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**DIGITAL DEMOCRACY: IS
TECHNOLOGY EMPOWERING THOSE
WHO NEED TO BE HEARD?**

Two case studies from Chile and Brazil

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Abstract

Digital democracy has become a popular topic in current political debates. The relation between technology and theories of participatory and deliberative democracy has been analysed by a variety of scholars. The internet can strengthen democracy by: 1) making political information accessible to citizens, 2) creating new spaces for public discussion and social mobilization, and 3) enabling new channels of communication between representatives and those represented.

Early studies of e-democracy practices were characterised by great enthusiasm for the potential of the Internet for solving democratic deficits. Nowadays, scholars are cautiously focused on empirical-driven approaches that aim to research how to adapt theoretical models to socio-political realities. This dissertation wants to highlight the importance of the inclusion of all voices in democracy. In order to do so, two case studies of e-democracy in Latin America (specifically in Chile and Brazil) will be analysed with the objective of identifying current barriers to participation and to find out what voices might be underrepresented online.

The challenges of democracy in the 21st Century remain huge and are not only related to the empowerment of citizens through the web but, to a greater extent, to institutional architectures and political contexts that may hinder citizen participation.

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1. Introduction

Democracy is undergoing a revision. Especially from the seventies onward, scholars¹ started to write about the crisis of the representative system. Indeed, the lack of legitimacy of public institutions has become not the exception but the rule in a considerable number of European countries as well as around the world.

Political scandals and corruption along with the fact that citizens have the willingness to participate more and more in the decision-making processes, appear to require long-term structural changes. This demand for transformation is supported by the following apparent ambiguity: at first sight, the low levels of voting could be seen as a sign of political apathy. However, parallel developments of non-conventional public participation (such as online forums, local “town-square” meetings and networks for solidarity and collaborative work) mean we need to reconsider whether public participation should be measured by other means. One example of this would be the willingness to be part of the public space might be happening somewhere other than the polling stations.

Theorists in participatory and deliberative models of Democracy have contributed to the study of current democracies by extending the meaning of participation to concepts related to Athenian ideals. Similarly, institutional authorities are aware of the so-called democratic deficit, and consequently, a series of new practices and innovations have been developed during the last 25 years aiming to create a new social contract which would redefine the relation between representatives and represented². However, public authorities are no longer the sole providers of these kinds of mechanisms, as civic society movements have also been designed as alternative ways of participation in the public space, both online and offline.

Among these practices, the case of e-democracy stands out; it has the potential to create a direct link between civil society and public authorities by using the Information and Communication Technologies³ (ICTs).

¹ Pateman 1970, Barber 1984.

² For instance, deliberative polling, participatory budgeting, citizens’ juries, citizens’ assemblies.

³ Kies, 2010.

This dissertation has selected two examples of e-democracy practices from Latin America, a region that has demonstrated a relevant commitment in opening new participatory channels via the web: The UN E-Government Survey 2014 puts Uruguay and Chile in the 3rd and 8th place respectively in the worldwide ranking of e-participation. Moreover, Colombia, Costa Rica, Brazil and Peru are all in the top 30 performers regarding e-participation. After all, it is significant to stress that many Latin American countries started their transition from dictatorship to democracy in the eighties which results in (for instance) considerable instability at the institutional and party level, political polarization and high volatility in voters' preferences from one election to the other⁴. Notwithstanding the above, some scholars argue⁵ that precisely because of the lack of a long tradition of democratic institutions the region tends to be more flexible in terms of democratic innovations, which are significant for further study. These experiences are essential in understanding new trends at the democratic level, coming both from the institutional instances and society at large.

Thus, the selected case studies, Virtual Senator/ Senador Virtual⁶ in Chile and Votenaweb⁷ in Brazil are outstanding examples of innovative mechanisms that incorporate online discussions about legislative procedures, which do nevertheless have limitations in relation with theories of participatory and deliberative democracies. Above all, the main limitations of forums are related to the difficulty of including all voices in the discussions and the lack of legal mechanisms that would ensure that the outcome of the debates are actually influencing decision making in the Parliaments. Indeed, a report from the World Bank's Digital Engagement Evaluation Team⁸, -after assessing four online civic engagement initiatives- found that the citizens that participated online were "systematically more privileged than the population or offline participants." However, as far as the authors are concerned, this may not be the problem in itself, but rather the structure of the initiative and the government's response to it could play more significant roles, which mean that the situation can improve if designed differently.

⁴ Welp, 2010, p. 42.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Senador Virtual means Virtual Senator in Spanish.

