

## **E-Government and Its Limitations: Assessing the True Demand Curve for Citizen Public Participation**

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### **Abstract**

Many e-government initiatives start with promise, but end up either as digital "ghost towns" or as a venue exploited by organized interests. The problem with these initiatives is rooted in a set of common misunderstandings about the structure of citizen interest in public participation – simply put, the Internet does not create public interest, it *reveals* public interest. Public interest can be high or low, and governmental initiatives can be polarized or non-polarized. The paper discusses two common pitfalls (“the Field of Dreams Fallacy” and “Blessed are the Organized”) that demand alternate design choices and modified expectations. By treating public interest and public polarization as variables, the paper develops a typology of appropriate e-government initiatives that can help identify the boundary conditions for transformative digital engagement.

### **Keywords**

Digital government; public participation; political mobilization; internet governance

### **E-Government and Its Limitations**

The Internet has routinely disrupted large, traditional, bureaucratic industries. News production, book publishing, music and entertainment have all become common benchmarks for the changing digital landscape (Shirky 2008, Jenkins 2006). So it is unsurprising that many observers have directed attention towards the largest, most traditional, and most bureaucratic institution of all – Government – and optimistically speculated about the coming digital revolution (Layne and Lee 2001, West 2005, Noveck 2009, Sifry 2011). The field of “e-government” research has for years featured a cross-section of researchers, funders, and practitioners eager to apply the lessons of the digital age to the inner workings of government. The results have rarely lived up to the hype.

In 2012, two high-profile examples have attracted much attention. First was the failed third party electoral effort from AmericansElect.com. Americans Elect attracted headlines for their promise to do to two-party politics “what Amazon.com did to books” (Friedman 2011). The organization promised to nominate a third-party candidate via open online caucuses in the summer of 2012. South By Southwest Interactive gave AmericansElect a People’s Choice Award for its potential impact. But when it came time to start caucusing, Americans Elect quietly folded because no potential candidates had crossed the minimum threshold of support.

The second example seems more positive at first glance. Petitions.Whitehouse.gov provides a platform called “We The People” that allows citizens to directly petition the President. This has been hailed as a benchmark in open government. Successful petitions ranging from the serious (assault weapons, wall street reform) to the silly (“build a death star,” “release the White House beer recipe”) have elicited an official administration response. Originally, any petition on the site that received more than 25,000 signatures was promised a response from the Obama administration. That number has been continually revised upward, and now stands at 100,000. Silly petitions have attracted far more public attention than the serious ones, and serious petitioners have later turned into critics, noting that administrative response still falls far short of administrative action.

Along with these high-profile examples, there are also thousands of low-profile examples. E-government projects can range from simplified online governmental information to interactive citizen deliberation efforts. With rare exceptions (Noveck 2009), applications of technology to the challenges of governance have had limited effect. Online deliberative processes fail due to lack of public interest. Powerful actors either prevent agency adoption of new digital practices, or else they subvert the new practices to their own ends. Government bureaucrats choose not to simply give away the power and authority they have traditionally held. E-government proponents often note that these same forces are at work in rapidly changing marketplaces, but *homo politicus* and *homo economicus* display different logics in their respective realms. Markets and ballots enact different forms of power.

We can generalize the two limitations above into a pair of principles. Both relate to the underlying “demand curves” for citizen political engagement.

First is the “Field of Dreams Fallacy” (Karpf 2011). Writing about the limits of open source software production in 1999, Clay Shirky noted that “...Commercial companies make software for money, so money is the limiting factor: Open Source developers make software for the love of the thing, so love becomes the limiting factor as well. *Unloved software can't be built using Open Source methods*” (Shirky 1999). Likewise, many digital governance efforts fail because they presume an unrealistic level of public engagement or interest. The lowered transaction costs of digital communication do not *create* our underlying interests. It reveals them. Interest in government activity is not uniformly low; it is variable. There is vast public interest in space exploration, and minimal public interest in highway reconstruction planning. To avoid the Field of Dreams Fallacy, digital government efforts must be calibrated in light of existing public interest levels.

