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Political Deliberation and E-Participation in Policy-Making

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Abstract: In her paper, "Political Deliberation and E-Participation in Policy-Making," Rebecca J. Romsdahl proposes that the internet has now become a valuable medium for information dissemination and long distance communication; it is also gaining attention as a potential tool for political deliberation. Public participation has been a long-standing tradition in American democracy but most scholars today believe it needs a revival. Some of these scholars believe that e-participation in policy-making could help revitalize political discussion between citizens and government and promote greater participation by disenfranchised groups. Whether this would lead to greater opportunities for true deliberation on political issues and not just add to the prolific exchange of conversation on the internet, however, is a more difficult question. Romsdahl argues that despite the internet's ability to reduce the transaction costs of participation, true deliberation will be more difficult to develop. The internet poses great challenges for the essential components of deliberation, such as ensuring access for all interested individuals, fair and equal involvement for all participants, development of interpersonal trust, and the ability to produce effective dialogue on complex, value-laden issues.

Rebecca J. ROMSDAHL

Political Deliberation and E-Participation in Policy-Making

The exchange of dialogue has been recognized as an important component of democratic decision-making by scholars throughout the twentieth century, from John Dewey to Jürgen Habermas, as well as by scholars analyzing the intentions of the American founders. Many of these scholars argue that the opportunity to exchange views on significant issues is the foundation of an educated civil society. In their analyses, political participation scholars explore a variety of deliberation methods, including electronic participation (e-participation), and they present a variety of compelling reasons to support a growing interest in public deliberation. Many of these rationales can be summarized by Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson's four reasons to support deliberation: 1) it increases the likelihood of developing justifiable policies, 2) it can help identify incompatible moral values and provide a means to clarify these moral conflicts, 3) it can help people take a broader perspective on policy questions than they might be willing to do on their own, and 4) it adds legitimacy to decisions made under conditions of scarce resources (Gutmann and Thompson 41-43). Although public participation has been a long-standing tradition in American democracy most scholars today believe that it needs a revival. Some believe that e-participation in government policy-making could help revitalize this type of dialogue between citizens and communities and promote greater participation by disenfranchised citizens and groups as they educate each other about political issues through on-line communication. Whether this would lead to greater opportunities for true deliberation on political issues and not just add to the prolific exchange of conversation on the internet, however, is a more difficult question. In this study, I examine that issue through a survey of 39 public participation practitioners about their experiences using the internet in federal land management planning and what potential they see for e-participation. This paper argues that despite the internet's benefits, such as the potential for unbiased dialogue provided by online anonymity, true deliberation will be more difficult to develop. The internet poses great challenges for the essential components of deliberation, such as ensuring access for all interested individuals, fair and equal involvement for all participants, development of interpersonal trust, and the ability to negotiate and compromise. In addition, it will be more difficult to produce the same levels of dialogue on complex, value-laden issues that face-to-face deliberation can achieve. Over the past decade, across the United States, citizens have been taking new steps to get involved with government policy-making. One public administration expert sees this as a significant development that may be changing the relationship between US citizens and their government. He states that: "as the spread of information through education has been abated by new technologies, more people have come to feel capable of speaking out about decisions that affect their lives, and consequently, they have been demanding a say in those decisions. Unless the public's demands for involvement are heeded, decisions can prove meaningless in the face of the public's apathy or active opposition" (Thomas 1). This movement provides insight on the rise of e-participation efforts and could signal important changes in how government operates.

Since the early 1990s, the internet has fast become a valuable medium for information access and dissemination and long distance communication; it is also gaining attention as a potential tool for political deliberation. Within the realm of government alone, the internet has given more people immediate access to "a wealth of on-line news sources, government documents, and other information sources from around the world. Increasingly, one can submit on-line contributions to, or simply read, the contributions made by interested citizens and various policy stakeholders to policy documents posted by different government departments and agencies" (Alexander and Pal 4). One researcher (Howes 329) argues that access to "well-designed" on-line scientific databases may also encourage greater public participation. In addition to greater information access, the internet is also providing greater geographic access to government policymaking (Cross 133). Examples of this include government sponsored experiments in e-participation, the National Performance Review's Open Meeting (<http://www.ai.mit.edu/projects/iiip/doc/open-meeting/paper.html>) and the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) National Dialogue

