

Minnesota E-Democracy Survey Report

Data presentation of Minnesota E-Democracy survey carried out in Minnesota in 2002 by

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Introduction

Minnesota E-Democracy is one of the best-known and highly praised examples of civic engagement online. It is a local, private initiative set up in Minnesota, USA, and based mainly around the metropolis of Minneapolis-St. Paul. The idea is to combine local political debates with a massive provision of political information and links based on the project's website. At the same time, physical political meetings are set up occasionally. Minnesota E-Democracy is obviously a critical case for investigating the political effects of online debates. It is one of the longest-standing and most successful online discussions, and in his investigations of the debates, Lincoln Dahlberg (2001) has concluded that Minnesota E-Democracy to a large extent fulfils the promises of the coming of a virtual public sphere.

The idea behind my research design was that political effects are difficult to measure unless you rely on information from the participants themselves. For example, measuring the impact of the debate on the political agenda would require an intense analysis of all local newspapers and electronic media over a vast period of time. Instead I apply the methodological concept of efficacy (Almond & Verba, 1963: 145), namely the participants' self-identification of experienced (internal and external) effects.

This presentation examines who the participants are, how they participate and with which effects.

The participants and their activity

First and foremost, some general demographical characteristics of the participants. The income level of Minnesota E-Democracy's users is higher than of the rest of the population. This tendency is clear, even if we take into account that the average household income in Minnesota is about 25 percent higher than the national average, \$52,681 versus \$42,228.¹

1. Based on US census data, source <http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/p60-218.pdf> and <http://censtats.census.gov/data/MN/04027.pdf#page=3>, links checked February 20th, 2003.

The participants are well educated as this figure shows.

Education level of participants (percent)

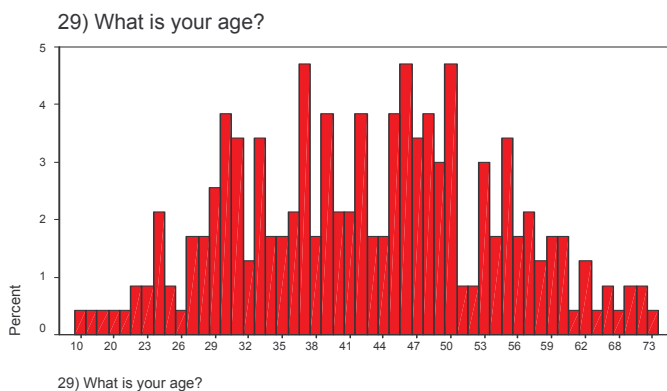
	Minnesota E-Democracy	Minnesota in general
11 years of schooling or less	0	12.0
Vocational education	1.3	0
High school / merchant school	0.4	28.8
Advanced studies, 1-2 years	17.6	24.0
Advanced studies, 3-4 years	35.6	26.8
Advanced studies, 5 years or more	45.1	8.3
N	233	-

Who are the participants? Many politicians, civil servants and journalists participate in the forums of Minnesota E-Democracy along the citizens.² 73 percent of the participants identify themselves as citizens. Of those 61 percent identify themselves as activists and 39 percent as average citizens. 27 percent of the participants identify themselves with other positions. Within that group 7 percent are elected politicians and officials where as the vast majority are civil servants: 35 percent are employed at city level, 15 percent at county level and 16 percent at state level. Finally, 27 percent are journalists.

The figures tell us that Minnesota E-Democracy attracts a large share of activist citizens but it seems as if average citizens participate as well. Even though similar data are unavailable for Minnesota or the US in general, it seems fair to assume that activist citizens are heavily over-represented.

The gender distribution on Minnesota E-Democracy is 57.7 percent male and 42.3 percent female versus 49.5 percent and 50.5 percent for the Minnesotans in general.

Concerning age, the median age of Minnesota E-Democracy users is 42.8 years versus 44.9 for the Minnesotan voter population in general.



The participants were interested as well as politically active even prior to their participation

² Many participate as citizens as well as officials. Participants are asked directly how they identify themselves. As such, the answers point to the role in which they mostly participate.

