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E-participation Among American Local Governments

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Abstract: Using data from national surveys conducted in 2006 and 2011, we examine whether local governments in the United States have adopted e-participation (a.k.a. e-democracy). The results show that few American local governments have done so. These results are highly inconsistent with the claims of e-democracy advocates. Two important factors account for the lack of e-democracy at the American grassroots: lack of funding and lack of perceived demand. Another reason may be that early predictions were incorrect. Based on these findings, we would expect that e-democracy among US local governments will not be substantially different in the foreseeable future than it is now.

Keywords: E-participation, e-democracy, e-government

1 Introduction¹

In this paper, we examine empirically whether American local governments have adopted electronic participation (e-participation), also known as e-democracy (herein, we use these terms synonymously). For years, scholars and advocates have argued that e-government has the potential not simply both to deliver governmental information and services online and to produce e-democracy (e.g., Nugent, 2001; Garson, 2004; and Ward and Vedel 2006). Proponents' claims about the potential of e-democracy suggest that it will produce primarily positive results in such areas as democratic engagement and deliberation, citizen participation in government and politics, and voter turnout in elections (e.g., Meeks, 1997; Baum and DiMaio, 2000; Becker, 2001; Gronlund, 2001; Hiller and Belanger, 2001; and Westcott, 2001; OECD, 2003; King, 2006; Ward and Vedel, 2006; Amoretti, 2007).

2 Defining E-democracy

Currently, there is little agreement in the literature about what e-democracy means in theory or constitutes in practice, which should not be surprising because the same can be said of democratic theory in general. According to Dahl (1956), “One of the difficulties one must face at the outset is that there is no democratic theory – there are only democratic theories (1).” The term e-democracy is often conflated with constructs labeled e-participation, virtual democracy, teledemocracy, digital democracy, cyber democracy and e-democracy.

Several authors have offered definitions of e-democracy (e.g., Hacker and van Dijk, 2000; Gronlund, 2001; Kakabadse, et al., 2003; European Commission, 2005; Pratchett, et al., 2005; Tambouris, et al., 2008; and Spirakis, et al., 2010, among many others). Most commonly, definitions of e-democracy involve the use of ICTs for citizen participation. Additional elements common to such definitions are normative in nature and suggest purposes for e-democracy, such as improving or enhancing democracy, involving citizens in decision-making, fomenting organizational (that is, governmental) change and transforming governments.

For the purposes of this paper, we define e-democracy descriptively as: *The use of electronic means, principally although not solely through government websites and the Internet, to promote and enhance citizen engagement with and participation in governmental activities, programs and decision-making. (This is the same definition that we used in our survey.)*

3 Literature Review

For this research, we conducted an extensive review of the e-democracy literature. The great majority of the works we found were speculative or theoretical in nature or addressed e-government applications. Very few were empirical. We reviewed the empirical works to find those that sought hard evidence (e.g., through case studies, surveys, website analyses, etc.) of the existence of e-democracy anywhere around the world. We discuss findings from this review in the following paragraphs

Gibson, et al., in 2008, reported that there was little citizen uptake of e-participation efforts in Australia. They also suggested that “...widespread mobilization is unlikely to occur in the near future (111).” Medaglia (2007) found that very few Italian municipal websites provided opportunities for active citizen participation (93 percent did not). In an examination of Korean government websites, Lyu, et al. (2007), discovered low citizen uptake of and demand for e-participation efforts.

Astrom (2004) found that although the elected heads of Swedish municipalities favored aspects of e-democracy, there was little evidence of these initiatives on municipal websites. “As the analysis shows, most local governments “...use the Internet for modernization rather than radical regeneration (111).” Astrom, et al. (2011), found little evidence of e-participation in municipal planning in Sweden, despite the fact that a large fraction of local planning directors said that they favored it.

In a paper about e-government in Istanbul, Turkey, Akdogan (2010) was unable to identify any significant amount of e-democracy via governmental websites in that metropolis. Similarly, Sobaci (2010) found that the Turkish parliament website offered very little in terms of e-participation. In a web based survey of civil servants in six New Zealand government departments, Baldwin, et al. (2012), found that while civil servants generally had favorable views of e-government (though not of e-transformation), the actual extent of e-participation efforts among those agencies was limited. This, the authors argued, "...suggests that 'e-participation' largely remains a method of informing, keeping happy and convincing the public (116)."

After conducting an analysis for the *Local e-Democracy National Project* in the UK, Pratchett, et al. (2005), found that "Despite the existence of a range of e-democracy tools and some significant experience of using them in different contexts, the penetration and take-up of e-democracy in the UK, as elsewhere, remains limited (4)." Writing about the effect of the Internet on citizen participation in politics in the UK, Ward and Vedel (2006) reported only a limited impact. Indeed, they cautioned that, based on the extant evidence, "the Internet per se is unlikely to stimulate widespread mobilization or participation... (215)." Polat and Pratchett (2009) reviewed the UK's local e-government program that operated between 2000 and 2006, which they argued was "...arguably one of the biggest initiatives of its kind in the world (20)," and found that it largely ignored what the authors called online practices of citizenship and instead favored themes of modernization and efficiency.

