

E-participation in the Chilean Senate: deliberative online applications?

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Abstract: The Information and Communication Technologies (ICT's) have been accompanied by a series of promises in terms of citizen participation and the development of a closer relation between the political authorities and the citizens. The Chilean Senate has used two online applications (Senador Virtual and Chat de los senadores [Virtual Senator and Senators Chat]) which allow citizens to be in contact with senators and provide their points of view on topics to be debated in the legislative process. This paper analyzes how these programs enable citizens to take part in debates related to public affairs and the legislative agenda. It specifically analyzes how these two applications have worked and it estimates if they manage to achieve the normative ideal of deliberation, which inspires the academic debate on ICT's and politics.

Key words: ICT's, citizen participation, quality of democracy, Senate

Resumen: Las Tecnologías de la Información y Comunicación (TIC's) han traído una serie de promesas para la participación ciudadana y el establecimiento de una relación más estrecha y cercana entre las autoridades políticas y los ciudadanos. En Chile, el Senado ha llevado dos programas (Senador Virtual y Chat de los senadores) que permiten a los ciudadanos mantenerse en contacto con los senadores y dar sus puntos de vista en temas discutidos en el legislativo. Este artículo estudia cómo estos programas posibilitan a los ciudadanos engancharse en debates en torno a asuntos públicos y a la agenda legislativa. En específico, estudia cómo estas aplicaciones han funcionado y se evalúa si logran cumplir con el ideal normativo de la deliberación, que inspira el debate académico en torno a las TIC's y política.

Palabras clave: TIC's, participación ciudadana, calidad de la democracia, Senado.

Introduction

Latin American political science has been devoted to aspects related to *the quality of democracy* in the last two decades; after most of the region has returned to democracy. The balance of this process, apparently, has not been much encouraging, considering that the debate has started to be full of concepts such as *citizenship deficits* (Cameron, 2007), *disaffection* (Altman, 2006) and, even, *delegative democracy* (O'Donnell, 1992).

This phenomenon, however, does not only occur in a Chilean or Latin American context. In general, the distrust towards politicians and politics has been debated worldwide. In this regard, there has been a search for new alternatives to improve *the quality of democracy* and to “capture” citizens in order to bring them into politics. Since the second half of the 90's, there has also been a debate regarding the role that new forms of communication could have in the attempt to make democracy more participative and to achieve higher levels of deliberation. These new forms of communication include the internet and a series of online applications, such as e-mail, chats or debate forums

Chile stands out in the incorporation of ICT's to governmental activities. According to a recent international research, the Chilean e-government was among the top-ten in the world in 2005 (UN, 2005). That is the result from the political will of the authorities at the Executive aiming at incorporating the use of the ICT's, specially the internet, in the dissemination of information to citizens and the performance of online procedures.¹ However, these efforts do not come from the Executive only. The legislative and specially the Senate have also incorporated ICT's to attract citizens. Three initiatives have been promoted in this regard since 2004. The first, *Senador Virtual*, is an application in use since the second half of 2003, which allows citizens to vote the law proposals that the Senate will debate, and deliver their suggestions to the corresponding commissions. The second initiative, short-lived –it was used from September 2004 to May 2005–, was called *Chat de senadores*, and consisted of a series of videochat sessions between citizens and senators. This last involves the opportunity for the senators to have a blog.

This paper analyzes how the two former initiatives allow citizens to take part in the debate of public affairs in general, and in the legislative agenda in particular.

¹ There is a website (<http://www.tramitefacil.gob.cl>) in which one can retrieve information on a great number of administrative procedures that citizens have to perform in public offices. Tax declaration is one of the main procedures carried out online. In 2006, 97.04% of the taxpayers delivered their declaration by means of the website of the Servicio de Impuestos Internos (Internal Taxes Services) (SII, 2006).

It specifically analyzes the performance of these online applications and estimates their achievement in terms of the normative ideal of deliberation, which has supported the development of projects that incorporate ICT's to politics (for instance, Colombo, 2006; Martí, 2008). The second section provides a description of the debate on democracy in Latin American during the last two decades, and we focus our attention on the main concepts that have emerged to understand the democratic deficits. We also make reference to the current characteristics of this debate in Chile. We then analyze the debate created on the possible implications that the use of ICT's could have on democracy, as well as on certain patterns that are part of the international experiences. The fourth section analyzes the functioning of *Senador Virtual* and *Chat de los senadores*. Regarding the first initiative, it is important to determine the level of participation in the debates – which was measured by means of the votes and suggestions provided by participants during the online sessions – on the projects that have been incorporated in the online application.

As for the *Chat de los senadores*, the number of participants, questions, rates of answers and other aspects are presented in the appendix. This data is of the utmost importance for us, given the fact that it implies the existence of 'reciprocity' in the dialogue, which is a basic consideration in the idea of deliberation (Jensen, 2003: 36). Finally, some conclusions and a series of questions that ought to be tackled in future research projects are presented.

The problems of the democracy in Latin America and Chile

If the Latin American political science was devoted to study the kinds of authoritarianisms that existed in the region and to analyze the processes of transition to democracy in the 80's, it nowadays focuses on *the quality of democracy* (for instance, O'Donnell, 2007; Morlino, 2007).

