BOOK REVIEW

E-GOVERNMENT IN EUROPE: RE-BOOT-ING THE STATE. Paul Nixon and Vassiliki Koutrakou, (Eds.), *London: Routledge, 2007, 228 pages*

The proliferation of academic and policy papers on e-government in recent years makes one long for a more elaborate grounding of this research in political science. The view that e-government research should draw more from the discipline could be perceived as imperialism; however, the technological and social determinism found in e-government research would benefit from an understanding that we are dealing with institutions where fallible human beings interact. The implicit assumptions of research in the field reveal a naive positivism which could be overcome by more explicit theorizing. Descriptive studies of single cases and comparisons of "thin" data in either small-n or large-n versions demonstrate a need for more analytical political science research methods.

Editors of this book seem to share this understanding by writing that "We must remember that e-government is just government, and you can drop the 'e'" (p. 215). This insight is not surprising: both Paul Nixon and Vassiliki Koutrakou are political scientists. The volume as a whole does not actually follow the insight, however, and many chapters could benefit by stressing more the government aspect of e-government. If the object of study is "just government," then there is no reason to re-invent the wheel by ignoring the contributions from traditional political science.

The volume starts by offering three chapters by American and European authors on some of the key conceptual issues (democratic politics, citizenship, and cyberterrorism), and a chapter discussing the role of the European Union (EU) in e-government. This is followed by 10 country studies of e-government in EU member countries. The country reports offer both breadth and depth by covering large countries (the United Kingdom, France, and Germany) and smaller EU members from all parts of Europe. Value is definitely increased by including countries that can be perceived as fairly successful in their e-government programs (Estonia, Denmark, Netherlands, Slovenia), as well as laggards (Hungary, Greece, and Portugal). The beauty of such an approach is that it allows us to make our own comparisons by considering both positive and negative cases.

Indeed, as it emerges from these studies, the state of e-government in European countries varies considerably. Unfortunately, so does the quality of research, though the two are not necessarily correlated. The inconsistency in research quality—a typical problem of edited volumes—is exaggerated in this book by its having over 20 authors, ranging from senior scholars to masters students. Some authors analyze actual outcomes, while others focus on describing e-government programs. Sometimes the diversity of ad hoc definitions of simple terms leads to conceptual stretching and creates confusion. For instance, discussion of e-voting in Estonia refers to remote voting online (pp. 178–180). At the same time, discussion of e-voting in France seems to imply offline voting in polling stations by using "e-voting machines" that municipalities have installed (pp. 79–80).

A key problem of the country studies is weak conceptualization. Explicit statements of analytical frameworks could have replaced mere description of some e-government phenomena. Many chapters of the book beg questions about

why this particular program, outcome, or phenomena is studied but not another one. For instance, privacy and security issues could have received more attention. The issue of cyberterrorism, which is analyzed by Rajash Awal in his entire chapter, is barely mentioned in the country studies that follow. Stronger links between the discussion of conceptual issues in the beginning of the book and the country studies that follow would have helped to overcome some of the problems of weak conceptualization.

The unifying factor of most country studies is their highly descriptive nature. Some studies are filled with heavy data, others with authors' opinions. Some offer overviews of policy documents and rely heavily on these documents to reach their conclusions. Asking more fundamental questions about the object of research, presenting a stronger conceptual framework, and defining the unit of analysis would have avoided the presentation of less than useful data in some chapters. The use of primary sources and elite interviews would have reduced reliance on papers and presentations prepared by policy wonks.

There are some implicit or explicit causal explanations offered in the country studies. However, the laundry list of explanatory variables is clearly not sufficient, and perhaps not even necessary for explaining the outcomes. For instance, Marc Ernsdorff and Adriana Berbec provide the following list for explaining e-government success in Estonia: EU membership, strategic thinking within government, positive attitude towards ICT, good attention to detail, legal framework, economic growth, and macroeconomic stability (p. 171). At the same time, Darren Purcell and Aaron Champion provide the following variables for Slovenia: position vis-à-vis western Europe, affluence, the legacy of civil wars, small nation-state status, unclear identity in the world, openness to business, efficiency, and providing a modern and safe environment for capital (p. 208). Paul Nixon and Katalin Szaloki emphasize the role of the EU in Hungarian e-government efforts (p. 184–185). However, if the EU is an important variable in explaining the e-government outcomes, then why do we see different outcomes? Estonia is perceived as a success (pp. 171–175) and Hungary as a laggard (pp. 185–186). The

same question could be asked about many other explanatory variables, such as strategic thinking: Hungary had an informatics strategy as early as 1995 (p. 190), while Slovenia had a Ministry for Information Society which was created in 2000 and abolished in 2004 (p. 198).

However, there are some positive exceptions that stand out by providing explicit analytical frameworks. Chapter 8 on Denmark by Kim Viborg Andersen, Helle Zinne Henriksen, and Eva Born Rasmussen uses institutional frameworks as an analytical springboard. By offering an analytical account of e-government in Denmark, they raise some of the fundamental questions that could interest researchers worldwide, such as the tensions between central state control and decentralization of e-government services, and the potential downsides of duplication. This is followed by four case studies of government's electronic endeavors in the following areas: communication with citizens and companies, public procurement, taxation, and the health sector. Accounting for dynamic changes in these cases, they demonstrate how e-government implementation has been achieved by a diversity of means. They conclude by pointing out that the success of Danish e-government should be seen as the result of a long evolution, and not as stemming from "unidirectional regulation."

Gustavo Cardoso and Tiago Lapa place their assessment of e-government in the context of literature on public administration modernization, and they emphasize the usefulness of Fountain's technology enactment framework for explaining the state of the program in Portugal. They argue that e-government innovation there has been "incremental" (not "radical" or "systemic" in Mulgan's terminology) and that "the impact on underlying state structures has been very limited" (p. 154). While the rhetoric concerning e-government has been ambitious, according to the authors it is impossible to give one example in the public sector "that has been radically reengineered to make full use of new technology" (p. 154). Despite being connected to the Internet, public sector agencies—even those within the same ministry—are what the authors refer to as "archipelagos of isolated islands" (p. 166). They offer an analytical story

in which e-government technology meets the Weberian bureaucracy, and they point out that organizational innovation is needed because technology on its own is simply not sufficient for making the transition to a network society: "Without organizational innovation, technological innovation will never constitute an effective development factor and a source of competitiveness," they conclude (pp. 167–168).

In sum, the book offers a great diversity of perspectives, research approaches, and objects of study that all fall under the category of e-government in Europe. The diversity poses a challenge to those who look for a coherent overview. It certainly offers some valuable country studies and discussion of conceptual issues. It can serve as a starting point for formulating research questions and discovering empirical evidence that may be investigated further. In this sense, the volume is representative of our current understanding of e-government in Europe.

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