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**Citizen Participation and Transparency in Local Government:
Does Online or Offline Participation Matters?**

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to analyze the impact of citizens' engagement in various participation programs on the participants' assessment of transparency in local government. To examine the relationship between citizen participation and transparency, the study focuses on two dimensions of citizen participation: 1) citizen engagement in participation programs; and 2) online and offline participation programs. Citizens' assessment of transparency is measured with citizens' perceptions of openness, corruption, two-way communication with citizens, and fair and increased opportunities to participate in the rule making process in the local government. Using the 2009 Citizen Survey data in Seoul Metropolitan Government, the study finds that citizen engagement in participation programs (both online and offline) is positively associated with their assessment of government transparency. The study also finds that the citizens who engage in online participation programs do not show a higher level of their assessment of transparency in local government than the citizens who engage in offline participation programs.

Introduction

Citizen participation research has been progressed significantly over the last two decades (Thomas 1993; Cooper, Thomas, and Meek 2006; Reddick 2011; Royo, Yetano and Acerete 2011; Scott 2006; Yang and Callahan 2005). Researchers and practitioners have emphasized citizen participation in public administration as a means of collaborating with citizens to promote democratic values such as transparency and accountability (Thomas 1993; Cooper, Thomas, and Meek 2006; Irvin and Stansbury 2004; Fung 2006; King, Feltey and Susel 1998; Nelson and Wright 1995; Weeks 2000). Cooper et al. (2006) further argue that deliberative and collective action strategies of civic engagement are the most promising ways of involving the public and centering public management around the citizen. Several scholars also emphasize that government effort to provide more opportunities for citizen participation and input in government performance evaluation and policy decision-making is an important strategy for improving trust in government (Citrin and Muste 1999; Kim 2010; Kweit and Kweit 2007).

A growing body of literature also focuses on government efforts to utilize new technologies to enable greater citizen participation in policy formation and evaluation and to create greater information exchange between citizens and government (Macintosh and Whyte 2008; Norris 1999; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 2003; Komito 2005). Many governments have adopted various forms of electronic participation (e-participation) applications, including online forums, virtual discussion rooms, electronic juries or electronic polls (OECD 2003).

The literature, however, has left significant gaps in our understanding of how to measure the outcomes of citizen participation programs and limited attention has been paid to the evaluation of citizen participation programs in local governments. Local governments continuously face the challenge of improving the quality of public service and the capacity to implement adequate policies and practices that respond to the challenges of economic and social development. The demands of economic and social development also influence citizens' expectations of local government responsiveness, transparency, and accountability. Citizens and community organizations have also expressed their interest in a more participatory approach to the decision-making processes, transparency, and accountability from the local government (Hambleton and Gross 2007).

This study argues that one of the core values of citizen participation programs could be related to enhancing transparency in government. Scholars and practitioners address that transparency is an essential democratic value which undergirds a trustworthy, high performing and accountable government (Transparency International and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme 2004). In response to the demands of transparency in local governance, Kim (2009) argues that local governments can enhance the level of transparency with their commitment to three core components of transparency, comprising openness, integrity, and citizen empowerment. A high degree of openness by public officials and agencies regarding all the decisions and actions that they take may reduce the information gaps between government and citizens and enhance the level of transparency in local governance. Some other components of openness could include the degree of information and knowledge sharing between sectors and among agencies and various methods for communicating government work and functions to

citizens and the local community. Kim (2009) also argues that another important dimension of transparency in local governance is integrity. Integrity is defined as incorruptibility, and it requires that holders of public office avoid placing themselves under financial or other obligation to outside individuals or organizations that may influence them in the performance of their official duties (Cheema 2003; Pope 2005). Finally, citizens' perceived empowerment through fair and increased opportunities to participate in the rule making process in the local government could be another indicator assessing the degree of transparency in local government (Kim 2009).

The purposes of this study were twofold. First, this study attempts to empirically examine the relationship between citizens' engagement in participation programs and their assessment of government transparency. Second, this research investigates the effect of citizens' engagement in online participation program use on their assessment of transparency in government. To measure citizens' assessment of transparency in local government, the study focuses on citizens' perceptions of openness, corruption, two-way communication with citizens, and fair and increased opportunities to participate in the rule making process in the local government that provides various participation programs (Kim 2009). To test the hypotheses proposed in the paper, the study uses the 2009 Citizen Survey data of 1,014 participants collected from citizens who live in Seoul.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

The emerging literature on collaborative governance in public administration has emphasized that citizens should be considered as collaborative partners in a governance era for building democratic and effective governance (O'Leary and Bingham 2008; O'Leary, Van Slyke, and Kim 2010). While there are various definitions of citizen

participation, this paper adopts a citizen participation definition by Verba et al (1995). Verba et al. (1995) defines citizen participation as any voluntary action by citizens more or less directly aimed at influencing the management of collective affairs and public decision-making. The evolution of citizen participation in public administration decision-making has been facing a new phase as many government agencies have initiated electronic government (e-government) development and taken advantage of internet-based applications to communication with constituents and to provide online application services.

