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The Political Character of Computing Developments: Citizens' interests and Government Services

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on how citizens' interests are dealt with and mediated by means of computer technology. It examines the distribution of computing resources to different government activities and, indirectly, to different client groups. It asks to what extent the patterns of computer use reflect stable patterns of choice favoring some uses over others and, therefore, some client groups over others.

Two political perspectives on the patterns of choice are considered: managerial rationalism and reinforcement politics. To the extent that managerial rationalism characterizes computing decisions, we would expect to see computing distributed in favor of these government activities that provide direct services to citizens, and that actually expand, rather than contract, the array of choices available to citizens. In contrast, to the extent that reinforcement politics characterizes computing decisions, we would expect to see computing used in support of routine administrative activities, basic local government services, bureaucratic control over government departments and agencies, and social control over the recipients of social services such as welfare, health, and recreation.

To examine which of these perspectives best characterizes computing in public organizations, we examine the portfolios of investment in computer based applications, using data collected from over 700 city and county governments in the United States. First, we look at the extent to which computing is applied to different local government functions. This examination suggests that computing tends to reinforce the traditional emphases of local governments toward

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internal administrative efficiency, and toward basic government functions, especially finance and police. In order to explore more fully these suggestive patterns, we then classify local government computing applications in terms of the extent to which they are oriented toward providing direct services to citizens as opposed to indirect support, and toward social control of "target" citizen groups as opposed to bureaucratic control of government departments, agencies, and employees.

The data show that the pattern of local government use of computing is complex and rich. But generally, computing tends to be used primarily to: (1) support basic government services such as police, fire, highways, and sanitation rather than more socially oriented services; (2) achieve efficiency payoffs through automation of administrative services rather than equity, effectiveness, or other possible payoffs; and (3) enhance social control through support of inherently regulatory services such as law enforcement and various kinds of code enforcement. Clearly these uses of computing serve a wide variety of citizen interests. Indeed, they serve what many scholars have characterized as historically dominant interests of citizens for basic services, efficiency, and law enforcement from their local governments. Thus, in a broad sense, computing has served to reinforce prevailing community biases.

More narrowly, and within the government itself, computing has been used to serve the interests of central administrators in reformed governments. The reform administrators' values of efficiency, control, and decision making effectiveness have been served by a byproduct of routine administrative automation in finance, in general administration, and in the operating departments of the government. Even where computing appears to have been broadly applied to a wide variety of government functions and departments, it has in fact been narrowly applied to generate efficiencies in large data-handling operations of the departments, and to produce rudimentary data that top administrators can use for the myriad decisions they face in managing the government. Thus, computing has served to reinforce the biases of reform administrators.

In summary, managerial rationalism does not fit well with the reality of computing development in most governments. Rather than being oriented toward service delivery to citizens and toward enhancing the choices of citizens, as one would expect with managerial rationalism, computing appears oriented toward governmental efficiency and toward enhancing the choices of top-level administrators. Thus, we conclude that reinforcement politics is a better characterization of local computing decisions.