Political interests of participants of Minnesota E-Democracy

Very interested	70.6
Interested to some extent	24.8
Not really interested	4.2
Not at all interested	0.4
	N=238

Political participation for participants of Minnesota E-Democracy

Voted in the most recent election	93
Member of a political party	63
Member of organisation, grass root movement etc.	45
Member of users' councils etc.	31
Member of or candidate for parliament, county council or city council	8
Discussing politics with friends, family and colleagues	93
Participating in town meetings, hearings and other political meetings	71
Contacting a politician or a civil servant regarding a political matter	74
Writing a letter to the editor	41
Other political activities online	66
	N=241

In which E-Democracy hosted forum do the participants engage:

Participants are asked in which they participate at all and in which they spend the most time

	Participation		Most time	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Minneapolis Issues	158	65.3	146	60.3
St.Paul Issues	41	16.9	25	10.3
Winona Online Democracy	34	14.0	30	12.4
Minnesota Politics	77	31.8	39	16.1

For how long have the participants been active?

	Frequency	%
Since 1994	9	3.7
Between 5 and 7 years	21	8.7
Between 3 and 4 years	51	21.1
Between 1 and 2 years	89	36.8
Less than a year	72	29.8
N=242		

How did they first become aware of Minnesota E-Democracy?

	Frequency	%
Via links on the Internet	43	18.2
Through an e-mail from a friend or family member	30	12.7
Through an e-mail from a political or professional contact	51	21.6
Through media coverage	19	8.1
Through word of mouth (off-line)	68	28.8
At a public meeting or event	4	1.7
Through print flyers or similar materials	1	0.4
Other	20	8.5

How often do participants use Minnesota E-Democracy and how often do they post to the forums?

N=242

	Participation		Posts	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Everyday	76	31.4	2	0.8
Most days	100	41.3	8	3.3
Most weeks	32	13.2	26	10.7
Every month	11	4.5	45	18.6
Rarely	15	6.2	115	47.5
Never	8	3.3	46	19.0

What activities have the participants engaged in?

	Frequency	%
Started new discussions	102	42.1
Contributed to discussions	152	62.8
Requested information	77	31.8
Contributed information	117	48.3
Forwarded messages from other forums	119	49.2
Encouraged other to join the forum(s)	102	42.1
Engaged in private exchanges with other members	121	50
Read a post which caused me to contact an elected official	105	43.4
Read a post which caused me to attend a public meeting, event or rally	122	50.4
Read discussions without posting	197	81.4

External effects – Minnesota E-Democracy as a forum for political agenda-setting

When evaluating the external effects of the debate it seems reasonable to touch upon a range of factors. The political agenda is a complex phenomenon where citizens and politicians are the actors, and media, meetings, cafes, neighbourhoods and workplaces are all arenas. In the evaluation of the effects the participants were asked to distinguish between direct influence on political decision-makers, influence on media coverage of political and community topics, effects on setting the community agenda and the extent to which Minnesota E-Democracy affects public life in general. For all four questions, the participants were asked to evaluate the effects on a scale from 0 to 4 (from no effect to large effect). This enables us to calculate average values, allowing direct comparisons of effects. The frequencies and average scores are shown in table 1.

Table 1: The external effects of Minnesota E-Democracy according to the participants

	No effect ----- Large effect					Average	Total	N
	0	1	2	3	4			
Influencing political decision-makers	6	16	53	19	6	2,05	100	234
Influencing media coverage	9	19	47	22	3	1,90	100	234
Setting the community agenda	7	27	45	16	5	1,85	100	234
Affecting the public life in general	11	23	40	22	5	1,88	101	234

The figures show that on all four questions about 25 percent of the respondents ascribe to Minnesota E-Democracy a large effect. On the other hand, only between 6 and 11 percent state that the debates have no effect what so ever. There are only minor differences in the answers across questions. The average score for the influence on political decision-makers is slightly higher than those for the other questions, but it is doubtful whether anything substantial can be concluded from that.

Now it is time to find out in more detail just how the external effects of Minnesota E-Democracy are achieved. In other words: which dynamics go on within the debates and among participants. Who are the actors and which mechanisms might cause the issues raised within the debates to appear on the wider political and community agenda?

