Chapter IV
Issues and Trends in Internet– Based Citizen Participation

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INTRODUCTION

The use of Internet technology to further citizen participation is believed to hold great promise to enhance democratic governance by allowing citizens to access public information and interact with government officials, promoting better accountability of public officials to citizens through efficient and convenient delivery of services, and producing fertile ground for reinvigorated civil society (Barber, 1984; La Port et al., 2000; Scavo & Yuhang Shi, 1999). Empirical evidence suggests that some of the promises of bridging the gap among governments and citizens through enhanced interaction between citizens and government, and between citizens themselves are yet to be fulfilled (Chadwick & May, 2001; the Global e-Policy and e-Government Institute and Rutgers University e-Governance Institute, 2003; Hale, Musso & Weare, 1999; Wales, Kerns, Bend & Stern,2002; West, 2001). This chapter reviews the opportunities and challenges of Internet-based citizen participation, the trend noted in the findings of some of the empirical studies and attempts to explain the reason the Internet has failed in its putative potential to bring citizens closer to their governments.

BACKGROUND

As the Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW) have come to dominate discussions of organizational change, technology has come to be seen as the solution to a variety of governmental and administrative problems. The Internet has revolutionized the way government operates and delivers public services in recent years. Internet technology is increasingly being applied in government organizations to help improve e-services and make them less expensive to deliver, and to make organizations more responsive to citizens (Negroponte, 1995; Rheingold, 1993; West, 2001,2004). By utilizing the Internet government agencies can seek citizen opinion on particular issues to guide policy making, and potentially help resolve the endemic problems with the state-citizen relationship by providing unmediated access to government officials, and minimizing agenda management. However, the issues noted from empirical studies indicate the opportunities and challenges of Internet-based citizen participation may influence the extent of realization of the previously mentioned potential.

ISSUES IN INTERNET-BASED CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

Internet-based citizen participation provides some opportunities to minimize or avoid decision making delays, special interest influence and spatial-temporal barriers that plaque traditional citizen participation. On the other hand, current trends in Web-enabled governance suggest a number of challenges including some unresolved policy and administrative issues of the Internet, as well its potential to erode the roles of mediating institutions and to alienate citizens.

Opportunities

Minimize Decision-Making Delays and Special Interest Influence

Some scholars argue while traditional citizen participation in abstract may appear to be an unadulterated good, in reality it presents a number of threats and challenges. For example, unorganized, direct participation by citizens can result in the stalling of economic development or innovations of any kind. This is because participation, like all procedures that are open, could potentially halt progress toward substantial changes in policies or programs (Cleveland, 1975; Sabatier, 1986). Others argue because higher income people have more time and more skill to act in their interest through channel of public participation, lower income people may be better served by strong representation than by widened avenues for participation (Verba & Nie, 1987).

Citizen participation, in some cases, can undermine the reliance on science and scientific thinking for policy developments, resulting in a threat to public health. Public health is imperiled when a delay in a decision caused by expanding public participation makes it more difficult to manage an epidemic. The Internet has the potential to address these problems in diverse ways. As Internet technology becomes widespread with universal access, the cost of citizen participation could be substantially reduced. Internet technology should make it possible to speed-up the process of citizen participation. This speed up effect could improve e-management by addressing the problem of delays in worthwhile projects such as implementation and application of scientific discoveries. In addition, there is some potential for technologies such as the Internet to help organize and channel citizen participation in effective ways that lead to "system integration" rather than conflict (Gutterbock, 1980).

Avoid Spatial and Temporal Barriers, and Reduce cost to Citizens

Klein (1999) argues three structural characteristics of the Internet most greatly differentiate it from other technologies for creating participation forums. The Internet is free from constraints of space and time, and also lowers the costs of citizen participation. These characteristics allow an online forum to avoid the temporal barriers of a meeting-hall forum, lower the expense of traveling to the city hall or the meeting hall, and bring greater continuity to citizen government relationship (Klein, 1999). A meeting hall suffers from severe spatial and temporal barriers in the sense that it could impose considerable hardship for those who reside far away, and also require synchronization of schedules. From strictly economic perspective, a rational individual might determine the cost of involvement exceeds the benefits, and so might refrain from participation (Olsen, 1968). Internet users who cannot attend meeting-hall forums can now use the Internet to participate and actively take part in discussions. Although the Internet has a great potential for e-democracy, empirical studies suggest the trends in Web-enabled governance at all levels of government are yet to serve as catalysts for the Internet to bring citizens closer to their governments.

Trends in Web-Enabled Governance

In recent years, scholars in public administration and allied disciplines have focused on the impact of Internet technology in public organizations and the implications for governance and for public

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