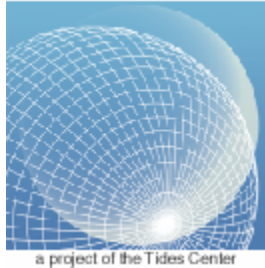


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How Americans Get in Touch With Government

Internet users benefit from the efficiency of e-government, but multiple channels are still needed for citizens to reach agencies and solve problems

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Summary of Findings

The drive by public agencies to provide information and services on the Internet opens up a way for Americans to contact government that was not available a decade ago. This report takes stock of how e-government is faring by placing e-gov in the context of the other ways people get in touch with government, such as telephone calls, in-person visits, and letters. It then assesses whether different means of contact – or other factors – are connected to the rates of success and satisfaction that users report when they reach out to government. This comparative look at how Americans get hold government reveals the benefits and limits of e-government at its current stage of evolution.

The benefits involve expanded information flows between governments and citizens. In addition, many citizens say the Internet helps in conducting their business with government. Americans with Internet access are much more likely to contact the government than non-Internet users, showing that Internet users have strongly embraced a new communications medium to contact government. The conveniently available information offered at government Web sites makes it easier for Americans to conduct their business with government by whatever means they choose. The ease of email makes it possible for citizens to fire off a missive to express a view about policy or highlight a problem with neighborhood garbage pickup. The upshot is that Internet users say that e-gov improves their relationship with government. It is important to note, however, that there is no independent effect of Internet use on the chances of success with government.

E-gov is not yet the “killer app” among the available tools to contact government.

The limits of e-gov have to do with people’s technological assets, preferences, and the wide range of problems people bring to government. Not everyone has Internet access – about one third of American adults do not – which means that phone calls, in-person visits, or letter-writing are the available options to contact government for a large share of the population. Many people simply do not choose to use the Web or email to get in touch with government. In fact, those who contact government, including Internet users, are most likely to say they prefer to use the telephone to do so. And not all problems lend themselves easily to e-gov solutions. “Real time” interaction with government – the telephone or in-person visits – is preferred when people have urgent or complex problems to sort out with the government.

In sum, e-gov is a helpful tool among several options for reaching out to government, but

This Pew Internet & American Life Project report is based on a random digit dial telephone survey of 2,925 Americans age 18 and over conducted between June 25, 2003 and August 3, 2003. The survey was conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates and was administered in English. For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects is +/- 2%. For results based Internet users (n=1,899), the margin of sampling error is +/- 2%. For “Government Patrons”, n=1,657 and the margin of sampling error is +/- 3%.

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it is by no means the “killer app” among them. People’s problem-solving capacities matter to successful outcomes with government, not a specific technology. As policymakers expand the offerings of e-government, they would be wise also to maintain and upgrade the other channels that citizens use to contact government, with a focus on how these traditional channels may complement e-gov applications.

Data from our July 2003 survey of 2,925 Americans fill out the picture of how many Americans contact government, what for, by what means, and with what outcomes. The data also show how the Internet is used by citizens in their dealings with government. Much of the analysis focuses on a group we call Government Patrons – people who contacted government in the past year for reasons not related to the simple act of mailing in tax returns. The total number of Government Patrons is roughly 109 million adults (those 18 and older).

The type of contact Americans have with government

A plurality of Americans who contact government do so via the telephone. Using a government Web site is the second most frequent approach for contacting government.

Here’s how the numbers break down for all Government Patrons. The percentages total to more than 100% because respondents were permitted to give multiple responses.

- 42% said they used the telephone the last time they contacted government.
- 29% said they visited a government Web site to contact government.
- 20% visited in person.
- 18% sent an email.
- 17% wrote a letter.
- 22% use multiple means to contact government.

When Government Patrons were asked what way they would most prefer to contact government, the telephone was again the top choice.

- 40% of those Government Patrons say they would prefer to use the phone to contact government.
- 24% say they would prefer to use the Web.
- 13% say an in-person visit would be the way to go to contact government.
- 11% would prefer to use email to get hold of government.
- 10% would prefer to write a letter.

Summary of Findings

More than half of all Americans contact the government in a given year.

People give a variety of reasons for contacting government, including conducting transactions, looking for answers to specific questions, seeking help with a specific problem, or expressing an opinion. Some 54% of *all* Americans – both Internet users and non-users – contact government in the typical year, where contacts are defined to exclude the simple act of mailing in tax returns. Those with *specific* queries about taxes were counted in the 54%. Here is why people contact government:

- 30% of all Americans contact government for reasons relating to a transaction such as renewing a car registration.
- 25% contact government to get an answer to a specific question, whether that is about eligibility for a government benefit or finding out the hours of a nearby park.
- 19% register their opinion with government agencies on issues and policy questions.
- 11% contact government seeking out help for a specific problem.

Internet users are more likely than non-users to contact government.

With a new tool at hand to contact government, Internet users put it to use. They are much more likely to contact government than non-Internet users. Some of this additional contact with government comes from online users expressing their opinion to policymakers about the issues of the day or pending policy decisions. Overall:

- 72% of Internet users contacted the government in the past year.
- 23% of non-Internet users contacted government users in the past year.
- Among Internet users, 30% say they have used email or the Internet to try to change a change a government policy or influence a politicians vote on a law.

Outcomes: What matters in successfully addressing the problems and concerns people bring to government

People generally have success when contacting government, and they report high rates of satisfaction with their interactions with government.

- Fully 63% of Government Patrons say that they had a successful outcome the last time they contacted government. No single mode of contact, whether phone, email, Web, or letter, is associated with greater success than others.
- Three-quarters (76%) say they are satisfied with how their last contact with government went, with 35% saying they were “very” satisfied and 41% saying they were “somewhat” satisfied.

Success in their interactions with government is influenced by people's education and problem-solving skills, not just their technological assets.

- Internet users who contact government using any communications channel are more likely than non-users to report that they have been successful in their most recent interactions with government, by a 65% to 53% margin.
- These differences, however, are not solely attributable to some inherent benefit brought about by Internet use. Rather, educational and attitudinal factors come into play in predicting success. Those with higher levels of education and those who think government can be trusted are more likely to be successful with government than those without those characteristics.

Some types of government contacts lend themselves to success, but some do not.

- Most Government Patrons (82%) are successful when conducting a transaction such as getting a license, probably because transactions have clear-cut conclusions.
- Only about a third (36%) say they are successful when they express an opinion to government. This is not surprising given the low probability that the opinion of a single individual will influence a government outcome.
- The complexity of a Government Patron's problem matters to the outcome. Half (49%) of those with complicated problems say they have successful outcomes, and half (52%) who contact government to solve a specific problem were successful.

Some problems lend themselves to "real time" interaction with the government. That means Government Patrons prefer using the telephone or visiting government offices as they deal with public agencies. Other problems are well suited for the Web or email.

- For very complex problems or contacts that in some way involve problem-solving, the phone or in-person visits are preferred by 62% of Government Patrons. Only about one-quarter prefers the Web or email in these instances.
- For general information-seeking from government, the gap is much smaller. The telephone or in-person contact is still preferred (by 51% of Government Patrons), but Web or email is preferred by 43% of Government Patrons.

Demographic characteristics also come into play with successful interactions with government.

- Older people have lower rates of success with their last government contact, as 55% of those over age 65 said they were successful compared with the 63% average.
- Education is a clear dividing line: only 48% of Americans with a high school education or less said they were successful in their last contact with government.

