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Publication Date

2005-09-01

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September 1, 2005

This study was conducted as part of Project POINT at the Center for Research on Information Technology and Organizations (CRITO) at the University of California, Irvine. Funding was provided by ITR/National Science Foundation grant No. SES-0121232.

Electronic Governance and Modes of Membership in the Local Political Community*

The introduction of each revolution in information technology has been greeted with both optimism and ambivalence. Optimism from those hoping the technology will further democratize access and control of information enabling a more democratic politics and ambivalence from those concerned that the technology will erode traditionally authoritative sources of knowledge or serve the interests of the already powerful. These hopes and concerns are brought to a head with the increasing integration of information and communications technologies—in particular the Internet—into the practices of public administration at all levels of government. Today, virtually all local governments in the U.S. are online. Robert Klotz notes that “cities without websites by 1999 were already being seen as behind the times.”¹ At the same time, Internet use is diffusing in American life faster than almost any other communications technology and for many segments of the population, the Internet is becoming indispensable (ITU 2002, Hoffman, Novak, and Venkatesh 2004). Of Americans online, eighty-eight percent say the Internet plays a role in their daily routines (Fallows 2004).² The Internet is increasingly becoming a facet of everyday life for both users in the political community as well as governments. The central question this paper investigates is, how are members of the political community using the Internet to interact with the political system?

Though unaware of today’s technological environment, Alexis de Tocqueville was also concerned about the role of technology, democracy, and administration in local governance as he saw contradictions emerging in the modern world. Writing 150 years before the ascendancy of the Internet, Tocqueville theorized extensively about the relationship between local governance, administration, democracy, and media. Tocqueville raised significant concerns about the encroachment of despotism through the expansion of administrative tutelary power in the modern world, preferring a more

* We would like to thank Debora Dunkle, Helen Ingram, Nick Kremenek, David Easton, and Mark Poster for their assistance. All remaining errors are solely the authors’.

¹ Robert J. Klotz. *The Politics of Internet Communication*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield. 2004, p. 101.

² Donna L. Hoffman, Thomas P. Novak, and Alladi Venkatesh. “Has the Internet Become Indispensable?” *Communications of the ACM*. Vol.47, No. 7 (July 2004), p. 37-42 and Fallows 2004.

political and participatory form of governance.³ In this political view of governance, the political community communicates demands and support to the regime and authorities while, at the same time, governance does not function properly without communication from political authorities back to the political community through policy outputs.⁴ Hence, while governmentality may reign as an administrative logic of control and tutelary power, members of the political community are still in a position to adopt different dispositions towards and relationships with the regime and its authorities.⁵ That is, we may find different modes of membership within the political community. Members of the political community may take their role and relationship with government as politicized or they may choose to consume government outputs in relation to private interests. We analyze how members of the political community are using the Internet to interact with the political system.

This paper explores these online modes of membership with respect to two theoretically derived ideal types: the passive consumer and the active political participant.⁶ These analyses are centered primarily on elucidating types of practices rather than analyzing cases. Therefore we ask which types of activities (collectively referred to as a “practice”) are engaged in more or less commonly, which activities are done in common, and who engages in which kinds of practices? We categorize practices in terms of whether they are consumptive or participatory. Hence these categories do not constitute a totalizing taxonomy of persons but instead a way to discriminate between types of practices. Nevertheless, we use respondent engagement in these practices as a way to classify different types of respondents. This does not foreclose the possibility, as an empirical matter, that persons might do both. This paper begins with a theoretical derivation of the consumer and participant ideal types and situates this within the literature on the Internet and local governance. It then examines an original dataset in

³ *Democracy in America*. Vol. 2.

⁴ This paper intentionally makes use of the Estonian political system framework (*A Framework for Political Analysis*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1965 and *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1965). Also, policy outputs may take many forms from the promulgation of new legislation, the maintenance of the status quo policy, and public pronouncements to legitimate or delegitimize certain demands or supports directed at the regime and authorities.

⁵ Likewise, in practice there may be more than one logic in play.

⁶ Here “passive” contrasts with the participant who *actively* makes demands or offers support to the political regime/authorities. This is not to deny that the otherwise passive consumer is not actively implicated in the recursive maintenance of a consumer culture.

terms of identifying and classifying online modes of membership within the political community. The empirical analysis is driven by the following research questions:

1. To what extent are online consumer practices and participatory practices engaged in by members of local political communities?
2. To what extent can we describe online consumer practices and online participatory practices as empirically distinct, on the basis of how they are engaged in and understood by members of the political community?

We take practices both as an analytical discrimination of activity and as an empirically self-constituted and socially understood domain of activity. Our findings indicate that there are a wide variety of ways in which the Internet is being used to interact with the political system. These interactions tend to be more directed at service acquisition or compliance with government regulations rather than participation in the political process. Furthermore we find that these activities tend to be organized into empirically coherent constellations of consumer and participatory practices.

Politics, Public Administration, and Information Technology

This article is situated in the intersection between theories of citizenship and theories of technology use. We are concerned with understanding the ways members of the political community use the Internet to interact with their local governments. As the Internet has become increasingly integrated into everyday life for publics and political officials, political theorists have been debating whether this trend augurs Pangloss and Pandora or a democratic renaissance.⁷ We classify the literature on information technology and democracy in terms of “elite reinforcement” and “cyber pluralization.”⁸ The elite reinforcement position argues that the Internet will be used in ways that “reinforce the

⁷ Barber 1998, p. 237-282.

⁸ This is not to exclude other positions such as technological elitism, technological determinism, or a host of other positions limited only by one’s imagination. However we select these two on the basis that their opposition gives us analytical purchase on online interactions with the political system.

power and influence of those actors and groups that already have the most power.”⁹ On the other hand, what we call the cyber pluralization school argues that the Internet “radically decentralizes the positions of speech, publishing...the apparatuses of cultural production” and therefore “puts cultural acts, symbolizations in all forms, in the hands of all participants.”¹⁰ We use these categories of information technology and politics to derive classifications for modes of membership in the political community. We take the elite reinforcement position as corresponding with a consumer mode of membership in the political community while we take the cyber pluralization position as corresponding with a participatory mode of membership in the political community. Our claim is not that persons necessarily use the Internet in exclusively one particular mode, but instead may use the Internet in a variety of modes.¹¹ Our aim is not to falsify these perspectives or their corresponding images of citizenship, but instead to use them as ways to conceptualize different practices identified within our data. This section begins by elucidating the elite reinforcement and cyber pluralization perspectives and their corresponding consumer and the participant modes and concludes with some justifications for focusing on local politics.

