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The Citizen Participation Continuum: Where Does the US Stand?

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ABSTRACT

Active citizen participation facilitated by information technology can have profound implications for democracy and civic discourse. In this paper we describe a continuum of tools that encourage active participation by citizens. We use a comprehensive review of the web-sites of the 50 States of the U.S. to chart the current position of the country on this continuum. We find that these G2C initiatives provide some tools for passive citizen participation (e.g. on-line feedback) but ignore two important tools for active citizen participation (electronic voting and discussion forums). The lack of discussion forums is especially surprising since they are a low cost scalable tool for fostering deliberation and works equally well under both representational and direct democracy systems. In conclusion, the paper discusses the future implications of the participation continuum.

Keywords

E-Government, E-Democracy, E-Participation

INTRODUCTION

Research on E-government has typically been classified along four sub-areas in present research and government reports: G2B, G2C, G2G, and G2E. The main thrust of E-government initiatives thus far has focused on providing citizens with better services and increasing the government's internal effectiveness and efficiencies. Past work in G2C areas has typically explored how best the government can provide information and services to its citizens in the digital form. Marchionini (Marchionini, Samet, & Brandt, 2003) divides such government initiatives along three major areas: Access to information, Transaction services, and Citizen participation, while the OECD report (2003) on E-democracy and E-participation similarly focuses on Information, Consultation, and Active participation (Macintosh, 2004). Examples of these different categories can be found easily on government websites. Governments are typically large producers of information. Hence, it is not surprising that providing citizens with access to quality information with the help of easy-to-use web sites and portals is the most widely available and commonly studied initiative.

Taking this a step further, the government can also provide transaction services, such as allowing citizens to file their taxes on-line. According to an IRS news release in the United States of America (IRS, 2004), at least 60% of the US's 130 million tax-payers are eligible for free electronic filing of taxes. Other examples of transaction services include citizens applying for various patents and renewal of driving licenses and passports. While the initiatives that fall under the first two categories according to Marchionini (2003) and the first category according to the OECD report have been studied widely, enabling active citizen participation has been an area that has "perhaps been the most controversial and certainly the least developed" (Marchionini, 2002). Any initiative that encourages meaningful and active participation from its citizens on-line has the potential to impact the underlying mechanisms of democracy and civic discourse.

This paper combines Marchionini's and the OECD's reports with some theoretical developments in the area of Economics called Public Choice to construct a continuum of on-line tools classified according to the level of citizen participation that they support. We conduct a comprehensive survey of the web sites of all 50 states of the US in order to map the position of that country on the continuum and later compare it to other countries. We conclude with a discussion of a new category of tools that can enhance the active participation of citizens online.

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THE PUBLIC CHOICE FRAMEWORK

The areas of constitutional economics and public choice provide a useful framework for analyzing different tools that might be used to govern in terms of their costs. James Buchanan pioneered this field of research and received a Nobel Prize in 1986 for his contribution. Past research in e-government has mostly ignored these areas, which analyze in detail the basic economic reasons for the existence of governments and the most fundamental problems related to democracy as a political and economic system. In order to be successful and efficient in the long run, an E-government system has to address these fundamental problems.

The main role of government is to provide goods of public nature. These are services that benefit a big group of the population, and at the same time are non-exclusive, i.e. once a service is provided, there is no easy way to exclude citizens from using it. Goods with similar characteristics such as highways, bridges, education, healthcare, national defense, etc, must be provided by the government because of the so-called free-rider problem. In a free market situation, every individual citizen will expect others to contribute to the project while minimizing his contribution; therefore enough demand may not be mustered for the provision of the service.

