Effects of e-governance on trust and confidence in government

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ABSTRACT

E-government has been proposed as a way to increase citizen trust in government, and to improve citizen evaluations of government more generally. Using few survey data and literature reviews, we explore the relationship between e-government use, attitudes about e-government, and finally, trust in government. There is a statistically significant relationship between trust and use of a local government website, as well as other positive assessments of federal and local governments, in particular. The evidence suggests that e-government can increase process-based trust by improving interactions with citizens and perceptions of responsiveness. The findings are theoretically important for reconciling previous conflicting research on the effects of e-government, and for understanding variations by level of government. Citizen attitudes toward government, including trust, are core concerns for democratic governance and public administration.

Keywords: e-government, digitalization, government, democracies.

INTRODUCTION

Recognising the increasing importance of electronics, the Government of India established the Department of Electronics in 1970. The subsequent establishment of the National Informatics Centre (NIC) in 1977 was the first major step towards e-Governance in India as it brought ‘information’ and its communication in focus. In the early 1980s, use of computers was confined to very few organizations. The advent of personal computers brought the storage, retrieval and processing capacities of computers to Government offices. By the late 1980s, a large number of government officers had computers but they were mostly used for ‘word processing’. Gradually, with the introduction of better softwares, computers were put to other uses like managing databases and processing information. Advances in communications technology further improved the versatility and reach of computers, and many Government departments started using ICT for a number of applications like tracking movement of papers and files, monitoring of development programmes, processing of employees’ pay rolls, generation of reports etc.

Does e-government improve citizen attitudes toward government? Can it remedy the problem of declining public trust and confidence in government that has been apparent for more than three decades? According to Norris (2001, 113) “there is widespread concern that the public has lost faith in the performance of the core institutions of representative government, and it is hoped that more open and transparent government and more efficient service delivery could help restore that trust.” E-government, which has been proposed as one solution, “refers to the delivery of [government] information and services online via the Internet or other digital means,” (West 2000, 2) and may also include opportunities for online political participation (Mossberger, Tolbert and Stansbury 2003). E-government holds promise for improved delivery of many types of public services, including online transactions, as well as disseminating information about the operation of government. It can improve communication between citizens and government through email, enabling more direct participation in government decision-making (Thomas and Streib 2003).

The purpose of this study is to provide an empirical evaluation of the impact of e-government on citizen attitudes about government. Reversing the decline in public trust in government is one of the dilemmas of modern governance, and has been the focus of a great deal of theory and research (Levi and Stoker 2000; Nye, Zelikow and King 1997). The problem has also inspired myriad proposals for government reform, including market-based or entrepreneurial reforms that seek to make the administration of government more efficient and effective (National Performance Review 1993; Osborne and Gaebler 1992; Peters 2001, Chapter 2). Other proposals for government reform prescribe increased citizen participation in
the political process to counteract declining trust in government (Dryzek 1990; Barber 1984; Fishkin 1993; Bowler, Donovan and Tolbert 1998; Donovan and Bowler 2004). Drawing upon both of these prescriptions for reform, governments and institutions such as the European Union and United Nations have portrayed e-government as a renewal of the relationships between governments and citizens (Chadwick and May 2003; United Nations 2001, 5).

Trust in Government

Trust in government slid into a steep decline in the mid-1960s, and has been persistently low ever since, despite short-lived fluctuations, including a temporary respite after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In 1958 almost three-quarters of people surveyed said they trusted the federal government “to do what is right” most of the time or just about always. Only 40 percent professed this level of confidence in 2002. In 1994, the proportion of the population trusting the federal government reached a century low of 21 percent, and has been hovering around 40 percent since the 1970s (Donovan and Bowler 2004, 17-18). What is meant by “trust in government,” and why does it matter? According to Miller and Listhaug (1990, 358 cf. Levi and Stoker 2000), trust in government is an evaluation of “whether or not political authorities and institutions are performing in accordance with normative expectations held by the public.” Declining trust has been linked to declines in political participation by some of the leading scholars in the field (Hetherington 1998 and 1999; Norris 1999; Craig 1996), and many consider it no accident that the dramatic decline in turnout rates in America since the 1960s mirrors the decline in political trust (Putnam 2000). Yet trust is only one factor in complex decisions about political participation, and so, its effect has been hard to measure and much-debated (Levi and Stoker 2000). Beyond the question of voting and participation, trust is important for the legitimacy and stability of the political system. Trust in government encourages compliance with laws and regulations (Tyler 1990 and 1998; Levi 1988 and 1997; Ayres and Braithwaite 1992). At the extreme, a lack of trust in governmental institutions undermines rule of law. Most importantly, distrust diminishes the legitimacy of government. High levels of cynicism and distrust are reasons to be concerned about American democracy (Donovan and Bowler 2004, 29; Craig 1993; Putnam 2000).

