

Chapter 29

New Technology

Communication in American State Governments: The Impact on Citizen Participation

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effects of states' e-government efforts, more specifically the progress of e-service and e-democracy, on citizens' general political engagement and electoral participation. Utilizing the combined data with the state level of West's e-Government measures (2008) and the individual level of the 2008 American Election Study, this study finds a strong link between state sponsored efforts at e-Government and traditional forms of the public's political participation. State sponsored digital services and outreach increase general political participation more than campaign activities, and the implementation of e-democracy has a greater effect on mobilization than e-service. The results imply that e-government has potential to ameliorate political exclusion by letting the politically disadvantaged access a higher quality of information with an equalized accessibility through state governments' electronic systems.

INTRODUCTION

Information technology adopted by government, or e-Government, has become part of the infrastructure of American state government (Yun

& Opheim, 2010). States are using the Internet to make it significantly easier for citizens to do business online; they are also providing increasing opportunities for citizens and public officials to interact. This development has encouraged more and more people to use the Internet as a source of

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information (Anstead & Chadwick, 2008; Bennett, 2007; Lupia & Philpot, 2005).

While most observers and practitioners believe e-Government has improved government efficiency and processes, there is also speculation that digital technology enhances the quantity and quality of citizen participation (Fang, 2002; Seifert & Chung, 2009). Indeed, the evolution of e-Government is moving beyond providing information and services to the public to subsequent models of engagement. These models urge the implementation of three principles: transparency, participation and collaboration (Chun, Shulman, Sandoval, & Hovy, 2010). Thus technology may enhance citizens' expectations of their own impact in the policy process and government's accountability in general. Such feelings of "empowerment" may very well encourage political participation in general, and in both offline and online behavior.

This research examines e-Government's potential for mobilization of citizens. That is, the study investigates whether state efforts to digitize state services and outreach can encourage a more engaged public in traditional and electoral political participation. While there is a growing body of research on the impact of the Internet and participation in general, there is a dearth of studies that examine the potential impact of states' digitalization of government on mobilization of citizen participation. In addition, this study investigates whether state implementation of digital technology is altering the traditional demographic patterns of political participation. Is e-Government encouraging political activity from those who have been less likely to participate, that is, those who have been socially excluded?

The chapter begins by reviewing the literature highlighting the link between digitalization of government services and outreach and the mobilization of political participation. The study then narrows this review to the mobilization of socially disadvantaged groups. The chapter then addresses definitions of e-Government, that is, the

latter is refined to delineate between government's implementation of e-Service versus e-Democracy. Using two different indices to measure participation, the study examines the relationship between digitalization efforts in the American states and public political participation.

BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

Government Information Technology (E-Government) and Political Mobilization

As a part of governments' efforts to deliver public services and enhance their democratic processes, many governments worldwide have attempted to establish speedy and efficient e-Government systems. In the U.S., the Clinton-Gore administration's focus on information technology accelerated state governments' adoption of electronic communication systems. This focus encouraged the transformation of hierarchical communication to horizontal communication between governments and citizens (Chadwick & May, 2003).

The diffusion of Internet technology in American state governments has been occurring at a brisk pace (McNeal, Tolbert, Mossberger, & Dotterweich, 2003). Almost all states now provide publications and databases. More and more sites offer privacy and security statements, and a majority now comply with the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) standards for disability access. Over the last decade states have been offering more and more services online (Yun & Opheim, 2010). The most common of these services include business registration, professional licensing, driver license and license plate renewal, filing and paying taxes, locating information on sex offenders and missing persons, and "Do Not Call List" registration. Many state legislatures offer bill and legislation search and live broadcasts of legislative sessions (West, 2007).

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