

Chapter 18

Internet and Political Parties in Chile

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ABSTRACT

Due to the importance that the Internet has gained as a means of communication, literature on political communication has incorporated it as one of its preferred topics of focus. Literature stems almost entirely from Europe and the United States. Very little is known about the political use of new information and communication technologies (NICTs) in other parts of the world. The present chapter aims to provide evidence in that line, starting from the study of the incorporation of the Chilean political parties to the Internet. In specific, the following questions are answered: In what extent do factors such as the organizational characteristics of the political parties explain their greater or lesser adoption of NICTs? What do parties use NICTs for? Furthermore, although briefly, the authors will try to answer the question whether the parties have experienced change in their interaction with the citizenry and their bases because of the usage of NICTs.

INTRODUCTION

In *The Internet Galaxy*, Manuel Castells showed how Internet entered the daily lives of people. It is especially remarkable that, as Castells declares, based on a series of studies, people use the web to broaden their non virtual social relationships. The complementarity between the Internet and ‘real

life’ does not only occur at an interpersonal level. Economy, for instance, has witnessed the emergence of a virtual space of economic exchange, which has integrated with the traditional market.

Politics do not escape this phenomenon. For some decades, the growing importance that media has played in different political systems has been perceptible (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999). With the Internet, traditional communication forms coexist with new forms of political action. Castells (1997)

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has shown that the web has been used as a vehicle for political action by social actors so different, as are the pro-gun associations in the United States and the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, in Mexico.

Due to the importance that the Internet has gained as a means of communication, literature on political communication has incorporated it as one of its preferred topics of focus (Dahlgren, 2005). In this fashion, studies have emerged on how governments, parliaments, parties and politicians use the Internet. In the case of political parties, literature has sought to understand how political parties are beginning to use the Internet, both to connect with the citizens, to perform their traditional duties and to resolve internal management problems.

The active interest that researchers - from the different disciplines - have put on the political use of NICTs is caused by the fact that, as some authors suggest, studying how technologies are used entails understanding how these affect the functioning of democracy (Hansen, Pedersen & Wahl Jorgensen, 2005). This proves interesting primarily because of a strong feeling of displeasure that currently exists, generalized throughout the Western world, regarding the performance of the political systems (Dahlgren, 2005).

Literature on these topics stems almost entirely from Europe and the United States. Very little is known about the political use of NICTs in other parts of the world. The present paper aims to provide evidence in that line, starting from the study of the incorporation of the Chilean political parties to the Internet.

Despite of the changes they have experienced and the fact that they have had to face the competition of NGOs, study centres and social movements, which sometimes intend to replace them, political parties continue fulfilling the role of intermediaries between the political system and society. Hence, studying how NICTs are used involves knowing how they are embedded in the functioning of the political system.

The Chilean case is interesting to analyze because of two reasons. The first one is the degree of institutionalization of a party system such as the Chilean, which has endured over time and, due to its deep roots in society, makes parties the main players in the political process (Mainwaring & Scully, 1995: 64).

The second reason is the Internet penetration level in the country. By September 2008, 32.3% of households had internet access in their homes (SUBTEL, 2009). Thanks to the reference made by traditional media (television, radio, newspaper) about situations that occur on the web - or about information that travels through it - the presence of the Internet in daily life is greater than what the usage statistics suggest. This statement is consistent with the fact that, by 2006, 49% of the population claimed to feel "being a part of the world of new technologies" (UNDP, 2006: 81).

In particular, this chapter is intended to answer the following questions: ¿In what extent do factors such as the organizational characteristics of the political parties explain their greater or lesser adoption of new information and communication technologies (NICTs)? ¿What do parties use NICTs for? Furthermore, although briefly, we will try to answer the question whether the parties have experienced change in their interaction with the citizenry and their bases because of the usage of NICTs.

This chapter will present an analysis on the websites of seven political parties: Communist Party of Chile (PC), Socialist Party of Chile (PS), Party for Democracy (PPD), Radical Social Democrat Party (PRSD), Christian Democrat Party (DC), National Renovation Party (RN) and Independent Democrat Union (UDI). The selection meets the criteria of identification of relevant parties, propounded by Sartori (1976). All of these parties, except for the Communist, have parliamentary representation. Nevertheless, the PC has been included because - due to the distribution of the votes among the parties - it has a certain blackmail potential. This results

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