

**Preliminary Report**  
**E-Democracy and E-Participation Among  
Local Governments in the U.S.**

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## **Preliminary Report**

### **E-Democracy and E-Participation Among Local Governments in the U.S.**

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In this paper, I report preliminary findings from the first ever nation-wide survey of electronic democracy or electronic participation among U.S. local government.<sup>1</sup> Presently, I will discuss that survey, including its methodology, in detail.

Perhaps, however, I should begin by asking why we should care about e-democracy? The first reason is that over the past 40 years or so, public participation in civic affairs and voter turnout in democratic elections have declined both in the U.S. and in Western Europe. Many feel that this “democratic deficit” is or will soon become a serious crisis in democratic nations. Observers also believe that action must be taken immediately to rectify the democratic deficit.

A second reason has to do with electronic government, a phenomenon that, within the past ten years, has seen widespread adoption by governments through out the world. By electronic or e-government, I mean:

*The delivery by electronic means of governmental information and services, 24 hours per day, 7 days per week (Holden, Norris and Fletcher, 2003).*

E-government advocates, and more than a few scholars in the field, argue that the end stage of e-government will include more widespread citizen participation (including e-voting) increased trust in government, a dramatic transformation in the relationship between citizens and their governments, and generally more citizen centric governments. These advocates also claim that e-government, as it (almost certainly) morphs into e-democracy, can and will fix what is broken about democracy today. See, for example, the principal models of e-government and

their claims about the progressive development of e-government and the literal transformation e-government will bring about (i.e., Baum and diMaio, 2000; Hiller and Belanger, 2001; Layne and Lee, 2001; Ronaghan, 2001; Westcott, 2001).<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I examine not so much whether e-democracy or e-participation works as its advocates claim (although I do discuss some reported early impacts), but whether it exists at all among local governments in the U.S. I do so because, unless e-democracy exists in some form or forms, it can hardly be expected to work its predicted wonders. Therefore, it is important to obtain and understand baseline data about e-democracy among these governments today. This is so because local governments in the U.S. are the closest governments to the people, elect the largest number of office holders, deliver the most services directly to the people, and have the greatest immediate impacts on the people.

### **Method**

The data for this paper are from the very first nationwide survey of e-democracy among U.S. local governments. The International City/County Management Association (ICMA), which is the premiere local government association in the U.S., conducted the survey. ICMA is well-known among local governments and has a strong record of conducting surveys among these governments. ICMA mailed survey instruments (a four page questionnaire) in two rounds of mailings in May and June of 2006 to all municipal governments of 25,000 population or larger (n = 1,434) and all county governments that had either elected executives or appointed administrators (n = 611) for a total of 2,045 governments. ICMA received the responses, entered them into a database, “cleaned” the data, and provided a usable dataset. ICMA received a total of 593 usable responses for a response rate of 28.99 percent.<sup>3</sup>

I examined the responses for representativeness – that is, were the responding local governments reasonably similar to or significantly different from all local governments in the sample (Table 1). I found that, generally, these governments were reasonably representative, except as follows. Governments between 500,000 and 1 million and those between 100,000 and 249,999 were slightly over-represented (24.2 percent each versus 33.3 percent for all respondents) while governments between 250,000 and 500,000 were slightly under-represented (38.7 percent). Governments in the Northeastern U.S. were substantially under-represented (17.3 percent) while those in the West were slightly over-represented (34.1 percent). There were no differences among governments by metropolitan status.

Among municipalities, mayor-council and “other” forms were considerably under-represented (16.1 and 11.5 percent) while council-manager cities were over-represented (36.9 percent). Among county governments, there were no substantial differences by form of government.

These data suggest that, for the most part, responding governments were reasonably representative of all local governments over 25,000 in the U.S. However, governments in the Northeast and mayor council governments were substantially under-represented while governments in the West and council-manager governments were over-represented. Over-representation of local governments in the West and among council-manager governments is likely related because of the preponderance of council manager governments in the West and of mayor-council governments in the Northeast.

The survey instrument defined e-democracy or e-participation (terms that I use synonymously) for respondents as follows:

*Electronic participation or electronic democracy is defined as the use of electronic means, principally although not solely, local government web sites and the Internet, to promote and enhance citizen engagement with and participation in governmental activities, programs and decision-making.*

The survey screened out governments that did not have official sites on the World Wide Web. Thus, these data are from only governments with web presences. This should not present a problem because 95 percent or more of U.S. local governments have official websites. I did this because the focus of this survey was on governments that could have engaged in e-participation. Those without websites could not have done so. Hence, they were screened out of the survey.