(<http://www.network-democracy.org/epa-pip/>), as well the vast array of agency websites where the public can submit comments and questions directly to the agency and in most cases receive a timely email response from an agency representative; see the U.S. Forest Service Customer Comment Card on-line at: <http://www.fs.fed.us/customer/commentcard_wo-other.htm>. Other realistic benefits for policymaking that have been promoted by political theorists include greater transparency and legitimacy in the policy process, increased citizen participation in rule-making, and potential for the comment process to become more interactive and deliberative with citizens submitting more meaningful comments (Beierle, "Discussing the Rules" 8-13; Beierle, "Democracy On-Line" 30-49; Brandon and Carlitz 1442-47; Bimber, "The Internet" 410; Coglianese, "The Internet" 6; Coglianese, "Information Technology" 85; Hale, Musso, and Weare; Schlosberg and Dryzek; Zavestoski, Shulman, and Schlosberg 110-20). But to review the internet's potential for deliberation, in this paper I highlight one specific form, namely e-participation in government rulemaking.

Entrepreneurs in government saw the potential for e-participation in the early stages of internet development. "An early recommendation of Vice President Gore's National Performance Review (1993) was to 'use information technology and other techniques to increase opportunities for early, frequent, and interactive public participation during the rulemaking process'" (Beierle, "Discussing the Rules" 6). However, it is only recently, with the passage of the 2002 E-Government Act, that the executive agencies have begun to seriously consider this potential for public involvement (Brandon and Carlitz 1422-35). Experiments in e-rulemaking can be classified as two types, electronic dockets and electronic dialogues (Beierle, "Discussing the Rules" 6-8). The best current example of e-dockets is the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) common e-docket system for all federal agencies (see <http://www.regulations.gov>). This system gives citizens a single internet portal through which they can review proposed rules and file electronic comments. Although this system does not provide opportunity for interactive comments, the system that it is modeled on does. EPA's e-docket system was launched in 2002 and provides citizens not only with the proposed rules for comment but also background information on them, their primary goals, links to relevant laws and other dockets, *Federal Register* notices, and EPA contact information (Beierle, "Discussing the Rules" 7-8). In addition, "to encourage a more reciprocal approach to commenting, the system gives users the ability to search for and read others' comments," a feature that could be added to Regulations.gov (Beierle, "Discussing the Rules" 7). Another dramatic example of e-rulemaking comes from the Department of Agriculture (DOA).

Between December 1997 and March 1998, citizens submitted over 275,000 comments on proposed standards for the DOA's National Organic Program (NOP) (Zavestoski, Shulman, and Schlosberg 2). Of these comments, approximately 21,000 were submitted through the program's website. The website not only provided means to submit comments but it also provided citizens with the opportunity to read others' comments. During the course of the comment period, people began to post comments on other participants' submissions and interpretations. "Whether by accident or design, the NOP provided a discursively democratic platform where diverse positions were aired and engaged" (Zavestoski, Shulman and Schlosberg 12). This type of interactive exchange between citizens in the rulemaking process has led the way to the development of purposeful experiments in e-dialogue. In December of 1994 an "Open Meeting" took place on the internet, during a two-week time frame, that involved over 4,000 federal government employees in discussions about proposals for bureaucratic reforms; the proposals were prepared by the National Performance Review (NPR) under the guidance of Vice President Al Gore (Hurwitz and Mallery, "The Open Meeting" <http://www.ai.mit.edu/projects/iiip/doc/open-meeting/paper.html>). The experiment was designed to "involve ... workers, from a wide range of government organizations, who [could] easily access texts relevant to their interests and link their comments in coherent, virtual conversations" so that NPR could demonstrate how computer networks might be used to develop policy-making across traditional organizational boundaries (Hurwitz and Mallery, "The Open Meeting" <http://www.ai.mit.edu/projects/iiip/doc/open-meeting/paper.html>). The Open Meeting was more than a series of threaded discussion lines. The dialogue was implemented as a highly structured "set of rules that specify the admissible ways in which comments can be linked to an evolv-

ing hypertext based on their type and the context. These rules formalize the quasi-normative or-der of a conversation and prevent incoherent or inappropriate sequences" (Hurwitz and Mallery, "The Open Meeting" <http://www.ai.mit.edu/projects/iiip/doc/open-meeting/paper.html>). Addi-tional structure was provided by moderators who helped minimize low quality, redundant, and po-tentially inappropriate postings. The implementers of the Open Meeting summarized its success with the claim that the internet "can support productive, wide-area collaboration for policy plan-ning and problem solving" (168). They felt that the Open Meeting format for e-participation pro-vided an accessible platform for information exchange and opportunity for people to participate in "orderly discussions" (168).

