Chapter 9
The Role of Trust in the Global Acceptance of E-Government

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ABSTRACT
Throughout the world, the number of e-government applications enabled by information and communication technologies (ICT) is proliferating. Some of the newer applications allow for interaction between government officials and its citizenry. As a result, the concept of a public sphere and e-democracy is becoming more of a reality. In all of these applications, one would expect that the level of trust within the society would be an important factor in determining the level of adoption. Using cross-country data from 140 countries, this empirical study extends past research by examining the impact of trust on the level of e-government where national diversity is used as a proxy of trust within a nation. The major empirical finding of this research shows that, even after controlling for the level of economic development and other socio-economic factors, trust as measured by ethnic and religious diversity, was a significant factor affecting e-government usage.

INTRODUCTION
In today’s global economy, a country’s level of e-government, or the use of information and communication technology (ICT) to provide government services, has emerged as an important policy tool for government. Recent studies indicate that the use of e-government is growing throughout the world (Mossberger, Tolbert, and Stansbury, 2003 and Larsen & Rainie, 2002). Formally defined as “the delivery of government information and services online via the Internet or other digital means” (West 2000, page 1), e-government offers many benefits to its major stakeholders.

Implemented properly, it can be a cost effective method to deliver public services which can result
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in significant gains for the national economy. E-government initiatives also foster competitiveness by further enabling the integration of a country into the global community. A country that engages in e-government signals to the international community that it is open, transparent, and efficient, and creates an environment conducive to its users by streamlining procedures and providing easy access to a variety of public services (Thomas & Streib, 2003 and Peterson & Seifert, 2002). While the emphasis in e-government applications has been on providing information and services, a subtle shift has been occurring with ICT becoming the means to involve citizens in the democratic process. The recent election of President Barack Obama in the United States (U.S.) and some of the initiatives his administration is encouraging can best be described as open systems allowing the citizenry to have a stronger voice in arriving at national decisions or policy (Lyons and Stone, 2008).

As a result of such efforts and other worldwide initiatives, ICT is now enabling the concept of a public sphere, first proposed by Habermas (1962). The public sphere is a societal entity where people and groups can join together to freely identify and discuss issues, and possibly through such discussion influence political action. It’s “a discursive space in which individuals and groups congregate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment” (Hauser 1998, pg. 86). Given its value to a country both in regard to domestic and international relations, it is important to understand the factors that encourage the use of e-government.

To date, the majority of e-government research studies are narrowly defined case studies which are qualitative in nature (Devadoss et al., 2002 and Ke & Wei, 2004). In regard to quantitative research, the primary focus has been on the availability of technical infrastructure and its usage at a country-level, while others have considered how digital technology and online services allow citizens to accomplish tasks easily (West, 2000 and Steyaert, 2004). Broader studies by West (2003) and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) (2003) have explored how the use of ICT transforms the role of the government in regard to the level of economic and human development. However, only a few recent studies such as Kovačić (2005), Rose (2005), and Srivastava and Teo (2007) have explored which factors drive the level of e-government within a country. These studies have found that several “hard”, socio-economic and institutional factors such as freedom of expression, civil rights, level of development, and infrastructure significantly affect a country’s e-government usage. However, little to no research has considered “soft” factors such as trust that can also impact the successful implementation and adoption of e-government. These “soft” factors will become more critical as countries in their e-government pursue the concept of the public sphere and encourage greater participation of citizens in decision-making processes.

This study contributes to the advancements of e-government research by empirically exploring the relationship between trust and e-government globally. Using cross-country data from 140 countries, the relationship between trust and e-government is examined using regression analysis. In addition, cluster analysis is used to explore emerging global patterns in the use of e-government. If trust does indeed emerge as a significant factor as to why countries differ in the level of e-government, policy makers working to enhance e-government usage will also need to consider policies and methods to promote trust. Further, if trust is found to be an important precursor to successful e-government adoption, implementation, and promotion, this study will help lay the foundations for future analyses and provide the first roadmap for such policies and recommendations.