



The impact of government form on e-participation: A study of New Jersey municipalities



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ABSTRACT

During the past two decades, governments have started to use information and communication technologies (ICT) to offer a new forum for citizen involvement known as e-participation. The rapid development of e-participation has been attracting attention from many researchers. While a growing body of research has explored various factors impacting e-participation, few studies have examined the influence of government structures on the e-participation opportunities that jurisdictions offer users. To fill the research gap and begin investigating this relationship, we use data from 97 New Jersey municipalities to analyze the impact on e-participation of three local government structures: mayor-council, council-manager, and township. The results show that municipalities with the mayor-council form of government are more likely to have higher levels of e-participation offerings. We argue that the role of an elected executive in this structure facilitates the will to provide greater opportunities for citizens to participate online.

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1. Introduction

This study explores the impact of municipal government form on the e-participation opportunities local jurisdictions offer. The intent of the article is to use a survey of New Jersey governments to investigate the role of structure on e-participation opportunities.

During the past 25 years, governments have expanded electronic delivery of information and services. Although efficient service delivery rather than dialogue remains the primary focus of governmental website design, some jurisdictions also use information and communication technology (ICT) as a mechanism to involve citizens in policy development (Roman & Miller, 2013). This extension of ICT into citizen involvement is alternatively called e-participation, e-democracy, e-governance, or e-government (Sæbø et al., 2008).

The rise of municipal websites has generally developed incrementally rather than in a transformative manner (Norris & Reddick, 2013). With the development of new technologies that permit an increasingly broad array of e-participation activities, governmental actors in each jurisdiction have had to decide which forums to adopt. The decisions governments make will have significant impacts on the roles and responsibilities of citizens and the ability of IT to reinvent democratic governance (Kakabadze, Kakabadze, & Kouzmin, 2003). Yet, vast

differences exist in the menu of participation-oriented activities individual jurisdictions provide. As we will discuss later in the literature review, governmental structure is one factor that may influence which activities a jurisdiction offers. It is one factor in whether and to what extent a jurisdiction provides interactive participation opportunities as well as information and service delivery, at a time when some analysts consider such use of IT necessary to engage residents (e.g., Barnes & Williams, 2012).

At the local level in America, a key structural difference emanates from the political status of the chief executive. American municipalities often have a choice between using the mayor-council and council-manager structures, as well as other possible arrangements. In the mayor-council system, citizens elect both the chief executive and the legislators, thus politicizing both roles; in the council-manager system, citizens only elect legislators who then appoint a professional manager.

Both forms have adherents. An Moulder (2008) survey found that 34% of cities with 2500 or more residents used the mayor-council form and 55% used the council-manager arrangement. But their rationales are at odds. The council-manager form assumes that local governments should provide apolitical, administrative services. This rationale separates policy making, which is the council's function, from implementation; technical expertise rather than political approval determines who should appoint department heads and hold them responsible for the operation of the city (Basehart, Kane, Wagenhals, & Hedger, 2000). Mayor-council governments, on the other hand, assume that the chief executive who formulates budgets, recommends policies,

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and takes responsibilities for the everyday operation of the government needs to be a political figure.

The purpose of this research is to use a survey of New Jersey governments to investigate the role of structural difference on the e-participation opportunities which jurisdictions offer users. The importance of the analysis lies in its help to answer the question: which attributes of governments facilitate using IT to foster citizen engagement?

The study will investigate the influence of three types of structures: mayor-council, council-manager, and township. As we will explain later in the data and measurement section, New Jersey law allows local governments a choice of municipal structure. While large New Jersey jurisdictions tend to use the nationally ubiquitous mayor-council or council-manager forms, some smaller governments use a number of other structures, including, the Township, an intermediate form. In this form, voters elect a Township Committee of three or five persons as their legislature; this committee then elects a mayor for a 1-year term (New Jersey State League of Municipalities, 2013).

These three forms produce governments with different internal distributions of authority and responsibility. Executives with variant bases for their authority may favor different approaches for obtaining citizen feedback on public issues. As these executives and their subordinates are the individuals who authorize and develop website participation initiatives, such variance in executive preference could impact government provision of e-participation opportunities.

This article proceeds in six sections. The first section reviews some literature on the role of municipal structure in conventional participation settings, with an emphasis on the influence of council-manager and mayor-council structures. The next section reviews literature on a variety of variables that seem to impact e-participation opportunities. The third section discusses the Rutgers survey of New Jersey governments and describes how we measure the variables in our model. The fourth section presents the empirical findings. The final two sections present discussion and conclusions, respectively.