Summary of Findings

- Some racial divides exist; 66% of whites say they were successful in addressing their issue the last time they contacted government, while 51% of non-Hispanic blacks said this and 55% of Hispanics did.

People sometimes encounter problems when they contact government. Those who use the phone are more likely to report problems than those who use the Web.

- Overall, 59% of Government Patrons who contact the government by phone encounter a problem of some sort.
- Among Government Patrons who contact the government through the Web, 46% encounter some kind of problem.
- The leading problem for those who contact the government by telephone is time; 36% say they do not have enough time to stay on the phone or make repeated calls to government agencies and 31% say they get put on hold for extended periods of time.
- Government Patrons who use the Web to contact government say their top problem is not being able to find the right information.
- Relatively few (one in eight) Web users say that bad links or unclear instructions to download needed forms are problems.
- People with disabilities are significantly more likely than others to encounter problems when contacting government using the phone or the Web.

The growing popularity and importance of e-gov among Internet users

Fully 77% of Internet users – or 97 million Americans – have at some time gone online to search for information from government agencies or to communicate with them.

As of the middle of 2003, use of the Internet to interact with government had grown 50% since the middle of 2002. In other words, roughly three fourths of Net users have done at least one of the following six e-gov activities, with the average user doing about three of them.

- 66% of Internet users have looked for information from a local, state, or federal government Web site.
- 41% of Internet users have done research involving official government statistics or documents online.
- 34% of Internet users have gotten recreational or tourist information.
- 28% of Internet users have gotten advice from a government agency about a health or safety issue.
- 27% of Internet users have sent an email to the federal, state, or local government.

Summary of Findings

- 23% of Internet users have gotten information or applied for government benefits online.

Internet users who contacted government in the past year are more likely to turn to the telephone or in-person visits than cyber means (i.e., the Web or email) to deal with government. Among *all Internet users* who are Government Patrons:

- 41% used the telephone to contact government.
- 33% used the Web.
- 21% used email.
- 19% visited an agency in person.
- 14% wrote a letter.

For Internet users with high-speed Internet connections at home, the Internet takes on greater prominence.¹ Home broadband users who contacted government in the past year are slightly more likely to employ the Internet over the telephone or in-person visits to get in touch with government:

- 38% used the telephone to contact government.
- 36% used the Web.
- 25% used email.
- 20% visited an agency in person.
- 14% wrote a letter.

The Internet provides some efficiency payoffs for citizens in their interactions with government. Net users report that it takes less time for Net users to conduct their government business compared with non-Internet users.

- When asked whether the last contact they had with government took less time than they expected, 27% of Internet users said it did compared with 22% of non-users who reported quicker-than-expected interactions with government.

Internet users report that the Net helps in their dealings with government.

- The Internet has a significant impact on users' views about dealing with government. Half of all Internet users and 59% of those with broadband at home feel that the Internet has helped their relationship with government.

¹ In our July 2003 survey, 32% of Internet users who have access at home have high-speed Internet connections such as a cable modem or digital subscriber line (DSL) service.

Summary of Findings

- These perceived benefits also probably have to do with information reducing people’s uncertainties when they approach government. The additional information gathered online may contribute to feelings of efficacy when people reach out to government, even if its substantive benefit is hard to discern.

The Internet is the principal tool in getting certain types of government information, but not for sensitive information or some transactions.

- When all respondents were asked where they would turn if they *needed information* about government, the Internet outpaced the phone as the preferred channel for non-sensitive purposes. For instance:
 - 39% of all Americans said they would use the Internet to find out about government benefits and 28% said they would use the phone for that.
 - To find out about programs an agency offers, 53% of all respondents said they would turn to the Net and 23% said they would use the phone.
- For more sensitive queries, such as personal tax questions, people turn more often to the telephone than the Net by a 51% to 17% margin.
- For several types of transactions, such as auto licenses, recreational licenses, or professional licenses, “some other way” (presumably in-person visits) lead the way, with both the phone and the Internet lagging significantly.

How People Contact Government: Summary of Findings at a Glance
E-government is an increasingly popular tool for Internet users, and its utility is primarily in getting information from and sending messages to government.
Internet users report that e-gov improves how they carry out business with government.
Americans like to have multiple channels available when addressing a need they have with government.
A plurality of Americans who contact government do so via the telephone. Using a government Web site is the second most frequent approach for contacting government.
Focusing on <i>preferred</i> means for contacting government, the telephone and in-person visits outpace the Web or email as the way people would like to contact the government.
Some problems lend themselves to “real time” interaction with the government – meaning the telephone and in-person visits are preferred – while other problems have greater suitability for the Web or email.
Internet users are more likely than non-users to contact government, suggesting that the Internet helps expand information flows between governments and citizens.
People generally have success when contacting government, and they report high rates of satisfaction with their interactions with government.
Success in their interactions with government has to do with people’s education and problem-solving skills, not just technological assets.
People sometimes encounter problems when they contact government. Those who use the phone are more likely to report problems than those who use the Web.
Source: John B. Horrigan. <i>How Americans Get in Touch with Government</i> . Washington, DC: Pew Internet & American Life Project, May 2004.

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About the Pew Internet & American Life Project: The Pew Internet Project is a nonprofit, non-partisan think tank that explores the impact of the Internet on children, families, communities, the work place, schools, health care and civic/political life. The Project aims to be an authoritative source for timely information on the Internet's growth and societal impact. Support for the project is provided by The Pew Charitable Trusts. The project's Web site: www.pewinternet.org

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Part 1.

Introduction

The recurring theme of “reinvention” in American government has in recent years been fueled by the desire to employ networked communication technologies to enhance government’s capacities.

Electronic government, or e-government, has come to refer not just to Web pages of government agencies and government officials using email, but also to the Internet’s transactional and interactive capabilities as means to better governance. Various definitions of e-government talk about information technologies as building blocks to improve government’s responsiveness to citizens, as well as how these technologies should encourage government officials to rethink service delivery, improving some processes and replacing others.

“The true test of a good government is its ability to produce good administration.” –
Alexander Hamilton

As the Internet revolution began to gain steam in the 1990s, e-government started to attract the attention of government officials. However, electronic interactions and applications utilized by government and citizens lagged behind similar developments in the commercial sector.² By the late 1990s, government agencies began to see the potential of networked information technologies to improve government operations. Yet, the e-gov applications that existed were oriented mainly towards information provision – for example, “brochure” Web pages featured information from publications that were already available offline in print.

Still, online government information and applications have proved fairly popular with Internet users. When the Pew Internet & American Life Project first began conducting surveys in March 2000, 47% of Internet users, or 40 million adult Americans, said they had sought information at a state, local, or federal government Web site. By the end of 2002, this number had risen to 66 million Americans, or 56% of Internet users. The nature of people’s online e-gov activity was oriented towards a wide range of information-seeking. Respondents reported that they were most likely to go to sites with the following kinds of information: getting tourism and recreational information, doing research or work for school, downloading government forms, finding what services a

² C. Richard Neu, Robert H. Anderson, Tora K. Bikson, *Sending Your Government a Message: E-mail Communication Between Citizens and Government*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1999.

Part 1. Introduction

government agency provides, and seeking information about public policy and other issues of interest.

