important to reach a more in-depth understanding of the ideas underlying e-government, in order to understand the potential effects of e-government. Ideas have since long been perceived as an essential factor in processes of change (e.g. Hall, 1986; Blyth, 2001). The growing importance of the EU institutions in the field also means that more light needs to be shed on the ideas framing these developments on an EU level, in order to understand the perceived centrality and ready acceptance of the reform by national governments.

**Aim of paper**

The aim of this paper is to develop an analytical framework to analyze the dominant ideas underlying the implementation of e-government. In order to do so, an analysis of the salient ideas in the two main policy documents of the European policy on e-government, the action plans on e-government for 2006-2010 and 2011-2015, will be made. The analysis will use previous research, both from Public Administration and (PA) and Information Systems (IS), as its point of departure, where a discussion of the role and content of e-government will provide a backdrop for understanding which ideas are underlying EU policy. Consequently, two research questions will guide the analysis: (1) What are the underlying ideas which, in the case of EU policy, frame and drive the implementation of e-government? (2) What views on public administration do these ideas convey?

The analysis is built on the assumption that in order to explain social phenomena, we need conceptual frameworks to describe them (Pollitt, 2011). Whilst much has been written on the implementation of e-government and whether it has been effective or not, not as much attention has been devoted to understanding the values and ideas embedded in its formulation and implementation in public administration (Åström & Olsson 2006; Giritli Nygren, 2009; Persson & Goldkuhl, 2010), especially not on an EU level, despite the growing activities and influence of the EU institutions (Criado, 2009; Amoretti & Musella, 2011). The framework is thus seen as an initial step in understanding the dominant ideas underlying e-government, in order to, in a later stage, explain these developments. By concurrently building on previous perspectives from research in e-government, both from PA and IS, some of the “ghettoization” (Pollitt, 2011) and “theoretical neglect” (Dunleavy et al, 2005; Heeks, 2006; Meijer, 2007) of e-government – i.e. the inability to build on previous results and theory development from adjoining fields of research – can be addressed. In turn, the overarching purpose is to contribute to existing academic discussions concerning what type of public administration e-government is advancing towards (e.g. Bekkers & Homburg, 2005; 2008; Persson & Goldkuhl, 2010).
The structure of the paper will be as follows: first, an overview of the methodology and material will be given. Secondly, an assessment of perspectives on e-government according to previous research of the phenomenon will be provided. This will result in an analytical framework that summarizes the main ideas of these perspectives. Thirdly, the main objectives and strategies of the EU e-government policy will be assessed, followed by an analysis of the underlying ideas of the policy from the perspective of the analytical framework. This will be followed by a discussion concerning what views on public administration these main ideas convey, as well as reflections concerning the ideological and normative implications of these ideas.

Methodology and Material

The methodology used in this paper is qualitative and interpretive and constitutes of an analysis of the salient ideas in the two EU action plans for e-government. The documents are viewed from the perspective that texts mirror both conscious and unconscious conceptions and ideas (Bergström & Boréus, 2005: 13), and can thus give us important pointers of the fundamental ideas underlying the phenomenon in question. An idea can be viewed as a conceptual construction which, in contrast to more transient attitudes and impressions, is distinguished by a degree of continuity. Ideas are here regarded as a notion of reality but also as a value-laden assessment of events or a notion of how one should act, i.e. normative in character. (Bergström & Boréus, 2005: 149-150). Ideas are regarded as influential in the sense that they can act as key mediators between contextual and institutional change; ideas can destabilize otherwise stable institutional environments by redefining problems as well as providing new solutions. Furthermore, once institutionalized, ideas can act as cognitive locks, which frame and bound what is perceived as possible. Ideas are thus essential if we want to understand change and its effects (Hall, 1986; Blyth, 2001).

In order to operationalize the analysis, earlier research of e-government will be used as a point of reference. Here, perspectives on the role and content of e-government as a reform in public administration will be focused, omitting more techno-centric perspectives. The paper thus places e-government into a research field which favors a wider definition of the concept, that is, "ICT-mediated change in public administration", rather than merely “ICT in public administration” (e.g. Bekkers & Homburg, 2005; Taylor & Lips, 2008; Persson & Goldkuhl, 2010). This is essential if the underlying ideas of e-government are to be in focus rather than the technology. By summarizing earlier perspectives on e-government, distinguishing their main points and comparing these with the ideas in the EU e-government policy, an analytical framework will be constructed and simultaneously applied for the specific aim of this paper. The intention is however that it can be used and concurrently developed for further analysis of the ideas and intentions of e-government in other contexts, thus, contributing to a cumulative building of knowledge. This analytical framework will be based on ideal types, which is an analytical instrument for refining certain characteristics. However, here, ideal types will mainly be used for reconstructing ideational systems in relation to e-government, what role, meaning and content e-government has been given, and as a framework for interpreting the content of the EU e-government policy (Bergström & Boréus, 2005). The intent is, through a systematic analysis, to clarify as well as to re-evaluate taken for granted ideas of the phenomenon (Beckman, 2007).

