

## E-PARTICIPATION AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE: A CASE STUDY

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### **Abstract**

Together with an extensive review of recent literature in the area of civic participation and drawing upon a series of interviews with citizens of a neighbourhood in a large city that experimented with the use of NICT and Internet in order to reinforce citizen's participation and voice, this article offers an appraisal of the impact of such an experience. We particularly question whether in their enthusiasm for bringing the use of NICT into politics its advocates really look to increase citizen's involvement in local policies by allowing them to participate in the outcomes of nearby public issues. A particular concern raised is that local authorities place much less weight on democratic underlying issues and place a high value on political marketing and in the control of technologies involved, expecting higher levels of citizens' participation by means of a cosmetic exercise. This paper examines structural democratic local issues and uses a field experiment in the neighborhood of a large European city to examine the degree to which the use of Internet impacts local residents, the importance they place on NICT to participate in local issues, and the impact they have for enhancing local democracy and network governance.

**Keywords:** democracy, e-democracy, e-governance, local government, new information technology.

### **1. Introduction**

As a result of scientific progress, information and communication technology (ICT) performs a key role in a democratic state. E-democracy involves the use of information technologies to improve the relationships between the public and the government entities in terms of citizens' participation and public service delivery (Kailor, Deshazo, Van Eck, 2001, Dobrica, 2007). It could be argued that the Internet and e-democracy are being used to improve both the engagement of citizens in public affairs and the quality of public services, particularly in city governments (Alexander and Pal, 1998, Sava, 2007).

Under the present circumstances the convergence of more general processes generates a pressure on those local governments which, for political legitimacy, have to implement untried policy options and experiments in democratic innovation. While those city governments may be constrained by the forces of globalism they are also active in developing strategies to improve democracy and, therefore, the local

level has become an excellent laboratory for democratic innovations. In fact, the increasing importance of local government is the consequence of two intensive trends (not necessarily compatible) which exist today and are, in many ways, a reflection of the times in which we live. Those two trends are, firstly, the desire to improve and extend representative democracy which, many believe, is too superficial and restricted and, secondly, the unstoppable progress of the process of globalization, which has changed the traditional rules of politics and, consequently, those of administration.

Liberal representation is undoubtedly an ingenious intellectual invention, but lacks sufficient credibility. Certainly, democracy based solely on the traditional party system has served to deepen this crisis, and in addition, liberal representation has been superseded by historical advances. Political parties are no longer an aid but rather an obstacle to the satisfaction of new demands and forms of participation. Thus, it is not surprising that citizens, especially in a post-materialistic political culture, demand from their most immediate political administrations the improvement and extension of political participation. There is no doubt that the new demands for participation at local level are also demands for increased control over the public authorities and the decisions they take. Thus, an increase in civic participation is also an increase in control mechanisms and in the accountability of local authorities.

Overall, however, these changes have not yet produced a general and coherent transformation of the political sphere (Barber, 1984). Consequently, it would be premature to affirm that representative democracy has been replaced by participatory democracy. Today, the most we can say is that there is a significant tendency to introduce participatory democracy at the local level, where there is less risk and difficulty in so doing. In general terms, we may assume that in the future a new political structure could emerge, to compete with or even replace, to a certain extent, representative democracy.

However, there are many problems to overcome. For instance, it may be that the majority of the new experiments in democratic innovation end in failure because they produce a reduction in the political sphere. Another possibility is that such experiences are unequally distributed and improve the quality of democracy in some places but not in others. Therefore, the general concept of democracy that has been linked to the existence of the nation-state must be reviewed. As a result, it may be necessary to reflect upon the consequences that apparently emancipating policy would have on the defence of democratization at the local level and on the reinforcement of a communitarian idea of politics and its criticism of the concept of citizenship.

As suggested above, the increase in the number and depth of studies of local participation is due not only to the interest displayed regarding those practices which may improve and extend traditional representative democracy, but also to the crisis of the nation-state and its political structures.