Deeper types of online contacts with government have become increasingly evident among Internet users. This is attributable at least in part to the growing sophistication of Internet users and more easy-to-use Web sites provided by governments. Our September 2001 survey showed that 20% of Internet users who had gone to government Web sites had sought out information on how to apply for government benefits, 12% had renewed a driver's license or car registration online, and 7% had renewed a professional license. The result of expanding supply and demand for e-gov has been rising expectations among Internet users with respect to e-government. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of Internet users said in a September 2002 Pew Internet Project survey that they would expect to find government information online, and about as many Americans (Internet users and non-users alike) said they would turn to the Internet next when they need government information as say they would use the telephone.

The goal of this report is to explore the different ways in which people contact government and the factors that are associated with success.

With people increasingly turning to e-government for basic and vital purposes in mind, it is important to continue to benchmark what people do when they turn to e-government, and to assess e-government contacts in the broader context of how people get in touch with government. This report does that in three ways by:

- analyzing the means by which people contact government and how they fare with those means;
- examining the specific problems people encounter when they contact government via the Web, the telephone, or by email;
- probing more deeply than the Pew Internet Project has in the past into what people do when they seek out government information online.

Part 2.

How Americans Contact Government and Why

What Government Patrons want.

To compare the different means people use to contact government and the outcomes, survey respondents were asked whether they contacted government in the past year (the year prior to the July 2003 survey), and by what means – telephone, Internet, letter, or in-person visits. For analysis of the subsequent series of questions about the reason for the contact and whether the outcome was successful or satisfactory, respondents were asked to keep in mind their last contact with government that excluded mailing in their tax return (although respondents who said their last contact was filing taxes were included as “yes” responses). This allows respondents to focus on something relatively recent that is other than a task that every taxpayer must do. This approach yields a sample of Americans who had a reason to contact government within the past year not related to sending in their tax return. They are referred to as Government Patrons in this report.

Throughout the report, with the exception of Part 4, the analysis refers to Government Patrons, that is, people’s most recent contact with government, not counting sending in a tax return. In Part 4, some of the analysis is of questions asked either of all Internet users or all respondents to the survey.

Government Patrons are people who contact government for reasons other than mailing in tax returns, although people who had issues related to tax preparation were counted as Government Patrons.

The rationale in focusing on people’s last contact with government is to jog respondent’s memories about an interaction with government that is relatively fresh in their minds. We were probing some basic questions: In the course of carrying out transactions with government, making queries, or finding information, are some means of contact associated with higher rates of success and satisfaction than others? How do users of government services rate them? If e-government tools are meant to improve government, what do we know so far from the experience of current e-gov surfers as compared with other means of contacts?

How often do Americans contact government?

In the year prior to the July 2003 survey, more than half of all Americans, some 54%, said they had contacted the government in a way other than mailing in a tax return. Of

Part 2. How Americans Contact Government and Why

Americans who did not contact government in the past year, most (60%) did not know that the government has set up Web sites and 800 telephone numbers to assist the general public with questions about government.

Most Americans contacted the government for personal reasons – 71% of Government Patrons said a personal reason motivated their contact with government, while 20% said it was business and 7% said it was a combination of personal and business. Of Government Patrons, fully 79% said the reason they contacted government was not related to filing taxes, with 21% saying it was tax-related. In all, 30% of Americans get hold of government for personal reasons not related to taxes, 9% do so for personal tax reasons, 12% for a business reason that is not related to taxes, and 3% for a tax reason related to their business.

Americans spread their government contact around: 35% say they last contacted the state government, 32% identify the federal government, 19% say local, and 7% a combination of governmental levels. Some people (21%) first turn to some place outside of government for a problem for which they eventually turn to government.

Why did Government Patrons contact government agencies? The most common reason, cited by 30% of Government Patrons, was to carry out a transaction of some sort, such as filing taxes or registering the car. Another 25% said they had contacted government to get an answer to a specific question. Nearly one-fifth (19%) said they had contacted the government to express an opinion, and 11% sought out help for a specific problem. A few (5%) offered that they had contacted government for a combination of reasons mentioned above, with the balance giving some other or no response.

Reason for last contact with government			
	All Government Patrons	Government Patrons with very urgent reason	Government Patrons with very complicated reason
Transaction	30%	26%	22%
Specific question	25	23	19
Express opinion	19	16	24
Solving a problem	11	23	19
Some other purpose	7	7	8
Combination of above	5	5	5
Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, July 2003, n=1,657 for Government Patrons. Margin of error is ±3%.			

In characterizing the nature of the contact, 31% said it was complicated (9% saying it was very complicated, 22% saying “somewhat” complicated), with the remaining two-thirds (68%) saying it was not really complicated at all. Respondents were also asked how

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urgent their contact was, and 11% said it was very urgent, meaning they needed a response within 24 hours. Another 39% said it was somewhat urgent, and 48% said it was not really urgent at all.

Contacts that are very urgent are driven partly by problems that need to be solved; 23% of people whose issues with government are very urgent say they contacted government because they needed help solving a problem. This is twice the rate for all Government Patrons. People contacting government for very complicated reasons are less likely than others to want to perform transactions (22% versus 30% for all Government Patrons). Those contacting the government with complicated issues in mind are more likely to be expressing opinions (24% versus 19% for all Government Patrons) and seeking help for a specific problem (19% versus 11% for all Government Patrons).

The means people use to contact government

The telephone leads the way in terms of method of last contact and preferred means of contact. For method of last contact, however, cyber means – either email or visiting a Web site – exceed the frequency of telephonic means when summed together. That is not the case for preferred means of contact, where telephone is clearly preferred to both Internet methods of contact. The gap between the means people use to contact government and how people prefer to contact government suggests that the Internet may not fulfill all of the needs of Internet users.

Means of Contacting Government		
	Method of last contact ...	Preferred means of contact ...
Telephone	42%	40%
Web site	29	24
In person	20	13
Email	18	11
Letter	17	10
Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, July 2003, n=1,657 for Government Patrons. Margin of error is ±3%.		

Preferred Means of Contacting Government—Net users		
	Preferred means of contact – dial-up Internet users	Preferred means of contact – home broadband users
Telephone	41%	33%
Web site	27	36
In person	12	8
Email	12	17
Letter	6	6
Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, July 2003; n=1,253 for Government Patrons who are dial-up users; n=429 for Government Patrons who are home broadband users.		

Part 2. How Americans Contact Government and Why

Among Internet users, the telephone is the preferred means of contact, but the magnitude of preference depends on the type of connection people have. Dial-up Internet users are most likely to prefer turning to the telephone to contact government. For those with high-speed Internet connections at home (32% of home Internet users in this survey), the Web is narrowly preferred to the telephone as a way to contact government.

People’s preferred means of contact also varies significantly by the nature of the problem at hand. For the 18% of Government Patrons who classify the reason they contact government as either very complicated or very urgent, “real time” interaction is by far the preferred choice. The telephone or in-person visits are the most valued forms of contact for these kinds of problems, while the Web and email fade in relative importance. The same is true for people who said that they sought out government help to solve a problem the last time they contacted government. For seeking information or executing a transaction, the Web and email become more prominent.

Preferred Means of Contacting Government—by Reason for Contact				
	Problem was very complex or urgent	Contacted government to solve problem	Contacted government for transaction	Contacted government to get information
Telephone	46%	47%	40%	41%
Web site	14	17	30	33
In person	16	15	15	10
Email	10	9	6	10
Letter	11	9	7	4

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, July 2003; n=1,657 for Government Patrons. Margin of error is ±3%.

