Chapter 29
E–Government in the OECD:
A Comparative Geographic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The literature on electronic government (e-government) often assumes that there exists one suitable model that can be adopted in all contexts. This chapter emphasizes the constitutive role of political and institutional context in the design, implementation, and impacts of e-government initiatives, the understanding of which require a geographically-specific analysis. It begins with a summary of various styles of e-government, including differing models and stages of implementation. Second, it offers empirical synopses of how e-government varies among and within OECD countries, emphasizing that the impacts are always culturally and politically mediated. Third, it points to the role of the digital divide in shaping citizen access to e-government, re-enforcing existing social inequalities and enhancing the access of already information-privileged groups to the levers of state power.

INTRODUCTION

As the internet has spread rapidly to encompass more than 30% of the planet's population in 2011, its applications have multiplied accordingly, including an ongoing reshaping of the interactions between many governments and their citizens. In addition to the growth of personal and commercial uses of the internet, electronic government, or e-government, expanded in tandem throughout the world. User-friendly graphical interfaces expedited this process enormously and opened the possibility of two-way flows of digital information between citizens and their states (and more recently, have paved the way

for mobile governance, or m-government). There are many definitions of e-government (Yildiz 2007), but all essentially point to the use of information technologies (typically the internet) to facilitate the delivery of government information and services, restructure administrative procedures, and enhance citizen participation. As Jaeger and Thompson (2004) note, "e-government is quickly becoming 'simply the way things are done' in technologically advanced nations" (p. 95). Not surprisingly, the topic has drawn considerable scholarly attention (for a review, see Rocheleau 2007 and the *International Journal of Electronic Government Research*).

E-government takes a wide variety of forms, ranging from simple, static, one-way broadcasting of information via webpages to integration (i.e., allowing user input) that enables two-way flows and citizen feedback (Tapscott 1998). Often e-government is divided into government-to-business (G2B), government-to-government (G2G), and government-to-citizens (G2C) forms (Fountain 2001). B2B e-government includes digital submissions of bids, contracts, and bills. G2G e-government enhances communication and interaction among different government agencies. All of these variations are held to increase accessibility and efficiency; as Tapscott (1995: 163) notes,

Internet worked government can overcome the barriers of time and distance to perform the business of government and give people public information and services when and where they want them. Governments can use electronic systems to deliver better quality products to the public more quickly, cost effectively and conveniently.

E-government may also encourage public bureaucracies to modernize their administrative practices, moving from classic forms based on hierarchical control to more horizontal, collaborative forms (Ho 2002; Ndou 2004). Perhaps most common is G2C e-government, which allows, for example, for the digital collection of taxes; electronic voting; payment of utility bills, fines, and dues; applications for various types of public programs, permits and licenses; on-line registration of companies and automobiles; access to census and other public data; and reductions in waiting times in government offices. Cities may promote themselves on the Web as a means to entice tourists and foreign investors; interactive municipal sites give residents access to information about schools, libraries, bus schedules, and hospitals; even downloading official forms facilitates citizen participation. By making public records more open, e-government may increase responsiveness and empower citizens to challenge arbitrary government actions, enhancing transparency.

Similarly, digital hotlines for submission of citizen complaints give voice to those who are typically voiceless in the circles of governance. Concerns over e-government include the potential invasions of privacy that it invites, local and national security, and the inequality of access generated by digital divides (about which more later).

Naïve views of the impacts of the internet hold that it leads to the "death of distance" (Cairncross 1997), the "death of geography" (O'Brien 1992), or an ostensibly "flat world" (Friedman 2005). In this technologically-determinist reading, because everyone connected to the internet can access virtually everyone else, the impacts are similar everywhere. In the context of e-government, such a stance implies that there is, or at least there can be, a generic, universal model (e.g., Grant and Chau 2005) that can be applied everywhere in cookie-cutter fashion. In contrast, more realistic appraisals focus on the institutional and political contexts in which e-government is adopted, which lead to enormous differences in effects and impacts. A central goal of this chapter is to refute such assertions by emphasizing the profound geographical variations that exist in the nature and consequences of e-government among (and within) countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which consists of the largest 34 economies in the world. Because e-government is best developed in economically developed countries, the analysis is confined to such states, but as e-government has gradually spread to parts of the developing world, the spatial variations in its applications and impacts have multiplied correspondingly.

The chapter summarizes the literature on e-government in the OECD, stressing the theme of social inclusivity and exclusivity. Its primary aim is to demonstrate the socially and geographical variable nature of e-government among and within the world's economically advanced countries. It proceeds in three steps. First it outlines broad arguments pertaining to the forms that e-government assumes, including different

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