

Chapter 20

Citizen Participation through Municipal Websites: A Global Scorecard

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ABSTRACT

This study is based on a global survey of municipal websites conducted by the E-Governance Institute at Rutgers University New Jersey and the Global E-Policy E-Government Institute at Sungkyunkwan University, South Korea. The survey evaluated municipal websites in five distinct e-governance categories: (1) security and privacy, (2) usability, (3) content, (4) services, and (5) citizen participation. This chapter examines the area of citizen participation in detail and the analysis found that online citizen participation was highly correlated with both the percentage of Internet users and the percentage of mobile users in a country. In the analysis Seoul, Korea achieved the highest score in this category. Unlike previous research the population of a country was not found to be statistically significant. Overall, this research indicates a strong relationship Internet users and education have with online citizen participation. As the percentage rate of Internet users increases across the globe, along with the rising literacy rates, more countries will progress towards adopting and implementing e-democracy strategies.

INTRODUCTION

A growing phenomenon around the globe is how online citizen participation influences the relationship citizens' have with their government. Democratic governments are increasingly scruti-

nized for how effectively they use the Internet to provide services to citizens. Initially, traditional citizen participation involved limited to face-to-face interactions and telephone communications, however, the evolution of technology has given citizens more opportunities for participation with improvements in communication, and accessibil-

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ity. This chapter examines different variables that might explain why countries provide online citizen participation opportunities. The analysis is based on the global study of municipal websites that was conducted by Rutgers University and Sungkyunkwan University. This chapter focuses on two primary questions related to citizen participation:

1. What opportunities for online participation are available in the world's most populous cities?
2. What factors best explain the development of online citizen participation on municipal websites?

The results from this study will not only contribute to our understanding of best practices, but also help establish municipal e-government benchmarks.

BACKGROUND

E-government enables citizens to participate more actively in the democratic process and the governance of their communities (OECD 2003a). The use of information and communication technology (ICT) promises a participatory democracy (Clift, 2004). Both political support from the top officials and demand from its citizens are necessary to facilitate a shift towards e-government. Johnson and Kaye (1998) argue that within the argument that the Internet can reinvigorate democracy is the implicit "notion that Web users trust the government and want to participate" (p. 123).

The Internet can reinvigorate civic engagement, which is defined as "the activities by which people participate in civic, community and political life and by doing so express their commitment to community" (Smith, Kearns and Fine, 2005, p. 6). Online civic engagement is different than traditional engagement; with online capabilities many individuals can be mobilized quickly at little or no cost. Individuals can get involved directly,

bypassing such middlemen as advocacy groups and organizations. Online engagement can also empower groups and organizations; they can generate their discussion forum and create news updates without going through traditional media channels. "Methods of public engagement can be described as deliberative when they encourage citizens to scrutinize, discuss and weigh up competing values and policy options" (Coleman and Gotze, 2001, p. 6). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) outlined three ways to engage the public – 1) *information sharing*: one-way communication in which the government produces and delivers information to its citizens; 2) *consultation*: two-way communication in which citizens can provide feedback to the government; and 3) *active participation*: a partnership between the public and government in which the citizens are directly involved in the decision and policymaking process.

There are possible problems with an increase in public engagement. Coleman and Gotze (2001) suggest a possible objection, "online public engagement might compromise a threat to effective policy making and good governance" (p. 15). As citizens become more knowledgeable and actively express their concern over an issue, they can become less representative of the general populace. This can lead to minority rule over the majority, and the exclusion of others, forming small elitist groups that have a great deal of control over policy decisions via online means. If governments offer online consultation they "should not offer [it] as a gimmick; they must be committed to integrating evidence gathered into the policy process and being responsive" (Coleman & Gotze, 2001, p. 20). Online communication networks have the potential to create a strong sense of community and social ownership, which are high in social capital (Foth, 2003). An online community can be a geographic place or group of people that come together for a specific issue, transcending a physical place. The Internet has great potential to tie together people based on their interests and concerns because

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