Assessments of the Open Meeting found that over 3000 people had accessed the meeting, 2000 went beyond the introductory page, but only 1000 reviewed the discussion threads; of those, 290 individuals contributed 1013 comments accepted for posting (Hurwitz and Mallery, "Managing Large Scale" <http://www.ai.mit.edu/projects/iiip/doc/large-scale/kyoto.html>). Although interest in the Open Meeting was evident and the "ratio of one contributor for five actual lurkers at the dis-cussions is much higher than the 1 to 10 or 20 ratio for variously estimated newsgroups" the gen-eral absence of complex, reasoned arguments in favor, or in opposition, of the proposals support-ed the critique of early internet discussions -- "that cyberspace does not nurture the reflection de-sired in a public sphere" (Hurwitz and Mallery, "Managing Large Scale" <http://www.ai.mit.edu/projects/iiip/doc/large-scale/kyoto.html>). Another factor that research-ers felt would need to be addressed to improve this e-participation method was to provide partici-pants with opportunities to reach discussion/decision closure, perhaps through a voting mechanism that would end discussion on one issue and thereby potentially open discussion on a new issue (Hurwitz and Mallery, "Managing Large Scale" <http://www.ai.mit.edu/projects/iiip/doc/large-scale/kyoto.html>). The success of the Open Meet-ing helped promote the idea that the internet can become a useful tool and potentially a new 'public space' for democratic deliberation.

Another well-documented e-dialogue experiment took place over a two-week timeframe in July 2001. The EPA brought together over 1,100 people to participate in its "National Dialogue on Pub-lic Involvement in EPA Decisions" (Beierle, "Democracy On-Line" 13). EPA designed this experi-ment to complement the formal comment period and implementation plans for its draft Public In-volvement Policy. "Although participants' submissions did not constitute formal public comments, it was the first time that EPA (and perhaps any federal agency) had so highly integrated a sophisti-cated on-line participation process into its decision-making" (Beierle, "Democracy On-Line" 8). The EPA Dialogue was structured as an asynchronous, threaded, internet conversation. EPA recruited a variety of 'hosts' and 'panelists,' from a broad range of "interest groups, levels of government, ac-ademic institutions, and other sources," to help facilitate and guide discussions (17). Participants posted their comments to the Dialogue website at their convenience while non-profit organizers compiled and posted daily summaries of the conversations at the end of each day (see also *Infor-mation Renaissance* <http://www.network-democracy.org/epa-pip/>). The success of this experi-ment was measured by the broad range of people who were able to be involved and by participant satisfaction with the process, both citizens and the agency. A more traditional "notice and com-ment" procedure "could never hope to involve 1,166 people from all 50 states, two U.S. territories, and six other countries, all talking and listening to one another. Travel costs would be astronomi-cal, scheduling would be insurmountable, and the logistics of running such a meeting would be extremely challenging" (Beierle, Democracy On-Line" 32). The EPA dialogue was also considered successful by the participants; 76% of respondents in a follow-up survey reported that the process had been "very" or "somewhat" positive, while only 9% rated it negatively (Beierle, "Democracy On-Line" 30). Based on the two most common motivations to participate, a desire to influence EPA decision-making and to learn from others, the majority of participants reported satisfaction with the Dialogue; 51% of participants felt that the Dialogue would have some influence on EPA's poli-cymaking and 76% 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that "they had learned a great deal about how other participants (including EPA staff) viewed public participation ... [while] 53% ... learned a great deal about people, organizations, or information sources that are resources for public partici-

pation" (Beierle, "Democracy On-Line" 44). As for the agency, EPA gained a much more diverse set of comments from the Dialogue than it did from the officially submitted comments, which tended to be predominantly from state level submissions (Beierle, Democracy On-Line" 45-49). In sum, this experiment "demonstrated that on-line dialogues are a viable approach to public partici-pation and are significantly different from more traditional methods. The Dialogue turned a static commenting process into an interactive and dynamic discussion ... Unlike any other form ... it al-lowed people to participate as much or as little as they wanted without any sort of selection pro-cess or agency control. And ... [it] was an interactive dialogue usually found only in small group processes (Beierle, "Democracy On-Line" 11). This outlook is shared by a variety of non-profit or-ganizations that are developing methods for e-dialogues as well; EPA worked with "Information Renaissance" (whttp://www.info-ren.org>) in this experiment, others include "E-the People" (<http://www.ethepeople.org>) and the "Web Lab" (<http://www.weblab.org>). As these exper-iments progress, practitioners continue to note what makes e-participation successful but they are also evaluating its drawbacks.