One of the first calls in this interest was performed by O'Donnell (1992) with regard to what he called *delegative democracies*: democracies that had Dahl's characteristics of polyarchy – and that did not have the risk of experiencing regression towards authoritarianism –, but which were not institutionalized. In these cases, the president is able to govern on his or her own and is considered as the 'guardian of the national interest'. O'Donnell suggests that presidents gather a group of technicians and receive a delegation from the majority who elects them to act as a kind of 'savior'. These democracies experience a series of problems, such as strong oscillations in their popularity levels and the irresponsibility of the legislative sphere in the policies promoted by the Executive.

O'Donnell's analyses are not the only critical evaluations. Recently did Maxwell Cameron (2007) draw the attention to the fact that the analysis of the state from an electoral perspective has implied a series of confusions in Latin America. His warning is mainly focused on the electoral indexes – which list countries that have a great part of the electoral institutions that, in normative terms, a democracy shall have –, but which do not account for the main problem that affects the countries of the region: the lack of a separation of State powers. In his opinion, the main deficit in the Latin American democracies is related to the deliberative quality of their institutions. He states that neither the legislative is deliberative nor are the courts impartial, and that the Executive, is openly, in charge of the rule of law.

Apart from the agreement or disagreement to Cameron's estimations and generalizations, his proposals are a clear reflection of the critical look that politology has created on the new democracies from the region. That is why several authors have attempted to incorporate new conceptual elements to examine the phenomenon. O'Donnell (2007) has paid attention to the existence of vertical and horizontal accountability, which have been incorporated by other authors in their estimations on *the quality of democracy*.

There is not a full consensus regarding the implications of this last concept; however, at least, it seems clear that, in its different versions, what it aims to measure are the results that democracy delivers. Disagreement stands out when authors enquire on which results to take as significant. Thus, Morlino (2007: 5) states that *the quality of democracy* refers to the institutional order that enables the adequate functioning of these institutions and allows reaching the freedom and equality of the citizens. In contrast to this, Levine and Molina (2007: 6) do not define *quality of democracy* with a relation between specific objectives, and they limit themselves to point out that it is achieved inasmuch as citizens participate in an informed way in free, fair and frequent elections and that, apart from that, they have the option to influence the decisions related to public policy. The latter aspect requires policies to respond to the citizen's interests.

We will not elaborate much on the debate of these authors with regard to the use of the indicators to measure *the quality of democracy*; however, we are interested in highlighting three concepts that seem to be essential in it. From Levine and Molina's (2007) definition, one understands that participation is a requirement for it to exist. Since, from their vision, quality depends to a great extent on the capacity from the citizen to have influence, it is not possible to imagine its existence without participation. In the opposite way, even if Morlino (2007) acknowledges

the satisfaction of the user as an attribute of quality, he does not give a significant place to participation. His stance gives room for *quality of democracy* to exist without it assuring freedom and equality.

What both postures agree on is the outstanding place that the concepts of accountability and responsiveness have. Both works consider that accountability refers to the procedural dimension. They understand it as the call from the authorities to respond to electors (*electoral accountability*) or over the authority of the State power (*inter-institutional accountability*) regarding the decisions they make. On the other hand, responsiveness is directed towards the dimension of the results obtained. It is specially focused on the capacity of response of the authorities to satisfy the citizens and civil society. This last part, according to Levine and Molina, does not necessarily imply that responsiveness makes reference to the attachment from the governors to their programs, given the fact that a government can, for example, convince the citizenry of the advantages of following certain policies (Levine and Molina, 2007: 10-12; Morlino, 2007: 6-7).

Results from evaluations made on the Chilean case do not represent an exception to the discomfort that is seen in whole region. What is interesting is that criticisms to the Chilean democracy are, precisely, directed towards the lack of citizen participation and mechanisms for citizens to have influence and ask for explanations to politicians for their decisions.

The return to democracy in Chile, despite the expectations from some observers, has not resulted in a revitalization of the civil society. It is in fact the opposite, according to some critics, the country has experienced a depoliticization of the society. In this regard, the army was successful in 'privatizing social relations'. Thus, it seems as if the idea implying that the fulfillment of needs shall be achieved by means of personal efforts has been accepted in Chile (Silva, 2004).

Electoral participation,² along with the debates on the electoral system, have been one of the most debated topics in the current Chilean democracy. The electoral pattern, created in the 1988 plebiscite – which decided the extension of the *de facto* government of Pinochet – has become 'old' in a continuous way. In the plebiscite, 89.1% of the population in age to vote was in the electoral register, whereas in 2001, only 58.2% (Navia, 2003: 92) was in it. This fact has alarmed some political actors, but, as stated by Navia himself, the result of 2001 responded to the historical average of participation and those of 1988 were 'abnormal' due to the significance of the vote. Despite the validity or not of this interpretation, it is undeniable that

²The registration in the electoral records is voluntary, but once someone has been added to them, voters are obliged to vote in every presidential, parliamentary and municipal election.

there is a significant phenomenon of electoral participation. Likewise, in some years, such as in 1997, a great part of the constituents (almost 18%) let their disapproval be seen for all candidates by voting blank or null (Riquelme, 1999).³

To this process of reduction in the electoral participation one shall add the lack of other mechanisms of social participation. That is a result of the attempt from the civil authorities to inhibit participation, in the name of democratic consolidation (Drake, 2003; Silva, 2004). This phenomenon has implied the deterioration of the capacity of influence of different social groups, for instance unions, in public policies. In the same way, it has brought about a distance between citizens and politicians. Said fact is seen on the results of a recent national survey, in which 77% of the surveyed people expressed that the members of the parliament were neither concerned nor interested in the problems of the people like them (CEP, 2007), and in the fact that institutions that are eminently representative, such as the Congress, experience a special distrust from the citizenry (CEP, 2003).