Two policy documents for e-government will be used as main sources, namely the e-government action plan for 2006-2010 "Accelerating eGovernment in Europe for the Benefit of All" and the action plan for 2011-2015 "Harnessing ICT to promote smart, sustainable &
innovative Government”. These are the overarching strategies for a European e-government policy and are thus considered an important starting point for reaching a deeper understanding of the ideas framing the policy field. The emphasis will be placed on distinguishing and refining the main ideas behind the objectives and implementation strategies of the plans. In this respect, the intent is to find commonalities rather than to compare them by, for instance, identifying the development of ideas over time. Noticeable differences between the plans will however also be highlighted. Furthermore, the policy for e-government is highly integrated with other policy fields, such as “A European Information Society for growth and employment” (European Commission, 2005) and “A Digital Agenda for Europe” (European Commission, 2010b). Central texts for these policies will therefore in some instances supplement the action plans.

**Previous research**

In the following section, perspectives on e-government, grounded in previous research, will be discussed in order to provide the theoretical framework for the analysis. The discussion will in turn lead to the development of ideal types, which will be applied in the analysis of the ideas in the EU policy documents. E-government is a much debated concept with rather unclear boundaries. It has traditionally been seen to include three dimensions: (1) **public e-services** which concern the external delivery of public information and services electronically, (2) **e-administration** which entails activities aimed at developing internal processes of public administration through ICT and (3) **e-democracy** which involves the development of political influence and participation of citizens through electronic channels (e.g. Grönlund & Ranerup, 2001). In the practical development of e-government, emphasis has however generally been placed on developing public e-services, with the digitization of democratic channels lagging behind (e.g. Dawes, 2008).

Perhaps due to its broad applicability, e-government has been linked to several administrative reforms and societal developments. These will in this paper be systemized into four main schools, which do not claim to be exhaustive but nevertheless, touch upon some of the main aspects that have been lifted in e-government research during the last decade. On the one hand, e-government has been directly or indirectly linked to the (1) de-bureaucratization and marketization of public administration usually associated with New Public Management (NPM). On the other hand, e-government has also been linked to a (2) strengthening of bureaucracy according to post-Weberian ideals. In addition, e-government has been associated with (3) a new dawn of more deliberative forms of democracy. Finally, e-government has also been regarded as something (4) separate from previous developments, a new reform in itself in the shape of a digital-era governance.

**E-government and NPM**

NPM is a much debated phenomenon which lacks a single definition. On the one hand, NPM can be seen as a neoliberal administrative philosophy that applies market logic to public administration, meaning that public organizations can be run according to similar principles as private organizations. On the other hand, NPM can be seen as a new model of governance which involves a different way of running public administration according to higher degree of decentralization, disaggregation and delegation, as well an increased focus on controlling and measuring output, in contrast to the traditional, hierarchical bureaucracy along Weberian ideals which stresses process rather than output. This new model involves increased emphasis on effectiveness, quality, productivity and cost-efficiency. Most observers agree on that the
core of NPM entails a rational view of actors in line with the Public Choice Philosophy; self-interest is the driving force of actors and accordingly, competition and markets provide quality and efficiency. As a consequence, citizens, in the shape of customers, can contribute to increased quality and are “empowered” rather than merely served (Agevall, 2005; Christensen & Lægrid, 2007; Gjelstrup & Sørensen 2007).

Although parallels between e-government and NPM are not always made explicit, e-government is often considered to build on similar principles of de-bureaucratization, decentralization, rationalization and marketization. Several researchers note how ICT, in policy documents, often is viewed as the central tool for practically realizing shifts from an internal-, bureaucracy-oriented public administration to an external-, customer-oriented public administration (e.g. Van Duvenboiden & Lips, 2005; Cordella, 2007; Giritli Nygren, 2009; Persson & Goldkuhl, 2010). In line with NPM, e-government implementation is often related to a number of overarching goals: cost-efficiency and effectiveness, as well as customer orientation; these are usually seen as complementary.

On the one hand, ICT can do what technology has done for a long period of time in public administration, i.e. automate slow and cumbersome internal working processes and deliver public services more efficiently. By letting citizens do a proportion of the work, e.g. through self-service applications, further rationalization can be achieved. On the other hand, ICT offers possibilities of providing services more according to individualized needs and also increases the possibility to monitor and influence service provisions and decision-making by citizens. ICT can also facilitate the provision of quality measurements of public services and tools for comparing different public service providers. Citizens are thus able to more closely monitor government performance and in turn, the increased two-way interaction can lead to enhanced service quality. The citizen thus becomes “empowered”; just like customers in a market place, they are, with the help of ICT, increasingly able to make informed choices and place demands on the governments according to their own needs (Homburg & Bekkers, 2005; Dutil, 2007). In line with NPM, policy documents on e-government often view customer satisfaction as a major source of legitimacy. Effective service delivery is regarded as imperative for the creation of public trust and legitimacy (Homburg & Bekkers 2005; Cordella 2007).

