

ONLINE VS. OFFLINE VS. MIXED PARTICIPATION FOR BETTER GOVERNMENTAL POLICY-MAKING

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to find the characteristics of a better participation model that would generate stronger leverage in the decision-making process. The objective is to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of online, offline and mixed participation models, given relevant literature available, real world examples and theoretical predictions.

Key words: *online, offline, participation, policy-making, decision-making.*

1. Introduction

The “great thing” about a better participation tool is to allow any person the possibility to recommend solutions to various community problems at local, national and international levels.

This paper is going to identify the defining characteristics of a better citizen engagement model that copes with the disadvantages of traditional offline and online participation methods and builds upon the advantages of the two. The paper is also comparing some of the most used projects of participative democracy and analyzes ways to improve the face-to-face participative democracy endeavors and the traditional participation options allowed by the laws.

A better citizen engagement model will be called in this paper SolveNet, for easier reference. The name does not constitute any project referral. It will just sum up the

theoretical and practical functionalities of the new citizen engagement model.

The study of SolveNet is important, to give the participation efforts of every-day citizens greater leverage to their constructive ideas, in order to generate more community action. In doing this, the paper is framing the characteristics of a participation method that would achieve efficiency of time and costs to participate and at the same time an increased effectiveness.

The answer to this matter will be sought after carefully analyzing relevant literature about participative democracy, the most famous participation projects that communities organize, the characteristics of the online dialogue, and using the assumption of a *constructive attitude*. The already-existent literature forms the backbone of the paper, helping to project the better participation model. Scholars have been showcasing many advantages and disadvantages of various participation attempts and their research conclusions form important theoretical background for this paper.

2. Literature review

The relevant literature that has been studied includes titles like Brian E. Adams, *Citizen Lobbyists. Local efforts to influence public policy*; Matt Leighninger, *The Next Form of Democracy*; Cass Sunstein, *Infotopia*; and Mark H. Moore,

Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Government.

Scholars who study the resources used by citizens participating in politics have found that three are critically important: *time, money* and *civic skills* (Verba, Scholzman and Brady 1995, 270-272). In his book, Brian E. Adams adds a fourth resource to that list: *social networks*. The importance of social networks consists in creating opportunities for others to mobilize citizens, fostering democratic norms and civic virtues and helping citizens develop political skills. Brian E. Adams argues that we need to make a distinction between citizens' capacity to participate, which is enhanced by social networks, and citizens' effectiveness at influencing policy.

In his book, *The Next Form of Democracy*, Matt Leighninger advises that in order to make democratic governance work, you have to move past the civic stereotypes and *create environments that will appeal to real citizens*. The author points out one of the main weaknesses of most citizen involvement efforts: *they focus on the goals and agenda of the organizers, rather than the citizens*.

Cass Sunstein argues in "Infotopia" that the key goal of deliberation is to improve choices, not to legitimate whatever choice ultimately is made. Wikipedia is successful because of the large numbers of knowledgeable people who are willing to participate in creating it. People are motivated by the desire to see their words in print, the value of self-expression and the apparently widespread desire to be helpful and constructive. Status and motivation can play a significant role in wiki communities. Participants compete for prestige by giving time, energy and creativity away. Innovation improves people's reputations.

Mark Moore advocates in his book, *Creating Public Value*, that in order for a solution to generate stronger leverage, it needs to comply with three criteria:

1. **be feasible**: this means that it can be accomplished by the existing organizations or with help from others.

2. **be valuable**: it should bring value to overseers, people in general or members of various communities.

3. **be sustainable**: it is likely to attract public support, authority and money from the political, social or business environments.

3. Paper Content

3.1. Participation Problems

SolveNet has to address two major citizen engagement problems:

- The lack of participation of every-day people and experts in solving community problems at local, national and international levels.
- The flows of the citizen engagement tools that people and organizations use nowadays.

Researches show that people don't participate in solving community problems mainly because of "lower socioeconomic status, lack of impact of personal participation compared to collective participation, limited time and money, lack of information and knowledge about issues, and lack of confidence in their ability to be effective."¹ SolveNet's theory for social change has thus to focus around the individuals, who feel they need to take action and fix what is wrong in the community, but they are limited due to one or more of the reasons mentioned above.

As scholars argue that governments alone cannot solve pressing social problems, a better citizen engagement model will have to provide the resources that every-day people need, to bring their knowledge to the table. The problems of local, national or international communities need to become opportunities for the new model.

There are many attempts to facilitate people's input in the policy-making process. Some of the most used ones are citizen assemblies, deliberative polling, citizen juries, study circles, and choice dialogues. They are based on meetings where people have a direct contact with one another. From the authors' point of view, they face two major problems. The first one is stated by Matt Leighninger: "the whole notion of citizen involvement

centers on the needs and goals of the person doing the involving, not the citizen...ordinary people are only needed to play limited roles on certain occasions.”ⁱⁱ The other problem concerns the high costs associated with these engagement programs.