The elite reinforcement perspective raises the concern that, “Machines mediating between citizen and ruling institution would in no way enhance individual freedom; instead this scheme would further naturalize the force of...regulation, procedure, and other codes of conduct while further depoliticizing the administration of society.”¹² This view of governance comes out of an administrative paradigm, which has gained ascendancy in both the study and practice of local government. This practice of government seeks to efficiently deliver services, unfettered by political interference. Hence, this conceptualization of local governance views Internet use by members of the political community as reinforcing the position of elites by rendering members of the political community (i.e. citizens) consumers of government resources rather than political agents. Traditionally the study and practice of local government has embraced

⁹ Danziger et al, p. 18.

¹⁰ Poster 2001, p. 184.

¹¹ Alice Robbin. “Rob Kling in Search of One Good Theory: The Origins of Computerization Movements.” Presented at the Extending the Contributions of Professor Rob Kling to the Analysis of Computerization Movements conference on Social Informatics, UC Irvine, March 2005.

¹² Brook and Boal 1995, p. xiii.

the administrative ethos and harbored suspicions towards democratic participation.¹³ Those in public administration have found great potential in the use of the Internet as a way to facilitate service delivery and even choice in service providers.¹⁴ Information and communications technologies (ICTs) have played a central role in the deepening of administrative practice. Following the National Performance Review (NPR) carried out in the first term of Clinton's Administration, government agencies have been searching for ways to implement ICTs in the service of increased administrative efficiency and a more business-like bureaucracy. During the second term of the Clinton Administration, the National Partnership for Reinventing Government began evolving into e-government strategies with the goal of "putting people 'online, not in line.'"¹⁵ Alfred Tat-Kei Ho has found that these principles have filtered down to the local level, noting that his survey of municipal websites reveals the web designs emphasize "'one-stop shopping' and customer-oriented principles."¹⁶ Juliet Musso, Chris Weare, and Matthew Hale note in their survey of California municipal websites that this is to the exclusion of policy matters (12-13). One reason why local governments tend to eschew facilitating contact between the political community and groups seeking to pressure the government, they suggest, is that municipal governments "do not wish to encourage street-level battles that may complicate governance or present barriers to economic development" (Musso, Weare, and Hale 1999: 16).

The resulting image of one's role as a member of the political community is the consumer figure, which has a long lineage within the study and practice of public administration.¹⁷ This image is reinforced by the consumerist orientation of local government websites wherein the emphasis is the access to government goods and services rather than input from the political community. This configuration renders the

¹³ Guy, p. 645. Some representative historical examples would include Woodrow Wilson. "The Study of Administration." *Political Science Quarterly*. Vol. 2, No. 2 (June 1887), p. 197-222, Goodnow. 1967 (1900), and criticism of this tendency by Dwight Waldo. *The Administrative State: A Study of the Political Theory of American Public Administration*. 2nd ed. New York: Holmes and Meir 1984.

¹⁴ William D. Eggers. *Government 2.0: Using Technology to Improve Education, Cut Red Tape, Reduce Gridlock, and Enhance Democracy*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Press. 2005.

¹⁵ "Access America: E-Gov." January 2001. <http://govinfor.library.unt.edu/npr/initiati/it>. (Accessed 12/8/03).

¹⁶ Ho, p. 434.

¹⁷ Lizbeth Cohen. "Citizens and Consumers in the United States in the Century of Mass Consumption." *The Politics of Consumption: Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America*. Ed: Dauntun and Hilton. New York: Berg. 2001, p. 203-221.

relationship between the political community and the government readily amenable to economic rather than political analyses as political tropes are substituted for those of the market. Electronic government systems in America are, thus far, largely a continuation of these dynamics. Hence the “cultural interfaces”¹⁸ of local government websites tend to construct an image of its user as consumer, given that it is geared towards consumptive interactions with government. Consequently, in the image underlying e-government designs, augers for elite reinforcement rather than cyber pluralization.

However, website designs are not totalizing and there are avenues for both consumption and also participation. Even if websites are geared towards forging a consumptive relationship between the political community and the government, members of the political community may use the available tools to redefine that relationship in more participatory terms. Tocqueville presents a participatory vision of democracy that provides a contrast to the consumer model. Conceptually, he took democracy to refer to “on the whole, more a type of society and manner of acting than a kind of political system, and for the most part, he took the former as more important than the latter” (Gunnell 2004: 49).¹⁹ Instead of focusing on government outputs such as satisfaction with services, Tocqueville took input from the political community as central to democratic practices. Consequently, Tocqueville was concerned about consumerist conceptions of citizens on the grounds that “economic self interest” and “the desire for material gain...tended to depoliticize society and draw people away from public affairs and communal activity” (Gunnell 2004: 51). Tocqueville raised serious concerns about the rise of a form of bureaucratic government in which the primary purpose is to slake and regulate the material needs and daily concerns of persons, thereby sparing residents “all the care of thinking and all the trouble of living” (Tocqueville: 870). As this relationship becomes a generalized cultural phenomenon, the government “does not tyrannize, but it compresses, enervates, extinguishes, and stupefies a people, till each

¹⁸ Lev Manovich. *The Language of the New Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press. 2001, p. 69-73.

¹⁹ In fact James Bryce derided Tocqueville’s focus on the “moral and social sphere” and argues in favor of centering the study of American democracy on the functioning of its institutions (Bryce 1890, p. 4). This contrasts significantly with much of the more recent empirical work on democracy and civil society today (e.g. Putnam 1993, 2000 and Tarrow 1996) which tend to focus on institutional outputs rather than micropolitical input side of the political system.

nation is reduced to nothing better than a flock of timid and industrious animals, of which the government is the shepherd” (Tocqueville: 870).

While Tocqueville saw that “a great many persons...are quite content with this sort of compromise between administrative despotism and sovereignty of the people,” this fails to satisfy him (p. 871). Instead he would prefer to see persons providing active input into the political process through contact with political groups or directly with governments. Henrik Bang has emphasized the communicative character of this relationship between the political community and government in a process he terms, “culture governance.”²⁰ Distinguishing this input model of democracy from the consumerist output model, Bang argues, “political culture is not merely a matter of having the right attitudes to the democratic regime but of cooperating in partnerships and networks in a democratic political community.”²¹ This input, network orientation of democracy revolves around a more horizontal image of the process of governance. Central to its function is the organization of political actors as well as the production and communication of political information and argument. The Internet, in this view, functions as a space of activity that expands the limited notion of conventional public spaces envisioned by Tocqueville.²²

These competing visions of democracy entail great differences in the quotidian practices by members of the political community. The consumer mode of membership is predicated on an output view of democracy whereby input aspect of democracy is primarily manifest through the electoral process. Hence the primary actor in this model is the government. The consumer model then fixes attention on the outputs of government and the practices of consumption by members of the political community. Central to these concerns is the level of customer satisfaction with the services provided. In contrast, Tocqueville’s model focuses on practices on the input side of governance. Central these concerns raised by Tocqueville is the level at which persons are engaged as active participants in the political life of the community.

