

Chapter 27

Beyond the Online Transaction: Enhancement of Citizen Participation via the Web in Ontario Provincial Government¹

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ABSTRACT

Among North American state and provincial governments, there are only a handful of chief executives who make the most of the Internet as a tool for gaining citizen input on policy questions and disseminating a clear and well-crafted agenda. Dalton McGuinty, the Premier of Ontario since 2003, was the first to push the Web beyond conventional e-government functions such as tax or fee payment, the filing applications for programs, and report dissemination, into a realm of interactive facilitation of democratic governance. This chapter describes the context of Ontario politics and establishment of common e-government techniques before McGuinty became his government's leader; the responsive digital strategies that he adopted to treat Ontario's situation as he came to office, and an assessment of these strategies five years into his leadership of this diverse province.

INTRODUCTION: A HIGHER ORDER OF DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT

When initiating the field of public administration in North America late in the 19th century, Woodrow Wilson declared, "It is getting to be harder to run a constitution than to frame one." (1887) With over a century of history passed since this statement and much development of the field of public administration, it is clear that one cannot run a constitution

or other guiding institutions of governance without informed support and consensus of the citizenry. This is a major current challenge, as citizen trust in government can scarcely fall lower than its current levels. Support for government agencies such as the police and military average approximately 50 percent worldwide; however legislative actors are granted much lower support from citizens. Parliaments in Africa and East Asia have the positive endorsement of approximately 40 percent of their citizenries, support in the European Union is as low as 35 percent, and in Latin America public trust in

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the political process is as low as 15 percent (Blind 2007). In the United States, the drop-off over the past few decades is dramatic; from approximately 60 percent support in the 1960's, trust in government among Americans fell to 20 percent by the turn of the century (Bok 1997). When this is the case, who is left to sustain progressive change in democratic societies? What policies and administrative mechanisms will it take to bring citizens back to a reasonable level of trust in governing institutions?

A range of internal or administrative reforms implemented during the 1990's and into this century attempt to reengage citizens and stakeholders in their governments' programs and administration. Under titles such as "reinventing government" or the "New Public Management," nations and their subnational governments have made strides to meet public expectations for responsiveness, effectiveness, and accountability (Kettl 2005). The main interest within this book falls to on-line provision of public services, such as processing of governmental business transactions and the dissemination of information related to governmental services and programs. Indeed, there has been tremendous success in these areas, with much greater efficiency, economy, and flexibility in how governments worldwide meet their constituents' needs (Fountain 2001; Coursey and Norris 2008). One direction for this book's enhancement of knowledge about Internet-based innovation relates to a conventional view of the "digital divide," the gap between haves and have-nots regarding contemporary or current technological access to on-line services and information (Dewan and Riggins 2005). It is possible, however, to expand the discussion of digital access and application to look beyond service transactions, to the Internet's role in enhancing democratic participation as part of an attempt to reduce the chasm within levels of citizen trust in government. Citizen participation was discussed, at least in theory, within the reform writings of the 1990's, but few worthwhile examples of effective participation initiatives

arose above the community level. The Canadian province of Ontario provides a rich case of well-crafted citizen participation initiatives using both face-to-face techniques as well as Internet-based mechanisms. This chapter builds an understanding of this successful case as a discussion point for the prospects and pitfalls of e-government effort that moves beyond citizen-government transactions toward facilitation of community dialog on behalf of its own self-determination.

Since 2003, the executive in the Canadian province of Ontario, Premier Dalton McGuinty, has made strong strides to expand discourse on policy and administration through a combination of public forums and on-line citizen input mechanisms. This chapter, in turn, discusses the historical precedents driving a need for enhanced citizen input in Ontario, the E-government mechanisms that enabled a combined on-line and face-to-face system for raising citizen input, and the mixed results of these initiatives for altering the face of trust in Ontario government. The case history of Ontario's political and administrative efforts prior to and during the McGuinty government also inform us about the place of a "next generation of E-government" (Management Board Secretariat 2004) in the variety of governmental reforms under way around the world since the 1990's.

Reform is a current by-word in government throughout the world, be it a move toward democratic political processes or a variation of "New Public Management" in the functioning of government agencies, programs, and administration (Kettl 2005). Democratic reform is a fascinating current story, given the dramatic numbers of nations that claim a move toward democratic processes but which do so in a manner lacking authenticity (Ginsborg 2005). This chapter is focused, however, on the public administrative side of governmental reform with its ways to reinvigorate existing democracies in their quest to bolster the citizen-civil service relationship, especially with the help of information technology innovations. A range of improvements to the

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