Of course, people are not limited to a single means of contact with government. For Government Patrons, fully 22% said they used a combination of means to contact government. Among those who used multiple means, 71% named the phone as one way they contacted government, with sizable numbers also saying they used the Web or email to contact government (49% and 40% respectively). People often switch means in the course of trying to address an issue with government. Nearly one quarter (23%) of Government Patrons say they change channels during a contact with government, say from phone contact to Web contact. Of these channel changers, 40% say it is because they were not getting the response they needed and 23% say someone instructed them to use a different source.

Part 2. How Americans Contact Government and Why

A profile of those who contact the government

Demographically, those who contact the government are better educated, wealthier, younger, and more likely to be male than the general population. People employed by government (about 19% of those who are employed) are more likely than others to contact the government. As for attitudinal factors, people who are satisfied with the direction of the country are less likely to have contacted government, those who believe that government is wasteful are more likely to contact government, while those who tend to trust government are no more likely than others to contact government.

Although the table shows that people with disabilities are somewhat less likely to contact government, this finding does not hold up when other factors are held constant. Among the factors that do not come significantly into play in people's tendencies to contact government are race, political affiliation, marital status, or being a parent.³

Internet use seems clearly to come into play when it comes whether people contact government. Fully 72% of Internet users say they

Who contacts government		
	Contacted government last year	Did not contact government last year
Men	50%	45%
Women	50	55
Race/ethnicity		
Whites	80%	79%
Blacks	10	13
Hispanics	8	12
Age		
18-29	21%	21%
30-49	44	35
50-64	24	20
65+	10	24
Household income		
Less than \$30,000	24%	38%
\$30,000-\$50,000	22	17
\$50,000-\$75,000	17	13
\$75,000 +	23	9
Education		
Did not graduate from HS	6%	24%
High school grad	28	46
Some college	28	18
College degree +	37	13
Internet Use		
Percent who go online	84%	38%
Broadband at home	34%	27%
Average number of years online	5.8	4.8
Other		
Government employees	17%	6%
People with disabilities	12	16
Language other than English is spoken in household	15	15
Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, July 2003, n=2,925. Margin of error is ±2%.		

³ Regression analysis permits the effect of individual variables on the likelihood of contacting government to be isolated. In the case of people with disabilities, this means that their lower rate of contacting government is not attributable to their status as people with disabilities per se, but other characteristics they may possess.

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contacted the government in the past year versus 23% of non-Internet users. Some might wonder, though, if the large gap is attributable to the Internet or to another phenomenon. For instance, online Americans have other characteristics, such as higher educational levels or incomes, which may be the drivers for higher contact rates with government. Those factors do have an independent effect on whether one contacts government. However, statistical analysis shows that being an Internet user has a large and independent impact on whether one contacts government. In fact, having Internet access is the single largest predictor of whether a person contacts government. This makes sense: The Internet is a means of communication, and given the tool, people put it to use.

Some portion of the additional contact by Internet users may be due to their sending emails to communicate views on public policy issues. Of Internet users who have contacted government, one in eight (13%) does this at least several times a month. Lots of these frequent contactors are using the Net to try to change government policy or affect a politician's vote on a law; about half of these users (48%) say they email government officials to express a policy opinion versus 27% for other Internet users.

Success and Satisfaction with Government Contact

Americans who have contacted government report reasonably high rates of success and satisfaction with the experience. Fully 63% of targeted contacts (Americans who contacted government in the past year) said that the outcome was successful, with 25% saying they were still working on the problem, and 10% saying the outcome was not successful. As for satisfaction, 76% of Government Patrons say they were "very" or "somewhat" satisfied with their last contact with government, with 35% saying they were very satisfied and 41% reporting that they were somewhat satisfied. Nearly half (46%) said the contact took about the amount of time they expected, while 28% said it took longer than they anticipated.

Reason for contact		
	Success rates	Satisfaction ('very' or 'somewhat')
All Respondents	63%	76%
Last contact -- transaction	82	86
Last contact -- information	65	78
Last contact -- express opinion	36	64
Last contact -- to solve a problem	52	68
Last contact was complex	49	71
Last contact was urgent	59	73
Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, July 2003, n=1,657 for Government Patrons. Margin of error is ±3%.		

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Most people are successful when trying to conduct a transaction with government, probably because transactions have a visible finish line that enables citizens to identify success or failure. More challenging kinds of citizen-government contact have lower rates of success. Just over half of those who contacted government in the past year in order to solve a problem said they were successful, and half who contacted the government regarding a complex matter were successful. Comparatively few people who contact the government to express an opinion consider the outcome of this contact successful. Given the difficulty in tracing how expressing one's opinion translates into changing or even influencing an outcome, this is not surprising.

Demographic variations in success and satisfaction

Success and satisfaction by age		
Age category	Success rates	Satisfaction ('very' or 'somewhat')
Ages 18-29	66%	78%
Ages 30-49	65	77
Ages 50-64	62	77
Ages 65+	55	82
Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, July 2003, n=1,657 for Government Patrons. Margin of error is $\pm 3\%$.		

Looking at demographics, some clear patterns emerge. People over age 65 report lower levels of success than others, although intriguingly they express higher rates of satisfaction with government. This may be due to the different motivations senior citizens have when they contact government. Those over age 65 are much more likely to contact government to express an opinion (33% versus the 19% average) and this reason for contact is associated with much lower reported rates of success, but only somewhat lower-than-average rates of satisfaction.

Success and satisfaction by education & ethnicity		
Less than high school	48%	66%
High school grad	60	76
Some college	63	80
College graduate	68	80
White	66	80
Black (not Hispanic)	51	71
Hispanic	55	65
Other	60	69
Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, July 2003, n=1,657 for Government Patrons. Margin of error is $\pm 3\%$.		

Other demographic factors mark clear dividing lines for success and satisfaction with government contacts. The 20 percentage-point difference in success between those who

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have not completed high school and those who are college graduates suggests that the human capital that people bring to interactions with government has something to do with success. Differences by ethnicity are less marked, although there are clear gaps between whites, blacks, and Hispanics when it comes to success and satisfaction with interactions with government.

An Internet difference, but no independent effect

Internet use also seems to be associated with higher rates of success with government; 65% of Net users report success while just over half (53%) of non-users say this. (The 65% success rate among Internet users is the same for home broadband and dial-up users.) As the preceding discussion suggests, however, a lot is in motion when people contact government. Rates of success and satisfaction vary widely by demographic characteristics and reason for contact. It may not be the case that the Internet is a reason for the higher success rates among users; Net users may possess particular qualities that contribute to success that have nothing to do with whether they use the Internet or not. To disentangle the different effects, regression analysis was performed to examine what demographic, socioeconomic, and other factors might be associated with success and satisfaction in contacting government.

An Internet difference, but no independent effect		
	Success rates	Satisfaction (‘very’ or ‘somewhat’)
All Government Patrons	63%	76%
Internet Users	65	79
Non-Internet Users	53	68

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, July 2003, n=1,657 for Government Patrons. Margin of error is ±3%.

The analysis shows that being an Internet user does not have an independent impact on the chances of a person being successful in interactions with government. The same is true for satisfaction; being an Internet user does not increase the chances that someone rates their last contact with government as something that was “very” or “somewhat” satisfactory. In other words, though Internet users are more likely in our survey to say they have been successful or satisfied with their last government contact, Internet use in itself is not responsible for these differences.