The authority under which participation programs come from, vary from governments to non-governmental organizations, community leaders and various interest groups. They usually tend to provide unbiased information to the people they engage. However, there is no accountability on the end result, which is usually a new policy proposal, a prioritization, or an opinion.

The traditional participative democracy models usually use random sampling to choose their participants—Study Circles use self selecting criteria. They usually try to be representative for various demographics. The number of participants can be as high as thousands in the case of Citizen Assemblies, hundreds in the case of Deliberating Polling or Choice Dialogues, and as small as 15-30 for Citizen Juries. The high-number models usually last for one day to one weekend, while the lower-number models tend to last from a couple of days to months. The costs associated with these projects are usually very high and can even reach millions of dollars in the case of Citizen Assemblies. Organizers have to cover costs that include food, accommodation, travels, stipends and even prizes.

These face-to-face or offline participative democracy models face important challenges that SolveNet has to minimize:

- Limited time and money – in order to participate in the programs, people need to dedicate first of all time. This is a big problem in attracting professionals, as they are usually very engaged in many projects. The projects are also expensive to organize.
- Sometimes, group discussions tend to be polarized by one or few members. This requires facilitators to make sure that everybody’s opinion is being heard. However, they are not all the time effective and can be expensive.
- Lack of knowledge about issues. This is more prevalent in the case of Citizen

Assemblies and Deliberative Polling that last for short periods of time. The randomly selected people usually don’t have enough knowledge about the issues being discussed and there is not enough time to learn about them during the unfolding of the project. The longer the participative democracy process, the more time you have to think about issues and recommend a better solution.

- Lack of ability to be effective. A couple of major factors influence this. One of them is the lack of accountability. Usually, you don’t have access to people’s data to ask them about the participative democracy process or about the policy they chose. Sometimes, even the project participants are not confident enough in their ability to influence policy. So far, hardly any participative democracy initiative has generated a change of policy.

The greatest advantages of the traditional participation programs are the face-to-face discussions and the fact that they usually tend to be representative for the targeted communities. These two advantages give them greater leverage to change policies, at least in theory.

3.2. Elements of a better participation model

The new model has to allow people with various backgrounds to participate, from PhD professors to unskilled workers. All they need to have in common is the desire to solve community problems. SolveNet will thus allow anybody to choose a public issue of importance to him/her, provide the strategy and the tools to address it, mobilize other interested people to form a small policy working group and create an opportunity to build awareness and influence policy. If these opportunities are presented to them, citizens may be more likely to participate.

SolveNet has to focus mainly on the quality of the solutions that emerge out of its participation model. These should comply with the three criteria, inspired from Mark Moore’s Creating Public Value: be valuable, sustainable and feasible.

Under SolveNet, nonprofits with activity and interest in participative democracy have to run the model and thus form the general authority, while the citizens who recommend solutions to community problems are held accountable for their ideas. This ensures that they receive the appropriate acknowledgement for their contribution, as well as prestige from the communities they contribute to. SolveNet has also to transform the raw solution ideas into official policy papers with a leveraging layout, under the endorsement of a nonprofit in charge of the participation model. The scope of this is twofold: On one hand, this is a motivation for the citizens to recommend a valuable, sustainable and feasible solution. As Cass Sunstein mentions, people are motivated by “the desire to see their words in print, the value of self-expression and the apparently widespread desire to be helpful and constructive.”ⁱⁱⁱ On the other hand, the information about the participants would allow decision makers, mass-media and other target audiences to obtain more information from them, if they want to.

The face-to-face participative democracy models usually focus on generating new policies, making an educated opinion, prioritizing various policies, and predicting people’s future views. These are usually complex issues that are supposed to help decision makers make better decisions or people vote new ballot initiatives. Issues vary greatly and include health care, new voting systems, the future of various communities, education reform, community planning, racism, emigration, land use, or other social problems. While SolveNet can deal with all these issues and others of importance to the network members, the end product will be different. It will basically consist in a policy paper that has specific layout characteristics. The content of the paper will recommend a solution to a specific community problem or a well-defined policy or action plan from a pool of policies, while carefully analyzing other alternative solutions.

Under SolveNet, any citizen has to be able to raise a problem of public concern that is of interest to her/him on a specially-created online policy-making platform. In

the case of SolveNet, the citizen’s needs and goals are actually advantages, because they are the ones who push the policy-making process further. This way, ordinary people will not be just some tools to play limited roles, but accountable citizens.

