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Democracy and Digital Divide in Latin America

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Democracy and Digital Divide in Latin America*

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Abstract

While in Europe people were beginning to comment on a crisis of democracy which would become evident in the decrease of participation in elections, and in the distrust and lack of interest of citizens in politics, in most countries of Latin America the transition from dictatorship regimes to democratic regimes was beginning. However, although this political system has consolidated itself, it coexists with a growing citizen dissatisfaction which, more than once, has led to the fall of constitutional governments. In this context, the renewal of the traditional mechanisms of direct democracy (MDDs) and the recourse to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) come out as tools capable of increasing transparency in the public sector, improving communication between citizens and government, and opening new channels and spaces of participation. Yet, while the MDDs have had a broad and controversial spreading during the last decades, the uses of ICTs have been barely explored. The present paper is aimed at identifying the main initiatives developed by the national/federal governments of Latin America and at examining to what extent new technologies, and particularly the Internet, would contribute to the improvement of the quality of democracy, assessing its scope, potential and restrictions.

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1. Introduction

A range of indicators show a decline in the capacity of the democratic political systems to uphold among citizens the certainty that the existing political institutions deserve acceptance and support (Lipset 1992). The basic elements of this crisis would be citizens' distrust in politics, which would become evident in the decrease of participation in elections, in the distrust in institutions and representatives, and in the fall of affiliations to political parties and labor unions (Putnam 2003, Huse 2003, Clift 2003, Carnoy 2000, Hague and Loader 1999). However, it should be highlighted that this scenario, reflecting European and American trends, cannot be transferred to the Latin American context, which presents other characteristics.

In most Latin American countries, participation in elections has not changed significantly (it should be noted that in some countries voting is compulsory). In any case, participation varies among the different territories: for period 1976-2006, Colombia, El Salvador and Guatemala showed an average participation of less than 60%, while Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Peru and Uruguay surpassed 80%. The region's average for that period was 70.18%. The trend was also different among countries, as in Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Honduras, Mexico and Nicaragua participation decreased (Honduras and Mexico stand out with a decrease of 11% and 5%, respectively), while in Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela participation increased (Venezuela and Bolivia stand out with 19% and 12%, respectively) (Latinobarómetro 2006). On the other hand, the survey carried out by Latinobarómetro in 2006 indicated that 57% of the population answered that the most effective method to change things is to *"Vote to choose those who uphold my position"*, while 19% indicated *"It is not possible to exert such an influence so that things may change, whatever you do is just the same"* and 14% preferred to *"Participate in protest movements and, directly, demand changes."* In all the countries of the region, more than half of the population states that democracy may have problems but it is the best system of government. The average is 74%, ranging from Paraguay (54%) to Venezuela and Uruguay (89%).

At the same time, the paradox undergone by most Latin American countries is frequently quoted, as on the one hand, they have consolidated the democratic regime as a form of government and, on the other, they tackle successive social and political crises (UNDP 2004). There are abundant

examples concerning the latter. Many popular demonstrations have led to convene early elections and/or the establishment of transition and provisional governments. Among others, we may recall the fall of presidents Abdalá Bucaram in Ecuador (1996), Fernando de la Rúa in Argentina (2001) or Gonzalo Sánchez de Losada (2002) and Carlos Mesa (2005) in Bolivia. Likewise, there has been a consolidation of social movements with innovative protest methods and/or historical claims until then silenced, such as Zapatism in Mexico, the Landless Workers' Movement in Brazil, Picketers in Argentina or the aboriginal and farm movements in Ecuador and Bolivia.

In the described scenario, political parties, civil society, as well as academic circles reflect on new formulas which could contribute to improve regional *governability*¹, i.e., to contribute to the capacity of political institutions to assume and process conflicts democratically (Cerrillo 2001). The mechanisms of direct democracy, as well as the uses of new technologies for the governments' control, the improvement of the services delivered and the opening of participation spaces emerge as tools that could contribute to overcome the existing problems. However, the discussion on its consequences remains open.

The mechanisms of direct democracy (MDDs) have been a resource used by governments in order to channel popular protest, endorse their actions or settle conflicts between the executive and the legislative power, which in presidential systems frequently block the government's action capacity. On some occasions, they have also worked as institutionalized channels, enabling citizens to have a say (Mayorga 2006, Altman 2005, Lissidini 2006).

In Bolivia's case, the conflict on gas privatization was the conflict that originated the 2004 social demonstrations, which did not stop despite president Mesa's attempt to channel them through the call of a referendum and which, in the end, finished with his government (Salazar 2006). In Venezuela, the referendum has been used to endorse Chavez' permanence in power (2006) despite the efforts made by the opposition (Lissidini 2006). In Chile, with outcomes not expected by the government, 1988 and 1989 referendums initiated the transition to democracy (Gonnet Wainmayer 2006). In Panama, the referendum is constitutionally regulated for certain actions concerning the Channel (the last call was made in 2006) (Welp and Laferriere 2006). In

¹ According with the literature, we use the concept of *governability* as a result of the process -able to be governed-, while reserve the concept of *governance* to describe the action, manner or fact of governing (Cerrillo 2005).