## 2. Democracy and local government

The defence of local democracy and its improvement through electronic means should not lead us to forget the problem of the health and quality of democracy at a more general level (Dutton, 1999). Rather one of the most difficult problems to be resolved is not that of the attempt to improve democracy but, of how to situate new forms of participation within a wider project of democratic expansion. It should be noted that local autonomy refers only to those aspects which are strictly local, since many core elements at the local level depend, in reality, on other levels of government. In other words, the local level can only be understood within a more general context. However, there is a body of conservative thought which is interested in the local level not so much because of its undoubted belief in the value of local democracy per se, but rather because it is convinced that the local tier can be employed to confront other levels of government. Whatever the case, local democracy cannot be used to attack the central general government (duly endorsed by the popular will) as some founding fathers of the American Constitution argued, as well as Tocqueville and a number of similarly minded conservative and liberal thinkers of the 18th century.

As suggested above, another trend which should not be ignored, as it provides a framework for recent developments in autonomy at local level, is that of globalism and globalization. Globalization processes are undoubtedly posing a threat to local governments, particularly those of large cities, since it is the local level which is becoming more and more closely connected to the global order. The internationalization of capital forces of local communities to strive for greater autonomy and decision-making capacity in order to try to solve their problems, especially those related to economic welfare. As a result, such local communities require greater development of their civil society and democratic practices. This pressure on specific localities is justified by the comparative economic advantages enjoyed by such communities in comparison to their states. Furthermore, we must add the cost in terms of territorial inequality associated with the decreasing dependence on the national level of government. It is then that the dangers that become obvious. It is easy to imagine the following situation - the existence of various well-connected local communities, economically and politically strong, and in which there is a very advanced civic culture with regard to new forms of democratic participation, but which are, however, surrounded by other communities which have not enjoyed a similar degree of progress.

We may conclude, as a result, that reflections upon innovation in local democracy should recognize the duality of underlying forces and the possibilities and risks these processes produce. The most important lesson to be extracted from the above is to ensure that these new democratic practices improve democracy not only at the local but also at the national level.

### 3. The contours of e-democracy and e-participation at the local level: local governance, social capital, and the modernization of public administration

The relationships between local democratization and social capital, first formulated by Putnam (Putnam, 1993) are a new version of the classic problem of the relationships that exists in civil society and the possibilities for the development of democracy. In other words, this is the type of political culture operating in civil society and democracy today.

Similarly, Pratchett (Pratchett, 1999) analyzes if democracy and social capital are independent of each other; then, in fact, social capital is not the independent variable. Pratchett similarly considers the negative consequences for local democracy regarding the existence of social capital in a state with an unequal territorial distribution.

This said, it is believed (Lowndes and Wilson, 2000) that institutional arrangements have an important influence upon social capital, and that social capital can be developed as an institutional policy. The conclusion is quite clear: a "spontaneous, natural and autonomous" development of social capital cannot be expected. Instead the improvement of citizens' participation will arise from institutions intervening to create homogeneous and strengthened social capital in place of a factor which was hitherto weak and unequally distributed.

Equally, there are specific problems regarding participation practices at the local level. A considerable number of authors are in agreement regarding some key questions which arise from every democratic innovation experiment and process. For example, there is a continuous production of studies regarding fairness, empowerment, disempowerment, governance, efficiency, efficacy, evaluation of procedures and results, the coordination of participation, etc. The nature of these studies is varied because they usually include both empirical and normative approaches, which allow a comparative analysis to be made. Subsequently, strengths and weaknesses of each example of democratic innovation can be inferred.

Other authors classify the range of democratic innovations according to such concepts as representation and legitimacy (Webler and Tuler, 2000). The importance of normative judgments seems obvious in this classification, when they are made on the basis of the capacity of each participation exercise that incorporate citizens into the democratic process. In other words, in these studies the most important factor is the degree of legitimacy. In such research there are two areas of special interest. They include:

1. Studies of the breadth of participation (how many participate, if the participants are representative, what kind of representation is sought, what criteria of selection are employed, who has chosen those criteria, etc.), the kind of participation desired and obtained (information, co-management, consultation or co-decision) and the nature and quantity of the resources of the participants.
2. Studies of those issues where participation is easier and the results of such participation (i.e. whether participation has influenced the final decisions).

