

Chapter IV

Citizens, Not Consumers

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ABSTRACT

E-government and t-government programs too often see government as service provider and citizens as customers. T-government should view government and citizens as one decision-making entity. This chapter (1) critiques the citizen-as-consumer perspective as a cause of citizen alienation, (2) contributes a theoretical model based on citizen participation to guide development of t-government systems to act as social decision support systems, (3) highlights examples of e-government systems that encourage citizen participation, (4) sketches one possible t-government implementation of the model, and (5) addresses challenges the model and systems based on it may face.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of reengineering through technology is critical. We didn't want to automate the old, worn processes of government. Information technology (IT) was and is the great enabler for reinvention. It allows us to rethink, in fundamental ways, how people work and how we serve customers.

—U.S. Vice President Al Gore, 1997

During the 1990s, Vice President Gore promoted the expansion of e-government capabilities and the Internet in general. Like many public officials, he recognized the potential of the Internet to transform the way government serves its citizens.

As Vice President Gore introduced the 1997 report on the Access America Initiatives to reinvent government, he used language that indicated another transformation, a conceptual transformation in the view of citizens. Twice in this 1200-word document on e-government, Gore

(1997) refers to the *customers* e-government will serve. Nowhere in this opening statement does the word *citizens* appear.

Vice President Gore did not invent the concept of viewing citizens as customers. He was not the first nor the last government official to apply the language and paradigm of e-business to e-government. Gore's statement is but one instance of a perspective very common among government officials, IT professionals, and researchers: that e-government is just a subset of e-business.

This chapter will identify the prevailing misconception in e-government programs of citizens as mere consumers of services provided by government and the harm that incomplete conception can do. This chapter will explain that t-government—application of information systems to support all functions of government, including the function of citizens as participants—should move away from that incomplete conception to a genuinely citizen-centered social decision support model. Applying the emancipatory and participatory ideals of neohumanism to e-government can form the axiological basis for the creation and implementation of web-based computer-mediated communication systems in regional and nationwide parliaments and legislatures connecting legislators, citizens, lobbyists, and organizations in social decision support systems (SDSS). Such a paradigm shift will truly transform e-government by increasing government transparency, citizen participation, and citizen sense of “ownership” of government information and decisions.

PROBLEM: E-GOVERNMENT AS PROVIDER–CLIENT RELATIONSHIP

Foundational Perspective: E-Government as a Subset of E-Business

In a democracy, the government is “us.” However, that conception of government appears

largely absent from the literature and practice of e-government. When determining how to incorporate information systems into government, researchers and policymakers alike apply the template of e-business. They view government and citizens as separate entities: the government is the service provider, and citizens are customers. E-government literature portrays citizens not as participants in government but as consumers of government services.

The citizen-as-consumer mindset starts in e-government's pedigree as an offshoot of e-business. The Americas' Conference on Information Systems (AMCIS) 2008 e-government mini-track is listed under the E-business/E-commerce track. The mini-track description defines e-government as follows (*italics added here and in all subsequent quotes to highlight the e-business, citizen-as-consumer mindset*):

E-Government is an emerging paradigm to deliver government services to citizens, businesses, and other stakeholders through the use of Internet and information and communication technologies (ICTs). E-Government is an extension of e-business applications to the public sector. Increased adoption and application of e-Government across countries is being propelled by its potential to offer not only a convenient service to citizens but also related benefits such as reduced transaction costs and enhanced operational efficiency (AMCIS, 2008)

This treatment of e-government as a subset of e-business arises from various strands of business thinking applied to efforts to improve government. In the 1960s and 1970s, the technocratic approach to government fostered a “service-delivery” perspective that often had the effect of “leaving democratic participation as an afterthought” (Keating, 1995, p. 128). The 1980s and 1990s brought an emphasis at many levels of government in many countries on market solutions, on privatizing various services and making govern-

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