⁷ Votenaweb means "Vote on the web" in Portuguese.

⁸ Mellon, Peixoto and Sjoberg, 2015.

This dissertation will support the need for a new methodology that looks beyond the profile of users and research on the institutional architecture of these practices in a region that urgently needs to search for solutions to tackle inequality and exclusion. It is challenging work as it leads to improvements in current e-democracy projects that might be undermining those minority voices that should be incorporated in the public space.

1.1 Outline

This dissertation is divided into various sections. The first section reviews the literature on the very concept of democracy, drawing the essential theories on participatory and deliberative democracies, including the case of e-democracy. The theoretical and philosophical foundations on a research of this nature will be introduced, as well as the importance of contextualization in order to analyse democratic institutions and deliberative practices. In addition, special attention will be given to the notion of public space.

This dissertation starts from the basis that greater reflexive thinking is needed in order to create a more inclusive, participatory and deliberative democracy. Hence, all institutional efforts and resources allotted to opening new channels for deliberation will be in vain if the population don't have the knowledge, interest or time to participate in the public sphere.

The second part of the research will introduce the methodology used, as well as the main objectives of the empirical study.

Thirdly, the focus will shift to the general democratic context in Latin America with the aim of identifying potential barriers to the democratisation of society. Indeed, the region is coping with serious troubles in terms of inequality at all levels (economic, social, educational and political). Thus, the relation between the unequal access to education and the unequal participation in the public sphere will be explained. Then, the two selected case studies will be presented: Chilean Virtual Senator and Brazilian Votenaweb are online platforms where citizens can vote and give their opinions about draft bills discussed in the legislative bodies. The aim of this analysis is to reveal the extent that practices of e-democracy in the region are actively incorporating a variety of voices or may be undermining inclusiveness in the decision-making process. The other essential measure that

will be analysed in this research is the external impact of such practices - to what point all this collaborative and deliberative work done by the general public is collected and used by the Parliament, and also to what extent this information is decisive or influential in the legislative process. Above all, the essential objective of this dissertation is to analyse whether these mechanisms of e-participation and e-deliberation in the case studies are actually improving the quality of democracy by empowering the people who need it most.

Finally, the conclusions will be presented, combining the essential findings of this dissertation with previous literature analysing the topic.

The main research question behind this dissertation is the following: *Are all voices heard and included in e-democracy projects?*

1.2 Literature review: What is Democracy

The history of a contested term?

Democracy: from Greek δημοκρατία –demokratia-
-δημο-demos,
-κρατία- kratia
In which demos means “people” and kratos means “power” or “authority”.

The original Greek term “democracy” (δημοκρατία) links together the word “demos” (people) with the word “kratos” (power), which can intuitively be translated as “power of the people” or “popular sovereignty”.

When taking a look at the Dictionary of the French Academy⁹, there are little changes in the definition from 1694: *démocratie: gouvernement populaire (1694, 1762, 1787-88), gouvernement où la souveraineté réside dans le Peuple (1798, 1835), gouvernement où le peuple exerce la souveraineté (1872-77, 1932-35), système politique, forme de gouvernement dans lequel la souveraineté émane du peuple (2015)*.

The etymology of the word is focused on the idea that people are the only custodians of power, an aspect that is in fact in opposition to the reality of current constitutional systems, where the individual tends to have little room for manoeuvre at the public space. Indeed, defining democracy has always been a controversial issue, as a variety of discourses and alternatives have been developed both at the normative and practical level¹⁰.

The main question to pose here is the following: **Can we still use the concept “democracy” when referring to current constitutional systems of governance where “popular sovereignty” is exercised mainly once every 4 or 5 years at the polling station?**¹¹ Before answering this question, it is necessary to assert that the term “democracy” is broadly used to designate political systems that do not necessarily resemble each other: Norway, Switzerland, Spain, Australia, Uruguay, Botswana, India, Japan and Brazil are all

⁹ Dictionnaire d'autrefois

¹⁰ Cini, 2011.

¹¹ In certain cases, also in referendums and similar mechanisms.

states with democratic regimes, however, the degree to which a citizen can exercise their sovereignty vary from country to country. Thus, the term itself is controversial at the discursive level, and not only in the theoretical world, as explained below.

Indeed, coming back to the question of the accuracy of the term for referring to present systems of governance, liberals generally agree to call them democracies, whereas other scholars - particularly advocates of participative or deliberative models of democracy - tend to consider current democratic regimes as actually non-democratic, exactly because of their lack of democratic mechanisms for enabling the citizen to participate in the decision-making process:

On the one hand, democratic liberals¹² believe that we live in a democracy as long as citizens have a series of political rights, including the right to vote for a representative of their choice. Hence, democracy is seen as a normative and institutional framework through which limited power is delegated to a certain number of representatives that will exercise it in a controlled manner¹³.

