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## **Chapter VIII**

# **Consequences of the Cyberstate: The Political Implications of Digital Government in International Context**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Emerging technology has provided public sector leaders with unprecedented opportunities to redefine the relationship between citizens and the state. Yet, even as leaders embrace the promise and possibilities afforded by digital government, there is little consensus about the political implications of digital government. While some experts expect little impact, others claim that advances in digital government will have significant political implications. This study assesses the political implications of digital government from an international perspective. Using data recently compiled by the United Nations (U.N.), the findings indicate that digital government is likely to produce significant political implications. Specifically, advances in digital government are likely to engender greater citizen support for government as well as higher levels of political participation.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Emerging technology has recently provided public sector leaders with unprecedented opportunities to redefine the relationship between citizens and the state. Even

as leaders grapple with alternatives over how best to incorporate technologies in their provision of services, there is little doubt that progress has been made and that, in many cases, the “rhetoric” of e-Government is becoming a reality. Yet, even as leaders embrace the promise and possibilities afforded by digital government, there are fewer consensus about the political implications of e-Government.

Two camps have emerged in the debate about the political implications of digital government. On one side, experts argue that digital government will have few, profound political implications. Implementation barriers, concerns about privacy and security, and reliability and access issues, they argue, will perpetually limit the possibilities of e-Government and compromise its efficiency. Digital government may supplement the government’s current system, but it is unlikely to replace it entirely. It may add a spoke in the governmental wheel, so to speak, but it will not reinvent it. As a result, the implications for politics and for democracy will be minimal, at best.

Proponents of the opposite viewpoint argue that digital government will fundamentally reshape citizens’ interactions with government. The benefits of greater efficiency and reduced costs are likely to engender favor towards the government amongst the citizenry, perhaps even encouraging increased participation in the political process. Consequently, they believe the political implications of digital government will be profound.

This selection will analyze the global status of digital government. It presents a balanced summary of each perspective and of the major arguments that each camp uses to advance its claims. Then evidence is presented that speaks to the political implications of digital government in international context. This analysis will focus on two aspects of political life: the public’s level of confidence in government and political participation. In the end, the findings reveal that digital government has important political implications on these two critical components of politics.

## **THE GLOBAL GROWTH OF DIGITAL GOVERNMENT**

Governments throughout the world have been consistently leveraging emerging technologies to enhance the lives of citizens and to improve the governing process since the mid-1990s. Most recently, the global growth of digital government has been impressive. A comprehensive, worldwide study commissioned by the United Nations (Benchmarking E-government, 2002) and released in May 2002 claims that “[f]rom Armenia to Zaire, the concept of e-government is being openly embraced (5).” The report finds that 2001 saw a greater expansion of government online presence than during the previous five years combined. It estimates that over 50,000 official government websites exist worldwide, compared to only 50 in 1996. Of the U.N.’s 190 member states, 169 are providing some level of information and services online. Each of these states has an official government website, 84 have a national government website, 36 have a single entry portal, 84 have sub-national government websites, and 17 have online transaction capacity. A separate study of 22 nations, conducted by *Accenture* in 2001, claims that “online service delivery has never been higher on the political agenda than it is today. From the United Kingdom to the United States, Belgium to Brazil and Malaysia to Mexico,

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