First and foremost, it is notable that not only “normal” citizens take part in the debates on Minnesota E-Democracy. According to the survey, 2 percent are elected politicians, 6 percent are journalists and no less than 15 percent are civil servants or government officials. Further, several individuals no doubt play several different roles on Minnesota E-Democracy. For example, certain individuals use different e-mail addresses, depending on whether they are posting from work (e.g. the State Capitol) or from home. They participate as civil servants and as citizens. In practice the roles are mixed up, however, as nothing prevents them from posting as private citizens from the workplace or as journalists from their home. That makes an exact count difficult and the frequencies above are based on self-identification. It is clear, however, that the different kinds of participants combined with the possibility of taking on more than one role might contribute to a lively exchange between the debates on Minnesota E-Democracy and wider political life.

Considering the character of the responses, about half of the participants have experienced support for their opinion, while 34 percent have been contacted by someone with a differing opinion. About one-third have received information and 15 percent abusive comments.

To support these figures and get more details about offline life and political consequences, the participants were asked a wider range of questions about specific effects on the political agenda and the interplay with other media.

Many participants stress that Minnesota E-Democracy is a good forum to spot new political undercurrents not appearing in other media. A commonly reported example is that it was the first place where dissatisfaction with the former mayor of Minneapolis was expressed. Some participants estimate that Minnesota E-Democracy as such was a decisive factor in the election campaign. Traditional media like the local paper, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, were much more slow to spot these new trends in the political landscape.

Compared to other media, many participants agree that Minnesota E-Democracy is much quicker and more flexible. It fulfils the positive expectations that the internet is a media allowing quicker responses and interactions among political actors. For example, local political news is often found on the online debates before appearing in more traditional media. At the same time, the participants stress Minnesota E-Democracy's ability to converge with other media. Representatives from local newspapers and television- and radio stations say that they monitor the debates in order to react if interesting or controversial topics crop up. Journalists state that this has happened several times.

At the same time, the participants report that Minnesota E-Democracy provides much more equal access for all viewpoints and opinions than traditional media do. First and foremost, besides the official moderation based on a few, but strict rules, Minnesota E-Democracy has no editorial filters. Thus, outsiders with limited access to the media in the physical world get a chance to get heard. For example, political candidates outside the two big parties, Democrats and Republicans, are over-represented on Minnesota E-Democracy.

The next question is whether and how the debates on Minnesota E-Democracy have played a role in specific political decisions. First, there is a well known, well documented case to which many participants refer. It took place during the author's field work in Minnesota and the local media coverage was considerable.³ The fast food chain, Dairy Queen, offered to pay for the maintenance and cleaning of the public parks in Minneapolis in return for permission to set up ice cream stalls in the parks. The Minnesota E-Democracy debates revealed that the city council was about to accept the offer, causing an outcry among participants. A protest movement popped up overnight. The protests spread to the offline world. Traditional media covered the topic intensively and protest rallies were held. In the end, the city council had to decline the offer.

There are other examples of debates directly affecting political decisions. The participants mention several instances where possible hazards to the local environment, e.g. new factory sewage outlets and draining of a local lake, have been stopped after criticism within the Minnesota E-Democracy debates. Others mention how they have influenced school board decisions or plans for refurbishing certain city districts.

Internal effects

We now turn to the internal effects on the participants of Minnesota E-Democracy. In a republican tradition of democracy, society is seen as a sum of its parts, the individuals. Thereby the individuals' interests are defined in societal and community terms. The reason for political participation is to achieve competence and enlightenment as democratic citizens.

³ The references of the debate is accessible on <http://www.mail-archive.com/do-wire@tc.umn.edu/msg00439.html>

Scholars following that tradition stress both the importance of democratic enlightenment and the sense of reciprocity (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). The latter refers to the level of respect for and the sense of connection to fellow citizens.

I have started the investigation of the internal effects by measuring the experienced effects on democratic enlightenment as well as reciprocity among participants. The citizens have been asked to categorize the level of each effect on a scale from -2 to +2, where -2 is a decrease and +2 an increase. It allows us to calculate the net effects and compare across different effects. The results are shown in table 3.