On the other hand, both the participatory approach¹⁴ and the deliberative model¹⁵ propose a series of normative innovations that, when translated into practice, would put the citizen at the centre of the public space. At that point, it is interesting to highlight the fact that not only normative approaches to participatory and deliberative democracy have prospered over recent decades, but they have also being operationalized throughout as participatory budgeting, deliberative polling, online deliberation etcetera¹⁶.

¹² Constant 1970, Schumpeter 1983, Sartori 1998.

¹³ Guitián, in Del Águila, 1998, p. 117.

¹⁴ Arnstein 1969, Pateman 1970, Barber 1984.

¹⁵ Habermas 1984, Dryzek 2009, Benhabib 1996, Gutmann and Thompson 2004.

¹⁶ Fishkin, 2009.

The need for representation

Generally speaking, **liberal theory** on democracy accepts the system of representation as the most feasible one, and for instance Constant¹⁷ explains “*The representative system is a proxy given to a certain number of men by the mass of the people who wish their interests to be defended and who nevertheless do not have the time or interest to defend them themselves.*” Along the same lines, R. Dahl¹⁸ illustrates the impossibility of a democracy based on Athenian ideals because in modern times societies are bigger and more complex and consequently deliberation in public spaces is not a realistic prospect. As a consequence, he suggests using the concept of “Polyarchy” to define the framework of institutional arrangements of representative systems: Democracy is an ideal, polyarchy is a measurable dimension¹⁹. In addition, Schumpeter²⁰, with his elitist- approach believes that the ordinary citizen tends not to be able to decide on complex political matters.

Following this line of argumentation, J. Linz²¹ defined democracy as: “*a political system for governing based on **legal liberty** to formulate and create political alternatives in a society with **freedom of association, expression** and other basic **freedoms** that make possible a **free competence** and non-violent among leaders, with periodic opportunities to revalidate the right to govern, with the inclusion of all effective political charges in the democratic process and which allows for participation to all members of the political community, independently of their political preferences, as long as that preferences are expressed in a pacific way.*” Clearly, the one distinctive feature of liberal democracies is individual freedoms protected by law, with “popular sovereignty” surpassed by them. Habermas²² (who defends a deliberative model of democracy) explains that the essential and recurrent point in the discussion that started more than two hundred years ago between the liberal and republican schools of thought is the following: liberals give priority to human rights over popular sovereignty whereas republicans prefer to prioritize popular sovereignty over human rights. The philosopher asserts that both pillars of constitutional states are equally important and the

¹⁷ Constant, 1970.

¹⁸ Dahl, 1989.

¹⁹ Welp, 2010, p. 44.

²⁰ Schumpeter, 1983.

²¹ Linz, J., 1998, p. 226.

²² Habermas, J., 1994, pp. 267-280.

debate would end if both schools could find a balance between them. This is actually the basis for his theory on deliberation in democracy.

In conclusion, liberals defend systems of representation because they believe that direct, popular sovereignty is not only impossible and unfeasible, but also undesirable. For instance, James Madison²³ supported this idea in his essay “The Federalist number 10”. He rejects “pure democracies” -based in the ideals of Ancient Greece-, not only because of the scale and growing complexity of modern societies but also because he thinks that modern conditions do not benefit this type of government: society is not stable or tolerant and is generally governed by the passions of large majorities.

So, the next question to ask here is the following: To what extent are direct forms of democracy unfeasible and undesirable?

Theorists in participative and deliberative democracies give answers to that question in pursuit of greater citizen participation in the public space.

²³ Cited in Del Águila, 1998, p. 226.

The participatory approach

“Democracy is not a spectator sport, it's a participatory event. If we don't participate in it, it ceases to be a democracy”²⁴.

What is participatory democracy?

B. Barber defined participatory democracy -or strong democracy, using his own term- as self-government of the citizens -and not the government of the representatives in name of those represented (1984)-. Those active citizens govern for themselves, not necessarily at each level, but often enough to give a sense of continuation in the decision-making processes, and particularly in basic public matters. Strong democracy is based on the idea that the majority (the whole population) tends to be more prudent than a minority (the representatives) and thus politics need to be managed by the citizenry.