Studies in the US have similarly failed to find evidence of the adoption of e-democracy by governments there. Using data from a survey of residents of the state of Georgia, Thomas and Streib (2005) categorized citizen visits to government websites as e-commerce, e-research or e-democracy. E-democracy visits were the least frequent. Norris (2006) conducted focus groups with local officials and found that e-democracy was not a consideration when these governments initiated their e-government efforts nor a part of their future planning for e-government.

After examining planning-related websites among US municipalities with populations of 50,000 and greater, Conroy and Evans-Crowley (2006) found little evidence of the use of e-participation tools. Scott (2006) reviewed the websites of the 100 largest US cities and found little evidence that these websites supported "...significant public involvement in accordance with direct democracy theory (349)." Finally, D'Agostino, et al. (2011), reviewed the websites of the 20 largest American cities for their practices of e-government (information and services) and e-governance (participation) and found that information and service delivery predominated and that "...governance applications are only marginally practiced via the Internet. (4)"

A number of scholars have conducted comparative studies, mostly concerning e-government and e-democracy initiatives in the US, the UK, European nations, and by the European Union (EU) and the European Commission (EC). These works, like those reviewed above, have also failed to find evidence that governments in those nations have adopted or are practicing e-democracy (see, for example: Annttiroiko (2001); Chadwick and May (2003); Needham (2004); Zittel (2004); and, Chadwick (2009). The principal conclusion that we draw from these empirical studies is that,

despite much early enthusiasm, there is little evidence that governments anywhere around the world have not adopted or are practicing e-democracy.

4 Research Methods

We study e-democracy at the American grassroots for two important reasons. First, the US has a large number of general purpose local governments – about 39,000 -- 19,429 municipalities; 16,504 towns and townships; 3,034 counties (Census, 2002). Second, local governments are the closest governments to the people and have the greatest direct impacts on people's lives.

To produce the data needed for this study, we contracted with the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) to conduct a survey of e-democracy among American local governments.² (For readers from outside of the US, the ICMA is a major and highly respected local government association that, among other things, conducts and publishes considerable research for its members.) The questionnaire that we used for this study is based in part on an e-democracy survey conducted by ICMA in 2006 (Norris, 2006b). Because we wanted to be able to compare the results from our 2011 survey with data from the 2006 survey, we based the 2011 instrument on the instrument from 2006. However, recognizing that much has changed in the world of e-government and e-democracy in the five years between the surveys, we needed to update the 2006 instrument at least somewhat to capture recent e-democracy issues and trends.

Therefore, prior to developing the 2011 instrument, we asked a convenience sample of local Information Technology (IT) directors and Chief Information Officers (CIOs) to review the 2006 instrument and make recommendations to us based on their expert knowledge of local e-democracy developments since then (see Appendix A). Armed with these expert practitioners' suggestions, we worked cooperatively with the ICMA survey research staff to write the 2011 questionnaire. While many of the questions are identical to those in the 2006 survey, we added a number of new questions. In order to keep the length of the survey manageable, as we added new questions to the 2011 instrument, we deleted a nearly equal number from the 2006 instrument. Note that we told survey respondents that, for our purposes, the terms e-participation and e-democracy were synonymous and, that to simplify things for the questionnaire, we used the term e-participation to mean both.

Of 2,287 surveys mailed in 2011, 684 local governments responded, for a response rate of 29.9 percent. This response rate is consistent with other recent surveys recently conducted by the ICMA at around 30 percent, although lower than the response rate of 36.8 percent 2006 survey. ICMA has noticed a decline in responses to its surveys in recent years and attributes this, in part, to the impact of the "Great Recession" on local staff cutbacks. As a result, local governments understandably have fewer resources to devote to completing surveys (Moulder, 2011).

When we examined the responses for representativeness (that is, of the responding governments to US local governments as a whole), we found that local governments with over 1 million in population were underrepresented. Local governments in the

Northeast were underrepresented, while those in other regions of the nation were about evenly represented. Among municipalities, the council manager form of government was substantially overrepresented, while among counties the council-administrator form of government was also overrepresented when compared with governments with elected executives.

5 Findings

We begin by examining whether responding governments had implemented one or more of several possible e-participation activities (Table 1). The first and most important finding from these data is that very few local governments had undertaken any of these e-participation activities. Second, most of the e-participation activities that the governments had undertaken did not provide much, if any, opportunity for meaningful citizen participation, at least by our definition (that is, activities that promote and enhance citizen engagement with and participation in governmental activities, programs and decision-making).

