

**Can E-Government Promote
Civic Engagement? A study of
local government websites in
Illinois and the U.S.**

Research supported by the
Institute for Policy and Civic
Engagement

October 6, 2009

CAN E-GOVERNMENT PROMOTE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT?

A study of local government websites in Illinois and the U.S.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Civic engagement consists of knowledge, discussion, interest and participation in public affairs – in government and politics, policy issues, and the community. Recent trends have emphasized greater involvement of both citizens and nonprofit organizations in governance and public policy. The internet offers convenient and flexible access to information about government and community affairs, as well as a channel of communication with public officials. Recognizing this, the Obama administration has prioritized the use of federal websites to increase government transparency and citizen input.

Local government websites, however, have unique opportunities to connect citizens with *both* government and community (neighborhood organizations and nonprofits). Representing the level of government closest to citizens, city websites may also facilitate face-to-face interaction between citizens or between citizens and government. **This study examines the websites of the 20 largest cities in Illinois and the 75 largest cities in the U.S., ranking them according to features that could be expected to encourage civic engagement.**

Previous studies concerned with civic engagement and local e-government have concluded that there is scant evidence of democratic participation online at the local level. We argue that it is time to take another look, however, as many of these studies are several years old and preceded the development of social networking, blogs, RSS feeds, email alerts, and other interactive tools. Moreover, many researchers have defined civic engagement rather narrowly, in terms of online deliberation. This is one important aspect of civic engagement on the web. But, the information capacity of the internet is also critical for civic engagement, and we argue that local government websites can promote knowledge about government, policy, and the community, including awareness of offline participatory opportunities.

Toward that end, we examine the information on local government websites as well as opportunities for participation both online and offline. Additionally, we assess the transparency and accessibility of the websites. More specifically, the list below details the types of information we coded in a content analysis of these 95 websites.

INFORMATION

- Government officials, duties, and organizational structure
- Government processes, laws, and regulations
- City policies and performance information, including budgets and audit reports
- Neighborhood data and resources
- Neighborhood and nonprofit organizations

PARTICIPATORY OPPORTUNITIES

- Contact information for public officials
- Offline events sponsored by the city, such as hearings

- Offline events, volunteering, donating or other activities involving neighborhoods and local nonprofits
- Online interactive tools such as blogs, comment forms, electronic town meetings, or social networks
- Online customization of information search – signing up for email alerts and newsletters, RSS feeds.

ACCESSIBILITY AND TRANSPARENCY

- Information that is up-to date, private and secure
- Access to information through online search, transactions, and downloading
- Language and disability access

Based on the above criteria, we ranked the websites on civic engagement overall. We also created rankings for the subcategories of: organizational information; processes and regulation; neighborhood information; policy and performance information; information for offline participation; online interactivity and participation; and transparency and accessibility. Differences across categories reveal some trends, where local governments as a whole are stronger or weaker in their promotion of civic engagement.

For the overall rankings, the 75 largest U.S. cities receive between 53 percent and 96 percent of possible points on the civic engagement index with an average score of 78 percent. The five highest-ranked U.S. cities meet at least 90 percent or more of the civic engagement criteria and the top 10 cities achieve at least 85 percent.

The 10 highest-ranked U.S. cities are: Seattle (96%), Phoenix (95%), Louisville (93%), San Francisco (92%), New York (92%), Boston (88%), Virginia Beach (87%), Chicago (86%), San Jose (86%), and Columbus (85%). With a few exceptions, most of these top cities are fairly large, although they also include places that are known for participatory cultures, and for the presence of technology firms.

How do Illinois city websites stack up? The overall average score of 66 percent is lower for Illinois cities than for the 75 largest U.S. cities (78 percent). This partly reflects differences in size; only Chicago is large enough to appear on both lists. Yet, there are some Illinois cities that score quite well. Size does not completely determine rankings on civic engagement. Naperville’s first-place website edges slightly past Chicago’s, even though Chicago is well-ranked nationally.