When it comes to success with the last government contact, a number of factors do figure in the chances of success or failure. People who say that they generally trust the government to do the right thing, are satisfied with the direction of the country, and are well educated have greater chances to be successful in their dealings with government than those without those characteristics. Conversely, people who say they think

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government is generally wasteful are less likely than others to say that their last interaction with government was successful.

The story is much the same when examining satisfaction with a respondents' last government contact. Positive attitudes about government, such as trust in its ability to do the right thing and high levels of satisfaction about the direction of the country, are independently associated with satisfaction with respondents' last contact with government. Educational attainment is also an independent predictor of satisfaction, though the magnitude of this effect is lower than when the analysis focuses on success.

One notable finding from the regression analysis is that people whose last means of contact was the Web or the telephone are more likely to be successful with government, even when holding type of transaction and other social and demographic factors constant. The Web applications they encounter may not necessarily be behind this effect, but rather the skill people bring to the task at hand.⁴ Those who prefer interactive means of communication, such as the phone or the Internet, bring more education and, in all likelihood, better problem-solving skills to the matter at hand. The Internet and the telephone are convenient means to address the issues people have with government, but offer no inherent capacities to solve problems better.

The Internet saves some time

Although having the Internet does not, independently, improve outcomes for people, it does seem to save some time. About 46% of Government Patrons said their last interaction with government took about the amount of time they expected, 28% said it took more time than expected, and 24% said less time. Focusing on Internet users versus non-users shows that Internet users moved through their last contact with government a bit quicker than those without Net access. Fully 35% of non-users said their last contact with government took more time than expected, a nine-point difference in comparison with the 26% of Internet users who said it took more time than expected. About 27% of Internet said the interaction with government took less time than expected compared with 22% of non-users. Among Internet users, there was no difference between dial-up and home broadband users in these numbers.

Internet users are more likely than non-users to say that their last contact with government took less time than expected.

In keeping with the notion that people's problem-solving abilities are important in their dealings with government, higher levels of education are associated with moving through government interactions somewhat faster or in about the expected time. Fully 56% of

⁴ See Eszter Hargittai, "Serving Citizens' Needs: Minimizing Online Hurdles to Accessing Government Information". *IT&Society*, Volume I, Issue 3, Winter 2003, pp. 27-41. Available online at: <http://www.stanford.edu/group/siqss/itandsociety/v01i03/v01i03a03.pdf>. Hargittai has found that access to technology itself does not ensure good outcomes using online resources, but that skills people bring to the table matter a great deal in how well people use the Internet to address problems.

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people with college degrees or higher say their last contact with government took approximately the amount of time they expected, 24% said it took more time than expected, and 18% said less time.⁵

Contacting different levels of government

We asked Government Patrons which level of government they contact most often and found that there are differences in how people contact government across the different levels, the reasons for contact and, to a lesser extent, in rates of success and satisfaction. As the table shows below, more than two-thirds of government patrons contact state or federal governments, with local governments less likely to be contacted.

Level of government contacted most often	
State	37%
Federal	35
Local	23
All three	3
Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, July 2003, n=1,657 for Government Patrons. Margin of error is $\pm 3\%$.	

As for preferred means of contact, Government Patrons favor phone calls or in-person visits as a means of contact for local government, while clicking on a Web site is a relatively strong preference for those who contact the Federal government.

Preferred Means of Contacting Government by Level of Government			
	State	Federal	Local
Telephone	39%	38%	43%
Web site	24	31	18
In person	12	9	22
Email	14	12	7
Letter	11	9	8
Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, July 2003; n=1,657 for Government Patrons.			

There are also differences in why people contact governments at different levels as well as minor ones when it comes to success and satisfaction.

⁵ Both the Internet and education effects withstand multivariate analysis, that is, these effects are independent of one another while holding other demographic and socio-economic factors constant.

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Reason for last contact with government by level of government			
	State	Federal	Local
Transaction	28%	34%	27%
Specific question	27	25	22
Express opinion	21	19	15
Solving a problem	11	8	16
Some other purpose	5	5	12
Combination of above	6	5	4
Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, July 2003, n=1,657 for Government Patrons. Margin of error is $\pm 3\%$.			

Success and Satisfaction by level of government		
	Success rates	Satisfaction ('very' or 'somewhat')
State	65%	75%
Federal	62	82
Local	62	78
Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, July 2003, n=1,657 for Government Patrons. Margin of error is $\pm 3\%$.		

Proximity probably explains some of the difference in preferred means of contact between those contacting local governments and other levels of government. The ease of the no-cost local phone call or the drive down to city hall is likely behind why phone calling or in-person visits are preferred by nearly two-thirds of those who contact local government most often. The distance between state capitals and the nation's capital for most people may make clicking on a Web site relatively more attractive than a toll call or a trip to an agency's office.

Tax reasons may be a reason for the emphasis on transactions among Government Patrons who contact the federal government most often. Because transactions, as discussed above, are associated with higher rates of satisfaction among government patrons, this may be a reason why satisfaction levels are higher among those who contact the federal government.

The Tax Man

Of Americans who have contacted government in the past year, about 20% do so for reasons having to do with their taxes – a query that is different from simply mailing in their tax returns. For people with tax concerns, the phone and the Web were the main means of contact. Fully 51% of those with tax queries picked up the telephone to approach the government and 40% used the Web; this compares with 40% of

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Government Patrons with non-tax related questions who used the telephone and 26% who used the Web. Both groups were equally likely to use a combination of methods (22%). Most of the tax queries were for personal reasons (77%), with the remaining 23% being either for business purposes or a combination of personal and business; this compares with 69% and 28% respectively for non-tax queries.

One in five Government Patrons got hold of government to ask a question about taxes.

Most of those who contact government to inquire about their taxes consider this contact a transaction – 66% do, with another 16% saying the reason is to get an answer about a specific question. About one-quarter (27%) of those with tax concerns switched means of contact during their contact with government and half (49%) did so because they were not getting the response they needed. This compares with 22% who switched when contacting government for non-tax reasons; 38% of these people switched because they were not getting the answer they needed. Finally – and likely because of the transactional nature of the inquiry – fully 76% of those who had a tax question of government said their interaction was successful. Of Government Patrons who did not have a tax question, 60% said their interaction with government was successful.

Those with disabilities

People with disabilities make up an important sub-population of Americans. About one in seven (14%) of respondents said they have a disability of some sort, and they tend to be the elderly. Fully one-third (34%) of those with disabilities are over age 65 versus 11% of the rest of the population. People with disabilities exhibit other differences compared with the rest of the population. Fewer are Internet users – 40% of those with disabilities use the Internet. In addition, more are female (55%), and, as a group, they are less educated. Some 13% have college degrees, about half the rate of the general population). Among those who are Internet users, 16% say their disability makes it harder to use the Internet. Among non-Internet users, 22% say that their disability would make it difficult or impossible to use the Internet.

People with disabilities are more likely to contact government with complex and urgent problems, and they prefer the telephone or in-person visits as the way to address these problems.

People with disabilities also differ when it comes to government contact. A bit less than half (48%) have contacted the government in the past year, and they are less likely than others to say their interactions with government have been successful (52% say this

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versus the 63% average).⁶ Seventy percent say they were satisfied with their last contact with government compared with the average of 76%.

