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GOVERNMENT WEBSITES AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT: FACILITATING CITIZEN ENTRY INTO THE POLICY PROCESS

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Abstract

Previous research shows that in the United States, municipal government websites contain both participatory and consumer elements; however, these websites are generally designed to facilitate consumption of government services rather than participation in the policy process. The research presented here, using an original dataset, empirically analyzes how residents use the websites. The evidence indicates that while use of the Internet to facilitate the consumption of government services is more common than participation, there is reason to believe that the Internet could become a vehicle to foster greater participation. The paper concludes with suggestions on constructing municipal government websites to facilitate greater participation.

Keywords: E-government, Electronic Democracy, Political Participation, and Consumer Citizen

1. Introduction

Conventional modes of political participation are said to be declining across America [27]. Additionally, attachment to traditional political parties in many advanced industrial democracies is waning as publics have become increasingly dealigned from the ideological divisions that shaped the emergence of modern party systems [10]. Many observers have noted there exists a great deal of alienation between publics and the policy process—a process which has become increasingly the domain of experts and elite interests both within and outside government institutions. At the same time, politics as a matter of access and recognition for social cleavages is now being accompanied by a politics directed at concrete policy matters [2]. In place of the sovereignty associated with government institutions, we are witnessing the rise of networked forms of governance that involve partnerships between government institutions and organizations in civil society alongside private individuals [1]. Networked governance is not an inevitable consequence of the emergence of the Internet, but it is facilitated by this fact. Policy networks have emerged as the increasing

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complexities of societies are exceeding the capacities of governments alone to implement policies [6]. While information technologies do not determine the structure of political organization, they do shape relations between users and enable the creation of new forms of political organization [26].

In this context, the Internet can play an important role in mediating the relationship between political activists, nongovernmental organizations, individual members of the political community, and governments. Today, virtually every local government in America has an official website. Robert Klotz notes that “cities without websites by 1999 were already being seen as behind the times” [18: 101]. These websites serve two important functions for local governments. First, they structure the interactions between government officials and members of the political community and second, they consolidate a government’s online presence for users thereby constructing the online “face” of government [8]. The website forms the online interface between users and governments.

Many have heralded the potential of networked societies to bring about a radical democratizing transformation in politics by enabling direct democracy [5]. However, whether such a transformation occurs is ultimately a function of the political purposes to which governments’ and users put the technology. [11]. These websites may serve bureaucratic interests in facilitating the passive consumption of government goods as well as political objectives in facilitating participation in the policy process. However, if websites are not constructed in a manner to invite and facilitate participation in the first place, no amount of preference modeling or other decision analytic tools can make up for the absence of citizen input.

This paper presents an empirical analysis of how local government websites in America are used by residents from twelve geographically diverse metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) along with an analysis of the factors that predict participatory and consumer interactions with the political system. The paper concludes with suggestions on facilitating public input into the policy process.

2. Government Websites, Citizen Engagement, and Hypotheses

2.1 Government Websites: E-government and E-democracy

To date there have been a number of studies on the design of websites: the functions made available and their accessibility. This research tends to focus on what services are offered by governments [20] and the extent to which this increases government efficiency and decreases costs [12], [3]. Alfred Tat-Kei Ho has found this emphasis predominates in municipalities, noting that at the local level, web designs emphasize “‘one-stop shopping’ and customer-oriented principles” [15:

434]. The emphasis on access to governments' services has been consistently prioritized over the websites' participatory potentials [22]. Catherine Needham observes, "the experience of electronic government in the United Kingdom and the United States is one of limited ambition and mixed achievement" [23: 62]. Given the consumer focus of local government websites, we expect that users of these websites will primarily use the websites to access government services rather than participate politically.

2.2 Citizen Engagement

Citizens may be *participants* in the political and policy process, they may be *consumers* of government goods and services, or both participants and consumers. Participation is typically thought of as active and may take the form of either demands or supports on the input side of the political system while typically consumers are thought of as passive and their actions directed at the output side of the political system in terms of the consumption of government services and resources. However, these constructs are analytical classifications of behavior rather than totalizing conceptions of political subjects. Many persons are active on some issues, while passive on others and engage in both participatory and consumptive interactions with their governments. They legitimize the regime and officials in some respects while placing demands on it in other areas.

