Chapter IX

Civic Engagement via E-Government Portals: Information, Transactions, and Policy Making*

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Abstract

This exploratory study examines civic engagement with e-government via Web sites. It provides an analytical framework that integrates both the supply and demand sides of citizen interaction with e-government. In modeling three dimensions of online civic engagement (government information access, service transactions, and contributing to government policy-making processes), the study framework incorporates a number of variables, including political activism, civic involvement, perceived benefits and difficulties, information channels, and demographic characteristics. Based on a national sample of Internet users, the study highlights the importance of the supply side (availability of e-government) for promoting civic engagement. Furthermore, political activism is found to be positively related to accessing gov-

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ernment policy information and contributing to policy-making processes. The study results also confirm the significant impact of perceived benefits in fostering online civic engagement. Future research can benefit from this study by utilizing a more comprehensive model, treating various dimensions of online engagement separately, and conducting an in-depth analysis of the elements of perceived benefits.

Introduction

Electronic government services have gradually evolved from simply providing information on Web portals to offering citizens opportunities to communicate and conduct online transactions. Engaging citizens online to improve governance and facilitate e-democracy remains one of the key challenges of the next generation of electronic government (Pratchett & Krimmer, 2005). Norris and Moon (2005) report, however, that there is little progress made at the local level in adopting interactive services (Norris & Moon, 2005). A study of local government officials also suggests that e-democracy is not high on their agenda for future deployment of electronic government (Norris, 2005). Surveys of government Web sites indicate that even, when available, interactive features to engage citizens in formulating public policy are rarely used (West, 2004). Although with the introduction of Internet technologies, governments are shifting away from the traditional bureaucratic paradigm, providing customer services rather than enhancing citizen participation in policy making remains the primary focus (Ho, 2002). This seems to be a missed opportunity when recent evidence has shown a positive link between visiting local government Web sites and trust in government (Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006).

Learning from experience and building on the information and communication infrastructure, government can introduce meaningful ways to engage citizens in the policy making process. One of the main criticisms of current e-government concerns the top-down bias impacting decisions on what type and nature of information and services are to be provided (McNeal, Tolbert, Mossberger, & Dotterweich, 2003). Thus, e-government tends to either ignore the citizen’s perspective or misunderstand it. Moreover, existing scholarly literature on e-government seems to pay limited attention to the citizen’s perspective. Studies of transparency (Pandey & Bretschneider, 1997), information and service delivery (Holden et al, 2003), online public involvement (Scott, 2006), and reforms (Ho, 2002) are mostly based on surveys of either government Web sites and/or government officials. Although some popular studies take a more citizen-centric approach in trying to understand the demand side (e.g., Graafland-Essers & Etteedgui, 2003; Horrigan, 2004), such studies have limited analytical methodologies for understanding the impact of individual factors. One exception is the investigation of the factors leading to e-government adoption by Carter and Belanger (2004), who tested the impact of several variables on intent to
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