²⁰ Henrik Bang. *Governance as Social and Political Communication*. New York and Manchester: Manchester University Press. 2003.

²¹ Bang 2003, p. 253.

²² Diana Saco. *Cybering Democracy: Public Space and the Internet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2002, p. 70-74.

We focus our analysis on local governments for two reasons. First, Tocqueville took local communities to be the central theater for democratic voices, because “in no other stage of government does the body of citizens exercise a more immediate influence” (Tocqueville 2000: 68). Tocqueville held that if the *demos* were to have influence over government anywhere, it would most significantly manifest itself at the local level. While politics is mediated by a number of forces and interests, individuals and groups are more likely to be able to compete with these interests at the local level. Decentralization succeeds or fails in its democratic mission to the extent it facilitates influence from the *demos*. Second, we encounter and experience local politics more than other levels of government and it is the proximate source of many goods and services that affect our daily lives. If the Internet is changing the way we interact with governments and engage in politics, we should find evidence of it at the local level.

Data, Measures, and Methods

The above analysis grounds the following two specific research questions that guide our empirical analyses. First, how do persons use the Internet to interact with the political system? Second, are these practices empirically organized in distinct modes? Our data were gathered in a survey of 1200 respondents from 12 geographically diverse metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) in summer 2003. There were 100 respondents selected from a probability sample in each MSA. The overall response rate was 44.3%. These MSAs were selected on the basis that they have a relatively high rate of broadband use so that our results reflect the emerging context of more extensive broadband Internet use.²³ Additionally, if the Internet is having an effect on how people interact with their local governments, we would expect to find evidence first in places where people use the Internet regularly. While the individuals in our sample tends to be predominantly Caucasian and middle or upper middle class, there is diversity amongst our respondents.

²³ Previous work has shown that broadband users tend to make the most extensive and ubiquitous use of the Internet (John Horrigan and Lee Rainie. *The Broadband Difference: How Online Americans' Behavior Changes with High-Speed Internet Connections at Home.* Pew Internet and American Life Project. 2004. http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Broadband_Report.pdf.

Roughly 30% of our sample reports annual household incomes of \$50,000 or less and more than 12% of our sample earns \$30,000 or less. Furthermore, there is diversity in the types of communities in our survey; they include rural areas, small towns, suburbs, and cities. The sample is 85% percent Caucasian, 4.8% African American, 4.6% Asian American, and 3.5% Hispanic, and the rest classified themselves otherwise or declined to state an ethnicity. Respondents were queried on their use of information technologies in the household and the role the Internet plays in everyday interactions with family, friends, community life, and their local governments. A full listing of the MSAs and response rate information can be found in Appendix 1.

Measures

Online Interaction with the Political System: We queried respondents regarding how they and their households have used government websites within the last year. Full wordings of all the questions are in Appendix 2. Specific questions included whether or not they obtained information about government services, downloaded forms for home-related needs, completed transactions like paying bills, looked up information on past or upcoming council meetings, or contacted public officials online. Each item was dichotomous (yes/no). These questions were based on extensive study of the options available at local government websites (not reported here) in the twelve MSAs we surveyed and cover the range of the main functions available on these websites. Additionally, these items correspond with our theoretical ideal types of the consumer and the political participant. The first three items—looking up information on government services, downloading forms for household needs, and completing transactions—correspond with salient elements of the consumer ideal type and therefore constitute central consumerist practices of online interaction with a local government website. These three items are concerned with accessing and consuming the outputs of government. Participatory activities include looking up information about past or upcoming public meetings as a means of becoming informed about local governmental politics and contacting public officials as a measure of providing input to the political process. Looking up information and contacting public officials online are, then directly

concerned with engagement in the political process. These five activities are components of the two indexes—consumer and participatory—we subsequently construct. One additional item that we use to construct the participatory index is engagement in an online discussion about local politics. This item captures another dimension of political participation by inquiring to what extent respondents are engaged in discussion with others in the political community about politics.

We operationalize consumer and participatory practices, then, in terms of the diversity of the activities respondents engage in rather than the frequency of their engagements. While frequency measures are useful for identifying the level of intensity of interaction that is not our aim here. We prefer operationalizing practices in terms of the diversity of activities because it measures the richness of respondents' engagement in a practice allowing us to investigate the empirical coherence of online consumer and participatory practices.

Offline Government Interactions: We surveyed respondents regarding three types of offline interactions with local governments. These interactions included one consumerist activity (i.e. processing a transaction at a city government office), and two participatory activities (i.e. contacting a public official via phone, mail, or in person, and attending a public meeting).

Community Involvement: We also surveyed respondents regarding their involvement in four types of offline community interaction and four types of online community interaction. Offline interactions included membership in a local club, attendance at a neighborhood event, holding office in a local club, or planning a neighborhood event. These offline community interactions were dichotomous items and asked regarding a timeframe of the previous year. Online community involvement questions measured the frequency (often, sometimes, rarely, or never) of contacting four types of websites. These online sites included a local community organization, a local hobby group, a local political association, and a local religious group.

Government Website Evaluation. We use three items to measure respondents' evaluation of government websites. We asked respondents what affect their use of government websites had on government accessibility, their use of government services, and the number of interactions they had with government. The response choices were: increase, no change, or decrease. This gives us an indication regarding how respondents feel the use of government websites has had an impact on their relationship with government.

Methods

We primarily rely on two techniques to analyze the data. The first technique is a multidimensional scaling (MDS) routine. We use this technique to provide broad outlines of the structure of interactions with local governments. This technique allows us to visually represent each item along different dimensions. The proximities are derived from similarities in response patters between items. Items with greater similarities in response patterns are mapped more closely together and greater dissimilarities translate into greater distances between the items.²⁴ In this way, MDS characterizes each activity relative to all of the others enabling the identification of constellations of activities that tend to be treated similarly by respondents MDS is an appropriate technique for the analysis of similarities between different entities and activities within a social system, including the identification of subsystems (Cauce and Srebnik 1990; Brieger, Boorman, and Aribe 1975, Wasserman and Faust 1997). In this way, we can characterize particular activities on government websites within the whole domain online political activities and administrative interactions with local governments. MDS will tell us whether or not these items are related to each other and along which dimensions they are related.²⁵

Secondly, we use ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models to examine the types of respondents who engage in consumerist and participatory activities. We explore

²⁴ The particular MDS technique used here is an Alscal Euclidean distance model. Distances between items are calculated according to the following formula: $D_{ab}^2 = \sum (X_{aj} - X_{bj})^2$ where D is the distance and each X_{aj} represents variable a for case j and X_{bj} represents variable b for case j (Nunnally and Bernstein 1993: 602, 637-640). The values of the variables are rescaled in an iterated process until an optimal fit is achieved accounting for all the variables. The intuition behind rescaling the data is that social actors may not treat the difference between having done or not having done an activity uniformly. Consequently, rescaling gives a better account of how actors within our sample treat their social/political world.