There is the complexity of evaluating the performance of various citizen participation programs in collaborative governance. Government may face challenges for designing customized performance evaluation programs by various types, formats, and purposes of the online and offline participation programs. Scholars have categorized several types of citizen participation programs. For instance, Arnstein (1969) introduces a ladder of participation that describes levels of interaction and influence in the decision-making process from elemental to more in-depth participation (e.g., information, communication, consultation, deliberation and decision-making). Rowe and Frewer (2005) also categorize three different levels of citizen participation: 1) citizen communication, where information is conveyed from the government body to the public; 2) citizen consultation, where information flows from the public to the government; and 3) citizen participation, where information is exchanged between the public and the government and some degree of dialogue takes place.

This study argues that one of the core values or goals of citizen participation programs and policies could be related to enhancing transparency, including citizens'

perceptions of openness, corruption, two-way communication with citizens, and fair and increased opportunities to participate in the rule making process. This study explores how citizen engagement in participation programs and the experiences of online participation and offline participation are associated with the participants' assessment of local government transparency that provide these participation programs.

Citizen Participation and Transparency

Scholars in the field of citizen participation argue that citizens who receive quality feedback and responsiveness through the interaction with government employees while they engage in citizen participation programs are likely to perceive that they gain useful policy information to have better understand government agencies and community issues (Sabatier 1988; Yankelovich 1991; Blackburn and Bruce 1995).

This study argues that citizen engagement in participation programs may be positively associated with the participants' assessment of transparency in the government that provides the participation programs. The participants, who engage in various participation programs, may learn more about community issues from various participation program experiences than the other citizens who have not engaged in the participation programs. The citizens engaged in the participation programs could be likely to perceive that the government agencies offering the participation program are capable of improving transparency, two-way communication with citizens, and participatory governance. Accordingly, this study proposes that citizens' engagement in both online and offline participation programs can be positively associated with e-participants' assessment of transparency in local government that provided the participation programs.

H1: Citizens' engagement in participation programs is positively associated with their assessment of transparency in local government.

Online/Offline Participation and Transparency

Scholars find that internet based interactive technology for facilitating citizen participation programs not only help gauge citizen preferences in government decisions, but also improve decision making and transparency (Robbins, Simonsen, and Feldman 2008; Tolbert and McNeal 2003; Bertot, Jaeger, and Grimes 2010; Phillips and Abey 2007). Compared to offline participation programs, the website based online participation programs allow a more efficient distribution of government policy and programs to citizens (Borgea, Colombob, and Welpc 2009; Justice, Melitzki, and Smith 2005) and a higher level of interactive communication between government employees and citizens and among citizens (Phillips and Abey 2007).

Scholars have also found that the ease and effectiveness of using online participation applications motivates citizens' active use of the applications (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Malhotra 2005; Kim, Kim, and Lennon 2006; Borgea, Colombob, and Welpc 2009). Online participation programs often allow citizens to locate public policy and program information associated with community issues (e.g. policy proposals, progressive reports) easily and effectively. Also, it provides citizens with a better opportunity to propose their inputs or to ask about policy and community issues. In addition, online participation programs allow participants view other participants' ideas or share their thoughts with others easily and effectively (West 2004; Coleman et al. 2008). Furthermore, online participation programs also provide flexibility of engaging in

the programs whenever citizens want to revisit the website to see ongoing forums and posting their ideas under their time control (Robbins, Simonsen, and Feldman 2008).

Scholars find that the online participation programs have been a useful tool in expanding the scope and breadth of information available to the general public and key constituents (Phillips and Abey 2007; Connecticut, Robbins, Simonsen, and Feldman 2008). For example, the City of Virginia Beach makes financial information available online 24/7 to encourage stakeholder participation, increase awareness, and demonstrate financial accountability (Phillips and Abey 2007). A real time, interactive, web based method also enables citizens to engage in tax and budget choices that are technical and complex (Connecticut, Robbins, Simonsen, and Feldman 2008). The study proposes and tests the variance in citizens' assessment of transparency between their experiences with online participation programs and the other offline participation programs.