To measure practitioners' perceptions of e-participation, 104 federal land managers, in the Bu-reau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service, were invited to take part in an on-line sur-vey; the survey was created using the University of Virginia 's SurveySuite website (<http://intercom.virginia.edu/cgi-bin/cgiwrap/intercom/SurveySuite/ss_wizard.pl>). In response to this invitation, 39 practitioners participated; of these, 35 were valid responses for statistical analysis. As part of a larger research survey, participants were asked a set of five questions on their experience and perception of e-participation in natural resource planning. When asked about their perspective on the importance of dialogue, defined as back and forth discussion between practitioners and interested publics, 91% of the participants responded that dialogue was essential to the process; many stated that it is necessary to establish trust and mutual learning, to minimize controversies, to discuss values, and to resolve issues. Building on this, participants were asked whether they believed e-participation methods might be valuable tools for incorporating dialogue into the planning process; 45% felt that these methods could be valuable tools for effective dia-logue, but only if they were combined with other strategies. When asked to compare the dialogue effectiveness of e-participation and face-to-face interactions, 54% of the participants responded that e-participation would be less effective than face-to-face dialogue. Their reasoning's for this stand closely match the challenges facing e-participation as described in the literature. First and foremost among the challenges is that everything involving the internet is constantly changing as new technologies become available and new strategies are implemented; studying e-participation is like trying to examine a moving target (see Beierle, "Discussing the Rules"; DiMaggio et al.; Hale, Musso, and Weare 14-16). In conjunction with the rapid pace of change associated with the internet is the lack of quantitative studies on e-participation and a lack of understanding for how these experiments might work most effectively in practice (see Bimber, "Information and Political Engagement" 59-64; Beierle, "Discussing the Rules" 14-16). E-participation is similarly challenged by the problems facing traditional public participation efforts including public apathy, lack of infor-mation, complexity of issues, conflicts between expert and lay knowledge, public has limited time for involvement, and limited access to the process (see Fishkin, "Virtual Democratic" <http://www.lautexas.edu/conf2000/papers/DeliberationDay.pdf> 2-11; Cappella, Price, and Nir 73-77; Zavestoski, Shulman, and Schlosberg; Zavestoski and Shulman 6-11).

E-participation, however, also faces challenges unique to the internet, for example, privacy questions arise (see Beierle, "Discussing the Rules" 14-16; DiMaggio et al.; Lin and Inouye 308-22). Tesh argues that grass-roots groups will lose influence over government agenda setting if agencies move toward increased e-participation. She argues that public meetings not only provide information feedback to the agencies but grass-roots groups also benefit from these opportunities to "energize their members, get media attention, and attract new supporters" (Tesh 337). Other critics of e-participation argue that lack of internet access is a substantial drawback for its poten-tial to increase public involvement in government, especially among the poor and those who live in rural areas (Brandon and Carlitz 1451-55; DiMaggio et al. 310-14; Wilhelm 155; Alexander and Pal 5). Brandon and Carlitz counter this by highlighting that "very few citizens have 'subscriptions to

the *Federal Register* or the time and money to travel to a [traditional Washington, DC] docket room'" (1451). This debate will continue even as internet access becomes more widespread, but supporters of e-rulemaking contend that legitimate questions over access should not stop governments from experimenting with internet options (Brandon and Carlitz 1451). Other challenges include two concerns with information overload. The first is that the wealth of information available on the internet creates "attention scarcity" (DiMaggio et al. 313). Another perspective on this is that e-participation is suited for "citizens with attention deficit disorder, zooming from one site to another rather than offering sustained dialogue" (Fishkin, "Virtual Democratic" <http://www.lautexas.edu/conf2000/papers/DeliberationDay.pdf> 15). Members of Congress have complained that email comments are not of the same thoughtful, reflective quality as written letters (Bimber, "The Internet and Citizen" 425). Bimber finds that "the deliberative value of communication may be undermined if talk through the internet is increasingly cheap and divorced from other forms of political engagement. Floods of e-mail from citizens acting without lasting convictions ... or lasting interest do not add to democratic discourse or provide much of a guide to elected officials" (425). In contrast, however, Tolbert and McNeal find that the internet, as a "new venue for political information and communication" (184) may be important in stimulating civic engagement. Wilhelm supports this in his claim that unlike face-to-face interactions, e-participants are not pressured to give an immediate response to questions, instead they can take the time they need to reflect and respond with a more meaningful, considered judgment.