These topics have not been disregarded by political science scholars. There has been an intensive debate on the voluntary nature of the vote in the last years; considering it as a means to bring citizens close to politics; especially those who keep aside from the electoral processes, and debates have arose on how to improve *the quality of democracy* (for instance Altman, 2006).

As it will be shown in the following section, ICT's offer a series of promises that, despite not having been achieved in the international experience, ought to be, at least, considered in the Chilean debate. The significance of this perspective of the debate is clearer if one considers that one of the institutions that experience a significant social questioning – the Congress – has attempted to use the ICT's to work together with the citizens.

ICT's and the promises of a better/higher democracy

In terms of mass media communication, internet is the last of a series of great technological innovations. It has been announced as a decisive step forward in favor of the public information and the political participation (Davis, 2001: 8). In its specific case, internet stands out by its possible potential in the achievement of the deliberative ideals in two ways: enabling communication among citizens, and between them and politicians. In the same way, it has come out in a moment in which the ideas of the deliberative democracy are in vogue (Jensen, 2003: 30; Martí, 2008). This perspective of the problem will be reconsidered at the moment of analyzing the experience of the Chilean Senate.

³ Youths are generally the sector that is least interested in politics. On the political attitudes from this group see González *et al.* (2005).

Literature on ICT's and politics, at its beginning, was branded with the debates of programmatic nature, which provided an optimist vision on the impact of the use of the technologies in democracy, in which two different directions coexisted. On the one hand, there were visions such as the electronic or demo-elitist, which related the use of ICT's to the improvement in the representative democracy – for instance, by means of the closer relation between the citizen and the representative – and, on the other, there were more radical perspectives, which considered that technologies would enable a profound democratic renewal – for instance, the replacement of representatives, making the collective decision-making process a communitarian or virtual voting experience – (Colombo, 2006; Harto de Vera, 2006).

From the stances with a less radical perspective, concepts such as *e-government*, *e-democracy* and *e-participation* arouse. While the former highlights the efficiency of the government, the access to the service and higher accountability levels (Altman, 2002: 10), *e-democracy* or *electronic democracy* refers to the improvement potential of the democracy that the new ICT's provide in aspects such as the spread of information and communication, the association and adding of interests and demands and the decision-making process, by means of deliberation and vote (Hagen, 1996: 2-3).

Also, *e-participation* has been understood as the sum of the programs of the governments to stimulate participation of the citizens and the desires of them to take advantage of the opportunities provided by these programs. United Nations concept incorporates *e-information* as the dissemination of information related to the activity of the government. *E-consultation* is the existence of tools on the website which enable the government to discuss with citizens about the selection or debate of public policies in real time, and *e-decision-making*, allows the government to weigh the input that citizens send via internet at the moment of making a decision (UN, 2005: 19-20).

Although optimist literature seemed to believe that technologies themselves would achieve democratizing effects – a stance known as *technological determinism* (Costafreda, 2004: 4)—, after years of experience, numerous authors have started to state that the problem underlying the use of ICT's is not only related to the availability of technologies. Analyzes on the use of ICT's in politics tend to demonstrate that the promises of a higher democracy have not been fulfilled, with exception of the Scandinavian cases (Castells, 2001: 177; Costafreda, 2004: 4-5). Some researchers even stated that there are not significant changes that challenge the traditional political practices (Parvez, 2006: 79). These findings have moved the debate to new critical aspects such as that of the theoretical models of democracy which sustain projects of *e-participation* (Martí, 2008).

The gap between expectations and experiences is partly due to the fact that the potential of ICT's was overestimated. Although television, radio, telephone and new ICT's can be used in three ways in the democratic process (delivering and spreading information, making communication and interaction easier, and making transactions), what is true is that technologies are not inherently democratic. In order to fulfill these objectives, they have to be lead in that direction (Antiroiko, 2003: 125), under a strong political leadership (Takao, 2004: 240). Some authors have even drawn the attention to the fact that ICT's could be a tool that would enable the government to control the citizens. This *Orwellian vision* (Barrientos del Monte, 2007) has been stated to understand the Russian experience, in which the government has attempted to control the use of the internet (Alexander, 2004).

Analyses have demonstrated that even though governments, public administrations, political parties and parliaments have incorporated the internet, most of them make it in a unidirectional way (Colombo, 2006). For instance, a study on websites from parliaments in 18 countries⁴ found that only three cases (Denmark, France and New Zealand) had specific spaces for citizens to take part in different kinds of debates (Setälä and Grönlund, 2006: 157).

Parliaments follow the same path. By 2003, 5% of the members of the Swiss parliament expressed to have chatted one time (Chappelet, 2004: 93). On their side, in Portugal, Austria, Norway, Holland, Denmark and Austria less than 3% of the representatives used that application, unlike the e-mail, which is used by more than 50% of the Portuguese and Austrian members of the parliament and by over 92% by those members of parliament in the rest of the countries (Cardoso *et al.*, 2004: 30).