**E-government and Post-Weberian Bureaucracy**

So-called post-Weberian bureaucracy can be seen as a reaction to NPM since it stresses the importance of not neglecting traditional bureaucratic ideals such as accountability, legality, objectivity, impartiality and equality of citizens, in favor of cost-efficiency and performance. The basic assumption is that the logic and structure of private organizations cannot be transferred off-hand to public organizations since they are founded on different values and goals. Bureaucratic structures inhabit an important role in facilitating these values and goals through standardized norms and rules. In turn, bureaucracy should thus not be seen as the scapegoat of the alleged service and administrative crisis of public administration of the last decades. Rather, the cause can be found in the increased complexity and information overload in administrations. In this respect, ICT can offer new solutions. Bureaucratic ideals do not necessarily have to be inconsistent with performance, service or citizen orientation; through ICT, a combination is possible (e.g. Hood, 1991; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000). Cordella (2007) speaks of the potential of ICT as an instrument for strengthening bureaucratic administrative functions in the shape of the “e-bureaucratic form”. Rather than diminishing bureaucracies, ICT can through its design enforce the rules and norms that public
organizations have to rely on: “...e-government policies should be developed with a renewed and caring attention to the original and true mission of PA in modern democracies, namely, the delivery of public services according to principles of impersonality, equality and fairness (Cordella, 2007: 272).

According to this logic, ICT is regarded as the ideal objective, efficient and rule-abiding bureaucrat – a “system-level bureaucrat” – since information systems can be designed to diminish discretion, complexity and diversions from rules and legislation (Bovens & Zourid, 2002). In addition, ICT can improve transparency by opening decision-making and improving access to information. Thus, ICT can in several ways be used as a tool for enforcing constitutional ideals such as fairness, legality and openness in the process of public services and administration.

E-government and the New Dawn of Deliberative Democracy

The role of ICT in reinventing or revitalizing democratic processes in governments, so-called e-democracy, has alternated between great optimism and great pessimism (Nord, 2002; Åström, 2004). The 1990’s introduced the concept “cyber democracy” (e.g. Tsagarousianou et al, 1998) that highlighted the Internet as a new public sphere which would revolutionize the old democratic mechanisms. These claims were built on the proposition that the Internet inhabit certain inherent qualities, such as inclusiveness, transparency and universality. Consequently, earlier barriers to freedom of expression and association had disappeared, meaning that everyone could voice their opinion. The improved accessibility to and transparency of information and public discussions also meant that political elites had been robbed of their privileges; citizens would now be on equal footing with politicians and civil servants in terms of intellectual and communication abilities. Finally, the fact that the Internet stretches beyond national, institutional and other barriers, would relativize the frontiers of nation states and other groupings.

Although “cyber democracy” transcends e-government since it takes place not only within formal, governmental institutions, but also, to a great extent, outside of these institutions, it nevertheless, has been seen to carry with it great potential in terms of revitalizing political processes and thus the formal channels of political representation and communication. With the help of ICT, new possibilities for democratic dialogue, both between citizens and between citizens and decision-makers can be facilitated, e.g. through web-based discussion forums, blogs or e-mail. For instance, the Internet allows transparency in decision-making processes, which facilitates public influence before a decision is a taken. The Internet also has the potential to mobilize groups of citizens and increase participation in political matters through direct contact with decision-makers (e.g. Budge, 1996; Schuler, 1996; Nord, 2002). The focus of e-democracy has thus mainly been placed on improving processes of democratic deliberation. Consequently, there is a strong focus on the input side of governments, i.e. political processes. In contrast to NPM that highlights empowerment according to market and consumer principles, above perspectives highlight empowerment in a political sense. This meaning denotes the collective citizen who is engaged in common issues, of common interest, rather than individual choice and interests (Montin, 2007).

Today, most observers agree on that the potential of e-democracy has not been realized. Governments have tended to focus on improving effectiveness and cost-efficiency in the shape of public e-services rather than developing democratic processes (Åström, 2004; Dawes 2008). Furthermore, there has been a growing recognition of the different preconditions
amongst citizens for taking advantage of e-democratic initiatives. For instance, restricted access to computers or broadband, low computer maturity or e-literacy can obstruct access to democratic channels and thus create new or reinforce old “digital divides” (e.g. Norris, 2001)

E-government and Digital-Era Governance

Whereas the above perspectives give ICT a more drawn back role, i.e. regard it more as a tool – or a means to an end – for realizing fundamental ideas related to public management and democratic deliberation, Dunleavy and Margetts have in several writings (Dunleavy et al 2006; Dunleavy & Margetts 2006; Dunleavy & Margetts, 2010) granted ICT a more central place in public administration reform, naming it “Digital-Era Governance” (DEG). They stress that ICT should no longer be seen as peripheral of changes in contemporary public administration and public policy, but as an increasingly important and determinant influence upon what is feasible. This does not assume a direct, deterministic influence of technological change but nonetheless, emphasizes that ICT is central for a wide-ranging number of changes in how public administration and services are currently being organized (Dunleavy et al, 2006: 216-249). In fact, they claim that the centrality of NPM in public administration reforms and measures, such as disaggregation and competition, are increasingly declining, whereas ICT has moved to the centre of public administration, producing a new series of changes.