Uruguay, the referendum on water (2004) showed the power of the people organized (Hall, Lobina and de la Motte 2004). Besides, in Bolivia, a new application on the possibility of establishing the referendum to revoke the presidential mandate (Mayorga 2007) is being discussed and, in Ecuador, there is a proposal concerning the implementation of a plebiscite for the creation of a constituent assembly and the drawing-up of a new constitution², among many other examples³. The constitutional enactment of the mechanisms of direct democracy and the increase of their uses have been complemented with a growing interest of researchers specialized in this issue (Altman 2005; Lissidini 2006; Mayorga 2006; Zovatto, Marulanda, Lizarazu and González 2004, only to mention some of the most relevant authors).

Unlike the mechanisms of direct democracy, the effect and use of ICTs, and of the Internet in particular, as tools for the improvement of the performance of democratic political systems has been scarcely studied. This lack of interest could be due to the fact that ICTs, unlike MDDs, are a tool that goes through, and potentially facilitates processes; they are not a mechanism *per se*. Another explanation could derive from the evident relationship between economic development and technological spreading, which has been pointed out by many studies (Hargittai 1999, Guillén and Suárez 2001, Milner 2002, Castells and Himanem 2002, Welp 2004), leading to reject the interest on this issue in a region with high levels of poverty and inequality. However, objections to both issues may be set forth. On the one hand, the potentialities of ICTs could bring about substantial changes in democratic performance, as well (Castells 1997, 2001). On the other, although wealth may be conditional on the spreading of the Internet, its progress has been remarkable in all the regions of the world –even if it has been at different speeds and with different consequences on social organization–, including Latin America where a gradual and considerable increase of users who could provide sustenance to these new initiatives is observed⁴.

² When Rafael Correa undertook his mandate in January, 2007, he made public the call of a plebiscite to convene a constituent assembly, allowing amendment of the constitution http://www.elpais.com/articulo/internacional/Correa/convoca/consulta/popular/nueva/Constitucion/dia/investidura/elpepuint/20070115elpepuint_9/Tes (01/2007)

³ Studies on the uses of the mechanisms of direct democracy in Latin America may be consulted at <http://www.dd-la.ch> (01/2007)

⁴ Data from the World Bank for 2004 show that the most advanced countries in number of Internet users are below 30% (Chile 26.7%, Costa Rica 23.5%, Uruguay 19.8%), while the ones with a lower user percentage do not reach 5% (Paraguay 2.5%, Bolivia 3.9%, Ecuador 4.8%). Figures are low, even lower if they are compared with those of advanced countries

We may ask ourselves whether the digital gap inhibits the government's action and, in any case, within what framework the *need* of developing public policies in this sense is reflected. The reasons of those upholding that the promotion and use of ICTs should become an issue of the political agenda is based on the fact that the population more prone to *be left outside* is the least educated, the poorest, the most discriminated against (Norris 2000, Jordana 2001, Proenza 2002)⁵. On the other hand, emphasis is given to the potentialities of the ICTs; among them, those related to the improvement of the services delivered by the government (Hinnant and Moon 2001, Finger and Pecoud 2003, Fountain 2001), the reduction of corruption (Bhatnagar 2003) and the channeling of citizen demands through new spaces of political participation (Bimber 1999, Chadwick and May 2003, Hague and Loader 1999, Clift 2003). In any case, there is evidence showing that in recent years all the governments of the region have developed programs and initiatives related to the implementation of ICTs in different areas, including planning, actual actions or, at least, strategic documents⁶. The objectives of these actions and their consequences regarding governability are the subject matter of this paper. *What type of actions are carried out, and what are their objectives and consequences for democratic governability?* In the first place, we propose a theoretical framework in order to define the types of actions. Then, the main initiatives developed by the governments of the region are compiled. Finally, some conclusions are drawn and futures lines of research are pointed out.

(in 2004, the European average was reaching 40%); however, figures also show a constant growth, considering the relative novelty of this technology, which began to be spread in 1995 (Castells 2001, Dodge y Kitchin 2001, Norris 2000).

⁵ Some studies consider that the digital fracture is a reflection of other inequalities (Compaine 2001), while other studies state that it is a new kind of inequality, built on the preceding ones but that could multiply the forms of socio-economic exclusion (Proenza 2002). If it were related to the former, it would only be necessary to wait for the use of the Internet to become widespread, as it has happened with other technologies. However, the trend indicates a slow-down in the spread of the Internet (ITU 2002) and the extrapolation of different spreading patterns shows different scenarios: in the developed countries, the telephone left broad sectors of the population outside for decades, while the television spread very rapidly among all social sectors (Jordana 2001).

