Chapter XVII
Experimental E–Deliberation in Taiwan:
A Comparison of Online and Face–to–Face Citizens' Conferences in Beitou, Taipei

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces a case of e-deliberation in Taiwan. Democratic deepening can be achieved by the application of information and communication technologies (ICTs), based upon their ability to connect people at a relatively low cost. Following the theories and application of deliberative democracy and e-government, experimentation is increasingly being conducted to answer the critical question: "will ICTs help?" It offers a quasi-experimental design of two citizen conferences held simultaneously in the Beitou area of Taipei, Taiwan; one face-to-face and the other online, with all other factors being equal. The results suggest that whilst online conferencing is as good as face-to-face conferencing on all fronts (with the single exception of time constraints), the expansion of e-deliberation to county- or national-level issues presents significant challenges. More evidence from further experimentation will be required to form viable strategies for fulfilling the "e-dream" of revitalizing democracy through ICTs at community, local, and national levels.

INTRODUCTION

Ever since the American Revolution of the late eighteenth century, representative democracy has continued to form the cornerstone of institutional democracy; there is, however, continuing debate and critique of certain inherent limitations of such representative democracy. Many critics point to the abiding political inequality and alienation of citizens (Lijphart, 1997); indeed, for some, democracy remains an "unfinished endeavor of modernity for human beings" (Habermas, 1996; Bohman, 1996). With the emergence of the so-called 'deliberative turn' in the early-1990s, a premium began to be placed on deliberative participation in response to the need for democratic deepening (Dryzek, 2000). However, it is clear that if citizens are to be involved in the deliberation process of policy decision making, then the problem of additional 'decision costs' needs to be dealt with (Tullock and Buchanan, 1962). This currently represents the key impediment to the transformation of citizen participation from simple normative discussion into a workable alternative to representative democracy.

The problems relating to the costs involved in wider participation are troubling for both citizens and bureaucrats alike. Given that, from a bureaucratic perspective, the participation of citizens increases operational costs, the incentives for bureaucrats to allow greater citizen participation will invariably be negative. From the standpoint of the citizenry, the increased opportunity costs will undoubtedly lead to citizen disengagement. Thus, the issue of cost management has become a crucial factor in the successful promotion of citizen participation; however, it seems that with the advent of new information and communication technologies (ICTs), the possibility has now emerged for citizens to become involved in the policy decision making process at relatively little additional cost.

Following a lengthy period characterized solely by the concentrated application of service delivery, some recognition has emerged, over recent years, of the need to adopt ICTs as a means of extending the scale of citizen participation within modern democracies. Adopting the term 'e-governance' as encompassing the overall contexts of IT application within the public sector, Backus (2001) regarded the process as a combination of two means within governance, e-democracy and e-commerce, each of which respectively promoted the engagement of citizens into public policy processes, and government service delivery to the public.

Responding to the call for participatory governance, the early years of the twenty-first century have witnessed online participation becoming a focal point for the application of ICTs within the overall transformation of the public sector (Chadwick, 2003). Despite the strong support for such new developments, this period has, however, also witnessed the emergence of pessimistic commentary, arguing that the effects of the application of ICTs as a means of supporting democracy remain unclear. Kampen and Snijkers (2003), for example, contend that both representative and direct democracies share a number of inherent problems; heading this list of problems, according to Kampen and Snijkers, is the likelihood that such attempts to combine ICTs with democracy will create new problems, such as increasingly inequitable participation resulting from the 'digital divide'.

This chapter sets out from the premise that it is far too early to judge whether or not the application of ICTs to democracy will meet with success; indeed, we feel that there is an ongoing requirement to carry out real-world experiments to acquire more data to support the growing debate on this issue from an evidence-based standpoint, and to further develop feasible strategies for the implementation of e-democracy initiatives (Sæbø et al., 2008). We provide a report on a city regeneration project which took place in Taipei City, Taiwan in 2004, and which adopted the use of citizens' conferences as a primary element of

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