By contrast, however, there exist a number of (similarly normative) pieces of research in which classifications are made according to the effectiveness and efficiency of the different processes. In these studies the principal aim is to obtain results and costs (measurable in terms of money, time and human resources) involved in reaching those final outcomes. In addition, effectiveness and efficiency can be defined from a mercantile or a public point of view (de Vries, 2000).

### 3.1. Local governance and e-participation

Governance of the local political and administrative system is closely linked to civic participation where the hierarchy, as an instrument of coordination, is substituted by a variety of networks comprised of individual and collective actors with different degrees of institutionalization (i.e. governance as an alternative to hierarchies).

The characteristics defining this form of coordination are the search for a continuous consensus and group decision-making. The latter characteristic is an instrumental rationality based on hierarchies (top-down instructions) substituted by Habermasian communicative rationality, which is grounded in negotiation with and among responsible citizens (Sanderson, 1999). Civic participation processes at the local level are thus located within the framework of the governance of complex societies. Such governance requires a redefinition of the dynamics between citizens and the political and administrative system. This, in turn, will improve the processes by which society formulates its objectives, as well as expand the means to achieve them.

Differentiation processes challenge the capacity of local political and administrative systems to make decisions in the name of the public interest. Without considering the question of whether public interest is something that local governments may find difficult to resolve in isolation, structures of hierarchical coordination and administrative rationality will rely exclusively on "expert" knowledge that are no longer functional. As a result, it is imperative to adopt criteria of social relevance that must include the process through which public decisions are made via the establishment of a communicative process on which

the orientation of administrative actions depends. Thus, local governance requires the construction of space available to the public in which reflection and debate is made possible.

In the local political and administrative subsystem citizen participation policies are aimed at enabling governance. Moreover, it is at the local level where the limits between the political and administrative system and civil society are more permeable. As a result, citizen participation policies are much more visible, have greater impact upon the citizenry and are consequently placed high on the political agenda.

It is at local government level where the state is most clearly seen as a “negotiating state” (March and Olsen, 1995). Local government becomes one actor among many and it is by no means a dominant actor — for the resolution of urban problems it depends on other interests. It is through civic participation processes that interaction between citizens and the political and administrative system occurs. Both local civil society and local governments are involved in broader social, political, economic and cultural processes. On this point, local governance theory offers a distinctive approach and provides a framework for analysis that encapsulates important aspects related to the issue of civic participation, since it emphasizes the interaction between the political, administrative, and societal systems in achieving common goals.

#### **4. The initiative of Madrid for enhancing civic e-participation**

The city of Madrid has become a laboratory for democratic innovations. It has a large and diverse population of more than 3.5 million. Over the last twenty years, it has undergone considerable demographic, cultural, and economic shifts and, historically has suffered from low civic participation levels. Additionally, Madrid has a large population of recently arrived immigrants who are integral to the economy and culture of the city, but are not yet well-integrated into formal political processes, and therefore have little access or power in the political arena. In 2005, a charter of civic engagement was approved by the City Council to provide local officials with an instrument to respond to the political, social, and economic demands of the local community by allowing citizen’s input into the policy decision-making process.

##### **4.1. The city’s social and political environment.**

The City of Madrid has a political culture and a social structure that foster civic participation. This city is the national capital of the Kingdom of Spain and as of today is a major economic and cultural player in the European Union. With well-organized political parties and high rates of electoral participation, the

vote is split among three parties (PP, PSOE and IU), which dominate the branches of Spain's major political parties.

During the 1960s and 1970s, huge internal migrations sharply increased the City's population creating "banlieu" neighbourhoods. These areas were ripe with social conflict. In many respects, their political exclusion derived from the existence of an autocratic political regime. In the absence of political parties, a significant number of civic associations (economic, social, cultural, etc.) developed in a vindictive style.

