Electronic Democracy at the American Grassroots

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I examine the delivery of electronic democracy (e-democracy) by U.S. local governments through their e-government activities. In particular, I examine three issues related to local e-democracy through data from focus groups with officials from 37 municipal and county governments across the U.S. The issues are: (1) why local governments decided to adopt e-government, and whether e-democracy was among the reasons for its adoption; (2) whether e-government has produced or affected local e-democracy; and (3) what plans, if any, local governments have with respect to e-democracy in coming years. My principal findings are that e-government at the local level was adopted principally to deliver governmental information and services and to provide citizen access to governmental officials; that e-government does not operate in a manner that either produces or impacts local e-democracy (at least as the term is broadly defined herein); and that e-democracy is not on the radar screens of most American local governments for future deployment.

Keywords: citizen participation; democracy; digital democracy; digital government; electronic democracy; electronic government

INTRODUCTION

Electronic government (e-government) has been defined as the electronic delivery of governmental information and services 24 hours per day, seven days per week (Norris, Fletcher & Holden, 2000). This is a broad definition and, as such, would include a wide variety of activities undertaken electronically by governments.

In this paper, I focus on only one aspect of e-government and at only one level of government in the U.S. I examine the delivery of e-democracy among U.S. local governments through their e-government efforts. E-democracy, which I will define, can be part of a government’s initial de-
ployment of e-government, a subsequent development within an e-government deployment, a consequence (intended or unintended) of the deployment of e-government (e.g., e-democracy may be demanded by citizens’ organizations), or possibly a combination of two or more of these.

However it may arise, e-democracy is viewed by many observers as a potentially significant phenomenon with far-reaching consequences. In recent years, scholars and political observers in the U.S. and Europe have argued that new forms of public participation in government and politics are necessary to rejuvenate what they believe to be a stagnating, if not failing, democracy. The evidence that these critics offer to support their claim includes at least the following: declining citizen participation in national and local elections and decreasing citizen trust in and feelings of efficacy toward government (Westin, 2004). These critics also argue that e-democracy (essentially the ability of citizens to participate in government and politics via various electronic means, including electronic voting) has the potential to reverse these trends and to breathe new life into democracy (Clift, 2004).

If these claims are true (and nearly all observers agree that voter turnout and citizen trust in government have declined substantially in the recent past), then e-democracy may be an important option that governments might find worth adopting in order to increase citizen participation in government and improve citizen trust in government. Additionally, scholars should find e-democracy worth careful study, particularly to learn how e-democracy arises, to examine the role that governments play in deploying and supporting e-democracy, to understand the forms that e-democracy actually takes on the ground, to identify what impacts e-democracy may have, and to forecast what the future may bring with respect to e-democracy.

In this paper, I address three questions related to e-democracy through data from focus groups with officials from 37 municipal and county governments across the U.S. The questions are:

1. why local governments decided to adopt e-government and whether e-democracy was among the reasons for its adoption;
2. whether e-government has produced or affected local e-democracy; and
3. what plans, if any, local governments have with respect to e-democracy in coming years.

In the following pages, I first discuss and define e-democracy. Next, I explain the methodology that I employed to gather data for this study. Then, I present findings with respect to each of the three previous questions. Finally, I draw conclusions about e-government and e-democracy at the American grassroots.

WHAT IS E-DEMOCRACY?

E-democracy can be defined in a number of ways (Gabardi, 2001). For example, it can be something as simple as electronic access by citizens to governmental information. E-democracy can also be more complex and can involve far greater interaction between citizens and government, including: the ability of citizens to reach and interact with governmental officials (e.g., via e-mail or other electronic means); online review of and comment on government proposals (budgets, land use plans, etc.) and regulations; citizen participation in governmental actions and decisions through such things as online
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