Chapter 6
Municipal Government and the Interactive Web:
Trends and Issues for Civic Engagement

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ABSTRACT

What opportunities do citizens have to interact with government online at the local level? This study uses content analysis of the websites of the 75 largest U.S. cities to identify the extent to which they integrate features that allow online information customization and online citizen participation. Completed from March-May 2009, the coding includes analysis of Web 2.0 applications and older web-based tools such as citizen surveys, online town meetings, and other features relevant to citizen engagement. The study finds that municipal governments have steadily developed their online capacity to provide information to local residents, but new media such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube remain underutilized. Local e-government has yet to evolve as a tool to advance deliberative democracy, but some opportunities for input have increased. An initial analysis indicates that cities with large African-American and Latino populations have less interactive websites, and that larger cities are likely to have more participatory opportunities online.

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INTRODUCTION

Web-based technologies continue to change the way citizens receive information from and communicate with government (Chadwick 2009a). One important set of digital tools that has received increasing attention is Web 2.0. The Pew Internet and American Life Project defines Web 2.0 as "Web-enabled applications that are built around user-generated or user-manipulated content, such as wikis, blogs, podcasts, and social networking sites."[1] In December 2009, 31 percent of internet users reported using such interactive tools to obtain government information, according to Pew (Smith, 2010).[2] Approximately three-quarters of Americans believed that such tools help citizens to be more informed and make government more open (Smith, 2010). In addition to Web 2.0 innovations, such as Facebook and Twitter, citizens use older applications to sign up for email and newsletters, send comments, fill out surveys, or participate in online discussions of issues.

To what extent are cities using Web 2.0 applications and other older web-based technologies to provide information as well as facilitate communication between citizens and government? What explains the variation in city performance in online information customization and online citizen participation?

This study uses content analysis of the websites of the 75 largest U.S. cities to identify the extent to which they integrate features which allow online information customization and online citizen participation. The coding was completed from March to May 2009, and includes Web 2.0 applications as well as citizen surveys, online town meetings, and other features relevant to citizen engagement.

It is at the local level where citizen participation has perhaps the greatest promise for influencing government (Oates, 1972; Berry, Portney and Thomson, 1993; Peters, 1996; Oakerson, 1999), and so it is important to examine trends at the local level, especially in larger cities, which are most likely to be early adopters of new technologies (Ho, 2002; Moon, 2002).

BACKGROUND

Potential Benefits of Interactive Digital Government

One mechanism through which local governments can connect with local residents is e-government, or "the delivery of [government] information and services online via the Internet or other digital means" (West, 2000, 2). For many municipalities in the U.S., the internet has become an indispensable tool for undertaking important functions of government, specifically the provision of services to citizens.

E-government also can be an important tool to empower citizens and engage them in the policymaking process, thus promoting a more transparent and accountable government (OECD, 2003). The information capacity of the web may encourage civic engagement – greater knowledge and interest in public affairs, as well as discussion and participation (Mossberger, Tolbert and McNeal, 2008).[3]

First, government online can provide information about policies, and administrative and political processes that contributes to civic knowledge and interest, including knowledge about how to participate both online and offline. Second, e-government provides a possible means of discussion and participation – whether that is by contacting officials through email, filling out surveys or comment forms, or contributing to online discussions or blogs. Interactive tools on the web bridge these two functions of e-government, by allowing users to request or customize information to fit their needs, to communicate with government agencies in new ways, or to discuss and deliberate more broadly with other citizens as well as with government officials.