When the government makes a decision to provide a certain public good, there are two important costs incurred in the process: external costs, and decision-making costs (Buchanan & Tullock, 1962). The external costs are ones that are incurred by an individual who is adversely affected by a government decision. For example, the government decides to build a new public stadium in Upper Manhattan. The stadium is beneficial to many people but harmful to citizens who live close to the area during the construction period. The sum of the adverse effects to all these affected individuals represents external costs. The size of external costs depends on the type of decision mechanism used. The decision-making costs on the other hand are costs that are involved in the process of reaching a decision. These include the cost to provide information for the people to decide on an issue, the cost to provide ways to citizens to voice their opinion and the costs involved in the interaction between the citizen and the decision mechanism used. For example, using a complicated mechanism that takes a long time to reach a decision represents high decision-making costs.
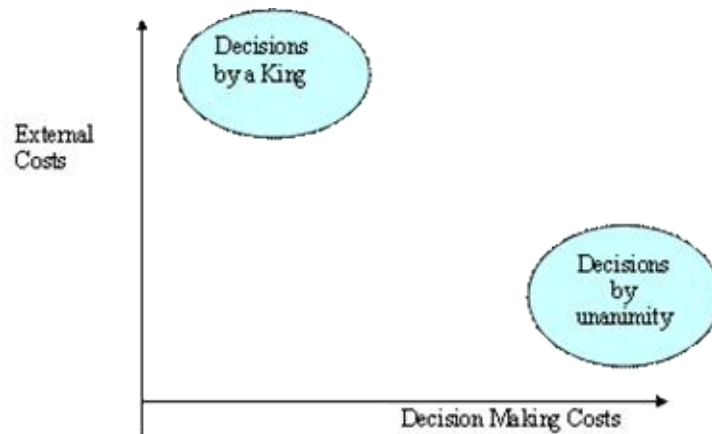
Figure 1. Trade-off between External and Decision Making Costs

Buchanan argues that there is a trade-off between external costs and decision-making costs in every mechanism. For example, decision-making processes that involve unanimity have low external costs but might have large decision-making costs because it is hard to gather all concerned people at the same place and time and have everyone agree on the procurement of a public good. On the other hand, a mechanism in which a king makes a public decision without too much deliberation and opinion polling has low decision-making costs but most likely high external costs because many citizens might be affected in a negative way. Figure 1 represents the trade-off between the two costs graphically.

Most modern democracies function by dealing differently with two broad categories of decisions: very important decisions and all other decisions. Certain inalienable rights of individuals are considered too significant to be left to the vagaries of majority opinion and are guaranteed by the constitution - e.g. right to free expression, right to own property (Shapiro, 2003; Zakaria, 2004). For all other decisions of lesser importance, the central concern of a democracy is to come up with a system

that consistently minimizes the sum of external and decision-making costs. For example, in a representational democracy, most of the decisions are left to the judgments of lawmakers. This keeps the decision-making costs reasonable. Citizens often vote for a candidate who will reduce their external costs. Of course, even in a representational democracy, direct democracy is possible through the use of referendums when citizens vote directly on an issue they perceive as important, sometimes even resulting in constitutional amendments. The Constitution is designed to allow for changes to the status quo, but the decision-making costs are high in order to keep the external costs low.

Recent advances in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have created a lot of opportunities for transforming the relationship between a government and its citizens (Macintosh, 2004; Moon & Welch, 2004). Marchionini (2002) classifies the nature of these interactions along the following dimensions: information dissemination, transaction services and citizen participation. A recent OECD report (2003) specifically places the different types of engagements possible along a participation continuum:

- one-way dissemination of information
- citizen feedback through consultation
- active participation between the government and citizens

Table 1

OECD Categories	Traditional ICTs (Before 2000)	Internet enabled ICTs
A. One-way Dissemination of Information	TV, Radio, Newspapers, printed materials	Traditional + digitized information on the government web site; email distribution lists
B. Consultation	Telephone, Fax, Face-to-Face meetings with government representatives	Traditional + on-line feedback; virtual meetings with government representatives
C. Active Feedback	Telephone; Fax; Face-to-Face meetings with government representatives;town hall meetings; local mobilization of communities; voting; letter-writing	Traditional + virtual meetings and bulletin boards that facilitate connection among citizens as well as between citizens and government