Table 1. Has your local government has done any of the following electronically within the past 12 months?

	2006		2011	
	N	%	N	%
One-way				
Enabled citizens to view a hearing or meeting	-	-	447	68.3
Enabled citizens to post comments	-	-	322	49.9
Enabled citizens to participate in a poll or survey	-	-	315	47.9
Straw polls	61	8.7	-	-
Web surveys	180	25.2	-	-
Two-way				
Enabled citizens to participate in a hearing or meeting	-	-	128	19.8
Formal public hearings	76	10.7	-	-
Informal public hearings	60	8.5	-	-
Public consultations	47	6.7	204	31.8
Non-narrated or guided discussion forums	49	7.0	104	16.0
Narrated or guided discussion forums	45	6.3	96	14.7
Enabled citizens to vote in election or referendum	-	-	51	7.9
Referenda	17	2.4	-	-

Conducted electronic town halls	-	-	33	6.1
Citizen petitions	17	2.4	35	5.4
Voting for local elected officials	14	2.0	-	-
Chat rooms	9	1.3	33	5.1

Note: Blank spaces indicate that the question was not asked in that year.

Only one e-participation activity had been implemented by more than half of the governments responding to the 2011 survey (enabling citizens to view a hearing or meeting, 68.3 percent – not asked in 2006). While an adoption rate of this magnitude might appear impressive, merely viewing a hearing or meeting hardly constitutes meaningful citizen participation. Far fewer governments (only one in five, 19.8 percent) enabled active citizen participation in meetings or hearings. This does, however, represent a substantial increase over 2006.

Two activities approached half of local governments reporting. The first, enabling citizens to post comments (49.9 percent), was not asked in 2006. The second, enabling citizens to participate in a poll or survey (47.9 percent), was asked in 2006, when a quarter of governments (25.2 percent) said that they had conducted web surveys. Posting comments and responding to surveys or polls represents a type of active citizen participation, but it is one-way communication (citizen to government).

Next we inquired about why local governments engage in e-participation projects and activities (Table 2). We did not ask this question in 2006. The great majority (82.5 percent) responded that it was “the right thing to do.” Although the survey instrument did not delve into the meaning, we suspect that doing the right thing is driven by both professional norms and a public service motivation.

Slightly more than four in ten governments said that both top local administrators (43.8 percent) and local elected officials (43.3 percent) demanded e-participation. About one third (32.3 percent) said demand by local citizen.

Table 2. Why does your local government engage in e-participation? (2011)

	N	%
Demanded or required by local elected officials	236	43.3
Demanded or required by top administrators	238	43.8
Demanded by citizens	176	32.3
Demanded by important local interest groups	54	9.9
It is the right thing to do	449	82.5
To keep up with other local governments	179	32.9
Other	80	14.7

Next we asked (2011 only) whether these governments’ e-participation projects were mostly one-way from governments to citizens or mostly citizen to government (Table 3). The great majority of governments (71.0 percent) said mostly one-way.

Only 2.9 percent said mostly citizen to government, while about one-quarter (26.0 percent) said a combination of one- and two-way.

Table 3. Are your local government's e-participation projects and activities today mostly communication from the government to citizens or mostly from citizens to government? (2011)

	N	%
Mostly government to citizen	183	33.3
Somewhat government to citizen	207	37.7
A mix of both, about half and half	143	26.0
Somewhat citizen to government	7	1.3
Mostly citizen to government	9	1.6

To help understand why so few local governments had adopted e-democracy, we asked about barriers to adoption (Table 4). The top four barriers, all of which were reported by greater than a majority of governments, were lack of funding (83.5 percent – up eight percent from 2006); need to upgrade technology (69.6 percent – up seven percent); lack of technology staff (60.7 percent – down nearly three percent); and concerns about the digital divide (55.7 percent – up nine percent). The second and third of these barriers are directly related to the first, funding.

Table 4. Barriers

	2006		2011	
	N	%	N	%
Lack of funding	504	75.7	515	83.5
Need to upgrade technology infrastructure	408	62.2	403	69.6
Lack of technology staff	419	63.3	359	60.7
Concerns that the digital divide would prevent participations by some citizens	290	47.2	299	55.7
Concerns that unrepresentative groups would dominate e-participation channels	188	31.4	263	49.3
Difficulty justifying the cost of e-participation applications	-	-	259	48.2
When we have provided opportunities or mechanisms for e-participation, few citizens participated	173	30.9	247	47.8
Issues around security	335	53.9	262	47.1
Lack of demand by citizens	396	60.3	257	45.8
Lack of technology expertise	265	41.7	240	42.9

Issues around privacy	267	44.1	227	42.5
Lack of demand by elected officials	377	57.7	233	42.1
Lack of demand from elected officials	169	27.7	190	36.5
Lack of information about e-participation applications	-	-	169	32.9
Inadequate bandwidth	-	-	142	27.0
Lack of support from top administrators	-	-	68	13.0

Note: Blank spaces indicate that the question was not asked in that year

The survey also asked about whether local elected officials and local administrators promoted e-participation (Tables 6 and 7). Answers here could also be important to understanding why so few local governments have adopted e-participation.