⁶ In this first analysis, the information contained and developed by the *Red de Gobierno Electrónico de América Latina y el Caribe* (E-Government Network in Latin America and the Caribbean) has been very useful. In this web, it was observed that all analyzed governments had worked out some kind of strategy involving the development of Information Society and e-government. Most of them had action plans under way. The ones with no action plans (Paraguay, Nicaragua, Honduras) had strategic documents. <http://www.redgealc.net> (01/2007)

2. New Technologies, Democracy and Good Government

Summing up what was pointed out in the introduction, both a growing trust in democracy as the best system of government –though the weight of distrust is significant, as well–, and a high level of participation in elections, together with social demonstrations and within the framework of recurrent political crises are observed in Latin America. These crises mainly stem from inequality and poverty but break out with corruption cases and/or as a result of the failure to comply with electoral programs. In this context, what could ICTs contribute to democracy? E-democracy has been defined as the use of electronic communication means granting citizens the power to control the accountability of lawmakers and politicians as regards their actions in the public sphere by strengthening transparency in the political process, the improvement of the quality of the stages of opinion formation or the increase of citizen participation in the decision-making process (Trechsel *et al* 2003: 10).

Thus, the uses of technology by governments in order to improve their relationship with citizens may be approached at different levels, though this division is analytical as they are closely interrelated. On the one hand, we found issues strictly associated to the quality of democracy, which technology could influence when more information on public space management is made available to the citizens, generating more transparency and opening more and/or better channels of communication with them. On the other, technological innovation in the Public Administration may also change the delivery of public utilities, increasing management efficiency and transparency, which would lead to improve the levels of citizen satisfaction. Thus, we may distinguish:

- ✓ *The citizen's right to access public information:* It intends to improve the quality of the information received, and it is expected to increase trust in the political and administrative system. It is aimed at providing transparency to management and, consequently, producing an increase of the control over the government. It is aimed at reinforcing representative democracy.
- ✓ *Assistance for the citizen as consumer of public utilities:* Here the emphasis is set on the quality of the services provided and on the internal efficiency of the organization. It would intend to make citizens gain an easier access to the information they might be interested in, and

enable them to follow the processes, thus, removing distrust and the deeply-rooted suspicion of inequality and corruption. The administrative simplification, the dwindling repetition, the automation of processes, etc. would be part of this area of action.

- ✓ *Citizen participation based on the right granted by sovereignty:* Here democratic participation processes, involving the use of new technologies (on-line consultations, electronic voting, chances of participation in the design of public policies, etc.), are framed. It is especially –though not exclusively- associated to ways of direct participation.

Table 1: e-Democracy Action Areas

Area	Description	Actions
<i>Transparency, ability to control the activity of governments</i>	The aim is to improve the quality of the information received and, as a result, increase trust placed by citizens in the political system. Transparency in government activities has an effect of control on the government, and of learning for citizens, who will be more qualified for decision making. It reinforces representative democracy.	Government information. Transparency initiatives. Portal of state purchasing and contracting. Monitoring of legislative activity, budget publication, etc.
<i>Organizational change, improvement of internal management</i>	The emphasis is placed on the quality of the services delivered, which can be obtained through citizens' control on their demands; for example, by enabling citizens to track their procedures. It strengthens satisfaction and trust in public administration. Creation of new information-based services.	Projects such as <i>Ventanilla Única</i> (Unique Window), tailored services, simplification of procedures, improvement in the speed of response. Creation of portals for citizen demands.
<i>Citizen Participation</i>	It includes processes of democratic participation through the use of ICTs. Depending on the characteristics of the projects, the results can either strengthen the good operation of representative democracy or introduce and facilitate mechanisms of direct democracy.	On-line consultations, electronic voting or participation in the design of public policies. Participative budgeting, citizen consultations.

Source: Self-reported data

Table 1 summarizes the analyzed dimensions. These differences of perspective, although complementary, have promoted different viewpoints. Thus, while some governments have centered their policies on improving the quality of the delivery of public utilities, tailored services, etc., other governments have placed a greater emphasis on increasing management transparency or generating new areas of citizen participation. An improvement of the services delivered produces consequences on the legitimacy of the political system, in the same way as management transparency and access to a larger quantity of information produces consequences on the practice and the perception itself of

democracy. However, certain elitist service developments could also lead to an increase of the differences among population groups (the ones having access, who would benefit from them, and those who do not). Transparency, in turn, could stimulate self-control and reduce the levels of corruption.

3. Empirical Approach

The main initiatives developed in the region are included in this section, reintroducing the question previously put forward in this article, "*What type of actions are carried out by governments in Latin America and what are their objectives and consequences for democratic governability?*" We have searched for initiatives oriented towards each of the items highlighted in Table 1 in order to examine what type of actions are promoted, considering the peculiarities of each of the analyzed countries. We have focused on initiatives developed by the national or federal government and available on the Web. Table 2 identifies the actions recorded at the national level, aimed at enhancing management transparency and reducing the existing levels of corruption.

As we may observe, all the governments have developed actions aimed at increasing management transparency. It is worth differentiating the more developed initiatives from the embryonic ones. The first group includes state contracting systems which operate within a virtual environment, and which, in turn, enable to increase the efficiency of government purchases and to make these processes more transparent (Chile, Colombia). At an intermediate level, there are initiatives targeted at citizens' access to information (Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador). Finally, we may mention the mere existence of information in governmental portals (Paraguay, Dominican Republic). We will provide a detailed analysis of this issue in the conclusions.

