

Chapter 3

E-Government and Citizen Participation in Chile: The Case of Ministries Websites

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ABSTRACT

Various international assessments have drawn attention to the level of development e-government has reached in Chile during the early 2000s. Despite this, even official reports recognize that there is an e-government deficit in opening spaces for citizen participation. These results coincide with several works which have shown the limits the State of Chile put to citizen participation. This chapter analyzes the participation supply that the websites of Chilean ministries offer the citizenry. We describe the existing interactive applications offered by the websites, and the possibilities they make available for citizens to participate in public policy discussions. Our conclusion is that there is a wide range of available information regarding ministerial management but, on the other; the lack of participatory mechanisms is confirmed. These results can be understood if considering that within the Chilean public administration a managerial predisposition exists, which makes open participation spaces subordinated to prevailing managerial logics.

INTRODUCTION

Various international assessments have drawn attention to the level of development e-government has reached in Chile during the early 2000s (UN, 2003, 2005). It is noticeable that, towards 2003, Chile ranked second in the world in the level of development of their websites and third in e-partic-

ipation, particularly when considering the fact that it is a South American country that is not part of the developed world (US\$11,100 per capita income for the year 2005, according to the World Bank). Nevertheless, these results are understandable when taking into account that, after the return to democracy in 1990, successive governments have attempted to modernize public administration, where new information technologies (NICTs) have played an important role (Araya & Barría, 2008).

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Despite of these improvements, even official reports recognize that there is an e-government deficit in opening spaces for citizen participation (SEGPRES, 2006b). A number of United Nations reports have stated that Chile has experienced a downturn in e-participation rankings (UN, 2003, 2005, 2008). These results, as we will show, coincide with several works which have shown the limits the State of Chile put to citizen participation. Participation is a big issue in Chile, not only in the political arena but also in academia, for the reason that there is a disagreement feeling within the citizenry, and the citizens are increasingly disinterested in politics in general, and in electoral processes in particular.

This chapter analyzes the participation supply that the websites of Chilean ministries offer the citizenry (because these are the bodies in charge of formulating public policies). We describe the existing interactive applications offered by the websites, and the possibilities they make available for citizens to participate in public policy discussions.

Based on these results, the conception of citizen participation on which each one of these e-participation project is analyzed. This exercise allows us to enter a greater discussion, on the degree of participation availability with which Chilean public administration meets its citizens.

E-GOVERNMENT, MANAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION

Different approaches have been raised to understand the incorporation of NICTs to public administration. Margetts (2007, pp. 234-236) identifies three currents; Hyper-, Anti- and Post-modernism. Each one focuses on issues that are beginning to become the focus of attention in public organizations.

Hyper-modernists have an idealistic view of the role that technology might play within organizations, especially in relation to the potential of

rationalization and organizational transformation they deliver. In contrast, while recognizing the transformation potential, Anti-modernists focus on the dangers technologies bring, particularly in regard to the social control that can be exerted through them. On the other hand, Postmodernist views are idealistic, just like modernists and, starting from the transformation potential, they show their enthusiasm for the liberation from bureaucratic control and the greater organizational flexibility and fluidity.

The incorporation of information technologies (IT) to public administration dates back to the second half of the twentieth century. At first, they were used to improve administrative efficiency. Later, the concern for the quality of services produced was incorporated (Snellen, 2005, p. 399).

With the rise of the internet, the use of ITs was no longer focused as an internal organizational issue, but started to centre outside of themselves, especially in relation to society, companies and other kinds of organizations (Margetts, 2007, p. 234). The possibilities are not limited to this new form of contact, but have more profound implications. Thus, the concepts of virtual States and virtual agencies have emerged, which not only refer to the presence of pre-existing agencies on the Internet, but also to the creation of new organizations, which only exist online (Fountain, 2001). Moreover, the idea of virtuality crosses different intra- and interorganizational areas. On the one hand, there is a virtual face, based on the websites through which the organizations present themselves to the public. On the other hand, there is an internal virtuality, where the organization is reduced to a small core, dedicated to manage the contracts with the suppliers. Finally, there are virtual networks, which coordinate joint actions between different agencies (Margetts, 2005).

Nevertheless, these changes are not mechanical, as believed by those who endorse that technologies, by themselves, generate change (technological determinism), and by those who claim that the success of these technologies is related to the

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