²⁵ To be clear, while MDS identifies the location of items along various dimensions, it does not interpret the meaning of the dimensions—inferences which require recourse to theory.

consumer and participatory practices by comparing across two OLS models to see whether (and where) there are differences (and similarities). This should give us evidence as to whether consumer and participatory practices are engaged in by distinct subpopulations and if so what differences there are between these subpopulations. Furthermore, these models will allow us to investigate whether the consumer and participatory activities fit within a coherent constellation of activities and interactions with the political system and local community.

Results

We begin by outlining online practices, examining frequencies of participatory and consumer activities. These frequencies represent the percentage of respondents who report having performed each action within the last year. The results are displayed in **Figure 1**.

[Insert Figure 1 Here]

The most frequent type of online interaction is looking for information on government services (82.5%) followed by downloading government forms (54.1%), obtaining information on past or upcoming council meetings (35.4%), processing transactions online (34.4%), contacting public officials online (33.3%), and engaging in an online discussion (10.2%). Apart from the slightly lower percentage of respondents processing an online transaction, consumerist activities are the most common modes of interaction, though too much should not be made of this aberration. At the time of this survey (summer 2003) government websites for suburbs and smaller cities did not universally feature this function.²⁶ Website sophistication is often correlated with the size of the

²⁶ A survey of the city government websites from the two largest cities in each of the 12 MSAs reveals that at the time only 17 of the 24 websites had features enabling users to process transactions like pay a bill or apply for a permit or pet license. Our claim regarding the predominance of consumer activities is reinforced by the fact that it is even less likely that smaller cities where our respondents live offer the ability to process transactions since smaller towns are less likely to offer the ability to process transactions online (M. Jae Moon. "The Evolution of E-Government among Municipalities: Rhetoric or Reality?" *Public Administration Review*. Vol. 62, No. 4, p. 424-433).

municipality with larger municipalities featuring more functions online. Additionally, municipal governments have been slow to add transaction processing to their websites.²⁷

The first step towards identifying the salience of consumer and participatory modes of membership in the political community is examining the correlations between the items. It is one thing to say these activities are theoretically coherent as categories of activity, but it is another to say these categories functionally discriminate distinct practices within the political community. These results are displayed in **Table 1**.

[Insert Table 1 Here]

Here we generally find support for these categories in the correlation matrix. All of the participatory activities are closely correlated with each other and more closely correlated with each other than any of the other items. Likewise, the consumer items are generally fairly well correlated with each other. There is one exception here. Looking up information on government services appears unrelated to completing a transaction online. This is surprising because it is the most widely reported use of a government website and transactions are often processed in the course of acquiring a service. This result may, in part, be a consequence of the unavailability of this feature on the websites of some of the smaller cities and the slower development of online transaction processing on municipal websites. Completing a transaction online, however, also is positively correlated with downloading forms which suggests that there may be a number of persons who do not otherwise use government services but find the Internet as a convenient way to apply for permits or pay fees. Additionally, looking up information on government services is also positively related to looking up information on public meetings and contacting government officials, though not as strongly as it is related to downloading forms. Finally we see a weak and positive relationship between participation in an online discussion and completing a transaction online. These two items may be weakly related on the basis that both require a higher degree of computer skills than information seeking or downloading forms. In sum, the correlations constitute some evidence to empirically

²⁷ Donald F. Norris and M. Jae Moon. "Advancing E-Government at the Grassroots: Tortoise or Hare?" *Public Administration Review*. Vol. 65, No. 1 (January/February 2005), p. 64-73.

substantiate the coherence of consumer and participatory practices, though participation is clearly a more coherently defined practice than consumerism.

Now we turn to the MDS analysis to assess how each of the items maps relative to each other. While the correlation information gives an “absolute” and linear assessment of the relationship between the items, the MDS analysis will tell us how sets of items are treated by respondents relative to each other and relative to different dimensions that demarcate the political community. We created a two-dimensional Euclidean distance model. Distances were derived from the dissimilarities between each item. Additional dimensions could not be computed given the number of variables in the model. The resulting solution has an Rsq of .99870 and a stress value of .01970 (Kruskal’s stress formula 1).²⁸ The results are displayed in **Figure 2**.

[Insert Figure 2 Here]

Participation in an online discussion about local politics, contacting officials, and obtaining information on meetings are all located in the top left quadrant while completing an online transaction, downloading forms, and obtaining information on services are all located in the lower half of the MDS solution. This result is consistent with our theoretical categories of the participant and consumer. Moving across the figure, left to right, the items are arranged in terms of increasing frequency. Moving from right to left, as the frequency of the items decreases, the vertical distance between the items increases which suggests greater divergence between consumer and participatory items as the frequency decreases.

The horizontal dimension is also intriguing. There is a particularly striking distance between looking up information on government services versus looking up information on past or upcoming council meetings. Both of these activities involve roughly the same prerequisite computer competencies so it is unlikely this reflects a

²⁸ Rsq values in MDS are intuitively similar to an Rsq value in a regression. This statistic ranges from 0 to 1 and indicates the amount of variance in the data that the model can account for (1 meaning all the variance in the data can be accounted for by the model). Kruskal’s stress formula 1: $STRESS = ((\sum(d^2 - d^{\wedge 2})) / \sum d^4)^{1/2}$ where d^2 = the square of the distance and $d^{\wedge 2}$ is the square of the disparities. This value approaches zero as the iterative mappings better account for the observed data values (Nunnally and Bernstein 1994, p. 639-40).

distinction between skill levels. However, these frequencies may reflect professed e-government priorities that emphasize service access and provision rather than participation. Hence municipal websites may be constructed such that locating information on services may be easier than locating information on council meetings. This interpretation is consistent with previous work indicating that websites tend to emphasize the administrative activities of service provision over the political dimension of local governance.²⁹ Additionally, while information on services, instructions regarding downloadable forms, and transaction processing are directly related fulfillment of a particular, defined goal, the participatory activities are not. For example, one may download forms or process a transaction to apply for a permit, which has a specific purpose. By comparison, information on public meetings, links to contact officials, and forums for online discussions are not directed towards forming a particular opinion or taking a particular course of action or advocacy. Hence these findings may be a consequence of both the intentional design of government websites as well as the nature of consumer and participatory activities.