These changes are broadly summarized as: (1) reintegration (2) needs-based holism and (3) digitization changes. Reintegration involves integrating the various functions and clusters of expertise which under NPM were fragmented and achieve simplification of services and policies, e.g. the rollback of agentification, the centrality of joined-up (or seamless) government, re-strengthening central processes in the form of hierarchies or sharing services between departments and agencies. Needs-based holism focuses on moving away from the NMP emphasis on business process management, towards a more citizen-based public administration, e.g. one-stop provisions in the shape of Internet portals or agile government processes, i.e. speeding up flexibility and responsiveness in governmental decision-making. Finally, digitization changes involve a transition to fully digital operations in the public sector. In other words, electronic channels are no longer supplementary to other processes but the agency “becomes its website” (Dunleavy et al, 2006; 228). This means converting most paper-based administrative processes to electronic services delivery, actively managing the move of service users to electronic channels, mandating a close down of previously well-used service or information channels, citizens and businesses running their own interactions with government (“do-it-yourself-government”) or direct contact with state systems, without passing the previous gatekeepers of civil servants.

In contrast to earlier propositions, which predict the construction of a “virtual state” (Fountain, 2001), Dunleavy et al stress that DEG is not primarily about changes within governments but a “movement of the digital era in society at large” (Dunleavy et al, 2006: 225). Current developments of the Internet, such as Web 2.0 and social media, which are being used on a widespread basis, put pressure on governments to innovate and offer the potential for co-production and co-creation of public services (Dunleavy & Margetts, 2010).

Summary - Ideal Types for E-government

The above section assessed, in the shape of four main schools, the content attached to e-government in previous research. Accordingly, these can through a systematization of the
main characteristics of these schools be refined into four ideal types with regards to the ideational systems behind e-government: (1) New Public Management, (2) Post-Weberian Bureaucracy, (3) The New Dawn of Deliberative Democracy and (4) Digital Era Governance. It should be stressed that the ideal types should be seen as extreme and refined pictures of e-government. In reality, these are clearly difficult to separate, exist side by side or are highly integrated in most public administrations. They nevertheless contribute to a clarification and summary of the ideas and content attached to e-government, as table 1 illustrates:

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<td>Empowerment (in market sense)</td>
<td>Legality</td>
<td>Empowerment (in political sense)</td>
<td>Joined-up/seamless government</td>
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<tr>
<td>Customer orientation</td>
<td>Objectivity</td>
<td>Inclusiveness</td>
<td>One-stop shops (single-point entry)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Decentralization and disaggregation</td>
<td>Impartiality</td>
<td>Transparency</td>
<td>Do-it-yourself-government</td>
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<tr>
<td>Market-based incentives (competition)</td>
<td>Equality</td>
<td>Universality</td>
<td>Rationalizing contact channels (electronic channel as main channel)</td>
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<td>Effectiveness, productivity and cost-efficiency</td>
<td>Transparency</td>
<td>Democratic dialogue</td>
<td>Customer segmentation</td>
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<td>Output orientation</td>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>Input orientation</td>
<td>Co-production of public services</td>
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<td>Benchmarking and quality evaluations</td>
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Table 1. Ideal Types of E-government.

The EU Action Plans for E-government
Policies for furthering ICT use and implementation in the member states have existed for a period of time on the EU level, as a measure for creating a European Information Society. However, e-government as a distinct policy field of its own became most evident with the launching of the action plan for e-government for 2006-2010 and the most recent plan, for 2011-2015. Both documents set out general objectives and key enablers for facilitating e-government implementation in European public administrations (the European Commission 2006; 2010a).

Although the wording differs slightly between the action plans, the overarching objectives can be summarized as follows: (1) advancing mobility in the Single Market, (2) citizen and business empowerment and participation, (3) increasing administrative efficiency and effectiveness and, (4) establishing the necessary legal and technical preconditions (“key enablers”) for realizing the preceding three objectives. In addition, the first action plan also mentions advancing inclusion through e-government, i.e. combating digital divides and delivering public services that are accessible and trusted by the public. The reason for the omission of this in the second action plan could be due to that “e-inclusion” now features in the “Digital Agenda for Europe” (European Commission, 2010a) and thus is actively connected to advancing ICT in society as a whole and not only in governments. The three overarching objectives will now be considered more closely.
Mobility in the Single Market

The importance of advancing e-government in order to facilitate mobility in the Single Market of the EU is repeatedly stressed in both action plans. It is currently cumbersome for EU citizens to apply for public services in other member states than their country of residence. This in turn reduces mobility of businesses and people. To avoid this, the Commission propagates for seamless services for business, across borders, e.g. single points of contact via governmental websites. Thus, an EU-wide implementation of necessary cross-border services in order to improve availability for citizens moving in-between member states is stated as a central aim. Specific attention is paid to citizen mobility services, such as job search and educational services. The European Commission (2006) writes:

As the European Union continues to enlarge and embrace greater diversity, new needs and demands are arising such as for seamless public services across borders, essential to increase citizens’ opportunities for mobility and for business in Europe. eGovernment can help governments to meet these challenges and demands.