⁴ Germany, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Spain, U.S., Finland, France, Holland, Ireland, Italy, New Zealand, Norway, United Kingdom, Sweden and Switzerland. An exception in the European parliaments and in the world is the Scottish. Their parliament, established in 1999, incorporated the ICT's to the parliamentary work as a way to relate representatives and represented. The idea of this effort was to overcome the use of e-mails. Two initiatives were created in order to achieve this goal. The first, promoted in 2002, set citizen forums which would later be a support for the ulterior debates of the members of the parliament. The second initiative has promoted a system of e-request, where citizens can make requests in terms of the parliamentary competence. E-requests, started in 2004, has also opened the door to debates on topics (Seaton, 2005: 335-336). Its representatives show a higher level of use of ICT's than their peers. The determination to use them is due to the new parliament and the fact that its creation occurs in a moment in there is a high confidence on the idea that ICT's can help strengthening the democracy (Smith and Webster, 2004: 78).

The Danish case, in the opposite way, shows higher levels in the use of interactive applications. 27% of the members of the parliament have taken part in debates with citizens via ICT's. In a context of low militancy, Danish parties have seen in the ICT's a means to approach to the citizen, having applications in their web forums, e-mail listings and chat rooms. In the same way, they are getting ready to use mail in lists at massive scale, attempting to contact certain segments of the constituency (Hoff *et al.*, 2003: 53-54).

The lack of interaction⁵ is due to the fact that internet has not replaced the traditional channels of information (Jensen, 2003: 46). For instance, Austrian, Danish, Dutch (Filzmaier *et al.*, 2004: 21) and German (Kleinsteuber and Fries, 2004: 86) members of parliaments have a higher estimation in favor of T.V., written press and radio than the internet as means of communication. In two state parliaments in the U. S., congress people estimate more personal visits, hand-written letters and telephone conversations than e-mail as form of contact with their represented (Alperin and Schultz, 2003: 24-9). The Swiss case, in contrast, demonstrates that the use of the e-mail has made members of the parliament replace other means such as written letters or telephone conversations (Chappelet, 2004: 97).

A possible explanation to understand why politicians have not substituted their means of contact is related to the existence of a digital gap⁶. Due to the fact that not all citizens have access to internet, this means does not provide the possibility of contacting all the citizens that the parliament wants to.⁷

⁵ Other ideas that explain the lack of fulfillment of the starting expectations on the use of ICT's are based on the high number of e-mails received by members of the parliament, a fact that causes frustration on citizens and the members of the parliament themselves (Alperin and Schultz, 2003: 8; Nugent, 2001: 228; Cardoso *et al.*, 2004: 36). Also, the findings in countries such as Denmark, Holland and Austria shall be considered; they state that members of the parliament use e-mail, mainly, to be in contact with supporting staff (Filzmaier *et al.*, 2004: 24-25; Richardson and Cooper, 2006: 124-126).

⁶ In a broad vision of the concept, Barber (2006) has suggested that the gap does not only imply the lack of access to technologies; he also relates them to the lack of capabilities to be a proficient user of the them.

⁷ Analyses show that, most of the internet users who contact members of the parliament or take part in political forums, have certain specific characteristics such as: being males, white, with high levels of education and political activity (Jensen, 2003: 45; Hoff *et al.*, 2003: 54). It has also been found that in the U.S. people who contact the government via internet have the same characteristics, but they also have higher economic resources and are the people who express to have higher degrees of satisfaction (Cohen, 2006: 53-55).

Two phenomena can be seen in Chile. On the one hand, the internet connection is not fully massive (only 13% of the population have access to it from their homes) and it exists, mainly, in the youngest and well-off sectors of the society (UNDP, 2006: 37; UC-CCS, 2006: 16). On the other, members of the parliament of both chambers are reluctant to answer, via e-mail, all the consultations that are made by citizens or scholars (Orrego and Araya, 2002; Costafreda, 2004; UNDP, 2006).

The international experience shows that there are not yet incentives that sustain the use of the ICT's in the relation between citizens and representatives. This makes one think that, apparently, ICT's neither act in a vacuum, nor cancel all the effects of the inherent characteristics that each political system has in its citizen-representative relation. In giving attention to these topics, literature has recently highlighted that technologies are only instruments that reflect the characteristics of societies (Barber, 2006) and it has drawn attention to the fact that the institutions themselves set limits to *e-participation* projects (Colombo, 2006), altering, in a minimal way, the institutional characteristics of political powers (Martí, 2008).

In the same, ICT's neither change the attitudes and performance of politicians nor the little participative political cultures (Colombo, 2006). A proof of that is the persistence on the estimation, for example, of hand-written letters, and the fact that politicians and parliaments on the web show low levels of online interactivity with the citizen.

The Chilean Senate and the approach to the citizenry via internet

The Chilean Congress has a website (<<http://www.congreso.cl>>) which includes, apart from the Senate, the Chamber of Deputies and the Library of the Congress. On the website presentation of the Senate in 2005, the then president of the corporation (senator Sergio Romero) asserted that they expected the site to be an instance of citizen participation, where they expected the citizen to provide ideas and opinions 'in order to build together a better future for our country' (<<http://www.senado.cl>>, May 2005). The web page of both Chilean parliamentary chambers stand out among developed democracies – such as those from U.S., Australia, Canada and the U.K. – in the index of interaction⁸ (UNDP, 2006: 182). In this regard, the website of the Senate has several applications, which will be next analyzed in the following section and where citizens can be in contact with the members of the parliament, apart from being able to give their opinions on the legislative process.