Next, we compare consumerist participatory online practices in terms of range of engagement in each set of activity. We created an index out of our three consumer items—looking up information on services, downloading forms, and processing a transaction—and our three participatory items—looking up information on public meetings, contacting public officials, and engaging in an online discussion about politics. We compare the distributions of these indexes in **Figure 3**.

[Insert Figure 3 Here]

This indicates a strong proclivity towards consumerist activities rather than participatory activities. Consistently at each interval of behavior in the indexes, there are a higher percentage of respondents engaging in consumer practices than participatory practices.

While engagement in consumer activities is generally more common, we explored whether this is a function of the relative ease of making use consumer elements on government websites and that people who consume also participate or are there

²⁹ See for instance, Musso, Weare, and Hale 1999 and Ho 2002.

differences between those who consume and those who participate. We compare respondent attributes that predict engagement in consumer and participatory practices using OLS models. Taking the consumer and participatory indexes, ranging from 0-3, as dependent variables, we examine which variables predict greater engagement in participatory activities and which predict greater involvement in consumer activities. The independent variables include a variety of demographic characteristics, community interactions (both online and offline), and offline interactions respondents may have with their local governments. The results are displayed in **Table 2**.

[Insert Table 2 Here]

Table 2 reveals some striking differences between the population engaging in consumer interactions online and the population engaging in participatory interactions online. To begin with, household income is positively associated with consumer interactions while it is negatively associated with participatory interactions. This finding is particularly interesting given the salience of household income as a predictor in previous work on offline participation and it merits more study.³⁰ In terms of online activities, relying primarily on the Internet for news about local politics and visiting a website about local politics are positively associated with online participatory activity but not at all related to online consumer activity. Regarding offline community activities, taking a leadership role in one's community by planning a neighborhood event is related to online participatory activity but not to online consumer activity. Finally, with respect to offline interactions with local government, there are also marked contrasts. Unsurprisingly processing a transaction at a government office is positively related with consumer interactions online but it is not related to online participatory activities. Additionally, both attending a council meeting and contacting public officials offline are strongly related to online participation, but are not at all related to online consumer interactions with local government.

³⁰ See for instance, Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry Brady. *Voice and Equality: Civic Volunteerism in American Politics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1995 and Russell J. Dalton. *Citizen Politics: Public Opinion and Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. 3rd Edition. New York: Chatham House Publishers. 2002.

In sum, this table indicates that those who engage in online consumer activities and those who engage in online participatory activities are different populations. There is not a single common predictor across the models. Every item that is positively and significantly associated with online participation is not associated with online consumer activities. The two items that are positively associated with online consumer interactions are either not associated with online participation (i.e. offline transaction) or negatively associated with online participation (i.e. household income). Furthermore, all of the explicitly political offline activities are related to online participation but not at all online consumer practices. By contrast, processing a transaction offline, a distinctly consumer activity, is positively associated with online consumer activities but not with online participation. Additionally, these data on online participation seems to indicate the existence of two populations of participants: one group is simply the same people who participate offline, which other work tells us tend to come from higher SES levels, but there is another group with lower SES (specifically household income) that also participates. Taken together, our data shows overall support for empirically distinguishing consumer and participatory practices and these activities occur within a constellation of online and offline practices that are either consumerist or political.

Finally, we look at how each index of activities is related to respondent assessments of the impact of local government website use on their overall interaction with government. We asked them whether they thought local government websites altered the frequency of their interactions with local government, government accessibility, and their use of government services. The responses were: increase, decrease, or no change. These responses were then correlated with the participatory and consumer indexes to see if there were different experiences associated with different types of online interactions. Differences between the indexes would indicate that the different sets of activities are thought of differently by members of the political community. These results are displayed in **Table 3**.

[Insert Table 3 Here]

These results indicate some differences between the meanings respondents associate with consumer practices and those they associate with participatory practices. The consumption index is positively associated with all three items. Those who engage in a larger repertoire of online consumer activities are more likely to indicate that use of their local government websites has increased government accessibility, their use of government services, and their number of interactions with government. Between the participation and consumer indexes there is relatively no difference in their assessments of government accessibility. However, those engaging in a larger repertoire of participatory activities view their use of local government websites differently when it comes to assessing their use of services as well as the number of interactions they have with government. We find that, in contrast to the consumer index, participation is not seen as related to increasing their use of government services. This suggests that, at least in an online context, the use of government services is not seen as a vehicle to enhance participation. Additionally, while both indexes are positively associated with increased interactions with government, the participatory index is more strongly associated with this than the consumer index. One speculation is that those reporting higher levels of consumer activities may see the website as a way to conduct their business while avoiding interacting with government since the website may eliminate a trip to a government office or contact over the phone. Hence, these data provide some evidence that consumer and participatory practices are treated as functionally distinct and are assigned different purposes by members of the political community.

Discussion

This paper began as an inquiry into the nature of participatory and consumer online practices. Our analyses were structured around two questions: To what extent do respondents engage in each type of activity? Do the participatory and consumer categories constitute empirically distinguishable practices within the political community. We have found that these practices are distinguished in terms of their ubiquity, the constellations of activities engaged in common, who participates in each set of activities, and the meanings associated with each type of practice. First, we found that online consumer practices are more commonly engaged in compared to online participatory

practices. Second, we found that online participatory practices tend to be engaged in by a more limited and select segment of the political community. Finally, unlike participatory practices, we find that those who engage more in consumer practices are more likely to associate their use of local government websites with enhancing their access to government services. This section expands upon both of these observations and then draws some broader implications.

We generally find that people tend to use the Internet for consumer purposes more than for participatory purposes. In fact, nearly half of the respondents indicated they had not engaged in any participatory activities altogether. Despite the structural possibilities, it does not appear that the Internet is being used in a way that creates a community-wide “cyber society” on top of offline civil society. The primary purposes for which residents are interacting with the political system concern meeting private needs or complying with government regulations—precisely the form of bureaucratic governance Tocqueville hope America would avoid. This behavior may simply reflect website designs that emphasize administrative goals rather than political participation. Catherine Needham’s cross national research indicates that e-government emphasis on service delivery and other administrative goals is not limited to America but that UK websites also prefigure users as consumers.³¹ Alternatively it may reflect the predilections of a predominantly consumerist culture or a mutually constitutive interaction between the preferences of the political community and website designs that reinforce a consumer mode of membership.

