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E-GOVERNMENT PERSPECTIVE

SERVICE DELIVERY, TRANSPARENCY, and POLICY FORMATION

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Technology and Public Administration
Spring 2023

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I believe that governments, for the most part, have taken a qualitative approach in providing citizen-centric integrated e-government that more effectively informs and serves citizens, ensures transparency, and promotes changes in public policies. "Citizen-centric integrated e-government services are the hallmark of a mature electronic government. Although different in the specifics, several maturity models of e-government (i.e. Andersen & Henriksen, 2006; Hiller & Belanger, 2001; Layne & Lee, 2001; Lee, 2010) all argue the importance of integration to advance e-government services." "Such integration can occur across departments within a government, various governments at the same or different levels. Information and communication technologies, when properly deployed, can provide the virtual integration of information and services that used to reside in multiple agencies and take a long time to assemble" (Fountain, 2001; Reddick, 2009). "Moreover, a backend e-government service integration promotes quality and sustainability" (Kuk & Janssen, 2013). "Governments around the world have invested in the development of e-government to provide their citizens with public information and services online as well as advancing key public values" (United Nations, 2014, 2016).

Another major improvement in e-government is the inclusion of transparency. "Transparency is generally regarded as a key element of good governance (TI., 2015). The topic has been widely discussed in recent literature and relates to many other concepts such as open government and freedom of information. For this research, we adopt a simple - and perhaps slightly more constrained than usual - operational definition of transparency: it corresponds to "the online publicity of all the acts of government and their representatives to provide civil society with relevant information in a complete, timely, and accessible manner" (i.e. in the municipalities' official websites) (da Cruz, Tavares, Marques, Jorge, & De Sousa, 2016). "Transparency enables accountability by empowering citizens, the media, monitoring bodies, and other stakeholders to find, process, and reuse government data to generate meaningful information and knowledge" (Murillo, 2015; Robinson, Yu, Zeller, & Felten, 2009). "For this reason, it is desirable that timely information on political representatives, decision-making processes, and outcomes are made available to citizens. Yet, transparency levels are often substandard in public or governmental bodies. Depending on the particular contexts and jurisdictions, sharing information about the decision-making processes (and the decision-makers themselves) may be a longstanding tradition or a brand-new concern. Particularly, at the local level, transparency practices vary substantially from one municipality to another" (e.g. see TpC, 2010; TIE, 2014; TIS, 2014). "In spite of the latest efforts, current empirical research still does not provide decisive answers on the reasons behind these fluctuations in levels of transparency. To a great extent, this gap in the literature has persisted due to the lack of reliable and operational measures of transparency" (Hollyer, Rosendorff, & Vreeland, 2014; Piotrowski & Bertelli, 2010).

The State of New Jersey is a prime example of how a citizen-centric approach to the integration of e-government services can substantially help public officials recognize the community's needs, open more lines of communication between government and its citizens, provide transparency, shape public policy, and improve internal processes. A newly designed website known as the *NJ COVID-19 Information HUB*, during the recent public health emergency caused by the coronavirus pandemic, provides quantitative data collected at hospitals, long-term-care centers, schools, and other state facilities, with the intent to help mitigate the spread of the virus and to guide public policy discussions, passage and implementation. Daily empirical research posted on the aforementioned website created a sense of urgency for legislators to make necessary policy changes that would help to save lives. Information shared on the dashboard included new and cumulative coronavirus cases, testing, positivity rates, hospitalization, deaths, and vaccines, as well as gaps in demographics based on race, age, and gender. The data points led to the implementation of numerous public policies, one of which was enacted to temporarily allow state licensing boards to expedite

or reactivate licenses of certain individuals, in the medical profession, to address staffing shortages in the healthcare sector. Providers of public health insurance, like Medicaid, were now required by statute to cover the testing of the coronavirus, as well as the use of the telehealth and telemedicine services. Legislations to allow public official meetings to be conducted and made public through an electronic means, and another to permit teachers and students to use a virtual platform for remote instruction for a minimum 180-day school year, were also signed into law. To close the disparity gaps in the internet connection or the lack of technological devices, one of the steps taken by the federal government was to pass measures that would temporarily secure broadband access to disadvantaged communities by negotiating with telecommunications companies a lower rate for service and to provide free mobile devices for recipients of social services programs, among other unprecedented and life-saving measures. The website also informed citizens of the happenings in the state and provided guidelines adopted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), such as wearing masks, the regular washing of hands, and maintaining social distance. It is evident by the declining number of cases recently reported that effective public policies, shared information, and the increased rate of vaccinations, all helped to curb the spread of the coronavirus. All approaches assisted in restoring stability, and in modernizing government processes. The consistently updated and easy-to-comprehend visual charts and maps posted online, not only displays how the state's emergency status has changed over-time, but they also show how the government has increased transparency. Websites that were once complicated to navigate and had limited access to information or resources, are now updated and are far more user-friendly. Examples of the sites that provided continuity of state government services during the state of emergency include, the Motor Vehicle Commission, the Department of Labor, Banking and Insurance, Community Affairs, Law and Public Safety, Treasury, and the Division of Consumer Affairs, among others. Many government entities, for the first time, were now able to receive and process electronic submissions of payments for various transactions.

On the other side of the spectrum, "taxpayers feel that they are not getting value for their money. They would like this value reflected in terms of cost savings and better performance. Many citizens are demanding more and better services through the Net" (Gupta and Jana, 2003). In addition to general requirements, they would also like to vote on the Internet (Gupta and Jana, 2003). "Government organizations should make a performance evaluation and see whether they are capable of doing the task and delivering services as expected. At the normative level, concerns have already been expressed about the "digital divide" and whether e-government will exacerbate inequities among citizens. Addressing this concern and finding an amicable way out would also constitute a part of the effectiveness of the government" (Gupta and Jana 2003). In a survey conducted in the United States, "it was observed that among the state and federal chief information officers, 86% felt that e-government had improved service delivery, 83% believed that it had made government more efficient, and 63% claimed that it had reduced government costs. Twenty-nine percent felt Congress or their state legislature had been very helpful in developing e-government, 43% believed legislative institutions had been somewhat helpful, 17% said they had been not very helpful, and 11% were undecided. Forty-nine percent indicated they had relied on surveys, focus groups, or other kinds of market research in planning e-government activities and 71% said they had developed reports or strategic planning documents to help guide their efforts" (Gupta and Jana, 2003). A recent study also revealed several interesting changes. "After September 11, governments are taking security and privacy much more seriously than they did previously" (Gupta and Jana 2003). "Efficient performance of the organization and accountability might also be blocked by an administrative culture that may not be able to cope with the demands of a digital world and that leadership is unable to develop partnerships within government and across sectors. The lack of new skill sets in leadership can also play a role in poor performance evaluation" (Gupta and Jana 2003).

In conclusion, results from surveys conducted in the United States, prove that there has been a positive change in governments using a citizen-centric approach and integrating e-government services. The effects of Information Technology (IT) on policy decision-making processes among

government users and citizens have been transformational. Studies also show that technology cannot act alone. These changes require strong leadership in Information Technology, a change in the organizational culture, and e-government initiatives. Other roadblocks to improving government services through technology, may include a digital divide across governments and between government and citizens. During the recent public health emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, many policy measures were temporarily signed into law to increase access to technological infrastructure in public government spaces and among the general public. These important steps helped to boost engagement between government and citizens, and to improve service provision, but it also created awareness of the fact that more permanent technological initiatives are desperately needed to ensure further equity in service provisions, accountability, efficiency and effective governance.

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