

Communication and Citizen Participation in Southern Local Politics: A Disconnect Between Municipalities and Constituents

Abstract

Despite the fact that 96 percent of all political contests in the United States are for local offices, citizens are far more likely to participate in national elections and forgo exercising their voice in local politics. And, although academic literature has focused extensively on citizen participation at the national level, local-level democracy has often been neglected. This neglect may be caused by a lack of interaction between constituencies and city mayors and managers. Without effective communication between both groups, citizens will be unaware of opportunities to affect social and fiscal policies in their communities. Scholars know little about the perceptions of local government officials concerning citizen participation and the media. By analyzing survey data from 221 local municipalities in the South, this study focuses on understanding Southern city mayors' and managers' views on media reporting about government and citizen interest in local politics. This study finds that a majority of Southern city mayors and managers do not put emphasis on increasing citizen engagement in their cities and do not see a connection between the media and citizen participation.

Introduction

As a result of technological advances over the last two decades, elected city officials have had more access than ever before to media (Olimid 2014). And while media has become a prominent communication tool, Williamson and Parolin (2012) and Hubbell (2013) say that only a small portion of local governments are effectively promoting and nurturing citizen participation. Why are city officials not taking advantage of the media? Academic literature has not focused specifically on how Southern city officials and mayors value the media to communicate with constituents. More so, scholars have not examined the willingness of Southern local government officials to seek more participation from community members. This study considers if Southern city officials, councilmembers, and mayors neglect participatory responsibilities by not utilizing media to its full potential. It also considers that a lack of effective communication between citizens and government may cause an absence of citizen participation. This study is distinctive from other local government research because it looks at modern media's role in a traditionalistic South. By assessing Southern city officials and mayors, this study seeks to advocate a change in how Southern local governments interact with constituents.

Literature Review

Academic research has primarily focused on understanding citizen participation at the national level, whether it is voting, volunteering for campaigns, writing letters to elected representatives, contributing money to a party or candidate, etc.; however, local level democracy has been neglected (Hubbell 2013). This is unfortunate, as 96 percent of political elections in the United States are for city offices. And while a growing number of local governments in the United States attempt to use measures such as citizen surveys to gauge satisfaction levels and receive citizen feedback, many do not participate (Ryzin 2006).

When citizens are actively engaging in local issues, most studies have seen an increase in the efficiency and responsiveness of democratic governments (Wong, Liu, and Cheng 2011). Citizen participation increases a person's civic skills and competency. When citizens participate, they become more educated about their communities and feel a sense of belonging. Therefore, they may feel more personal responsibility for public decisions.

Irvin and Stansbury (2004) note that policies based on citizen preferences are also more likely to be accepted and supported by the community. Therefore, local politicians should have an incentive to try and increase the participation of, and increase communication with, citizens in their communities. Studies have shown, though, that city officials often only involve their constituents with public hearings because most other engagement tools are not legally mandated (Hubbell 2013).

Effective citizen participation varies by three stakeholder groups (Berner, Amos, and Morse 2011). This may help explain the degree to which city officials, mayors, and councilmembers in the South are promoting citizen participation. Elected officials, such as city mayors, tend to define effective citizen participation by a lack of complaints and citizens voting for re-election. If citizens are satisfied, the idea is that they will vote and do little else. Staff members for these officials see effective citizen participation as a valuable resource to get members in the community to understand controversial decisions. Citizens conversely believe that effective participation involves communication between all three stakeholder groups. They want the communication to be honest dialogue that explains staff and elected officials' roles in decision making.

If elected officials see citizen participation as a lack of complaints, then Hubbell (2013) elaborates on how elected officials participate with citizens. There are three different levels of citizen participation he explains: 1) citizen communication that flows from the government to the people, 2) citizen consultation where information flows from the public to the government, and lastly 3) citizen participation where information is exchanged between both parties. City officials who see participation as a lack of complaints and voting for re-election tend to use a monologue approach to distribute information. It is simple and cost efficient. Democracy then becomes a delivery of public services and not a two-way flow of communication between public officials and constituents.