## **Findings**

The instrument contained a number of questions that addressed particular aspects of e-participation. I report findings in the narrative that follows.

### **Citizen Surveys**

First, I inquired if, within the previous three years, these local governments had surveyed their citizens when determining “what types of online information, services or participation they want available on the local government website.” In other words, did these governments systematically try to learn their citizens’ preferences when developing their websites? Only a minority (one in five or 20.8 percent) of responding governments did so (Table 2). Slightly less than half of those governments (46.4 percent) asked only about online information and services while slightly over half (50.9 percent) asked about information, services and participation. Just under 3 (2.7) percent asked about participation only. Among local governments that conducted citizen surveys, most (50.0 percent) had conducted only one survey while an additional 25.4

percent had conducted two surveys. The rest (24.6 percent) had conducted three surveys or more, including nine percent (11.0 governments) that reported having conducted five surveys or more.

I was also interested in the types of surveys conducted and extent to which they were professional or scientific surveys (Table 3). (Answers to these questions may indicate a great deal about the validity and reliability of the information the local governments received from the surveys.) Because there could be some overlap in these responses (governments could have conducted more than one type of survey), percents will be greater than 100.

Nearly half (45.9 percent) conducted web surveys; just over one-third (36.1 percent) conducted telephone surveys; slightly less than one-third (31.1 percent) conducted mail surveys. Nearly one in five (18.9 percent) reported conducting surveys by another method.

For the most part, the surveys were conducted by local government staff (62.3 percent), followed by professional polling organizations (36.1 percent), university survey groups (14.8 percent), volunteers (1.6 percent), think tanks and advocacy groups (0.8 percent each), and other (4.1 percent).

I then asked the local governments that had conducted citizen surveys whether they believed that their surveys were “‘*scientific*,’ like those conducted by university survey research centers or professional polling organizations.” To my surprise, the answers split nearly 50-50, with 56 (49.6 percent) responding governments saying that they had conducted scientific surveys and 57 (50.4 percent) saying that their surveys were non-scientific. Fully 80 (71 percent) of these 113 governments said that the surveys were available for others to review.<sup>4</sup>

Next, I asked the local governments if they had concrete plans to conduct citizen surveys about online information, services or participation within the next 12 months. Here, the vast

majority (83.3 percent) said that they had no such plans. Nearly 10 percent planned to conduct surveys about online information, services and participation; nearly seven percent about online information and services only; and less than one percent about online participation alone.

On the whole, these data tell us that local governments in the U.S. do rather little by way of seeking the opinions of their constituents, at least formally, in the development of their websites whether with regard to information, services or participation. Nor do these governments plan to do much more in the near future.

### **Planning for E-Participation**

What about planning for e-participation in general? Here I asked if the local governments had engaged in formal planning or had conducted cost-benefit or other types of analysis for e-participation projects (Table 4).

Few governments reported that they engaged in formal planning for e-participation (22.4 percent). Of these, 59.1 percent engaged in such planning as part of local e-government planning; 52.3 percent via local IT planning; and 17.0 percent via e-participation planning alone. In terms of cost benefit (or other formal analyses) *before* undertaking e-participation projects, only 16 governments (4.0 percent) reported doing so.

### **Online E-Participation Activities**

Next I asked whether the local governments had undertaken any of a series of e-participation activities “electronically (*e.g., via your website or otherwise via the Internet*)” within the past year and whether they had concrete plans to do so within the next year (Table 5). The results are absolutely dramatic. Hardly any local governments in the U.S. have done

*anything* to enable e-participation. With one exception, web surveys (23.4 percent), fewer than 10 percent of local governments reported having any online e-participation activities. (This means more than 90 percent have done nothing.) The greatest percentages of local governments reporting e-participation activities were: formal public hearings – 9.9 percent; informal public meetings – 7.9 percent; straw polls – 7.6 percent; public consultations – 6.2 percent; and non-narrated discussions – 5.9 percent. All other e-participation activities were reported by fewer than five percent of the responding governments.

The existence of concrete plans to provide one or more of these e-participation activities fared even worse. Here, even fewer governments had plans to undertake e-participation activities: i.e., web surveys – 10.5 percent; formal public hearings – 5.9 percent; and all others less than five percent.

