Chapter 14
The Invisible Side of Political Participation: E-Participation Mechanisms and Information Management in Latin American Parliaments

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ABSTRACT
The aim of this chapter is to map out the main digital political participation initiatives available in the websites of Latin American parliaments, highlighting the e-democracy project of the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies. We argue that, although there is increased willingness by Latin American parliaments to offer society diverse digital channels, this concern is not matched by equivalent efforts in efficient management of information made available by citizens through mechanisms of e-participation. We illustrate this argument with an analysis of experiences in information management of citizen political participation mechanisms present in the e-democracy program of the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61350-329-4.ch014
INTRODUCTION

The strengthening of democracy has as its fundamental features the increase of government transparency and the establishment of deliberative spaces between society and political entities. Despite the obstacles arising from the digital divide, the use of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has been expanding in Latin American countries, resulting in high expectations about the possibility of improvements in the quality of their democracies. Experiences in different countries have shown that expanded forms of political participation have been developed through the use of ICTs, thus promoting new opportunities for interaction between civil society and the political system (Chadwick & Howard, 2008). These virtual spaces of interaction reduce the informational asymmetry between the political system and society and enrich the information repertoire of state actors about citizen interests and demands, thereby contributing to the improvement of decision-making processes.

Within this context, the aim of this paper is to map out digital political participation initiatives available in the websites of Latin American parliaments, highlighting the e-democracy project of the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies. We argue that, although there is increased willingness by Latin American parliaments to offer society diverse digital channels, this concern is not matched by equivalent efforts in efficient management of information made available by citizens through mechanisms of e-participation. The argument is illustrated with an analysis of experiences in information management of citizen political participation mechanisms present in the e-Democracy program of the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies.

To achieve this goal, the discussion is organised as follows: (a) first, we briefly review relevant literature on the subject and introduce a general framework of the methodology used in the investigation; (b) second, we present the first part of the research results, analyzing some of the main mechanisms of political participation found in the websites of Latin American parliaments; (c) lastly, we present a case study of the e-democracy project by the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies, highlighting positive and negative aspects related to project implementation, especially regarding the management of the information made available by citizens through their participatory experiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2000), 101 countries had parliament websites available, representing 57% of all parliaments. A survey we conducted in the institution’s website in 2010 shows this rate has increased considerably, with 188 countries already maintaining parliament sites on the Internet\(^1\). From this data, we can agree with other authors, who argue that the central question for research on this issue is not whether parliaments or its members have an online presence, but in which way are they using new technologies and what are its effective impacts on parliamentary activity (Leston-Bandeira, 2007).

While this topic is already widely covered in international literature, it is significantly less present in Latin American literature\(^2\). Within the general context of international research focused on the impact of new technologies on parliamentary work, we highlight the contributions of Cristina Leston-Bandeira, who proposes a broad analytical structure to investigate the impact of the internet in parliaments that integrates institutional factors, the different roles performed by parliaments and the internal routines of personnel management in legislative institutions (Leston-Bandeira, 2007). In a recent study that featured contributions from both academic researchers and managers of legislative bodies, Leston-Bandeira and Stephen Ward called to attention the need for comparative investigations focused on new democracies undergoing consolidation processes,
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