Chapter 11

The Role of Parliamentary Websites in the Budget Process: The Case of the Turkish Parliament

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ABSTRACT

The “power of the purse” is one of the fundamental powers of the parliament. This power is defined as a parliament’s authority to determine the amount of public expenditures to be made and the category and amount of taxes to be collected from citizens. To exercise this power, parliaments must debate and review the budget drawn up by the government to ensure that it reflects the preferences of citizens. Nevertheless, it is quite apparent that parliaments today do not sufficiently debate government budgets and do not completely exercise their existing authority. This development weakens the political function of the budget process and sometimes leads to non-optimal budget outcomes. Information and communication technologies (ICTs), particularly websites, are significant tools that parliaments have at their disposal to address this problem. When they are effectively designed, parliamentary websites can contribute to more efficient outcomes to the budget process by enabling the members of a parliament and the citizens they represent to involve themselves in that process. This chapter addresses the potential contributions of parliamentary websites to the budget process. These contributions promise to make budget information more transparent and understandable. This chapter engages in this task by using a content-analysis methodology to examine the website of the Turkish parliament.

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INTRODUCTION

A parliament is an institution essential to a democracy. However, behind the spectacle of members of parliament (MPs) assembling and taking decisions on behalf of citizens lies long years of struggle, conflict and casualties. Parliaments managed to obtain their powers of legislation, public representation and government oversight only as a result of fighting extensive battles against monarchs.

One of the first rights parliaments obtained was the power of the purse (Wynn, 2001). The “power of the purse” can be defined as the right and authority to decide, on behalf of the public, the categories and amounts of taxes to be collected from citizens and the public expenditures to be made (Gürsoy, 1980). The first stage in the transfer of this power from monarchs to parliaments was acceptance of the principle that no tax could be levied without the permission of the citizen’s representatives. As is well known, this principle was a source of inspiration for the American Revolution. The great effort initiated by the slogan “no taxation without representation” against new taxes resulted in the declaration of the colonies’ independence in 1776. The second stage in the process was the transfer of spending power to the nation’s parliament. After a long struggle, parliaments obtained the right to make appropriations; this means no expenditure could be incurred without explicit authorization from parliament. In the course of time, as this legislative action became an inadequate means of fiscal control, modern budgetary practices emerged. With these practices, the transition of the power of the purse to parliament was completed. At the end of this long adventure, which lasted into the 20th century, the power of the purse became one of the most important of the constitutional rights parliaments possessed (Edizdoğan, 2010; Sander, 1998; Premchand, 2006; Yılmaz & Biçer, 2010; Schick, 2002).

It is a country’s budget that determines whether more or less money will be allocated for public services and how much and what types of taxes will be collected from which sectors. The size and distribution of a budget has a direct impact on expectations regarding the welfare of the country, the lifestyles of people, the prevention of poverty and the quest to solve unemployment (Wildavsky, 1986). In short, budgets determine the future of a country. As one proverb emphasizes, “the budget is like the book of destiny of nations.” A natural outcome of this understanding is the necessary participation of citizens and their representatives in the creation of budgets. Today, parliaments possess important rights, such as the powers to debate, approve, amend and scrutinize the budget. However, it is quite difficult to claim that these rights are exercised vigorously. In reality, parliaments mostly do not provide input during the preparation phase of budgets. They do not demand regular financial reports from government. They fail sufficiently to debate draft budgets. Parliamentary oversight committees do not possess the capacity comprehensively to scrutinize public accounts (Stapenhurst, 2003). Additionally, due to budget reforms introduced in the last few decades, budgets have become a complex and perplexing issue. MPs, therefore, have difficulties comprehending them (Justice et al., 2006). Finally, because some research conducted in the 1990s (Hagen & Harden, 1994; Alesina & Perotti, 1996; Hagen, 1998) demonstrated that fiscal discipline was stricter in countries where the legislative power of the purse was limited, attempts have been made to reduce the authority of parliaments over budgets.

Despite the obstacles and restraints in question, it is commonly accepted that, due to the nature of the concept of “the power of the purse”, it is imperative to enhance the control of parliamentarians over the budget. Hence, there have been attempts to increase the capacities of parliaments. The common focal point of these efforts is making the budget more understandable to parliamentarians. Such measures include increasing the number of the trained staff working at the budget office.
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