Chapter 87
Bridging the Political Gap?
The Adoption of ICTs for the Improvement of Latin American Parliamentary Democracy

Yanina Welp
University of Zurich, Switzerland

ABSTRACT

Given the lack of transparency and the extent to which corruption is endemic to most Latin American countries, it is not surprising to find a high level of citizen distrust in political institutions. Parliaments and political parties are the institutions most affected by this crisis of representative democracy, and receive the lowest levels of public confidence. In recent years, many initiatives, including those based on Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), have been developed with the aim of revitalizing democracy, increasing transparency in public management, and opening up new spaces for political participation. However, the consequences of such initiatives are still unknown while the potential benefits of e-participation remain controversial: Should parliaments promote e-participation in societies that experience such a huge digital divide? Should participation be a top-down process initiated by governments or parliaments? Or should they increase accountability and leave participation in hands of the people? The aims of this chapter are twofold: (i) to analyze to what extent parliaments are offering more and better information to the public, and are becoming more transparent and accountable through the use of ICTs, and (ii) to examine the spread and scope of participatory initiatives in the law-making process.

INTRODUCTION

After more than thirty years in the third wave of the process of democratization that began in the late 1970s, which put an end to the authoritarian regimes that held sway in most countries in Latin America, democracy has gradually consolidated its place in political life. However, while this region has more or less institutionalized a democratic regime as a form of government, faces a succession of social and political crises. Popular demonstrations have often led to early elections and/or the establishment of transitional and provisional governments. Among the South American countries analyzed here, this has occurred in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru and Venezuela where at least one government's resignation was provoked by popular demonstration[1]. According to Freedom House, only half the countries were considered to be free democracies in 2008, the other five qualifying as only partly free countries. The perception of corruption in this region is not much better, with five countries scoring as highly corrupt (Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, Paraguay and Venezuela), three as corrupt (Brazil, Colombia and Peru) and only two as relatively clean (Chile and Uruguay). In this scenario, it is not surprising to find a high level of citizen distrust. Parliaments and political parties are the institutions most affected by this crisis of representative democracy, and receive the lowest levels of public confidence[2]. According to CIMA 2008, in all countries analyzed, citizens trust in the church and in the television news more than they do in justice, parliament or political parties. In Ecuador, Paraguay and Peru, confidence in parliament is less than 10% while these scores are even worse for political parties.

If ICTs could help to reinforce democracy, what governments do and to what extent people has access to the Internet are conditions to reach that result. As can be observed in Table 1, even if slower than in Western countries, Internet is growing in the region (ITU, 2009) and governments are providing online services that open up participation channels for online participation in public affairs (measured through the UN 2010 index of e-participation)[3].

Table 1. Indicators of quality of democracy, internet spread and e-participation

Country	Freedom & Democracy[1]	Corruption[2]	Confidence [3]		Internet users[4]	e-participation[5]	
			Parliament	P. Parties		Rank	value
Argentina	Free	Highly corrupt	13	10	34%	58	0.2000
Bolivia	Partly Free	Highly corrupt	27	8	11%	58	0.2000
Brasil	Free	Corrupt	23	13	39%	42	0.2857
Chile	Free	Clean	11	5	41%	34	0.3429
Colombia	Partly Free	Corrupt	29	20	49%	26	0.4429
Ecuador	Partly Free	Highly corrupt	5	4	25%	76	0.1571
Paraguay	Partly Free	Highly corrupt	9	5	17%	157	0.0143
Peru	Free	Corrupt	7	4	31%	68	0.1714
Uruguay	Free	Clean	55	40	31%	48	0.2571
Venezuela	Partly Free	Highly corrupt	42	15	42%	82	0.1429

(1) Freedom and Democracy 2008.
(2) Corruption Perception Index 2006. Transparency International.
(3) Barómetro Iberoamericano de Gobernabilidad, CIMA 2008
(4) International Telecommunication Union 2009
(5) UN eGovernment Survey 2010

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