The above objectives build on the assumption that a more efficient government can generate a number of savings, not only for governments but also for citizens and businesses dependent on public services. In this respect, e-government and the rationalization of public administration through the use of ICT is seen to inhabit a central role – as the Commission (2006) puts it: “eGovernment is the key to unlocking potential in the public sector”. E-government is thus meant to contribute to a smooth realization of the Single Market and complement EU legislative acts and their effectiveness in a number of domains.

The role of e-government in facilitating the functioning of the Single Market is generally linked to improving competition, thus fulfilling the aims of the Lisbon Agenda, i.e. to make Europe “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion (European Council, 2000). In particular the first action plan emphasizes how countries that score high in public-sector openness, efficiency and e-government, also score high in terms of economic performance and competition. E-government is thus here seen as an important factor behind strengthening nation’s competitiveness in a global economy: “Effective and innovative public administrations are essential to a globally competitive Europe” (European Commission, 2006).

Empowerment and Participation

It is interesting to note how the 2006-2011 action plan speaks of “strengthening participation and democratic decision-making in Europe” through e-government, whereas the 2011-2015 action plan speaks of increasing “user empowerment” and “stakeholder involvement”. A closer look nevertheless reveals that both plans speak of related issues, albeit with a different emphasis, although the second plan does not formulate it in terms of “democracy” or “e-democracy” (in fact, “democracy” is not once mentioned), but rather “effective involvement of citizens and businesses in the policy-making process” (European Commission, 2010a).

Both plans emphasize how governments have become too complex and too remote for its citizens. Citizens are also becoming better informed and are demanding greater involvement. In this respect, ICT offers great potential for, on the one hand, increasing transparency in decision-making procedures, bringing citizens closer to governments. On the other hand, ICT
offers tools for participating in public policy consultations, debates and policy making processes, e.g. through electronic debate forums and blogs. Thus, e-government can, by providing new forms of political expression, further inclusion and public participation.

Simultaneously, “participation” is discussed in terms of strengthening collaboration with citizens in the production of public services. This is especially evident in the 2011-2015 action plan. Whereas the first action plan speaks of the possibilities of ICT for creating more extensive involvement in all the phases of decision-making, i.e. political influence, the second action plan mentions involvement mainly in terms of influencing the design and production of public services, thus emphasizing influence in terms of user-friendliness and adapting services to demand:

There is clearly a need to move towards a more open model of design, production and delivery of online services, taking advantage of the possibilities offered by collaboration between citizens, entrepreneurs and civil society (European Commission, 2006).

Through social networking and other collaborative tools (e.g. wikis), users can play a more active role in the design and production of public services. In turn, services can be designed around users’ needs and become more flexible and personalized. It does not only enhance user satisfaction and empowerment, but is also claimed to improve administrative efficiency and effectiveness of public policy output. User satisfaction and increased internal efficiency in public administration are thus seen to reinforce each other. The Commission (2010a) summarizes it in the following way:

Empowerment means increasing the capacity of citizens, businesses and other organisations to be pro-active in the society through the use of new technological tools. Public services can gain in efficiency and users in satisfaction by meeting the expectations of users better and being designed around their needs and in collaboration with them whenever possible.

This line of reasoning is made even clearer in the work of the eGovernment Sub-group (2009), in the preparation of the 2011-2015 action plan:

Services should be maximally responsive to user needs and wants by providing more individualized services and allowing users to tailor the service to their personal requirements. Increasingly, users should be able to design, create and self-direct their own services.

User empowerment is also seen to increase with the new possibilities of making public services and information more accessible and available, even to more vulnerable groups:

The combination of new technologies, open specificities, innovative architectures and the availability of public sector information can deliver greater value to citizens with fewer resources (European Commission, 2010a).

Overall, developing more inclusive, user-friendly, accessible and transparent public services is in both action plans emphasized as an important step towards increasing trust for European governments.

**Administrative Efficiency and Effectiveness**

Strengthening efficiency and effectiveness in governments can be seen as an underlying aim of all above objectives. Nevertheless, it is also emphasized as a separate aim in both action
plans. Generally, e-government is seen as key to reducing the “administrative burden” of European governments:

For many people and businesses the best government is one that goes unnoticed. In practice however, many procedures and requirements make interactions with governments burdensome in terms of time and resources. Therefore simplification or elimination of administrative processes should be an important objective (…) (The European Commission, 2010a)

E-government is described as “an instrument of change” for improving organizational processes in administrations and reducing costs. This can for instance be done by using ICT to automate administrative procedures, providing one-stop entries or “once-only” registration of data. Increasing efficiency and effectiveness internally (within governments) as well as externally (towards citizens and businesses) is regarded as an important measure for creating a “less intrusive” government. They are in turn perceived as complementary, or as the Commission (2006) puts it: “(g)overnments need to provide better public services with fewer resources”. A more efficient government is in turn regarded to improve accountability and increase trust for governments.