Table 2: ICT-Based Initiatives for Government Control and Efficiency

Country	Control and Transparency*	Basic Features
Argentina	Argentina Compra (<i>Argentina Purchases</i>) Mejor Democracia (<i>Better Democracy</i>)	This initiative is directed to companies that conduct transactions with the government and to citizens who want to monitor such processes. Regulations have been established for the mandatory use of this System in procedures of "Direct Contracting through Simplified Procedures" within the National Public Administration. There is also a new system to promote access to public information.
Bolivia	SICOES	It is the State Information and Contracting System, with information and forms which can be sent by e-mail.
Brazil	<i>Transparency Portal</i>	There is a section named "The Government Informs" where

		governmental activities, budgets, purchases, etc. are informed.
Chile	System of Purchases and Contracting / TV Network with Legislative information	It is addressed to providers, purchasers and citizens. It has two functions: make purchasing efficient and increase citizen control. Besides, apart from a legislative information portal, there is also a TV network with real-time highlights of legislative information.
Colombia	Portal Único de contratación pública (<i>Unique Portal of Public Contracting</i>)	It is an electronic system which enables to consult information on contracting processes managed by State entities. Its main objective is to promote transparency, efficiency, and the use of technologies for the publication on the Internet of public procurement.
Costa Rica	Sistema Integrado de Actividad Contractual (<i>Integrated System of Contractual Activities</i>)	It includes information about contracting procedures, acts of award, contractor's qualities, purpose and amount of the operations, and other data on the contractual activities of the Administration.
Ecuador	SIGOB Contratanet	Sistema de Información para la Gobernabilidad Democrática (<i>Information System for Democratic Governability</i>). Official system of public contracting.
El Salvador	e-Country Program Legislative Portal	Creation of a governmental portal with information for citizens.
Guatemala	Guatecompras <i>Transparency</i>	Portal of purchase under the slogan "Everything in sight of everybody". Space in the governmental portal containing public information.
Honduras	Honducompras	According to a 2005 law, this portal is the only means to disseminate and manage the contracting procedures performed by the organizations within the scope of application of the Act on State Contracting.
Mexico	Transparencia (<i>Transparency</i>)	In the government portal, there is an initiative which facilitates access to public information with a system of requests via Internet. Live broadcasting of legislative sessions.
Nicaragua	EVA (<i>Voluntary Strategy of Access to Information</i>)	The information is scarce, and it is mainly focused on disseminating presidential activities. Unlike the Presidency's portal, the government portal includes more links to actions. EVA is an initiative to promote access to information (under implementation).
Panama	PanamáCompra (<i>Panama Purchases</i>)	Its goals are to promote citizen participation in the government purchasing process, to stimulate the economy by promoting competence, to encourage technological culture in the government and the private sector, and to save time in state purchasing procedures.
Paraguay	Government portal	There are management reports, as well as a follow-up of the President's activities. Besides, there is a contracting portal with information about public transactions and the possibility to monitor and to make corruption complaints.
Peru	Contracting and procurement system. Transparencia Económica (<i>Economic Transparency</i>)	It is a state purchasing and contracting system. This system aims to promote transparency and competitiveness and to save time and resources. There is also a project for economic transparency: a free-access information platform with information centralized by the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF, <i>Ministerio de Economía y Finanzas</i>).
Dominican Republic	<i>Transparency</i>	It works like a news portal of governmental activities, especially of the Executive. Access to Public Information Act (<i>Ley de acceso a la información pública</i>).
Uruguay	Government portal Purchasing System	It is a news portal of the government actions, not only of the Executive but also of the Legislative, actions programs, etc. State purchasing system.
Venezuela	Government portal	This portal contains a lot of information on government actions.

Source: Self-reported data. * The corresponding links to each of the initiatives are included in the annex.

Table 3 shows those initiatives whose goal is to improve the internal and external efficiency of public administration, mainly in the provision of public utilities. By analyzing the portals, we can distinguish three different types: those portals which are a means to communicate the government activities (of a more propagandist than informative nature), those organized according to the administration offering (with an administrative language and organized by government units), and those organized according to the citizens' needs (by profile, theme and/or key facts, with a user-friendly design).

