Chapter V

Culture and Trust in the Adoption of Electronic Voting:
A Look at the USA and South Africa*

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ABSTRACT

Trust is a cornerstone of society, and it enables democratic institutes. It captures people's expectations about others' (the trustees) socially-acceptable behavior. In the context of information technology (IT) adoption, trust also increases the perceived usefulness (PU) of IT associated with the trustee's agency. One way of increasing this trust is through greater sociocultural similarity. Extrapolating based on previous research to the realm of electronic voting, this chapter posits that because trust is culture-dependent, it should decrease considerably as cultural diversity and differentiation increases. To investigate the role of trust in IT adoption in different cultures where dissimilar concepts of socially-acceptable behavior exist, this study

* This project is in cooperation with Accenture South Africa (www.accenture.co.za)

compares trust-related perceptions of an emerging IT, namely electronic voting, between the United States of America (USA) and the Republic of South Africa (RSA). More specifically, the question was addressed by comparing the unique circumstances of the cultural changes in the RSA with the more socially-integrated mainstream USA culture. In both cultures, perceived sociocultural similarity between the individual and the agency in charge of the electronic voting IT contributed to both the establishment of trust and to an increase in the perceived usefulness of the IT, supporting and extending the extrapolations of past propositions to this new realm. However, only in the USA did trust contribute to the PU of the IT. The results suggest that when cultural diversity is large, trust becomes of lesser importance, perhaps because it can no longer reduce social uncertainty. Implications for researchers and governmental voting agencies are discussed, and future research directions are proposed.

INTRODUCTION

Electronic Government (e-government) is the ability of citizens to interact with a government organization using electronic technology, primarily the Internet. Because of the extensive use of technology, it is beneficial to examine e-government adoption by regarding citizens as also IT users, which is actually in accordance with previous research. According to Taylor and Todd (1995), IT adoption not only encompasses hardware and software use, but also the use of services that surround the technology, as well as the people and procedures to support that technology.

Viewing e-government adoption as IT adoption brings trust into the story. Trust is a central issue that facilitates IT adoption, when the IT is a social medium through which individuals interact or transact business with other people or organizations (Gefen, 2000, 2002a, 2002c; Gefen, Karahanna, & Straub, 2003; Jarvenpaa, Tractinsky, & Vitale, 2000; McKnight, Choudhury, & Kacmar, 2002; Pavlou, 2003). The e-government medium is an instance where trust should have a prominent role.

Of course, IT adoption also depends on the ITs Perceived Usefulness (PU), originally defined as "the individual's assessment of the ability of a specific IT to increase his or her performance at some task or activity" (Davis, 1989). In the case of e-government processes, such as electronic voting (e-voting), this definition would narrowly address how well the IT manages the activity of casting and counting votes. In this study, however, we adopt a broader definition of the term as it has been applied by more recent research in e-commerce (Gefen et al., 2003). In e-commerce, as in e-voting, the IT is only a conduit to a much broader process which includes organizational activity beyond what the Web site reveals. Accordingly, PU is herein defined as "perceptions that the IT increases the productivity of the overall *process* of which the voting machines are a conduit." In other words, the PU of e-voting deals with both the usefulness of the IT itself in handling the voting activity, and with the usefulness of the whole voting process done through the IT beyond its limited technological perspective.

In this broader definition of PU, related research in e-commerce and enterprise resource planning (ERP) implementation has shown that trust increases the positive assessment of IT usefulness because that assessment depends on whether the personnel deploying and managing the voting process, of which the IT is the starting point, are trustworthy, and whether they will fulfill their socially expected roles, as is the case with

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