One reason for their comparatively low rates of success and satisfaction relates to the reasons that those with disabilities have for contacting government. One in six (16%) say their query of government was “very” complicated and 21% said it was “very urgent”; both numbers are about twice the rate for all Government Patrons. People with disabilities also are more likely to say the reason they contact government is to get information to answer a specific question; 22% say this, which is twice the rate for all Government Patrons. Finally, due to the low Internet penetration rate among this segment of the population, cyber means of contacting the government is not preferred by people with disabilities. Among Government Patrons with disabilities, 44% say they prefer the telephone to contact government, 21% prefer visiting in person, and 16% prefer to write a letter. Just 9% say they prefer visiting a Web site and 6% prefer email.

⁶ Recall from earlier in the report that the difference in the rate of government contact for people with disabilities is not statistically significant.

Part 3.

Problems People Encounter When They Contact Government

The survey asked people detailed questions about the types of problems they run into when they contact government by phone, the Web, or email.

Telephone contacts

About 40% of Government Patrons who had some interaction with government in the past year used the telephone and it was a circuitous journey for many of them. Slightly more than half (52%) had to make more than one call before finding the appropriate person, while 46% said that they only had to make one call. When asked how they found what number to call, 27% said they dialed the operator or looked in the phone book, while 20% had the number because they had used it before. A similar number (19%) had gotten the number from a government publication or notice, and 15% said they looked the number up on the Internet. Only 3% used a government information number such as 1-800-FED-INFO.

People who used the phone to contact government were confronted by the usual litany of voice mailboxes and automated touch systems. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of this group encountered automated menus, with one-third of this group finding this not helpful at all. A bit more than a third (36%) got to someone's voice mail where they could leave a message, and about a third found this not to be at all helpful. Finally, three-quarters (78%) reached a live person, and fully two-thirds who reached a person found this very helpful, and only 12% found it not helpful at all.

Problems encountered when phoning government offices		
	Yes	No
Not having the time to stay on the phone or make repeated phone calls	36%	63%
Not able to get through to the right person	35	63
Being put on hold for long periods of time	31	67
Getting transferred to many people	30	69
No one returning your call	24	75
Not being able to figure out where to call	21	78
Not being able to call during business hours	18	81
Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, July 2003, n=684. Margin of error is ±5%.		

Part 3. Problems People Encounter When They Contact Government

In looking at problems that arise when calling government offices, most users who contacted a government via the phone encountered some sort of problem. These problems generally have to do with spending a lot of time on the phone. Somewhat more than one-third of telephone callers did not have time to stay on the phone or make repeated calls, and a similar share said this about difficulties in finding the right person, spending too much time on hold, or being transferred too often. All in all, three in five (59%) of people who used the phone to contact the government ran into at least one of the problems listed in the table. The average number of problems encountered (out of the seven listed) was 3.3.

Web contacts

For the 29% of Government Patrons who used a Web site in their last contact with government, three out of eight (37%) respondents who used the Web to contact government found the site via a search engine and 19% said they heard of the site from a family, friend, or advertisement. Another 17% said they went to the site because they had used it before. One in seven (14%) said they came upon the site because of a government publication. Only 8% said a general government information site, such as FirstGov or AOL's government guide, directed them to the site.

Problems encountered at government Web Sites		
	Yes	No
Web site didn't have information needed	33%	65%
Web site was difficult to navigate or figure out	20	79
Had difficulty figuring out what site to go to	18	83
Site had bad or outdated links	16	85
Experienced difficulty downloading forms or instructions	13	86
Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, July 2003, n=480 Margin of error is ±5%.		

Once at the Web site they needed to use, the experience went fairly smoothly for users. As the table shows, many people who used the Web to contact government did not have problems. One third of those who went to a government Web site said the site didn't have the information they needed. One in five (20%) say they found the site difficult to navigate and 16% said they had a hard time figuring out what site to go to. Bad links and problems downloading forms or instructions were problems for only about 1 in 7. Overall, 46% of these users ran across at least one of the five types of problems queried, with these users on average encountering two of the five problems.

Once people find their way to government Web sites, some use the search engine at the site – 32% do – and most of those (90%) find them very or somewhat helpful (about half saying the search engines are very helpful and half saying they are somewhat helpful). Four in nine (44%) use the “frequently asked questions” section of the site, and 84% say

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the FAQs (responses to frequently asked questions) are helpful, 27% saying they are very helpful and 57% saying they are somewhat helpful.

Email contacts

Comparing email contact to telephone contact, the 19% of people whose last contact with government was using email seemed to have a somewhat more straightforward experience than the phone callers. For those who used email to get in touch with government, 58% said they sent only one email, while 41% said they sent multiple emails (compared with 52% in the group of phone callers who made more than one call). Of those who used email to contact government, two-thirds said they wanted or expected a response, and 79% of them said they received a response. And 80% of all users who emailed government in their last contact were confident that the email went to the appropriate person or office.

As to how they found the email address for their contact, 34% turned to the Internet to get it. One in five (19%) said they used an email address they had used in the past, and 18% got the email address from a government publication or notice. One in eight (12%) asked a friend or family member for the appropriate email address. Emailers seemed to have an easier time hitting the right target in their query of government, and the Internet might have improved the aim of some users.

Sources of problems

Further analysis of those who experience problems when they contact the government using the Web or the telephone indicates that disabilities and, to a lesser extent, possible language barriers are behind some of the problems people have in interactions with government, along with general attitudes about government. These factors come into play more clearly when analyzing problems encountered when the telephone is the means of contact than when the means of contact is the Web.

Among respondents who classify themselves as having a disability, 67% encountered some sort of problem the last time they contacted the government by telephone, above 59% average.

There are some small differences in the profiles of those who experienced problems during their telephonic contact with government compared with those who did not. Those who did not experience problems are somewhat more likely to have high-speed connections at home and are slightly better educated. The significant differences emerge with people who have disabilities and when focusing on the general attitudes about government. Among respondents who classify themselves as having a disability, 67% encountered some sort of problem the last time they contacted the government by telephone (compared with the average of 59%).

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For those who live in a household in which a language other than English is spoken, 65% had a problem when they contacted the government by phone, six percentage points above the average. Just because a language other than English is spoken in the home does not mean that all respondents from such households have problems with the English language. However, households in which another language is spoken is an indicator that, for some of these homes, language barriers may come into play in interactions with government. In addition, it is important to note that our survey was conducted. It was conducted in English, meaning respondents obviously had facility in the English language.

Those who believe that government tends to be wasteful also are more likely to have more problems with government when the telephone is the means of contact. Two-thirds of these people had a problem when they last contacted the government by telephone. Conversely, 46% of those who say they trust government had at least one problem with government the last time they used to phone to contact it. Finally, government employees seem to have an edge in using the phone to contact government; just under half (about 10 percentage points lower than the average) reported a problem when they last contacted the government by telephone.

People with disabilities were no more likely to report problems than others in their Web contacts with government, but they are about half as likely as the general population to use the Web to contact government.

Focusing on respondents whose last contact was via the Web shows similar, though less pronounced patterns. Fully 62% of people who report that a language other than English is spoken in the house said they had trouble in using the Web to contact government compared with the average of 46%. Although people with disabilities were no more likely to report problems than others in their Web contacts with government, these people are about half as likely as the general population to use the Web to contact government. Attitudinal factors also figure into the frequency with which people encounter problems in using the Web to deal with government. Of the people who say they trust government, 39% ran into at least one problem when they used the Web to contact the government.

