

EXAMINING THE MOTIVATIONS FOR E-GOVERNMENT FROM AN INSTITUTIONAL THEORY PERSPECTIVE: EVIDENCE FROM TURKEY

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1. Introduction

The objective of this study is to understand why e-government projects are initiated at the first place. I define an e-government project as an effort by a government agency by itself or by partnership with other government agencies, private firms and/or civil societal organizations to use information and communication technologies (hereafter ICTs; they are technologies that capture, transmit and display data and information electronically) to provide government information or services to citizens, businesses, other government agencies or civil societal organizations.

The main task of this study is to examine and explain the “black-box” of e-government agenda setting. The processes by which decisions are being made regarding which projects to initiate; and the issue of which individuals and institutions are included, and which are excluded from this agenda setting process are critically important.

I conducted 27 in-depth interviews with decision-makers on ICT issues. My interview data along with the data gathered from archival research and content analysis will provide an inductive, accumulative understanding of the various kinds of institutional factors playing roles in the practice of e-government in Turkey.

The data gathering effort for this study is not only comprised of examining e-government projects. In addition, the environment of these e-government projects, including the private firms working in the ICT sector, print and visual media covering the developments in ICTs, civil societal organizations focusing on ICT-related issues, and ICT experts from universities and research facilities are investigated as well. Such an approach is critical for the success of this study, since the data gathered from within the e-government projects might most probably be biased as it might tend to underline the accomplishments and overlook the shortcomings of e-government. Data provided by the other sources in the institutional environment, on the contrary, are more likely to represent a more critical look at the e-government efforts. In other words, these two different sets of data could be used for triangulation purposes.

Turkey is a developing country with limited resources. It would be interesting to examine how political and administrative top decision makers make policy. In other words are the initiation of e-government projects geared towards making governments work better (i.e. increasing productivity via automation, promoting participation, enhancing transparency, curbing corruption, etc.) or are they also partial outcomes of conforming to isomorphic tendencies such as being on the cutting edge, keeping up with other government agencies, conforming to European Union standards? It is highly possible that these two mechanisms work simultaneously. If the former mechanism (using e-government as a part of administrative reform) is more dominant, then a study like this one can inform us about how e-government efforts relate to government reform. If the latter factor (symbolic actions as a reaction to isomorphic pressures) is more dominant, then a study like this one might provide empirical data regarding the processes of isomorphic pressures/ changes, which are mostly taken for granted, but rarely elaborated upon.

2. Rationale

The Internet was introduced to Turkey in 1993. Since then, the experiences of public organizations with Internet use have accumulated enough to create a fertile ground for research. For example, Ince (2001) lists more than 60 e-government projects being planned, ready to be implemented or already in use by ministerial (national) level Turkish government organizations as of 2001 in areas as varied as law enforcement, foreign affairs, census processing and local government information integration. Not only the supply of e-government information and services are on the rise; so is the demand for them. According to recent surveys by Taylor Nelson Sofres Consulting Firm (TNS, 2001; 2002), while only 3% of people

living in Turkey (about two million) used the Internet for accessing government information and/or services during the year 2001; this number has risen to 12% (eight million) in 2002. All indicators point to this percentage rising sharply over the next few years.

The study of e-government projects is critically important in theoretical and practical terms, as Internet technology has the potential to help government organizations to be more responsive to citizens' needs, and to be more transparent, efficient and accountable in the delivery of goods and services. However, developing countries such as Turkey do not have large amounts of resources to commit to ensuring the successful planning and implementation of individual e-government projects. Therefore, careful analysis of the policy processes behind these projects is essential to make sure that the resources are spent for projects with the highest priority, prevent perpetuating previous mistakes, and to maximize gains while minimizing resources spent. Accordingly, the main objective of this study is to learn how e-government policy is being made, how e-government projects emerge on the agenda.

3. Literature Review: Institutional Theory of Organizations

Institutional theory helps us to explain the ceremonial conformity to rules and trends of the institutional environment. It necessitates the incorporation of boundedly-rational and social aspects of decision-making such as concerns of legitimacy, stability and enhanced survival prospects (Meyer and Rowan, 1977: 340). In other words, we can use institutional theory when there are empirical anomalies difficult if not impossible to understand and explain by rational-actor accounts (March and Olsen, 1984: 747; Tolbert and Zucker, 1996: 176).

...Technologies are institutionalized and become myths binding on organizations. Technical procedures of production, accounting, personnel selection, or data processing become taken-for-granted means to accomplish organizational ends. Quite apart from their possible efficiency, such institutionalized techniques establish an organization as appropriate, rational, and modern. Their use displays responsibility and avoids claims of negligence (Meyer and Rowan, 1977: 344).

Before employing it in research, one has to be cautious about the consensus on the key concepts, measures and methods of the institutional theory; since it is argued that the theory itself has not institutionalized yet (Tolbert and Zucker, 1996: 175). Still, it may help students of public management to understand the use of ICTs in government. For example, explaining why organizations are so similar (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), the process of homogenization in structure or behavior regarding ICT use in government can be undertaken by institutional theory. Indeed, why do increasing numbers of government organizations go online and establish similar web presences with similar structures and characteristics? In the examination of this question, the level of analysis is the individual government organization. The focus is on the processes of adaptation to the environment and pressures of legitimacy and economic efficiency.

