

Citizen Participation Is Critical: An Example from Sweden

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1 Introduction

Lack of citizen interest in democratic participation is one of the most severe problems for democracy in the twenty-first century. Can modern technology help? Surely there are a number of models and theories about new forms of citizen participation, but much of this has not been tried empirically yet. It is difficult to get political support for experiments that try to move some influence towards the citizen.

However, looking at the concept of citizen participation, we find several possibilities. Participatory democracy can include acquisition of knowledge, discussion about the decision process, citizen initiatives, participation in agenda setting, deliberative dialogue concerning alternatives, concern for minorities, participation in preparatory decisions, actual decision making, built on representativeness, and citizen participation in analysis of the effects of a decision.

Participation need not be restricted to heavy and long-term decisions. On the contrary, it may be quite local and limited in scope. Mere presence in decision making, although small in scope, often generates citizen satisfaction. This in turn tends to avoid later problems of dissatisfaction with the results. It therefore seems advisable for politicians to try this kind of sharing of power. Citizen influence can be increased on both sides of a decision. Many of the planning sessions that take place before decision making

contain space for participatory citizen presence. Information communication technology (ICT) can support such citizen presence in several ways, including distribution of background knowledge, simplified access to initiatives and discussions, simplified participation in agenda setting, easier formulation of alternatives, online support for deliberative sessions, participation in preparatory decision making, and participation in analysis of the effects and feedback related to the decision.

It is amazing that so few of these possibilities are being tried in European countries at present. Planners seem to be frightened to approach the topic. Politicians are not unaware of reform possibilities. At a meeting with the Council of Europe in 2004 in Barcelona, a number of possibilities were presented. Among these were: support for citizen initiatives, encouragement of citizen participation, warnings around citizen passiveness, organizing and financing of citizen panels, definition of local space for citizen decision making, intelligent registering of political participation, smart voting (voting on issues with pre-prepared alternatives), and many more. Organized citizen movements may be needed in order to get the ball rolling.

2 Cybervote and the Kista Project

The Cybervote project (<http://www.eucybervote.org>) was a research project (partly funded by the European Commission) that included representatives from seven European countries. It was carried out from 2001 to 2003. Participants represented users, researchers, and providers of technology. The focus was originally placed on the development of secure Internet voting software, and this focus remained central for most of the participating countries during the duration of the main project. However, in the Swedish version, this was complemented by an interest in participation, discussion, and agenda setting. Such a social approach differed from the other nations, which mostly concentrated on technology.

There were three 'user' projects in the main project, one of which was carried out in Kista, a northern suburb of Stockholm. It concentrated on citizen involvement in city planning. A unique aspect of the Kista project was that it only engaged elderly citizens, in an attempt to deal with the 'digital divide' between the oldest and younger generations.

With the help of local organizations of the elderly, invitations were distributed that said: 'Do you want to join in the shaping of history?' The invitation mentioned the use of new technologies, and prospective participants were told that they would be instructed in how to use the equipment. This was a general appeal to senior citizens to get them involved in helping develop part of a new city plan for where they lived.

A sizable group turned up for the first meeting, where the discussion centered on a variety of possible project topics to be addressed later. Through this process a list of about a dozen topics emerged. The next step was to get a smaller sample of the participants to use new communication and voting technology to go through the list and establish their own priorities. This included deliberation, plus testing new and more secure software.

The priority topics that were agreed on through this process were: (1) local planning (parks or commercial), (2) public transportation (trams, buses, or trains), and (3) art and culture (a cultural center or not). These were then disseminated through printed materials and via the Internet. Two young researchers carried out a specific study of this part of the project. It showed that these elderly citizens did encounter certain practical problems in using what for them were new PCs, particularly in the voting software, but that they appreciated the possibility to take part in agenda setting.

The main Kista trial project then took place in January 2003. Everyone who had preregistered was invited to come to discuss and vote. Two hundred thirty-six elderly participants showed up. Each person who came was given a password that they could use once at the final vote via the Internet. Their choices concerned the three topics listed above, from the earlier agenda setting process. There were discussion facilities available. The electronically supported voting was done without major problems. The results showed majorities for a green environment, a new train line, and a cultural center. In fact, the participants were very pleased with their project experience, and several indicated that they would like to do it again in the future.

