

# E-government in Europe

Re-booting the state

*Edited by*

**Paul G. Nixon and  
Vassiliki N. Koutrakou**



Routledge Advances in European Politics

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# E-government in Europe

This book traces the development of e-government and its applications across Europe, exploring the effects of information and communication technology (ICTs) upon political action and processes.

The authors explore a range of concepts and topics underpinning e-government in Europe and assess:

- The degree to which e-government translates into genuine reform of government and public administration.
- Its democratic amelioration credentials in relation to citizenship and participation.
- The dual role of the EU as both a provider of e-government through its own internal activities and also as a facilitator or aggregator in the way it seeks to engender change and promote its ethos in member states across the EU.
- Cyberterrorism and its use both by terrorists and governments to pursue political agendas.

The book also features a number of in-depth case studies on the progress of e-government in the UK, France, Germany, Denmark, the Netherlands, Portugal, Greece, Slovenia, Hungary, and Estonia. Reflecting on the broader technological context within which the ICTs are utilized by governments in Europe, these case studies address the above issues while at the same time highlighting commonality and diversity in practice and the paradox between top-down strategies and the effort to engage wider civil participation via e-government.

This book will be of interest to students and scholars of public policy, politics, media and communication studies, sociology, computing and information and communications technologies and European studies.

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*Edited by Paul G. Nixon and Vassiliki N. Koutrakou*

To my son Patrick  
Paul G. Nixon

To my life-long friends Suzy and Tabatha  
Vassiliki N. Koutrakou



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# Introduction

*Paul G. Nixon and Vassiliki N. Koutrakou*

As the long-accepted borders between traditionally delineated policy domains and between differing strata of governance are appearing to become ever more blurred and indistinct by technical networks, facilitating and, some might argue, stimulating the emergence of many differing modes of new social and political networks around the issues and concerns which typify our late-modern society, we have an opportunity to examine and question the ways in which e-government concepts are facilitating a re-drafting of the contexts in which citizens and governments interact. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are increasingly being used as tools to facilitate this interaction.

This trend is taking place in an evolving world with e-government being viewed as an integral component of public sector reform.<sup>1</sup> The European Union (EU) is not immune from such change. New and revamped public services will need to be developed to meet the challenges that the EU will face in terms of demographic change, cultural and religious diversity and changing norms<sup>2</sup> which will in turn necessitate a rethinking of the way in which e-government services are used both in terms of service delivery and in the wider terms of state legitimization through a strengthening of democracy.

Increasingly citizens and governments use ICTs to interact regularly, for example obtaining a new driver's licence by dispatching data; or in the transfer of monies in terms of the paying of taxes and/or charges or via the receipt of social benefit payments. We see more and more improvements being made to utilise new technologies to increase efficiency, ease of use, and to make the system of government–citizen interactions more comprehensive. In order to achieve this we can observe the creation of single points of contact, 'one stop shops' or portals which are designed to allow citizen to government access 24/7. Thus, in many cases making the services available when the individual wishes to utilise them and not restricted, at least in the initial phases, by office opening hours. This contact may be available via various technologies such as a personal computer, mobile phone, digital TVs or even via future developments of existing or new technologies. As Dahlgren<sup>3</sup> argues new uses of ICTs are shaping, and will, presumably, continue to shape in the foreseeable future, new perceptions of government and sovereignty in the European Union member states and in the applicant states. However there is scepticism over the willingness of politicians and officials to engage with *all* of its citizens.<sup>4</sup>

As this book will consistently show, e-government isn't just about value-neutral technological advances in service delivery and communication. E-government is about people and how their democratic governments act in their name. People live both on-and off-line<sup>5</sup> and it is the mix of these two elements that represents the reality of lived experiences. As with most democratic debate there will be digression and disagreement between the contributors to this book in how they interpret what is occurring in each of their countries. This should not necessarily be viewed as a weakness; indeed the editors feel that this is one of the strengths of books such as this, in that they reflect the diversity of opinion and the overarching contested nature of the subject matter.

In recent years the introduction of e-government has been firmly placed on the policy agenda by governments across the world. The successful implementation of e-government is seen as prerequisite for modernising public administrations and providing new forms of electronic service delivery and for stimulating inclusive participation in a new information society. At first glance it would appear that the moves to e-government, the creation of the infrastructure necessary for services to be online, the elimination of digital divides, often to specific timetables laid down in strategy documents, cannot be argued against. However, on closer examination, whilst the policy may at first appear to be benevolent the reality of its implementation and the subsequent consequences for governance within democratic societies may be somewhat different. Whilst accepting e-government as almost a *fait accompli*, are we in effect accepting a policy or set of policies which cloak the weakening of our democracy and a benign commercialisation of our political institutions?

