Chapter 2
An Overview of E–Parliament Services:
Designing for Citizen Awareness and Participation

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ABSTRACT

In an era of citizens’ discontentment towards parliamentary democracy and a common perception that public opinion is not properly taken into account by governments, many national parliaments are striving to implement e-services that will attract citizens’ interest and engage them actively in parliamentary procedures. This chapter provides an overview of e-parliament concepts and services, relevant initiatives organized by parliaments, governmental agencies, or NGOs, as well as technologies that can be used for such applications. The chapter intends to bring forward issues and opportunities for implementing e-parliament initiatives according to the needs and capabilities of different target groups, with a view to rendering e-parliament services more attractive for citizens, and, at the same time, more effective in their civic education aspects, more efficient in providing feedback to parliament stakeholders, and delivering usable outcomes for parliamentary e-participation.

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and their applications in the fields of e-government and e-participation highlights capabilities that open up new terrains for modern parliaments. ICT-based e-services can be envisaged for parliaments with a view to facilitating the interchange of information between parliamentary agencies, supporting everyday activities of elected representatives and, most importantly, encouraging participation of civil society organizations and individual citizens in democratic parliamentary procedures.
Successful planning and deployment of such services is subject to a number of political, economic, social as well as technological factors. It requires a systematic analysis of the current strengths and weaknesses of parliaments, as well as the future opportunities and threats that the workings of parliamentary institutions may face. On the other hand, the objectives of these services are directly related to the mission of parliaments within democratic regimes and to issues such as the effectiveness and quality of parliamentary operations, their accessibility and transparency to citizens and the civil society, as well as their openness to civic participation and engagement. Last but not least, new web-based services can also help parliaments communicate and implement initiatives such as age parliaments, thematic parliaments and others, targeted more at civic education rather than officially binding participation.

In light of the above, this chapter intends to bring forward issues and opportunities for implementing e-parliament initiatives according to the needs and capabilities of different target groups, with a view to rendering e-parliament services more attractive for citizens and, at the same time, more effective in their civic education aspects and more efficient in providing feedback to parliament stakeholders and delivering usable outcomes for parliamentary e-participation. To this end, the chapter provides some typologies and taxonomies that can help to structure better the concepts and domain of e-parliaments; an analysis of the factors that may affect the design and development of e-parliament services; an overview of current advancements in the provision of such services; as well as a proposal for novel e-services that may be considered by modern Parliaments, on the basis of emerging web-based technologies and applications.

More specifically:

- Section 1 provides some concepts, typologies and taxonomies for e-parliaments and e-parliament services as well as elements of strategic analysis for their planning and deployment. The section further presents a number of representative e-parliament services currently available and discusses them against the conceptual framework proposed.
- Section 2 investigates ways in which new service paradigms such as e-rulemaking and participatory budgeting, as well as recent and emerging technologies such as Web 2.0 (including social media and user-generated content), discourse visualization (including argument and discussion visualization) and graphical simulations (including both pure simulations and serious games), can help deploy novel e-parliament services with emphasis on the support for citizen awareness and the opening up of citizen participation in parliamentary operations.
- Section 3 presents a discussion and proposes elements of possible strategies to cope with important open issues.

E-PARLIAMENTS: TRYING TO DEFINE THE CONCEPT

From Parliaments to E-Parliament

Nowadays, parliaments are trying to attract citizens’ interest and engage them through different initiatives, some of the most popular ones being those of the “Youth Parliament” and the “Elders’ Parliament” programs. Apart from national parliament initiatives there are also parliament-like initiatives that are implemented by European bodies, public sector institutions (e.g. universities) as well as by civil society organizations, demonstrating a will for active participation in political and social issues.
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