**Technical and Legal Preconditions**

The last objective is emphasized as a means for facilitating the three above objectives. In other words, in order for e-government to become a reality and meet its aims, certain “key enablers” need to be put in place. These enablers involve several technical and legal preconditions (e.g. ensuring interoperability between infrastructure and systems across borders), as well as organizational and semantic aspects. These preconditions include legal frameworks for a European wide use of (national) electronic identification (eID), cross-border payment schemes and deployment of one-stop approaches for information and services. In these areas, the Commission provides expertise and forums for sharing knowledge and expertise, best practices and good examples, formulates common frameworks or standards and provides re-usable technical building blocks.

Although the Commission admits that most of the challenges for effective e-government implementation are at national or sub-national levels, the Commission regards its role as “adding value” in providing support to the member states, mainly by measurement and knowledge sharing. As the Commission expresses it: “(p)roviding relevant information, quantifying, benchmarking, measuring and comparing impact and benefit is essential for mainstreaming eGovernment” (European Commission, 2006). By providing common, measurable indicators the Commission thus provides certain standards according to which e-government should be implemented in the EU. The main responsibility of the Commission is thus to improve conditions for the development of cross-border public e-service.

**Discussion**

With the assessment of the two action plans as basis, the following section will, from the perspective of the four ideal types of e-government – NPM, Post-Weberian Bureaucracy, the New Dawn of Deliberative Democracy and DEG – analyze what salient ideas can be distinguished in the action plans. The point of using ideal types as an analytical tool is to assess if any of the provided ideal types suit the studied phenomena better than the others. This will also be the main intention of this discussion. However, the analysis will also identify what aspects of the ideal types the policy documents do not include or put less emphasis on, since the omission of ideas can contribute to a clarification of the most prominent ideas (see
In turn, the first research question will be assessed, namely what are the underlying ideas which, in the case of EU policy, frame and drive the implementation of e-government? This will be a stepping-stone for, in the next section, arriving at the second question: what views on public administration do these ideas convey?

De-Bureaucratization and Seamless Government

In the action plans, few parallels are drawn to e-government’s role in strengthening of bureaucratic administrative functions, such as legality, objectivity and impartiality. Although the plans mention that ICT can contribute to improving transparency in public service provisions and decision-making processes in general, this is mainly mentioned in relation to increasing citizen involvement and empowerment, rather than in terms of enforcing constitutional ideals, such as guaranteeing equality, impartiality and objectivity in public service provisions. Enforcing accountability is also referred to but mainly in terms of improving efficiency rather than ensuring responsibility of decisions. In fact, ICT’s role in strengthening rule of law is hardly mentioned.

Rather, e-government is mainly discussed in terms of achieving a de-bureaucratization of public administration. Ideas of de-bureaucratization are noticeable in the objectives which concern seamless (cross-border) services and single entry-points for public information and services. In this respect, administrative and even nation specific divisions, are becoming irrelevant and should not be noticed by the citizens in their contact with public administrations. This elucidates how the formal and comprehensive set of rules currently governing public administrations, usually organized according to a hierarchical structure and according to certain boundaries, should be changed in favor of more external-oriented and citizen-centric organizations, where these boundaries and hierarchies are dissolved, or at least, less noticeable. This is for instance manifested in wording that propagate that the best governments are the ones that go unnoticed and do not “intrude” in the lives of citizens. Obviously, enforcing public rules and regulations according to the rule of law and constitutional ideals sometimes means that governments have to be rather prominent in the lives of citizens, e.g. concerning the enforcement of the obligations of citizenship. Focus thus lies on achieving effective output with ICT, rather than to use ICT to enforce legal and accountable processes.

In sum, these ideas of de-bureaucratization, seamless government and output orientation partly correspond to the ideational systems of NPM, as well as DEG, whereas the ideas of post-Weberian bureaucracy are diluted.

Empowerment (In a Market Sense)

Although the first action plan speaks of the potential of ICT in increasing participation in political debates and influence in democratic decision-making, the wording in the second action plan illustrates how empowerment in a political sense is being down-prioritized in favor of empowerment in a market sense. For instance, participation and involvement are not related to the input-side of governments, e.g. democratic decision-making, dialogue or political communication, but rather to the output-side, that is, citizen’s role in the design and co-production of public services. User-driven services are here seen as an important prerequisite, not only for enhancing involvement in policy making processes, but also for improving the quality of services. Citizen involvement is perceived as central for achieving customized and personalized services, that is, services that are in demand. The strong
emphasis on meeting the demand of citizens points at how citizens are handed a type of market power, as customers. In this respect, the needs of the individual, as well as individual choice are highlighted rather than collectively formulated interests and decisions, which traditional, political channels are to represent. It signifies ideas related to a “democracy without politics”, where “voice” (Hirschman, 1970) is a necessary prerequisite for involvement and participation in policy making.