Table 3: the participants’ experienced effects of participating in Minnesota E-Democracy

	Decrease ----- Increase					Average	Total	N
	-2	-1	0	+1	+2			
Democratic enlightenment								
Political interest	0	3	29	50	18	0.83	100	234
Political knowledge	0	0	8	53	39	1.29	100	234
Reciprocity								
Knowledge about rationale behind other people’s opinions	0	3	11	55	32	1.15	101	234
Respect for those with differing opinions	2	7	39	39	15	0.57	102	234
Civic involvement	0	1	53	38	8	0.53	100	234

For democratic enlightenment I have distinguished between political interest and political knowledge. Like in most other net debates the participants on Minnesota E-Democracy are politically much more active and interested than the general population is. Nonetheless, political interest seems to be further strengthened as 68 percent state that their political interest has increased by participating. The effect on political knowledge seems even more significant as 92 percent have experienced a positive effect.

Considering reciprocity, I have distinguished between knowledge about the rationale behind other people’s opinions and the respect for those with different opinions. 87 percent state that they have obtained a higher level of knowledge about the rationale behind different opinions, while 54 percent now have a higher level of respect for the person behind the differing opinion. A last and topically related question is about overall civic involvement. Here 46 percent state that it has increased to some or to a large extent by participating in Minnesota E-Democracy.

Based on table 3 one could claim that the enlightened and involved have become yet more enlightened and involved. The gladiators have positioned themselves within the arena!

In the more qualitative evaluations several participants stress the high factual level of the debate and that Minnesota E-Democracy is a useful forum for acquiring new information and knowledge. Some participants emphasize that they have learned a lot through dialogues with elected officials, while some politicians, on the other hand, state that they have learned a lot through inputs from citizens.

One last question has to be asked. We saw that many participants undergo processes of enlightenment and have an enhanced sense of reciprocity by participating in Minnesota E-Democracy. A related question is whether this has made an impact on their actual political behaviour? It was investigated whether the participants had changed different aspects of their political behaviour, from changing one or more opinions to change of political affiliation. Table 5 summarizes the results.

Table 5: Minnesota E-Democracy’s effect on the participants’ political behaviour. Figures in percent

It has had some impact on my political opinions	57
It has influenced my vote in specific elections	19
It has changed one or more of my political opinions	15
It has changed how I normally vote	2
It has had no impact at all	29
N	232

Internal life of the forums

Another interesting phenomenon is the off-list communication among participants. It is not possible to get an impression of that part by looking only at the debates. The survey made it possible to ask the participants about their communication off-list or offline with fellow participants. Two aspects were investigated: relations offline and the kind of interaction. The results are sketched in table 2.

Table 2: The level and character of private (offline or off-list) responses from other participants. Figures in percent.

Response from other participants	
Citizens	63
Government official	26
Elected official	32
Journalist	28
Kind of response	
Information offered	34
Supporting opinion	52
Differing opinion	34
Abusive comments	15

Question asked: have you ever received private responses (those not shared publicly with other participants) to any of your postings?

First, table 2 show that 63 percent have received private responses from citizens and more than double as many as have received responses from government officials, elected officials and journalists, respectively. However, we must remember that about 75 percent of the participants fall within the category of citizens. Various officials and journalists thus seem to be much more eager to respond privately than other citizens do. There may be reasons that these groups respond privately. Maybe a journalist wants to make a story based on a posting or a politician engage in consultancy processes on a certain topic with a citizen. Nonetheless, Minnesota E-Democracy seems to be an online forum with a quite high offline communication level.

Conclusion

It is now time to sum up the results, mainly considering the effects of Minnesota E-Democracy. First and foremost, I conclude that Minnesota E-Democracy has had certain external political effects, mainly in the Twin Cities area where the activities are concentrated.

Local politicians and civil servants participate and the discussions are often referred to in local offline press. There is convergence between Minnesota E-Democracy and other media, both according to the participating politicians as well as to the “ordinary” citizens. There are several examples of discussions online having affected political decisions, not only locally but also at state level. Minnesota E-Democracy has gained status as an important medium of the political agenda, something quite unique for an online political forum.

Lastly, the positive evaluations on Minnesota E-Democracy should not be over-estimated. One should expect participants in a survey tend to be more optimistic on behalf of a forum where they have chosen to spend some or a lot of their time. On the other hand, the opinions presented through the survey come from a wide range of local community people: citizens, journalists, politicians, candidates for elective office and civil servants. The main picture drawn from their conclusions is that Minnesota E-Democracy has turned out to be quite an important factor for agenda-setting and political life in the Twin Cities area.

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