Comparing online with offline citizen engagement for climate change: Findings from Austria, Germany and Spain

CrossMark

Vicente Pina *, Lourdes Torres, Sonia Royo

University of Zaragoza, Gran Via 2, 50005 Zaragoza, Spain

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to study the expectations of environmental senior managers, as experts in this field, about the effect of e-participation in the fight against climate change. Their experiences in, and the fulfillment of their expectations about, citizen participation in local government environmental programs have been analyzed through different questionnaires in order to answer the following research questions. What effects can be expected from citizen participation in environmental programs? What conditions are necessary for, and what barriers are there to, successful participation processes? Is e-participation more effective than traditional citizen participation? The results confirm that e-participation is only an enabler of citizen engagement in participation processes, but it does not overcome all the barriers to these processes. The success of citizen participation cannot be guaranteed merely by introducing ICTs. The integration of e-participation with traditional offline tools for citizen participation is needed.

© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Citizen participation is gaining popularity all over the world, especially at local government level (Bovaird, 2007; Cahn, 2004; Dunston, Lee, Boud, Brodie, & Chiarella, 2008). Just as, in the 1990s, there was global pressure for undertaking managerial public sector reforms under the New Public Management (NPM) postulates, in the twenty-first century, the demand for new methods of governance is putting governments worldwide under pressure to develop tools for improving information, consultation, and active citizen participation (OECD, 2001). The need to integrate citizen engagement with traditional structures and processes has been defined as one of the three contemporary challenges faced by local governments (Nalbandian, O'Neill, Michael Wilkes, & Kaufman, 2013).

Both the academic literature (Löffler, Bovaird, Parrado, & Ryzin, 2008; Portney, 2013; Royo, Yetano, & Acerete, 2014a; Wang, Hawkins, Lebredo, & Berman, 2012) and international strategies, such as the Local Agenda 21, the Aalborg Charter on Sustainable Cities, and the Local Governments for Sustainability program of the United Nations, have emphasized the strong role of stakeholder involvement in sustainability issues. A citizen who is well informed about environmental policies and initiatives can become part of the global effort for environmental protection. The use of ICTs and, in particular, the

Internet, may have an important role in climate protection, given its potential for informing, educating, and empowering citizens. E-participation can help to give the necessary visibility to environmental protection initiatives and to promote the engagement and cooperation of citizens and other key stakeholders (Royo, Yetano, & Acerete, 2014b). However, there are very few studies about the effectiveness of citizen participation in climate protection and even fewer regarding the effectiveness of e-participation.

To fill this gap, this study focuses on the analysis of the expectations of senior civil servants with many years of experience in managing environmental programs (hereinafter "the managers") about the contribution of e-participation in the fight against climate change. For this purpose, a questionnaire to analyze the previous experience of managers about citizen participation in environmental policies and an in-depth longitudinal analysis (at the start and at the end of a specific long-term citizen participation initiative involving online and offline panels) were designed. The results allow the comparison of the opinion of managers about their expectations and the actual results achieved in citizen participation initiatives. Their experience in climate protection and citizen participation programs gives these managers a solid background that allows them to build an informed opinion about what can be expected from citizen participation in climate protection programs, although these initiatives are relatively recent in local administration agendas.

This research collects the opinion of managers from Austrian, German and Spanish cities or regions. These countries belong to two different public administrations styles (Weberian and Napoleonic) and they share federal and bureaucratic legal frameworks for the organization

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: vpina@unizar.es (V. Pina), ltorres@unizar.es (L. Torres), sroyo@unizar.es (S. Royo).

of the public sector, with similar competences at local level. These characteristics make them comparable in the implementation of public sector reforms at local level. The opinion of managers involved in the study will provide insights into the following research questions. RQ1 What effects can be expected from citizen participation in environmental programs? RQ2 What conditions are necessary for, and what barriers are there to, successful participation processes? RQ3 Is e-participation more effective than traditional citizen participation?

The perceptions and opinion of managers of the cities involved, as experts in citizen participation initiatives, may be useful to other managers and politicians who want to introduce or improve citizen participation in environmental protection programs. The results will also be useful to show whether managers perceive e-participation as being more effective than offline participation. Few studies compare online and offline participation and none address the evaluation of citizen participation effectiveness from the point of view of the managers. Furthermore, only five per cent of e-participation studies in Europe have used e-panels (Panopoulou, Tambouris, & Tarabanis, 2010) and having comparable online and offline panels for the same citizen participation initiative is even less common.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents some background ideas about citizen participation and an analysis of the most relevant research comparing online and offline citizen participation and analyzing managers' opinions about e-participation. The study carried out is presented in Section 3 and its results are analyzed in Section 4. Section 5 discusses the most important findings and the conclusions are presented in Section 6.