This paper compares the different mechanisms available for citizen participation before and after the advent of internet-enabled ICTs using Table 1. This paper argues that Internet enabled ICT tools that support one way dissemination of information have the potential to lower decision making costs as these new technologies have dramatically reduced the cost of citizen's access to information (see Figures 2 and 3). The ICT tools that support citizen consultation and active participation can lower both the decision-making and external costs. These tools lower the decision-making costs by reducing the costs of citizens' access to information. The ability of these ICT tools to connect people directly enabling deliberation (e.g. bulletin boards) and decision making (electronic voting mechanisms) could help lower the external costs. While access to these tools is still an issue that hinders participation of specific groups of citizens, the power of these tools can be amply illustrated by the speed with which anti-war protests were organized in the U.S. in 2003 (Zernike & Murphy, 2003). In comparison, the Vietnam era protests took years to organize primarily due to the lack of such democratizing tools. The case studies in the OECD report (2003) also point to the fruitful use of the new ICTs in advancing a more active engagement of citizens with their government.

HYPOTHESES

According to the literature in constitutional economics, the advances in internet-enabled ICTs have the power to reduce the decision-making and external costs through deliberation. However, past research points to several social and cultural factors that could impede the development of meaningful engagement between government and its citizens (OECD report, 2003; Macintosh, 2004; Shackleton et al., 2004). In this paper, we posit that there will be a gap in the participation continuum in terms of what is technologically feasible and what is available for interaction between government and its citizens. Specifically, we hypothesize that:
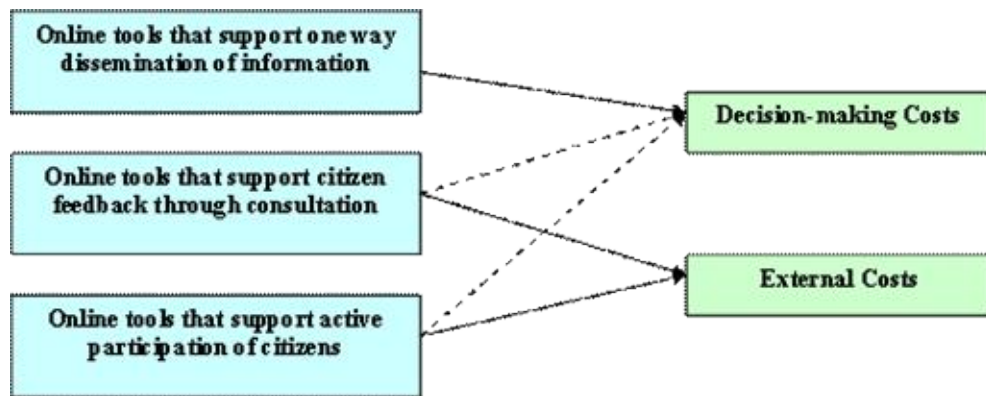
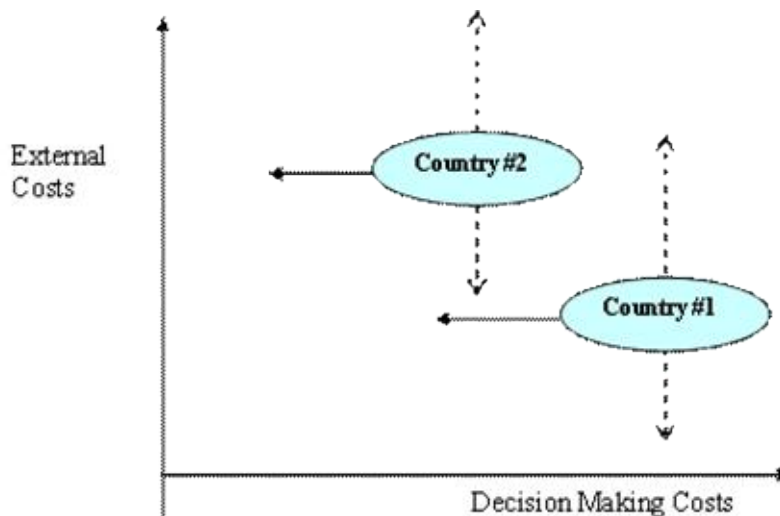**Figure 2. Impact of Online Tools on Costs**

Figure 2. Impact of Online Tools on the Trade-off

H1: Government web sites that act as portals for C2G interaction predominantly provide tools for one-way communication (OECD Category A tools; Table 1).