⁸ A study that compares the use of ICT's in the Chilean and Spanish parliaments also highlights the Chilean emphasis on applications which give preference to the communication with citizens (Costafreda, 2004: 18-19).

The website of the Senate has the characteristic of having three levels of information that Setälä and Grönlund (2006) have identified as necessary for the citizens to understand the political process. In <<http://www.senado.cl>> one can consult the information related to the structure, functioning, members of the corporation and the legislative processes. Records of the parliamentary activity (parliamentary sessions, the performance of the committees and the vote processes) are also kept. Lastly, the website allows contacting members of the parliament, apart from providing the chance to send feedback, comments and questions.

It is not in our interest to elaborate here on the characteristics, advantages and disadvantages of deliberative democracy, given the fact that there is abounding literature on the topic (for instance, Elster, 2001); however, deliberative democracy is important for us, due to the relation that literature establishes between ICT's and deliberative democracy so that we wonder on the characteristics that the projects of *e-participation* shall have to achieve certain degrees of deliberation. This way, we can understand the deliberative dimension that initiatives carried out by the web of the Chilean Senate might have in the future.

The theory of political deliberation, mainly based on Habermas' ideas, provides special attention to the way in which decisions are made by the members of the political unit. From a deliberative perspective decisions are made from the transformation of arguments. This process occurs when there is an encounter and debate of rational arguments, which have been previously stated by the different agents (Elster, 2001: 19-20). This is possible to the extent that people are entities that process both, information that is available and the different points of view that exist, from which they create well reasoned judgments (Thompson, 1998: 327).

From this, one infers that the construction of rational arguments is significant; however, their encounter is even more transcending. In order for that to occur, it is of vital significance that the participants in debates have will, on the one hand, to listen, and, on the other, to ponder the arguments of the other participants. As Gambetta (2001: 36) has stated "if participants are late, do not listen to their counterparts' speeches, deliver their speeches before their corresponding turn, speak at the same time or shout when they do not have valid arguments, the conditions for deliberation will be simply absent".

Another possible problem of deliberation refers to the heterogeneity of those who take part in the debates. It has been stated, from a normative perspective, that deliberation shall bring about a series of benefits, such as the distribution of information, the creation of new solutions, the search for more fair results, broader consensus and, even more important, the achievement of legitimate

decisions (Gambetta, 2001: 41). Nevertheless, doubt is cast on the possibility of achieving these benefits when the debate is presented at the bosom of the social elite, to the detriment of the rest of the sectors that are part of the political unit (Elster, 2001: 31).

In order for ICT's and democracy to work together, in the way 'optimists' have expressed, these aspects should be considered. From a perspective of the design of e-democracy and *e-participation* it is necessary, on the one hand, to exchange information in a continuous way – that is, that the technological support is able to maintain debates in real time – and, on the other, that there are neither controls on information nor hierarchies among participants.

In spite of this, as it has been said, deliberation requires will or 'deliberative disposition'; which imposes the need of providing access to a heterogeneous group of citizens. It is also necessary that those who partake, for instance, in forums or chat rooms, listen to the others (Jensen, 2003: 36).

To sum up, an 'application for online deliberation' shall allow creating spaces of debate between different participants – who are not differentiated by hierarchies in the applications –, but in order for it to be graded as 'deliberative' it is necessary to use it with a 'deliberative disposition'. We will now present some experiences of *Senador Virtual* and *Chat de los Senadores*, which have been the main initiatives of interactivity promoted by the Chilean Senate in the last years.

Senador Virtual

Senador Virtual came out by the second half of 2003 as an initiative of the Senate to explain its functioning to the citizens. In it, it is possible for senators to learn the opinions of the citizens on certain projects of law.

Senador Virtual puts at the consideration of the citizens a series of law proposals – which are to be debated in the Senate–. Citizens sign in as users and can vote proposals in general or in specific, apart from being able to express their ideas on it. The application also allows citizens to make comments on each project and to request support material for the debate. The connection with the legislative work is carried out with the delivery of the results of the vote and the suggestions made by the citizens to the respective commission or parliamentary committees, which will debate the law proposals.

The proposal involves the work of lawyers, journalists, IT specialists and the secretariat of each of the parliamentary commissions, who are in charge of choosing the projects and giving them the necessary form and language for them to be included in *Senador Virtual*. This team also defines the time in which the ideas of the projects shall be submitted to the consideration of the citizens.

Up to January 2007, there had been 97 projects in general debate. The total number of votes has been of 26,360, whereas the number of suggestions reaches 7,392. In average, each debate has voted 271.7 people and 76.2 suggestions have been received. The average percentage of votes in favor of the projects has been 81.1% and their rejection reaches 14.8%. From the 97 debates, only one, which proposes the penalization of illegal games of chance, was rejected by the participants (see Table 1).

From the 10 projects with higher number of suggestions, eight belong to the most voted. This fact demonstrates that citizens, in the topics that have been more interesting, do not limit themselves to vote in favor or against certain project of law; they also take advantage of the opportunity to deliver their own suggestions on the legislative process.

In both, the voting process and the suggestions, a series of topics related to delinquency (as in the case of the increase of sentences to criminals who reoffend, the creation of a Ministry of Public Security and the legalization of marihuana, associated in the public debate, by certain sectors, to delinquency) had significant levels of interest. Proposals of law related to labor or the economic situation of workers also stand out; in this case we can mention two cases: the existence of *Boletín Comercial*⁹ and prevision affairs. The interests of specific groups – matrons and employees of the public sector – also have a high number of suggestions. The only health topic that is present in the list is related to both publicity and consumption of tobacco.

