Cultural Diversity and Trust in IT Adoption: A Comparison of Potential e-Voters in the USA and South Africa

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ABSTRACT

To trust means to have expectations about others’ (the trustees’) socially acceptable behavior. One of the central effects of this trust in the context of IT adoption is to increase the perceived usefulness (PU) of Information Technology (IT) associated with the trustee’s agency. One way of increasing this trust is through greater sociocultural similarity. Taking previous research into the realm of electronic voting, this paper 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 compares trust-related perceptions of an emerging IT (i.e., 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, a 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.

Keywords: citizen access; individual rights; Internet policy; Internet trust; IS project planning; IT in less developed countries; marketing of MIS; MIS implementation; national culture; public policy; socio-technical approach
INTRODUCTION

Electronic Government (eGovernment) 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 eGovernment 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 and the people and procedures that support them.

Viewing eGovernment 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, 1999; Jarvenpaa, Tractinsky, & Vitale, 2000; McKnight, Choudhury, & Kacmar, 2002; Pavlou, 2003). The eGovernment medium is an instance where trust should have a prominent role.

Of course, IT adoption also depends on the IT’s 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, p. 320). In the case of eGovernment processes, such as electronic voting (eVoting), 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 eCommerce (Gefen, Karahanna, & Straub, 2003). In eCommerce, as in eVoting, the IT is only a conduit to a much broader process that 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 eVoting deals with both the usefulness of the IT 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 eCommerce and 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 eCommerce (Gefen, 2004; Gefen, Karahanna, & Straub, 2003). In the case of eVoting, these socially expected roles include activities beyond the limited interaction that voters have with the IT, including the honest and proper management of the whole voting and counting processes. Similar to eCommerce, trust is likely to increase PU in eVoting. Since many of the benefits from an eVoting system depend on the agency behaving in a socially acceptable manner, citizens, assessing the situation rationally, should expect more usefulness from eVoting when the agency and its personnel can be presumed to be trustworthy.

Another aspect of IT adoption is culture. Unfortunately, most empirical research in eCommerce and eGovernment has dealt exclusively with the USA and similar Western cultures. Moreover, even when that research was not conducted in the USA, it still involved mainly educated young adults (frequently students) in cultures where sectarian influences are small. How-
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