The crisis of legitimacy in representative systems can be explained by a variety of factors, depending on the political and social context: political scandals, corruption, incoherence, lack of transparency, erosion of the party system, lack of leadership, etcetera. If this is combined with the fact that the citizen does not have the impression that their personal choice really counts in decision making, the outcome is a distance-relationship between the representatives and those represented.

This situation explains the rise of new forms of active participation which aim to reduce this gap. In fact, a number of initiatives coming from both institutions and civic society movements have confirmed a desire to change current structures, a situation that requires further research both at the normative and empirical level: participation is desirable and possible.

²⁴ Michael Moore, 2009.

Illustration 1 Example of social movement that strives for participation in the decision making



Source: *interoccupy.net*

How to design a participatory system?

Political theorists contributed greatly to the debate, notably Habermas, Barber, Macpherson and Pateman, and Fishkin at the empirical level. This critique mainly emerged in the 60's: As mentioned earlier, liberal concepts of democracy believe that the ordinary citizen neither had the time or interest to participate in public issues, and consequently public decisions should be made by specialized elites that truly understand these matters. In contrast, participatory democracy theorists believe that "people are apathetic because they are powerless, not powerless because they are apathetic"²⁵. Following this line, Fishkin suggests that most people are rationally ignorant: "it makes no sense to engage in politics because I have no power, thus, I decide to use my time for other purposes"²⁶.

Thus, the question here is "**How to empower the people?**"

The classical debate between Lippmann and Dewey in 1922²⁷ already established the foundations for the discussion of citizens' role in democracy. On the one hand, Lipmann stated that public opinion was eminently shaped by leaders in a manipulative process called "the manufacture of consent"²⁸. Subsequently, giving too much power to the citizens was not a wise decision. On the other hand, Dewey attributed Lipmann's denial of participatory democracy to his lack of faith in the role of progressive education to forge a democratic

²⁵ Barber, 1984, p. 272.

²⁶ Fishkin, 2009.

²⁷ Available online: <http://schugurensky.faculty.asu.edu/moments/1922lippdew.html> (last consulted on 5 May 2015).

²⁸ Term used later by Chomsky, 1988.

public²⁹. Dewey stated that through nurturing democratic institutions, people could educate themselves to achieve better knowledge and abilities for deliberation and decision-making processes. Nevertheless, he admitted that the task was very difficult. In fact, this concern remains generally the same nowadays: “While integrative democratisation- generating citizenship- is the most desirable and effective form of democratisation, it is also the least feasible one”³⁰.

The chicken-and-egg debate

What comes first, the knowledge or the participation? If the community is about to take a decision but does not have enough knowledge or information about a certain political issue, it is foreseeable that the political outcome will not be the best. However, if the citizen does not have the possibility to participate in public issues, they will rarely obtain information and knowledge about it. Barber³¹ considers that participation needs to come first, as it is actually the process of building participatory democracies which results in citizens’ freedom (in a similar notion to the Liberty of Ancients coined by Constant) and it also creates the basis of an equal and fair society. Thus, as stated by Pateman³², there is a relation between institutional structures and the attitudes of individuals towards politics: “engagement of citizens in political decision-making can be increased through institutional reform”³³.

Participatory democracy theorists understand participation as a work in progress, subjected to changes and dependent on the political context. Within this model, the public space becomes the place where the citizen, through participation, learns to think critically and consequently, to be free.

So, to the question: “**How to empower people?**” Theorists believe that a combination of institutional and educational reform is needed in order to facilitate a participatory

²⁹ The idea of the educational aspect of participation in public decisions was also present in Rousseau’s social contract and contemporary authors: Pateman 1992 and Barber 1984.

³⁰ Zittel 2007, cited in Nommesch, 2015.

³¹ Barber, 1984.

³² Pateman et al., 1970, p. 27.

³³ Ibid.

democracy. The availability of information is also essential, one reason that explains the rise of scholars' interest in the study of the potential of Internet, as will be explained later on.

Deliberative democracy

What is Deliberative Democracy?

“Deliberation is an approach to decision-making in which citizens consider relevant facts from multiple points of view, converse with one another to think critically about options before them and enlarge their perspectives, opinions, and understandings. Deliberative democracy strengthens citizens' voices in governance by including people of all races, classes, ages and geographies in deliberations that directly affect public decisions. As a result, citizens influence the policy and resource decisions that impact their daily lives and their future”. (Deliberative Democracy Consortium)

“Deliberative democracy affirms the need to justify decisions made by citizens and their representatives (...) but not all issues, all the time, require deliberation. Deliberative democracy makes room for many other forms of decision-making (...) as long as the use of these forms themselves is justified at some point in a deliberative process. Its first and most important characteristic, then, is its reason-giving requirement” (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004)

The first definition refers to the idealized public space, where everyone respects each other and everyone is included: The second “realistic-driven” approach to deliberation, counts on the fact that ideal conditions for deliberation are not always present in online debates³⁴ and in society.