CHALLENGES FOR E-GOVERNANCE IN INDIA

There are a large number of obstacles in implementation of e-Governance in India. These can be categorized under the following titles: Environmental and Social Challenges, Economical Challenges and Technical Challenges. These challenges are explained below:

A. Environmental and Social Challenges

i) Different Language: India is a country where people with different cultures and different religions live. People belonging to different states speak different languages. The diversity of people in context of language is a huge challenge for implementing e-Governance projects as e-Governance applications are written in English language. And also, English may not be understandable by most of the people. Therefore, it becomes a challenge for the government to write e-Governance applications which are to be implemented for the whole nation in more than one language so that these may be acceptable to the users of a particular language.

ii) Low Literacy: Literacy can be defined as the ability to read and write with understanding in any language. A person who can merely read but cannot write cannot be considered as literate. Any formal education or minimum educational standard is not necessary to be considered literate. Literacy level of India is very low which is a huge obstacle in implementation of e-Governance projects. Illiterate people are not able to access the e-Governance applications; hence the projects do not get much success.

iii) Low IT Literacy: Much of the Indian people are not literate and those who are literate, they do not have much knowledge about Information Technology (IT). Most of the people in India are not aware about the usage of Information Technology. So, in India, having such low level of IT literacy, how can e-Governance projects be implemented successfully? We can say that IT illiteracy is a major obstacle in implementation of e-Governance in India. So, first of all Indian people must be made aware about the usage of Information Technology.

iv) Recognition of applications: Recognition of the e Governance facilities by the citizens is another huge challenge. It is a challenge to have all the citizens well aware of the facilities offered by the e-government and have them to trust in it, so that citizens should be ready to accept these facilities.

v) User friendliness of government websites: Users of e-Governance applications are often non-expert users who may not be able to use the applications in a right manner. Such users need guidance to find the right way to perform their transactions. Therefore, government websites must be user friendly so that more and more people can use them easily.
Hence, these websites can be more effective. If government websites will be designed in an easier format only then these will be more usable for the users who are not expert users of IT.

B. Economical Challenges

i) Cost: In developing countries like India, cost is one of the most important obstacles in the path of implementation of e-Governance where major part of the population is living below poverty line. Even the politicians do not have interest in implementing e-Governance. A huge amount of money is involved in implementation, operational and evolutionary maintenance tasks. These costs must be low enough so that to guarantee a good cost/benefit ratio.

ii) Applications must be transferrable from one platform to another: e-governance applications must be independent from hardware or software platforms. Therefore, these applications can be used at any platform irrespective of the hardware or software and from one platform to the other platform. These applications may also help on possible reuse by other administrators.

iii) Maintenance of electronic devices: As the Information Technology changes very fast and it is very difficult for us to update our existing systems very fast. Regulations of different devices and their different characteristics may vary and the system in use must be capable to handle all the emerging needs. Maintenance is a key factor for long living systems in a rapidly changing technical environment.

iv) Low per Capita income: Per capita income means how much each individual receives, in the terms of money, of the yearly income generated in a country. This refers to what each individual receives if the yearly national income is divided equally among everyone. Per capita income of India is low as compare to the other countries. Therefore, people cannot afford on-line services provided by the government which is a challenge for implementation of e-governance.

v) Limited financial resources: The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is one of the measures of national income and a country’s economy. GDP is defined as the total market value of all final goods and services produced within the country in a given period of time. GDP of a country is the measure of its financial strength. India has limited financial resources so as to implement and maintain the e-Government projects properly.

STRATEGIES FOR E-GOVERNANCE IN INDIA

1. To build technical infrastructure/framework across India

India lacks a full fledged ICT framework for implementation of e-governance. Complete implementation of E-governance in India will include building technical Hardware and Software infrastructure. It will also include better and faster connectivity options. Newer connectivity options will include faster Broadband connections and faster wireless networks such as 3G and 4G. The infrastructure must be built by Government, Private Sector as well as individuals. Infrastructure will also include promotion of Internet Cafes, Information and Interactive Kiosks. However while building technical infrastructure, disabled persons must also be considered. The technology implemented, shall incorporate the disabled persons.

2. To build institutional capacity

Apart from building technical infrastructure, the Government needs to build its institutional capacity. This will include training of Government employees, appointment of experts. Alongwith the Government has also to create an Expert database for better utilisation of intellectual resources with it. Apart from this, the Government has to equip the departments with hi-technology and has also to setup special investigating agency.

3. To build legal infrastructure

For better implementation of e-governance, the Government will need to frame laws which will fully incorporate the established as well as emerging technology. Changing technology has changed many pre-established notions; similarly the technology is growing and changing rapidly. It is important, that the Government makes laws which incorporate the current technology and has enough space to incorporate the changing future technology. These IT laws need to be flexible to adjust with the rapidly changing technology. Currently India has only the IT Act, 2000 which is mainly an E-Commerce
legislation. India has also modified many laws to include electronic technology, however it is not sufficient to cover e-governance completely.

4. To build judicial infrastructure

Overall technological awareness in current Judges is very low. The judiciary as a whole needs to be trained in new technology, its benefits and drawbacks and the various usages. The judiciary may alternatively appoint new judges with new judges and setup special Courts to deal with the matters relating to ICT. The Government can also setup special tribunals to deal with matters relating with ICT.