H2: Citizens who engage in online participation programs are more likely to show a higher level of their assessment of transparency in local government than the citizens who engage in offline participation programs.

Research Methods

Citizen Participation in Local Government: The South Korea Case

As political system in Korea has been more democratized since 1987, local governments have expanded local autonomy and democratic structures. Especially, since the South Korean Self-Governance Act in 1988, elections for local legislative council seats began in 1991; elections for city mayors and provincial governors began in 1995. The Korean government's commitment to prevent corruption and ensure transparency is demonstrated by the establishment of the Korea Independent Commission Against

Corruption (KICAC) in 2002, a central-level anti-corruption agency based on the Anti-Corruption Act of 2002 (Transparency International, 2004), and the 2006 Act on the Local Ombudsman Regime and local petitions against the abuse of local finance. Since 2005, under the Roh Moo-hyun Administration diverse channels of interaction and citizen engagement programs in local communities to increase effective communication with citizens were created. The Roh Administration was called the “Participatory Governance” due to his commitment to enhancing public trust in political institutions through promoting the value of citizen participation in public affairs (Kong, Kim, and Yang, 2013).

Public policy and administration literature has characterized citizen participation as a part of policy decision-making processes, which includes policy agenda setting, policy formation, policy implementation, and policy evaluation phases (Arnstein, 1969; King, Feltey, and Susel, 1998). The Korean government has also put more emphasis on citizen participation in the process of policy agenda setting, analysis, formulation, implementation, and evaluation at the national and local levels. Some examples of citizen participation programs by policy making processes at central government (Table 1) and local government (Table 2) are provided as follows.

Table 1. Examples of Citizen Participation Programs in Korean Central Government

Participation type	Information Provision		Consultation	Active Participation
	Gov't to Citizens	Citizens to Gov't		
Policy making process	Gov't to Citizens	Citizens to Gov't		
Agenda setting	Public hearing	E-People	Online forum	E-People
Formation	Mailing service	Newsgroup	Seminar	Referendum
Implementation	Brochure	Citizen audit	Policy advisory committee	Volunteer
Evaluation	White	Satisfaction survey	Policy monitoring systems	Opinion poll

Source: Adapted from Kim, Lee, and Han (2004), p.872.

Table 2. Examples of Citizen Participation Programs in Korean Local Government

Participation type	Information Provision	Consultation	Active Participation
Policy making process			
Agenda setting	Public hearing	Oasis	Request for enactment, revision, or abolition of local ordinance
Implementation	Brochure	Participatory budgeting	Citizen inspection
Evaluation	Satisfaction survey	Ombudsman	Ombudsman

Source: Adapted from Jung (2012), p.99.

Data collection

To test research hypotheses, we used 2009 Citizen Survey data collected from residents in Seoul. The 2009 Citizen Survey was originally designed to understand various citizens' behaviors including their perception of citizen participation program experience, volunteer experience, and civic engagement. In June 2009, the survey was conducted through face-to-face interview at six sites, including places around four SMG offices. As results, we collected 1,014 usable pieces of data. Table 3 depicts the distribution of both sample and population demographic variables such as gender and age.

Table 3. Demographics

Variable	Characteristics	Respondents (%)	Population (%)
Gender	Male	43.6	49.5
	Female	56.4	50.5
Age	20s or less	21.9	18.8
	30s	27.4	18.3
	40s	31.0	16.7
	50s	14.5	11.9
	60s or over	5.2	10.3

Measurement

Transparency in government. The dependent variable of transparency was measured with citizens' perception of transparency in government using six survey items. The survey participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they evaluate SMG efforts to improve transparency in government (i.e., improved transparency in civil application procedure, improved transparency in decision making process, reduced corruption, promoted two-way communications, increased opportunities for diverse citizens' participation, improved fairness in citizen participation) using a five point Likert-type scale ranging from "Strongly disagree" (1) to "Strongly agree"(5) (See Appendix for the survey items).

Citizens' engagement in participation programs. As one of main independent variables, citizens' engagement in participation programs was measured by respondents' actual participation in SMG's participation programs. In the survey questionnaire, we provided a list of SMG participation programs, which was a total of 33 programs

including 19 offline citizen participation programs (e.g. public hearing) and 13 online programs (e.g. opinion survey). Respondents were asked to check all citizen participation programs listed that they actually used for the last 12 months. We coded 1 if respondents indicated any programs (regardless of online or offline ones) in which they participated. And it was coded 0 when they did not indicate any programs. The results show that 63.7 % of respondents have used at least one SMG participation program.