Second, we find that the consumer-participatory distinction is not simply a theoretical distinction but these concepts represent empirically demarcated practices within the political community. Our data indicates that these practices are distinct, though not inversely related. Consumer and participatory activities tend to be found within constellations of similar activities. The participatory constellation tends to be particularly coherent and more deeply rooted in both offline and online aspects of community life. Those who participate online are generally are the same people who participate offline. They also tend to be persons who display an interest in politics given they are likely to have also visited political websites. This is consistent with previous

³¹ Catherine Needham. “The Citizen as Consumer: E-government in the United Kingdom and United States.” *Electronic Democracy” Mobilization, Organization, and Participation via New ICTs.* ed. Gibson et al. New York: Routledge. 2004, p. 43-69.

work suggesting that political interest is a crucial factor in whether or not users are likely to participate politically online.³² Additionally, those who participate online are also more likely to have leadership roles in their community like planning a neighborhood event. By contrast, online consumer activities are not related to any of our measures of community involvement or political engagement. This observation provides some credence to Tocqueville's concern that a consumer form of citizenship would emerge, drawing people away from community life and public affairs. Consumer activities are not associated with either offline or online participation. Hence, the consumer mode of membership is deracinated from the community and depoliticized, as Tocqueville feared.

Additionally, we detect some variation in the types of people who engage in online practices that merits further study. The Internet does not uniformly structurally determine the types of interactions and political relationships that might develop, but much depends on who uses it and how they use it for political purposes. The first group of online participators is just an extension of those who participate offline. These tend to be the most significant group who uses the Internet to participate in local politics. Previous research indicates that they tend to be long-term residents of the community and come from higher SES categories. That finding is consistent with the elite reinforcement perspective regarding technology and politics. Thus, those who use the Internet for political purposes are very likely to be the same people who are already politically engaged. A second population revealed by our results seems comes from lower SES levels since the SES variables either drop out altogether or, in the case of household income, is inversely related to participation. This second category of participators is more consistent with the cyberpluralization vision of online politics. Hence the more marginalized SES population may find the Internet emancipatory. Alternatively, these results could represent more minor discriminations in a population of computer owning homes that are already likely to have slightly higher household incomes. Further research is necessary to discern whether more marginalized subpopulations are making use of the Internet at lower income levels or whether this result only holds for computer owning

³² See for instance, Richard Davis. *The Web of Politics: The Internet's Impact on the American Political System*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1999.

households. Though online participation is not as common an activity, these results suggest the need for further study of those who participate online.

The dominant political paradigm underlying interactions with e-government reflects the output model of democracy rather than the participatory image favored by Tocqueville. This finding is consistent with predominant configuration of e-government systems, which create a cultural interface treating the user as a consumer rather than as an active participant in local governance. The predominant resulting relationship between the government and members of the political community, then, is depoliticized. For the most part, members of the political community interact online with their local governments in order to address household concerns or comply with government regulations rather than participate in the public discourse of governance. This is precisely the tutelary image of public administration that Tocqueville feared would come to colonize the political community. Rather than taking part in the discourse of governance and treating democracy as a way of life, most seem to treat the Internet as a mechanism to simply consume government goods and services. Though the structural “affordances”³³ of the Internet might enable the creation of horizontal discourses of governance, in practice, it is not predominantly used in this way. While the Internet is increasingly a part of everyday life, for most people, politics online is not.

More generally this suggests that e-government does not alter the prevailing power structures in a dramatic fashion but generally serves as an extension of the existing structures. While some are using the technology in ways that are emancipatory, Internet use for local politics generally reflects the interests of elite power structures and an “enervated” role in the political community. This is not to say that elite reinforcement is a necessary or determined outcome of the social structure. Technology situates users in particular relationships and creates new political *possibilities* through its structural affordances, but it does not determine these outcomes. As Rob Kling notes, “people and organizations adopt constellations of technologies and configure them to fit ongoing social patterns.” However, he continues, “people and organizations often alter their

³³ Klaus Bruhn Jensen and Rasmus Helles. “Who do You Think We Are?” *Interface://Culture.Samfundslitteratur*. ed. Jensen. Nordicom: Copenhagen. Forthcoming (in Danish).

practices to accommodate the new advantages and limitations of new technologies.”³⁴ That is, technologies are both a product of the social and political forces that surround their use as well as a mediator of the social and political forces to which they are put to use. In this way, the Internet is not a neutral tool, its form and function are shaped by its users, just as it shapes relationships between users.

³⁴ “Computers as Tools and Social Systems: The Computer-Car Analogy.” *Computerization and Controversy: Value Conflicts and Social Choices*. San Diego: Academic Press. 1995, p. 19.

