e-Participation and Governance: Widening the net

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Abstract: As a solution to declining political and civic participation, many governments are seeking to increase the number of citizens who participate in policy-making and governance. Contrary to early expectations, recent research suggests that new information and communications technologies (ICTs) may not increase participation rates in formal organisations, and so may not improve participation rates. The Mobhaile project in Ireland is an example of a local government initiative which combines service provision ('e-government') functions and facilities for voluntary, community and business organisations that enhance social capital in local communities, while also enabling civic participation functions ('e-governance'), in a single web-based geographical interface. Such projects enable citizens to access government services and encourages them, as part of this process, to also participate in local activities that build social capital in the community. The resulting mix can be an effective basis for greater political and civic participation.

Keywords: eInclusion; eParticipation; community politics; Ireland; governance; social capital

1. Government, governance and participation

Throughout the world, public confidence in political institutions (Bok 1997; Norris 1999; Perry and Webster 1999) and political participation as, evidenced by reduced voter turnouts (Blondel, Sinnott et al. 1998; Eijk and Franklin 1996), has been diminishing. Governments have decided that these trends are problematic, and have sought to increase the number of citizens who participate in governance by broadening the network of citizens who involve themselves in policy formation (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2001). Differing policy proposals to increase participation by citizens in policy formation and evaluation have emerged, and an obvious means of increasing civic commitment is to use new technologies to enable greater participation and information exchange by citizens (European Commission. 2001; Norris 1999; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. 2001; Steele 1998). After all, e-government initiatives have already utilised new technologies to decrease administrative costs and improve service delivery (Commission of the European Communities 2003). Thus, various 'e-participation' or 'e-inclusion' projects have attempted to create citizen-based groups via online forums, virtual discussion rooms, electronic juries or electronic polls (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2003). Although such projects receive some support from the governments, these projects have had limited impact and have not yet led to clearly defined policy strategies (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2001). In the European Union, for instance, a recent Commission document on e-participation (Commission of the European Communities 2003) could only propose that all eGovernment strategies should "promote … online democratic participation"[i].

In this article, it will be suggested that widening the network of citizens who participate in policy can be achieved through e-government projects designed to also facilitate community participation. Such projects could increase civic participation more effectively than 'stand-alone' projects or sites. This article will describe a project in Ireland that is designed to combine e-government and e-participation in this manner.

2. New Technologies and political participation

Macintosh (2004) has suggested three levels of participation in policy making: information (unidirectional information flows, in which governments produce and deliver information for use by citizens), consultation (in which citizens provide feedback on policy issues identified by government), and participation (in which citizens themselves partly define the process and content of policy making). New technologies have long been expected to be a mechanism for greater and more effective political participation. With new technologies, more individuals should have access to greater amounts of information, be able to participate in policy

formation more effectively, and even challenge the existing 'political establishment' (see Dutton 1996; Dutton 1999; Tsagarousianou, Tambini et al. 1998).

In the event, there has been little evidence of transformation; why have new technologies had relatively little impact on politics and participation?[ii] Lack of participation has often been blamed on the 'digital divide': individuals are excluded from participation because they can not afford access to the necessary technologies or do not have the training or background to feel comfortable using them (McCaffrey 2003; Haase and Pratschke 2003; Lenhart, Horrigan et al. 2003; Sciadas 2002; Birdsall 2000). Certainly there are barriers to access, and free access via public libraries and other open access points does not totally remove these barriers. However, evidence suggests that such barriers are diminishing and access is increasing (International Telecommunication Union and Minges 2003; National Telecommunications and Information Administration 2002), yet political participation is not increasing in line with these changes. It would appear that even when people have access to appropriate technologies, and know how to use them, increased participation does not inevitably follow.