The main advantages of SolveNet have to consist in its cost of use, flexibility in terms of time to offer a solution to a community problem and an educational approach. People have to use SolveNet at no cost. Because they can use the participation platform from basically anywhere they have an Internet connection, they will offer their input whenever they have time. More over, people can use additional time to do individual research on the issue they want to solve and thus make more informed solution proposals. One important side of the method of participation has to focus on the educational approach. The participation platform has to offer basic tutorials that show citizens what the policy-making steps are and how to work online. This is aimed at offering basic policy skills to all participants, in order to make them more confident in their ability to be effective as a group. Also, the educational tutorials will help shorten the education gap between more educated people and less educated ones.

SolveNet will face a series of difficulties that are specific to the Internet-based enterprises and to the participative democracy models in general. The first one will be the absence of the face-to-face discussions. Some ways to combat this problem will include using a friendly format of the citizen engagement platform that will also host the pictures of the participants. On the other hand, the online presence will allow for collaborations between people from different regions or countries. They need to have in common the desire to solve problems in a specific community.

Another important challenge for SolveNet will be the leverage for the recommended solutions. The online approach means that the participation process will not be representative for any community. That is why the focus of the participation platform is on the quality of the solutions

that citizens recommend. The policy papers that the scripts generate will follow a well designed template that addresses all the options for a solution. Another way to gain more leverage stands in the professions of the persons who participate.

The effectiveness of the policy papers is another challenge. This is what SolveNet and the other participative democracy models will have in common. In order to be effective and influence a change of policy once the solutions come out of SolveNet, the participants need to act creatively. They need to find the best ways to promote their solutions and, may be, lobby the right persons. This is also true for the other models. It could be argued that SolveNet and the other models of participative democracy will have at least the same chances to influence a policy.

Cass Sunstein argues in Infotopia that “deliberation on the Internet (through blogs) can produce errors and nonsense.” Blogs are indeed not a good and encouraging environment to deliberate on pressing issues. However, SolveNet will not use blogs. The citizen engagement platform has to be new software that will consist in many different scripts that will guide the citizens throughout the policy-making process and transform their rough work into a policy paper.

There is also the issue of Internet pranks. When referring to wikis, Sunstein mentions that “at first glance, the democratic quality of wikis seems to be a big problem. If anyone in the world can make changes, isn’t the text vulnerable to pranks and even destruction?” Cunningham and Leuf say that “experience shows that in fact little damage is done to wiki content even in the absence of security mechanisms.” Of course, SolveNet is not wiki. However, pranks might want to register and use it. Compared to wikis, SolveNet will have security mechanisms. The proposed problems and solutions have to be moderated, so that licentious language is avoided. But the main reason that pranks might not actually try to inadequately use SolveNet is also stated by Sunstein when referring to wikipedia: “an essential part of the answer is that large numbers of

knowledgeable people are willing to participate in creating it; status and motivation can play a significant role in wiki communities; participants compete for prestige by giving time, energy and creativity away.” Also, “innovation (creative solutions in the case of SolveNet) improves people’s reputations.”

3.3. Coordination with governmental participation programs and participative democracy projects

SolveNet could be used as a follow-up of various offline governmental participation programs. An example would be community meetings. During a summer internship at Los Angeles Mayor’s Office, I attended such a meeting. During approximately two hours, policy analysts from the Mayor’s Office presented the Mayor’s initiatives to their constituents from Hollywood and other representatives of nonprofit organizations. The participants raised a lot of questions and expressed their concerns about major problems. These didn’t always fit the proposed initiatives. However, two hours a month that the Mayor’s representatives use to meet their constituents is not enough to create meaningful projects. As a follow-up of these kinds of meetings, participants could agree to use SolveNet and work on its participation platform on solutions to community problems in their neighborhoods. The policy papers that would come out could be discussed at the following community meeting and influence new projects or allocation of resources. More over, the group members would also benefit from an initial face-to-face contact.

The same situation could be true for people who attend offline participative democracy projects. Some of them may want to work more on certain issues and come up with a better solution or policy. So SolveNet could be nicely used in combination with both participation options provided for by the laws and the traditional participative democracy projects.

On August 11, 2007, California Speaks organized a “statewide conversation on health care.” The organization randomly chose 3.500 participants who met in eight

sites throughout California. The purpose was to find the “enlightened opinion of people.” Overall, the organizers had 400 facilitators, contacted 120,000 people, sent 300,000 letters and made +2,000,000 phone calls. The budget for this project was approximately \$4.5 million. The end result is summarized in the event’s final report: 82% of participants say the system requires major change; 86% say it is essential or important for reform to pass this year; 84% say they are at least somewhat willing to share responsibility for paying for reform.

Some of the major problems of this event are associated with the lack of time for the participants to discuss about health reform, the impossibility to consider tradeoffs and alternatives, the reliance of their decisions mainly on a booklet provided by the organizers, the high costs, and even its outcomes.

