Municipal Websites:
Linking Democratic Theory and Citizen Participation

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ABSTRACT

In this paper the authors draw on Scott’s (2006) work on e-government and democratic theories to examine how governments engage their citizens online. The three theories they focus – representative, pluralist, and direct – are the most prominent in the democratic theory literature. Using data from the 200 American local governments, they examine two research questions: What factors drive governments to employ each theory? Which theory predominates in the implementation of e-government? Our assumption is that providing answers to these two questions will help set the stage for future research linking e-government and democratic theory.

Keywords: Cities, Citizen Engagement, E-Government, Democratic Theories, Websites

INTRODUCTION

Over the last 15 years e-government has been at the forefront of the management reform movement. Around the world, governments have launched websites and other Internet technologies to enhance government services and engage citizens in the decision-making process. E-government refers to “the use of technology to enhance the access to and delivery of government services to benefit citizens, business partners and employees. It has the power to create a new mode of public service where all public organizations deliver a modernized, integrated and seamless service for their citizens” (Silcock, 2001, p. 88). According to Garson (2006), the adoption of e-government transforms the relationship between government and businesses and the resulting new improved transaction process leads to substantial savings for the government. Moreover, increased use of technology promises the reversal of the declining social capital in the United States. Research on e-government has recognized the dual components of e-government and e-governance, where e-government refers to a one-way communication between government and its citizens, while e-governance pertains to a two-way communication. According to Garson (2006 p.19), the phenomenon of e-government represents the “provision of government services by electronic means, usually over the Internet, while e-governance points to “a vision of changing the nature of the state.” E-governance moves beyond e-government; it represents “the co-evolution of the information and communication technologies with the political institutions, taking in particular into...
account how these political institutions and the state more precisely are evolving in the context of globalization and by doing so, crystallizing all other relevant function” (Rossel & Finger, 2007). The e-governance perspective also involves e-democracy, which will allow for greater government transparency and openness, which in turn leads to a better-informed citizenry. The phenomenon of e-democracy also denotes the potential for information and communication technology (ICTs) to improve the degree and quality of citizen participation in government decision-making. Although e-democracy has not been widely adopted by government in the United States, research that its use has the potential to create a more engaged citizenry. For instance, Garrett and Jensen (2010) found that local government officials who use the Internet to communicate with various stakeholders are more engaged with a more diverse array of stakeholders, which speak to the potential of e-democracy to improve civil discourse. What’s more is that ICTs can enable direct democracy on a large scale, allowing for greater government transparency and openness, resulting in a better-informed citizenry.

Over this same period scholars have worked to provide empirical support about how e-government works. The vast majority of this research has focused on trust and confidence in government (Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006; Kim & Lee, 2012; Morgeson, Van Amburg & Mithas, 2011); adoption (Schwester, 2009; Schwester, 2010; Moon 2002); innovation (Tolbert, Mossberger, & McNeal, 2008), changes and challenges faced by government officials (Carriozales, 2008; Dawes, 2008), and social equity (Helbig, Gil-Garcia, & Ferro, 2008; Manoharan & Carriozales, 2011). Much of this research relies on a similar model of e-government development. Coursey and Norris (2008) lay out five models of e-government (Layne & Lee, 2001; Baum & DiMaio, 2000; Hiller & Belanger, 2001; Westcott, 2001). In the interest of space we will layout the common elements of the models discussed in their work.

E-government development is a five-stage linear process beginning with an emerging web presence where the website provides rudimentary information such as contact information, frequently asked questions, and service offerings. During the second stage of enhanced web presence, the website is periodically updated with links to other agency websites. It also allows users to send messages to government officials. In the third stage of interactive web presence, the website enables users to have access to government documents by searching specialized databases. The fourth stage, transactional web presence, allows users to complete some transactions (paying parking tickets and Renewing drivers licenses) on-line. In this stage, users will also be able to customize the site to meet their individual needs. In the fifth stage of fully integrated web presence, governments provide access to all public services through a single web portal. A government with a fully integrated web presence allows users to complete all government transactions (monetary and non-monetary) online.

Although this model has been the basis of most e-government research, Coursey and Norris (2008, p. 533) are skeptical about its viability. They argue that “the models are purely speculative. They were not models per se but guesses about what e-government might be and how it may develop.” While their research provides insights regarding e-government, it fails to address one critical question: How does e-government fit into democratic theories of governance? Their examination of the five models of e-governance delves into online service offerings, barriers to implementation, adoption, and impact on governmental operations, but there is little discussion of how this relates to democratic theories of governance. One goal of e-government is to maintain citizens’ trust and confidence in government. This can only be realized if governments rely on democratic theories in the implementation of e-government. Coursey and Norris’s analysis focuses primarily on one-way interactions and does not sufficiently address how citizens can be more involved in decision-making processes. One way to address this question is to
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