Why such low participation rates, even when there are no barriers? A common explanation is the 'free-rider syndrome' – voters know that, even without their intervention or participation, appropriate decisions are made and so they choose not to 'waste' their precious resources of time and effort by involving themselves in the process. People retain the capacity to scrutinize final decisions and protest if they do not agree with the final outcome. Elections are the obvious example of where individuals vote on the basis of approving or disapproving of previous decisions (in addition to evaluating future policy proposals). Through this process, people get 'good enough' governance and find this satisfactory enough so as not to bother becoming involved[iii].

While this general satisfaction may be true some of the time, it is clear that issues arise about which citizens feel strongly and which mobilises them to take action.

There is more than sufficient evidence, whether at the international level of 'anti-globalisation' protests or the local level of community action, that citizens are often not satisfied with 'good enough' governance and use new technologies to influence policy outcomes (Surman and Reilly 2003). However, it has been suggested that new technologies accentuate existing political processes but do not alter them (Agre 2002); the activists who currently use new technologies to participate in policy formation would participate anyway. The issue is, can the network be widened so that new actors are brought into policy discussions?

Recently, debates about political participation have been subsumed into discussions of social capital (Farr 2004). It has been argued that decreasing levels of political participation are the result of decreasing levels of social trust and solidarity (Putnam 2000; Putnam, Leonardi et al. 1993). If new information and communications technologies could increase levels of trust and solidarity, there would be long-term benefits for civil society and political participation. Recent studies provide an indication of the potential of new technologies to enhance local community interaction and communication (what would now be labelled as building 'social capital'); these are studies of communities in which a majority of residents use new technologies (Wellman and Haythornthwaite 2002; Huysman, Wenger et al. 2003). A community of special relevance for this discussion is Blacksburg, Virginia in the United States. This community was the recipient of significant technology investment in the mid-1990s, and by 2001 it was a 'wired community': over 75 percent of local businesses had their own web sites, over 80 percent of residents had internet access (which included discussion lists), and over 120 non-profit organisations subscribed to a bundle of internet services that included information sharing software (Kavanaugh and Patterson 2002). Did the prevalence of these technologies encourage greater community participation as well as political participation?

Contrary to some expectations, research found that increased technology usage over three years did not lead to increased community involvement as measured by

memberships in formal voluntary organisations or by amount of activity in these organisations.[iv] This data may offer a partial explanation for the relative ineffectiveness of new technologies in facilitating new forms of public participation in governance (as already noted by Agre 2002). If new communications technologies do not increase the amount of participation in formal community and voluntary organisations, then they are also unlikely to increase formal political participation.

On the other hand, there was clear evidence of increased 'social capital building activities', measured by increased amounts of informal communication amongst individuals, including increased communication amongst members of voluntary groups. As the authors point out, this must also mean an increased amount of information being distributed amongst members of the community as well (see also the 'Netville' study by Hampton and Wellman 2002). The authors further argue that increased levels of communication and information flow must imply increased levels of social trust, even if that trust does not manifest itself in greater participation in voluntary organisations. This identifies an unexpected, but important, issue in the use of new technologies: the greater use of communications technologies may not lead to greater participation in voluntary organisations, but it does lead to increased informal communication amongst all individuals (including people who were already members of organisations). Though more difficult to measure than participation in formal organisations, such informal activity is also evidence of social capital. Thus, when new technologies facilitate greater informal exchanges, they also foster social capital in a community (see also Anderson, Bikson et al. 1995 on this issue).

There is already clear evidence that individuals and groups are using new technologies to facilitate exchange of information and coordination of activity on community issues, in ways that have implications for political participation. In Ireland, for instance, politicians now send out newsletters electronically and receive queries from citizens via email. More significantly, residents and community groups use technology to organise their own activities and coordinate representations to politicians and officials.

Officials now receive 'round robin' emails – a message will have been distributed to members of a residents' group or sports club and each will then send the message to local officials. It is clear to officials that the message has simply been redirected, and a duplicated message has less impact on a local official than an equivalent number of individual messages. However, officials consider such messages as a 'straw poll', indicating how citizens feel strongly enough about an issue to engage in some level of policy discussion.