Citizens' engagement in online or offline participation programs. We also collected the data of the survey respondents' engagement in SMG's online and offline participation programs. In order to examine the effect of citizen participation using different channel, we created a dummy variable – online participation. To measure citizens' engagement in online participation programs, we coded 1 if respondents indicated any online programs they participated in, otherwise we coded 0, which reflects their engagement in offline participation programs.

Control variables: *Civic engagement* is measured by the number of memberships in civic organizations. Respondents were provided 15 categories including veterans' groups, labor unions, sports clubs, youth clubs, hobby clubs, school service groups, professional associations, religious groups, school groups, college alumni groups, NGOs (Putnam 1995; Brewer 2003). We measure *social altruism* using a single item: volunteer experience (Brewer 2003). The respondents were requested to indicate how often on average you have involved in volunteer works for the past three years. This item was rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "Never" (1) to "Every Day" (7).

It is likely that respondents' socio-economic status (e.g. age and income) have effects on new technology adoption behavior such as active e-participation. To control

for these effects, we included *age*, which was measured on a continuous scale. While education is likely to co-vary with income, we included *education* to control for the possible effects on transparency in government. Education was measured on an interval scale so that it was set to 1,2,3,4 and 5 for respondents of High School Diploma, those of Bachelor's Degree in Progress, those of Bachelor's Degree, those of Master Degree in Progress and those of Master Degree, respectively. Likewise, *income* was measured by households' monthly income with an interval scale ranging from More than \$5,000 (6) to Less than \$1,667 (1). Seoul consists of 25 districts where each district government is independent local authority. It is likely that district governments affect residents' perception of transparency in Seoul. To control for the *district* effect on transparency in Seoul, this research treats them as a series of dummy variables. Among 25 districts, Songpa district was chosen as the base dummy variable because the population size of this district is the largest.

Results

The collinearity diagnostics were conducted to detect the severity of multicollinearity among independent variables. The low variation inflation factor (VIF) scores imply that multicollinearity does not hurt the results. Note that this research used robust regression analysis technique because we found wide variations in the measurement of citizen participation and civic engagement, which can create heteroskedasticity issue. As an alternative to OLS, robust regression analysis is often used when data consists of outliers or influential observations.

In order to test research hypotheses, two models of perceived transparency in government were suggested. Model 1 was constructed to test hypothesis 1 and it includes

citizen participation variable and all control variables. As a key independent variable, citizen participation variable captures citizens' experience on citizen participation regardless of online or offline channel. Model 2 was designed to test hypothesis 2 and it consists of an independent variable (i.e. citizens' online participation) and all control variables. Running Model 2 with online participation variable allows us to examine how citizens' choice of differing channel affects their perception of government transparency.

Table 2 reveals the OLS estimation results of the two models testing our hypotheses. Estimation results report robust standard errors. Model 1 in Table 2 supports hypothesis 1, which citizen participation is likely to be positively associated with transparency in government. That is, respondents who experienced citizen participation programs (regardless of their channel) positively assess transparency in government. The study findings imply that no matter what channels citizens prefer, those who are engaged in citizen participation programs are likely to perceive improved transparency in government. However, the other hypothesis is not supported by the data (Model 2). The study results indicate that the citizens who engage in online participation programs do not show a higher level of their assessment of transparency in local government than the citizens who engage in offline participation programs.

Among control variables, civic engagement, social altruism, age and education were found to be the factors related to transparency. It should be noted that unlike our expectation, the direction of social altruism shows negative relationship with transparency. The effects of control variables in Model 2 are consistent with Model 1.

Table 4. Estimation Results

	Model 1		Model 2	
Independent Variables	Beta	S.E	Beta	S.E
Citizen participation (any channel=1)	.37**	.19		
Online participation			-.14	.58
Control Variables				
Civic engagement	.25***	.10	.33***	.11
Social altruism	-.24***	.09	-.28**	.11
Age	.02***	.01	.02**	.01
Gender (male=1)	-.16	.18	-.20	.22
Education	-.20**	.09	-.28**	.11
Income	-.11	.10	-.13	.13
<i>N</i>	995		995	
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	0.16		0.15	

p* < .10; ** *p* < .05; * *p* < .01

Discussion and Future Research

The study finding indicates that citizen engagement in participation programs can facilitate citizens' positive assessment of transparency in local government. This finding confirms prior literature emphasizing the traditional role of citizen participation in monitoring government activities (Roberts 2004; Box 2007; Yang and Holzer 2006; Kweit and Kweit 2007) and in enhancing transparency (Robbins, Simonsen, and Feldman 2008; Tolbert and McNeal 2003; Bertot, Jaeger, and Grimes 2010; Phillips and Abey 2007). For instance, Yang and Holzer (2006) address the fact that participation introduces citizen monitoring, which increases the likelihood of catching deception and ensures government's commitment to openness and honesty. Scholars indicate that government efforts to provide more opportunities for citizen participation and input in government performance evaluation and policy decision-making can be an important strategy for

improving transparency (Kim and Lee *forthcoming*) and trust in government (Kim and Lee *forthcoming*; Kweit and Kweit 2007).