The second concern with information overload is the idea that agencies will be overwhelmed by the number of electronic submissions they could receive (see Richard 81): "This undesirable result can be attenuated by intelligent routing that decomposes the comment stream by policy proposal and directs comments to the responsible officials" (Hurwitz and Mallery, "The Open Meeting" <http://www.ai.mit.edu/projects/iiip/doc/open-meeting/paper.html>). Technology is also available to make sorting and indexing e-comments much easier than it has been for traditional written comments (Brandon and Carlitz 1452-55). This concern can be additionally tempered by highlighting the fact that traditional participation in federal rulemaking has never generated extremely large numbers of responses; "the great majority of government rulemakings generate only a few hundred or a few thousand comments, and this is unlikely to change significantly using electronic rulemaking" (Brandon and Carlitz 1452). In conjunction, the use of e-dockets means that agencies would only need to respond once to a common concern by posting to their website. However, if these and other challenging factors facing e-participation are set aside, the fundamental question remains: what is the potential for e-participation to promote democracy, by increasing citizen deliberation on political issues?

In traditional public participation efforts, deliberation has often been an idealized and well-intentioned objective but a seldom achieved goal. Given the US tradition in representative democracy, supporters of deliberation have consistently struggled to promote its widespread adoption. The New England states of the US have a long tradition of more deliberative citizen-government interactions; although this type of townhall communication is not customary in other regions, some scholars argue that various opportunities for deliberative interaction are prevalent throughout the US governance system. Gutmann and Thompson claim that "the forums of deliberation in [US] democracy embrace virtually any setting in which citizens come together on a regular basis to reach collective decisions about public issues -- governmental as well as nongovernmental institutions. They include not only legislative sessions, court proceedings and administrative hearings at all levels of government but also meetings of grass roots organizations, professional associations, shareholders meetings, and citizens' committees in hospitals and other similar institutions" (20). Their perspective stems from the idea that the exchange of moral arguments is the foundation of true political deliberation. Scholars agree that deliberation has and will continue to face many challenges in our representative democracy including social justice issues, incomplete understanding of complex situations, and problems with self-interest (see Gutmann and Thompson 18-26; Fishkin, *Democracy and Deliberation* 21-25; Bohman 107-42; Thomas 1-14). However, these challenges should not discourage supporters of deliberation from continuing to seek new methods and incentives for improving political dialogue, including the development of the internet

as a public sphere for discussion. Further, many scholars argue that e-participation needs careful and attentive guidance as it is being developed so that it can provide opportunities for true deliberation, in the Habermasian ideal, rather than symbolic participation that only serves to undermine civic engagement in democracy (see Bimber, "The Internet and Citizen" 423-25; Schlosberg and Dryzek 332-35; Wilhelm 169-75; Zavestoski, Shulman, and Schlosberg 29-33). Early studies of the internet and its potential impact on civic engagement found that there was little opportunity for interaction amongst users and where there was opportunity there was little dialogue. For example, a 1999 study found that e-participation was more of a "place-event" where "anonymity, isolation and asynchronism become familiar landmarks of political life" and in newsgroups where messages were not addressed to a specific respondent "reciprocity is unlikely ... [because] participants do not feel responsible before other forum members" as compared to a townhall setting where they might feel compelled to engage with opposing voices face to face (Wilhelm 171). In light of this perspective, some scholars argue that e-participation is more of a polarizing force than a means for building civic engagement in democracy.