Particular events are often a catalyst for such communication, and informal or ad-hoc groups can easily develop to address specific issues. In 2003, there was a controversy regarding a large residential plan for Adamstown in South County Dublin (http://www.sdublincoco.ie/ and http://www.adamstown.ie) which attracted significant local and national media attention. The controversy led to a substantial number of email messages to the County Council. Although there was no electronic bulletin board to facilitate discussion of the issue, the concerns raised by individual emails were addressed and responded to in the form of a series of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) on the Council web site. Politicians and other interested parties checked the information and conveyed that information back to residents via public meetings. This ad-hoc interaction was 'consultation' rather than 'participation', since the local authority determined the issues about which it would accept citizen input and reserved for itself the right to a final determination. Further more, individuals saw no clear link between their input and subsequent policy discussions. While these examples illustrate that new technologies can support policy debates on specific issues, they are best described as 'swarming': individuals flocked together as a response to an issue that concerned them. There was no long term engagement in the policy process, and individuals would drift away once the issue was resolved. Such ad-hoc groups do not always disappear, and some well known groups, such as ecology and anti-nuclear groups, first began as ad-hoc social movements (see Della Porta and Diani 1999 for further discussion of social movements). The key is to maintain that participation and create an on-going dialogue so that increased informal

communication and information flows are translated into communities of participation and policy formation.

3. Service provision and public participation

Although new technologies facilitate ad-hoc and short-term protests, there is little evidence that these technologies will reverse the decline in long-term civic and political participation that has been identified as a problem by many governments. However, to return to a point made at the beginning of this article, the decline in participation has been linked to declining confidence in public institutions (Bok 1997; Norris 1999; Perry and Webster 1999). If confidence can be increased, then perhaps participation might also be increased. Further, if new technologies can be used to increase that confidence, then the same technologies might also be used for policy participation. Perhaps the solution is to focus on the increasing use of new technologies to improve the delivery of services for citizens. Interactions between citizens and government on these service issues may be a means of reversing the decline in public confidence and facilitate greater policy participation.

When citizens interact with the state's administrative structure via 'e-government', they learn that they can participate in the system and benefit by their participation (even if it is only in the case of directly applying for, and then receiving, benefits to which they are entitled). Rothman (2003) points out that trust is rarely given unconditionally, especially to governments composed on unknown and unaccountable individuals. Trust is earned, based on actual interactions that citizens have with particular agencies of the state. That trust, once gained, can then be extended to other agencies of the state and thus transmuted into a social capital that leads to greater commitment to civil society. An effective way to improve participation would be to build on the efficiency gains in administration and service provision that have resulted from current e-government investments, and leverage these gains to improve public participation.

Thus, if people can exercise control over the delivery of services, this provides

convincing evidence that intervention has an impact, and individual intervention can be effective. When individuals use new technology successfully to pay their tax, renew their driver's license or apply for a housing grant, they learn that their interactions with state are beneficial and so are likely to use new technologies for other interactions in the future[vi]. Continual interactions with local authorities on the provision of services such as road maintenance, lighting repair, public amenities such as parks, and so on provide evidence that local authorities listen and respond to citizens on community issues as well. It also creates a habit of participation and interaction, which can be transposed to the policy arena, encouraging citizens to believe that they can also alter policy decisions and getting them into the habit of contributing to policy discussions. The provision of local services can become a mechanism for community involvement, and e-government can become a means of encouraging e-participation.

4. Mobhaile

An obvious strategy by which the processes of e-government can support e-participation is to develop software that combines e-government, e-participation, and community formation. In this way, individuals learn that interactions with government are beneficial, use that knowledge to also participate in policy formation, and may encourage others to do the same, using the same set of technology skills. Mobhaile is a project currently under development in Ireland which provides an example of this sort of information system. It is being developed by the Local Government Computer Services Board in conjunction with a number of local authorities in Ireland including South County Dublin, Westmeath, Tipperary North and South, Meath, and Mayo. The project name derives from an Irish term which roughly translates as 'my community' (http://www.mobhaile.ie) and provides a local interface for both government and community information. Amongst other functions, it provides access to information stored on local authority information systems not previously available to the public. This includes a wide range of information about services such as street lights and garbage collection, as well as

planning applications and public libraries. Information is presented through a geographical interface, so that individuals access only information of relevance to their locality. It is possible to access only those bus timetables or garbage collection routes that are relevant to a particular locality. Since only those that are relevant to the local area are presented, this has obvious benefits in fostering a sense of geographical community. Residents can exchange information about the services and issues of relevance to that locality, whether it is to tell each other when the street light will be fixed or whether the planning permission for a nearby development was approved.