In order to enhance our understanding of theoretical and practical implications of the association between citizen participation and transparency, however, scholars need to pay more attention to how different types of participation programs facilitate citizens' assessment of transparency in local government. For example, the degree of citizens' participation can be classified as two dimensions: consultation and active participation (OECD 2001). Consultation emphasizes that a citizen acts as consultant for government activities in the process of citizen participation. For consultation, "government asks for and receives citizens' feedback on policy-making" (OECD, 2001. p.15). Active participation highlights "citizens' engagement in decision-making and policy-making" (OECD, 2001. p.17).

Meanwhile, the literature of citizen participation shows that local governments still underutilize the possibility of active participation programs (Reddick 2011; Royo, Yetano, and Acerete 2011; Scott, 2006; Yang and Callahan 2005). Based on a national survey of 428 local governments in the US states, Yang and Callahan (2005) find that citizen input is not frequently sought in decision making or for functional areas that are managerial or technical or involve issues of confidentiality. Survey evidence of citizens' use of e-participation in the states demonstrates that citizens were most likely to use e-participation for management activities and much less likely to use the internet for more advanced consultative and participatory activities (Reddick 2011). Royo, Yetano and Acerete (2011) also find that most local governments in Germany and Spain are using citizen participation only to increase the level of perceived legitimacy or to comply

minimally with legal requirements, without really taking advantage of citizen participation to enhance decision-making processes.

Through active participation, citizens could initiate two-way interactions with government in that they suggest policy and program ideas, give feedback to existing government programs and share those ideas with other participants. As a result of engaging active participation programs, citizens may have a greater monitoring role over public administration and perceive their ownership and empowerment through their engagement in the programs. Furthermore, citizens' participation experiences in active participation programs could be positively associated with their assessment of transparency in local government. Accordingly, the future study should analyze how citizens' experiences with active participation facilitate their assessment of transparency in local government compared to their experiences in consultation or information access.

Conclusion

Using the 2009 Citizen Survey data in Seoul Metropolitan Government, the study finds that citizen engagement in participation programs (both online and offline) is directly associated their assessment of government transparency. The study also finds that citizens who engage in online participation programs do not show a higher level of their assessment of transparency in local government than the citizens who engage in offline participation programs. This exploratory study contributes to transparency literature and by uncovering the role of citizen participation in influencing citizens' assessment of transparency in government. However, external validity can be a limitation of the study. Since this study was conducted in the context of one particular

city in South Korea and used the data collected from residents in Seoul, the findings can be carefully applied to other research settings.

There are some practical implications from the research findings. In order to incorporate citizen participants' input into actual policy making decisions and inspire a sense of empowerment, we suggest that policy makers and government officials in charge of citizen participation programs engage citizens in the earlier stages of policy making processes, especially prior to making decisions, and appreciate them as collaborative partners. In order to improve citizen participants' perception toward government responsiveness, policy makers and officials in charge of citizen participation programs should sincerely deal with participants' input, suggestions, and inquiry by providing relevant, timely, and customized feedback. We also suggest that policy makers and practitioners take advantages of advanced technologies (e.g. interactive websites, mobile services) to inform how citizens' input, complaints, requests are processed by government agencies in a timely and sincere manner. This may require government agencies to horizontally and vertically integrate dispersed online participation platforms into a single one-stop platform.

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Appendix. Survey Items

Transparency in government (6 items, 5 point-Likert scale):

SMG's civil application processes have been more transparent.

SMG's decision making processes have been more transparent.

SMG officials' engagement in corruption has been reduced.

SMG has promoted two-way communication with the public.

SMG has provided the citizens of Seoul with diverse opportunities to participate in the rule making process.

SMG has provided the citizens of Seoul with an equal opportunity to participate in the rule making process.

Citizens' engagement in participation programs (33 items, discrete variable):

Have you participated in the participation programs administered by SMG in the past three years? Please check all that apply.

Civic engagement (15 items, discrete variable):

Have you had a membership in the following social and civic organizations in the past three years? Please check all that apply.

Social altruism (1 item, 7 point-Likert scale:)

On average, how often do you engage in volunteer works in the past three years?

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