In order to make informed political decisions, scholars agree that citizens need to listen to and debate opposing viewpoints, but in a faceless internet based medium, it becomes much easier to find and identify with individuals of similar perspectives: "new communication technologies may narrow the focus of attention, reducing citizen exposure to conflicting views and political tolerance" (Tolbert and McNeal 184). Thus, in the terminology of Robert Putnam, the internet may foster more "bonding" among individuals with similar perspectives and interests, but less "bridging" or tolerance for those with different perspectives (Tolbert and McNeal 184). Forums such as on-line newsgroups are examples of "virtual gathering places in which those people who share a common interest can discuss issues without substantial transaction and logistical cost ... [supporting] the view that individuals tend to seek out those individuals (and affiliations) with whom they agree" (Wilhelm 161). In this way, e-participation could "serve to fragment the citizenry further along narrow, issue-specific interests" (Alexander and Pal 6). This concern highlights the overarching challenge involved in developing high quality dialogue amongst e-participants. Critics of e-participation argue that there is great risk for it to simply "amplify the voice of those citizens who are already politically active" (Alexander and Pal 6) and that these "self-selected groups ... take their biases with them wherever they go -- including the world of [cyberspace]" (Davis 95). These inherent biases would include individual characteristics such as education level, language skills, and personal experience. Even though the internet provides a high degree of anonymity, a person with a higher education or more experience related to a given issue will not easily be able to hide these characteristics in their "discourse style" (Gastil 359-60); for example, researchers have found that "many of the distortions of group discussion resulting from dominant personalities and group dynamics are reproduced in cyberspace, but ... virtual political space (notably usenet-style threaded discussion groups) has its place as a significant supplement to, if not replacement for, the face-to-face discussions of Habermas's idealized nineteenth-century salon" (DiMaggio et al. 322). Other scholars support this perspective in stating that "if computer-mediated interaction can consistently reduce the independent influence of social status, it will have a powerful advantage over face-to-face deliberation" (Gastil 359). In other words, similar to the primary challenge in traditional face-to-face settings, high quality dialogue will depend on the structuring of fair and equal procedures for internet deliberation (see Lenk 87-92; Hurwitz and Mallery, "Managing Large Scale" <http://www.ai.mit.edu/projects/iiip/doc/large-scale/kyoto.html>); it will be difficult to construct effective opportunities for these types of exchanges but government sponsored experiments, like the EPA National Dialogue and the Open Meeting, show that there is great potential in continuing e-participation development.

Two long-standing debates have been staked in efforts to develop effective traditional face-to-face deliberation and they have similar weight in examinations of e-participation experiments as well. One debate focuses on the scale of participation efforts with one side arguing the need for mass public involvement on many or all issues and the other side criticizing the overwhelming factors involved in such feats and thereby emphasizing small-scale or project-specific deliberations (see Fishkin, "Virtual Democratic"

<http://www.lautexas.edu/conf2000/papers/DeliberationDay.pdf> 5-7; Hurwitz and Mallery, "Managing Large Scale" <http://www.ai.mit.edu/projects/iiip/doc/large-scale/kyoto.html>; Thomas). The second debate examines the question of who should sponsor deliberative efforts; is deliberation more effective from a grass-roots, self-organized source or could it improved as an institutionalized government strategy? (on this, see Bohman 231-36; Fishkin, "Democracy and Deliberation" <http://www.lautexas.edu/conf2000/papers/DeliberationDay.pdf> 14-20; Renn, Webler, and Wiedenmann 361-66). And a final concern in developing high quality dialogue for e-participation is the question of how to build trust in cyberspace. The success of past political deliberations may be linked to the rapid development of group cohesion, or group trust, that can be achieved in traditional face-to-face participation settings (Gastil 356-60). Many of the survey respondents, in the present study, emphasized that this type of trust is often an essential factor in a traditional face-to-face group's ability to negotiate and compromise on value-laden policy issues. Group trust has also been significant in some studies involving disenfranchised citizens and groups; there is a "persistent feeling among women that face-to-face interactions [are] necessary [for] mobilization and empowerment" (Alexander and Pal 12). One practitioner, however, related a counter example of trust development recently. She described a participant's reaction to moderator feedback in an internet dialogue; the participant felt a personal connection to the internet discussion space because the moderator's posting responded directly to a question she had raised. Even though the moderator was most likely responding to a common question, the participant developed a sense of inclusion that may also help foster a sense of trust in the discussion space even without face-to-face interactions. This may be a sign of larger society changes in how people view themselves and their relations to others through on-line interactions (Turkle 647-48).