Spain's first democratic local government elected in 1979, approved in 1982, the first local regulations on citizen's participation. They focused primarily on the creation of Councils at the district level. Due to the limited resources available, these councils were unable to channel citizen's demands. Furthermore, many of the civic leaders were co-opted by the political parties. Since then participation remained weak and in 1987, an effort to revitalize citizen engagement was made through a cooperative agreement between the city government and the Regional Federation of Associations.

Together, though at the regional level, an important turning point took place in 1997, with the so-called "Investment Plan Villaverde-Usera". This Plan, an important instrument of cooperation between the regional government and the associations, was greeted by the associative network of the city since it represented the dismantling of the so called "markets of drugs". More importantly, it was meant to have substantive and positive impacts. This Plan showed a real commitment that sought to eliminate the historic social divide between the deprived south-east area of Madrid and the rest of the capital.

#### **4.2. Social Capital in Madrid.**

Social capital is an important factor in increasing citizen's trust and as such is interwoven with civic engagement and participation at the local level. Studies suggest that people with higher education and income levels are more likely to have stronger social capital, which leads to greater participation in community organizations and local government. Social capital in Madrid is low since its residents are reluctant to participate in civic networks and express low trust in their fellow citizens.

Under the authoritarian Franco's regime, where the political parties were banned, the period of 1970 to 1980, saw neighbourhood empowerment grow striving for demands regarding the quality of municipal services. Resident's discontent with the poor quality of municipal services led to an increase of neighbourhood associations such as civic clubs, homeowners' associations, tenant groups, in solving local problems. In the absence of political parties those associations also pushed for a democratic regime, but once democracy was restored as from 1978, most local leaders went to join the political

parties in order to become public officials and since then the neighbourhood power was somehow dismantled particularly in the low-income neighbourhoods.

#### ***4.3 The Reform Process on citizen participation.***

Particularly in large cities, the Mayor in the Spanish local government has normally a strong position, which provides the Mayor the power to issue executive orders to administrative departments, and remove department heads and city commissioners without the approval of the City Council. The Mayor is also designated as the Chief Executive and is in charge of managing the city departments and bureaucracy.

The Mayor of Madrid from 2003, became a strong supporter of civic participation as a means to increase his legitimacy. In his agenda he put forward a system to afford opportunities for neighbourhood expression. With this in mind and having the control of the City Council, he appointed a commission of experts to develop plans for the design of a system of civic participation in the whole city. This commission included mostly bureaucrats, worked approximately one year and agreed upon a local Charter that was approved by the Council where the Mayor's political party had the absolute majority. The new Charter had the intention to link the fostering of local democracy with the modernization of the city government's bureaucracy and though was created specifically as an answer to the complaints of non-responsiveness by poorer neighbourhoods in Madrid, made neither changes in mayoral power nor in the City council. It also created a new Area of Civil Participation under a Councillor and established a Neighbourhood Council System, which encompassed the creation of a Neighbourhood Council in each of the 21 districts within the City. By establishing such a System, it was thought that citizens could have a say for the effectiveness and efficiency of the delivery of city goods and services, improving accountability in the service delivery functions of the city. The new Charter also introduced the possibility for citizens to have a say before any policy or program decision was made coordinating neighbourhood service delivery with relevant city departments, and assisting in community-based problem solving. The Charter also set out broad goals to promote collaboration, making government more responsive, and building sense of community.

In the first year after the passage of the reform, the fact was that the Neighbourhood councils were mostly colonised by the political parties and controlled by the one that had the absolute majority in the City Council. In this way the Neighbourhood Councils reproduced the political divide structure of the City Council dominated by the political party that held the local government. This was prompted by the lack of organizational structure definition and the lack of mechanisms that would foster authentic participation.