The rates of participation in the debates on delinquency, health and employment coincide with the importance that constituency provide to these topics in the public opinion polls (See, for instance, CEP, 2006). However, despite of this coincidence, there are projects which have captured the political debate since 2003 up to present and which are not among the 10 most voted projects in *Senador Virtual*, for instance, AUGE Plan.¹⁰

⁹ *Boletín Comercial* is an instrument created by private agencies; it provides information regarding the unpaid debts of the citizens. This instrument is determining for those in it, it can even limit their chances of finding a job.

¹⁰ AUGE Plan was created during the government of Ricardo Lagos (2000-2006). It guarantees a preventive health plan –either public or private - for all citizens, the coverage of a series of diseases defined by the law in the time periods established by it, with equal quality standards and with a financial security system (See <<http://www.fonasa.cl>>). The plan came into force in July 2005, but was a significant part of the political debate since the beginning of Lagos' presidency. In that time, the government demonstrated a great concern on the materialization of these projects.

Although the average votes per project (271.7) could be considered low in comparison to the sample of 13% of the population with access to the internet – approximately, a million 950 thousand people –, the experience from *Senador Virtual* allows each Senate commission to receive 76.2 law proposals per project, which without the existence of the application would be not be known to senators. This fact, in qualitative terms, could potentially imply a new instance of influence in the legislation process. Nevertheless, the impact of this situation in the individual decisions of each senator shall be the subject of a more detailed study.

Chat de los senadores

Chats between senators and citizens, performed since September 2004 and up to May 2005, set senators in videochat sessions with participants interested in talking to them. The session was advertised on the web page of the Senate one week in advance and, when corresponding, the topic to be dealt with was informed.

The starting schedule for this initiative was weekly. However, it changed and chats finished by May 2005. 14 sessions took place in total, 12 senators took part in them and all of them were men. The beginning and end of the activity coincides with the presidency period of Hernán Larraín senator (a member of *Unión Demócrata Independiente*, Independent Democratic Unit [UDI], who led the corporation between May 2004 and that same month in 2005).

In a videochat modality, the senator answered previously selected questions from the citizens.

The number of participants in this application changed throughout the eight months of the experience.¹¹ The two first sessions of the chat had the highest number of questions. The first is (we refer to the session), also, the one which shows the highest number of insistence to answer the questions, and the third showed the lowest level of response. This may have caused disappointment in the citizens; a fact that could explain the fall in the number of questions after said session.

If one considers the percentage of response as an indicator of the interest of the senator to ponder the interests of the citizens – at the moment of tackling the topic, even when the response was neither complete nor fully tackled – one sees that the lower rate that was reached is 50%, and the highest 94.8%, having an average of 74.6%. This implies a predisposition to listen and answer to the citizen.

¹¹ The numbers of the two first sessions cannot be compared with those from the following ones. That is due to the way in which sessions were saved by the Senate. In the record of the two first chat sessions one can find all the login in and closed sessions of the users. In contrast, in the case of the following sessions only the dialogue among participants was saved. In any case, what can be really compared is the number of questions.

In the same way, in those chats where further contact was requested to a member of the parliament, they invariably preferred the e-mail. However, half of them did not give the option to have a later contact (See Table 2)

The interest of the citizens in the chats was mainly in asking questions to senators. For instance, in senator Martínez' session, a participant justified their high level of consultations arguing that that was the only opportunity they had to ask the senator.

That is why, with the exception of some sessions – for instance those in which senators Cantero or Ávila took part –, chats did not become instance of debates on matters of public interest. This situation can be demonstrated by the fact that from 14 sessions, with an average of 13.6 participants – excluding the two first –, only one idea expressed by a citizen was considered by a senator in order to incorporate it to the legislative work.¹²

This interest in being listened created a competence among citizens who wanted their questions to be answered. Some participants of the sessions considered that the members of the parliament preferred talking to specific people in the sessions. In five sessions, citizens attempted to make other participants respect the topics announced. That implied controlling participants who consulted different topics, probably aiming at taking advantage of the opportunity to ask online to the member of the parliament on the topic that was of his or her interest, even if it had not been announced.

Arguments between participants and members of the parliament were not general. In four chat sessions accusations existed from citizens regarding the predilection of the senators on answering only certain questions. For instance, in the first chat with senator Larraín, two citizens accused him of answering only questions that were not complicated for him. This occurred specially in topics that were supposedly not tackled by the parliament and that were related to the strengthening of social organizations and the presentation of pieces of evidence to the justice on the side of the defense of former dictator Augusto Pinochet in order for him not to take part in a prosecution on account for violations to human rights. In this last aspect, a female citizen complained arguing that the server disconnected her when she insisted on questions about the former dictator, a fact that was denied by the senator.

¹² It was the chat with Horvarth, in which the senator requested the citizens to send him an e-mail to take the proposed initiative to the Environment Commission of the Senate.

Disqualifications were not either general. When they occurred, they were caused by a clash in the opinions of the citizens and members of the parliament on topics that sensitive in the public sphere. For instance, Ávila immersed in a debate with citizens that were opposite to the legalization of marihuana and euthanasia (the senator is in favor of these proposals). Another citizen was bothered with the relativization of the torture concept which senator Martínez Bush, a former commander in chief of the Army, made. Lastly, there were some disqualifications from citizens regarding the physical appearance of Senator Romero, a fact that, apart from being an anecdote, demonstrates how in a virtual context the authority is not regarded as sacred anymore.