Other studies highlight that "the visual and verbal expression of a face to face discussion is one that is open to participants even if they are less educated or less comfortable with written materials" (Fishkin, "Virtual Democratic" <http://www.lautexas.edu/conf2000/papers/DeliberationDay.pdf> 14). In a townhall setting or other face-to-face forum, participants often have several hours of concentrated attention and engagement with other individuals, which is likely to result in a higher level of trust than "many forums on the [internet] [that] involve respondents for only brief bursts of activity" (Fishkin, "Virtual Democratic" 15). These concerns may be overshadowed, however, by the great "potential for the internet to decrease the transaction costs of participation" and thereby provide an incentive for increased numbers of citizens to become involved in political discussions (Hurwitz and Mallery, "Managing Large Scale" <http://www.ai.mit.edu/projects/iiip/doc/large-scale/kyoto.html>). The convenience of asynchronous discussion threads or hypertext provides opportunities for discussions over multiple time zones and over longer timeframes than traditional face-to-face interactions can. Traditional participation efforts may involve citizens in several hours of intense interaction, as Fishkin advocates but internet based dialogues can allow discussions over several days or weeks, thereby providing opportunities for extended interaction and trust development ("Virtual Democratic" <http://www.lautexas.edu/conf2000/papers/DeliberationDay.pdf> 13-15). Other researchers argue that the two sides of the dialogue debate are talking past each other; they advocate a third perspective. This viewpoint argues that the internet has contributed to a shift in general social interactions "from a group-based to a network-based society that is decoupling community and geographic propinquity, and thus requiring new understandings and operationalizations" of our traditional group-based interactions (DiMaggio et al. 316). Studies that support this perspective find that "internet users visit friends more and talk with them by telephone more frequently, but that they also travel more and have fewer friends in their immediate neighborhoods" (DiMaggio et al. 316). In light of this perspective, research must continue to examine what role the internet should play in democratic deliberation; it was Dewey's contention that "a community must always remain a matter of face-to-face intercourse" (Dewey 211), but does the internet preclude this? Hurwitz and Mallery's assessment of the Open Meeting suggests that e-participation supporters "think about multiple public spheres, each serving a different subcommunity ("Managing Large Scale" 169). Each group could develop its own discourse grammar, and agents in each sphere would seek cross-links to other groups by similarities in issues discussed" and although this

may not produce consensus on issues, Hurwitz and Marley suggest that "it might promote mutual awareness" (169). If the internet is reshaping social interactions, this would provide strong support for increasing democratic experiments in e-participation methods and more comparative studies of face-to-face versus internet-based deliberations.

Several studies suggest possible incentives for promoting more frequent use of e-participation methods and these suggestions include the use of a presidential directive to require federal agencies to experiment in and analyze e-participation strategies as well as support for legislation that would involve new guidelines on when and how to conduct e-participation (see Beierle, "Democracy On-Line" 49-55; Beierle, "Discussing the Rules" 17-18; Brandon and Carlitz 1455-60). Other suggestions include an electronic notice system for alerting interested members of the public to proposed rulemaking activities and a broad research program to better understand how e-participation works in practice. Such a research program would encompass agency dialogues, administrative law, developments in information technology, training for agency officials, and efforts to increase internet access to low-status groups (see Brandon and Carlitz 1455-60; Beierle, "Democracy On-Line" 49-55; Beierle, "Discussing the Rules" 17-18; Coglianese, "Information Technology" 88-91). Many studies conclude with tough questions and trade-offs that will require serious future examination. For example, Coglianese asks how the potential increase in public participation will impact the role of agency science experts; will they be required to provide greater levels of justification if their recommendations do not match public demands? ("Information Technology" 88-91, or will we see a continued shift from expert decision-making to political decision-making; for example, in the case of the FS Roadless Rule, the media portrayed the overwhelming number of comments in favor of the rule as a "vote" for the rule (Herz 6-8). Overall, the literature presents substantial arguments that e-participation will be increasingly incorporated into our democracy and that this will result in definitive changes in public participation in government decision-making (see Herz; Coglianese, "Information Technology"), but this shift will not be revolutionary; it will be as incremental as most other changes in US governance (see Bimber, "The Internet" 423-27). The results of the current survey confirm the argument presented here. Despite a small sample size limited to two government agencies, it provides a glimpse of the current state of e-participation; there are limited opportunities for political deliberation at present but there is optimism among public participation practitioners for the future development of e-democracy.

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