

Chapter 83

To Participation and Beyond? Developing E-Democracy in Bristol, UK

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides a case study of local developments in e-democracy in the city of Bristol, UK. Although some of these developments relate to periodic local elections, most are concerned with supporting new forms of engagement between local citizens and local government institutions and processes in the times between these. Starting with the coordination of its own consultation activities, then encouraging greater participation in council-run activities, and finally supporting grass roots engagement activities, Bristol City Council embarked on a local program of e-democracy activities from 2000 onwards. This grew into a national pilot scheme that enabled a number of valuable comparative evaluations of e-democracy in practice. The chapter draws on the results of a number of evaluations of these local and national developments and highlights the more widespread and enduring challenges of trying to broaden the scope and the effectiveness of local democracy and improve the practices of social inclusion.

INTRODUCTION

There is widespread and growing concern in many democracies with the apparent disengagement of citizens from many of the formal processes of democratic politics: turnout in elections is declining and measures of trust in politicians and many of the institutions of government are falling (Dalton, 2004; Held & Koenig-Archibugi, 2005). There have, however, been concerted efforts to

reinvigorate and renew democracy, especially at the local level (Rao, 2000), and to re-engage and re-animate the populace and create a more active citizenry (Miessen & Basar, 2006).

The rapid expansion of information and communication technologies (ICT) offers the prospect of substantial support for these programmes of democratic renewal. The delivery and management of many government services online are now widespread, but there has also been a dramatic

increase in the use of ICT to support a range of initiatives under the broad heading of e-democracy. These include online petitioning, e-citizens' panels, electronic voting schemes and online forums. Mass participation via new technologies is believed to offer potential to 'crowd-source' new ideas and solutions and online groups that may have started with a limited social remit are seen to be developing broader political goals and programmes. In this context, e-democracy is often also connected directly to grassroots engagement and to community-led activism as well as to the electronic delivery of services by local and municipal governments. One of the key questions we pose in this chapter is: what relationship, if any, should directly elected public bodies such as local governments have with these new technology-fueled forms of activism?

In many instances the widespread uptake and use of ICT by citizens in all aspects of their lives, along with the rise of social media as a tool for linking and uniting previously disparate groups, is seen also as a challenge to traditional models of representative democracy and top-down forms of democratic engagement. Many current local politicians did not grow up with these new ICTs and while many have embraced them as an important part of their role, some struggle to move beyond the more traditional modes of face-to-face meetings, written submissions and paper-based surveys of public opinion.

An important element in measuring the impact of these new initiatives and activities lies in judging their value and the extent to which they reduce or reinforce historic inequalities in patterns of political engagement and active citizenship. Concern has been expressed at the prospect of a 'digital divide' increasing these inequalities in political engagement and thereby exacerbating broader patterns of social exclusion (Compaine, 2001).

This chapter addresses these broad concerns through a critical case study of the development over the last decade of e-democracy in Bristol, a

mid-sized city in the UK. It draws on the results of a national research project and on the first-hand experience of key protagonists to critically review the progress and effectiveness of e-democracy in Bristol and to set this within the context of similar developments in England as a whole. It also considers wider questions of social inclusion and political engagement and in particular the extent to which initiatives of this type have succeeded in increasing social inclusion as part of the process of political re-engagement.

BACKGROUND TO E-DEMOCRACY IN BRISTOL, UK

In 2000, the City of Bristol council responded to growing local concerns about declining political engagement by establishing the independent Bristol Democracy Commission with a brief, *inter alia*, to review the state of local democracy and to make recommendations for how this could be reinvigorated. The Commission comprised twelve local residents with a variety of experience who gathered evidence from a number of sources over the course of a year and then developed responses to some of the local challenges of political engagement. In the context of this chapter, it is worth noting that apart from an online survey the work of the Commission relied on mainly traditional forms of data collection and engagement.

When it reported, the Commission recommended a number of ways in which the Council could strengthen its ties with local citizens and encourage a more extensive system of engagement between them and their political representatives, over and above the traditional opportunity to vote in periodic local elections (Bristol Democracy Commission, 2001). Some of these involved institutional reforms to create more localized forums for debate and decision making about issues of local concern, while others took the form of support for politicians to enable them to learn more

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