

# New Questions for E-Government: Efficiency but not (yet?) Democracy

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## ABSTRACT

*E-government's rise to prominence in the early 1990s was met with great enthusiasm amidst the promise that information communication technologies (ICTs) might fulfill the demands and expectations for improved democratic governance. Since then, significant progress has been made in terms of information provision and delivery of public services; yet, dialogue, a core dimension of democratic governance, remains largely unrealized within the digital context. This study employs content analysis within the frame of a check-off research protocol to determine if the population of state websites has the capacity to support digital democratic dialogue. The key question is whether there is an emphasis within the milieu of state websites to support e-dialogue outside the provision of information and e-services. The analysis suggests that efficiency rather than dialogue is the primary focus in the design of the state websites. Is, therefore, e-government a new development in the historical effort to enforce efficiency as a core value of governance?*

*Keywords: Administrative Efficiency, Citizen Participation and Politics, Democracy, e-Dialogue, e-Government, e-Participation, Governance, Public Policy*

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Starting with the early part of 1990s, an important share of governance shifted into the environment of digital platforms (Lee, Tan, & Trimi 2005; United Nations, 2010). As information communication technologies (ICTs) have evolved, digital applications became the focal point in the pursuit of improved governance (Dawes, 2008), with some scholars describing digitalization as “genuinely transformative” (Dunleavy et al., 2006). E-government is regu-

larly associated with better provision of public services, increased transparency and accountability (Bekkers & Homburg, 2007; Dunleavy et al., 2006; Hanberger, 2003). Johnson (1998) additionally suggested that ICTs could perhaps even revolutionize democracy, while Taylor and Lips (2008) allowed that digital governance might be inevitable within the realm of technological progress. Jaeger (2005) noted that e-government has the potential to become an

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institutional construct that would support a deliberative democracy through reasoned multilevel reflection and active participation.

Since the use of ICTs by government significantly shapes and alters citizens' behaviors (Dunleavy et al., 2006), the implication of the embrace of ICTs as a pillar of governance warrants detailed and careful attention. Along these lines, this article presents the results of exploratory research that asked the questions – What is the underlining narrative enforced in the design and the interaction on the governmental websites? Specifically, is dialogue through the means of ICT, e-dialogue, emphasized and encouraged within the design of the states' websites? Do the websites of the 50 American states “look” and “respond” to citizens who visit them in a manner that would encourage dialogue and democratic participation?

The results suggest instead, a familiar pattern in public administration practice - setting efficiency as a core goal of administrative efforts. Governments and bureaucracies have an affinity towards emphasizing service delivery within e-government (Stahl, 2005); the overarching implications of such dynamics in the realm of e-government have yet to be adequately addressed. In the context of e-governance the “design is the message.” Digital might be a new iteration of efficiency, and if so, e-government initiatives may represent a renewed attempt to engineer, through a dehumanized digital bureaucracy, a government that runs better.

Beyond this introduction, the discussion will be organized within three main sections. First, recent research on e-government and the reality of e-governance will be briefly discussed. The next section will introduce the methodological approach and the results. The paper will conclude with the discussion of the implications of the findings.

## IS E-GOVERNANCE POSSIBLE?

E-government, also described as digital government, typically refers to government's use of information and communication technologies

(ICTs) for purposes of governance (Dawes, 2008; Fountain, 2001; Brown, 2007; Moon, 2002). Similar to a number of other terms in public administration, scholars might employ the construct differently, emphasizing certain assumptions over others (Dawes, 2008; Hardy & Williams, 2011). For example Backus (2001), Lenihan (2005), and Lee, Chang and Berry (2011) draw a clear distinction between e-government and e-democracy. In broad terms, the former refers to using ICTs for provision of services, while the latter refers to supporting citizen participation in governance. Dawes (2008), Ahn and Bretschneider (2011) and United Nations (2003/2010), on the other hand, refer to the use of ICT to support citizens' involvement in governance as e-participation, which does not assume the possibility of a conceptual difference between democracy and e-democracy.

E-governance, on the other hand, “comprises a set of technology-mediated processes that are changing both the delivery of public services and the broader interactions between citizens and government” (Torres, Pina & Royo, 2005, p. 534). Or as Milakovich (2012, p. 9) defines it: “digital governance is a broader umbrella term referring to the networked extension of ICT relationships to include faster access to the Web, mobile service delivery, networking, teleconferencing and multi-channel information technologies to accomplish higher-level two-way transactions.” Hence, e-governance could be thought of as the art of public governance within which the role of ICTs is emphasized. There is an intimate link between participation and democracy that should be noted here. It is theoretically tenuous to refer to the use of ICTs to support citizen participation in the design of policy as e-democracy is theoretically tenuous. This would imply a subtle assumption that the solutions for eluding democratic challenges might be found within improved applications of technology. Only involvement that is intended to lead to changes in policy can be considered as authentic participation; opinion polls and rhetoric driven public discussions can hardly be referred to as anything more than consultations (Hampton, 2009).

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