

E-Government and Political Communication in the North American Context

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INTRODUCTION

This article will introduce the concept of e-government, provide a model and background, and discuss emerging issues. Canadian examples will be drawn into the discussion as the country recognized as the leader in e-government (Accenture, 2004).

E-government (electronic government) is a component of e-governance (electronic governance). The context of e-governance includes such components as e-government, e-democracy, e-representation, e-consultation, and e-participation. E-government refers to those aspects of government in which information and communications technologies are or can be utilized and in which basic functions are to increase efficiency in administrative processes, to guarantee easy access to information for all, to provide quality e-services, and to enhance democracy with the help of new technological mediation tools (Anttiroiko, 2005). It can be seen to describe all of the processes (administrative and democratic) that combine to constitute public sector operations, as broadly defined by Grönlund (2002). E-government is defined as “the use of ICTs [information and communication technologies], and particularly the Internet, as a tool to achieve better government” (OECD, 2003). E-government involves goals of enhanced operational efficiency and enhanced effectiveness. Effectiveness gains are attributed to “a better quality of services and increased and better quality citizen participation in democratic processes” (Grönlund, 2002). E-government relates to how the government delivers information, services, and programs. It relates to who provides services and how the services are delivered (Lenihan, 2002). At the core of e-government is the provision of information. E-government tasks include who and how, while e-democracy deliberates on what is to be delivered. Determining what services are to be delivered is a function of policy deliberation. The ability to research policy issues is an important element of a democracy. Stakeholders can share in the responsibility for developing the policy agenda, policy outcomes, and policy effectiveness. Public participation in this process will be discussed under the topics of e-democracy, e-representation, e-consultation, and e-participation.

E-GOVERNMENT MODEL

E-government and political communication can be modeled as a star topology. Members of the public receive communications from the government and political representatives. The communication flow is unidirectional from the internal node to the external nodes. The single internal node is reminiscent of the root in the traditional government hierarchical form. The unidirectional information and communications flow is one-to-many or one-to-one. This unidirectional communication is a monologue vs. a dialogue. The agenda and content of the communication is determined by the central agency. Communication flow from the external nodes to the central agency occurs only in response to specific requests. The opportunities to participate in online services are determined by the central agency.

The primary attributes of e-government include information provision, service delivery, and program support. These components are altered in fundamental form due to their electronic structure. The government workflow is reconfigured due to electronic workflow and productivity implications.

Cremonini and Botterman (2002) define e-government as “the use of ICT to improve the efficiency, effectiveness, transparency, and accountability of government.” They categorize participants of e-government, including citizens, businesses, other government agencies at the same hierarchical level, other levels of government, wider public sector (including nongovernmental agencies), foreign governments, and supranational entities. This expansive list of e-government participants may be involved in the information flow either to or from the government.

Information provision supports government transparency and accountability with implications for building a healthy democracy. The key distinction between e-government from e-democracy is this unidirectional flow with no dialogue and feedback provisions available at the point of contact. Accessible information is a basis for democracy and supports government legitimacy. Information sharing is a critical precursor to allow for e-democracy to develop. An understanding of the issues,

questions, and alternative solutions is necessary to support a deliberate and valid discourse available through e-democracy. As Lenihan (2002) points out, the Internet can provide more than a tool for disseminating documents. It can become a venue for discussion, debate, and engagement. E-democracy is based on this ICT extension of the democratic public sphere.

In Canada, this model serves to further a national vision. Canada's e-government goal is "to be known around the world as the government most connected to its citizens, with Canadians able to access all government information and services online at the time and place of their choosing" (Accenture, 2004, p. 68). The majority of Canadians have accessed e-government information, services, and programs. Of the 63.41% of Canada's population who are regular Internet users, 79% have visited an e-government Web site (Accenture, 2004).

In the United States, the E-Government Task Force clearly understands the merit of e-government. The Task Force stated:

E-Government is critical to meeting today's citizens and business expectations for interaction with government. It will enable agencies to align efforts as needed to significantly improve service and reduce operating costs. (Forman, 2002, p. 3)

E-government is based on a desire for time efficiency and cost effectiveness relating to the provision of information and access to services and programs. Connected members of society enjoy the ability to access government information quickly and easily. Government enjoys the efficiency of providing information, services, and program through online tools. Mass processing of transactions is time-efficient and cost-effective when compared to labor-intensive processes used in the past.

TIME EFFICIENCY

In an average day:

- The majority of my work day is spent at a computer.
- I use the Internet to gain information necessary to complete professional and personal tasks.
- I may shop online.
- I am involved in online learning (e-learning).
- I communicate with friends and colleagues predominantly through e-mail.

The way I work, shop, learn, and communicate has radically changed due to the use of ICTs. The tools I use to complete my daily tasks are based on ICTs. My methodology has changed as well as my relationships with

individuals and organizations with whom I communicate. Whom I contact, what tasks I complete, the amount of time resources, what information I obtain, and how I communicate with individuals involved have changed fundamentally due to the use of ICTs. My objectives are facilitated by online activities. Similarly, the objectives of organizations and governments are facilitated by my online activities. The symbiotic beneficial relationship (win-win) is an attribute of e-government.

E-government is based on citizens receiving information, services, and program support from government facilitated by ICTs. The government benefits from my use of the Internet in that this form of communication is very efficient from a human resource perspective. I also benefit from being able to find the answers to my questions through documented sources at anytime and from anyplace. For example, leading up to the recent federal election, there was news media coverage of the various party leaders relating to military spending. I was able to determine the exact amounts proposed in each party's budget and to read additional text on each party's platform. Telephoning party officials during work hours in order to request a mailed copy of each platform would have cost substantially more in human resources and time. Instead, the information was readily available to me with the click of a mouse, and I was able to make an informed electoral decision.

A growing number of Canadians are seeking government information similarly with the click of a mouse. In 1998, 8.2% of all households sought government information over the Internet. This figure increased to 29.2% in 2002 (Statistics Canada, 2004a). The number of Canadians visiting the federal government's Canada site has increased substantially. There were approximately 16 million visits to the Web site in 2003 (Government of Canada, 2004). The number of visitors increased 21% from 2002. Generally, client feedback has been positive, with 86% of visitors finding the information sought (Government of Canada, 2004). Citizens also are coming to expect online provision of information, services, and programs. The following statistics shared by Zussman (2002) clearly show the public's support for e-government initiatives:

- 77% of Canadians believe that the Internet will improve how they receive services from the government of Canada.
- 73% believe that putting services and information online is a good use of tax dollars.

COST EFFECTIVENESS

Mass communications such as online provision of information is extremely efficient when compared to historical

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