## **Evaluations**

Next, I wanted to know if local governments evaluated the impact or effectiveness of their e-participation projects (Table 6). For the most part, they did not. Only 12 governments (3.2 percent) reported that they had conducted such analyses. Thus, we must conclude that local governments (at least those few that support online e-participation) simply “roll-out” e-participation projects or activities and let them do whatever they will do without after-the-fact appraisals of their impacts or effectiveness. Additionally, of the 12 governments that indicated that they had conducted such analyses, only two reported having shut down or modified an e-participation project based on the results of these analyses.

## Impacts

I also wanted to know whether U.S. local governments believed that e-participation had had any impacts (Table 7). That is, do local governments believe that e-participation matters? The first thing that is really remarkable about these data is that far less than a majority of governments surveyed indicated that e-participation had had any impacts at all. The greatest number of governments reporting impacts (222) represent less than four in ten (37.4 percent) of all surveyed governments. Second, the reported impacts were not always in the direction predicted by the models of e-government or the hype surrounding it. Most responding local governments (56.6 percent), for example, reported that e-participation increased the workload of technology personnel, and more than one third (36.7 percent) said that e-participation increased work for line personnel.

On a more positive note, however, majorities of those that reported impacts said that e-participation increased the quantity of information for decision-making (61.4 percent), the quality of information for decision-making (53.8 percent) and the quantity of citizen participation (64.8 percent). Yet, respondents were divided about whether e-participation improved the quality of citizen participation (51.6 percent said it made no difference while 47.4 percent said it improved the quality).

Similarly, respondents were divided about how e-participation affected relationships between citizens and their governments. Here, less than half (46.8 percent) reported that e-participation improved the relationship between citizens and elected officials while just over half (52.3 percent) said that there had been no change. Exactly half felt that the relationship between citizens and the governmental administration had improved because of e-participation while 49.1 percent said that there had been no change.

## **Barriers to E-participation**

It is possible that local governments have not engaged more extensively in e-participation because of specific barriers to such efforts. Therefore, I asked the governments about the existence of barriers to e-participation (Table 8). Several barriers stand out. For example, majorities of local governments reported that they faced the following barriers to e-participation: lack of funding – 74.9 percent; lack of technology staff – 62.2 percent; need to upgrade existing technology – 60.7 percent; lack of citizen demand – 59.5 percent; lack of demand by elected officials – 58.0 percent); and security issues – 54.4 percent. Other barriers achieving substantial though not majority responses were: concerns about the digital divide – 46.9 percent; privacy issues – 43.5 percent; and lack of technology expertise – 41.4 percent. On the whole, these appear to be very substantial barriers – especially those relating to money, technology and demand – that may well explain a considerable fraction of why local governments in the U.S. do so little with respect to e-participation.

I then asked whether local officials (elected or appointed) or citizens actively promoted or pushed for e-participation. For the most part, the answer was no or not much (Table 9). On a scale of one to five (with one meaning “don’t promote or give little or no attention to e-participation” and five meaning “actively promote or give great attention,” nearly half of the respondents (48.8 percent) rated their elected officials as either a one or a two. This means that elected officials in about half of the responding governments actively promoted e-participation none or only a little. More than a quarter (28.3 percent) of the respondents gave their elected officials a three, meaning that they promoted e-participation somewhat, more than a little but not

a lot. Only 22.9 percent gave their elected officials a four or five, meaning that these officials actively prompted or gave great attention to e-participation.

The respondents – most of whom were administrators of local governments – were more generous to fellow administrators (appointed officials) regarding their support for e-participation. Here, one-third (34.3 percent) were deemed to be non-supportive of e-participation, receiving rankings of one or two. More than a quarter (28.9 percent, were ranked in the middle (a three – not too little but not a great deal of support for e-participation). More than a third (36.8 percent) gave administrators either a four or a five for support of e-participation (i.e., they actively prompted or gave great attention to e-participation).

Finally, I wanted to know these governments' views about citizen demand for e-participation. Here, I asked if citizens groups were actively pushing for e-participation (using a five point scale from one meaning none to five meaning significant active pushing for e-participation). The vast majority (80.5 percent) of responding governments gave citizens groups in their communities either a one or a two (little or no active push for e-participation) and only 3.9 percent said that citizens groups were actively doing so (scores of four or five). The rest (15.7) percent placed citizens groups in their communities as not doing much to push for e-participation but not doing little either (a score of three).

Considering the barriers previously discussed and the apparent lack of any (especially grass roots) demand for e-participation, it may be somewhat easier to understand why local governments in the U.S. have not embraced e-participation in any significant or meaningful ways (in the aggregate at least).

