E-Government and Multi-Level Governance: 
A Comparative Examination of Catalonia, Spain, and Ontario, Canada

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ABSTRACT

E-government is entering its second decade as a widely-embraced agenda for public sector reform. There are often distinctions made between e-government as administrative reform and e-governance as democratic reform, although there is invariable overlap between both spheres. In this context, the purpose of this paper is to undertake an examination of the impacts of e-government on both administration and democracy in a multi-level governance environment. In doing so, we will provide a comparative assessment of two sub-national jurisdictions known for investing aggressively in e-government in recent years: Catalonia, Spain, and Ontario, Canada. This investigation will thus seek to identify the manner by which the pursuit of e-government by a state and a province is intertwined with – or separate from federalist structures.

Keywords: accountability; Catalonia; democracy; electronic; federalism; governance; government; integration; Ontario; service

INTRODUCTION

This article examines e-government as a nexus of three inter-related sets of governance challenges: 1) service delivery and administrative modernization; 2) democratic engagement and accountability; and 3) federalism and inter-governmental dynamics in multi-level environments. These three challenges may be summarized in the following manner: service, democracy, and federalism.

As our primary interest lies in investigating the implications of the service and democracy components of e-government for federalism, the objectives of this article are twofold: first, to provide a conceptual review based in the research literature and our own past works of the ways in which
federalist public sector environments may or may not be well suited to e-government reform; and secondly, to contrast the experiences of two specific case studies, namely Catalonia in Spain and Ontario in Canada.

Both jurisdictions provide important case studies in their own right, in terms of what is happening within them, but also with respect to how their own reform agendas are intertwined with multi-level governance realities both below and above this state-provincial level. At the same time, there are important discussions underway in both Canada and Spain pertaining the functioning and financing of federalism, dynamics that are likely to shape e-government’s evolution in both countries at all governance levels. Finally, the continental dimensions of European and North American integration provide an additional governance variable that merits consideration.

Our guiding premise in undertaking this study is that there is likely to be some tension between the rhetoric and optimistic portrayal of e-government as movement toward more seamless governance systems (i.e., collaborative, integrated, and customer/citizen-centric in orientation) and the administrative, political, and technological structures of a public sector comprised of multiple decision-making levels. To what degree these tensions exist, how jurisdictions such as Catalonia and Ontario are addressing them, and the implications for the future of e-government represent the contours of the comparative investigation presented here.

Building on this introduction, section two presents a conceptual framework for better defining and dissecting e-government along service and democratic lines. Section three examines the challenges and opportunities of federalism in an increasingly digital world. Section four presents the comparative cases of Catalonia and Ontario, and section five summarizes the main conclusions emerging from an assessment of the similarities and differences of both jurisdictions.

E-GOVERNMENT AS SERVICE AND DEMOCRACY

E-government is entering its second decade as an agenda for public sector reform that has been pursued, to varying degrees, in most parts of the world (Oliver & Sanders, 2004). There are often distinctions made between e-government as service transformation and administrative reform on the one hand, and new forms of democratic participation and engagement on the other hand.

Reflecting the inclusion of both spheres in the public sector’s digital renewal, we adopt the following widely-encompassing definition of e-government as inclusive of many sorts of changes:

The continuous innovation in the delivery of services, citizen participation, and governance through the transformation of external and internal relationships by the use of information technology, especially the Internet.¹

All of these dimensions are related, directly or indirectly, to the widening presence and rapidly-expanding importance of a digital infrastructure encompassing information and communication technologies and online connectivity.

During the 1990s, as countries and other jurisdictions began to develop a Web presence, it became intuitive that an online
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