Figure 1: Online Consumer and Participatory Interaction

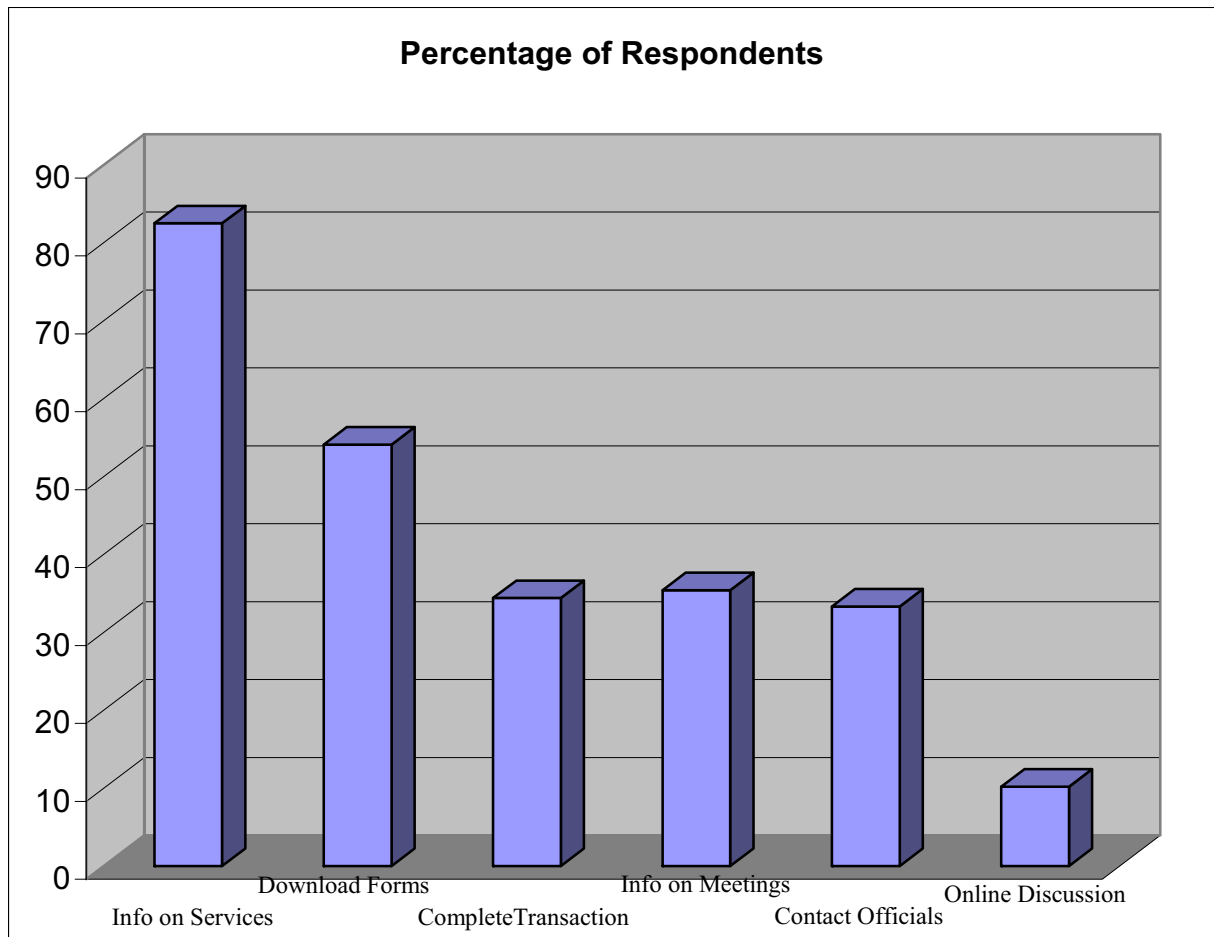


Table 1: Correlations of Online Interactions

	Info on Services	Download Forms	Online Transaction	Info on Meetings	Contact Officials
Download Forms	.148**				
Online Transaction	.048	.170***			
Info on Meetings	.093*	.054	-.003		
Contact Officials	.117**	.030	-.002	.293***	
Online Discussion	.018	.005	.097*	.130**	.271***

Pearson's R values.

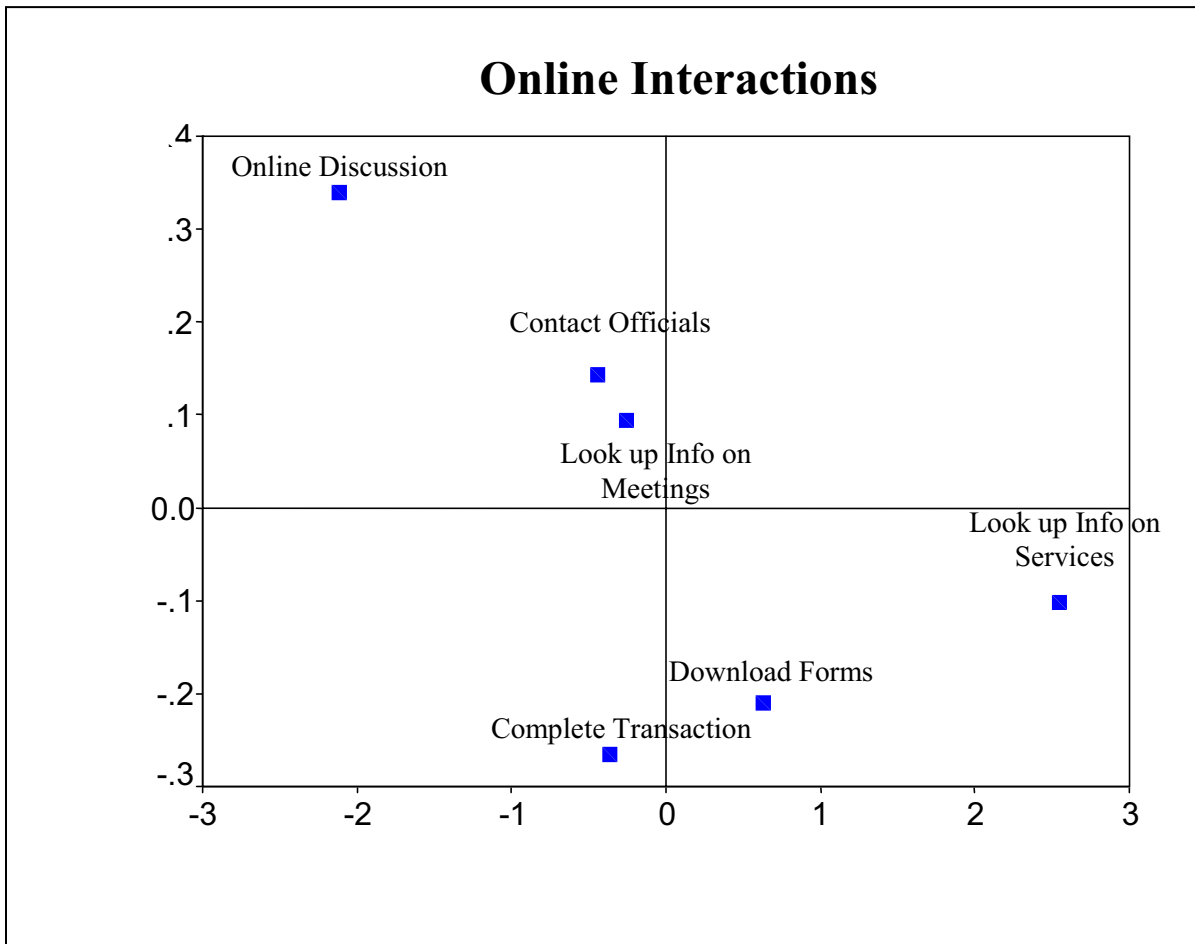
Notes: N = 511

*** $p < .001$ (2 Tailed)

** $p < .01$ (2 Tailed)

* $p < .05$ (2 Tailed)

Figure 2: Online Consumer and Participatory Activities



Rsq: .99870

Stress: .01970 (Kruskal's stress formula 1)

