DemTech
DEMOCRATIC TECHNOLOGY

Preliminary Research Notes
Reflections on organizational aspects of the 2011 Danish Parliamentary election

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Parliamentary election

Purpose of report
This document is a brief summary of reflections on selected impressions and observations primarily made from August 26th to September 17th during the preparation and execution of the Danish parliamentary election in 2011 in the three biggest municipalities in Denmark: Aarhus, Frederiksberg and Copenhagen. The material also includes follow-up interviews and participation in 'experience-sharing' - meetings. These observations were conducted by four researchers from the DemTech project (http://www.demtech.dk/) at the IT University of Copenhagen: Nina Boulus-Rødje, Andreas Laumand Christensen, Christopher Gad and Randi Markussen.

The document does not express a comprehensive ethnographic analysis of the electoral process in Denmark or in any of the particular municipalities. Rather, the purpose of the document is to highlight selected areas and themes for further ethnographic and sociological investigation that our observations suggest are crucial for how the current electoral system works.

The focus of our observations was the organizational aspects of preparing and executing a parliamentarian election. This includes a wide range of activities conducted by employees in the municipalities, election officials, and other organizations involved in carrying out the election. Thus the primary focus was on the work of the people organizing the election, rather than, for example, the voters and their points of view.

1 Background
Shortly after the official launch of the DemTech project July 1, 2011, the Danish Prime Minister, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, announced on August 26 that a parliamentary election would take place on September 15.

It is important to keep in mind that while in several other countries, parliamentarian elections take place within a pre-defined time frame (e.g., every four years), this is not the case in Denmark where the prime minister can announce a parliamentarian election at any time (up to maximum four years after the previous one). It is also worth mentioning that while many countries in the West are suffering from decline in attendance to parliamentarian elections, the attendance in Denmark has been relatively high and stable for many years. It is important to note, however, that the situation is different for the elections to the municipalities, which are always conducted every four years and has significantly lower attendance.

Currently, in Denmark the organization of elections is strongly decentralized. Many

tasks are managed locally by each of the 98 municipalities. Populations vary and thus also the number of citizens registered to vote in each municipality. To illustrate the span: for the parliamentary elections in 2007 in the Copenhagen municipality 369109 citizens were registered to vote, while, for instance, in Læsø the number was 1606 (http://www.microformats.dk/simile/stemmer/stemmer.html). This alone makes elections in Denmark a quite varied task in terms of organization, resource allocation, time consumption etc.

At the time of the announcement of the election, the social scientists in DemTech were in the process of negotiating access to study the organization and execution of the next election with the municipality partners in the project (Aarhus, Frederiksberg and Copenhagen). Likewise work on developing research questions for the qualitative research part of the project had just begun. From the moment the election was announced and during the three weeks of preparation until Election Day, the researchers visited and spent as much time as possible in the three municipalities.

2 Overview of research activities

The researchers followed different actors involved in the organization and execution of the election, participated in various courses and seminars, formal and informal meetings, conducted interviews and observations, attended special election meetings organized by the municipality employees (i.e., valgmøde, valgsekretær møde, generalprøve møde for fintelling, pakkemøde), etc.

An overview of the research activities:

- Seminars: 2 courses (in total 14h) organized by the Center for Public Management (*Center for Offentlig Ledelse*, COK)
- Field visits to the municipalities: 13 visits (32h in total)
- Election meetings and other formal meetings with municipality employees: 9 meetings (in total 21.15h)
- Formal steering committee meetings between DemTech researchers and partners: 5 meetings (in total 9.5h)
- Formal interviews: 6 (in total 9h)
- Observation: 9 sessions (66.45 h)

These research activities were not organized around following specific persons, a specific place, etc, but rather we used an explorative approach following and/or participating in occurring events, meetings, etc. Our aim was to get a good impression of the complexity of the elections process, the meaning of the event, and its present organization. Thus, activities spanned from observing relatively small tasks we happened to see in a municipality, over attending large meetings about the overall organization of the election, to having conversations about the overall and particular meaning of the election, and of course, to observing as much as possible on the election day and during the counting processes. One basic question guiding our research activities and following reflections were: what makes this clearly complex and critically important organization of election work?

3 Overall impression of the election

It is our impression in an organizational perspective that in several ways the election is a quite special *event*. It is an event, which is a result of intense, complex work 'behind the scenes'. From the point of view of especially large municipalities, preparing and executing an election is an enormous organizational and non-routine task requiring the involvement of many people, scattered across various sections. And it requires coordination of a range of different tasks. These both includes having employees from the municipalities work overtime, but also for instance, summoning volunteers for the polling stations on election days, where all political parties should ideally be represented. It involves attending meetings, collaborating and coordinating with other organizations such as schools, the police, taxi-companies etc.

When talking to employees from the municipalities, certain general characteristics about the election were highlighted:

- Taking part in organizing and executing the elections was seen as important, and the election was seen as an immensely *serious* event. The election was seen as a core process in a democracy and as such a solemn event. It was interesting to note how even small and unchallenging tasks (e.g., counting ballots; printing out new polling cards) were seen as more interesting than similar simple everyday tasks. Others, with key-positions in the execution of the election saw making the non-routine organization work as a most interesting challenge.
- While the election was described as a serious event, many also highlighted that it was "*a feast*" or a "*celebration of democracy*". It was highlighted to us, for instance, how Citizens did not seem to mind standing in line to vote and voting seem to be viewed by many as a right, but also an obligation.
- Similarly, municipality employees as well as other election officials seemed to display high dedication to the task of organizing an election, and they did not seem to mind spending extra hours working hard. Some saw working with elections as their obligation, while others saw it as a prestigious role to fulfill. It was interesting to notice that a light-hearted competition about 'organizational efficacy' seemed to take place between some of the polling stations, for instance regarding the time they spent on the rough count.