As already mentioned, Habermas is one of the essential scholars that worked on deliberative democracy theory by differentiating it from the liberal and republican discourses, giving the same value to the ideals of popular sovereignty and human rights. The essential element of deliberative democracy is in the opinion formation process and the quality of the decision making; decisions are taken following the “unforced force of the better argument.”³⁵

³⁴ A variety of scholars (Coleman et al. 2002, Beirle 2003, Janssen and Kies, 2004) have studied the relation between the political outcome expected and the quality of deliberation: when citizens know that they decisions will be taken into account, they tend to be more respectful, justify their decisions and give more constructive opinions.

³⁵ Habermas, 1984.

Consequently, the political outcome of that process is to achieve a consensus in which all voices are heard and included. Precisely because of this *modus operandi*, based on rational discussion, participants may change their opinion after listening to each other, the main objective of the debate being to realize “the full and equal membership of all in the sovereign body responsible for authorizing the exercise of that power, establishing the common reason and will of that body”³⁶.

In comparison with liberal approaches to democracy and certain participatory trends (see table below), which tend to aggregate individual demands in the public space by the rule of the majority, the deliberative approach goes further: deliberation becomes the **public space** where the public will is created. As stated by Young³⁷, the objective of democratic deliberation is to “arrive at a decision not by determining what preferences have the greatest numerical support, but by determining which proposals the collective agrees are supported by the best reasons”.

³⁶ Elster 1998, p. 222, cited in Cini, 2011.

³⁷ Young, 2000, p. 22.

Table 1 Differences between aggregative and deliberative model

	Aggregative model	Deliberative model
Nature of the opinion formation	No focus on opinion formation. Preferences of the citizens do not change on the basis of interaction with others.	Focus on opinion-formation process that leads to a decision: preferences may change on the basis of interaction. What counts is the process of justification (it is not the proposal that has the greatest numerical support, but the proposal that is supported by the best reason that counts).
Adaptability to plural complex societies	Not adapted to plural societies that are characterized by strong moral disagreements. Decisions are essentially legitimized by numerical support and social disagreements are not sufficiently publicly discussed.	Adapted to plural societies that are characterized by strong moral disagreement: if agreement is possible, deliberation will create the conditions to reach it, whereas if agreement is not possible, deliberation will at least favor postures of mutual respect and understanding and leave doors open for future discussions.
Fairness of the outcome	Unfair outcome: it reinforces existing distribution of power and does not offer any method to challenge such injustices.	Fairer outcome: the plurality and multiplicity of the opinions are taken into consideration. Citizens and public representatives are supposed to be ready to change their mind and not being exclusively motivated by their personal interest.

Source: Based on Kies, 2010, p. 30

It is also important to state that not all versions of deliberative democracy agree on the nature of collective reasoning: classical scholars on deliberation theory³⁸ believe that essentially only rational discussions are legitimate when taking political decisions -this logic tends to be more exclusive and considers politics as a “dispassionate activity³⁹”- whereas the majority of deliberative theorists⁴⁰ nowadays acknowledge other informal ways of communication, such as storytelling, humour, rhetoric, etc. Thus, this approach to deliberative theory tends to include a larger number of people that do not only communicate by means of rational discussion but also through emotional or rhetoric-oriented dialogues.

³⁸ Rawls, 2001.

³⁹ Cini, 2011.

⁴⁰ Young 1996, Sanders 1997, Dryzek 2000, Gutmann and Thompson 2004.

Dahlgreen⁴¹ explains the relation between the civil cultures and deliberation, echoing Almond⁴² when asserting that beliefs, values and feelings from a certain culture (obtained by socializing) significantly influence political behaviours, and supporting Young⁴³ in the sense that deliberative norms tend to privilege a certain kind of speech, generally based in the Anglo-Saxon cultures. In a similar way, this trend also permits the difficulty of reaching consensus in complex plural societies and, that being the case, attaining an agreement would be sufficiently legitimate for the decision-making. Hence, in order to reach an agreement Kies⁴⁴ states that people need “to be ready to change their mind, be sincere and respectful, and be ready to enter in a process of mutual justification and should consider the concerns of not only the interlocutors who are present but also the ones who are absent”.