Another common situation in the sessions was the delay or lack of response from senators. Although some of them, such as in the first chat of senator Romero, presented response with a delay of, approximately, a minute, others, such as senator Martínez Bush, experienced delays of even 34 minutes, due, probably, to the participation of a third part who delivered the consultations to the senators. The delay created skepticism on some citizens on the functioning of the chat, whereas other became angry and disqualified the members of the parliament in general.

By the end of a session (for instance, those from Romero and Ávila), some citizens expressed their disagreement with the extension of the sessions. Some condemned the time spent by the member of the parliament or his disposition to answer. However, these frustrated visions were not the only existent sensation, and they represent a discomfort with the functioning of the activity and not with its objective. This kind of questioning occurred only one time on one citizen who said: "I don't know why I am taking part in this chat session, the truth is that it does not provide anything serious to the country, it seems to me more of a tomfoolery".

However, not only do negative experiences exist. In six chats sessions, citizens congratulated the members of the corresponding members of the parliament, standing out the possibility of debating topics that can become parliamentary initiatives, apart from allowing citizens to be closer to senators. Both, the positive and negative expressions on the experience are grounded to the degree of participation that the citizens have. When making these evaluations, the citizens considered both their right to be listened and the way in which the senator responded to the consultations and opinions.

Conclusions

The online applications analyzed in this paper, conceived from a demo-elitist perspective, were directed towards two objectives: enabling citizens to be closer to the members of the parliament, enabling a dialogue between them by means of a experience called *Chat de los senadores*, and to enable citizens, by means of the *Senador Virtual* application, to take part in the legislative debate, giving their opinion on some projects debated in the Congress.

An analysis, based on the ‘deliberative criteria’ declared in the fourth section of this paper, makes us have a skeptical look regarding the results of these experiences. In accordance to what Martí (2008) stated for the projects developed in Catalunya, we can state that the main weakness of the applications promoted by the Chilean Senate is that they lack a democratic (deliberative) theory which sustains them. This is evident in the case of *Senador Virtual*, an application that does not provide citizens the possibility to take part in a debate with the members of the parliament on the projects of law that are to be voted. The voting act seems to respond more to plebiscitarian eagerness (not connecting)¹³ more than to a deliberative one. This statement takes on more sense if one considers that the people in charge of *Senador Virtual* choose projects that are, generally, approved.

Despite the fact that the possibility of delivering proposals also opens a new channel of communication for the citizens, it neither provides the option of making it in contact with the members of the parliament, nor allows knowing the attention that that proposal received in the parliamentary debate.

Chat de los senadores, on its side, was not successful in opening spaces of deliberation. Firstly, the design of the application set the senator in the center of the communication flows. That resulted in the failure to achieve debates among citizens and between them and the members of the parliament. Contrary to this, the dynamic that prevailed was one in which people wanted their personal opinion be known without being concerned about the rest of the participants.

Another aspect clear in both experiences is the existence of a series of controls in terms of content, this from the side of the Senate. In the chat sessions, senators defined the topics to debate and the questions to be answered by having them previously selected by their assistants, whereas in *Senador Virtual*, law proposals that were debated are defined by a team in charge of the application.

¹³ With this we refer to the plebiscitary democracy of Van Dijk, in which ICT's allow eliminating the functions of representatives (Harto de Vera, 2006), but to apply them in order to validate certain projects from the support in their application.

Although these two aspects limit the participation of the citizens, they have not prevented, for example, a senator from taking an initiative of a participant from a chat session to a commission of the Senate, or receive 76.2 suggestions per project debated in *Senador Virtual*, a number that must not be disregarded. Apparently, these proposals do play a role in the legislative work of the members of the parliament. On this last aspect, a senator, interviewed by the authors of this paper in 2005, asserted that this application implied a delay in the work of the commissions from the Senate.

Likewise, certain lack of interest was clear on the side of the members of the parliament; this occurred in regard to the proposal of making these experiences a permanent program with the citizens. An instance of this is the fact that chat sessions were left aside after the term of the president of the Corporation Hernán Larraín, who was a promoter of the experience. This topic is of utmost importance, since, as Martí (2008) has pointed out, the permanence in time of the programs is an essential requisite for their success.

Back in the topic of *quality of democracy*, stated in the second section: have these two applications improved participation, vertical accountability and responsiveness to the action of the Senate?

In terms of participation, the answer to this question seems to be no. In *Senador Virtual*, the possibilities of taking part are individual; this limits the collective actions; however, this situation does not fully prevent certain groups to deliver their opinion on certain matters of their interest. Matrons and taxed employees have taken advantage of the opportunity to give their opinion. Although punctual, these facts demonstrate that the groups of the Chilean society also consider the possibility of acting via internet, as it has been the case in different places (Castells, 1999). A possible future line of research could analyze how the ICT's are used by groups of interests of the society to coordinate actions in the sphere of the civil society and they have managed to influence this instance of the political decision.

Online applications do not demonstrate advances that make us expect profound changes in terms of vertical accountability and responsiveness. Nevertheless, citizens had the possibility of communicating directly in the chat sessions, and in real time, with the senators, the lack of a deliberative dialogue, and the short period in which the experience took place, does not allow to state that citizens have better chances of asking explanations to the members of the parliament.

