

Chapter 13

E-Participation

Informing and Transforming Local Government Decision Making

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ABSTRACT

Citizen participation in government decision making through online and other electronic technologies has been termed e-participation, and has the potential to facilitate better decisions, better citizens, and better government. The chapter examines the extent to which progressive e-participation practice interacts with local government decision making and contributes to the espoused benefits of citizen participation. The international case studies indicate that e-participation can inform the intelligence, design, and choice phases of decision making and transform the way future local government decisions are made by formalising new inclusive processes and building community capabilities and motivation. E-participation can positively contribute to community capabilities, political relevance, better problem identification, and more relevant solutions, but the initiatives studied were costly and resource intensive. These e-participation initiatives provide robust examples of utilizing progressive information communication technologies because of the novel ways in which technology is applied, and due to the significant affect on information flows and decision making.

INTRODUCTION

Citizen participation in local government decision making has become a dominant theme for public sector management and governance (Department of

Communities and Local Government, 2006), along with the question of how Internet and electronic channels of engagement might facilitate an increased public involvement in the work of government and provide a better connection between citizens and democratic institutions (Macintosh, 2007a, 2007b; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006). Citizen participation

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in government decision making that is facilitated by online and other electronic technologies has been termed e-participation (Macintosh, 2007a), and a key issue is how it can inform and transform local government decision making.

The theory suggests that citizen participation provides significant benefits to institutions and society through: empowering individuals; strengthening public spirit and social capital; playing an important educative and capacity-building role in the community; promoting relevance in the political system; and providing better problem identification and more efficient and effective solutions (Box, 1998; Roberts, 2004; Thomas, 1995). But there are gaps in our knowledge of how e-participation initiatives can contribute to these factors in practice (Demediuk, 2007; Macintosh, 2007a, 2007b).

The objective of this chapter is to describe e-participation activities that occur as part of Swedish and Australian initiatives to involve citizens in local government decision making, and consider if and how electronic channels of engagement facilitate the benefits espoused by the theory of citizen participation. Firstly the background to citizen participation in government decision making and the role of the Internet and electronic communications in such initiatives is examined. Secondly, the nature of the Swedish and Australian community engagement activities is described. Thirdly, the effect of these e-participation activities is discussed in relation to each of the benefits that community engagement can theoretically provide. Finally, future trends and areas for further research are examined and conclusions from the cases are drawn in order to inform practice.

BACKGROUND

The idea of community engagement initiatives that allow citizen participation in decision making has a history inexorably tied to democracy

itself. A modern wave of public sector reforms are described as heading towards local community governance, and have brought an increased role for engagement between government institutions and the public, and a wider scope for citizens to influence government decision making (Roberts, 2004). Whilst rational decision making remains a central theme, citizens become more involved as local actors in the work of government, and this necessitates a community-based performance management which consists of rational decision making by governments that is attuned to, and influenced by the community. This new localism is especially appealing at the local government level due to the closeness of the public and the services that councils provide – and so it is more practical to know communities better, make performance more visible, and ultimately give local people more power (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2006).

This ideal of ‘local governance’ is evident in practice but it has travelled and been translated in different forms - for example: in legislated ‘best value’ local government reforms in countries like Australia and the UK; in voluntary agendas in Swedish local governments that carry no particular or official ‘reform mark’; and in more established participatory budgeting initiatives in South America (Demediuk, 2007; Solli, Demediuk, & Sims, 2005). For example in the UK increasing the involvement of local communities in local government decision making is now seen simply as a part of good management so as “... to enable communities to have a say in issues that matter most to them” (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2006, p. 2) and reflects “... the idea of reshaping public services around citizens and communities who use them – consulting, involving and encouraging them to have a say about the sort of services they want” (Department of Communities and Local Government, 2006, p. 17). Corresponding calls for citizen participation in decision making have come from a host of other countries such as Sweden the

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