By assuming that citizens are to become more active in service production – what traditionally has been considered to lie within the exclusive competences of governments – some of the tasks of governments are also placed on citizens to carry out. Concurrently, it places some of the responsibility of governments on the citizen in fulfilling his or her needs or demands. According to this logic, ideas of a “do-it-yourself-government” are present. These ideas assume a rather rational view of citizens, as self-interested and well-informed actors. Most importantly, they assume that all citizens have similar prerequisites as users and are thus equally able to place demands on service production. In reality, user-driven services run the risk of becoming services shaped after the most influential or interested group, since these are the groups able to voice their demands and needs. The fact that the second plan also does not include advancing digital inclusion (as the first action plan does), but has been moved to the digitization of society in broader terms, signifies how the view on citizens as independent and equal users has been further enforced in the e-government policy. Inclusion here refers to inclusive services, i.e. improving access to services and furthering citizen involvement in the design and production of public e-services. Democratic inclusion, i.e. the incorporation of underrepresented groups in forums of political representation and influence, is thus being toned down.

In sum, the above illustrates how e-government is presently being actively connected to ideas of using ICT for empowerment in a market sense, according to the ideals of NPM, rather than deliberative democratic ideals. Aims such as achieving democratic dialogue, political communication and democratic inclusion appear to lose in importance; in the second action plan, the only aspect that touches upon these issues is the possibility to, through ICT, increase transparency in policy making, thus giving users insight in decision-making processes. Trust and legitimacy is here meant to be created through customer satisfaction in the service production (output) rather than democratic deliberative processes (input) In this respect, EU has, like governments in general, moved away from the e-democratic ideals of the 1990’s and early 21st century, towards increasingly focusing on e-government as in public service production through ICT (public e-services).

**Rationalization and Transformation**

Overall, e-government is actively being connected to ideas of rationalization and facilitating efficiency, competition and productivity. The significance attached to e-government in facilitating the Single Market (free movement) and the Lisbon agenda (competitiveness) indicates a strong belief in the potential of ICT in reducing the costs of public administration (“the administrative burden”) today and hence, improving the competitiveness of countries.

Rationalization is also strongly connected to increased user involvement and empowerment, i.e. involving citizens in the production of public e-services and hence services. As already mentioned, increased user involvement will place some of the work load of governments on citizens. This is consequently expected to rationalize some of the work of governments. Concurrently, by meeting the demand of citizens through personalized services, more stream-
lined and efficient services can be achieved. User empowerment and internal administrative efficiency, as well as effective output, are thus in the action plans treated as highly compatible.

By referring several times to how e-government will help combating “the administrative burden” of public administrations and creating a “less intrusive” government, there is also an underlying assumption that administrations in Europe are inefficient, burdensome and rigid, as well as interfere too much in people’s lives. This largely corresponds to the rationalization and streamlining principles of NPM. Furthermore, the progress measurements and benchmarking used by the Commission correspond to other NPM ideals, such as comparing and competing in order to enforce the desired results. Simultaneously, both action plans illustrate how e-government is given a much larger meaning than simply rationalizing administrative processes; e-government is seen as the much sought after tool for “unlocking potential in public administrations”, signifying how a public administration in its present form needs to be transformed and e-government in key to this transformation.

Summary – Ideas of the EU e-Government Policy

Table 1 summarizes the above discussion, by singling out the salient ideas of the EU e-government policy according to the four ideal types:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The EU e-Government Policy</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Empowerment (in market sense)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Customer orientation (user-driven services)</td>
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<td>- Output orientation</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Transparency</td>
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<td>- Seamless government</td>
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<tr>
<td>- One-stop shops (Single-point entry)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Do-it-yourself-government</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Co-production of public services</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Inclusiveness (in services)</td>
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<td>- Democratic dialogue*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Political communication*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Effectiveness, productivity and cost-efficiency</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Benchmarking and quality evaluations</td>
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Table 2. Ideas of the EU e-Government Policy.

Conclusions and Implications

The aim of this paper has been to develop an analytical framework for analyzing the dominant ideas underlying the implementation of e-government. The framework has incorporated previous research of e-government in order to arrive at four ideal types which highlight certain main ideas with regards to the content and role of e-government. These have been termed New Public Management, Post-Weberian Bureaucracy, the New Dawn of Deliberative Democracy and Digital Era-Governance. In turn, the salient ideas of the two main documents of the European policy on e-government, the action plans for 2006-2010 and 2011-2015, have figured as basis for analysis. Two research questions have further acted as guidance: (1) What are the underlying ideas which, in the case of EU policy, frame and drive the implementation of e-government? (2) What views on public administration do these ideas convey?

The paper has been grounded in a specific puzzle, namely the rather uncritical and ready acceptance of EU e-government policy in member states, despite previous resistance to EU
interference in matters concerning public administration. The marked influence of the EU on national e-government implementation highlights the importance of increasing the understanding of the ideas and content underlying the e-government policy of the Union. It means not taking the content of e-government as given, since these ideas can have important and unforeseen consequences. By providing an analytical framework for understanding the ideas of this phenomenon, the overarching aim has been to provide tools for understanding what views on public administration, e-government, in its present form, conveys.