The second broad limitation can be termed “Blessed are the Organized.” Some governance areas are uniformly appealing, while others are deeply polarized, attracted engagement from highly-motivated interest groups. Rarely does the American (or Canadian/Nigerian/Argentinian/global) population behave as a single, unified mass public. Instead, we frequently act as a collection of *publics*. New information technology does

not create participatory communities. It supports them. As such, e-government efforts can often be coopted by existing interest groups or issue publics, yielding a distorted picture of public opinion. Shulman (2009) argues that the drive toward online citizen comments carries a set of perverse incentives that prioritize the voices of the best-mobilized or best-motivated citizens over the voices of either experts or everyday citizens. This critique can be overstated (see Karpf 2010 for a counterargument), but the central point is that issue polarization is a variable. Digital government efforts must be calibrated in response to existing publics operating in any given area.

These two variables can be overlaid into a 2x2 typology of digital government projects. Crucially, the purpose of this typology is to identify *appropriate* expectations for where, when, and how technology can transform government (see figure 1, below). Where there is high public interest and low public polarization, proposals for transformative “wiki” or “open-source” government have the highest chance of success (Noveck 2009). Where there is high public interest but high polarization, government is better off investing in open data initiatives that give the polarized existing issue publics better data with which to make their public arguments. Where public interest is low and polarization is low, it is best to keep our expectations appropriately low and pursue simple online service delivery (West 2006). And where public interest is low and polarization is high, government can best help its citizens by streamlining or improving upon existing systems for public commentary (Shulman 2009).

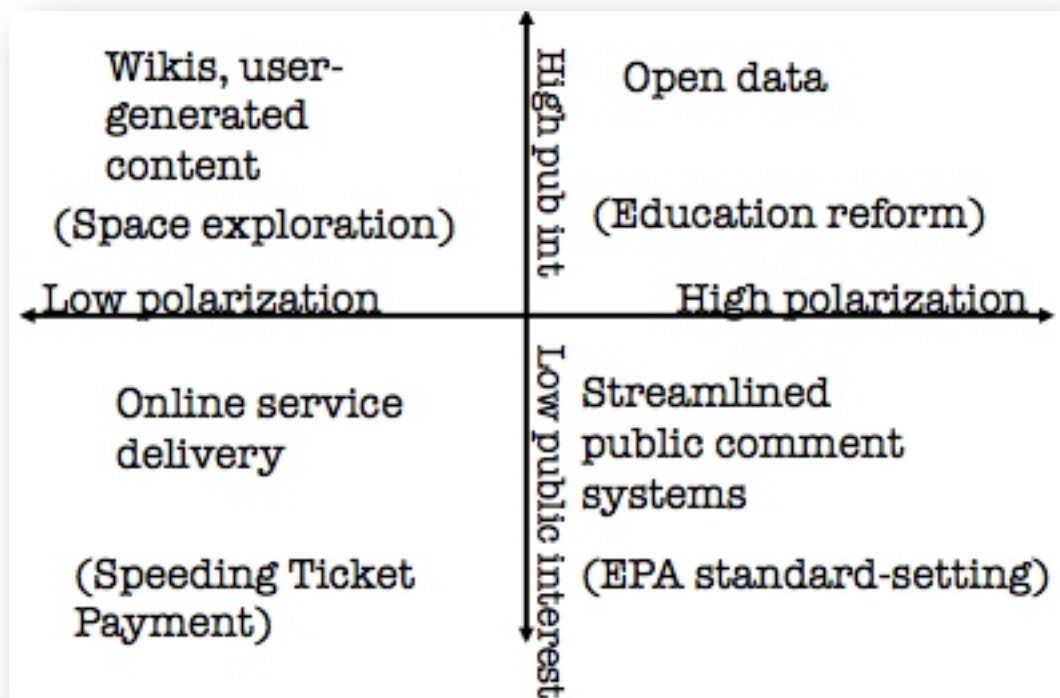


Figure 1: Typology of Appropriate E-government Projects

The internet can be transformative for governance practices. But not everywhere, and not all at once. The purpose of this study has been to consider the *boundary conditions* of the most promising examples that have occupied so much scholarly attention. The real costs of the Field of Dreams Fallacy and Blessed are the Organized occur when well-meaning proponents misspend their time, energy, and money, and later become discouraged by the lack of transformative success. It is no longer enough to look at disrupted communications markets and imagine parallel forces at work in governmental arenas. Markets are meant to efficiently reveal consumer demand. The relationship between government and citizen demands is far more complicated.

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