In the context of the Internet, there has been considerable debate regarding whether the Internet can transform citizen engagement. From an administrative standpoint, many point to the potential or more expedient access to government services online. In terms of political participation, there has been considerably greater uncertainty regarding whether or not Internet users are more politically active and, if they are, whether use of the Internet has anything to do with their participation. Some argue that the Internet functions, for the most part, as an online extension of offline political practices that are traditionally dominated by elites [14], [4], [13]. Furthermore, it is argued, to the extent that the educated and wealthy are most likely to have Internet access, the digital divide only reinforces participatory inequalities [30], [25]. By contrast, irrespective of socioeconomic status (SES), we expect all citizens to have a need for government services. In contrast to participation, we should expect that once online, there will not be additional SES stratification in consumer activities.

Others suggest that Internet use will facilitate greater inclusion of groups in the political process [7], [21]. In a networked society, there are more spaces for participation in the process of governance through the access to information and the facilitation of communication. In this context, laypersons are able to organize more readily and rapidly with fewer transaction costs to discuss and

challenge community elites. While the governance is often characterized by the politics of elites—both inside and outside government—promulgating policy on the public’s behalf, these community groups challenge the politics of expertise with their own politics of experience. Their participation is usually limited to particular, concrete policy matters [2]. The extent to which they can be successful in shaping policy is always a contingent and empirical matter. However, long tradition of research suggests that those who are more engaged politically are also more engaged with community groups [27], [29]. The question is whether online community life can link community and political engagement in the same manner as its offline counterpart. If the Internet can foster greater participatory inclusion rather than reinforce participatory inequalities, it may become a vehicle to expand the policy making dialogue to include ordinary citizens.

2.3 Hypotheses:

H1. Local government websites will be primarily used for the consumption of government goods and services rather than political participation.

H2. a) Online consumer interactions will not be stratified by SES.

H2. b) Online participation will reinforce SES disparities in political participation.

H3. Online participation is more likely to occur amongst persons who are engaged in the community—online and offline.

3. Data

The data are a telephone survey of 1203 respondents using the Random Digit Dialing (RDD) method. The survey was conducted in 2003. The sample was drawn from the same 12 MSAs used in the website survey. From each MSA, we selected a probability sample of 100 respondents, with an overall response rate of 44.3%. These areas were selected primarily on the basis of having a relatively high level of broadband Internet access and use in the home. If Internet use is impacting political practices in American communities, these are the areas where we would first expect to see it. While these areas tend to include wealthier communities (25% reporting household annual income of \$100K+, 15% in the \$75 – 100K range and 21% in the \$50K – 75K range), there is some diversity in income distribution, with 30% of our sample reporting yearly household incomes of \$50,000 or less and more than 12% of our sample earning \$30,000 or less. Furthermore, there is diversity in the types of communities in our survey: they include rural areas, small towns, suburbs,

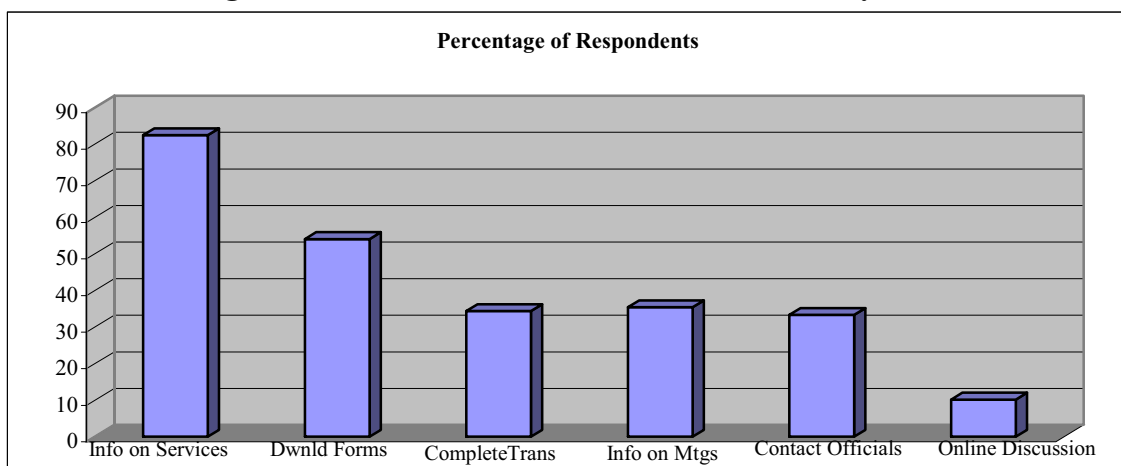
and cities. The sample is 85.0% Caucasian, 4.8% African American, 4.6% Asian American, and 3.5% Hispanic; the rest classified themselves “other” or declined to state an ethnicity. We surveyed respondents regarding a variety of household and individual practices with respect to their use of information technology in the household, their interactions with various community groups, and their local governments.