At first glance, it is evident that several objectives of the action plans correspond to the described ideal types; in fact, the EU policy can be regarded to integrate much of the content and ideas previously associated with e-government. E-government is seen as the solution to several and rather varying problems. In this sense, the EU e-government policy corresponds to what has been termed a “super-standard” (Røvik, 2000; 2008), i.e. a widely popular organizational idea. Due to its broad applicability to a number of problems, its correlation to the dominant, contemporary values and its “apolitical” character, this super-standard appeals to a number of different actors with competing interests.

However, against the above discussion and analysis, I argue that a number of ideas are more distinguishable than others in the EU e-government policy. Furthermore, I will also argue that the dominance of certain ideas over others has certain ideological and thus normative implications, which, despite the perceivably apolitical character of e-government, can have political meaning. Ultimately, it concerns the normative question of what governments ought to do, or, more specifically, how far the collective (government) responsibility of the individual is meant to stretch (Rothstein, 2002), as well as what source of legitimacy governments base their organization on (Rothstein, 2010).

E-services or E-government?

Several of the salient ideas of the EU e-government policy correspond to the ideals of the NPM perspective on e-government: empowerment in a market sense, meeting demands of citizens (citizens perceived as customers), achieving effectiveness, productivity and cost-efficiency, as well as benchmarking of progress. However, ideas corresponding to DEG are just as evident: a seamless, flexible and responsive government in the shape of cross-border services is stressed as one of the important aims of the EU policy, as well as single-point entries, do-it-yourself government and not the least, the co-production of public services. This is especially noticeable in the second action plan, although it cannot be claimed to entirely embody the DEG’s vision of a fully digitized public administration.

In contrast, the e-government action plans puts less emphasis on the ideas corresponding to the ideal types of The New Dawn of Deliberative Democracy and Post-Weberian Bureaucracy. In fact, the aims of the plans do not touch upon issues such as achieving increased accountability, impartiality, equality and legality through ICT, but rather advocates a de-bureaucratization of governments, a structure which the proponents of Post-Weberian Bureaucracy claim is not suitable for enforcing rule of law and constitutional ideals (Cordella, 2007). Furthermore, although the first action plan touches upon issues of using ICT for improving democratic dialogue and political communication, i.e. empowerment in a political sense, the fact that these issues are excluded in the second action plan, illustrates a loss in relevance. Similarly, advancing digital inclusion through e-government policies is also, through its exclusion in the second action plan, being toned down.
In short, the e-government is mainly treated as an issue of enhancing *service production* and *effective out-put*, rather than rule of law or democratic deliberation, i.e. the process- or input-side of governments. Bureaucratic and democratic ideals are consequently down-prioritized. This illustrates a view of public administration as predominantly a service producing instance, where the source of legitimacy stems from user satisfaction and empowerment in a market sense, rather than rule of law or democratic deliberation or decision-making according to traditional, representative channels. In a sense, it paints a picture of a public administration outside politics, where service rather than government is emphasized.

Furthermore, as Dunleavy and Margetts (2006) already have highlighted, the dominant ideas of NPM and DEG are not always compatible; rather, the latter has been seen as having developed in opposition to the former. The most illustrative example is how DEG is meant to focus on service- and citizen-orientation in contrast to NPM’s emphasis on business management and streamlining of administrative processes. By combining several of the ideas from both NPM and DEG, the EU e-government policy assumes that a rationalization of administrative processes and an increased service and citizen orientation are compatible. The question is if this is the case. Rationalization and internal efficiency is not always compatible with enhanced citizen orientation and user satisfaction, but can in fact be highly incompatible.

**What Ought Governments To Do?**

Finally, what ought governments to do, according to the e-government action plans? What is their role vis-à-vis the citizen? The e-government policy of the EU indicates that the role of governments should be rather retracted; they should act as unnoticed and be as flexible and customized to citizen needs as possible. Furthermore, administrative processes should be as streamlined as possible. In contrast, the role of citizens is viewed as more prominent; citizens should become more involved, in particular in service production. E-government is in several respects viewed as the tool for realizing these changes. The ideas underlying e-government thus illustrate a rather positive view on citizens in terms of interest and ability to participate in service production, and a negative view on governments in managing certain issues. Simultaneously, a great deal of responsibility is placed on the individual citizen in terms of, on the one hand, shouldering some of the (previous) responsibilities of governments and, on the other hand, voicing his or her needs or demands.

In this respect, it is vital to recognize the multi-functionality and complexity of public administration. Public administration is not solely governed by rule of law, market mechanisms, civil servants, politicians nor other organized interests, but constitutes a combination of these forms of governance. This means that principles related to rule of law have to be balanced against rule by the majority and cost-efficient management (Christensen et al, 2005). According to this logic, it is important that e-government encompasses more of these principles and is viewed more than an issue of improving public service delivery and efficiency through ICT, in order to not undermine trust for and legitimacy of governments. In this respect, further research is needed to increase the understanding of the role and content of e-government as well as its consequences for the organization of public administration.

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