## Definition

A useful if somewhat basic definition of e-government is given by the World Bank which refers to e-government as

'... [T]he use by government agencies of information technologies (such as Wide Area Networks, the Internet, and mobile computing) that have the ability to transform relations with citizens, businesses, and other arms of government. These technologies can serve a variety of different ends: better delivery of government services to citizens, improved interactions with business and industry, citizen empowerment through access to information, or more efficient government management ... [A]nalogous to e-commerce, which allows businesses to transact with each other more efficiently (B2B) and brings customers closer to businesses (B2C), e-government aims to make the interaction between government and citizens (G2C), government and business enterprises (G2B), and inter-agency relationships (G2G) more friendly, convenient, transparent, and inexpensive.'<sup>6</sup>

There are of course different interpretations of even apparently straightforward definitions such as the one above. What is not contested is that whilst there are

benefits to be derived from e-government implementation there is also potentially a downside to e-government particularly in terms of reducing human contact between citizens and the state at a time when confidence and trust in politicians and the state is waning. Finger and Pécoud note that each state faces challenges on three levels:

- challenges of legitimization;
- challenges of competition from other states; and
- challenges of a financial nature.<sup>7</sup>

The pressure to meet financial targets and reduce taxation is an imperative driving many ICT based projects, although of course not the only imperative as this book will demonstrate. Whichever imperative is driving policy there remain a significant number of barriers to successful implementation of e-government. Let us examine, briefly, the benefits of and barriers to effective e-government.

### **Benefits of e-government**

The benefits associated with e-government can generally be characterised as falling under one of two headings, which are not of themselves mutually exclusive; improving the machinery of governance and increased participation. Below are some more explicit examples of the perceived benefits:<sup>8</sup>

- improved co-ordination of EU policies and legislation with the potential to provide joined up government;
- more efficient and effective use of resources at a time when there is increased pressure on governments to limit their spending and to reduce the tax burden upon citizens and businesses;
- the facilitation of easier access to information generated by, the various organisations and agencies of the EU the dissemination of which allows consultation and individual and collective participation;
- it has the potential to enable citizens to undertake more efficient, transparent, quantitative and qualitative auditing of government;
- e-government can assist in the ongoing challenge of inclusion and assist in bringing equality of treatment to each citizen (although this would need to be underpinned by an EU wide freedom of information act);
- it has the ability to allow for a reconfiguration of interfaces between citizen and the EU and the potential to build a more direct participatory digital democracy.

### **Barriers to e-government**

There are also a number of barriers to effective e-government. Listed below are just some of the major political and practical barriers to e-government in the EU. The list is not an exhaustive one and is not presented in order of importance. One



must also remember that it is possible for the importance attached to issues or barriers to fluctuate contingent upon the political situation at any given time. The importance of issues/barriers can also vary from country to country as can be seen from the case study chapters in this volume.

- As Webster<sup>9</sup> notes, any definition of an information society (and the part that e-government plays within it) is a contested one. There are differing views on the purposes, values and goals underpinning e-government. It is not a value-free area as some would have us believe.
- EU member states seem on the whole to be loath to surrender power to the EU. This of course varies from state to state and indeed in any given state over a period of time. Circumstances can change and there is hope for progress in this specific policy area.
- The EU needs to facilitate as near as possible full public and private participation in the information society.

As electronic service delivery starts to replace offline service provision in some areas there is a danger of certain groups being excluded. As we can see in Chapter 2 the EU has increasingly given this more and more priority in its strategies as access levels are still low in some EU member states and far from universal in most. Of course it is not only issues of physical access that need to be addressed. Language barriers can also be an issue.<sup>10</sup> Given the levels of migration within the EU this is an issue that may rise in importance, particularly when the temporary restrictions on movement for the purposes of employment by citizens of the newest member states are removed by all member states. Education is also an issue, with citizens with lower educational attainment less likely to be online. It is also possible to suggest that a further linguistic barrier may well be active given the predominantly anglo-centric nature of the Internet<sup>11</sup> which can act as a disincentive to access for non English speakers at present although there is some evidence that this may be changing albeit slowly.

In order to create total equality the logic would suggest that there be some form of standardisation across the EU. This would be fiercely resisted by member states jealously guarding their individual sovereignty, although as Rawal shows in Chapter 4 of this volume, states are more and more willing to collaborate in joint ventures when they feel it aids their state security. There may well be a need for some form of standardised systems of data collection and analysis across the member states. The effects of this could homogenise government and thus remove or limit the intrinsic national characteristics of each member state government.<sup>12</sup> This would imply a new form of governance in the EU which would need to become more 'soft' in its structure. Many more of the services traditionally delivered by government apparatus may be delivered not only via the Internet in one's home but also via other outside agencies such as banks, post offices, supermarkets, interactive broadcasting companies and others.<sup>13</sup> As citizens increasingly access services or information using some form of 'one stop shop' system, this could have the negative effect of dehumanising the interface and thus further loosen the