The information system enables two-way information flow. Local residents can report a service fault (e.g., faulty street light or abandoned car) by locating it on a map. Such a service is obviously beneficial to the local authority, since it enables rapid notification of problems that need attention. The local authority is, in effect, 'out-sourcing' the monitoring of service delivery and repair issues to its citizens, which reduces staff costs while also speeding up repair times. Since the system largely depends on capturing data that is already on internal administrative information systems, it is relatively inexpensive to deploy. More significant, though, is the sense of accountability and participation it provides for citizens. The geographical input/output format is linked with an open-ended web form so that individuals can pinpoint a location on a digital map and then write a text that indicates a problem – whether that problem is a broken street light, abandoned car, blocked drain, or any other issue which requires attention. The message is then dealt with by local authority officials, and the citizen receives a report.[vii] Thus, citizens' interactions with local authorities regarding the provision of services and benefits provides evidence that their participation alter outcomes. This is an essential element required to create trust in government.

So far, the Mobhaile system appears similar to many other eGovernment systems (although the geographical interface is innovative). However, the system also provides access to community, voluntary, and business services. Some information is picked up automatically from the local authority's own information system (e.g., local taxation lists), but business or voluntary groups can also register with the local authority. There are many benefits of being registered; in addition to location information, businesses and groups can increase their visibility by contributing announcements or descriptions about their activities. A business can register the service it sells and provide information about that service, a church can provide information about church services, or a sports club can provide information about matches to be played. Once registered, groups have access to a targeted local audience, and can also be notified by the local authority about issues that affect their particular locality.

Local community and voluntary groups obtain a web presence via Mobhaile. Not only does this improve internal communication functions (paying membership dues, discussion board, electronic mailing list and so on), it also provides a public presence that enables the group to recruit additional members. The portal functions as a local notice board combined with local town hall, encouraging the easy diffusion of salient information that is relevant to local residents. Crucially, the definition of 'salient' is only partially defined by outsiders, it is also defined by the local residents who contribute information. Local authority information is combined with information about social and economic activities in a community, to provide a single source of local information.

It also acts as a springboard to a range of other government services; once linked with the citizen electronic authentication currently under development (www.reach.ie), citizens will be able to carry out a range of confidential interactions with government departments via the local community site. It is an example of how participation in the provision of specific services can be the central kernel for greater participation in more general local authority policies. In addition to eGovernment and 'community building', the Mobhaile project contains elements that encourage individual participation and the creation of social capital. For instance, it supports individual web logs (or 'blogs'), which represent one

of the most unrestrictive means of communicating personal opinions to a wide audience that currently exists on the Internet. It also provides email addresses and discussion lists for neighbourhoods.

Accessing government services provides the impetus to using the system. As individuals pay for rubbish collection, or register for housing grants or engage in any one of the many interactions they must have with agencies of the state, they can begin to explore the community and business services, using the same interface. They can participate in ensuring that the local community runs smoothly, and they can also contribute to broader policy discussions. Since they can access business and community/voluntary information, it enhances their participation in, and identification with, the local community. It is designed as an open flexible system; new functions and resources can be added as responses to local initiatives.