Elected officials may not be utilizing media tools to their full potential if they are using a monologue approach to communicate with citizens. There is small amount literature connecting this emphasis on citizen participation in local governments with local governments in the South. Barnidge and Rojas (2015) argue that Southern local government officials need to take advantage of the media, as it serves as a tool to keep members of the public informed about political happenings. The media “engages people with political institutions, contributes to political learning, influences political attitudes and preferences, and helps people to form political identities” (Barnidge and Rojas 2015, 136).

Southern city officials see elderly citizens as having the most interest about their government in local cities (Barnidge and Rojas 2015). This may be because the elderly demographic are generally the primary consumers of newspaper, a common tool used by local politicians to convey information.

Southern traditionalistic political culture also encourages elite dominance (Johnson 2001). It embraces a hierarchical society where the elitists dominate in government and discourage citizens from participating in politically powerful behavior. This culture rooted in the South during a time in its history characterized by a plantation economy filled with slaves and cheap labor (Elazar 1966). Those who do not belong to the elite class are not welcomed into the political realm. Elites want to play a conservative and protective role in politics, ensuring that the social order is secured. Rather than innovating and being open-minded, political officials in traditional political culture see limited government as best (Johnson 1976). This traditionalistic culture may contribute to modern Southern city official and mayor beliefs about the role citizens should have in government.

Citizens are often not aware of the major issues affecting their communities, the impact of the issues on themselves, and the process involved in becoming an active citizen. They will not participate in government if they feel that their contributions do not hold value (Piasecka, Pettigrew, and Ryan 2010). Bandura’s self-efficacy theory helps to better explain the types of citizens who are willing to participate in their communities (Ohmer 2010). The self-efficacy theory states that citizens are either efficacious or inefficacious. Those individuals who have self-judgment about their capabilities to organize and execute the actions necessary to achieve desired goals are efficacious. Those who perceive themselves as powerless and unable to achieve goals are inefficacious.

Efficacious citizens have strong beliefs in their abilities and may involve themselves with problem-solving activities, such as citizen participation in local government. Bandura says that inefficacious citizens can become efficacious by participating in experiences that produce knowledge, skills, and confidence. That knowledge can empower citizens to participate, because they see themselves as capable of initiating change and having control over problems in local government (Ohmer 2010). Thus it is necessary to use communication that targets both the efficacious and inefficacious citizens in a municipality. Local officials must define what constitutes citizen participation before trying to foster effective citizen participation. Community needs, citizen desires, and historical community expectations must be challenged before determining what role citizens need to play in the community, as they can serve as an interest group, consumer, represented voter, client, and citizen (Bingham, Nabatchi, and O’Leary 2005).

Theory

City officials, mayors, and councilmembers in Southern states may undervalue the importance of utilizing new media as a tool for interpersonal interaction, have a vague understanding of citizen participation and involvement, and may not take into consideration the influence of Southern culture in regards to local participation behavior. To promote democracy and an interactive governmental structure, however, these local Southern government officials must nurture citizen participation. More so, they must lessen desire for re-election and rather should focus more on building relationships with constituents. Re-election will happen as long as the constituency is content. The constituency must care about citizen participation as well, because it ensures that their interests are valued.

I. Citizen Participation

Public communication is one of the most important functions that a government has, and the communication medium used to reach the constituency directly affects the rate of citizen participation (Liu, Horsley, and Yang 2012). It is essential that information about government actions and performance is effectively delivered to citizens. Cities that utilize effective communication mediums such as

direct mail, social media pages, image campaigns, and citizen panels are perceived as having a less cynical public view and have higher levels of public trust.

By using the proper communication medium, citizen trust grows and local government maintains political legitimacy (Liu, Horsley, and Yang 2012). It can also lead to more favorable media coverage of the region. When a local government promotes and advocates what it is doing for the community, it can attract positive media coverage rather than it focusing on the negatives in government. It is very important for a government to keep a positive image of itself because a pronounced negative image can cause citizens to not participate. Negative images can influence the public to expect failure, but by using communication mediums in which the government can directly correspond with its constituents, the local government can be its own voice and not have to rely on the media.

The channels of media can affect how an individual perceives local government messages (Liu and Zhang 2013). Katz' Uses and Gratification theory focuses on three concepts that apply to the spreading of local government messages: people use media for their own purposes, seek to gratify needs through media, and media affects everyone differently. Each individual decides what media to consume and what effects the media will have on them.

