

Chapter 38

Online Presence of the Members of the Turkish Parliament: Evaluation of the Turkish MP Web Sites

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ABSTRACT

Increasing technology use opens up new channels of political interaction. Reviews of Turkish e-democracy literature show that research on technology use in the Turkish legislature is insufficient. This chapter addresses this gap and contributes to the e-government and e-democracy literatures by examining and evaluating the content of the personal web sites of the members of the Turkish Parliament. The findings show that MP web site presence in Turkey is still in its infancy. The potential of e-democracy through the use of MP websites are hindered by the same factors that limit the practice of democratic practices and participation in Turkey, such as the absence of a culture of citizenship with direct demands for being a part of the political process. Findings on MP website use also have implications on the development of e-democracy in Turkey.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of electronic(e) government, which is defined as the provision of government information and services by the help of information and communication technologies (ICTs), is a popular

topic of research in the public administration literature (Heeks & Bailur, 2007; Yıldız, 2007; Hoff, 2004). The experience and competence in using ICTs is very important towards the possible future democratic uses of these technologies (Hoff, 2004, p. 16). E-government not only includes administrative elements such as increasing transparency, accountability and citizen-centered

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public service, but it also encompasses a political dimension in which the opening, widening and deepening of political processes, such as participation, deliberation, and collective planning and decision-making in a democratic polity. The impact of ICTs on politics is not only in the realm of citizen participation or political activation, but in the area of better operation of institutions as well (Leston-Bandeira, 2007, p. 655). In this context, Lusoli et al. (2006, p. 27) argue that ICTs can help the parliaments reconnect with the public. This political dimension of the use of ICTs in participation and public deliberation in public life can be termed as “e-democracy”.

The concept of e-democracy includes the rapidly developing areas of technology-based enhancement of democratic participation (Rose & Sanford, 2007), such as electronic and mobile voting (Choi, 2006; Lipprott, 2006), and expression of citizen views on on-line forums in the forms of web site creation, blogging (Griffiths, 2006) and tweeting (Marlin-Bennett, 2009). A more institutionalized means of electronic democracy is the online presence of the main institutions of democracy, the parliaments. Whether unitary or federal a government may be, parliaments are of central and critical importance in the functioning of a democratic polity, as political representation is channeled through these institutions. Understanding the processes of technology adoption in parliaments as institutions, and of members of parliaments (MPs) as individuals, thus, becomes a research topic of paramount importance in the e-government literature. This interesting topic makes Hoff (2004, p. 6) wonder whether ICT use changes the role of MPs by strengthening their roles as delegates or trustees, or totally transforms them into becoming cyber parliamentarians.

This chapter examines and explains the online web presence of Turkish MPs on their web sites. These web sites are separate entities from the MPs online presence on the web site of the Turkish Parliament (Turkish Grand National Assembly, TGNA). Unofficial web sites established by or

in the name of Turkish MPs are not included in the study. The objective is to discover the nature and channels of political and administrative representation of Turkish MPs, as well as the emergence of political communication between MPs and their constituents. To this end, 179 MP web sites are examined by using a pre-determined content analysis form. The content analyses of MP web sites were conducted between July and August 2010. The findings provide a baseline to assess and compare the future changes in MP web presence. The findings and conclusions shed light into e-government and e-democracy literatures in Turkey and in countries under similar conditions elsewhere.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political systems are experiencing decreasing levels of trust and increasing cynicism towards the actors and institutions of politics, which is made explicit by decreasing levels of election turnouts. ICTs are presented as one of the remedies that can be used to overcome the crises of legitimacy of the representative democracy system (Lawrence, 2004; Lusoli et al., 2006, p. 24; Sawyer & Zappala, 2001). In fact, Lusoli et al. (2006, p. 29) emphasizes that the importance of the opening of meaningful and useful interaction opportunities via ICTs. They add that the majority of the citizens are expecting to use more ICTs in the future, but not necessarily for political purposes. Hilbert (2009) argues that newer opportunities presented by the technology such as social networking opens up new venues for political deliberation and meaningful participation. There are others, who argue that the use of ICTs does not solve important political problems, such as political participation inequalities based on socio-economic status (Sclozman et al., 2010).

The e-democracy literature, in general, is criticized for its lack of a comprehensive and integrated basis of knowledge-gathering, and a clear definition about the standards of democ-

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