Chapter 8
Strengthening Parliaments through ICT: Experience and Lessons from the Portuguese Parliament

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides an overview of the state of the art concerning the application of ICTs in parliaments and of the main problems identified when considering engaging the public through ICTs. Using the Portuguese Parliament as a case study, the chapter analyzes some effective approaches using ICTs to involve citizens and to support the dialogue regarding the legislative process. The conclusion emerging from the chapter is that the use of ICTs is not enough to get citizens to trust the parliament and to maintain their involvement. Parliaments need to follow a strategic and coherent plan that considers other questions apart from technology and goes beyond making documents available to the public. Parliaments need to ensure that their information systems provide both information and communication and meet the criteria of clarity, accuracy, timeliness, completeness, and the provision of feedback.

INTRODUCTION

The lack of confidence in the political institutions, in general, and in parliaments, in particular, forces politicians to find new ways to interact and to engage with the public. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have a potential to deepen public engagement even if it is considered that it “attracts only a small minority of voters who are generally already politically active and privileged” (Lusoli et al., 2006, p. 24). The use of ICTs in parliaments can encourage and promote public participation in the decision-making process, creating new channels to enhance efficiency and, consequently, to legitimate the parliament, making it benefit from the citizens’ input. ICTs allow information and communication to be quick and cost-effective and create...
opportunities to promote citizens’ engagement. However, electronic democracy cannot replace representative democracy and that is something that parliaments have to take into account.

Still, the positive aspects of ICTs can be capitalized while managing legislative information in parliaments. The citizens’ participation in the legislative process allows us to learn from the stakeholders how to draft more acceptable laws, because citizens tend to accept the law better when they are heard about it. Nevertheless, online information creates special responsibilities and requires a lot of work following the consultation. The parliamentary law is the result of a very complex decision-making and, during the last decade, an increasing attention has been paid to the law-making process and to the need to improve the quality of legislation. The Better Regulation policy, developed by the European Union (EU), considers consultation as a key instrument to ensure both quality and legitimacy for parliamentary law. Again, ICTs could play an important role, allowing the legislator to provide citizens with enough information for scrutinizing the drafting process, including the amendments of the proposed law and the final result. The concepts of better governance and better regulation turned the idea of communication in legislation into a very important issue.

An e-parliament is defined as “a legislature that is empowered to be more open, transparent and accountable through ICT. […] It is an organization where stakeholders use information and communication technologies to perform their primary functions of lawmaking, representation and oversight more effectively” (Global Centre for ICT in Parliaments, 2008, p. vii).

At first sight, the Portuguese Parliament seems to fit into this definition. It is often considered as a parliament with glass walls because transparency has become the rule in the parliamentary activity, first due to the TV¹ and then to the Internet, which spread the openness to the activity of parliamentary groups and even to the life and actions of members of parliament (MPs).

The parliamentary website was created in 1996, having static and dynamic contents. New versions modifying the layout, the contents and the structure were launched in 2002, 2004 and 2008. The main changes were the introduction of various dynamic components which provide the user with a vast set of online information thanks to an integration of its search facilities with the internal databases, especially the one of the Parliamentary Activity (including the legislative process and petitions), in order to facilitate the relationship with citizens. The website makes available an enormous amount of information about members: their biographical record, their parliamentary activity, their attendance/absences to plenary sittings and committee meetings and their register of interests.

In fact, the parliamentary website not only has a lot of information, but also a high level of complexity, providing aggregation of contents, themed sites designed from scratch for specific proposed laws or specific groups of citizens and the adaptation/development of tools to communicate in alternative ways. Every week, the Assembleia da República highlights some news on the website as a way of publicizing, whilst controlling redundant information, the most important activity that takes place in the parliament. On a monthly basis, it is published on the website a newsletter reflecting all the relevant activity (including the legislative process) that took place in the parliament in the month prior to its publication. The website of the parliament has also a so-called Citizen’s Space, which is a selection of content that best promotes the transparency of the institution and the ‘citizen-parliament’ relationship, including all the information about the legislative process and about e-petitions. The website also contains a specific form to send petitions by email and the possibility for citizens to consult their petitions and send additional information. Apart from a search engine, the website gives citizens the possibility of subscribing alerts if they wish to follow the development of a specific content such as a proposed law.