People are motivated to consume media by eight categories: passing time, companionship, escape, enjoyment, social interaction, relaxation, information, and excitement (Liu and Zhang 2013). If someone is not motivated by one of the categories, then the media used to deliver the message will be unsuccessful at targeting the constituent. For example, if a local government decides to reach out to their constituents by electronic mail and the constituents do not see electronic mail as a way to gratify their needs, then the local government would fail at enhancing citizen participation. However, if a municipality decides to use a social networking site and its constituents gratify their needs through that type of media, then the local government could successfully reach out to their target audience. By recognizing the needs that constituents seek to satisfy through media, it is easier to understand their media choices. This, in turn, allows local governments to select effective communication strategies to reach their constituencies and theoretically increase citizen participation.

II. New Media

A critical component of citizen engagement is increasing citizen awareness of opportunities to become engaged in activities; however, it may be possible that local governments are not using the appropriate medium to do so. Old media, such as newspapers, is still heavily utilized by city officials for communication with citizens in the South. This may be because old media is traditionalistic in nature. And while still effective in some aspects, this type of communication is a one-way flow of information that does not provide interactivity. Old media also commonly targets one primary age demographic (65 years or older) which constitutes a large majority of social and economic elites in Southern cities.

Young adults and middle-age citizens tend to engage with new media, such as the internet, more than old media, like newspapers. This poses a problem, as the citizens in these demographics may not be aware of opportunities to participate in community problem-solving and decision-making in local government. More so, they may not see it as an issue of importance because they have never been aware. For a local government to reach their entire constituency, they must form relationships with new and old media outlets alike. New media cannot be overlooked, because its ability to reach a wider audience is only going to increase over time.

The increasing popularity of the internet and social media gives local government more opportunities to interact and engage with constituents. Rather than newspaper's direct flow of information to constituents, social media and the internet enable a two-way flow of information where the constituents can respond to community leaders' comments and updates. This in turn can promote democracy. By utilizing a social media account or internet page, local governments can poll citizens and act as a nest for citizens to participate in interpersonal communication.

III. Southern Influence

The plurality of the Republican Party is white, male, the oldest of the age groups, Protestant, and financially comfortable. The demographics of this group have also been historically classified as the elite class and is known to be more involved and engaged with politics than any other group. In addition, voters that are 65 years of age and older are one of the fastest-growing demographics. Since the rest of the population does not tend to vote as much statistically, elected officials and staff may not see a need to communicate with younger demographics. There is often little motivation for elected officials to reach out to these other demographics. This implies that the metric for measuring participation in politics in the South is almost solely based on going out to the polls to vote. While many city officials believe this to be the case, it is far from the truth.

Thus, people who identify with the minority party in Southern Republican states may feel that they have lost the ability to effectively change their communities, because they think they are in the minority. Those who are considered a minority may simply not vote because of the perception that their vote does not matter. City officials tend to neglect reaching out to constituents of the opposite party because they are seen as not being needed for re-election.

Hypotheses

H1: As city officials' satisfaction with media reporting increases, perceptions of citizen activeness with city politics increases.

This hypothesis will assess whether or not Southern city officials see a connection between high-quality media reporting and activeness of citizens in the community. If city officials believe that the media is doing a good job (which can be done through advertisements, promoting events, and generally keeping the local government in a positive light) then the idea is that media will be a catalyst in promoting and nurturing citizen participation.

H2: If city officials rate local newspapers as being very interested about government in their cities, then they will want citizens to be more engaged in city politics.

Since the literature considers newspapers a popular media tool to convey local government news in the South, city officials may think that newspaper interest is related to citizen engagement. The hypothesis focuses on newspapers' role in city politics because of this thought. If newspapers are wanting more information about government, it may be because of a demand from the public for that information. Thus, when city officials and mayors want citizens to become more engaged, the assumption is that they will observe newspapers as having a high amount of interest in their municipalities. This hypothesis narrows down on a specific type of media to determine its effect on city official desire for citizen engagement.

H3: The more city officials are contacted by members of the public, the less city official offices are contacted by journalists and news reporters.

If city officials think more direct communication with the public means less communication with the media, this would assume that city officials are taking on communication responsibilities that are not legally mandated. This is important to this study because it will examine if city officials are using two-way communication mechanisms such as electronic mail, phone calls, and social media. If city officials are using new media to communicate with the public, then the demand for city information through journalists may decrease; thus city official offices would be contacted less often by reporters.

