



Chapter VII

E-Participation Models

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Abstract

Participation is the cornerstone of our governance process and has manifested in a variety of constructs since the inception of our government. As public agencies and political leaders discover the possibilities offered by technological mediums, the question becomes, what kind of participation should we be fostering and what do we hope to gain through participative processes? The opportunities to enhance our understanding and approach to democracy have grown tremendously in the past decade. Through technological means, more individuals can gain access to public dialogue and discourse. Given the nature of recent technological opportunities, public leaders are considering the possibilities of e-governance and within that framework, e-participation. This chapter provides a definition and discussion of three e-participation models: information exchange, general discourse, and deliberation. In addition, the chapter will address the issues, characterizations, and criteria that are closely related to the development of electronic participation in the governance process.

Introduction

The advent of the information age has brought with it a host of new monikers for our public-administration lexicon. These terms—e-democracy, e-government, and e-participation—express the direction we are heading with regard to government processes and citizen access. Today no discussion of issues surrounding government or administration can exclude concerns of our new, virtual world, where we engage in business dealings, administration, personal activities, discourse, and government electronically. The issues we have concerning all of these matters must now be discussed with an eye for the implications of what it means to engage virtually. Virtual communities are developing around us, outside of physical space; as these virtual spaces evolve and take shape, individuals, institutions, and governments must reframe their perspectives to meet challenges posed by emerging interactive environments. Old challenges mangle while entirely new challenges must be addressed outside of our conventional perspectives. E-government, and within it e-participation, is one such issue.

The Participation and E-Participation Relationship

E-participation is an approach, a technique, and a tool simultaneously, representing a new way of addressing old problems or issues, specifically regarding citizen access to government processes. In addition, e-participation structures a particular set of activities through which the public can gain information and services, and deliver input. Finally, e-participation is a specific tool for the development and enhancement of public participation as well as a means for access to elected officials and administrators. In other words, e-participation is not just a new way of doing the same old thing, but has the potential to transform citizen access.

Our current participatory structure has grown out of the problematic nature of representative democracy. Since the inception of our government, an ongoing discussion persists regarding the desirability and practicality of direct citizen participation in public decision making (Abilock, 2005; Morse, 2006; Noam, 2005; Timney, 1998). Given the representative nature of democracy in the United States, matters of equity and access are at the forefront of any discussion regarding citizen access and input into the governance process whether done so electronically or via more traditional systems.

In an ideal sense, citizen participation is a hallmark of the democratic process in the United States. However, in reality the transaction costs to obtain information and impart influence are borne differentially by citizens. The desire to interact as a significant member of the governance process necessitates being knowledgeable on the issues to a degree that has proven difficult to achieve for a variety of reasons. Government decision making is comprised of a complex network of political officials, technical experts, interest groups, organizations, administrators, and citizens. Effective input in these decisions demands some degree of sophistication in navigating the complex features of a given issue or problem. With increasing institutional interdependence comes increasing complexity, posing challenges for access and influence that even the well-heeled citizen may find daunting. Regardless of the intricacies involved, it is the citizen who must acquire the status of being informed in order to achieve legitimacy within the system. As the information age brings about new

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