Chapter 19
Hungarian MPs' Response Propensity to Emails

Norbert Merkovity
University of Szeged, Hungary

ABSTRACT

Within the framework of empirical research, the authors sent an email to every member of the Hungarian Parliament. They wanted to know how many representatives would answer their letter within a one-week period. As a next step, they listed the answerers, the composition of parliamentary groups, gender, age, and the way the representatives got into the National Assembly in the election (from single-member districts or from party list). On the basis of this, they outline the profile of the responding representative. The typical answers came from women, who are members of the opposition and who are between the ages of 30–39. The least responses came from the members of the governing coalition. As a final point, the authors conclude in this chapter that Hungarian representatives do not differ significantly from their colleagues in the Western countries.

INTRODUCTION

The interactions between politics and the media have been in the centre of the scientific interest of the political communication research for long. There have been instances that researchers sought to determine the quality of a democracy through the characteristics of the interactions. In not so recent times there have been scientific works which have generated such debate (see Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Meanwhile, the third player in political communication, the citizens have begun to have a walk-on role in political communication. They are considered to suffer generally from per-suasive, influential and manipulative techniques. The attitude of the political communication researches towards the citizens' is changing with the emergence of the new information and communication technologies (ICTs). The civic activity in the political process – not just during elections – and the institutional responses to those are just being integrated into the literature, as well as the researches on the new media.

The new wave of researchers has appeared in political and communication science in the past two decades, who have highlighted the involvement of citizens in the democratic process. Their studies suggest that new forms of civic dialogue

are born in front of our eyes, which fundamentally changes the well-known forms of the public sphere (Barber, 2003; Bohman, 1996; Chambers, 2009; Cohen, 1996; Dryzek, 2002; Moy & Gastil, 2006). The scientific interest focuses on the interactivity and explores the internet rather than mobile forms of communications. From the initial characteristics of the users of technology, starting from the 35-year-old men in the nineties the focus has shifted to the more diverse demographic groups of today. The traditional pressure groups are able to mobilize their members at lower costs or to contact the political organizations using emails, viral videos, websites, etc. (Margolis & Moreno, 2009, pp. 32–37). However, not only the traditional pressure groups, but individual citizens, as well, can interact with their representatives or officials of the government much easier (Bimber, 2003). The analysis of the relationship between the citizens and the politics has gained great popularity with Barack Obama, after the 2008 election campaign. The presidential election in the United States has become very fashionable since, unlike in previous campaigns, the Obama campaign staff used the new ICTs consciously to organise civilians (see Libert & Faulk, 2009; Merkovity, 2009). It is expected that the case studies from the "Arab Spring" will follow similar path, with the difference that compared to 2008, the civilians were the initiators. We can speak about heightened political atmosphere in both cases. While in the Obama campaign the elections, in the "Arab Spring" the disgruntled civilians, whose word did not want to be heard by the political leadership, caused the unusual forms of social actions. However, the question arises, what about the normal days when politics and the citizens are living they everyday lives? Should we expect that politicians will hear the voice of civilians? Do the new ICTs promote the interaction? First, we have to examine the role of new ICTs in political communication from a closer perspective and must understand the term of interaction to answer these questions.

THE NEW ICTs AND THE INTERACTION

The importance of information and communication technologies can be approached from positive and negative perspectives, as well. With regard to our research, we are dealing with the positive possibilities only. Thierry Vedel wrote that the new ICT tools enable people with similar interests to interact with each other regardless of their physical and social barriers. First, thanks to the internet, minorities can share common values and identity and they can increase their importance at the global level. Second, if these people form into groups, they can easily share ideas in order to formulate their own programme and decide how they will implement it. Regular email messages and forums can provide the institutionalized forms of dialogue. Third, the ICT tools, such as organised email campaigns, can be used to influence decision makers (Vedel, 2003, pp. 43–44). Vedel is taking three potentially positive possibilities of the new ICTs into account. He assumes that the people gain force to their political interests through co-operation. Accepting the existence of homo politicus, it should be noted that the twentieth century was accompanied with the fading of ideologies and with the crisis of liberal identity resulted diffuse "secularization". This went together with other phenomena, such as dissatisfaction, revulsion against politics, denial of the old forms of political activities (e.g. decrease in participants' willingness to vote), which result is traditionally described as the run of the people to individualism. Researchers make this determination especially about younger generations (Mazzoleni, 2000, pp. 326). Therefore, the starting point for this research had to be turned in the direction of the individuals, we gave space to the individual and unique issues, so we were able to give back the individuals who are interacting and communicating with politics in an artificial way. By this we have arrived to the question of interaction.

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