2. Government form and citizen participation

How best to involve citizens in government decision processes has been a longstanding research concern of public administration and political science scholars. A vast body of literature explores the factors that influence the opportunities governments offer citizen for participation and the responses of citizens to these opportunities. Some research emphasizes the demographic characteristics of the participants (Boschken, 1992, 1994; Franklin, 2001; Franklin & Ebdon, 2005); some focuses on their preferences and willingness (Franklin & Ebdon, 2005; Glaser & Hildreth, 1996; Wilson, 1983); and some examines the mechanisms used to gather citizen input (Bryson, 1995; Franklin & Ebdon, 2005; Simonsen & Robbins, 2000). Franklin and Ebdon (2005) argue that four groups of factors may influence effectiveness: city structure, types of participants, mechanisms used to foster participation, and the process itself.

No scholarly consensus exists on the impact of structure on traditional participation opportunities. Sharp (2012, p. 125) sums up one strand in the political science literature when she argued that the “so-called reformed institutions of government, such as at-large elections, the council-manager plan, and nonpartisanship, have long been viewed as depoliticizing features of local government; and part of depoliticizing means a lowering of citizen interest in politics and local elections.” She based this conclusion in part on Hajnal and Lewih (2003) finding that the more politicized mayor-council form of government yields higher election turnouts than council-manager governments, even when controls for various demographic factors are taken into account. Wood’s (2002) research of cities with 25,000 or greater population also found higher turnout in mayor-council cities; he attributed this disparity to those cities having one accountable figure whom voters knew to credit or blame. Yang and Callahan (2007) found that the council-manager structure had

a negative impact on governmental use of citizen input in strategic decisions.

However, a smaller body of research argues for the importance of the city manager’s professional expertise in fostering traditional participation. Based on data gathered from open-ended survey questions, correspondence, and in-depth panel discussions, Nalbandian (1999, p. 1) maintained that managers were expected to facilitate participation as part of their role “as community builders and enablers of democracy.” Franklin and Ebdon (2005) compared Burlington, Iowa (a council-manager city), and Topeka, Kansas (a mayor-council city), as to citizen participation in budget construction. They found that Burlington encouraged involvement with two call-in periods for citizen comments, while Topeka had little opportunity for two-way interaction for those people who lacked partisan connections.

Complicating the research landscape, Wang’s (2001) survey data from 249 chief administrative officers in U.S. cities with population greater than 50,000 showed no significant citizen participation difference between these two forms of governments. In this research, the differences between council-manager and mayor-council governments were not significant in terms of participation mechanisms, the functions of participation, and the role of citizens in decision-making.

Unfortunately, none of these studies yields a definitive role for structural influence on citizen participation opportunities, especially the new form of citizen participation online—e-participation. Insufficient research exists to test the impact of government form on e-participation offering level. Most of the political science literature restricts its focus to voting where mayor-council structures are superior, but this analysis says little about other forums. As Zhang and Yang (2009) noted, Ebdon and Franklin based their results on case studies of participation in one functional area, budgeting. This limitation makes it difficult to generalize their findings to other jurisdictions or functions. Although Wang’s study used quantitative methods, he limited himself to the traditional forums popular in the 1990s such as public hearings, citizen advisory boards, community meetings, individual citizen representatives, and citizen focus groups, rather than investigating current e-participation forums such as citizens’ directly contacting government officials online, completing online surveys, expressing opinions on online discussion boards, or participating in e-meetings. This change in the universe of participation forums makes it reasonable to test Wang’s conclusion again.

More problematically, no consensus exists on some of the underlying theoretical assumptions that support some of this research. While Kweit and Kweit (1981) and Nalbandian (1999) have posited that professional expertise will lead managers to want involvement, a number of other commentators have argued that professionalism subverts democracy in the public sphere (Adams, 1992; Lee, 1995). This latter view would support the primacy of mayor-council systems, with politically chosen executives, to promote participation.

Some recent commentators question whether the issue of structure can be solved with a simple “yes/no” answer, labeling one structure the winner in all participation scenarios. Zhang and Yang (see also Yang & Callahan, 2005) argued that the impact of the council-manager form depends on the dimensions of citizen involvement (p. 292). Even if council-manager governments are more likely to adopt involvement mechanisms such as public hearings, community meetings, and citizen surveys as Ebdon and Franklin proposed, this does not necessarily mean that they will enable more citizen involvement in strategic decision making, management, and service delivery. In Zhang and Yang’s argument, the impact of council-manager form on citizen participation is complex, with many factors involved.

Liao and Zhang (2012) make a similar argument. For them, the role of the council-manager form is complex because many factors impact citizen participation in a given system such as the “relationship between elected officials and city managers, utilization of participatory mechanisms, city manager’s motivation to incorporate citizens and the level of citizen participation in local budgeting” (Liao & Zhang, 2011, p.3).

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