As an initial step towards e-participation an electronic survey was carried out in one of the city's districts. Citizens were asked for their inputs on how to prevent vandalism in one of their main public parks. Under the leadership of the district councillor and the proactive role of the district administrators, the survey was prepared by the District Council, the neighbourhood associations and other stakeholders located in the district. Furthermore, the administration provided the necessary technical support. Over 192 citizens, out of a voting population of 21.373, answered the survey using Internet facilities. Beyond participation, even beyond empowerment, the exercise was set up to encourage citizens to work together with the local government. According to an institutional evaluation of the Citizen Consultation initiative, this exercise, that had an excellent acceptance, was viewed as a contribution to both familiarize citizens with electronic voting systems and the civic culture improvement of the district, namely through the building of social capital (Ayuntamiento de Madrid, 2005). In contrast to this type of exposé one may wonder if this kind of exercises for citizen's engagement is merely a guise for controlling and capitalizing on citizens' sentiments for improving the quality of local democracy

## 5. The impacts of the experience

### *a) Research questions and Hypothesis.*

The present study focused on three questions:

1. Will e-participation result in more interest for local issues?

We expect that e-participation can be designed with the specific function to support the comprehension of local issues on a higher level.

2. Will the availability of a computer result in increased or decreased public participation compared with traditional ways to participate?

We expect that to own a computer will result in increased participation.

3. Does familiarity with technology have a differential effect on participation?

We expect that low-ability computer users will be less prepared to participate.

### *b) Research Method.*

Our strategy was a qualitative method of research. A descriptive evaluation of the e-participation experience at the Hortaleza District was conducted by the researchers by means of 45 semi-structured interviews with residents from different backgrounds of sex, age, education, social class, and marital

status. The semi-structured interview, as a qualitative analysis method, has become very common and has proved to have many advantages (Wholey, Haltry, and Newcomer, 2004). That is, because the semi-structured interview has flexibility, convenience to focus on the important and detailed data collection about interviewees' attitudes and experiences, advantages over the acquirement of rich information within a reasonable time frame, and easiness for longitudinal research (Bryman, 2004), it is appropriate to the objectives of this study. Furthermore the residents were selected by both random and systematic sampling. First five blocks were selected from the neighbourhood (systematic random sampling) and then, ten households selected from each block (each block had various households) (systematic random sampling). Finally, one person was selected from each household (systematic random sampling). Anonymity of informants was emphasized throughout the research process. Finally, the interviews were carried out one month after the experience took place.

### **c) Findings.**

To examine the 45 transcribed citizen interviews, we used both individual case and cross-case analytic techniques (Yin, 1994). We began with a search for patterns within the data on each of the interviewees using a constant comparative method.

The descriptive results of research showed that 56.3% of informants were men and 43.7% were women. Their mean age was 32.8. The majority of them were married (61.3%) and (37.2%) had qualifications equivalent to secondary education and over. Illiteracy rates (4%) were similar to those who reported to have university education (4.1%). Self motivated political participation was 32%. Only two of the interviewees were members of an association and half of them read newspapers at least once a week. About 23% of the informants were familiar with internet and 75% of them used the internet for almost one and a half hours a day.

In coding the transcripts, we separately classified each respondent either expert- or illiterate with technology. We then discussed our individual coding results, identifying statements that seemed to clearly illustrate expert or illiterate characterizations.

Upon examining the transcripts captured from the interviewees we noticed the following:

1. 90% were unable to make a judgement on the "Huerta de la Salud" experience. This suggests that not enough publicity of the exercise was made by the local authorities.
2. Interviewees were quite unable to comment on the overall participation policies of the council. Most citizens had little previous exposure to any of the traditional instruments of citizens' participation (i.e. Neighborhood Councils and the like).