Participation, Deliberation, Representation

There are two main tendencies regarding the relation between participatory and deliberative democracy. On the one hand, a trend followed by a minority of scholars sees the two concepts as incompatible, both at the normative and empirical level. Cohen and Fung⁴⁵, identified three main tensions between the two paradigms: “1) improving the quality of deliberation may come at a cost to public participation; 2) expanding participation- either numbers of people, or the range of issues under direct popular control-may diminish the quality of deliberation; 3) social complexity and scale limit the extent to which modern politics can be both deliberative and participatory”. Nevertheless, these limitations can be solved. The dilemma between quality and participation in decision-making has already been explained by the debate of Lippman and Dewey and the solution can only be understood as a process of citizen empowerment, a work in progress in which participation and deliberation are needed in order to create citizenship. Thus, the first two limitations identified by Cohen and Fung are clarified. For the third limitation, related to a growing social complexity and larger scale, the role of the Internet as a tool for mobilization and participation has been highlighted, as will be explained in the next section. On the other hand, is it notable that a

⁴¹ Dahlgreen, 2005.

⁴² Almond, 1991.

⁴³ Young, 1996.

⁴⁴ Kies, 2009, p. 33.

⁴⁵ Cohen and Fung, 2004, cited in Cini 2011.

majority of scholars⁴⁶ agree that both theories are inter-dependent. For them, participatory and deliberative theories are complementary, deliberation being a concrete way of participation or in the words of Blondiaux⁴⁷: “we may understand deliberative democracy as a continuation and strengthening of participatory democracy”. Following this line of argument, in this dissertation participation and deliberation will relate to each other by the meeting point of **inclusion**, in the sense that deliberative democracy can only be democratic if it counts with “an expansive definition of who is included in the process of deliberation⁴⁸” which can be translated as “who is participating”. Consequently, democracy is seen as a process on which citizens are progressively empowered to participate in decision-making by means of collective reasoning.

Finally, it is useful to emphasize that theories of deliberative and participatory democracy do not necessarily oppose representation systems at all levels. Indeed, most scholars agree on the combination of the three, such as Monnoyer-Smith⁴⁹ with his concept “direct representation” or Gaudin’s search for a “new type of democracy, which still needs to be invented⁵⁰”. At this point it is essential to highlight recent developments in participatory mechanisms forged by Spanish civic society movements⁵¹ that recently entered into European and local politics. Indeed, a phenomenon of citizen mobilization of this nature has clearly shown the pressing social need for institutional changes that would ideally incorporate representative, participatory and deliberative elements. Therefore, a variety of scholars⁵² have defended ideas of complementation of current representative practices with participatory and deliberative approaches that would improve the quality of the debate, increase transparency and strengthen the power of civil society⁵³. To what extent popular sovereignty will become a reality is an open question that still needs an answer, both at empirical and theoretical level.

⁴⁶ Cohen and Fung, 2004, Gutmann and Thompson 2004.

⁴⁷ Blondiaux 2008.

⁴⁸ Gutmann and Thompson, 2004.

⁴⁹ Monnoyer-Smith 2011.

⁵⁰ Gaudin 2013, cited in Nommesch, 2015, p. 21.

⁵¹ Movimiento 15 M, Mareas Ciudadanas, Podemos, Madrid en Común, etc.

⁵² Fishkin 2009, Blondiaux 2008.

⁵³ Bourg and Boy 2005.

The revolution of the Internet: E-Democracy

E-democracy consists in the use of ICTs to enhance the capacity of citizens to hold governments accountable for their actions in the public domain. E-democracy can improve the quality of democracy by: 1) Increasing transparency of the political process, 2) increasing direct citizen participation and 3) improving the quality of public opinion by means of creating spaces for discussion on political matters. (Kies, 2010)

This work assumes that ICTs can be used as an interesting tool to improve the quality of democracy but also that technological progress on its own cannot by any means, bring democratic developments, as already stated in the Council of Europe Recommendations⁵⁴. In fact, technology cannot be considered as a panacea to solve all democratic deficits, but as an instrument. What is more, if e-democracy is badly administered, risks of reinforcing inequality and populism may arise⁵⁵.

