ABSTRACT

A new form of online citizen participation in government decisionmaking has arisen in the United States (U.S.) under the Obama Administration. “Civic Participation 2.0” attempts to use Web 2.0 information and communication technologies to enable wider civic participation in government policymaking, based on three pillars of open government: transparency, participation, and collaboration. Thus far, the Administration has modeled Civic Participation 2.0 almost exclusively on a universalist/populist Web 2.0 philosophy of participation. In this model, content is created by users, who are enabled to shape the discussion and assess the value of contributions with little information or guidance from government decisionmakers. The authors suggest that this model often produces “participation” unsatisfactory to both government and citizens. The authors propose instead a model of Civic Participation 2.0 rooted in the theory and practice of democratic deliberation. In this model, the goal of civic participation is to reveal the conclusions people reach when they are informed about the issues and have the opportunity and motivation seriously to discuss them. Accordingly, the task of civic participation design is to provide the factual and policy information and the kinds of participation mechanisms that support and encourage this sort of participatory output. Based on the authors’ experience with Regulation Room, an experimental online platform for broadening effective civic participation in rulemaking (the process federal agencies use to make new regulations), the authors offer specific suggestions for how designers can strike the balance between ease of engagement and quality of engagement – and so bring new voices into public policymaking processes through participatory outputs that government decisionmakers will value.

Keywords: Deliberative Democracy, eGovernemnt, eParticipation, eRulemaking, Online Civic Participation, Online Policy Deliberation, Participatory Design

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INTRODUCTION

Recent years have been a fascinating period for the study of online civic engagement. The proliferation of the Internet and continuous innovation around Internet technologies and applications has made mobilizing people for political action both cheaper and more efficient. The growth of “conversational” Web 2.0 technologies has arguably lowered the barriers between the decisionmaking elites and the public. Finally, the availability of data and digitization of public records has made it easier to hold the decisionmakers accountable. Taken together, these developments carry great promise for strengthening democratic practices, particularly those rooted in the deliberative democratic theory. Deliberative democracy is “anchored in conceptions of accountability and discussion” (Chambers, 2003; p.308), both of which can be enhanced through the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs).

Over the past few years, we have witnessed the Internet, and particularly social media, being credited with formation of social movements such as Occupy Wall Street, and with enabling revolutions such as regime change in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya (for example see discussions of that discourse in Zuckerman, 2011 and Christensen, 2011). The Internet is also credited with redefining the deliberative practices and the power relations between the government and the governed (e.g. Bertot, Jaeger & Grimes, 2010; Effing, van Hillegersberg & Huibers, 2011). These claims are typically broad in scope, casual in nature, and technology-centric. Yet, looking at the end results of numerous initiatives – particularly those aimed at engaging the public in deliberation of specific, complex, and often technocratic policy issues – the evidence on the ground suggests mixed results.

This paper explores the areas of e-participation and online deliberation of complex government policymaking in the U.S. It is based on a multi-year analysis of civic engagement on Regulation Room – an interdisciplinary design-based research project. The paper raises questions about the design of online participation and deliberation mechanisms that enable meaningful and effective civic engagement, and offers recommendations inspired by the theory and practice of democratic deliberation.

Theoretical Background and Problem Statement

Deliberative Democracy and the Internet

Since its early roots as an opposition to such standard practices of liberal democracy as aggregation of preferences by voting and strategic interest bargaining, the theory of deliberative democracy has come of age. Initial deliberative democracy work focused primarily on answering the question of why governments might want broader public engagement in the policymaking processes and politics more generally; later, the research focus shifted towards analyzing the practice of political deliberation (Bohman, 1998). Conceptual debates continue around the fundamental idea of conceptualizing democratic decisionmaking as a process of consensus-oriented, reasoned argumentation-based deliberation among equals (e.g. Bohman, 1998; Cohen, 2003; Fishkin, 2009; Gastil, 2008), but this paper focuses primarily on the challenges of instantiating deliberative democratic theory in practice. As Bohman notes, scholars of deliberative democracy soon recognized “practical concerns of [its] feasibility” (p. 401), which involve a balancing act between the principle and the ideal given the reality of established practices and institutions.

There is, of course, no single unified vision of the practice of deliberative democracy (Dryzek, 2000), yet there are some elements that seem generally accepted. Participants must have what Dahl (1994) calls “an understanding of means and ends, of one’s interests and the expected consequences of policies for interests, not only for oneself but for all other relevant persons as well” (p. 31). This understanding is what “separates a deliberative system from an unreflective one” (Gastil, 2008). Cohen (2003) describes the “ideal deliberative procedure” (p. 346) as based upon four principles: free, reasoned, equal, and consensus driven. Freelon
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