## Conclusions

Data from this, first ever, nationwide survey of e-democracy or e-participation among U.S. local governments do not paint an especially flattering portrait of the practice of e-participation by these governments, nor does it provide much basis for optimism about e-participation at the American grassroots, at least in the foreseeable future. To begin with, very few of American local governments reported providing the opportunity for e-participation through their websites (for the most part, less than 10 percent). Few do formal planning around e-participation (less than one-quarter), few involve citizen desires or needs in any such planning (about one in five), and hardly any conduct prospective cost-benefit (4.0 percent) or retrospective impact analyses (3.2 percent).

Few governments reported impacts from e-participation (only around one-third of all of the governments responding to this survey). Nevertheless, governments that answered impact questions believed that most of the impacts from e-participation were favorable, although a few are unfavorable (e.g., increased workloads on staff).

Substantially more governments responded to the question about barriers to e-government (between three quarters and nearly 90 percent), and they identified several barriers, including: money, staff, technology, lack of demand, and issues around security, privacy and the digital divide. Clearly, these barriers could pose significant constraints on local governments' ability to develop and support e-participation mechanisms.

Finally, it is clear that there is little active promotion by the governments and little grassroots or citizen demand for e-participation. Here, only one in five of the governments indicated that elected officials actively promote e-participation. Somewhat more (36.8 percent)

said that appointed officials do so. And, less than 4.0 percent felt that citizens groups actively pushed e-participation.

Regardless of other barriers, the clear lack of governmental and citizen support and demand for e-participation certainly help to explain its lack of development at the American grassroots. Absent such demand and support, it is likely that the further development of local e-participation will continue at a glacially slow pace in the U.S. These results are consistent with findings of focus groups that I conducted among local governments in 2002 (Norris, 2005). There, participants said that, for the most part, e-democracy is not on the radar screens of American local governments.

## End Notes

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<sup>2</sup> These authors make such claims, notwithstanding considerable evidence to the contrary. See, for example, Kraemer, 1991. More recent works, e.g., those works written after these models were initially proposed, support Kraemer's argument that e-government is unlikely to produce either reform or transformation (Danziger and Andersen, 200x; Kraemer and King, 2006; and Coursey and Norris, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> A third mailing, that is expected to improve the response rate to approximately 40 percent, is in the field and results are expected by September 1, 2006. A final report will be prepared after the final survey results are obtained.

<sup>4</sup> A further effort of this research will be to collect and analyze those surveys.

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## **Appendix A: Tables**

**Table 1  
Respondents**

	No. of Municipalities/ Counties Surveyed	No. Responding	
		No.	%
<b>Total</b>	2,045	593	29.0
<b>Population Group</b>			
Over 1,000,000	33	11	33.3
500,000-1,000,000	66	16	24.2
250,000-499,999	111	43	38.7
100,000-249,999	339	113	33.3
50,000-99,999	561	153	27.3
25,000-49,999	935	257	27.5
<b>Geographic Region</b>			
Northeast	392	68	17.3
North-Central	509	153	30.1
South	649	203	31.3
West	495	169	34.1
<b>Metro Status</b>			
Central	775	236	30.5
Suburban	910	263	28.9
Independent	360	94	26.1
<b>Form of Government</b>			
Municipal Mayor-council	483	78	16.1
Council-manager	899	332	36.9
Other municipal	52	6	11.5
County Council-administrator (manager)	288	88	30.6
Council-elected executive	323	89	27.6

**Table 2**  
**Surveys of Residents for E-Services or E-participation**

	No.	%
<b>A. Did your government conduct any such surveys?</b>		
Yes	122	20.8
No	465	79.2
Total	587	100.0
<b>B. Focus of surveys?</b>		
Online information & services	52	46.4
Online participation	3	2.7
Participation, information & services	57	50.9
Total	112	100.0
<b>C. Number of surveys conducted?</b>		
1	59	50.0
2	30	25.4
3	16	13.6
4 or more	13	11.0
Total	118	100.0

**Table 3  
The Surveys**

	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>A. Types of surveys (n=122)</b>		
Web survey	56	45.9
Telephone survey	44	36.1
Mail survey	38	31.1
Other	23	18.9
Note: The total is greater than 100% because governments may have conducted multiple surveys using different methods.		
<b>B. Who conducted the surveys</b>		
Local government staff	76	62.3
Professional polling organization	44	36.1
University survey research center	18	14.8
Volunteers	2	1.6
Think tank	1	0.8
Advocacy group	1	0.8
Other	5	4.1
Note: The total is greater than 100% because governments may have conducted multiple surveys using different methods.		
<b>C. Was the survey scientific?</b>		
Yes	56	49.6
No	57	50.4
Total	113	100.0
<b>D. Plans for surveys (next 12 months)?</b>		
No	458	83.3
Yes, information & services	38	6.9
Yes, participation	4	0.7
Yes, information, services & participation	50	9.1
Total	550	100.0

