Chapter XII
Sociological Factors Influencing Internet Voting

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ABSTRACT

The uptake of Internet voting for local government elections is still in its infancy worldwide. While it holds many potential benefits, there are various factors which can influence its uptake. This chapter explores the sociological factors which affect voter participation in Internet voting. It identifies 5 main influential factors, or groups of factors: trust; apathy; features of the Internet; access; and socio-technical aspects. Each is explored and ways in which each can be addressed in order to ensure optimal participation are discussed. A model conceptualizing the relative influence of these sociological factors is proposed and, finally, suggestions are made for future research.

INTRODUCTION

One of the guiding forces of modern democratic societies is to ensure that those who govern do so in the best interests of the people whom they govern. As such they should ideally be representative of those people, and this representation should be current. Regular elections by enfranchised voters are the most commonly accepted means of ensuring such representative government.

However, often the percentage of the eligible population that votes is disappointingly low, and the result is that the mandate of the elected government becomes questionable resulting in a lack of trust in their decisions. Gaining voter participation is thus a primary objective of the organizers of such elections.

There are many factors that can facilitate or impede voter participation and one of those is the means by which voters can vote. Over the decades,

in-person voting has been commonly augmented by postal voting, and more recently by Internet voting (I-voting) in some places.

The merit of I-voting for public governance has yet to be demonstrated conclusively. While there are many aspects of I-voting that need to be considered, one of the most important groups is the sociological aspects. It is believed that with a good understanding of these factors, greater participation can be facilitated and obstacles overcome. Although this applies to both national and local government elections, most of the initial work with regard to the introduction of I-voting has been in the local government context. Local government elections are easier to control and monitor and they provide an ideal opportunity to explore certain practices and mechanisms without the large risk associated with national elections.

While various researchers have explored different aspects of I-voting, no comprehensive study appears to have focused on the sociological aspects specifically. Prompted by a commission from the Society of Local Government Managers (SOLGM) of New Zealand, a study was undertaken to identify the relevant sociological factors and to develop a model which could later be used to determine the relative effects of these factors on I-voting. In this way, greater insights would be gained and avenues would be identified as to how best to ensure and maintain significant voter participation.

This chapter reports on that study. First the background to I-voting is presented. Next the sociological factors influencing the uptake of I-voting for local government elections are explored. The theoretical underpinnings which apply in this instance are then discussed and a proposed model which captures the effect of these sociological factors on I-voting is presented. Future research directions are discussed and conclusions are subsequently drawn.

BACKGROUND

To vote has been succinctly defined as "to express one's preference" (Morris, 1970, p. 1437). Voting has become an essential way for democratic societies to elect their governments. However, throughout the democratic world, there has been a particularly low voter turnout. While turnout rose globally between 1945 and 1990, since the 68% average high in the 1980s, the percentage has dropped to 64%. Local government election turnout has been even lower. In some areas a 20 to 50% participation rate has become the norm (Internet Policy Institute (IPI), 2001, p. 25). This lowers democracy, diminishes trust and public confidence in government (Armacost et al., 2000, p. 14), and calls into question the legitimacy of and the mandate given to the representatives (Clarke, 2002, p. 13).

In order to increase voter participation, and to meet the needs of different groups of voters, the method of voting has expanded to include postal voting, and more recently, I-voting.

I-voting can be regarded as a subset of e-voting as it is limited to casting electronic votes via the Internet only (Smith & Clark, 2005). While e-voting deals with the technologies that minimize the human aspect of vote collection and recording, I-voting is "the use of online information gathering and retrieval technologies to expand the reach and range of the potential voting population" (Smith & Clark, 2005). I-voting is thus dependent on the technological elements of e-voting. However, this chapter excludes the concept of e-voting in polling booths because while it may technically occur over the Internet, the social aspects of such voting are different to those encountered when voting from other places.

Internet-based voting systems hold much promise. The Internet is a popular means of communication in many different segments of society, and by introducing this concept of "e-democracy" it is envisaged that such an interactive medium will enhance citizen participation (Gibson, 2001-

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