The project is still at an early stage. Pilot projects in seven local authorities are now complete. By early 2005, fifty community and voluntary organisations, in four local authorities, will be trained so that these organisations can contribute material to their local authority Mobhaile site. In conjunction with this, local authorities will be providing public access to their own information, and businesses will be encouraged to contribute information about their activities. When a wide range of services are available from one source, the use of Mobhaile by citizens for the provision of specific services can be the central kernel for greater participation in more general local authority policies. Fundamental to this process, however, is that local authorities listen to citizens and respond to issues that they raise in a meaningful way. This requires a move from one-way information flow to consultation and engagement (Macintosh 2004). If this happens, then in every interaction with the local authority, citizens will learn that they can trust the administrative process and that they can influence the outcome of that process.

5. Conclusion

The decline in civic and political participation is a policy concern for many governments. Various initiatives have sought to use new technologies to increase public participation in policy formulation and community activity, and so reduce levels of alienation and disaffection. However these projects have had limited impact, and there is little evidence that new technologies have helped increase participation rates in formal policy or political organisations. This limited impact may be partly explained by research indicating that new technologies do not increase the number of individuals who participate in formal groups; they tend to intensify the participation of those already involved. However, research indicates that new technologies can increase amounts of informal communication, which, in turn, fosters social capital in communities. Thus, information systems designed to facilitate informal communication can contribute to community building, especially if there is relevant information to circulate. Information systems that combine e-government functions with community support and e-participation may be contribute to community building.

The Mobhaile project in Ireland is an example of such an information system. It makes public information available to anyone, permits individuals to conduct secure transactions regarding confidential issues, and enables individuals to report faults and make other interventions regarding the administration of services. It is a local portal, providing information on local administrative services, business organisations, and community/voluntary groups in the community. Citizens use the system to carry out e-government functions such as claiming entitlements or paying for services and so become habituated to accessing the system. They soon discover that they can access information about their local community, including local authority, community, voluntary, and business services and activities. The system makes it easier for individuals to become involved in such organisations, and also makes it easier for voluntary, community, and business organisations to function efficiently and inexpensively; this all builds social capital by encouraging community activity. In so far as local government authorities wish to encourage it, the information system enables greater participation in policy and citizens can learn that interventions lead to appropriate policy responses. Not only does this facilitate further individual policy

interventions of individual citizens, but it also encourages the development of an on-going policy community, in which individuals engage in dialogue with conflicting interests.

The Mobhaile project is an example of an information system that capitalises on the demonstrated affordances of new technologies in facilitating greater communication amongst individuals and the development of informal linkages amongst individuals. As the project is introduced into communities and made available to citizens, future research will ascertain who uses the system and the network effects of that use on the wider community. However, even at this design and implementation stage, such initiatives are indicative of the new policy focus on 'e-governance', and it offers the prospect of expanding the network of civic and political participation while also building social capital in local communities.

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47

ⁱ This contrasts with the detailed proposals for e-Government advanced by the European Union in the same document.

ⁱⁱ In recent local elections in the UK, a variety of electronic voting methods were tried, in hopes of improving electoral participation. There was some improvement (or at least less of a decline, as compared with other electoral areas, but 'modest' would be the most positive description of the outcome (Cross 2003; Mathieson 2003).

ⁱⁱⁱ This is in accord with Herbet Simon and the Carnegie School of decision-making in which the concept of 'satificing' can be used to describe behavior that seeks outcomes that are "good enough" (Bauer, Gergen et al. 1968; Cyert and March 1963; March and Simon 1958; Simon 1947).

^{iv} This assumes, of course, that social capital is measured by the number of memberships in voluntary associations or the level of participation in voluntary associations. The main significance of memberships in voluntary associations is that they can be relatively easily measured by surveys; social capital in a community involves informal activities as well as participation in formal organisations (Newton 1999).

^{vi} For statistics on e-goverment in the European Union, see the eGovernment Observatory (http://www.europa.eu.int/ida/egovo), as well as benchmarking studies undertaken by the European Union (http://europa.eu.int/information_society/ee urope/2005/all_about/benchmarking/index _en.htm).

^{vii} At the moment, it is not possible to trace the progress of the complaint through the system but, in future, a logging system could enable a citizen to track a logged item through the system.