

## Citizen Roles in E-government

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### 1 Introduction

During the latest years there has, in e-government, been a focus on public e-services (e.g. Layne & Lee, 2001, Wimmer, 2002; Andersen & Henriksen, 2006; Goldkuhl, 2007). There is a rapid growth in the development and launching of new public e-services over the web to citizens. This entails a more thorough discussion of roles of citizens in e-government. In public e-services, the citizens are direct users of such e-government applications (figure 1b). More conventional e-government systems, which are internal in public agencies, have public administrators (case handlers) as their direct users (figure 1a). The citizens can be seen as a kind of indirect users in such cases, if they are affected by decisions med by civil servants using internal e-government systems. The citizen may be users of information from the system. In the e-service case they are not only information users, they are also technology users.

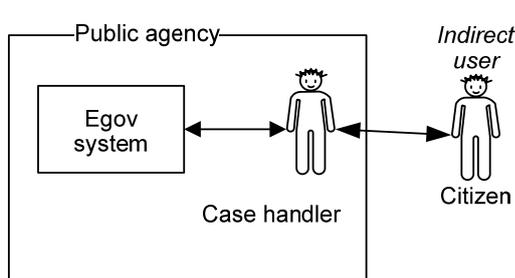


Figure 1a: Citizen as indirect user of egov system

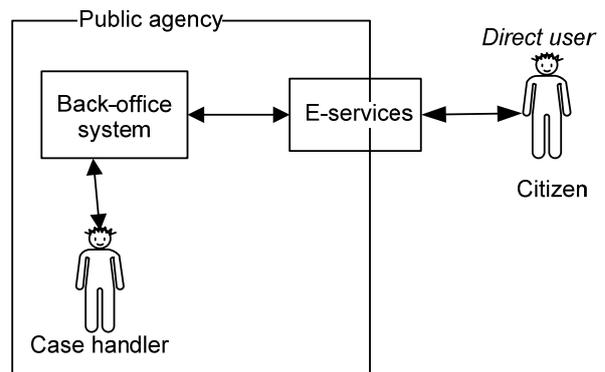


Figure 1b: Citizen as direct user of egov system (e-services)

In public e-services, citizens should always be able to reach, through the web, public agencies and also be served by them. A public *e-service* entails that some service is delivered and thus that the citizen is being served. This emphasis on *service* and *serving* may be accompanied by a (re)definition of the citizen role in e-government services to a *customer* role. Should we talk about customers, instead of citizens in e-government? Or what appropriate role notions are available in e-government discourses? The purpose of this short paper is to analyse and discuss citizen roles in e-government. What kinds of role notions are suitable for characterization of citizens in e-government?

The paper is based on on-going research in e-government. It is influenced by several case studies concerning public e-services and other kinds of e-government applications: provisional driver's licence, food permits, building permits and allowances for personal assistance for disabled persons.

## 2 Customers of public administration?

There is growing use of the notion of 'customer' in public administration and e-government (e.g. Wagenheim & Reurink, 1991; Ho, 2002; King, 2007; Schedler & Summermatter, 2007). This follows an emphasis on someone to be served and also someone who can make choices of which providers to select. Some authors claim that the very concept of e-government involves a customer orientation. Ho (2002, p 440) says "a transformation from the traditional bureaucratic model to the e-government paradigm, which emphasizes the customer-driven mentality and interorganizational collaboration and coordination". Customer orientation has been a pivotal part in the New Public Management (NPM) movement (e.g. Armstrong, 1998; Barberis, 1998; Mathiasen, 1999; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000). There is however not a clear link between NPM and e-government although some authors claim the close relationship (e.g. Schedler & Scharf, 2002; Hood & Peters, 2004).

There are, however, many scholars who are critical against the use of the customer concept in public administration. This is sometimes accompanied by a criticism against NPM as a management ideology with too much focus on economic values and too less on democratic values. Vigoda (2002) criticises the customer concept to be a passive one in relation to public administration. The public administration is seen as the active one trying to satisfy the needs of customer. Olsen (2005) talks about customers as acting with self-interest in contrast to civic-minded citizens who engage in political matters. Customers will have a commercial rather than a political relation to government. Alford (2002, p 337) states that "critics see [customer focus] as inappropriate to the public sector, in particular because it devalues citizenship". Arguments can also be heard that customers have a possibility to choose or not to in relation to a certain product and supplier. This is not the case with many public services. Although NPM has led to possibilities to choose between schools and clinics, there are many areas where there will not exist any possibilities for choice. A citizen applying for a provisional driver's license is not a customer who is buying such a license based on a selection of possible suppliers on a competitive market.

