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Chapter XX

Digital Government and Citizen Participation in the United States

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ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses the topic of citizen participation via digital government in several sections: first, we discuss the relationship between digital government and citizen participation from the academic literature. Second, we introduce some best practices of citizen participations through digital government in the United States; third, we offer some principles and implications from these best practices; and fourth, we discuss several potential problems of digitized citizen participation in terms of further research. The best practices described in this chapter include Minnesota's Department Results and Online Citizen Participation Opportunities, Santa Monica's Budget Suggestions, California's California Scorecard, Virginia Beach's EMS Customer Satisfaction Survey and others. We extract some common features from these best practices, such as citizen as customer, recognizing a citizen's capacity, and direct participation. Further, we recommend principles for designing digitized citizen

participation: operationalize direct policy involvement, enable the citizen to influence policy priorities, enhance government accountability, encourage participatory deliberation and shape digital citizenship.

INTRODUCTION

Although digital government has evolved at varied rates worldwide, all countries are concerned with (1) the quality of the developing online services and (2) how digital government can contribute to public participation and competence as the basis for a more democratic administration or democratic society (Leigh and Atkinson, 2001).

These new concerns are raising fundamental questions as to a digital government strategy. What are the purposes of digital government's functions? How can digital government cultivate citizen participation and citizen competence for public affairs? How might digital government influence the structures or functions of the public organization? These questions stem from a more basic philosophical question as to how we set the relationship between the state and the citizen in the information age (Wyman, Beachboard, and McClure, 1997).

Efficiency-oriented applications of digital government in the public sector may have side effects. In brief, many public sector organizations focus only on their own immediate interests, rather than the public interest, in the formulation of their digital government system. Some may focus on the appearance of the digital government rather than substantial contributions that digital government may make — such as increasing citizen participation, citizen competence, responsibility or responsiveness, and transparency or openness (Dunleavy and Margetts, 2000; West and Berman, 2001; Cullen and Houghton, 2000; Relyea, 2002; Wyman, Beachboard, and McClure, 1997).

Superficial approaches to digital government that focus on the appearance of the website or simple online transactions fail to take advantage of, or address, fundamental opportunities. That is, most current government websites merely provide public information instead of allowing citizens to interact with governments (Leigh and Atkinson, 2001). Therefore, it is not surprising that new ways of thinking about digital government are emerging based on citizen participation and citizen competence for democratic administration of a democratic society (Relyea, 2002).

This chapter consists of four sections: First, we discuss the relationship between digital government and citizen participation from the academic literature. Second, we introduce some best practices of citizen participation through digital government in the United States. Third, we offer some principles and implications from these best practices. Finally, we discuss several potential problems of digitized citizen participation in terms of further research.

DIGITAL GOVERNMENT AND CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

Dunleavy and Margetts (2000), in their depiction of the Digital State Paradigm, hold that radical web-enabled change inside government has already replaced the New Public Management as a dominant public administration paradigm. In this “paradigm,” the use

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