Citizen Participation and Digital Town Hall Meeting

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INTRODUCTION: THE PROMISE OF PARTICIPATION

If part of the promise of digital government is to enable citizens and businesses to enjoy greater convenience in their interaction with government, another goal is to revitalize democracy itself. A decline in civic engagement between citizens has been noted in society (Putnam, 1993) while citizen distrust of political institutions is on the rise (King & Stivers, 1998). Both trends do not augur well for democracy. Democratic theorists and public administration scholars have argued that one way to reverse these trends is to foster greater citizen participation in public decisions.

Why is participation so important that B. Guy Peters (1996) points to it as one of the four main alternatives for the future of governance? Participation is justified as a normative right, a contributor to better public decisions, and an enabler of higher social capital. One broad rationale underlying greater participation the rise of postmodern values among citizens, characterized by both a distrust of formal institutions such as government and political parties, and a desire for more participatory democracies (Inglehart, 1997). Societal changes, particularly increased education, lead to a greater demand for involvement and access to information (Thomas, 1995). Access to information is facilitated by new technologies. Citizens therefore enjoy both the will and the means to break the monopoly and centralized control on public information enjoyed by the government (Cleveland, 1985).

Participation is also justified in terms of benefits to individual citizens and society more broadly. Any form of citizenship beyond simple legal status requires active citizen involvement in public matters and the community (Cooper, 1984). Participation serves to establish the worth of individual citizens, allowing them to feel a sense of ownership and take an active part in controlling their surroundings and developing their capacity to act as citizens. The process of public deliberation also benefits society by creating democratic legitimacy and a deliberative political culture (Habermas, 1996).

One basic barrier to enhanced citizen participation is the nature of bureaucracy itself. Barber (1986) has argued that government has become a form of "representative bureaucracy" that undermines individual responsibility for beliefs, values, and actions, and is incompatible with freedom since it delegates and alienates political will. The values of bureaucracy are based on expertise and qualifications, conflicting with democratic values that underpin the idea of participation. Citizens are defined as non-expert outsiders who may have to be listened to, but are likely to have little actual impact on decisions. This is reflected in the failings of traditional modes of citizen participation.

Subject to particular ire is the town hall meeting/public hearing mode of participation. King, Fetley, and Susel (1998, p. 323) say: "The most ineffective technique is the public hearing. Public hearings do not work." Such meetings can be poorly attended and dominated by elite, non-representative groups (Fox & Miller, 1996). Hearings are often timed late in the decision process, used to convince citizens of pre-made decisions rather than gain their input, and provide no opportunity for an iterative dialogue. They have also been critiqued for fostering self-interested claims rather than concern with the general welfare of the citizenry and deemed unsuitable to foster choices between policy tradeoffs. Citizens attending public hearings tend to have little background information on issues, often leading to poorly informed opinions about policy and the working of government (Ebdon, 2002).

Can the problems of the traditional town hall meeting be solved through a more digital approach? Yes and no. As this article will show, digital town hall meetings, if well organized, can enable a large and diverse group of citizens to engage in an intelligent iterative dialogue with each other and with elected officials. However, whether this input ends up shaping governmental decisions still rests largely in the hands of public officials.

BACKGROUND: THE DIGITAL TOWN HALL MEETING IN PRACTICE

Efforts have been made to reinvent the town hall meeting using technology since the 1970s. In 1976, public officials in Reading, Pennsylvania began to televise public forums

and invited members of the public to offer comment or question via telephone (Becker, 1993). This approach can now be extended to allow public responses via the internet. One drawback of this model is that citizens are not physically present at such meetings.

The non-profit organization AmericaSpeaks is a strong proponent of the possibilities of digital town hall meetings that allow a high number of citizens to meet in the same physical space and engage in meaningful discourse. A digital town hall meeting uses technology to foster more meaningful interaction between citizens and public officials. During 1998-1999, AmericaSpeaks engaged thousands of Americans on the future of Social Security through a variety of interactive mechanisms, including five town meetings. It helped Hamilton County, Ohio to develop a comprehensive master plan based on town hall meeting with 1,300 citizens. In this article, I focus on two high-profile uses of digital town hall meetings, one of which is tied to the budget process in Washington D.C., while the other deals with highly symbolic city planning effort in New York City. By focusing on these two cases I develop an in-depth narrative that explains how the process worked and the relative the influence of technology-driven participation in each case. Readers wishing to learn more about AmericaSpeaks can visit: http://www.americaspeaks.org/.

In 1999, the mayor of Washington D.C., Anthony Williams, established a series of "citizen summits" to incorporate citizen involvement in the city government's strategic planning and budget process (Moynihan, 2002). The Office of Neighborhood Action was created to organize citizen participation that would link to district strategic planning. The Office initiated the goal-setting process prior to the citizen summit, facilitating two cabinet retreats that generated broad goals. Following the retreats, cross-agency task forces led by the Mayor's Office developed more detailed strategic plans around these broad goals. The Office of Neighborhood Action summarized the draft strategic plan into a four-page tabloid version to present to citizens both before and at the citizen summit. This was intended to inform the citizens to the basic issues in order to improve the nature of the dialogue that occurred.

The summit itself lasted over seven hours and included the development of district and neighborhood vision statements, discussion of citywide priorities and the draft strategic plan, and identification of action items to be carried out in each neighborhood. Efforts were made to ensure that all elements of D.C.'s diverse citizenry were reached—the summit was open to all comers, and summit literature and translations of the proceedings were available in Spanish, Vietnamese, Korean, and Chinese. Demographic surveys of the summit found it to be racially representative of the district's population.

The 3,000 people who attended the summit were divided into tables of 10; trained facilitators sat with each group to promote meaningful dialogue. The digital aspect of the meeting was reflected in two different kinds of technologies: networked laptop computers and wireless polling keypads. The computers recorded the messages developed at each table. As respondents sought to develop a consensus in addressing the issues raised and decide what messages would be entered into the computer, each group engaged in a discussion. The computers allowed the mayor to receive and respond to the messages during the forum. The polling keypads also allowed the mayor to ask citizens to vote on any question during any point of the summit, providing instantaneous results on large screens at the front of the room. Citizens prioritized citywide goals, which were ranked according to level of support. The data collected through the keypads was cross-referenced with demographic data based on a participant survey.

The input from the meeting served to shape the format and allocation of resources in the district's budget. The next budget request to the City Council saw each department identify strategic issues which were raised at the summit and codified in the strategic plan, subsequently requesting resources to pursue these goals. The meeting also pushed for suggestions of how to solve problems at the more local level, encouraging residents from different wards to register their opinion on neighborhood issues. The summit became the first step for more localized district/citizen planning efforts through a series of Strategic Neighborhood Action Plans. In addition, the head of each department had a performance contract and a public performance scorecard—a single-page list of the key performance targets and measurement of success or failure in achieving those targets–that incorporated goals raised at the summit of relevance to the department.

Following the summit, the revised strategic plan was presented to citizens at a similar forum on January 29, 2000, where 1,500 citizens (60% of whom had participated in the first summit) had the opportunity to hold the mayor accountable for the revisions made and offer final messages before the plan was completed. The final version of the strategic plan bore the clear imprint of the meetings. The front section of each issue-driven chapter identified specific priorities raised at the citizen summit and related strategic goals, action items, and performance targets.

Another digital town hall meeting occurred in New York City in the aftermath of 9/11 (Moynihan, 2004). Authorities sought a way to incorporate public input into the planning process for rebuilding the site of the World Trade Center. AmericaSpeaks was hired to run two meetings—one for the Civic Alliance, a nonprofit coalition of civic, labor, business and environmental groups, and

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