4. Use of American Local Government Websites

4.1 Resident Use of Local Government Websites

To address the first hypothesis we surveyed respondents regarding how they and their households use local government websites. They were surveyed regarding battery of three consumer and three participatory functions. The three consumer activities include looking up information on services, downloading forms, and processing transactions. The three participatory functions include looking up information on local public meetings, contacting a local public official online, and engaging in an online discussion about local politics. The frequencies of each activity are displayed in **Figure 1**.

Figure 1: Online Interactions with the Political System



The most frequent online interaction is looking for information on government services (82.5%) followed by downloading government forms (54.1%), obtaining information on past or upcoming council meetings (35.4%), processing transactions online (34.4%), contacting public officials online (33.3%), and engaging in an online discussion (10.2%). Apart from the slightly lower percentage of respondents processing an online transaction, consumerist activities are the most common modes of interaction. Much should not be made of this aberration given that municipal governments have

been slow to add transaction processing to their websites [24]. These data generally provide support for the first hypothesis: local government websites are primarily used for consumer rather than participatory interactions.

4.2 Comparing Predictors of Online Participation and Consumption

Our second hypothesis considers the characteristics that delineate online participation and online consumption in the political system. This was assessed through a comparison of respondent attributes that predict engagement in consumer practices and participatory practices using OLS models. The consumer and participatory indexes, ranging from 0-3, are the dependent variables. The independent variables include a variety of demographic characteristics, community interactions (both online and offline), and offline interactions respondents that may have with their local governments. The results are displayed in **Table 1**.

Table 1: Predictors of Consumer and Participatory Practices

	Consumer		Participatory	
	B (Std. Error)	Std. B	B (Std. Error)	Std. B
Constant	1.624 (.291)		-.089 (.248)	
HH Income	.069 (.031)	.032*	-.062 (.027)	-.066*
Years Lived in Community	-.041 (.033)	-.064	.012 (.028)	.019
Respondent Age	-.037 (.035)	-.055	-.031 (.030)	-.047
Respondent Race (White)	-.167 (.144)	-.057	-.120 (.121)	-.042
Time Comp Use	-.082 (.048)	-.082	.062 (.041)	.063
Internet News	.108 (.111)	.049	.214 (.095)	.098*
Online Community Group	.091 (.051)	.102	.024 (.043)	.027
Online Hobby Group	.026 (.043)	.032	.056 (.037)	.069
Online Political Group	.050 (.049)	.056	.147 (.042)	.170***
Online Religious Group	-.022 (.044)	-.025	.031 (.038)	.036
Local Club Member	.016 (.109)	.008	.118 (.093)	.062
Attend Neighborhood Event	-.134 (.103)	-.068	.063 (.088)	.033
Plan Neighborhood Event	.137 (.108)	.067	.251 (.092)	.125**
Held Office in Local Club	.066 (.102)	.036	.057 (.087)	.032
Process Offline Trans.	.255 (.089)	.141**	.056 (.076)	.031
Attended a Council Meeting	-.040 (.106)	-.020	.333 (.091)	.172***
Contact Pub Official Offline	-.054 (.097)	-.030	.427 (.083)	.243***

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Consumer: $R = .304$, $R^2 = .092$, $N = 427$

Participatory: $R = .555$, $R^2 = .308$, $N = 431$

This table reveals some striking differences between the consumption of government services and participation in the political system. Household income is positively associated with consumer interactions while it is negatively associated with participatory interactions. It should also be noted that the other status variables including age and years lived in the community do not predict either

consumer or participatory interactions. These results provide evidence against H2 part a: amongst the population of those who use government websites, higher income households are slightly more likely to use the websites for government services. However we find evidence that contradicts H2 part b. While none of SES categories positively predict participation, household income is a negative predictor of participation. Therefore we have reason to conclude that the digital divide does not deepen disparities in political participation. These findings are particularly interesting given the salience of household income, length of time lived in the community, and age as positive predictors of participatory repertoires [9], [29]. Furthermore, those who participate online seem to be generally more engaged in politics both offline and online. Those who use the Internet to participate politically are most likely to be persons who participate offline. Additionally, in contrast to consumer behavior, those who participate in the local political system are also likely to depend on the Internet for local news and visit websites devoted to local political issues.