As expressed by Chatwick⁵⁶, the ideal of “public sphere” is one of the essential concepts in the scholarly writing on e-democracy: “Citizens that have progressively shrunk into their respective private spheres as the historical public sphere collapsed are, in the Habermasian interpretation, once again able to emerge as a public force”. Thus, the Internet emerges as a medium for communication, uniquely suited to provide spaces for public debates that are relatively spontaneous, flexible and self-governed⁵⁷

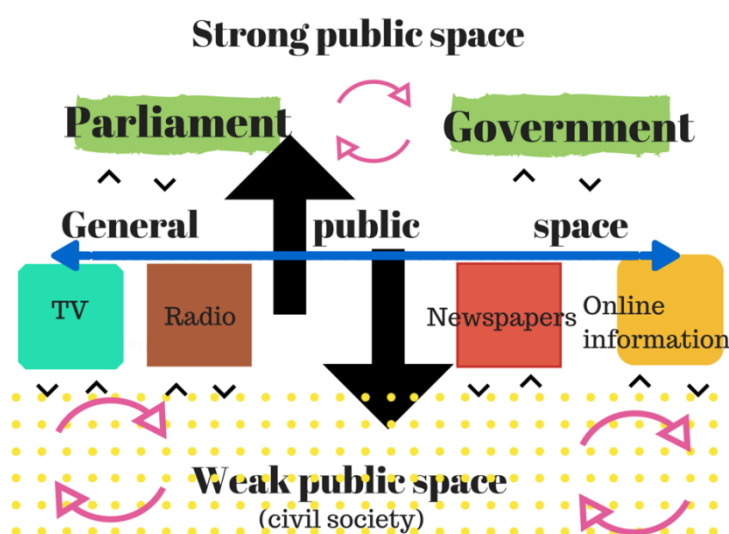
⁵⁴ Council of Europe Recommendations on Electronic democracy, *Recommendation CM/Rec (2009)1 and explanatory memorandum, 2009.*

⁵⁵ Welp, 2010, p.43.

⁵⁶ Chatwick, 2009, p. 14.

⁵⁷ Dahlgreen and Olsson, 2011.

Illustration 2 Public space and e-democracy



Source: prepared by the autor based on Kies, 2010.

This is when e-democracy comes into play: by expanding and facilitating the relations between Parliament and Citizen and creating direct links not only between them but among the whole society (see illustration above). All kind of links are possible, among the press, among citizens themselves, but the main added value of e-democracy is the provision of the direct link between representatives and those represented. Information flows freely and society gets easy access to knowledge. Thus, democratisation is understood as a process of society's empowerment through all possible channels, the Internet being one of them. Consequently, the public space strengthens from the process, at all levels. Above all, strong Citizen-Parliament Connections have a positive impact on the quality of democracy by enabling the flow of information at various levels, directly benefiting both the institution and the people:

- At the institutional level, politicians got to know the most common problems faced by citizens and receive feedback about their legislation and initiatives.
- At the society level, citizens get better access to information and legislation, have the possibility to follow the legislative procedures and to participate and influence policy-making to a certain extent.

E-democratic theories and practices first started with great enthusiasm and optimism then underwent a period of pessimistic critique, and nowadays there are more balanced and empirical-driven approaches⁵⁸. Thus, the greatest challenges for e-democracy are:

- To explain to citizens how to participate and engage them in the public debate.
- To ensure that information created by the citizenry is actually used at the institutional level.
- To break the gap and the digital divide to ensure that every voice is heard and include in such processes.

Here, it is worth considering if the Internet is a public sphere that favours deep discussions. As noted by the European Youth Forum, social media studies show that digital technologies tend to prioritize superficial discussions, as surfing the net may be translated to “moving in a hurry, not in depth”⁵⁹. However, several initiatives coming both from public institutions and civil society have shown that if certain conditions are met, Internet can improve the quality of democracy exactly through the creation of this direct link between representatives and those represented, including a variety of voices and engaging citizens in the political process. Moreover, at this point, some scholars and activists have posed the following question: “Do we really need a system of representation with Internet?”⁶⁰ Although there are different approaches to this question, the majority of scholars agree that a combination of representation, participation and deliberation is needed, as already mentioned.

⁵⁸ Chatwik. 2009.

⁵⁹ Bauman, Re:publica conference Berlin 2015

⁶⁰ Thomas Wagenknecht. Re:publica conference Berlin 2015.

2. Methodology

2.1 Objectives

This dissertation has chosen two cases of e-participation and e-deliberation in the Latin American region with two main objectives:

- 1) To highlight the latest developments in terms of democratic innovations in the region that aim to tackle democratic deficits.
- 2) To assess the extent to which those mechanisms are in line with participatory and deliberative theories of democracy, particularly highlighting the importance of the inclusiveness of such practices.

While public institutions and civic society movements have made a variety of efforts to make information more accessible and understandable to citizens (mainly via official webpages), and have also opened new ways to submit demands to the representatives (e-participation, e-deliberation), the real impact of these institutionalized practices in decision-making remains vague. In addition, there are several barriers that prevent citizens from engaging via online platforms, especially in countries with unequal access to resources. Consequently, further research is needed both to analyse the inclusion of citizenship in the process and to measure the extent to which these mechanisms influence final political outcomes.

