

# Chapter 1

## Which Digital State is Now at the Leading Edge? Contrasting Canada and the United States

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### **ABSTRACT**

*As part of ongoing research about the transformative impact of Information Technology (IT) on politics and government, this chapter outlines developments over the last four years in the use of IT in the federal government of Canada and the Province of Ontario. Areas discussed include online political campaigning, politicization of government's online presence, advocacy websites, online service delivery, and public consultation. While Canada and Ontario were previously considered to be at the leading edge and have made progress over the last four years, the 2008 Obama election campaign as well as online consultation and service delivery initiatives undertaken in the first year of the Obama Administration strongly suggest that the United States Government has surpassed Canada.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In our book *Digital State at the Leading Edge*, published in January 2007, my co-authors and I explored whether information technology (IT) is indeed transforming politics and government (Borins et al., 2007). The book attempted to transcend

the bifurcation between research on the impact of IT on politics and research on the impact of IT on service delivery that characterizes the field by considering both areas of impact in an integrated conceptual and empirical framework. As a transformation necessarily unfolds over time, we did this by means of longitudinal research about the impact of IT between 2000 and 2005 upon the federal government of Canada and the government of

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the Province of Ontario, two widely considered to be at the leading edge. (For comparative purposes, the book also included chapters about the US and UK.) The transformation we were tracking was not in the essence of politics (seeking office and exercising power) or government (implementing policy and delivering service) but rather in how people understand and perform these activities. Our research ended with the federal election of January 2006. The purpose of this chapter is to report on how the evolution of the relationship between IT, politics and government in the last four years – a considerable period of time for rapidly-changing technology – focusing on the Canadian and Ontario governments, but continuing to pay attention to the US and UK.

The primary basis for the claim – incorporated in the book’s title – that the Government of Canada was at the leading edge was that it was consistently ranked first in the annual surveys of e-government maturity conducted in the early years of the previous decade by Accenture. Accenture was particularly impressed by Canada’s Government On-Line initiative to put all major government services online and integrate them by user needs rather than departmental affiliation (Borins, 2007, p.37). The e-government literature has identified integrated online service as the penultimate step in the transformation of government, and interactive online democracy as its culmination (West 2005). I consider this notion of a sequence of developmental steps to be deeply flawed because it leads researchers to look first at online services and only later at online democracy initiatives emanating from the public service. As this chapter will show, initiatives in online democracy are more likely to emanate from the political world as the consequence of practices in online campaigning, and may occur well before online government services have been fully developed. This chapter – as reflected in its title – argues that Canada has fallen behind the United States because the Obama Administration has begun to apply to the work of governing the leading edge digital politics

techniques developed by the Obama campaign. Whether or not the United States Government is now *the* leading edge requires comparisons with governments other than Canada’s, something beyond the scope of this chapter.

The research for *Digital State at the Leading Edge* involved two surveys of federal and Ontario legislators, interviews of public servants in the IT area, and comprehensive tracking of party websites during several election campaigns. It was generously supported by grants of \$333,000 Canadian (210,000 GBP at current exchange rates) from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada between 2002 and 2007. The research methodology for this chapter was more informal because it was conducted after the funding for the project expired. In April 2007, I began a weekly blog focusing on the impact of technology on politics and government ([www.sandfordborins.com](http://www.sandfordborins.com)). I observed the use of IT in political campaigning in the 2007 Ontario election, 2008 federal election, and 2008 US primaries and federal election, paying considerable attention to the ways candidates and activists used social media such as YouTube and Facebook. Finally, I did considerable reading about IT, particularly in the newspapers of record in Canada (*The Globe and Mail*) and the US (*The New York Times*). During the last four years, these two newspapers have been paying growing attention to IT issues, as well as expanding their online editions, which have become increasingly important to their readership. It is not uncommon to see hundreds of comments, some by well-known party activists, on lead articles by 6 a.m., just as the print version is being delivered. These observations were validated by a recent Pew Research Center survey that noted that the US population’s use of the Internet as the primary source of news increased dramatically from 24 percent in 2007 to 40 percent in 2008, thus for the first time surpassing newspapers, which held constant at 35 percent (Mindlin, 2009).

This chapter begins by reviewing the conclusions reached in *Digital State at the Leading Edge*

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