5. To make all information available online

The Government has to publish all the information online through websites. This can be facilitated through centralised storage of information, localisation of content and content management. The information of government is public information, therefore the citizens are entitled to know every piece of information of the Government, because the Government is of the People, by the People and for the People.

6. To popularise E-governance

Literacy percentage in India is alarming. The whole world is moving towards e-governance, but India still lacks in the literacy department. The people need to be educated and made e-literate for e-governance to flourish. There are very few e-literate people in India is very low. The Government needs to campaign for e-governance, increase people’s awareness towards e-governance. Government can only encourage people to go online if it can make people feel comfortable with e-governance. This can be done through educating the people about the advantages of e-governance over physical governance. This can also be done through raising awareness of the leaders who can motivate the people to go online.

7. Centre-State Partnership

Indian setup is quasi-federal. Therefore Centre-State and inter-state cooperation is necessary for smooth functioning of the democratic process. This cooperation is also necessary for successful implementation of e-governance. This cooperation shall extend to Centre-state, inter-state and inter-department relationships. For the same the Government can setup a Central Hub like the current Government of India portal, for accessing the information of all the organs of the central government and also all the state government. The states can cooperate with the Centre to create a National Citizen Database.

8. To set standards

Finally it is important to set various standards to bring e-governance to the quality and performance level of private corporate sector. The Government of India is currently working on standards management and has various drafts prepared for the same. These standards include following: Inter-operability standards, Security standards, Technical standards, Quality standards. Government websites in India currently have no uniform standard. Many Government of Maharashtra websites differ in standards within even two of its webpages. There is no set standard as to quality of the information, document, the formats, etc. It is very important for the Government to set uniform national standards to be followed by all the Governments and agencies.

RESULTS OF IMPACT ON AGENCIES

It was intended that data on transaction volumes, operating costs, investments, tax collected, and revenues from transaction fees would be collected relating to the three years prior to the introduction of computerized systems, and for the entire period since computerization. However, it was very difficult to collect accurate data for pre-computerization, as often agencies did not have an MIS that was reporting such data. By and large, the major cost component was manpower. The study revealed that staff numbers were not reduced in any project after computerization. In some projects, workload was reduced, and therefore, additional time could be devoted to other tasks.

For example, in KAVERI and CARD, manual search of property data has been replaced by a database search, and manual copying of legal deeds has been replaced by scanning and digital storage, reducing the workload of employees considerably. In fact, in KAVERI, the task of scanning has been outsourced, further reducing the workload. Employees can
now be assigned to collect market intelligence to "x" tax rates and do physical inspection of property. Agencies are able to cope with growth in transaction volumes and reduce the average transaction processing cost. For example, in the case of CARD, transactions and revenues grew by 50% in two years from 2002–03, but the cost increased by only 6% in the same period (World Bank, 2007, p. 81). In the case of eProcurement, government departments and agencies that used the eProcurement platform realized cost savings of an average of 20% for procurement done through the exchange during the year 2003–04, and 12% in 2004–05, due to the increased competition among suppliers (Bikshapathi et al., 2006).

In addition, departments saved nearly 16.43% (US$0.56 million annually) of their advertising costs on account of the shorter tender notices that now needed to be published in the print media. In terms of the impact on agencies, the ability to cope with growth in transactions was enhanced in all cases. In some cases, computerization helped in the growth of transactions. Data on perception of the impact on workload and managerial processes was collected from operators (employees interfacing with clients) and analyzed. This data was collected at each of the delivery centers included in the sample. The staff in these agencies did not perceive that cost had been reduced. However, they felt that there was a significant positive impact on the quality of governance. Computerization was also seen to be partially responsible for improved tax collection by some agencies.

**CONCLUSIONS**

E-government at the local level is also perceived by citizens to make government accessible and responsive, but it is only responsiveness that is directly linked to increased trust of local government in the two-stage model. This suggests that increased government trust is produced by improved interactions through e-government at the local level. The federal government rates highest on positive attitudes about government processes. This likely reflects the wider use and greater technical capacity of digital government at the federal level. Yet, these advantages do not lead to greater trust. For the federal and state government, trust among e-government users is a function of other factors such as age, partisanship, gender, and ethnicity.

More frequent use of e-government is also associated with more positive attitudes toward government processes in many of the models. Despite the limited findings in terms of trust, it is good news that citizens see digital government in a positive light. What are likely reasons for use of e-government and responsiveness producing greater trust at the local level? Local government websites are often the least technically proficient. Perhaps it is the nature of local government and its proximity to citizens that leads them to place greater value on improved interactions with local government. The information and services available on local government websites may be especially valuable for citizen’s daily routines, such as mass transit, local services, or neighborhood information. Alternatively, the results may reflect a negative judgment of federal government. Distrust of federal government may be so high that even more positive attitudes toward e-government at that level do not influence these more generalized feelings.

**REFERENCES**