Responsiveness does not increase with the use of these applications. That is explained in the lack of mechanisms that enable citizens to demand members of the parliament a response to their stance and with regard to the recommendations that partakers deliver to the parliamentary commissions via *Senador Virtual*.

It is not possible to argue that the aforementioned deficits are a response to the design of the applications promoted by the Senate. As we have stated in the second section, the problems of *the quality of democracy* have existed in Latin America and Chile for a long time. Likewise, one shall bear in mind that ICT's have proved, in different countries, that they cannot themselves overcome the characteristics of the political systems. However, these proofs are not obstacles to propose certain revisions to the design of both applications.

They have a significant potential to bring citizens who are far from politics, since youth is precisely one of the most reticent groups (Riquelme, 1999). This group uses the internet the most (UND, 2006; UC-CCS, 2006). In order to take advantage of this potential, and tackle the problems of political apathy of the society and digital gap, it is necessary that these applications manage to open spaces of virtual participation that fulfill the following criteria: in first place, they shall allow the formation of permanent dialogues between citizens, and between them and the members of the parliament. In order for that to occur, it is necessary to reactivate the *Chat de los senadores* application, apart from creating permanent debate forums. An aspect to mind in the design of these chats and forums is equity of the participants in the use of the application. On the other hand, it would be adequate to make changes to *Senador Virtual*.

On the other hand, it would be adequate to make changes to *Senador Virtual*, and they should tend to allow citizens to have information about the follow-up to their recommendations and to guarantee their right to receive a response on the debate of their proposal and the date on which it was selected, as well as to know whether it was incorporated to the law proposal. In case of rejection, the citizen should have information on the causes of this decision.

This way, without hindering in a great manner the parliamentary process, citizens would have a higher opportunity to participate and demand a response from the representatives on the laws that were enacted. These two questions, as it has been analyzed in the second section, are significant to improve *the quality of democracy*.

Although these recommendations could create improvements, one shall not disregard the fact that the profound debate shall point to the closed characteristics of the political systems and the institutions, which have as a result the lack of interest of the citizen in taking part in politics. In this regard, the profound debate shall be directed to solving the problem on how to open spaces of participation of the citizens to debate, with a political elite, affairs that are part of the public agenda and, in the same way, to create incentives for politicians to take part in these debates in a more committed way in comparison to what they demonstrated in the case of these two applications.

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Appendix

Table 1
The ten most voted projects and with more suggestions in *Senador Virtual*

Objective of the law proposal	Votes/ Place	Suggestions/Place
To increase the sentence to reoffending delinquents	834 / 1º	239 / 2º
To request a professional degree to matrons	784 / 2º	197 / 3º
To change aspectos of the publicity and consumption of tobacco	578 / 3º	188 / 6º
To make a constitutional reform on the authomatic electoral register and the voluntary vote	535 / 4º	178 / 7º
To improve the retirement conditions of the workers at the public sector (previsional damage)	509 / 5º	266 / 1º
To eliminate <i>Boletín Comercial</i>	495 / 6º	197 / 3º
To extend the right of working women to breastfeed their children even in the case in which there is not a day nursery	495 / 6º	< 10º
To penalize paitings onf public and private property	460 / 8º	190 / 5º
To establish measures against discrimination	433 / 9º	
To allow self-cultivation of marihuana for medical use	421 / 10º	154 / 10º
To modernize the obligatory militar service	421 / 10º	< 10º
To protect the honor and the intimacy of the people	421 / 10º	<10º
To create a Ministry of Public Security	< 10º	166 / 8º
To make high ranking officials declare their personal assets	< 10º	160 / 9º

Source: The table was created by the authors based on data from <http://www.senadorvirtual.cl/ele_listado_votados.php> [January, 20, 2007].

Table 2
Functioning of *Chat de los senadores*

Senator	Date of the chat sesión	Participants	Num. Questions/ % of responses (answers and comments are considered as responses)	Insistence for the senator to answer the questions	Number of times in which citizens requested further contact	Number of times in which the senator offers further contact	Time online spent by the senator
Larraín	8/9/04	73	69/59,4	59	5	3	1 hr. 8 min.
Viera Gallo	15/9/04	63	74/75,6	13	0	0	57 min.
Romero	6/10/04	13	39/94,8	0	0	0	1 hr. 11 min.
Lavandero	13/10/04	16	21/90,4	5	0	0	1 hr. 8 in.
Ávila	29/10/04	14	23/69,5	2	0	0	47 min.
Muñoz Barra	3/11/04	16	20/130	4	0	1	1 hr. 13 min.
Horvath	9/11/04	6	23/86,9	7	1	1	57 min.
Gazmuri	17/11/04	17	19/78,9	11	0	0	40 min.
Martínez	24/11/04	12	35/74,2	26	0	0	59 min.
Cantero	1/12/04	10	31/67,7	6	1	1	1 hr 4 min.
Sabag	5/1/05	12	25/72	2	0	1	59 min.
Cordero	9/3/05	11	35/74,2	1	0	3	1 hr. 7 min.
Larraín	16/3/05	11	26/50	9	1	1	45 min.
Romero	17/5/05	26	29/55,1	16	3	2	31 min.

Source: The table was created by the authors based on data from http://www.senado.cl/prontus_senado/antialone.html?page=/prontus_senado/site/edic/base/port/chat.html [January 20th, 2007].

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