Data

The Dyer Institute for Leadership and Public Policy at Coastal Carolina University invited 1,009 city mayors/managers in the South, from cities with a population greater than 20,000, to participate in the survey. The time range for responses was from February 13, 2015, through March 17, 2015. Each participant was sent an initial invitation email, proceeded by two follow-ups spaced out evenly if the survey had not been completed. There was a 21.9 percent response rate, meaning that 221 of 1,009 participated; 23.1 percent of those with functioning emails were contacted (221 of 955). The 35-question survey assessed city official's and mayors' stances on: city government, citizens, the media, government funding, policy, administration, welfare, education, and career goals. However, this study is interested only in the questions pertaining to the specific hypotheses presented. It focuses on the perceptions of city mayors and managers with regards to media, citizen activity, and reporting.

The six questions that the study looked to make correlations with will now be described:

"Based on your experiences, how active or inactive with city politics are citizens in your community?"

The variable "Citizen Activity" was assessed on a 4-point scale from very inactive to very active, with 16 respondents claiming very inactive, 67 inactive, 99 active, and 31 very active. One respondent was not sure and was not included in the analysis. Two hundred and thirteen of 221 participants completed this question. This variable was tested with "Quality of Media Reporting."

"On a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being extremely poor, 4 being average, and 7 being extremely well, how good of a job do you think the media does reporting on city politics?"

"Quality of Media Reporting" was assessed on a 7-point scale from extremely poor to extremely well. The most respondents, 72 of 158 who responded, ranked quality of media reporting a 3 or 4 on the 7-point scale. This variable was tested with "Citizen Activity."

"Would you like citizens to be more, less, or just as engaged as they currently are in city politics?"

"Citizen Engagement" was originally a 3-point scale with the options of wanting citizens more engaged, less engaged, or just as engaged as they are now. However, only two respondents wanted citizens less engaged, therefore those two respondents were

combined with the participants who wanted citizens just as engaged as they are now. Thus, 142 participants wanted citizens more engaged than they are now and 72 participants wanted citizens just as engaged/less engaged. Two hundred and fourteen participants responded to this question. It was tested for a correlation with “Local Newspaper Interest.”

“On a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being not interested at all to 10 being extremely interested, please rate how interested you think the following groups are about government in your city. Local newspapers (Please rate how interested you think the following groups are about government in your city).”

The variable “Local Newspaper Interest” was assessed on a 10-point scale from 1 being not interested at all to 10 being extremely interested. The majority of participants responded with a 7 or 8 (89 participants) on the 10-point scale. A total of 203 participants responded to this question. It was tested with the variable “Citizen Engagement.”

“On average, how often would you say you are contacted by members of the public on a typical weekday?”

The variable “Contact with Public” was assessed on an 8-point scale from zero times a day to more than 100 times a day. For the analysis of the data, however, it was scaled down to 3 points. One hundred and forty-seven participants responded that they are contacted zero-5 times per day, 39 participants said they were contacted 6-10 times a day, and 28 participants were contacted 11 or more times a day. This variable was analyzed with “Contact with the Media.” A total of 204 participants responded to this question.

“On average, how often would you say you and your office are contacted by journalists and news reporters about city government on a typical weekday?”

The variable “Contact with Media” was assessed on a 5-point scale, however due to the responses, it has been condensed to a 2-point scale. Fifty-five participants said that they were contacted by journalists and news reporters zero times a day and 159 participants were contacted. A total of 204 participants responded to this question and it was correlated with “Contact with Public” for this study.