**Table 4**  
**Planning for E-Participation**

	No.	%
<b>A. Did you government conduct formal planning for e-participation?</b>		
Yes	88	22.4
No	304	77.6
Total	392	100.0
<b>B. Type of planning?</b>		
Planning for local e-government	52	59.1
Planning for local IT	46	52.3
Planning for e-participation only	15	17.0
Note: The total is greater than 100% because governments may have conducted multiple surveys using different methods.		
<b>C. Did your government conduct cost-benefit analyses before implementing?</b>		
Yes	16	4.0
No	577	96.0
Total	593	100.0

**Table 5**  
**Online E-Participation Activities**

	Undertaken within the last 12 months		Plans to undertake within the next 12 months	
	No.	%	No.	%
Web surveys	139	23.4	62	10.5
Formal public hearings	59	9.9	35	5.9
Informal public meeting	47	7.9	24	4.0
Straw polls	45	7.6	21	3.5
Public consultations	37	6.2	21	3.5
Non-narrated discussion forum	35	5.9	24	4.0
Narrated discussion forum	29	4.9	28	4.7
Voting	18	3.0	11	1.9
Citizen petitions	13	2.2	9	1.5
Referenda	13	2.2	10	1.7
Chat rooms	6	1.0	10	1.7
Other (only 8 = e-participation; 36 = e-services or information)	44	7.4		

**Table 6**  
**Impact Analyses**

	No.	%
<b>A. Did your government conduct any impact or effectiveness analyses?</b>		
Yes	12	3.2
No	362	96.8
Total	374	100.0
<b>B. Did your government shut down or modify an e-participation project as a result of these analyses?</b>		
Yes	2	16.7
No	10	83.3
Total	12	100.0

**Table 7  
E-Participation Impacts**

	<b>Increased</b>		<b>No Difference</b>		<b>Decreased</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>%</b>
Quantity of citizen participation	125	64.8	68	35.2	0	0.0	193	100.0
Quantity of info for decision making	121	61.4	76	38.6	0	0.0	197	100.0
Workload on tech personnel	111	56.6	79	40.3	6	3.1	196	100.0
Quality of info for decision making	105	53.8	89	45.6	1	0.5	195	100.0
Quality of citizen participation	91	47.4	99	51.6	2	0.3	192	100.0
Workload on line personnel	72	36.7	94	48.0	30	15.3	196	100.0
	<b>Improved</b>		<b>No Change</b>		<b>Deteriorated</b>		<b>Total</b>	
Relationship between citizens & governmental administration	110	50.0	108	49.1	2	0.9	220	100.0
Relationship between citizens & local officials	104	46.8	116	52.3	2	0.9	222	100.0

**Table 8**  
**Barriers to E-Participation**

	Yes		No		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Lack of funding	394	74.9	132	25.1	526	100.0
Lack of technology staff	322	62.2	196	37.8	518	100.0
Need to upgrade technology	312	60.7	202	39.3	514	100.0
Lack of citizen demand	306	59.5	208	40.5	514	100.0
Lack of demand by elected officials	296	58.0	214	42.0	510	100.0
Security issues	265	54.4	222	45.6	487	100.0
Concern about digital divide	225	46.9	255	53.1	480	100.0
Privacy issues	207	43.5	269	56.5	476	100.0
Lack of technology expertise	206	41.4	292	58.6	498	100.0
Concern about unrepresentative groups	146	31.3	321	68.7	467	100.0
Few participate	135	30.9	302	69.1	437	100.0
Lack of support by elected officials	129	26.8	352	73.2	481	100.0

**Table 9**  
**Who Promotes E-Participation?**

	<b>Little or no</b>		<b>Some</b>		<b>A lot</b>		<b>Total</b>	
	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>%</b>
Do elected officials actively promote?	281	48.8	163	28.3	132	22.9	576	100.0
Do appointed officials actively promote?	196	34.3	165	28.9	210	36.8	571	100.0
Do citizen groups actively push?	463	80.5	90	15.7	22	3.9	575	100.0