Chapter 11

Engaging Citizens on the Internet: An Assessment of Local Governments in Ohio

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ABSTRACT

This article presents empirical results relating to citizen-government relations on the internet that are based on an assessment of the World Wide Web presence of 428 local governments in northeast Ohio. Northeast Ohio provides a useful picture of E-government-citizen relationships because it includes a range of local government forms (counties, townships, etc.), urban and rural populations, and Midwestern influences that many consider “typical” of American states. The website reviews conducted assess citizen-government engagement in a variety of areas. The measures used include simple engagements like the ability to sign up for email updates and the presence of event calendars to more involved interactions, such as blogs, e-pay services, and open records requests. Using these measures, the authors assess citizen-government engagement among local governments in the sample.

I. INTRODUCTION

Citizen engagement is at the core of how we understand democracy. Citizen engagement is often messy and frustrating. However, a central promise of democracy is that engaging citizens brings broader interests into the decision-making process, diffuses power, and inhibits corruption by concentrated power elites. And while governments have long wrestled with the question of how best to engage citizens, advances in technology over the past two decades are forcing governments at all levels to rethink how they should engage with citizens. As Reddick (2004) puts it, “The Internet is one communication tool that has the potential
to radically change the face of government in the 21st century” (38). In response to the charge by Reddick and others that technology is changing the way governments engage citizens, the goal of this paper is two-fold: first, to contribute to an understanding of how local governments in the United States are using the internet to engage citizens; and second, to test several hypotheses to explain the conditions under which governments pursue different models of citizen engagement.

The paper draws on an analysis of 428 local governments in northeast Ohio. Northeast Ohio, which includes 13 counties with a total population of about 4 million citizens, offers a useful case study for assessing web-based citizen engagement efforts. There are a lot of local governments in northeast Ohio (Ohio ranks sixth in the number of local governments in the country, and northeast Ohio is well represented among these local governments), so analyzing citizen engagement efforts in this area is likely to provide a rich sample of alternative approaches. The region also includes the four major forms of general purpose local governments in the United States: counties, cities, villages, and townships). In addition, the region’s mix of urban and rural areas, its socio-economic variation, and its racial diversity make it a useful prism through which to view web based citizen engagement practices.

This study differs from existing literature on e-government in two-ways. First, it looks at government websites in terms of how web applications (which we also refer to as website “attributes”) reflect particular goals or understandings of citizen engagement. Much of the existing literature examines governmental websites through the lens of technological capacity. Scholars often make the case that governments’ use of the internet evolves over time along a continuum of technological sophistication – from simple posting of information on a website to more advanced Web 2.0 application like on-line forums or social networking sites. This study builds on the work of Kakabadse et al. (2003) in conceptualizing web applications not in terms of their technological sophistication but how specific website attributes promote different types of citizen engagement. Specifically, three distinct models of engagement are examined which Kakabadse and his colleagues term “electronic bureaucracy,” “information management,” and “populist.” By focusing on these three models, the study offers an alternative perspective to the “stages” approach that characterizes much of the e-government literature.

A second way in which our study differs from existing work is that our analysis extends to local governments that have traditionally been left out of the research because they were too small or the information was too difficult to collect. Our study includes 13 counties, 102 cities, 201 townships, and 112 villages. In Ohio, townships are the most common form of general purpose local government: they are unincorporated areas which develop general purpose government capacities and are governed by boards of trustees. Incorporated areas with more than 5,000 residents are cities, and those with less than 5,000 residents are considered villages. By including all local governments in our study we provide a more comprehensive picture of how local governments are using (or not using) technology to engage citizens. We also seek to assess what factors determine the type of engagement local governments seek to promote with their websites.

To examine the relationship between citizens and local governments, the paper is divided into several parts. In section II, we briefly discuss the literature on how government websites are conceptualized. This section also outlines the models of citizen engagement developed as an alternative to traditional accounts. In section III, we present a descriptive summary of the results of our analysis of local government websites in northeast Ohio. The analysis presents information on the types of website attributes governments are using most often, from which we infer the types of citizen engagement that governments seek to promote through their websites. In the following section,