A final issue in the problems people encounter has to do with the time it takes to address the problem. About 28% of Government Patrons said that their last government contact took more time than they expected. For those who encountered at least one problem in their contact with government via the Web or phone, extra expenditure of time comes into play. For those who encountered a problem when they contacted the government through the Web, 39% said the interaction with government took more time than expected, while 46% said it took about the time they expected (which is the average for all Government Patrons). For those who encountered some problem during their telephone contact with government, half (49%) said the interaction took more time than expected, and a third (32%) said it took about the time they expected.

Part 4.

The Frequency and Nature of E-gov Use

More Internet users are going to e-gov sites than ever.

To explore in more detail what Internet users do when they go online for e-government, this survey asked, as the Pew Internet Project has done in the past, whether Internet users had ever looked for information online from a local, state, or federal government Web site. Additionally, Internet users were asked whether they had done any of the following things:

- Sent an email to a local, state, or government Web site
- Sought advice or information from an agency about a health or safety issue
- Gotten recreational or tourist information
- Researched official government documents or statistics
- Looked for information about or applied for government benefits

Asking people about specific online government queries jogs people's memories. People who respond "no" to the general question about whether they have contacted any level of government online may say "yes" when prompted about a specific activity, such as emailing a government agency. The result will be a greater overall number of respondents saying that they have contacted government via electronic means than is the case when they are only asked the general question. This approach produces a richer picture of what people do when they contact government using the Internet.

Trends in e-gov

The July 2003 survey that is the basis for this report shows the steady upward trend in use of e-government among Internet users. Our trend question – "Have you ever gone online to look for information from a local, state, or federal government Web site?" – showed that 66% of Internet users had done this by July 2003. That is a ten-percentage point increase since the question was last asked in late 2002. With a growth in Internet penetration nationally since 2002, this means that 17 million more Americans had gone to e-gov sites by mid-2003 when e-government usage is measured by responses to that question. As noted, we probed further into the types of e-government activities. The table below shows that sizable minorities of Internet users have done things as varied as researching official documents to checking out tourist information.

Part 4. The Frequency and Nature of E-gov

Percent of Internet users who have ever done the following things online	
Look for information from a local, state, or federal government Web site	66%
Research official government documents or statistics	41
Get recreational or tourist information	34
Get advice or information from a government agency about a health or safety issue	28
Send email to local, state, or federal government	27
Get information about or apply for government benefits	23
Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project, July 2003 survey. N=1,899 for Internet users. Margin of error is $\pm 2\%$.	

With the expanded menu of e-government activities to consider, fully 77% of American Internet users – or 97 million people – have done at least one of the six online government items queried. This is 50% more than in 2002. Of the six items asked about, Internet users had on average engaged in 2.8 of them. Demographically, those who contact government using the Internet are more likely to be male, have been online longer, and are more likely to have broadband connections at home. They are also better educated and wealthier than those who have not sought out government information online.

Dispositions on how to contact government by issue area

All respondents were asked a series of questions about where they would turn first if they needed to contact government – the telephone, the Internet, or some other means. As the following three tables show, people’s preferred means of government contact vary according to the type of query that is posed in these hypothetical scenarios.

For personal transactions, some other way – presumably an in-person visit or ground mail – is the choice for executing a transaction such as renewing an auto license.

Part 4. The Frequency and Nature of E-gov

Personal Transactions			
	Over the phone	On the Internet	Some other way
Auto license or permit*	16%	22%	54%
License for personal project*	21	20	49
Recreational licenses**	17	26	45
Professional license**	21	25	40
Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, July 2003. * Denotes n=1,489, ** denotes n= 1,436. Margin of error is $\pm 3\%$ in both instances.			

The Internet takes on a more prominent role for information searches, as respondents say they would most likely turn to the Internet to do research for school or work or to find out what kind of programs agencies offer.

Information Searches			
	Over the phone	On the Internet	Some other way
Exploring government benefits*	28%	39%	24%
Research (school or work)**	18	57	16
Programs agencies offer**	23	53	17
Recreational or tourism activities**	26	49	18
Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, July 2003. * Denotes n=1,489, ** denotes n= 1,436. Margin of error is $\pm 3\%$ in both instances.			

When it comes to matters that may involve the disclosure of personal information, people feel comfortable with the phone or another means, with the Internet not widely being preferred by respondents. This is especially true for personal tax issues, where only one in six respondents said they would turn to the Internet.

Disclosure of Personal Information			
	Over the phone	On the Internet	Some other way
Personal tax issue	51%	17%	26%
Express opinion	28	27	38
Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, July 2003. n= 1,489. Margin of error is $\pm 3\%$.			

Part 4. The Frequency and Nature of E-gov

Comparing non-users, dial-up users, and broadband users

Breaking respondents into three categories – non-Internet users, dial-up users, and people with high-speed connections at home – yields a somewhat different picture. For broadband users at home (who in this survey made up 32% of people who go online from home), the Internet was far and away the tool to which people say they would turn to contact government for informational searches. This is most pronounced for research, finding out about government programs, and seeking tourist or recreational information.

For personal transactions, high-speed home users appear poised to engage in a substitution away from the telephone to online means in order to get recreational or other types of licenses. Still, broadband surfers say they will employ other approaches to address these problems; indeed for a license for a personal project they are as likely to use the Internet as some other means such as a personal visit to an agency.

For government contacts that may require the disclosure of personal information, the story is mixed. At roughly the same rate, non-Internet users and Internet users prefer the phone for inquiring about a personal tax issue, though high-speed home Net users show a preference for online means as well. For expressing an opinion, Net users, dial-up and high-speed alike, seem comfortable with logging on to pass on an opinion, while non-users either pick up the phone, write a letter, or pay a visit to be heard.

It may seem anomalous that a number of non-Internet users say they would turn to the Internet next time they need to contact government. Indeed one-quarter of non-Internet users say they would turn to the Net to research something connected to government, and nearly a fifth say that with respect to exploring government benefits. Two findings from past Pew Internet Project research help explain this oddity. First, about 20% of people who classify themselves as non-Internet users live in households in which someone else goes online. Second, a sizable number of non-users – about 30% – say that they were Internet users at one point.⁷ In the case of the former finding, non-users may plan to ask someone else in the house to do an online search for them. In the case of the latter, perhaps some of these non-users are saying that they would re-enter the online world, if only briefly, if they needed some government information.

⁷ Amanda Lenhart, “The Ever-Shifting Internet Population: A new look at Internet access and the digital divide.” The Pew Internet & American Life Project. Available online at: http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/pdfs/PIP_Shifting_Net_Pop_Report.pdf

Part 4. The Frequency and Nature of E-gov

Personal Transactions									
	Over the phone			On the Internet			Some other way		
	Non-user	Dial-Up	High-speed	Non-user	Dial-Up	High-speed	Non-user	Dial-Up	High-speed
Auto license or permit*	20%	14%	14%	5%	32%	43%	69%	53%	41%
License for personal project*	24	22	18	4	28	38	63	45	41
Recreational licenses**	26	14	9	6	37	50	55	43	36
Professional license**	27	21	15	10	32	45	48	37	34

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, July 2003. * Denotes n=1,489, ** denotes n= 1,436. Margin of error is $\pm 3\%$ in both instances.

