Chapter VII

Political Implications of Digital (e-) Government

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ABSTRACT

Citizen participation-driven e-government is, in theory, a desirable objective of government. However, it is complex along a variety of dimensions: from a design standpoint, considering the implementation aspects of access, and awareness; from a baseline assessment of what has *been implemented to date empirically; and in terms of a meaningful design of responsive policy. Much of the observed variations in e-government applications is still descriptive in nature and given the rapidly emerging technological and political ramifications, is expected. Following an overview of several examples of different types of participation-related e-government applications, we present preliminary results of an examination of the relationship between state e-government initiatives and underlying demographic, cultural or economic variables. While the population of a state appears to be related to the presence of e-government applications, beyond this, curiously, few of the expected relationships appear, or appear to operate in conflicting manners depending on the dataset used. As such, additional research drawing on larger dataset and more robust instrumentation is needed.*

OVERVIEW

The diffusion and adoption of innovative digital information and communication technologies (ICTs) by government and other public sector entities has been relatively well documented. This recognition has been especially true in terms of uses oriented at

the internal implementation of administrative systems to achieve managerial efficiency, and to enable more robust and broader delivery of service to the citizens (Bellamy & Taylor, 1998; Dutton, 1999; Fountain, 2001).

In many respects, this distribution is a logical extension of the literature dealing with organizational studies., It has resulted in the development of best practices and recommendations appropriate to fine-tuning of administrative systems (Fountain, 2001; Hague & Loader, 1999; Garcon, 2000). For instance, the World Bank website on E*Government[1] delineates the following goals for e-government: Better Service Delivery to Citizens, Improved Services for Business, Transparency & Anticorruption, Empowerment through Information, Efficient Government Purchasing. While two of the three goals do somewhat relate to the "politics" of these technologies, the thrust has more of an administrative, rather than participatory flavor.

Given the relatively recent deployment of the technologies for communication, policymaking and collaborative purposes, the literature on the application and implication of adoption of these systems is much thinner. In part, this can attributed to the fact that many of the most established and connected actors in the political system already had adapted to the efficiency of communication technologies, the use of newer digital ICTs provided merely evolutionary advantages. However, in the broader political sphere, these systems can be expected to provide a greater variety of tools to less "connected" groups, especially at state and local levels, and to groups characterized as less resource rich and those not generally well versed in the use of modern technologies for accessing the political system. While digitally based, ICT-related tools designed to boost general citizen participation exist, they appear to be more common at local and municipal levels, or show a greater variation in implementation (Larsen & Rainie, 2002; Larsen & Rainie, 2002b; West, 2002a, 2002b). It is a bit more problematic to ascertain the connections between the variations that occur between the states and underlying demographic, cultural or economic variables. An examination of some of the extant data about the implementation of e-government, presented below, suggests that population of a state appears to be correlated with degree of e-government applications, but beyond this, curiously, very little of the expected relationships appear. We discuss this below.

At a state and Federal level, the tools that appear to have been implemented are frequently specialized for specific input or comment on regulation (i.e., the FCC's solicitation of comment on pending regulation[2]), or are oriented toward a specialized class of user, such as lobbyists (i.e., Lobbyist in a Box[3]). While the latter might not necessarily come to mind immediately as a type of citizen participation, it does represent a positive movement toward increased involvement in government. The significance is less the groups represented, but rather that these ICT-based tools offer potential for increased kinds of interaction between citizens and governments.

GOVERNMENT, TECHNOLOGY AND KEY STAKEHOLDERS

The complex interaction between technology, society and government embodied in digitally-based interactions suggests that a variety of disciplines can contribute to understanding the implementation and operation of e-government (Hague & Loader, 1999; Garcon, 2000; Hacker & van Dijk, 2000). The cost of technology is still somewhat

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