Following this kind of arguments against the customer notion, what kinds of counter-arguments are possible to identify? Is it possible to conceive an applicant for a driver's license as a customer? The main line of thought is that such an applicant is to be seen as someone to serve, someone who demands a service from the public administration. The public administration has a capacity to deal with application cases from applicants. The applicants have expectations to get the service of a provided provisional driver's license. In this respect, there are clear resemblances with a customer relation. Someone asks for something to be done and expects a delivery from a provider who has a certain capability to do so. Public administration has legally defined capability to handle cases which involve individuals' needs transformed to requests.

There are citizen roles which resemble with a customer role, although there are some fundamental differences as well. In cases with application for permits or allowances of different kinds, there is not a commercially defined supplier-customer relationship.

The customer concept has a commercial flavour which may not correspond well to government-citizen relationships. There is however an obvious need for a role concept which may capture the properties of actors with expectations to get services from the government. Public administration is a provider of certain services to expectant actors. This is one role of

citizens; to expect services from government. Another role is of course the political roles of voting and participating in public debate.

I propose the notion of *client* to capture these properties of a service receiver. 'Client' does not have commercial connotations like 'customer'. The client concept has been used as generic concept in workpractice theory (Goldkuhl & Röstlinger, 2003) for those who are served by a workpractice through the delivery of products (goods/services). A client is the beneficiary of a workpractice.

### **3 Client roles of public administration**

An applicant for permits or allowances is thus defined here as a client. It is however not so simple to state that those applicants are the only clients of a public agency. In the case of a commercial supplier the purchasing customers are the only customers. There might be other beneficiaries, who will obtain something valuable from the s customers' use of their purchased products. However, there is usually a rather straight-forward satisfying of needs. There exist of course side-effects of products and the purchase process which should be taken into account. However in public administration there is a clear assignment to deal with these different and sometimes opposite interests.

Public administration comprises a balancing of different interests of different citizens. A case handler cannot strive for maximal client satisfaction. Public administrators must take into account the interest of the general public, i.e. other clients than the applicants. I will distinguish between these two client roles:

- Use-clients
- General-clients

The use-client is the one who wants something done, e.g. a provisional driver's license. The general-clients are the other part of the public; those who may be affected by the decisions made by the public administration. In the case of the provisional driver's license; the general-clients are the people who are out in the traffic environment and may be affected by the actions of the person learning to drive a car. A case handler who takes the decision to issue a provisional driver's license must take into account what is stated in the regulations to defend the general public (i.e. the general-clients). The case handler cannot maximize the service to the use-client requesting the permit. The case handler must, based on the specific regulations, balance the interests of the use-client and the general-clients.

The roles of public administrators, in relation to citizens as clients are dual. The public administrators should serve, but also regulate, since their work are based on laws and regulations. In an analysis of NPM, Denhardt & Denhardt (2000) has suggested a move from steering to serving. Steering in the sense of applying legal regulations can however not be abandoned by the administrators. The role is to apply the regulations in balancing the interests of different clients. I would like to claim that the role of a public administrator is to serve and regulate. In relation to what Denhardt & Denhardt (2000) proposed I would rather claim steering *and* serving. Goldkuhl (2008) has made a division of different regulation levels. Legislation is general regulation made by the elected representatives. Specific regulation is the application of the legislation by a public agency in relation to clients. The work of a public agency (when making decisions concerning permits and allowances) is a regulating practice. It is multifunctional, which means that it is at the same time is regulating and serving.

