

# AUTOMATED GOVERNMENT FOR VULNERABLE CITIZENS: INTERMEDIATING RIGHTS

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## Abstract

Filing tax returns or applying for unemployment benefits are some of the most common government transactions. Yet, interacting with tax and social security authorities is for many a source of government anxiety. Bureaucracy, regulatory delays, and the complexity of the administrative legal system have been regarded for decades as the key reasons for this problem. Digital government promised a solution in the shape of simplified forms, electronic filing, and better communication with citizens. In the United States, privately developed software systems such as TurboTax and MiDAS emerged as intermediaries between citizens and digital government, selling convenience and efficiency. These systems help citizens comply with their government obligations and apply for benefits. But they also allow governments to identify fraud on a large scale. This Article argues that automation, particularly when intermediated by private technology companies are double-edged swords for different reasons.

First, they help reinforce tax enforcement systems that typically target vulnerable citizens (e.g., low-income, underrepresented communities). Second, the price of the convenience offered by automation is different, depending on who you are. For average, middle to high-income, tech-savvy citizens who can interact with digital government without assistance, automation is a convenient alternative to the traditional bureaucracy. However, for vulnerable citizens who do not have access to stable Internet or a computer or are unable to interact with technology, automation has failed to promote equalitarian access to public services and government decision-making. Existing scholarship has primarily focused on the discriminatory effects of big data, the opacity and biases of algorithms without delving into the problem of the broader design of digital government and automation and how it leaves vulnerable citizens behind.

This Article addresses this issue by exploring how the interaction between bureaucracy, digital technology, and power asymmetries can have dehumanizing effects for vulnerable citizens. This Article's contribution to the literature is twofold: First, it explores how technological intermediaries (both privately and publicly developed) operate and reshape the relationship between citizens and governments; second, it demonstrates how technology has deepened existing vulnerabilities and what needs to be reformed in this context.