

From Representative to Digital Democracy: The Internet and Increased Citizen Participation in Government

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- 1. Competing Communication**
- 2. Electoral Structures**
- 3. 2008 Election**
- 4. Politics= Administration**
- 5. Citizen-Govt RESPONSIBILITIES**

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The Information Age

- Demands for accountability and transparency from a greater number of sources
- Citizens seek more information from both private and public organizations
- Demand created by the internet exchange of information and millions of weblogs or “blogs”
- Internet is an open network contributing to the development of open information environments
- Expectation of accountability from all public and private sector organizations

Democracy and Citizen Participation

- Participatory democracy implies a more activist (informed?) citizenry directly involved processes of governmental decision making
- Citizen participation in public decision making is encouraged and expected
- Obama's 2008 high-tech campaign used *polisphere*, space devoted to political activities such as blogging and partisan discussion to enhance political participation

Multiple Competing Information and Communications Systems

- Difficult to encourage citizens—especially those with greater access to resources and varying political ideologies and objectives—to band together to discuss and decide complex political issues
- Mass media, especially television, and more recently the internet, substituted for direct participation and assumed greater roles in articulating and defining public opinion upon which citizen attitudes are based.
- Advantage of the internet as a medium for citizen participation has been touted for various purposes only for a relatively short period of time

Electoral Politics-USA

- U.S. Federal structure decentralized
- 87,000 independent governments-difficult to reform
- Digital government in metropolitan areas and federal government, few states, fewer locals
- Electoral systems controlled by states- bleak history of denial of voting rights
- Bush v. Gore—Floridians can't count!

Election 2008

- 10 million new voters- younger, more tech-oriented
- Responded to individualized, personalized e-campaign
- Citizen as co-producer of services
- Active role essential to provide improved customer service and empower local communities to act in their own interests

Purposes of Participation

- 1) Provide information to citizens
- 2) Receive information from or about citizens
- 3) Improve public decision processes, programs, projects, and services
- 4) Enhance public acceptance of governmental activities
- 5) Alter patterns of political power and allocations of public resources
- 6) Protect individual privacy and minority-group rights and interests and
- 7) Delay or avoid difficult public-policy decisions (co-optation)

Empowering Capability of ICTs

- Permit previously marginalized individuals and groups to be heard and seen in *polisphere*
- Reveal the diversity in society to those previously without voice in public decision making
- Facilitate dispersal of power away from centralized governments as a sole means of political and social control
- Bureaucratic institutions losing monopoly over key sources of information-capacity for surveillance
- Permits alternative voices in civil society to emerge

Why Obama Won

- Prior to 2008, no comprehensive strategy to successfully apply information technology to electoral politics
- Obama's 2008 success first American national political campaign to apply new information technologies to garner political contributions and generate new voters
- Can participatory strategy be converted to improving the administration of public programs or initiating new policy initiatives ?

Obama first candidate merge ICTs

- Internet used to generate new voters as well as garner increased campaign contributions\$\$\$\$\$
- Democrats out-earned the Republicans by nearly a 2 to 1 margin during the 2008 Presidential campaign
- Obama raised a record-breaking \$600 million in contributions from more than three million people, many of whom donated directly through the web

Social Networking

- Obama recruited nearly 14 million online supporters (many of them first time voters)
- Communicated directly with them by email and cell phones, social networking websites such as Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, and Twitter
- Advertisements in the side columns of the Facebook website, 52% of whose users are between the ages of 18-25. Obama support group on Facebook.

Obama's Victory Not Landslide

- Campaign helped by anti-war sentiment, the Bush's inept handling of the economy and the subprime "mortgage meltdown"
- Massive federal debt created by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the collapse of financial markets and property values
- Mobilized millions of anti-Republican voters, especially Independents, who turned out in large numbers for Obama and other Democrats
- John McCain (R-AZ), little understanding of either computers or the interconnections in technology-driven political campaign
- Obama's use of ICTs struck a responsive chord with millions of younger, tech-savvy new voters motivated to participate by direct and fast contact, collaboration and information sharing with the candidate

Will Changes Last?

- The ultimate impact that the Obama campaign may have had on the (online and offline) *polispheres* in the United States and elsewhere will ultimately be determined by his administration's success in achieving policy changes, especially in the areas of environmental regulation and healthcare reform

Challenges for Citizens

- Better informed citizens about public issues and associated law making
- Improved citizen participation may be regarded by some as idealistic, even unrealistic
- For others in power, threat to economic and political positions
- Fear "dictatorship" of the majority or an "electronic mob".

Challenges for Governments

- Increase the number and security of inter- and intra-governmental communication channels
- Clear information strategies on issues such as goals, means/modes, time-space, evaluation, etc.
- Future political support to link citizen to government can not be assumed
- Incorporation and synthesize large volumes of email, data & opinions received online
- Challenge for public managers and policy makers analyze and interpret data- present to citizens and political decision-makers in a comprehensible format

Conclusions

- Internet played a significant role in promoting additional citizen participation in elections
- Causal linkages between fund raising, party identification, social networking and voter turnouts are difficult to establish with precision
- Currently being explored in more depth and detail by political scientists