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# **What Citizens Want from E-Government**

## **Current Practice Research**

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**Center for Technology in Government**  
**University at Albany / SUNY**

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# **What Citizens Want From E-Government**

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## **Overview**

*Governments in the US are using a variety of methods to find out what citizens want from e-government services. Different methods generate different kinds of results, with different levels of reliability.*

The Center for Technology in Government at the University at Albany is conducting current practice research into several areas of e-government. One practice that we are investigating is how governments solicit input from citizens. This first report from our study relies mostly on responses to an e-mail posting to the member listserv of the National Association of State Information Resource Executives (NASIRE). NASIRE represents state chief information officers and information resource executives and managers from the 50 states, six U. S. territories, and the District of Columbia. We supplemented this source by contacting other states directly. In both cases we asked, “Who is asking citizens what services government should provide electronically?” and “What do citizens say they want?”

Overall, we received information from 14 states, four nonprofit organizations, and three private sector companies. The responses included information about particular e-government initiatives and references to various articles, reports and surveys, as well as general knowledge about these questions. Three states said they are in the process of conducting surveys or analyzing results and promised to share them as soon as they are available.

These efforts are being conducted in a variety of ways, with different levels of formality and statistical reliability. A few are professionally designed public opinion surveys with random selection of respondents and formal statistical analyses. Others are informal efforts that ask citizens who visit state Web sites what they think about e-government services. Another kind of effort invites people to attend events where they discuss their needs and opinions.

The professional and informal surveys tend to offer respondents a fixed list of potential e-government services, and the same choices tend to be included from place to place. In response to these surveys, driver’s licenses and voter registration usually top the list of desired e-services. The discussion method offers greater opportunity to explore ideas from different

points of view and in more depth and therefore tend to generate longer lists of potential e-services that are tied to life events or areas of economic activity.

### **Who is asking citizens what services government should provide electronically?**

Among the states that responded, citizen input is a clear priority in developing online electronic services. Eight of the 14 responding states have either asked citizens about electronic government services or plan to do so within the next few months.

A report from the Momentum Research Group, sponsored by the National Information Consortium (NIC) which operates portals in several states, details the e-government needs, opinions, and preferences of 303 people and 103 businesses throughout the United States. In telephone interviews these two groups were asked many questions related to the use of government services, including their opinions about quality of service, confidence in results, funding for e-government, security of information, and whether they would like to find these services on state or local government Web sites. This input from citizens was gathered in several ways. A few open-ended questions asked, "What government services would you use electronically?" Most questions presented a list of services and asked the citizen to pick the one they would be most willing to use. Some questions focused on how the citizen would like to access the government service and asked what people thought about advantages and disadvantages of e-government.

A study conducted by the research firm of Peter D. Hart and Robert M. Teeter for the Council for Excellence in Government investigated experiences and expectations of e-government. They surveyed 1,003 citizens, 150 government officials in federal, state, and local government, and 155 institutional customers of government in the business and non-profit sectors about many areas including potential use of e-government services, benefits of e-government, how quickly e-government should develop, and what concerns them about the digital divide. The findings are compared across the three groups, although they are statistically significant only for the citizen group.

Of the states that have reached out to citizens, California's Life Event and Affinity Design (L.E.A.D.) effort, spearheaded by the Governor's Office of Innovation in Government, is one where citizens and business are being asked to attend focus group-like activities. The first of three regional conferences was held recently where 120 people gathered to discuss and document the government services needed at specific stages in life. People were grouped into seven age categories and three miscellaneous categories (starting a business, non-age-related events, and professional licensing). Each group was then asked to think about information they would need or business they would transact with a government agency from their particular stage of life or perspective. The results from the three conferences will be analyzed to produce recommendations for California's Web portal and e-government services.

The nonprofit Telecommunications and Policy Institute conducted a survey of 1,002 citizens for the state of Texas. In this random telephone survey, citizens were asked about their current and potential use of electronic government services. They were asked about services they currently use, services they would use in the future, concerns about privacy and security, funding options for e-government and several other issues. This study also documented aspects of the digital divide in Texas, identifying different levels of computer and Internet use by income, education, and ethnic group. These results will be used to inform the development of Texas' online government services.

A number of less formal efforts were also reported. Some states embarked on e-government by developing one or two online transactions and then monitored them for frequency of use. In Indiana, the AccessIndiana portal was developed and implemented and, after citizens had some experience with it, the portal began to ask citizens "What other government services would you like provided through this portal?" The Government Information Technology Agency (GITA) in Arizona developed a survey listing government services that could be or will be provided electronically. Citizens then indicated, via a Web or paper ballot, which ones they would most likely use. In Utah, the state asked businesses what government information and services they would like to access online and what the government should provide electronically to citizens.

## **What do citizens say they want?**

In the surveys conducted by states, and in the studies conducted by research organizations, these were the most common responses to the question, “What government service would you want to be electronically provided?” Generally, respondents chose these from a list.

- Renewing a driver’s license
- Voter registration
- State park information and reservations
- Voting on the Internet
- Access to one-stop shopping (one portal for all government services)
- Ordering birth, death, and marriage certificates
- Filing state taxes
- Hunting and fishing licenses
- Accessing medical information from the National Institute of Health

Renewing a driver’s license was the typically the first choice. It was followed most often by voter registration, obtaining state park information and making park reservations. Another common theme is the notion of one-stop shopping for government services, or the ability to access specific government information, such as medical or health care data.

