

Chapter 4

E-Government and Opportunities for Participation: The Case of the Mexican State Web Portals

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ABSTRACT

Electronic government has been considered a powerful strategy for administrative reform. Identified benefits from e-government are numerous and range from efficiency and effectiveness to transparency and democratic participation. However, only a few studies focus on the potential of information technologies (IT) to promote citizen participation in government affairs. This participation could be conceptualized in many different ways, from the possibility of submitting a request or question to actively participating in decision-making and voting online. In some developing countries, opportunities for citizen participation are still very limited and information technologies have the potential to expand these communication channels. Based on an analysis of the 32 state portals in Mexico, this chapter proposes an index of citizen participation opportunities, ranks the portals according to this index, and explores some of the determinants of the availability of these participation opportunities through the case of the Mexican state of Michoacán. We argue that assessing the different channels for citizen participation available through e-government Web sites is an important first step for understanding the relationships between government and citizens. Citizen initiated contacts and participation cannot exist if communication channels are limited or nonexistent.

INTRODUCTION

Government reform through the use of information technology (IT) is an ongoing process. Few changes in government procedures are as visible

as those promoted by IT applications. Some of the main benefits attributed to electronic government are related to greater citizen involvement, improved efficiency in public administration operations, better delivery of public services, and the development of better intergovernmental coordination, all of which contribute to achieving successful results

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from public policies (Kakabadse et al., 2003; OECD, 2003a; Netchaeva, 2002; OECD, 2005c). However, introducing technology into public administration or into the relationships between government and citizens does not guarantee that the potential benefits are attained or that participation will increase.

Given that representative democracy refers to the citizenry's right to vote and elect its representatives, some authors have reduced their analysis of e-Democracy to electoral issues, such as forms of e-Voting, remote voting, or preventing media bias from those interested in a particular outcome (Alvarez & Hall, 2004). However, e-Democracy does not only refer to elections through electronic means, but also to the exchange of information between citizens and elected officials (Murray, 2005). It also includes providing services over the Internet "that facilitate interaction between voters, candidates, and opinion leaders" (Chappelet & Kilchenmann, 2005), among other concepts. In fact, e-democracy should include any form of democratic participation by citizens using any form of IT. This participative aspect of the use of IT has also been considered an important element of a more comprehensive concept of e-government (Gil-Garcia & Luna-Reyes, 2006).

This chapter focuses on the opportunities for citizen participation in state Web sites. The inclusion of democratic concepts, such as transparency, accountability, and civic education may help to improve the relationships between government and citizens (Wong & Welch, 2004). Some of these concepts related to democracy are already reflected in the applications and tools currently used in e-government portals. Based on the analysis of the 32 state portals in Mexico, this chapter proposes an index of citizen participation opportunities, ranks the portals according to this index, and explores some of the determinants of the availability of these participation opportunities through the case of the Mexican state of Michoacán.

The chapter is organized into five sections, including the foregoing introduction. The second

section provides definitions of the main theoretical foundations and describes the variables used in this study. It also presents the construction of an index, which measures the opportunities for participation available in state Web portals. The third section presents the research design and methods used in this study. The fourth section contains the main findings from the evaluation and interviews. Overall, there is great diversity in the participation mechanisms available in each state, thereby providing differentiated opportunities to citizens. Finally, the fifth section provides some conclusions and suggests areas for future research.

ELECTRONIC GOVERNMENT AND E-DEMOCRACY

Theoretically and practically, electronic government and electronic democracy are interrelated phenomena. Both are related to the use of information and communication technologies, but have important differences (Alvarez & Hall, 2004; Amoretti, 2007; Birch and Watt, 2004; Grönlund, 2004; Macintosh et al, 2005a; Margain, 2001). Recent academic literature suggests several approaches that are useful in gaining a better understanding of these two concepts and identifying their differences and similarities, as well as their interrelations.

Electronic Government: A Broad Concept

There are many definitions of electronic government. One of them refers simply to "the delivery of government services and information electronically, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week" (Norris et al., 2001; Holden et al., 2003). The definition of electronic government that will be used in this study, although it condenses and synthesizes a number of definitions provided by various authors, is directly cited from Gil-Garcia and Luna-Reyes

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