Results

Through this study’s data analysis, it is found that no significant correlations identify Southern city officials’ desire for more citizen engagement and media involvement. In H1, if city officials and mayors thought the media was doing a satisfactory job with reporting, then officials would think that citizens are very active within the community. However, the correlation of $r=.15$ reveals that officials do not see a connection between good reporting and the level of citizen activeness within their municipalities (Figure 1). H2 analyzed city officials’ desire for more citizen engagement and interest from the media (with a focus on newspapers). A correlation of $r=.08$ signifies that officials do not want citizens to become more engaged in city politics even though the newspapers are very engaged. This can pose a problem, as a lack of desire for engagement can mean that city officials are not effectively communicating with newspaper outlets. When city officials and mayors see newspapers as being highly engaged, it may also mean that city officials think that they only need to communicate with the one type of media, newspapers. Since there is a lack of a significant correlation, identifying high media engagement levels does not automatically assume desire for more citizen participation. H3 attempted to measure a relationship between city officials communicating with the public and with media outlets. If the public communicated more directly with city official offices, then the thought would be that interest from journalists would decrease because the public would be obtaining the information on their own. However, a correlation of $r=.22$ signifies that there is lack of evidence to hypothesize that more public communication means less journalist communication.

Figure 1: Testing Hypotheses with Correlations of Southern City Officials’ Perceptions on Citizen Participation and Media

Variables	Quality of Media Reporting	Local Newspaper Interest	Contact with Media
Citizen Activity	.15	---	---
Citizen Engagement	---	.08	---
Contact with Public	---	---	.22

For exploratory purposes, Figure 2 assesses city officials and mayors' views on newspaper and television interest between young adults and elderly citizens. It is found that city officials view young adults as having more interest in television $r=.44$ than newspapers $r=.34$ and elderly citizens having more interest in newspapers $r=.46$ than television $r=.33$. This may help further explain why Southern cities tend to use newspapers for communication more than television, as elderly citizens are targeted more politically than young adults in the South. The South is historically a region dominated by older elites, and thus those elitist values may still be present through the types of media city officials and mayors use for citizen communication.

Figure 2: Correlations between Age and Perceived Media Interest Media and Age Relationship

Variables	Newspaper Interest	Television Interest
Young Adults	.34	.44
Elderly Citizens	.46	.33

Data from 2015 Southern City Mayor and Manager Survey

Future Research

There were a few limitations to this study which prevented some questions from being answered. Because a quantitative survey was used, it was difficult to gauge how city officials and mayors value citizen participation because they could only answer “yes, I value it” or “no, I do not value it.” To answer this question and many others relating to communication with constituents, a qualitative interview process should be done with Southern city officials. A qualitative interview would allow the study to answer questions such as:

1. Do you interact with people in your community? If so, how?
2. How important do you think it is to communicate with constituents in your jurisdiction?
3. What mediums do you use to communicate with your constituents, if at all?
4. Have you ever tried using new media, such as Facebook and Twitter, to communicate with constituents? Why or why not?
5. Which age group do you think cares most about local government politics and why?
6. Why do you think that citizens generally care more about national elections than local elections?
7. What does citizen participation mean to you?
8. How would you describe citizen involvement in your community? Do you think there should be more or less participation? In what ways? Why?

Patterns of similarity can be looked at to observe if Southern city officials, mayors, and councilmembers share identical views with one another. These views can be about citizen participation, communication with their constituencies, and Southern political culture to better understand this phenomenon. It could also measure how local politics and modern communication methods interact with the traditionalistic political culture of the South. If desired or if there is a time restraint, this study could be done with a specific Southern region, county, or city.

For additional exploratory purposes, Figure 3 represents the survey participants by Southern state. Out of 221 participants, 20 percent are from Florida, 20 percent are from Texas, and 15 percent are from North Carolina. It may be of value to further examine responses from these states, as they may care more about citizen participation if more city officials willingly took a survey about citizen participation and media. As a dissimilarity, only 1 participated from Louisiana and 6 from Arkansas. It would then be of importance to compare the responses of these states to those whom had high levels of participation in the survey.

Figure 3: Southern State Representation

Data from 2015 Southern City Mayor and Manager Survey

Discussion and Conclusion

This essay explored communication between municipalities and city officials in the South. It used a quantitative survey to assess how city officials value citizen participation and the media's influence to communicate with constituents. These results raise a variety of interesting implications for the study of Southern local politics. The survey data reveals that city officials in the South do not see a relationship between 1) media quality and citizen participation, 2) types of media (in this study newspapers) in relation to participation, and 3) variation of contact levels between journalists and citizens. These results suggest that there is a problem with communication between citizens and city officials. Though there were a lack of significant correlations, it may be important to question why this is the case. While a majority of Southern city officials do value citizen participation to some degree, it is unclear how much city officials value it and how they nurture participation.

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