The California L.E.A.D. project brings together citizens and businesses to generate lists of government services that an individual would need throughout a typical life span. One group generated a list for the 21-30 age range. It included such needs and interests as marriage, divorce, school systems, purchasing a house, name changes, and professional certificates.

In the research report sponsored by NIC, citizens were asked which activities on a standard list they would like to perform online. Of the listed services, renewing a driver’s license, voting on the Internet, having access to one-stop shopping, filing state taxes, and obtaining state park information were the most popular. Additional services, chosen by less than 30 percent of the respondents, were reviewing state police reports, paying parking violations, reviewing real estate records, and paying taxes by credit card. When asked if they had already used government services online, citizens most often reported that they had contacted the IRS and paid taxes electronically. When asked about funding for e-government services,

both citizens and business preferred a fee for online transactions rather than have it reflected in tax increases.

A different perspective on what citizens want is shown in the Hart-Teeter study done for the Council for Excellence in Government. This report shows that of the 1,003 citizens surveyed, only 53 percent were either very or fairly favorable of renewing driver's licenses online. The most favored examples of e-government were access to medical information from the National Institute of Health (80%), and access to a candidate's voting record (77%). Cost savings for government, and a legislation comment site followed closely with 71 percent each. Citizens were also asked about the benefits of e-government. According to this report, citizens see the biggest benefits as increased government accountability to citizens (36%), greater public access to information (23%), and more efficient/cost-effective government (21%). Finally, 65 percent of the public felt that government should proceed slowly in developing communication between citizens and government. This was due in large part to issues with security and privacy of information. Government managers, by contract, believed the effort should proceed quickly.

Arizona's GITA asked citizens what activities government should do online. State employees were informally polled first; then survey was web enabled to gather responses from the general public. The top four responses-- renewing a driver's license; ordering birth, marriage, or death certificates; Internet voting; and making state park reservations -- all fall in the most common responses generated by other studies. Additional e-government services identified by the Arizona effort include filling out a single change of address for government and business, looking up a child's grades and homework assignments, and enrolling in benefit programs.

In the state of Utah, business were asked if they would favor or oppose providing e-government services to citizens. Of the services presented, only one caused the respondents to be divided in their opinions. Slightly more than half of the businesses (54%) favored providing the ability to apply for unemployment insurance, welfare, and health benefits online. Of the 43 percent who oppose providing these benefit programs electronically, 27

percent strongly oppose it. The remaining e-government services were strongly favored including renewal of driver's licenses, voter registration, and hunting and fishing licenses.

When Minnesota citizens were asked if they had done business online with the state government, 87 percent said that they had not. And when asked if they would use it if it were available, 61 percent said they were either very likely or somewhat likely to do so. Arkansas completed a statewide survey to ask citizens about e-government services. This report is still in preparation.

Several other states have plans to gather citizen input. New York's Office for Technology is planning a series of citizen focus groups, as well as a round of regional meetings with local governments, to identify the services that are most wanted and ways that the state and local governments can cooperate to provide them. The e-government working group in Miami-Dade County in Florida plans to develop a survey to assess the needs of the public. This effort, along with the development of a countywide customer service program, will identify services that can be provided electronically by the local government. The state of New Jersey is working with the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University to investigate e-government services to citizens. This investigation is near completion and the results will be available in the coming months. Several focus groups will also be held with businesses and citizens to get feedback on New Jersey's Web portal. Wyoming is beginning an effort to enhance public access to court records and services. Citizens and business will be polled to find out exactly what information and services they would like to access from the courts system.

## **Conclusion**

The movement to e-government, at its heart, is about changing the way people and businesses interact with government. It only makes sense to find out what they want, expect, don't want, and worry about. The efforts described above vary considerably in their methods and in the range and reliability of their results. A quick informal questionnaire distributed in a mall, or posted on a web site invites only those who "come there" to express their opinions—but it is a low-cost and low-effort way to get some sense of what the people think. The formal research



study that generates statistically significant results or engages carefully selected focus groups tells you more reliably what the public thinks. It also costs a lot more. And all methods are limited by the way the questions are constructed and asked. All these approaches are worth considering. Just be sure to view the results with a discriminating eye and draw only the conclusions that can be supported by the data.

## **Referenced Reports**

*For more information about the referenced e-government reports and initiatives visit:*

### **Arizona**

Arizona @ your service

<http://www.gita.state.az.us/index.html>

### **California**

Life Events and Affinity Design (L.E.A.D.) Program

<http://www.egovernment.homestead.com/lead.html>

### **Florida**

E-Government: Serving the Public through Technology Miami-Dade County Working Group Report of Findings

[http://www.co.miami-dade.fl.us/cio/egov/e-government\\_report.htm](http://www.co.miami-dade.fl.us/cio/egov/e-government_report.htm)

### **Indiana**

Access Indiana Web portal

<http://www.state.in.us>

### **Texas**

E-Government Services and Computer and Internet use in Texas

<http://www.dir.state.tx.us/egov/surveys.htm>

### **Utah**

SmartUTAH Survey of Internet Usage and Attitudes of Utah's Small Businesses (New - Conducted June 1999)

<http://www.cio.state.ut.us/docs/smartUtah.pdf>

### **National Information Consortium, Momentum Research Group of Cunningham Communication**

Benchmarking the E-Government Revolution: Year 2000 Report on Citizen and Business demand

[http://www.nicusa.com/NIC\\_flash/index\\_flash2.htm](http://www.nicusa.com/NIC_flash/index_flash2.htm)

### **Hart-Teeter, Council for Excellence in Government**

E-Government: The Next American Revolution

<http://www.excelgov.org/egovpoll/index.htm>

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