Information Searches									
	Over the phone			On the Internet			Some other way		
	Non-user	Dial-Up	High-speed	Non-user	Dial-Up	High-speed	Non-user	Dial-Up	High-speed
Exploring government benefits*	41%	23%	19%	10%	56%	69%	42%	18%	9%
Research (school or work)**	33	11	9	25	77	86	31	9	4
Programs agencies offer**	42	15	7	18	74	83	33	9	6
Recreational or tourism activities**	46	16	11	13	71	82	35	11	6

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, July 2003. * Denotes n=1,489, ** denotes n= 1,436. Margin of error is $\pm 3\%$ in both instances.

Disclosure of Personal Information									
	Over the phone			On the Internet			Some other way		
	Non-user	Dial-Up	High-speed	Non-user	Dial-Up	High-speed	Non-user	Dial-Up	High-speed
Personal tax issue	52%	55%	49%	7%	22%	32%	38%	22%	17%
Express opinion	38	22	23	6	41	48	50	33	27

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, July 2003. n= 1,489. Margin of error is $\pm 3\%$.

Part 4. The Frequency and Nature of E-gov

Perceptions of how the Internet helps

In addition to the hypothetical question about where respondents would turn to for their next government query, Internet users were asked broad questions about how much, if at all, the Internet has helped the way they interact with different levels of government.

For Internet users – dial-up or broadband – online interactions with government seem to improve their perceptions about how they relate to government, particularly for the federal and state governments. Close to half of dial-up users say it has improved how they interact with the federal and their state government “a lot” or “somewhat,” while about 30% say it has had no impact at all.

Those who say Internet has improved interaction with government ...				
Dial-up users	A lot	Somewhat	A little	Not at all
Federal government	27%	22%	18%	29%
State government	24	23	19	28
Local government	16	19	17	41
Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, July 2003, n=1,899 for Internet users. Margin of error is $\pm 2\%$.				

For people with high-speed connections at home, the “always on” broadband connection appears to magnify the perceived benefits to using the Internet to interact with government. Roughly 60% of home broadband users say the Net helps them in their interactions with governments at the state and federal level, and just one in five say it has had no impact.⁸

Those who say Internet has improved interaction with government ...				
Broadband users	A lot	Somewhat	A little	Not at all
Federal government	35%	26%	15%	20%
State government	32	27	18	19
Local government	23	22	20	30
Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, July 2003, n=1,899 for Internet users. Margin of error is $\pm 2\%$.				

⁸ This broadband effect withstands multivariate analysis, meaning that having a home broadband connection is independently associated with positive perceptions of whether the Internet helps with government interactions, even when a variety of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics are held constant.

Part 4. The Frequency and Nature of E-gov

One factor that is strongly associated with positive perceptions of the Internet's role is whether a person's last contact with government was through email or the Web. Because use of the Net is not a predictor of positive outcomes with government, it seems that the Net nonetheless leaves a favorable enough impression with users that it improves users' perceptions of how they interact with government.

All this is in the realm of respondents' perceptions, but people's perception of a benefit is far from an insignificant finding. Armed with additional information that they get from the Web, Internet users may feel better about their interactions with government because they are more informed going in. The fact that the Internet also saves time in interactions with government is also likely to contribute to these positive perceptions. The larger effect for broadband-at-home Internet users is no surprise, given their easier access to information.

Expressing an opinion using the Internet

The Internet has an additive effect on the overall frequency of contacting government, and, as noted, some of this additional contact is probably attributable to people weighing in with opinions. Internet users were explicitly asked whether they had ever used the Internet or email to try to change a government policy or affect a politician's vote. About one-third (30%) said they had done this in the July 2003 survey, a substantial increase from the 19% who said this in a September 2001 callback survey of people who had at one time gone to a government Web site. The policy issues that prompted the contact run a fairly wide gamut; 15% identified the environment as the reason for their missive, 11% said education, 11% said budget or tax issues, 10% said the Iraq war, 10% said health care, and 10% said civil rights or social justice. One quarter (26%) identified some other issue.

Home broadband users are more likely than dial-up users to contact government officials about environmental issues.

For people with high-speed connections at home – which makes up 32% of those in this survey who go online from home – the convenience and speed of the “always on” connection seems to encourage them to share their views with government officials. Fully 36% of people with home broadband connections have contacted government officials about policy issues versus 28% of dial-up users. There are some differences in the types of issues about which broadband users share their views. About one-fifth (19%) identified the environment as the issue they sought to influence using the Internet compared with 12% for dial-up users. And 13% of broadband users said education was the issue they contacted government about versus 9% for dial-up users.

Part 5.

Implications for Policymakers

Americans clearly value multiple tools as ways to navigate through their interactions with government. E-government is an innovation in service delivery that many embrace, but people still use other means – most prominently the telephone – to get hold of the government. Using these various tools, Americans tend to be successful in their interactions with government, although success depends on the type of problem people have with government and their problem-solving skills. These findings yield several implications for policymakers and the interested public:

- E-government initiatives do not exist in isolation from other ways of contacting government. People will turn to different means to contact government for different problems.
- Policymakers should study how different means of contact may complement each other in helping citizens address problems.
- In designing e-government, policymakers should recognize that the payoff to e-gov investments varies according to type of problem and people's preferences in how they address different problems.
- People's problem-solving abilities matter. Success in addressing people's issues with government depends partly on people's level of education, in addition to a problem's degree of difficulty.
- For people with special needs – the 14% of the population that has a disability of some sort – non-cyber means of contacting government are primary.
- Given that 36% of adult Americans do not go online, maintaining robust non-cyber means of contacting government will remain important for some time.

Methodology

This Pew Internet & American Life Project report is based on a random digit dial telephone survey of 2,925 Americans age 18 and over conducted between June 25, 2003 and August 3, 2003. The survey was conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates and was administered in English. For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects is +/- 2%. For results based Internet users (n=1,899), the margin of sampling error is +/- 2%. For “Government Patrons”, n=1,657 and the margin of sampling error is +/- 3%.

The sample for this survey is a random digit sample of telephone numbers selected from telephone exchanges in the continental United States. The random digit aspect of the sample is used to avoid “listing” bias and provides representation of both listed and unlisted numbers (including not-yet-listed numbers). The design of the sample achieves this representation by random generation of the last two digits of telephone numbers selected on the basis of their area code, telephone exchange, and bank number.

New sample was released daily and was kept in the field for at least five days. This ensures that complete call procedures were followed for the entire sample. Additionally, the sample was released in replicates to make sure that the telephone numbers called are distributed appropriately across regions of the country. At least 10 attempts were made to complete an interview at every household in the sample. The calls were staggered over times of day and days of the week to maximize the chances of making contact with a potential respondent. Interview refusals were re-contacted at least once in order to try again to complete an interview. All interviews completed on any given day were considered to be the final sample for that day. The overall response rate was 31%.

Non-response in telephone interviews produces some known biases in survey-derived estimates because participation tends to vary for different subgroups of the population, and these subgroups are likely to vary also on questions of substantive interest. In order to compensate for these known biases, the sample data are weighted in analysis. The demographic weighting parameters are derived from a special analysis of the most recently available Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey (March 2001). This analysis produces population parameters for the demographic characteristics of adults age 18 or older, living in households that contain a telephone. These parameters are then compared with the sample characteristics to construct sample weights. The weights are derived using an iterative technique that simultaneously balances the distribution of all weighting parameters.