Table 3: Initiatives for Administrative Modernization

Country	Administrative Modernization	Basic Features
Argentina	Government portal	The information included in this portal is organized by profile. There is also a Guide of Procedures, a directory of government officials and an on-line service system to make complaints to the National Administration.
Bolivia	Guide of Procedures /Virtual Desk for Officials	It includes all the necessary information to carry out procedures. There are no electronic transactions. The project "Escritorio virtual para servidores públicos" (<i>Virtual Desk for Officials</i>) is an Intranet for government officials.
Brazil	Government portal	There is information and an open debate on electronic government. Services are organized for companies, citizens and by "key facts".
Chile	Trámite fácil (<i>Easy Procedures</i>)	This portal is targeted at different profiles (foreigners, companies, youth, families). It includes information on procedures and how to carry out such procedures on line.
Colombia	<i>On-Line Government</i>	The information in this government portal is organized by profile (citizens, companies, civil servants), each one containing a wide variety of information.
Costa Rica	<i>Easy Government</i>	This web site enables access to information for citizens, youth, companies and government officials. Besides, it is organized by field (agricultural and livestock sector, education, justice, etc.)
Ecuador	Government portal	It is only a portal with information. There is a great deal of information on the activity of the President (rather than citizen-oriented information).
El Salvador	ePaís (<i>e-Country</i>)	Its outstanding features include on-line procedures for citizens and companies, a guide of procedures and a mailbox for citizens.
Guatemala	Government portal	There is no information organized according to the citizens' needs, and no project for digitalization of services or guide of procedures has been found.
Honduras	Government portal	There are no ITC-based initiatives or procedures for administrative modernization.
Mexico	Government portal	The information in this portal is organized by profile. On-line procedures are available.
Nicaragua	Government portal One stop window of investments	Electronic government plan financed by the World Bank. On-line services (forms) are being developed. Created by the Ministry of Development, Industry and Trade.
Panamá	Panamá Tramita (<i>Panama Processes</i>)	It reduces, simplifies and integrates procedures required to citizens and providers by the different governmental entities. There are on-line services.
Paraguay	Government portal	Emphasis is placed on providing information, not on the services delivered.
Peru	<i>Citizen Portal</i>	It offers services and procedures, including on-line delivery of services.
Dominican Republic	Government portal	No ITC-based initiative of administrative modernization or citizen-oriented service has been found in this portal.
Uruguay	Government portal	There is no information organized according to the citizens' needs, and no project for digitalization of services or guide of procedures has been found.
Venezuela	Gobierno en línea (<i>On-Line Government</i>)	A portal including a directory of government entities, as well as information on procedures, has been created.

Source: Self-reported data.

In many cases, there are both a government portal and a presidential portal operating in parallel, the latter one frequently having clear propagandist purposes. There are also portals that have a lot of different types of information in their home page, thus creating a complicated map of scarcely-accessible information.

The level of development of the portal, as well as its propagandist, administrative or citizen orientation is linked to the implementation of on-line electronic procedures and/or the preparation of a guide of procedures as a particular initiative. Therefore, we find that all citizen-oriented portals include a guide of procedures (Argentina, Colombia, Costa Rica, among others), and some of them even enable to carry out electronic procedures (El Salvador). Most governmental portals directed to provide information about the government itself do not have a guide of procedures and, in general, there are no real modernization initiatives oriented to citizens in such portals (Ecuador, Honduras, Guatemala, Dominican Republic). However, Honduras and Guatemala, although they have not developed this type of initiatives, do have electronic systems for state purchasing and procurement.

Table 4 shows initiatives for citizen participation, ranging from more basic forms (e-mail delivery) to the possibility of submitting bills or requesting specialized information, or the creation of interaction spaces to have an influence on the design of public policies. Here we may see a greater difference among actions because, while in some cases the creation of sectorial forums, for example, has been promoted (Mexico, Bolivia) or virtual legislative programs in which citizens may participate have been created (such as the virtual Parliament in Peru and Chile), in other cases, the appeal to citizens is mainly symbolic, as the case of virtual mailboxes to write to the President (Paraguay).

Table 4: Citizen Participation Initiatives

Country	Citizen Participation Initiatives	Basic Features
Argentina	Ombudsman Discussion Forums (Senate's web)	Complaints may be posted by e-mail but once the procedure has been filed, a written appeal must be sent. Forums on federal co-participation in taxes and on education. Consultations and suggestions may be made as well.
Bolivia	Reports and Proposals (Webs of the Senate and the House of Representatives) Forums FORODAC	Reports submission, legislative information, bills. Citizens may make contributions to the hydrocarbon law. In the House of Representatives, representatives may be graded. Several government agencies have also created a forum to discuss on decentralization, autonomy and the constituent assembly.
Brazil	Consultations, Forums and Spaces of Participation	Citizens are requested to participate with their opinions concerning what measures would contribute to the success of a government program (speeding up growth)
Chile	Virtual Senator	Legislative information spreading and chance to express opinion regarding bills.
Colombia	Information – Public Hearings	Boxes for complaints and suggestions for the Legislative Power: In the Senate, the possibility that citizens may participate by requesting public hearings or sending bills is considered, but neither the procedure nor its relationship with the ICTs is clear.
Costa Rica	Office of Popular Initiative	Entity dependent on the legislative assembly, providing information on laws and receiving consultations, suggestions, proposals, etc.
Ecuador	Information – Citizen Consultation	The call for a citizen consultation in 2007 is announced in the portal. There are no spaces of participation.
El Salvador	Public Participation Program	The program seeks to improve communication between the government and the citizens and to enhance participation (no actions are under way).
Guatemala	Congress Website	Forum and chat, polls, question of the day. Non-binding and non-ruled interactions.
Honduras	Discussion Forums – Complaints and Comments	As in most forums, the connection with the decision-making process is not clear.
Mexico	Discussion Forums	Discussion forums organized by profiles (seniors, farmers, women, etc.) Non-binding.
Nicaragua	On-Line Meeting	Space in the web of the legislative assembly to give opinions and make suggestions about bills.
Panama	Citizen Participation Office	Virtual space where citizens may register to discuss and gain access to legislative information.
Paraguay	Write to the President	The portal includes a mailbox for direct communication with the president. Information on the procedure to convene public hearings.
Peru	Virtual Parliament	There are public forums; requests may be made and followed up.
Dominican Republic	Opinion Polls - Forums	Besides opinion polls, it is possible to participate in virtual legislative forums and in open forums. Both initiatives are developed in the Senate.
Uruguay	Consultations with the Parliament	An information and participation system for the spreading of legislative information is at citizens' disposal, using technology and other available tools.
Venezuela	Virtual Forum for Citizen Participation	Space for public consultation of laws, making available citizen participation. Virtual Forum for Citizen Participation.