The top 5 Illinois cities exceed the national average, and they are: Naperville (87%), Chicago (86%), Aurora (82%), Champaign (79%) and Elgin (78%). The top five cities include the state’s largest local government, satellite cities within the Chicago region, and a university town.

A comparison of the 75 U.S. and 20 Illinois cities shows that Illinois cities on average score a little lower in most areas, other than organizational information. The summary table below shows differences across the categories we tracked.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT INDEX			
COMPARISON BETWEEN 75 LARGEST U.S. CITIES AND 20 LARGEST ILLINOIS CITIES			
CATEGORY	75 U.S. CITIES	20 ILLINOIS CITIES	# OF ITEMS
	(Average)	(Average)	IN CATEGORY
Overall Score	78%	66%	74, 78*
Contact Information	95%	89%	12, 16*
Organizational Information	63%	65%	3
Processes and Regulations	75%	64%	11
Neighborhood Information	99%	85%	2
Policy and Performance Documents	95%	66%	8
Offline Participation Information	86%	78%	12
Online Interactivity & Participation	55%	46%	13
Transparency and Accessibility	67%	52%	13

*No city manager – 74 points possible rather than 78

The largest gaps between the Illinois and U.S. scores are in policy and performance documents. Online interactivity and participation was the category with the lowest average scores, for both U.S. and Illinois cities.

Local government websites provide a fair amount of basic information about government that is important for engagement (as well as accountability).

- The most common information on government allows citizens to contact officials, find city departments and agencies, attend or follow the results of council meetings and public hearings, and examine municipal codes, budget documents, financial audits, and press releases or major speeches.
- Video presentations of council meetings, which are widespread, have the advantage of allowing citizens to more fully experience the discussions and debates within meetings.
- While the posting of government information is “one-way” dissemination from governments to citizens, most local websites, including the smaller cities in Illinois have advanced beyond a simple phone directory approach to e-government to include substantive documents and records of council meetings.
- Local government sites almost universally include both descriptive and policy information on their neighborhoods. Between 40-60 percent of local government websites have various types of information on nonprofits and charities, including appeals to participate in events or fundraising.
- Information about how to participate in political processes is also present on local government websites, including links for elections and voting, and announcements for council sessions and public hearings.

- There are opportunities for citizen input, although this is generally between individual citizens and government officials through complaint forms or surveys rather than through collective deliberation.
- Online interactivity has improved since earlier studies. For large U.S. and Illinois cities, downloadable information and online transactions are nearly universal.
- Customization of information through email alerts, online newsletter subscriptions and (to a lesser extent) RSS feeds is also common.
- Web 2.0 is generally underutilized for interaction, with a small minority of cities using social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. This may be a temporary phenomenon, for cities will likely need time to experiment with these new media and to decide how or whether they contribute to citizen knowledge and participation.
- There is almost no trace of deliberative democracy online, however, as measured through discussion boards or electronic town hall meetings. Seattle provides video of many offline town hall meetings, and both Seattle and Bloomington, Illinois use discussion boards for citizen input. Council members and mayors in many cities have blogs, but these resemble online diaries rather than serving as platforms for comments from residents.
- Local governments in general could do better on accessibility for individuals with disabilities and for non-English speakers. This is particularly true for Illinois cities, although this is an area for improvement nationally as well.

Overall, there is some progress in the use of websites for information, online transactions, and for community information, in comparison with earlier studies. This research demonstrates a great variety of information provided by local government websites, and less development in terms of newer Web 2.0 tools and online deliberation.

A number of questions for further research emerge from this study. While this research examines the categories of information provided on local websites, more needs to be known about the quality of that information – for example, whether policy analyses are provided on major issues, and whether they are made available before decisions are made by government officials. Government websites can facilitate but not create citizen engagement, and so it would be useful to understand the extent to which citizens use these features on local government websites, and whether they affect knowledge, discussion, interest and participation. Finally, these rankings raise questions about why some cities outperform the others, and further analysis is needed to understand the factors associated with higher rankings on the civic engagement index.