

Electronic Government at the American Grassroots

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INTRODUCTION

During the past 10 years or so, governments in the United States have rushed to adopt and implement electronic government or e-government (defined as the electronic delivery of governmental information and services 24 hours per day, seven days per week, see Norris, Fletcher, & Holden, 2001). Today, the federal government, all 50 state governments (and probably all departments within them), and the great majority of general purpose local governments of any size have official presences on the World Wide Web through which they deliver information and services and, increasingly, offer transactions.

In this article, I examine the current state of the practice of e-government at the grassroots in the U.S.—that is, e-government among American local governments. In particular, I address the extent of local adoption of e-government, including the reasons for adoption, the relative sophistication of local e-government, and barriers to and initial impacts of e-government.

BACKGROUND

It is important to study e-government at the American grassroots for at least four reasons. The first is found in the sheer numbers of local governments. The 2002 Census of Governments reported that there are nearly 88,000 local governments in the U.S., including 19,431 municipal governments, 3,034 county governments, and 16,506 town and township governments, for a total of 38,971 general purpose local governments (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2002). Second, as I will show in this article that 95% of local governments of 10,000 or greater in population have Web sites for e-government purposes. These two reasons combined mean that the vast majority of Americans have at least the potential to interact with and be affected by local e-government. Third, governments at all levels in the U.S. are spending an enormous amount of money on e-government, annually up from \$1.5 billion in 2000 to an expected \$6.2 billion in 2005 (Gartner Group, 2000). Fourth, local governments are the closest governments and provide the greatest numbers of services to the people. Thus, these governments have the greatest immediate impact on

the peoples' lives. For at least these reasons, then, it is important to understand how and why e-government has been adopted, the functions it performs, how it has evolved, and its impacts.

DATA AND METHOD

In this analysis, I use data from three nationwide surveys, as well as evidence from focus groups that I conducted in 2002, to help understand e-government at the American grassroots. The surveys were conducted in 2000, 2002, and 2004 by the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) and Public Technology, Inc. (PTI) about local e-government (ICMA/PTI 2000, 2002, 2004). The 2000 survey was mailed to all municipalities with populations greater than 10,000 and all counties with either the council-administrator (manager) or council-elected executive form of government. The response rate was 50.2%.

The 2002 and 2004 surveys were mailed to all municipalities of 2,500 or more in population and all counties with either the council-administrator (manager) or council-elected executive form of government. The response rate to the 2002 survey was 52.6% and to the 2004 survey was 42.4%. In order to provide for direct comparisons between the surveys, I used data from all responding counties but only from municipalities with populations greater than 10,000 from the 2002 and 2004 surveys. With a few exceptions, the respondents to all three surveys were reasonably representative of U.S. local governments as a whole. (For a more detailed discussion of the survey responses, see Holden, Norris, & Fletcher, 2003; Norris, 2005b; Norris & Moon, 2005)

In addition, I employ data from focus groups that I conducted in the fall of 2002 among officials of 37 U.S. local governments that were on the leading edge of e-government adoption and use (Norris, 2003; Norris, 2004a; Norris, 2004b; Norris, 2005a; Norris, 2005b)¹ The focus group is a well recognized method of qualitative data collection, especially in market research but also in research in various disciplines in the social sciences. Focus groups involve researcher facilitated data collection from

Table 1. Web site adoption

A. Does your government have a Web site?	2000			2002			2004		
		No.	%		No.	%		No.	%
	Yes	1573	83.6	Yes	1866	87.7	Yes	2491	95
	No	308	16.4	No	262	12.3	No	132	5
	Total	1881	100	Total	2128	100	Total	2623	100

group interaction on a pre-determined topic and include three components: data collection, interaction through group discussion, and active participation by the researcher in shaping the discussion (Morgan, 1996) (For more information about the focus group methodology in general, see Merton, 1987; Merton & Kendall, 1946; Morgan, 1993; Morgan, 1996. For a more detailed discussion of the focus group method as applied to this research see Norris, 2004a; Norris, 2005a, 2005c).

The focus groups included chief information officers (CIOs) or their equivalents and top administrative or policy officials from 37 local governments that had adopted e-government, and that at that time were considered on the leading edge of e-government (Appendix A). These persons constituted a body of key informants with critical knowledge of and insights into their governments' adoption of e-government and issues related to it.

E-GOVERNMENT ADOPTION

Beginning in the mid-1990s, local governments in the U.S. started establishing official sites on the World Wide Web. According to the 2000 survey—that is within about five years of the beginning of the e-government—83.6% of these governments had established Web sites from which they delivered governmental information and services (Table 1). Local government Web site adoption increased to 87.7% in 2002 and to 95.0% in 2004. In 2000, about two-thirds of local government Web sites were three years older or less. If we extrapolate that finding to 2005 (five years later), two-thirds of local government Web sites are eight years old or less today (Table 2). Thus, local e-government is a relatively young phenomenon that has been adopted very rapidly in nearly all local governments in the U.S. with a minimal level of population (10,000 or more).²

Previous studies have shown that a statistically significant relationship exists between local government population and adoption of leading edge information technologies (Norris & Demeter, 1999; Norris & Campillo, 2000; Norris & Kraemer, 1996) and between population and the adoption of e-government (Holden, Norris, & Fletcher, 2003; Moon, 2002; Norris & Moon, 2005). These

studies employed data from a 1997 survey of computers and local governments and the 2000 and 2002 e-government surveys. Although I did not run tests of statistical significance for the relationship between population and e-government adoption for the 2004 survey data, based on previous work it is highly likely that this relationship exists.

Prior studies have also found that adoption of both leading edge information technologies and e-government may be related to type and form of government (municipal type and professional manager form being positively related), (Holden, Norris, & Fletcher, 2003; Moon 2002; Norris & Campillo, 2000; Norris & Demeter, 1999; Norris & Moon 2005). I did not run tests of statistical significance on the 2004 survey data. Here again, however, there is reason to believe that statistical significance would be obtained if such a test were conducted, there being so few differences between the results of the 2000, 2002, and 2004 surveys.

Although the surveys show how many local governments have adopted e-government and how rapidly, the surveys did not ask why local governments adopted e-government. The hype surrounding e-government predicts that governments will adopt e-government in order to provide services more effectively and efficiently; that they will engage in (usually unspecified) governmental reform and in (equally unspecified) governmental transformation; and that governments adopt e-government as part of a broader plan or strategy for improving the delivery of governmental services (see, for example, Garson, 2004). Based on data from focus groups of officials in governments on the leading edge of e-government, these reasons turn out not to be true.

Table 2. Age of Web site

	2000	
	No.	%
Three years or less	803	68.5
4-5 years	318	27.1
More than 5 years	52	4.4
Total	1173	100

Note: The question about age of Web site was not asked in the 2002 and 2004 surveys.

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