Source: Self-reported data.

4. Discussion and Future Lines of Research

This research study has contributed to identify some aspects that will allow the contextualization of future research on the links between ICTs and democracy. Firstly, we should remark that the European scenario of increasing citizen apathy, distrust on institutions and decrease in participation cannot be projected on Latin America. In this region, a predominance of democracy as the most appreciated form of government coexists with high citizen participation in elections and recurrent political crises that result in popular demonstrations. Social demonstrations and protests outside institutional channels and with consequences on the political system's stability are a clear special feature of the region.

Secondly, it should be highlighted that despite the digital gap, the promotion of ICTs is significant and has an increasing weight. The use of ICTs by Latin American governments is widespread. All of them have developed government portals and have strategic and/or action plans. With different emphases and consequences, all these actions could contribute to gain citizens' satisfaction, the legitimacy of the political system and governability, both for the increased control on governments (which would put pressure on those governments to improve their results), and for an improvement of the services delivered or a higher capacity of the citizens to submit proposals or have a say beyond elections. However, the situation among countries is diverse and the analysis of the uses is complex. In the following paragraphs, we will analyze this in each of the proposed dimensions (the information is summarized in Table 5).

As it can be observed in the table, most portals are organized as citizen-oriented portals (8 cases); in the second place, portals organized according to the offering of the administration, with information on programs and governmental units (7) stand out; and finally, the portals mainly operating as a news window on governmental activity (4). Time and again, the propagandist purpose probably leads the efforts of the states to adopt ICTs and provide the citizens with information (an analysis of this type would require a more thorough study of those initiatives); however, it can be observed a development toward citizen-oriented portals rather than toward portals reflecting their own administration or the activity developed by those governing at the moment.

Table 5: ICT Initiatives from Latin American Governments. Statement of Condition

Country	Portals ¹			Contract. System ²		Legisla-tion Portal	Guides of Procedures ³		Citizen participation ⁴		
	Gov	Adm	Citiz	Info	Trans.		Info	Trans.	Mailbox	Prop.	Interac.
Argentina	--	--	3	1	2	1	1	--	1	2	2
Bolivia	--	2	--	1	2	1	1	--	1	2	2
Brazil	--	--	3	1	--	1	1	2	1	2	2
Chile	--	2	--	1	2	1	1	2	1	2	--
Colombia	--	--	3	1	2	1	1	--	1	2	--
Costa Rica	--	--	3	1	--	1	1	--	1	2	--
Ecuador	1	--	--	1	2	1	--	--	1	--	--
El Salvador	--	--	3	--	--	1	1	2	1	--	--
Guatemala	1	--	--	1	2	1	--	--	1	2	2
Honduras	--	2	--	1	2	--	--	--	1	--	2
Mexico	--	--	3	--	--	1	1	--	1	2	2
Nicaragua	--	2	--	--	--	1	1	--	1	2	--
Panama	--	--	3	1	2	1	1	2	1	2	--
Paraguay	1	--	--	1	--	1	--	--	1	2	--
Peru		--	3	1	2	1	1	2	1	2	2
Dominican	1	--	--	--	--	1	--	--	1	--	--
Uruguay	--	2	--	1	--	1	--	--	1	--	--
Venezuela	--	2	--	--	--	1	1	--	1	2	2

Source: Self-reported data.

1: Portals: Gov: information about the activity of the Executive Power. Adm: administrative information organized according to the offering of the administration; Citiz: administrative information organized according to the citizens' demand (by profiles and subjects rather than by departments, easily accessible in terms of vocabulary and organization).

2: State contracting and procurement systems. Info: only supply of information/Trans: transactions are allowed.

3: Info: only supply of information. Trans: transactions are allowed.

4: Mailbox: Symbolic participation. Prop: demands, complaints and proposals from an individual. Interact: (interactive participation) spaces for citizen interaction to make proposals.

