

# The Politics Of Platforms

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Strengthening good governance through mobile technology (m-governance) is receiving growing attention by both civil society organizations and political institutions — and for good reason. Mobile technology has tremendous potential to improve citizen access to government services and officials. A recent report, [published](#) by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and the International Telecommunication Union, argues that deepening smart phone penetration will offer “unprecedented possibilities” for m-governance in the future. However, often overlooked in these discussions is the political effect of technology platform itself.

More advanced platforms have a strong allure for both technologists and governments. More capabilities and features mean more opportunities for connecting to governments systems. However, the more advanced a platform, the higher the bar to access — either educational or financial — for citizens. All platforms are not equal. When m-governance adopts a platform, the distribution of the platform’s penetration becomes the distribution of government access. This can be especially true when government institutions use m-governance efforts as justification to cut back on traditional forms of access (e.g. office hours). There is a real risk that promoting m-governance on high-end platforms will have an opposite, deleterious effect: improving government access to wealthy citizens and decreasing access to everyone else.

The solution lays in the appreciation that the selection of a platform for m-governance efforts is more than simply a technical decision; it is also a political decision. Any platform will determine citizen access, but by selecting free, open source, cross compatible, and high penetration platforms, the number of citizens able to access the system can be maximized. Free and open source platforms both reduce the financial cost to citizens and increase their ability to customize the system to their needs. Cross-

compatibility and high penetration means that the greatest number of citizens has access to the tools.

Mobile governance has the promise to open up government institutions and provide citizens with cheaper, better, and faster access to services and information. However, that promise can only be realized with the deliberate selection of technology platforms that lower, not raise, the access bar for citizens. When technology means access to government services, the choice of the platform has just as much impact on good governance as the application itself. The adoption of free, open source, cross-capable, and high penetration platforms for m-governance offer the greatest chance of leveling of playing field of participation and overcome the politics of platforms.

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