

*Simple.gov*

It's Time to Change the Story



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The future is simple. Not simplistic or simple-minded but sophisticated, elegant and straightforward. *Simple.gov* is doing for government what the iPod has done for personal music devices. And its time has come because it is the best way forward during a time of unprecedented change.

Simple is when the engineering is so refined, the ideas so powerful, and the interface so intuitive that using it is a joy. Simple is efficient. Simple is innovative. It evokes responses such as, “Wow, why didn’t I think of that?” Simple masks complexity and eschews the unnecessary.

It is not:

- Simplistic
- For simpletons
- Simple-minded
- “The Simple Life” of reality TV infamy

It is:

- Simplified
- Simplicity itself
- Simple to use
- What the TV ads for the office supply store mean when they offer the “Easy Button”

Government is not simple. But it *should* be. It *can* be. It *will* be. The focus here is on how and when. Simplicity matters now because of the confluence and convergence of opportunities. At its core, *Simple.gov* is about the “M’s”— the Moment, the Mechanism and the Meaning (or what it all means to “Me”).

The opportunity of the moment is always present after elections and especially after those resulting in shifts of power. The 2006 elections just happen to have come at a time that is ripe with opportunities masquerading as challenges. Balances of power are shifting about the globe. Empires are rising, falling and morphing. Governments are being squeezed and pushed between many vices and tides:

- Change and intransigence
- Bureaucracy and entrepreneurialism
- Centralization and distributed work, workers and systems
- More for less
- More needs than money
- The will to criticize but a shortage of problem solvers
- Old politics and anecdotes versus results and data-driven decision-making
- Debt, deficits and tax cuts
- Swapping labor for capital

- Transition costs and meeting current obligations
- Rules and responsive customer service
- Security, freedom and transparency
- Media-driven elections, partisanship and a rising desire for independent, practical solutions to real problems.

The oxymoron-laden, cognitively-dissonant, death-of-irony situation facing government has led some to despair. We think it is a time for hope. So many obstacles and challenges make us afraid of making wrong choices, taking missteps and stumbling just when we need change the most. The Moment demands that we stop looking down to avoid tripping and start looking up to find a clearer path. We think that moment is now.

One reason now matters is rooted in the second “M”: Mechanism. Technology — the Mechanism, the mechanism of modernity which is so ubiquitous in our time that we take it for granted rather than taking advantage of it — is entering another quickening phase. The pace and scope of change and invention are accelerating. The powerful, practiced and practical applications of these Mechanisms are well within reach — and more useable by more people and institutions than any other dominant mechanism in history since sticks, rocks and fire. The Mechanisms are democratizing and dispersing the tools of learning, communication, work and collaboration that underlie acts of creating and spreading ideas, theories, innovation, systems, software, content, data, rules, formulas, algorithms, processes and communities of dreamers and doers. The inevitable impact of these changes can already be seen and will grow to remake societies and cultures. Government will change with them, especially in relation to advancements in information technology, artificial intelligence and robotics. Will that change be guided by knowledgeable policymakers, with the benefits harvested and redeployed to a higher purpose? Or will change be resisted, stifled, starved, ignored and left to happen to government, as the Mechanism makes much of government obsolete and unable to work as the world works?

That leaves the final “M”: Meaning. In the short term, we ask, “What’s in it for me and my community?” While we may despair in our own short-term narcissism and the all-politics-is-pork implications of the question, we can use the parochial and personal as leverage for a greater good. The world has long centered on the center — not the person, but where many persons lived. These centers were about place. The important centers were: proximity and concentration, culture, production and the application of

knowledge through place-based mechanisms. The new centers are either inherently placeless or made placeless by Mechanism: excellence, integration, brokering, discovery, creativity, global scale and service. This means that the person who can do and participate in these things becomes more important than where they are or where they physically gather. Place becomes places where many “me’s” can use a Moment and a Mechanism to make a contribution and a difference. Moreover, the very Mechanisms that make the many “me’s” more important allow us to be treated more personally, and less like part of the crowd. We all want to be treated like a valued customer, a member, a returning friend, a known and trusted partner, a part of the family and an individual with our own preferences. Now we can be recognized on that level, and many private entities are using this opportunity to extend their ability to serve and their ability to manipulate those they serve (also known as niche marketing).

Will government take the hoped-for path of more personal service and less manipulation or the least favorable path of little personal service and greater manipulation? We know what the angels of our better “me” would say. Besides the moral imperative, the axiom that good policy makes good politics applies here. Good and simple policy means a government that is more about me, but in the interest of all of us. The choice for government leaders is whether this will happen to government by blunt instrument, or be done by government, with more precision through our venerated processes and the art of governing.

*Simple.gov* is the Center for Digital Government’s summary idea for taking the three M’s and using them to make government simple, in the best sense of the word. This paper is a framework for moving government in that direction.

To download the full version of the report, visit [http://www.centerdigitalgov.com/fileReg.php?pub\\_id=82](http://www.centerdigitalgov.com/fileReg.php?pub_id=82).

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The Center’s special reports and papers provide two decades of experience and insight into the most important policy and management issues facing governments, and offer strategic approaches for planning and implementing technology, funding sources, and case studies from jurisdictions.