If SolveNet had existed, people could have used its platform to recommend a solution to improve the health care system. In this case, those who are sensitive about the issue, could have established online working groups. For example, a health care specialist from California, a Wal-Mart worker, a nurse, a professor from France and an MPP student, could have offered solutions based on their experiences and expertise. Together, they would have as much time as needed to analyze tradeoffs and alternatives, do research on their own and exchange ideas on the participation platform. Other advantages would consist in working during their free time—at home, during breaks, no costs, the possibility to see the result of their work right away, the motivation to see their name printed on the platform, and the possibility to send the policy paper to anybody they see fit like executives, legislature, mass-media.

If third parties are interested to see solutions in a particular deadline or time frame, they could simply offer awards through the nonprofits that run SolveNet. In this case, instead of spending \$4.5 million on a one-day event, the six foundations that secured the funding would have spent little on awards for the

best policy solutions that people offer to the health care situation in California.

5. Conclusions and implications

SolveNet is a combination of online and offline citizen engagement. It benefits from advantages specific to the online dialogue like little to no cost of use, flexibility of participants to give solutions to problems of public concern, educational approach, and interactivity among the participants. At the same time, SolveNet is coping with the disadvantages of offline engagement, like the lack of accountability of the end result of a participation endeavor, limited time and money of participants to offer input in pressing community problems, polarization of discussions, and lack of knowledge about issues.

As the majority of the work is done online, the policy-making process is pushed further using the authority of a legally established nonprofit organization. This way, the most feasible, valuable and sustainable solution proposals from citizens, are sent to the desks of elected and appointed officials.

The participation model lacks the advantages of face-to-face discussions between the participants, but the online citizen engagement platform offers an interactive participation experience that allows people from different regions to work together creatively in solving community problems. The people who participate are not representative for any given community. That is why the main focus is on the quality of the solutions that are exchanged on the platform and not on the background of the citizens.

SolveNet faces however the problem that every participation model has: effectiveness in generating a change of policy. It is ultimately up to the decision-makers to consider the results of any participative democracy exercise or not. The main advantage of SolveNet is in this case the little effort that every-day people make, in order to make their voices heard in the community.

A mixed participation model to support governmental decision-making seems to work the best, in order to benefit the most

from citizen engagement. This model has to provide for authority, accountability, creativity, exchange of constructive ideas, educational approach, and perseverance. Future research could identify such a model and showcase it.

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Annex: the Participative Democracy Matrix.

	Citizen Assembly	Deliberative Polling
Product	New policy	Educated opinion; Prioritization of policies
Authority	Governments; Big NGO's	International and National Governments
Accountability	None	None
Technique	Random selection of large number of people; representative sample; incentives to participate; could reach thousands	Large scale project; statistical sampling; could reach hundreds
Time frame	One day	Long weekends
Costs	Can reach millions of dollars	Very high; provide for accommodation, food, transportation
Participating People	Random people and targeted recruiting	Random and representative participants of large communities
Information source	Organizers and partners	Experts
Target audience	Politicians; Press; Ballots	Legislature; Press
Problems	High costs; no time for participants to think at the problems	Nothing has to happen; high costs

	Citizen Jury	Study Circle
Product	Prioritization of policies	New policy proposals; Prioritization of policies
Authority	Nonprofits; Local and National Governments; Administrative Agencies	Nonprofits; Governments; Administrative Agencies
Accountability	None	None
Technique	Small groups of people; could reach 15-30 participants	Self selected participants; groups of 8-12 people; could reach 6-8,000 participants
Time frame	Two-five days	From 3-4 weeks to 4-10 months
Costs	Can get big; participants are paid; provide for accommodation, food, transportation	High
Participating People	Selected through random phone calls	Self selected
Information source	Usually an advisory board	Organizers and partners
Target audience	Any agency; PR campaigns	Governments
Problems	Hard to get representation from professionals because of time; participants are not representative	Not really an informed opinion; no demographics

	Choice Dialogue	SolveNet (online and offline participation)
Product	Prioritization of policies; Prediction of peoples' future views	A policy paper; Specific solutions to a community problem
Authority	Civic organizations; Governments; Administrative Agencies; Foundations	A legally-established nonprofit organization
Accountability	None	The nonprofit organization and the person raising a problem of public concern on the online policy-making platform
Technique	Random selection of participants; could reach 200-400 people total; small groups	Online exchange of solution ideas, unlimited participants, issuance of official policy papers for decision makers
Time frame	Three to eight days	No time frame, the person publishing a problem of public concern sets his/her own deadline
Costs	High	No fees from the part of the persons using the citizen engagement platform; the nonprofit organization will have operational costs that tend to be fixed
Participating People	Random people and leaders	Any person interested in solving community problems
Information source	Organizers	Person publishing the problem; individual research
Target audience	Governments and other agencies	Governments; mass-media, individual politicians; elected and appointed officials; other agencies
Problems		No face to face interaction; participants may not be representative for the targeted communities

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