Table 5. Elected officials promote e-participation?

	2006		2011	
	N	%	N	%
Don't promote	363	49.5	243	38.0
Promote some	207	28.2	199	31.1
Actively promote	163	22.2	198	30.9

Table 6. Top appointed officials promote e-participation?

	2006		2011	
	N	%	N	%
Don't promote	260	35.9	152	24.1
Promote some	210	29.0	203	32.2
Actively promote	253	35.0	275	43.6

Three in 10 respondents (30.9 percent) to the 2011 survey said elected officials actively promoted e-participation (up 8.7 percent over 2006); a similar fraction (31.1 percent) said that elected officials promoted it some (up 2.9 percent); and 38.0 percent said these officials did not support e-participation (down 11.5 percent). More than four in 10 respondents (43.6 percent, up 8.6 percent over 2006) said that appointed officials actively supported e-participation; one-third (32.2 percent) promoted it some (up 3.2 percent); and one-quarter (24.1 percent) did not promote it (down 11.6 percent).

Finally, we wanted to know whether these local governments perceived any citizen demand for e-participation (Table 8). This, too, could be important to an understanding of why so few local governments had adopted e-participation. Here we asked whether citizens or grassroots organizations actively pushed for e-participation oppor-

tunities. We asked the respondents to answer based on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 meaning no citizen demand and 5 meaning significant citizen demand. For ease of analysis, we collapsed responses 1 and 2 to mean little or no citizen demand, 3 to mean some citizen demand, and 4 and 5 to mean significant citizen demand.

Table 7. Are citizen groups actively pushing for e-participation

	2006		2011	
	N	%	N	%
No citizen demand	583	79.8	464	72.5
Some citizen demand	115	15.8	124	19.4
Significant citizen demand	32	4.4	52	8.2

The data suggest a slight trend in the direction of greater citizen demand, but the trend is so small that it could be an artifact of the survey, rather than an indication of anything substantive. The percentage of governments indicating the existence of significant citizen demand nearly doubled between 2006 and 2011, but only from 4.4 percent to 8.2 percent (still miniscule). Those indicating no citizen demand diminished slightly (from 79.8 percent to 72.5 percent). “Some” citizen demand remained at around three in 10 respondents (29.0 percent in 2006 and 32.2 percent in 2011).

6 Findings and Conclusion

The most striking finding from this study is that few American local governments have adopted e-participation and those that have been adopted, for the most, have not implemented what we would consider meaningful citizen participation. Data from the 2011 survey strongly suggest two explanatory factors: lack of funding and lack of demand. The responding governments cited lack of funding as the most frequently barrier to their adopting e-participation in both 2006 and 2011. Respondents also cited the need to upgrade technology, lack of technology staff, difficulty justifying costs, and lack of technology expertise as barriers – all of which are directly related to lack of funding. This finding is also consistent with surveys of local e-government in the US, where lack of funding nearly always tops the list of barriers to adoption (e.g., Coursey and Norris, 2008).

A second important reason for the lack of local e-democracy in the US may well be lack of demand – from local officials and citizens. When asked about barriers to e-participation, 46 percent of local governments cited lack of demand by citizens and 42 percent said lack of demand by elected officials. Moreover, only three in ten felt that elected officials actively promoted e-participation and about 4 in 10 appointed officials did so. And, only about a quarter of governments perceived any citizen demand at all.

Finally, the literature on e-government increasingly points to the probability that early predictions for e-government were simply wrong. In part, they were technologically deterministic (Coursey and Norris, 2008) and they also were based on a lack

or an incomplete understanding of the prior relevant literature (Coursey and Norris, 2008; Kraemer and King, 2006; and Danziger and Andersen, 2002).

Whatever the causes, the reality is that there is very little e-democracy among US local governments. Based on the available evidence, we suspect that the state of e-democracy at the American grassroots it is not likely to change much in the foreseeable future (see also, Norris 2010). Moreover, based on our reading of the empirical studies of e-democracy, we strongly suspect that the state of local e-democracy in the US is more similar to than it is different from that of local e-democracy elsewhere in the world. Of course, only further study will allow us to support or reject these suspicions.

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Appendix A Expert Practitioners

We wish to acknowledge and express our appreciation to the following local government officials who reviewed the 2006 survey instrument and provided comments and suggestions that we then used in developing the 2011 instrument. Any errors or omissions are those of the authors and in no way reflect on these officials or their advice.

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End Notes

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