Chapter 43

Is Political Participation Online Effective?
A Case Study of the E-Democracy Initiative Conducted by the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies

Patrícia G. C. Rossini
Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil

Rousiley C. M. Maia
Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil

ABSTRACT

The Brazilian Chamber of Deputies (Câmara dos Deputados) conducts an e-democracy initiative that enables people to participate in political decisions regarding legislation. "Portal E-Democracia" is the name of this website in which people can participate in several different ways to speak their minds regarding legislative activities. This chapter analyses the effectiveness of citizens' engagement in the e-democracy initiative through the case study of the discussion of the Internet Civilian Landmark – a bill to regulate Internet use in Brazil. The authors analyse two types of participation: comments to the draft bill and suggestions. To measure the effectiveness of user-participation in such a case of collaborative lawmaking, the authors compare the content of the first draft, the final draft, and the suggestions made through the wikilegis in order to assess whether the discussions maintained within the e-democracy platform were or were not taken into account. This procedure also reveals to what extent online discussion was able to reach political decision-makers and effectively change the Internet's Bill of Rights.

INTRODUCTION

The growing presence of organized civil society's actors and stakeholders and the participation of governmental and non-governmental institutions in the Internet motivate a debate of possible effects of such phenomenon in various political instances, such as participation, democratic governance and citizenship. Within this framework, the Internet's democratic potential is constantly thematized as well as questioned (Chadwick, 2009; Coleman; Moss, 2012; Coleman; Blumler, 2009; Dahlberg,

2007; 2011; Maia, Gomes, Marques, 2011). However, a huge gap keeps at bay the opportunities offered by virtual environments and an effective strengthening of relations between elected representatives and those they represent. The reason for this arm's length reality is that online political participation depends not only on the citizens being willing to participate but also on politicians and governments being open to recommendations and guidance flowing in from online popular participation. In this context, it is relevant to ask how effective is virtual engagement vis-à-vis institutional tools of political participation.

To address such issue, this chapter seeks to analyze the efficacy of virtual participation in *Portal E-Democracia*, a tool for civil society participation in political decision-making. This is an innovative landmark project, created in 2007 by the Federal House of Representatives in Brazil. It seeks to widen and deepen popular involvement in issues debated by their elected federal representatives.

This chapter dwells on virtual engagement on the *E-Democracia* portal, and focus on the Case Study of the bill of law of the Brazilian Internet Civilian Landmark, whose goal is to regulate Internet use in the country. To grasp how sizable is the gap between opportunities for virtual participation and effective citizenry influence on political decision-making, we analyzed to what extent political participation through a virtual platform was able to actually affect the discussion of the bill of law in the Brazilian House of Representatives.

Brazil is among the top countries investing in democratic innovations (Avritzer, 2009; Goodin, 2008; Coelho, et al. 2005; Smith, 2009), a major example of participatory-budget adoptions which have, more recently, integrated virtual stages (Peixoto, 2009; Sampaio, Maia & Marques, 2010). In this sense, it is important to highlight that the initial first draft of the Brazilian Internet Civilian Landmark, that seeks to regulate Internet use in the country, is the end result of a popular consul-

tation process stage, involving various sectors of society in the discussion of issues to be addressed in regulating Internet use in the country (Sampaio, Nicolás & Bragatto, 2013; Steibel, 2012). Even though virtual democracy initiatives run into many barriers (social, economic, cultural), affecting participation (Coleman; Blumler, 2009), the Internet Civilian Landmark case can be is regarded as a successful initiative of grassroots civilian participation in decision-making processes.

Despite Brazil's tradition of fostering popular participation, one must carefully analyze any sweeping generalized adoption of participative tools that, at first sight, might suggest that the political realm would be willing to listen to what civil society has to say. Possibilities of institutionalized online participation are many and varied, but our research is driven by the following questioning: Is online political participation effective? Is a virtual engagement in institutional tools of political participation (in the Portal E-Democracia) capable of influencing political decision-making?

This study is less focused on the deliberative stage of the online discussion of the Internet Civilian Landmark (in a Forum and Chat Rooms designed for this purpose); it rather focuses its attention on the efficacy of user participation in the process. Put in more precise terms, we pay attention to the opportunities to act and influence the collaborative process of discussing the bill of law, since we seek to verify whether or not the legislative committee was open to popular demands regarding Internet regulation.

This chapter surveys the contribution of recent studies on virtual participation and the adoption of digital tools by different spheres of institutionalized politics, in order to contextualize our research. We next lay out the methodological procedures applied to the two participative stages of the *wikilegis* tool, namely: comments and suggestions. In a subsequent section, the results and conclusions of this paper are presented. The study argues that the legislative branch can benefit from

Related Content

Movement Control Order (MCO) - A Viable Legal Mechanism in the Management of COVID-19 Pandemic in Malaysia?

Suzana Muhamad Said, Aini Aman, Mohd Rohaizat Hassanand Omkar Dastane (2022). *Journal of Comparative Asian Development (pp. 1-15).*

www.irma-international.org/article/movement-control-order-mco---a-viable-legal-mechanism-in-the-management-of-covid-19-pandemic-in-malaysia/315650

From an Emperor to the Derg and Beyond: Examining the Intersection of Music and Politics in Ethiopia

Zenebe Beyene (2019). *Music and Messaging in the African Political Arena (pp. 1-21).*

www.irma-international.org/chapter/from-an-emperor-to-the-derg-and-beyond/220119

China's Shifting Labour-Intensive Manufacturing Firms to Africa: A Particular Focus on Ethiopia and Rwanda

Ezihuelen Michael Mitchell Omoruyi (2021). *Journal of Comparative Asian Development (pp. 1-36).*

www.irma-international.org/article/chinas-shifting-labour-intensive-manufacturing-firms-to-africa/285550

Impediments to Nigerian Democracy: Ambivalent Role of Vigilante Groups in Maintaining Security in the Wake of the Boko Haram Insurgence in Northern Nigeria

Ibrahim Sani Kankara (2016). *Political Discourse in Emergent, Fragile, and Failed Democracies (pp. 240-251).*

www.irma-international.org/chapter/impediments-to-nigerian-democracy/150135

How Communication Technologies Function as Platforms and Pathways to Civic and Political Engagement: An Agenda for Research and Public Policy

Christopher McCarthy-Latimerand J. Richard Kendrick, Jr. (2019). *Civic Engagement and Politics: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications (pp. 78-104).*

www.irma-international.org/chapter/how-communication-technologies-function-as-platforms-and-pathways-to-civic-and-political-engagement/220202