To summarize: It became clear that an election is both seen as an interesting *organizational and bureaucratic event*, and, no less important, as a *cultural event*.

4 Central observations of some essential elements in the current electoral system

Elections in Denmark are thus non-trivial tasks; they contain multiple meanings, practices and, furthermore, have a long history. In the following we will highlight some characteristics we find particularly important for DemTech to investigate further, ethnographically.

The following is not an exhaustive list of what is relevant for conducting an election, or for research in DemTech. We highlight potential entry-points for further mapping and investigation based on the aforementioned question: What makes this clearly complex and critically important organisation work?

The distributed nature of the election:
There are many small polling stations each with their own organisation. Many people and different representatives from political groups, municipality employees and laymen are involved in the election. Many complex processes are divided into relatively simple and smaller tasks for individuals to accomplish. This means that today most people are able to do, and to understand by explanation or from observations, the individual tasks that make up an election.

It also means that in case of error, it is in many cases possible to take one step back, retrace the source of the error, and find a solution. This distribution of processes also means that many people are involved in the democratic process, and it is very hard to launch a large-scale attack on the system. That would at least take a lot of resources.

Exactly how work is distributed and divided into a complex chain of smaller tasks we believe should be mapped thoroughly in one or more municipalities, using for instance actor-network theory or a distributed cognition approach. This suggestion has received support and confirmation from academics who study election practices, the different municipalities as well as the ministry.

The distributed nature of knowledge about the organization and execution of an election:
The organization and execution of an election seems, in a relatively high extent, to depend on local situated knowledge and experience of those who participated in the execution of previous elections. This dependency becomes very acute in organizing an election as it is an immensely complex and non-routine task. Several municipalities, at least the big ones, seem to have their own guidelines, which they pull out of the drawer when an election is announced. Yet these guidelines can quickly run out of date due to changes in processes and practices, modification to the law, introduction of new technologies (e. g., digital voter lists in some polling stations), etc.

Thus, as soon as the election is announced, updated versions of these guidelines are circulated to the different people participating in the organization and execution of the election. We noticed (in Copenhagen) that a very large amount of emails and

attachments were circulated during the three weeks prior to the election, with the purpose of circulating relevant knowledge of experienced election officials. Likewise, other information is communicated through meetings. We noticed that a lot of meetings were held during the three-week period prior to the election.

Control mechanism:

An important aspect of the current election system is that several control mechanisms are inscribed in the different processes. These control mechanisms are both inscribed in the different computer systems used at different stages (for example, excel sheets are used to assist with the computation of results after the fine count, programmed to alert if an counting error occurs), and in the different processes and tasks conducted prior to and during the election. Ballots, polling cards (valgkort), etc. are all counted at least twice by different people. Most importantly ballots are first counted by political representatives and volunteer citizens during the rough count (on the election day), and then they are counted again by municipality employees during the fine count (the day after the election). These control mechanisms are spread throughout the chain of processes to ensure that the system is solid and cannot so easily be attacked or tampered with. This also implies, however, that changing even the smallest tasks is not easy as it will risk influencing a chain of interconnected processes and other control mechanisms.

Social-material traces:

Many of the above mentioned control mechanisms are designed in such a way that they leave *sociomaterial traces*, which makes it easier to detect situations where something goes wrong. To illustrate the sociomaterial traces, take for example, the act of refilling paper-ballots during Election Day. Ballots are counted in advance by election officials and sorted into piles of 100. Whenever the people sitting managing the polling stations run out of ballots, they receive a refill, for instance, from another election official who is responsible for refilling ballots. The election official who is responsible for refilling ballots notes down on his sheet the amount of ballots he hands out, the time and the name of the person receiving the ballots. The same happens on the other side of the table, where the person receiving the ballots notes down on his or her sheet the amount of ballots received, the time, and the name of person who handed them the ballots.

The sociomaterial traces or artifacts make it easier to trace previous activities in case of errors. Although such practices vary across the different polling locations and municipalities, their function is similar. The sociomaterial traces and control mechanisms are strongly interlinked, in what ways, we recommend should be further investigated.

5 Future work

We suggest that the issues listed above are thoroughly investigated. Not only is it important to better understand how the current system works in order to design technology. It is also important for deciding if and how to make changes to what could be irreplaceable aspects of the current process. What these are can only be known by conducting very thorough empirical investigation and mapping out the processes, including the many checks and balances involved.

Changing an important cultural event as such also needs consideration, as it might also affect how people are able to perform their role as citizen in the process.

It is important to consider the cultural aspects of current procedures: For instance if counting ballots is narrowly thought of as counting, it seems trivial to digitize this process. But if counting ballots is seen as a process where people are checking and monitoring ballots and each other, and building accountability relations, then it is not trivial to change it. The balances in the system need to be considered carefully.

6 Relevance
From our perspective informed by STS (Science & Technology Studies), elections are an interesting area of investigation on its own right. The relevance of further ethnographic investigation is also relevant for 1) contributing with continuous input to the design process – here understanding the organization of the elections is crucial. 2) Understanding new organizational changes and challenges produced by the introduction of new systems, which is especially crucial in the context of elections. 3) Help politicians make more qualified decisions on whether or not to digitize, or which parts of the election process that can be digitized. 4) Contributing more generally to a critical and qualified discussion of the potentials of e-voting in Denmark and beyond.