As an initiative related to transparency and the reduction of corruption but also with consequences on administrative modernization and the internal efficiency of management, the setting up of state contracting and procurement systems stands out (the majority of the countries have developed these systems, except for El Salvador, Mexico, Dominican Republic, Nicaragua and Venezuela). In the cases where the system operates electronically, ICTs are described as a source of transparency, efficiency (as the aim is to increase the number of suppliers and to improve the quality-price ratio) and promotion of ICTs use (Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, among others). Many of these initiatives or others oriented towards transparency and the access to public information have been

developed with international cooperation funds (Costa Rica, Panama, Honduras, Bolivia, Peru).

As for the guides of procedures, although most portals began to gather and organize this information, not all have done so (not found in six government portals). Electronic transactions linked to the guides of procedures are not very widespread and, in any case, their operation is highly embryonic in the countries that have already developed them.

In the field of citizen participation in general, it is important to differentiate the opening of "symbolic" spaces of participation (e.g., mailboxes to write to the president) from spaces where it is possible to raise and follow-up proposals, and from spaces of citizen interaction designed for the formulation of bills. Most of the latter were developed by the legislative assembly. The portals of the legislative power have also spread, with the exception of Honduras. Among them, it is important to differentiate those providing information from those that have implemented more advanced systems for citizen participation, either through individual access and submission of proposals and questions and/or through the creation of discussion forums (Panama, Peru).

As a result of putting the cases into groups according to those who implemented more ICT initiatives for information transparency, the improvement of internal processes and the enhancement of management efficiency, we found that there would be seven countries in the group of the most advanced ones (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Panama and Peru); in the intermediate group, six countries (Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Venezuela); and in the least advanced group, four countries (Ecuador, Paraguay, Dominican Republic and Uruguay). We found that, in the first group, cases with a lower level of wealth and of technology spreading stand out, as Bolivia, Panama and Peru, while Uruguay is positioned in the last group because its general indicators are above the regional average. This leads to a number of reflections and proposals to adjust the model of analysis. Among the reflections made, in the first place we should highlight the influence of the economic support of international organizations in the development of this kind of initiatives. In the second place, the need for a concrete approach to the practices, uses and outcomes, allowing to differentiate rhetoric from actual actions. This becomes particularly evident in initiatives oriented to citizen participation, which generally lack of any explanatory framework concerning the real consequences citizen participation could have.

In the first line mentioned, other studies have already indicated that international cooperation appears as an incentive for the development of electronic government. One of Reilly's studies (2003) centered on Central America shows that governments of the region focus their use of ICTs on the modernization of the state and not on the improvement of governability or the building of democracy. *"Specifically, there is a great international pressure related to the improvement of the government's information systems aimed at improving accounting proceedings to donors, increasing the state's efficiency, reducing the level of corruption and being rated at the status of highly indebted poor countries"*⁷.

In this line, it is highlighted that many of these projects are associated to the inclusion of governability in the agenda on development, on account of *"the results and consequences of the structural adjustment programs financed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund during the 1980s, which did not have a significant impact on economic recovery and, on the contrary, created even more difficult situations for the poor (for example, the increase of corruption, the lack of transparency in public decisions, the accountability gaps to citizens or inefficiencies in public management)"* (Cerrillo 2001). The consequences concerning the implementation of the agenda of actions should be analyzed.

As future lines of research, it is important to consider the use of these new systems and spaces of communication and information by citizens and authorities, the frames in which these initiatives are developed and their consequences on the political system, the administration and the quality of democracy. It would be worth analyzing that the real impact of comptroller's systems on corruption and the conceptions of these new spaces of participation, which may work as advertising tools for governmental actions, for the improvement of their *outward* appearance in order to gain access to external sources of funding or as instruments to improve the quality of management and of the operation of democracy.

⁷ In this study, Reilly points out that five cases analyzed in his report (Costa Rica, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua) showed the existence of projects funded by the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), aimed at developing on-line accounting systems to facilitate report preparation and submission and to follow up the national budget as a high priority in the region.

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6. Links (In February, 2007, it was the last time they were all checked)

Argentina

Government Portal: <http://www.argentina.gov.ar>
 Presidency's Portal: <http://www.presidencia.gov.ar/>
 Argentina Compra (Argentina Purchases): <https://www.argentinacompra.gov.ar>
 Ombudsman: <http://www.defensor.gov.ar>
 Mejor Democracia (Better Democracy): <http://www.mejordemocracia.gov.ar/>
 House of Representatives: <http://www.diputados.gov.ar/>
 Senate: <http://www.senado.gov.ar>

Bolivia

Government Portal: <http://www.bolivia.gov.bo/>
 Presidency's Portal: <http://www.presidencia.gov.bo>
 Information System on State Contractings: <http://www.sicoes.gov.bo>
 Guide of Procedures: <http://www.tramites.gov.bo>
 Gobierno en línea (On-Line Government): <http://www.gobiernoenlinea.bo/>
 Honorable National Congress: <http://www.congreso.gov.bo/>
 ForoDAC (Decentralization, Autonomies and Constituent Assembly): <http://www.descentralizacion.org.bo>