These multifunctional roles of public administrators (serving and regulating) can be summarized in the following way enhancing the aim of balancing different interests:

- Issue the right to use-clients to perform as much as possible of their desires without constraining the legitimate action space of the general-clients
- Guard the right to a safe action space for general-clients with respect to the use-clients' need for action space

**4 Conclusions: Citizens as clients and beyond**

I have introduced the two roles of use-clients and general-clients in order to have more nuanced role conceptions than the customer role in (e-)government. Does this resolve the issue of not devaluating citizenship as is claimed by many critics to NPM and customer orientation in public administration (e.g. Alford, 2002; Olsen, 2005)? One serious deficiency in the debate concerning NPM and democracy is that not different practices and roles of citizens are clearly differentiated. Citizenship may mean several things as the citizen may have different roles in relation to government. In figure 2 I have differentiated between different roles of citizens. The two client roles are depicted together with two more political roles: The role of the voter and the role of the citizen participating in policy making discourse. This latter role can involve political manifestations as well as communication to public agencies as proposals and complaints.

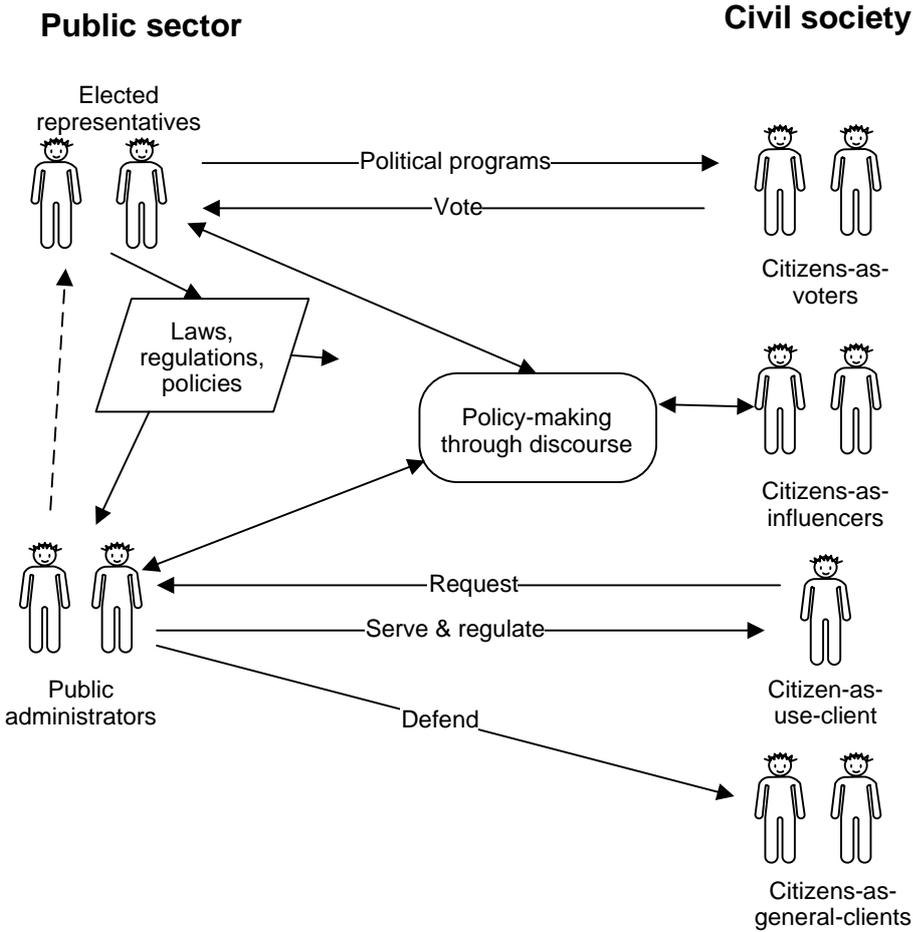


Figure 2: Citizen roles as relations between civil society and public sector

The direct political roles of the citizen are thus divided into one formal role (through voting) and one informal role (through discourse). Denhardt & Denhardt (2000) expressed some critique on NPM and suggested a transition to “New Public Service”. This critique was mainly based on what they conceived as a missing element of NPM: citizen involvement in public discourse. In the model presented above (figure 2) this aspect is covered by the role of citizen-as-influencer.

This proposed role model of citizens can be used to guide research and practice in e-government. The voter and the influencer are roles that are important for e-democracy and e-participation. For public e-services and other e-government applications, the role of use-clients is essential. However, one message of this paper is not to dismiss the role of citizens as general-clients.

The citizen-government interaction model (figure 2) also implies a clear assignment chain: From citizens (as voters) to the elected and the public administrator and back to citizens (as clients). Citizens are the assigners and the clients of the public sector and they are also dialogical participants in discourses on its development.

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