Figure 3: Comparing Frequency of Consumerist and Participatory Interactions

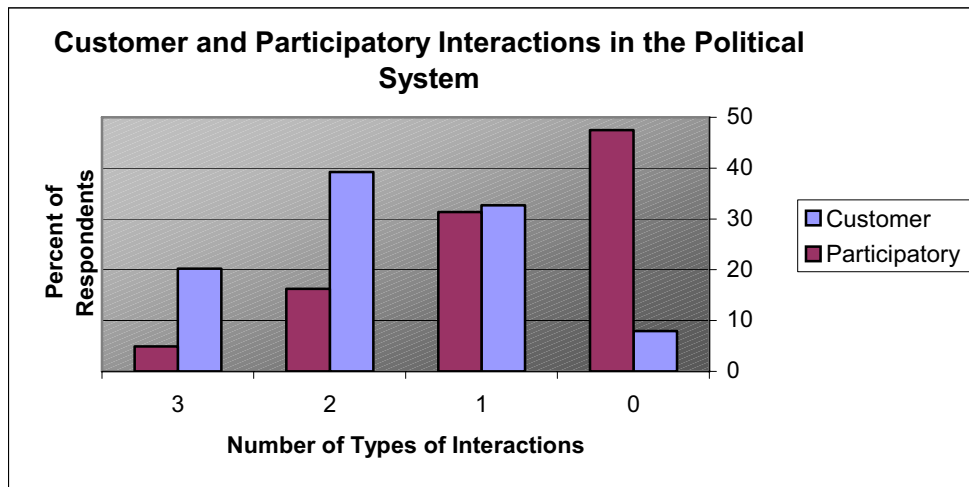


Table 2: Predictors of Consumer and Participatory Practices

	Consumer		Participatory	
	B (Std. Error)	Std. B	B (Std. Error)	Std. B
Constant	1.624 (.291)		-.089 (.248)	
HH Income	.069* (.031)	.032*	-.062* (.027)	-.066*
Years Lived in Community	-.041 (.033)	-.064	.012 (.028)	.019
Respondent Age	-.037 (.035)	-.055	-.031 (.030)	-.047
Respondent Race (White)	-.167 (.144)	-.057	-.120 (.121)	-.042
Length of Home Computer Use	-.082 (.048)	-.082	.062 (.041)	.063
Internet News	.108 (.111)	.049	.214* (.095)	.098*
Online Community Group	.091 (.051)	.102	.024 (.043)	.027
Online Hobby Group	.026 (.043)	.032	.056 (.037)	.069
Online Political Group	.050 (.049)	.056	.147*** (.042)	.170***
Online Religious Group	-.022 (.044)	-.025	.031 (.038)	.036
Local Club Member	.016 (.109)	.008	.118 (.093)	.062
Attend Neighborhood Event	-.134 (.103)	-.068	.063 (.088)	.033
Planned Neighborhood Event	.137 (.108)	.067	.251** (.092)	.125**
Held Office in Local Club	.066 (.102)	.036	.057 (.087)	.032
Processed Offline Transaction	.255** (.089)	.141**	.056 (.076)	.031
Attended a Council Meeting	-.040 (.106)	-.020	.333*** (.091)	.172***
Contact Public Official Offline	-.054 (.097)	-.030	.427*** (.083)	.243***

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Consumer: $R = .304$, $R^2 = .092$, $N = 427$

Participatory: $R = .555$, $R^2 = .308$, $N = 431$

Table 3: Dispositions Towards Government Website Use

	Consumer	Participatory
Increased Govt. Accessibility	.192***	.190***
Increased Use of Govt. Services	.172***	.104
Increased Interactions w/ Govt.	.147**	.333***
	N= 505	N=510

Pearson's R values.

*** p < .001 (2 Tailed)

** p < .01 (2 Tailed)

* p < .05 (2 Tailed)

Appendix 1: National Survey of 12 Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs)

This data comes from a probability sample of twelve MSAs (listed below). The data was collected using a random digit dialing drawing 100 respondents from each of the 12 MSAs conducted in the summer of 2003. The overall response rate for the survey was 44.3% using AAPOR response rate method 2³⁵:

$$\frac{(I+P)}{(I+P) + (R+NC+O) + (UH+UO)}$$

where I=completed interviews, P=partial interviews, R=refusals/breakoffs, NC=non-contacts, O=others, UH=unknown if housing unit, UO=unknown other. The intuition underlying this formula is that the response rate is the number of interviews divided by the number of interviews, plus the number of non interviews, plus all the cases of unknown eligibility.

The respondents were 44% male, 56% female.

MSAs

1. Orange County, CA
2. San Francisco, CA
3. Olympia, WA
4. Austin-San Marcos, TX
5. Boston, MA
6. Des Moines, IA
7. Ft Collins-Loveland, CO
8. Middleton-Summerset-Hunterdon, NJ
9. Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN
10. Portland, ME
11. Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill, NC
12. Washington DC-MD-VA

³⁵ For more information, see the American Association for Public Opinion Research site at: http://www.aapor.org/default.asp?page=survey_methods/standards_and_best_practices/standard_definition_s#response. Accessed: March 4, 2004.

Appendix 2: Question Wordings

Independent Variables:

Offline Community Life Questions:

In the last year, (have you) (has anyone in your household) done any of the following?
[Dispositions: 1 = yes, 0 = no]

- a. Been a member of a local club or organization
- b. Attended a neighborhood event
- c. Planned a neighborhood event
- d. Held office in a local club or organization

Online Community Life Questions:

As I read a list of groups, please tell me if you have ever used the Internet to be in contact with or get information from each type of group. (First/Next), how about... (read in random order) [Dispositions: often (4), sometimes (3), rarely (2), or never (1) unless otherwise noted]

- a. A local community group or association
- b. A group for people with whom you share a particular interest or hobby
- c. A political group or special interest group
- d. A religious group or organization

Offline Government Interaction Questions:

Now I'd like to ask you some questions about activities not involving the Internet or email. In the last year (have you) (has anyone in your household)...? [Dispositions: 1 = yes, 0 = no]

- a. Contacted a local public official on the phone, in writing, or in person?
- b. Visited a city office to complete transactions like paying bills or taxes
- c. Attended city council, planning commission, or similar meetings

Primary Source for Local News:

When you need to get information about local politics and community affairs, which source do you depend on the most? (Read in random order):

1. Television
2. Newspaper
3. Internet
4. Radio
5. Friends/Family/Neighbors

6. Some Other Source

These responses were recoded into binary variables for the first 5 options whereby 1 = primary source for news and 0 = not primary source for news.

Dependent Variables

Consumer

In the last year, (have you) (has anyone in your household)...? (read in random order)
[Dispositions: 1 = yes, 0 = no]

Obtained information about government services on your local government website?
Downloaded forms for home related needs on your local government website?
Completed transactions like paying bills or taxes on your local government website?

Participatory

In the last year, (have you) (has anyone in your household)...? (read in random order)
[Dispositions: 1 = yes, 0 = no]

Found out about past or upcoming local council meetings on your local government website?
Contacted public offices on your local government website?
Have you ever taken part in an online discussion about local politics?

Website Evaluation Questions

Have you (your household's) use of the Internet resulted in an increase, decrease, or no change for each of the following:

- a. Government accessibility
- b. Use of government services
- c. Number of interactions with your local government

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