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Chapter IX

Defining and Measuring E-Democracy:
A Case Study on Latin American Local Governments[1]

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Abstract

The aim of this chapter is to define and to measure electronic democracy. In order to achieve this purpose, first, different conceptual perspectives about the interconnection between new information and communication technologies and democratic institutions are described. Second, a definition of electronic democracy and its relationship with classical theories on representative democracy is provided. Third, with this description, an index to measure the stage of development of electronic democracy in a given political system is developed. Fourth, the index is tested in some Latin American municipalities. Finally, with the obtained results, some conclusions about the level and nature of electronic-democracy implementation in the region are described. The chapter adopts an institutional approach to understand the impact of ICTs on institutions that illustrates how difficult defining and measuring this reality can get.

Introduction

The study about the relationship between technological change and institutions has been a controversial topic in the social-sciences context. There are several researchers that try to illustrate, both from a positive and negative perspective, the impact of technological advances along history. This literature refers to several issues: economic development (Jorgenson & Stiroh, 1999), democracy promotion (Ott, 1998), public administration (Fountain, 2001), or business performance (Brynjolfsson & Hitt, 2000).

Recently, along with the rise of the Internet, the World Wide Web, and computer-mediated communications, there has been a growing concern about how to analyze the impact of ICT on political institutions. In this sense, there is a lot of research intended to show how ICTs have been adopted by some institutions, such as public administration (Criado, 2003; Fountain, 2001; Ho, 2002), political parties (Nixon & Johansson, 1999; Norris, 2001), or parliaments (Kingham, 2003; Louvin & Alderdice, 2001; Norris, 2001; Zittel, 2001). The results and conclusions of this kind of research have led to an increasing interest about the influence of ICTs on the whole political process (Hacker & van Dijk, 2000a; Hague & Loader, 1999; Tsagarousianou, Tambini, & Bryan, 1998; Wilhelm, 2000).

Despite the efforts to determine and to explicitly state the result of the relationship between ICTs and political institutions, it seems that bidirectional analysis has not been as important for researchers. In fact, apparently, scholars have paid less attention to research on the institutional characteristics that promote technological change. Nevertheless, this is starting to become a recurring issue and some authors, such as Parto (2003) or Taylor (2002), have already focused on it. In particular, based on an empirical study on how political institutions affect technological progress in the long run, Taylor maintains that a country's type of governmental structure plays an important role in technological innovation. He argues that centralized governments tend to ignore innovation at the first stages and that they are slower on technological diffusion in comparison to decentralized governments.

In the same context, Pippa Norris (2001) focuses on the political process and states that there is slight empirical evidence to support that differences in the political system can explain the development of an electronic government policy. In spite of it, she observes that the federal countries, and therefore more decentralized ones, have a greater tendency to introduce digital-government strategies. Other studies, like the one carried out by Trechsel, Kies,

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