3. Additionally, the analysis of transcripts revealed that although they were willing to engage in local issues related with their daily lives within their neighbourhood they felt that there were not channels at their disposal.
4. Overall, the responses confirmed that policy information regarding the District was beyond the reach of ordinary citizens. Furthermore, results of this emergent analysis revealed that they felt their opinions were not directly tied to public decision making.
5. The responses of those who were member of associations also confirmed that debates within the association normally lead to casual political talk and not to a public discussion were participants have to deliberate deploying public reasons.
6. Opinions were mixed with regard to being able to use a computer. Obviously, computer availability is a prerequisite for e-participation to take place but previously the institutional design of civic participation has to be taken seriously and not for the interest of politicians and local officials.
7. At the same time the vast majority of citizens felt that the e-participation carried out in their District was an elite-driven model and a purely strategic action with no deliberative potential.
8. This meant that being able to use technology was not important. That the promotion of citizen participation in the District (rather than participation management) should be one of the core principles of improving local democracy was an almost unanimous viewpoint held by our interviewees. However, a number expressed reservations over the capacity of NICT in achieving citizens' engagement. In general, interviewees were fairly dismissive of instruments and mechanisms of civic participation in the District and, within this context, most interviewees remain dubious of the NICT ability to contribute meaningfully to wider citizens' influence in decision taking regarding the design and implementation of local policies and public activities.
9. With regard to maximizing the potential and deciding how to take advantage of NICT it was linked to practical matters. For example, initial concern was expressed as to whether citizens had information enough about public matters. This insight leads to the question of whether or not (and to what extent) public managers and politicians should make information available via Internet. And, in turn, this leads to further questions such as: Do citizens have time enough and resources to deal with technical information? Emerging questions such as

these demonstrate just how connected are the aspects of transparency and citizens' interest in public matters.

10. All in all, the interviewees felt that the potential to shape the civic side of citizenship to foster civic engagement and community identity lies on politician's intentions to improve the deliberative potential of neighbourhoods rather than on the use of NICT.

## 6. Conclusions and implications.

This research offers straightforward theoretical as well as practical implications. On the theoretical side, it supports the notion that if using technology to foster local democracy, the civic culture and social capital should be improved prior to the introduction of technology. So far, there are no indications that e-participation will replace traditional instruments for civic participation. This research further shows that there is no case in which been familiar with technology led to higher interest in the public local issues

The participation policies of the local government of Madrid are intended to allow citizens' voice to be included in policy making and contribute to increase the quality of local democracy. Madrid's initial experience demonstrates how, at an early stage of e-democracy development that uses technologies, to engage citizens in deliberative forms of democracy may require extra time and effort on the part of local politicians and public officials. However, according to this research, and in order for the participative agenda not to be captured by politicians or public managers, advocates of civic engagement at the local level need to attend to the core ideals and values of democracy. Subsuming the ideals of civic participation to broader propaganda motivations, to legitimise and generate trust in the local government is simply part of managerial and political capture and it amounts to little more than a skilfully controlled propaganda exercise.

Although the adoption of e-democracy will increase citizens' engagement in local government, public officials still continue to be quite hierarchical in their approach to citizens' participation. There is a danger that in simply imitating environmental systems in which technology plays an important role, local participation processes will succumb to managerial capture, with legitimacy sustained by the very fact of being seen to organize those processes rather than there being any real substance to the participation process itself. Therefore e-democracy development requires some sort of political leadership that will enhance democracy since citizen participation on a local level are monopolised by well-organized groups and associations.

Again, due to the low level of participation, it is debatable how to legitimize the representation and promotion of the rights of the whole community. Another complication has to do with the problem of

equitable access and digital divide which includes the low levels of computer literacy. In this respect one of the priority actions of the local government should be to initiate computer literacy programs that will help reduce the internet gap within neighborhoods.

On the practical side, the present study contributes to the growing research base on the design of e-democracy applications. Our research also provides practitioners with guidance regarding the design of public policies on citizens' participation at local level.

All the same, it cannot be denied that the use of electronic tools can provide important benefits for citizens, politicians and public officials. We are at an early stage in the use of new technologies to foster democracy and e-governance and much still remains to be explored. Debates about civic participation in local government and, indeed, the use of NICT as a tool of civic engagement need to be recalibrated: first, empirically grounded understanding of experiences must replace discourses about enhancing local democracy. Second, our research is limited because it dealt with only one case and additional comparative research is needed, focusing on evaluative studies addressing the inhibitions or constraints that make it difficult for the citizens to play a part in public decision-making in the local arena. While our findings begin to provide a better understanding of the prior processes required for effective e-participation, further research is needed to provide additional information concerning the roles of politicians, public managers, civic associations and citizens.

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