Brazil

Government Portal: <http://www.brasil.gov.br/>
 Transparency Portal: <http://www.transparencia.gov.br>
 Portal with Information on Electronic Government: <http://www.governoeletronico.gov.br>
 Space of Participation: http://www.brasil.gov.br/participacao_popular
 Senate: <http://www.senado.gov.br/legislacao/>
 House of Representatives: <http://www2.camara.gov.br/legislacao>

Chile

Government of Chile: <http://www.gobiernodechile.cl>
 System of Public Purchasing and Contracting: <https://www.chilecompra.cl>
 Trámite fácil (Easy Procedures): <http://www.tramitefacil.gov.cl>
 Chile's National Congress: <http://www.congreso.cl>

Virtual Senator: <http://senadorvirtual.senado.cl/>

Colombia

Gobierno en línea (On-Line Government):

<http://www.gobiernoenlinea.gov.co>

Portal Único de contratación pública (Unique Portal of Public Contracting): <http://www.contratos.gov.co>

House of Representatives: <http://www.camara.gov.co>

Costa Rica

Presidential Home: <http://www.casapres.go.cr/>

Portal under construction (January 2, 2007)

Legislative Assembly: <http://www.asamblea.go.cr/>

Gobierno Fácil (Easy Government) <http://www.gobiernofacil.go.cr>

Office of the Comptroller General of the Republic:

<http://cgrw01.cgr.go.cr/>

Dominican Republic

Government Portal: <http://www.presidencia.gov.do>

Access to Public Information Act:

<http://www.senado.gov.do/transparencia.html>

The Legislative: <http://www.congreso.gov.do/>

Ecuador

Government Portal: <http://www.presidencia.gov.ec>

SIGOB: <http://www.sigob.gov.ec>

Contratanet: <http://www.contratanet.gov.ec>

Honorable Congress: <http://www.congreso.gov.ec/>

El Salvador

Government Portal: <http://www.elsalvador.gob.sv>

National Strategy on Electronic Government:

<http://www.elsalvador.gob.sv/pge/estrategia.pdf>

Legislative Assembly: <http://www.asamblea.gob.sv/>

Guatemala

Government Portal: <http://www.guatemala.gob.gt>

Guatecompras: <http://guatecompras.gt>

Guatemala's Congress: <http://www.congreso.gob.gt>

Honduras

Government Portal: www.gob.hn

Hondu compras <http://www.honducompras.gob.hn>

Mexico

Government portal: www.e-mexico.gob.mx

Transparencia (Transparency):

www.e-mexico.gob.mx/jwb2jeMexjeMex_Transparencia

System of Information Applications. Federal Institute for the Access to Public Information: www.sisi.org.mxj

Senate: <http://www.senado.gob.mx/>

Representatives:

Discussion Forums: www.e-

gobierno.gob.mx/wb2/eMex/eMex_Foros_eMex

Nicaragua

Government Portal: <http://www.nicaragua.gob.ni>

Presidency's Portal: www.presidencia.gob.ni

Investment Unique Window: <http://www.mific.gob.ni/IVUI/vm.htm>

EVA (Voluntary Strategy of Access to Information):

<http://www.hacienda.gob.ni/hacienda/eva>

Legislative Assembly: <http://www.asamblea.gob.ni/>

Panama

Presidency: <http://www.presidencia.gob.pa/>

Presidency Secretariat for Government Innovation:

<http://www.innovacion.gob.pa/>

Panamá Compra (Panama Purchases):

<http://www.innovacion.gob.pa/proyectos.php#pma compra>

Panamá tramita (Panama Processes):

<http://www.innovacion.gob.pa/proyectos.php#pma tramita>

Legislative Assembly: <http://www.asamblea.gob.pa>

Paraguay

Government Portal: <http://www.presidencia.gov.py/>

Contrataciones Paraguay (Paraguay Contractings):

<http://www.contratacionesparaguay.gov.py/indexl.htm>

Senate: <http://www.senado.gov.py/>

House of Representatives: <http://www.camdip.gov.py/>

Perú

Government Portal: www.peru.gob.pe

National Office for Electronic Government: www.ongei.gob.pe

Electronic System of State Procurement and Contractings:

<http://www.seace.gob.pe>

Economic Transparenc <http://transparencia-economica.mef.gob.pe/>

Portal of citizen-oriented services:

<http://www.serviciosalciudadano.gob.pe/>

Virtual Congress: <http://www.congreso.gob.pe/pvp/>

Uruguay

Government Portal: <http://www.presidencia.gub.uy>

Parliament: <http://www.parlamento.gub.uy>

System of State Procurement: <http://www.comprasestatales.gub.uy/>

Venezuela

Government Portal: <http://www.venezuela.gov.ve>

On-Line Government: <http://www.gobiernoenlinea.ve>

Legislative Assembly: <http://www.asambleanacional.gov.ve>

E-Government Network in Latin America and the Caribbean:

<http://www.redgealc.net>