

# Promoting Citizen Participation via Digital Government

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## INTRODUCTION

The advent of digital government unveils new opportunities in how government can address citizens' needs and requirements in innovative ways. One of the growing citizens' demands toward government today is the participation in policy making. This is reflected in a recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2001) report entitled *Citizens as Partners*, which concludes that "governments are under pressure to adopt a new approach to policy making—one which places greater emphasis on citizen involvement both upstream and downstream to decision-making" (p. 71). Digital government, enabled by information and communication technology (ICT), may help government in addressing such needs of citizens through network-based ICT applications.

ICT, particularly the Internet, may enhance citizen participation in several ways: By offering capabilities that transcend time and space limitations, ICT has the potential to overcome barriers of large-scale citizen participation. One of these barriers is the difficulty to achieve the desired level of face-to-face interaction during off-line participation (e.g., public meeting) (Adams, 2004). In off-line participation, citizens need to take turns to voice their opinions within a limited time frame. This often results in poor deliberation, a situation where the consequences of various policy options and views of others are not weighed carefully and sufficiently (Mathews, 1994). The mass communication and information exchange capabilities afforded by the Internet may be especially useful in enhancing participation of citizens in policy deliberation.

Despite the potential of ICT to enhance participation, it is vital to motivate citizens to participate. It is ironic that, while citizens increasingly demand for more participation, studies reveal that citizen participation has been declining in recent years (e.g., Lyons & Alexander, 2000). The paradox suggests that there is a need to investigate the factors that can lead to participation of citizens in policy making. Toward this end, we begin with a review of extant

literature from political science to identify pertinent theories that may help explain citizen participation. As citizen participation via digital government is enabled by ICT, we also explore pertinent ICT features that may support participation.

## BACKGROUND

Citizen participation has long been one of the major research themes in political science. Several theoretical perspectives have been devised to elucidate antecedents of citizen participation in the offline context. Among the three widely employed perspectives are socioeconomic theories, rational choice theories, and social capital theories. We will discuss these theories in turn, and attempt to illuminate the links among them.

### Socioeconomic Theories

Socioeconomic theories are at root a sociological account of citizen participation (Parry, Moysier, & Day, 1992). This theoretical strand attempts to explain participation in terms of the individual's socioeconomic characteristics that shape his or her attitude toward participation. These characteristics include the individual's age, education level, and financial status. The socioeconomic theories (e.g., Verba & Nie, 1972) hold that individuals who are older, better educated, and wealthier are more likely to participate than those who are younger, less educated, and poorer. The logic is that an individual's advantaged socioeconomic characteristics would shape his favorable civic attitudes toward participation (Verba & Nie, 1972). While initial thinking along this perspective held that individuals with advantaged socioeconomic characteristics are more likely to participate, subsequent research questioned such propositions and the mechanisms behind the effects of socioeconomic factors (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Past studies have also shown that the general rise in education level does not necessar-

ily lead to increased electoral participation (e.g., Lyons & Alexander, 2000). These limitations have led to refinements in socioeconomic theories in terms of including a more comprehensive set of participation factors and the mechanisms linking individual's socioeconomic characteristics to participation.

Along this vein, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) developed the civic voluntarism model, which aims to specify "in detail how socio-economic position is linked to political activity" (p. 19). Cited as the most widely employed participation theory (Seyd, Whiteley, & Pattie, 2001), the model considers resources, motivations, and mobilization as antecedents of participation. Resources that include time, money, and civic skills bridge the individual's socioeconomic characteristics to their participation. In other words, individuals with better socioeconomic characteristics are more likely to participate because they possess the resources to do so. Motivations are conceptualized as individual and group incentives as well as a sense of political efficacy (Verba et al., 1995). Individual incentives include the ability to influence specific policies that an individual would like to see implemented, whereas group incentives include an individual's identification with a group (e.g., political party). Last, mobilization refers to the extent to which individuals are influenced by people around them to participate. Citizens may be persuaded by their friends or family members to, say, sign a petition or join a political party. Civic voluntarism model has been found to be considerably robust in explaining different types of political participation (e.g., voting, contacting authorities, and attending political meetings) (e.g., Pattie, Seyd, & Whiteley, 2003; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). However, a limitation of the model is that it does not specify clearly the political institutions that may shape citizen participation (Rubenson, 2000). For instance, it may be useful to know whether existing political institutions support the formation of civic associations that generate mobilization, or whether there is an education system in place that promotes civic skills inculcation.

### **Rational Choice Theories**

Rational choice theories of participation see citizen participation as a rational activity to maximize benefits and minimize costs of participation (e.g., Olson, 1965). They propose that individuals are by nature economically rational actors, who base their decision to participate on cost-benefit calculation (Pattie, Seyd, & Whiteley, 2003). Benefits from participation include the ability to influence policy outcomes, whereas costs include the effort and financial resources required to participate. Additionally, the perceived benefits from participation are closely tied

to one's political efficacy. In contrast to the socioeconomic perspective, rational choice theories consider the broad civic orientation of individuals of minor importance when compared to the benefits and costs of participation.

Rational choice theories have been criticized for not being able to explain electoral participation. In an election where many actors are involved, the likely influence that an individual has on the outcome, and thus the potential benefit, is extremely small. Considering the cost required to vote (e.g., time and effort), a truly rational actor may choose not to vote. However, we do see people participating in elections. Explanations have been offered in terms of the sufficiently low cost of voting (e.g., Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995) that renders rational cost-benefit calculation unnecessary (Aldrich, 1993). This suggests that rational choice theories may be more appropriate for situations of participation where high potential benefits and costs are involved.

Arguing that the benefits for participation are too narrowly conceptualized in traditional rational choice theories, Seyd and Whiteley (2002) developed a general incentives model that incorporates incentives related to altruistic concerns and social norms. The resulting general incentives model encompasses five incentive types for participation: collective, selective, group, expressive, and social norms-derived incentives. Collective incentives are derived from policy goals that are available for all to enjoy regardless of whether one participates (e.g., tax reduction). This is in contrast to selective incentives that are restricted to participants, which include the gratification obtained during the participating process (e.g., enjoying interactions with others) and the privatized outcomes from participation (e.g., political career advancement). Selective incentives also include ideological incentives prompted by similar beliefs shared by members in a group. Group incentives and expressive incentives are related to individuals' attachment to a group (e.g., political party). Group incentives have to do with individuals' perception about the efficacy of the group as a whole to bring about desired social change, whereas expressive incentives are grounded in a sense of loyalty and affection to the group. Finally, social norms-derived incentives refer to the influence of other people on the individual's willingness to participate, and are similar to the concept of mobilization in the civic voluntarism model. The drawback of the general incentive model is that it does not consider the socioeconomic characteristics of an individual (e.g., education received) that shape the individual's civic attitude and skills toward politics. Another limitation of the model is its lack of consideration of the influence of political institutions on citizen participation.

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