Regarding offline community activities, H3 we find slight support. While none of the online community interactions are related with online consumer or participatory interactions, those who take part in planning a neighborhood event are more likely to participate online while they are not any more likely to use the Internet to consume government resources. Otherwise, involvement with the community, whether offline or online, seems unrelated to online consumption or online participation.

This table indicates that there are significant differences between those who engage in online consumer activities and those who engage in online participatory activities. There is not a single common predictor across the models. Every item that is positively and significantly associated with online participation is not associated with online consumer activities. The two variables that are positively associated with online consumer interactions are either not associated with online participation (i.e. offline transaction) or negatively associated with online participation (i.e. household income). Furthermore, all of the explicitly political activities as well as a quasi-political offline activity (i.e. planning a neighborhood event) are related to online participation but not to online consumer interactions. By contrast, processing a transaction offline, a distinctly consumer activity, is positively associated with online consumer activities but not with online participation. Collectively, this suggests that different types of respondents tend to engage in consumer and participatory interactions within the local political system.

5. Discussion and Implications for Website Designs

The evidence presented here indicates that while citizens generally do not use the websites to participate in the policy process, there is some basis for optimism that the Internet may be able to facilitate greater inclusion of the political community into the discussion of public policy. For the most part, those who participate online also participate offline. However, online participation is less characterized by SES stratification than is typically associated with offline participation.² Online, marginalized segments of the society are able to engage the political system bereft of the identity markers that would otherwise marginalize them [7:110-111]. Offline, those from lower SES groups and as well as ethnic minorities have historically been marginalized and this stratification has been evident in lower rates of participation [28], [29]. The question is how to make government websites facilitate participation in the promulgation and execution of policy rather than the single focus on the consumption of policy outputs?

While the data presented here cannot speak to whether or not the consumer orientation of these websites *causes* users to consume policy outputs more than participate in the policy process, it seems reasonable that more participatory orientations to municipal website constructions could promote participatory interactions with the political system. The website is an artifact of public policy that is created with an image of the user in mind. Municipal websites construct their target population as a particular type of user. Currently the front page of local government websites in America typically present images of government buildings or landmarks, thereby communicating either a bureaucratic image or an invocation to consume the good life available to residents. In contrast, the websites could present the government in more political terms by familiarizing them with local officials and making information on the policy agenda readily accessible on the front page of the site rather than repressing this information under several layers.

In addition to the general suggestion that the websites orient users towards participation, there are some specific suggestions that also might facilitate participation in discussions of public policy. Government websites can be an effective mechanism to acquaint residents with important policy matters before the municipality. Generally, however have three suggestions to improve these reports over their common presentation.

First, they are often written as a matter of decided policy rather than an invocation to participate in the policy discussion. Soliciting position papers from the variety of contrasting perspectives at

² Additional data analysis of these respondents confirms that, while offline participation is stratified by socioeconomic status, online participation is not [16].

the outset of deliberation could help facilitate citizen involvement by presenting the issue as open rather than the closure indicated reports that seek to legitimate a predetermined course of action.

Second, these papers must be written from the perspective of attracting public support. Hence, they should be written for a general audience rather than an audience of experts. Furthermore, authors should be encouraged to rebut the counter claims raised by competing elites as well as members of the local community. In this way the elite politics of expertise will be forced to confront the lay politics of experience.

Third, these reports should be connected with discussion boards that are visible to the general public. Some municipalities currently allow users to submit comments directly to the an agency or public officials. However, if comments are submitted directly to the government, the possibility for public discussion is short-circuited thereby eliding the community building and transformative potential of online political discussion.

Governance in networked society is becoming increasingly complex, but the information technology that facilitated its emergence also offers a way confront complexity. Technologies are both a product of the social and political forces that surround their use as well as a mediator of the social and political forces to which they are put to use. Governments tend to adapt technology use to fit existing patterns of organization. In a network society, that facilitates local policy making through policy networks of elites rather than everyday citizens. If, on the other hand, municipalities regard website users as able participants, websites may become a more effective means to incorporate citizen involvement in the policy process.

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