2. Theoretical framework and literature review

2.1. Theoretical framework for citizen participation in environmental protection

In the shift from government to governance[1], citizen participation is playing an increasingly important role. More participative approaches may be adopted to maximize the efficiency of public policy, to develop social capital and community cohesion, to improve service delivery, to meet local needs, to improve information flows and accountability, to give voice to those most directly affected by public policy, and to address concerns about the 'democratic deficit' (Andersen & van Kempen, 2003; Nabatchi, 2012; OECD, 2001). However, the application of Institutional theory (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) to the analysis of citizen participation initiatives (Yetano, Royo, & Acerete, 2010) suggests that, very often, the adoption of citizen participation is an attempt to change the perceived image of government without deeper changes in the decision-making processes that really incorporate citizens' points of view.

The daily work of public sector managers and politicians is directly affected by citizen participation developments. Previous literature indicates that these actors can oppose developments in citizen participation initiatives, as they fear losing power and are narrow-minded with regard to innovative processes, novelties, and changes in their everyday work process (see, e.g., Vogt & Haas, 2015; Wagner, Vogt, & Haas, 2016). As a result, citizen participation sometimes becomes an end in itself (a symbol of responsiveness and 'good management'), rather than a means to achieve other objectives such as strengthening democracy or achieving better service delivery.

2.2. E-participation versus traditional forms of participation

In recent years, there has been much discussion about the benefits of new technologies to improve government-to-citizen relationship. The Internet, Web 2.0 tools, and social media have emerged as important driving factors for citizen participation because of their potential for informing, educating, and empowering citizens (Bertot, Jaeger, & Hansen, 2012; Bonsón, Royo, & Ratkai, 2015; Bonsón, Torres, Royo, & Flores, 2012; Linders, 2012; Mergel, 2013). Electronic communication is often viewed as a panacea for all the ills of modern government (King, 2006; Linders, 2012). According to Vragov and Kumar (2013), technology can aid a peaceful transition from thin democracies (where there are very limited avenues of action for citizens to express their preferences) to strong democracies (where there is a strong emphasis on engaging the citizenry). For Pratchett et al. (2009), e-participation has three main benefits: 1) it offers more opportunities for participation and higher levels of convenience because it is not anchored in time or place; 2) it allows a greater range of participants; 3) it facilitates "better" participation, as new technologies allow participation to be linked to all the relevant information. However, there is little empirical evidence to support these positive claims and for some researchers, for example Alonso (2009) and Macintosh, Coleman, and Schneeberger (2009), an important challenge for e-participation is to achieve equity in the representation of stakeholders.

Although research on customer satisfaction and loyalty in online and offline environments started in the private sector more than a decade ago (Shankar, Smith, & Rangaswamy, 2003), research in the public sector is relatively recent and scant. In the public sector, the first papers comparing online and offline forms of participation dealt with political engagement and political mobilization (e.g. Conroy, Feezell, & Guerrero, 2012; Wojcieszak, 2009). Previous research comparing online and offline citizen participation within the public administration has found conflicting results with respect to representativeness. Some studies (e.g. Conroy et al., 2012; Saglie & Vabo, 2009; Smith, Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2009) conclude that online participation is strongly correlated with offline participation while others indicate that online and offline participants seem to have a different sociodemographic profile (Yetano & Royo, 2015), so the combination of these two forms of participation may lead to more inclusive processes. Previous research concludes that offline participants tend to interact with each other to develop ideas more fully (Schweitzer et al, 2012) and that the quality of online discussion tends to be low (Conroy et al., 2012).

A limited number of previous studies, among which we can highlight those of Feeney and Welch (2012); Mahrer and Krimmer (2005); Reddick and Norris (2013) and Royo et al. (2014b), have analyzed managers' opinions about e-participation. However, these studies either do not compare online and offline citizen participation or are based on the opinions of a limited number of managers in a specific setting (case study methodology). Feeney and Welch (2012) analyze the responses to a survey of 902 public managers at the local level in the US and their results show that managers' perceptions of the outcomes of e-participation initiatives are significantly related to the number of channels used and the frequency of use. After interviewing 201 Austrian politicians, Mahrer and Krimmer (2005) conclude that politicians are inhibiting the evolution of e-democracy. Reddick and Norris (2013) analyze the responses to a survey of 684 public managers at the local level in the US and their results show that citizen demand, formal planning and taking e-participation seriously are the most important factors predicting managerial support for e-participation and the impacts perceived. Royo et al. (2014b) analyze the opinions of six Spanish managers regarding a specific e-consultation process, showing that, although these managers seem to know the basic principles for successful citizen participation, they were not applied in practice. Improving the image of the local government and promoting transparency were the most important goals for the managers in this process.

---

[1] For Weale (2011), 'governance' can simply refer to processes of government, whatever form they take. More recently, it has come to be used to denote ways of governing that are non-hierarchical and involve networks of actors, both public and private, determining policy through negotiation, bargaining and participation.