

Chapter XV

Electronic Democracy and Citizen Influence in Government¹

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ABSTRACT

This chapter analyzes the “impact” of information and communication technologies (ICTs) on local government officials’ policy decision-making. Specifically, this chapter answers to what extent they use the Internet to communicate and obtain information and to what extent do their online interactions with “citizens” influence their policy decisions. A national sample of elected local government officials from the United States were surveyed regarding their ICT use and their interactions with stakeholders. The principal findings of the chapter are that, while officials are making extensive use of ICTs to communicate with actors and obtain information, citizens have more influence on policy decisions via offline media.

INTRODUCTION

Concomitant with “the rise of the network society,” local governments across the United States have invested considerable resources in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and the development of electronic government (e-government) systems (Klotz, 2004; Brown and Shelhin, 2005). At the same time, the Internet is said to facilitate interactions between government officials and “citizens”² (Budge, 1996; Webber and Loumakis, 2003). This chapter investigates the impact of these interactions on policy-making

in American local governments. In doing so, this chapter goes to the heart of discussions in the e-government and electronic participation literature regarding the possibility for electronic democracy (e-democracy). The viability of e-democracy depends not only on electronic participation (e-participation) but also responsiveness from government officials to this participation. Simply stated, the question this chapter asks and addresses is: even if new ICTs are expanding political participation, does this increase citizen influence in government?

Typically political participation is considered from the perspective of outside the political system looking in. Hence, it focuses on who participates and how. A number of authors have weighed in on whether and to what extent the Internet can be said to increase political participation (Jensen, Danziger, and Venkatesh, 2007; Muhlberger, 2004; Hill and Hughes, 1998; Bimber, 2003; Best and Kruger, 2005). This chapter reverses the perspective by considering political participation from the inside out: that is, from the perspective of elected officials. In particular, it focuses on officials' use of the Internet to interact with citizens, and the extent to which their use of the Internet increases the role of citizens' voices in policy decision-making.

Today politics takes place in a highly mediated space. Elected officials in the network societies of advanced industrial democracies are finding themselves in increasingly complicated communication environments (Crozier, 2007). They have at their disposal access to the mass media as well as more narrowly targeted communications they can transmit and receive from various public segments. The creation of a political event in this age depends on media to give it life. As Manuel Castells writes, "What does not exist in the media does not exist in the public mind.... Therefore a political message is necessarily a media message" (Castells, 2007: 241). While all forms interaction are mediated whether they be face-to-face or communicated on television, the multidirectionality of the Internet and broadcast media connects a message with the general public. Members of the public however are not only consumers of mediatized political messages, they are also producers, particularly through the Internet (Castells, 2007; Crozier, 2008).

At this point it appears that e-government has made very little progress in facilitating greater participation. Early work by Michael Margolis and David Resnick (2000) found that at all levels of government in the United States, e-government approaches have provided citizens with few channels

to influence the political process. Similarly, Juliet Musso and her colleagues found in an evaluation of California municipal government, websites tend to prioritize the consumption of government services over political participation, with most websites bereft of any reference to the municipal government as a site for politics (Musso, Weare, and Hale, 2000). Over time, there has been greater emphasis amongst American municipalities to further develop and facilitate access to services while there has been no measurable increase in access to officials and the policy-making process (Jensen, 2007). Moon (2002) suggests that e-democracy may be a final, though as of yet largely unrealized stage of e-government evolution at the municipal level.

Even when participatory space is provided, Catherine Needham finds in a comparative analysis of British and American executive and legislative branch websites, this participation has little bearing on public policy outputs. She argues that in practice, e-government "has primarily been conceived of as a way to expand the provision of services and information" and to the extent that it aims to achieve participatory objectives, she concludes that, "the experience of electronic government in the United Kingdom and the United States is one of limited ambition and mixed achievement" (Needham, 2004: 62). Andrew Chadwick's analysis of US and UK executive level agencies suggests that they are more concerned with "infortainment" and the legitimation of government officials and policy (Chadwick, 2001). Taken together, this suggests that there is little participatory space on American municipal websites and that e-participation is not a policy priority.

While it may be the case that the Internet is being used by local governments to reinforce elite objectives, this does not mean that citizens and interest groups are not using the Internet in an attempt to influence policy decisions. This chapter addresses the relationship between online interactions between elected local government

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