Scott (1987) argues that organizational structure is an adaptive vehicle, and institutionalization refers to evolutionary adaptive processes. He points out the importance of the symbolic aspects of organizations (Goodsell, 1997). Government organizations are good examples of this phenomenon. There are many symbolic meanings of the use of ICTs by government organizations. Using ICTs to electronically deliver government information and services to citizens symbolizes a variety of concepts like decentralization, democratic participation, informed citizenry, public information networks etc. It is also considered as a potential solution to the crises of legitimacy of and trust in representative democracies (Nye, 2001). One may argue that the public organizations' establishment of online presence is in some ways related to the symbols that ICT use in government bring to mind. For example, Cohen and Eimicke (2001: 11) report:

Most of these [government] organizations had obtained funding for their [web] sites by convincing senior management that the Web was the "wave of the future"; website development was a defensive reaction to the need to appear to be on the cutting edge of this new trend.

After examining 50 e-government projects in the U.S., Cohen and Eimicke (2001) conclude that more often there is a lack of a sound business plan and cost-benefit analysis before launching these initiatives. In addition, it is not uncommon government ICT projects are initiated as a function of fad and fashion, and because of legitimacy concerns.

Funding [for government organization web sites] was more of a function of fashion, than a result of an analysis of cost savings of expected benefits. Most officials assumed that the use of the web would increase customer satisfaction and was self-justifying (Cohen and Eimicke, 2001: 11).

Meyer and Rowan (1977), in a similar fashion, contend that formal organizational structures have symbolic as well as action-generating properties. They believe that the social evolution of organizations, hence organizations' survival can rest on the observation of the formal structures. Therefore, it is possible that government organizations use ICTs in their operations and management because of pressures of symbolic meanings (social legitimacy) and pressures to conform to commonly adopted action-generating properties (efficiency and productivity gains of using ICTs). This is ironic, because conformity with the myths (i.e. online presence of government organizations automatically increase customer satisfaction) is not enough by itself; the organization must also maintain the appearance that these myths actually work (Meyer and Rowan, 1977: 356). This point parallels the argument of Gold (1999), in which he underlines that legitimacy is sometimes more important than the rational decision-making processes. This kind of thinking sheds light into the rationale of some government ICT projects that were kept alive for legitimacy reasons even if they are not financially feasible in the short-run (Cohen and Eimicke, 2001). In short, from an institutional theory perspective, government organizations go online because of legitimization needs and resulting isomorphic pressures. The main types of isomorphic processes (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) are as follows:

From a coercive isomorphic point of view, the reason that government organizations are using ICTs is either the result of government mandates and/or by the informal pressures of other similar government and private organizations, which are already using ICTs successfully. The political decision-makers and directors of government organizations may decide to use ICTs for reasons of legitimacy and perceived efficiency gains and citizen demand (and thus perceived legitimacy) for their agencies and/or programs. Federal or state government mandates on government organizations to establish web presences or have certain characteristics on their web sites is a good example to this process. When adoption of mandated functions are enforced or encouraged by some monetary incentive, both institutional and resource-dependency perspectives can be used for explanation; since such a development connects isomorphic tendencies to organizations' reliance on resources from their environments. (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978), creating even a blurring of boundaries between the two theories (Tolbert and Zucker, 1996: 179).

From a mimetic isomorphic point of view, government organizations model themselves after similar organizations, which they perceive to be more legitimate and successful. By imitating these other organizations, which already use ICTs successfully, they enhance their legitimacy by demonstrating that at least the organization is trying to improve the conditions of its service and/or information provision. Another take on mimetic isomorphism is to observe it in network settings as network members turn to other members for information and new ideas, which again can be tied to resource-dependency arguments.

From a normative isomorphic standpoint, government organizations use ICTs because of the newly emerging professional norms of public service (online interactivity, virtual service, transparency and accountability etc.).

Derived from the above discussion of the relationship between e- government and institutional theory, my research questions are:

i. How do e-government projects originate in Turkey? Which problem(s) do they intend to solve? How do they move into government agenda?

ii. Who are the major actors in the agenda setting processes? Which actors (individuals, groups and institutions) are included, which are excluded? Why?

iii. What is the nature of the process through which these actors affect agendas?,

4. Initial Findings

I have found that:

Institutional pressures play some role in the use of ICTs by government organizations. Some of the e-government projects are initiated partly because of legitimacy concerns such as keeping up with other

organizations, being on the cutting edge of technology as well as more “rational” motives such as increasing effectiveness, efficiency, accountability, etc.

I have found that certain formal and informal groups, policy issue networks, within and/or across government agencies and e-government projects, are influential in the making of critical decisions about setting the agenda.

Similar to Kingdon’s (1986) argument, agenda setting stage (in Turkish e-government projects) seems to be following the garbage can model of decision-making (Cohen and March, 1972). In other words, specific solutions are not created to solve specific problems as a rational planning model would assume, but solutions are already on the agenda, and they try to find problems for themselves. When a problem aligns with a solution in a receptive political environment (when a policy window opens) the problem-solution coupling occurs.

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