H2: Government web sites that act as portals for C2G interaction provide tools that facilitate feedback from the citizens (category B tools) but will not be as prevalent as category 1 tools.

H3: Government web sites that act as portals for C2G interaction provide tools that facilitate active participation between citizens and government (category C tools) but will be eclipsed by both category 1 and category 2 in terms of their availability.

RESEARCH METHOD

To test the participation continuum gap posited above, this research intends to examine the government web sites at the state or province level from selected countries in North America (U.S.A., Canada), Europe (U.K., France, Germany, Sweden) and

Asia (India, Singapore). We assigned the various tools that can be provided to facilitate interactions between citizens and the governments to the three main participation categories developed by the 2003 OECD report (Please see Table 2).

Table 2

OECD Categories	Subcategory	Tools
A. One-way Dissemination of Information	A1	Recorded audio and video information
	A2	Forms/Printed materials
	A3	Contact Information
	A4	E-mail distribution of information
	A5	FAQ
B. Consultation	B1	Complaint/Feedback forms
	B2	One-way chat/webcast
	B3	Surveys
C. Active Feedback	C1	Interactive Discussion boards
	C2	Meetings between citizens and officials
	C3	E-petitions

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

The data collection for the research is underway and currently we have completed data collection for the U.S.A (50 States plus Washington D.C. for a total of 51 web site portals). Please use Table 2 to decode the labels used (A1, A2 etc.). Figure 4 shows the number of states that support the individual tools listed in Table 1 in percentages. For example, about 80% of the web sites surveyed provided recorded video or audio clips (A1) while about 55% of the web sites surveyed provided support for email distribution lists (A4) that pushed information to the citizens' email in-boxes. In contrast, only 8% of the web sites surveyed provided support for discussion boards (C1) where citizens could congregate on-line to deliberate on various issues.

Figure 5 shows the aggregated results for the three categories of participation developed by the 2004 OECD report. Taken together, Figures 4 and 5 provide support for our contention that there is a participation continuum gap in the support provided by government web sites. The pattern of results clearly shows that 85.1% of the web sites in the U.S.A. provide support for tools/features that facilitate one-way communication from the government to the citizens. On the other hand, only 17% of the web sites provide support tools that promote active participation and deliberation of the citizens.

CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The results for the U.S.A. support our contention that e-government initiatives are predominantly geared towards supporting one-way communication from the government to the web site rather than enabling citizens to make connections and deliberate issues using the power of internet-based ICTs. The lack of support for discussion boards is especially surprising as the they can foster deliberation and be used as repositories of civic knowledge. Their contents are primarily driven by citizens, cost little to set up and maintain and are above all eminently scalable (as opposed to providing live help on issues that have been experienced by other citizens). Classic examples of such tools are the discussion boards on U.S. immigration run by private as well as not-for-profit organizations.
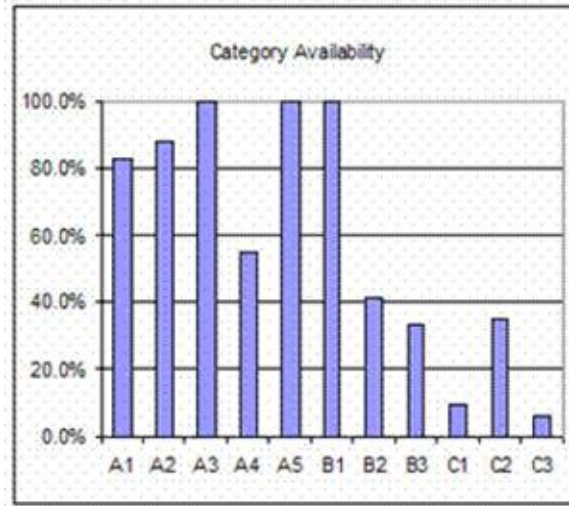
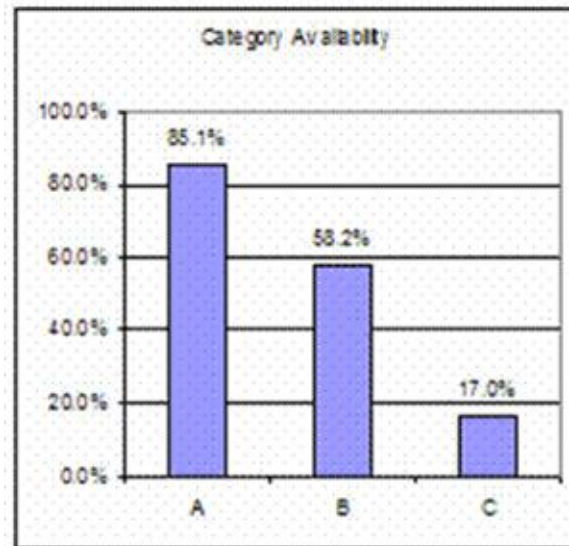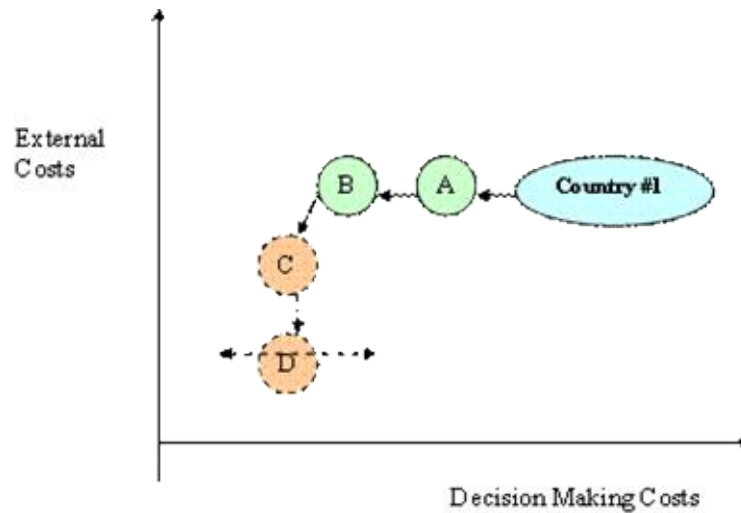**Figure 4. Impact of Online Tools on the Trade-off**

Figure 5. Impact of Online Tools on the Trade-off

Even though we collected rich information on the web sites analyzed in this paper, we only report information on the support for various features and tools as binary variables (presence or absence). Further analysis is needed to look at the various design and ease-of-use issues of these web sites. For example, different design guidelines are needed to support tools that are *primarily* intended as knowledge repositories (asynchronous discussion boards) or to facilitate deliberation (discussion boards plus issue-based asynchronous chat rooms). Another limitation of this study is that we looked only at official government web sites of the states and did not investigate potential NGO web sites that could provide a forum for citizens to interact with the government and amongst themselves. While this paper presented the results for the U.S., data collection is underway for other countries across three continents to show the existence of a participation continuum gap. We hope to present the results for other countries at the conference if selected.

Figure 6. Impact of Online Tools on the Trade-off

We are also currently undertaking another related venue of research. We plan to classify various E-voting tools in a separate category D. While the relative positioning of tools in categories A and B is certain, the positioning of categories C and D is not that clear (Figure 6). The future development of category D tools will be influenced by technical and constitutional changes; nevertheless it is very important for us to find a way to calculate the approximate external costs involved. We are currently working to discover ways to estimate the "invisible" external costs involved in the usage of such tools. Through our investigation, we intend to better understand how participation in E-government is affected by the sum of external and decision-making costs.

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