The selection of the two case studies is based on the following criteria: Firstly, Latin America is the most unequal region in the world⁶¹: Brazil's Gini Index is 54.7 and Chile's is 52.1⁶². Inequality starts at birth and continues throughout the life cycle generating exclusion, discrimination and lack of opportunities⁶³ at all levels. Secondly, Latin American democracies have shown a great flexibility and commitment to opening new channels for participation (including via ICTs) for the general public, and a variety of institutional efforts have been made in order to bring politics closer to the citizenship. In fact, the UN E-Government Survey 2014 puts Chile in 3rd place in the worldwide

⁶¹ UNDP, 2013, Oxfam International 2014.

⁶² World Bank, 2013.

⁶³ UNDP 2013.

ranking of e-participation⁶⁴, as already mentioned. So, whilst the region witnessed a debate on dictatorship versus democracy before the eighties, nowadays the focus has shifted to representation vs participation⁶⁵. However, as Garretón⁶⁶ suggests, it is necessary to look beyond and behind international rankings in order to contextualize certain democratic problems such as minority civil rights, socioeconomic inequalities and lack of decisive participatory mechanisms.

Both Virtual Senator and Votenaweb have attracted the attention of participative and deliberative theories of democracy scholars⁶⁷ as both online platforms clearly aim to reduce the gap between representatives and represented and promote citizen participation. Chile and Brazil are often cited as good examples of implementation of e-participatory mechanisms, not only in the region but in the world⁶⁸. Whereas the majority of literature on e-democracy in Latin America emphasizes the role of the President in enhancing the quality of democracy and therefore tends to focus on e-Government initiatives, the present dissertation wants to contribute by analysing the role of the legislative powers at providing solutions to democratic deficits via the Net⁶⁹.

Chile's Virtual Senator is a participatory institutional platform with accessible legislative information which allows citizens to voice their opinions and vote for or against draft bills. Similarly, Brazil's Votenaweb is a deliberative online initiative that provides citizens with a space for voting and deliberating on draft bills. Their main differences are that Virtual Senator does not favour citizen's deliberation by the architecture of the site, whereas Votenaweb does, and Virtual Senator is an institutional initiative while Votenaweb was created by an enterprise initiative with a clear social aim. But the analysis of the two case studies does not fall into the category of comparative studies; it is not the aim of this dissertation to contrast the two initiatives but to identify the potential barriers that citizens might face in order to participate in countries that indeed have developed significant tools for opening new channels of

⁶⁴ Brazil is the 24th.

⁶⁵ Rojas, 2014.

⁶⁶ Garretón and Garretón, 2010.

⁶⁷ For instance Farias 2013 and Mendôça and Pereira 2012.

⁶⁸ Arnold 2012, Farias 2013, Mendôça and Pereira 2012.

⁶⁹ See Arnold, 2012 for a general overview of e-legislative innovations in Latin America.

communication. To clarify, this dissertation will not only aim to identify barriers to participation in online environments but will also try to recognize offline obstacles that prevent citizens from engaging in political discussions of all types. The idea behind this work is that Democracy needs to incorporate all voices in order to live up to its name and consequently all channels for communication and equal participation need to be open.

2.2. Methods: How to measure Inclusion?

The link between participatory and deliberative theories of democracy and the practice of online forums has created an emerging body of literature in the last decade. For instance, Graham⁷⁰ has related online forums with Habermas' notion of the public sphere and Wilhelm⁷¹ has analysed the potentialities of virtual debates for enabling deliberation in the public space.

There are different methodologies for the study of the quality of participatory and deliberative projects, i.e. Fung's⁷² mini-publics or Smith⁷³'s democratic innovations. However, their work is not focused on the case of online initiatives. Significantly, Farias⁷⁴ evaluated digital participatory experiences related to the parliament by dividing his analysis into three categories: 1) technological interface, 2) management of participation and 3) political efficacy. Following his scheme and incorporating elements from Mellon, Peixoto and Sjoberg's⁷⁵ work that specifically studied the variable of inclusion and Kies⁷⁶ approach to the study of deliberative forums, this dissertation will have the subsequent structure in order to answer the research question: *Are e-democracy projects including all voices?*

⁷⁰ Graham, 2002.

⁷¹ Wilhelm, 1999.

⁷² Fung, 2006, pp. 667-683.

⁷³ Smith, 2009.

⁷⁴ Farias, 2013.

⁷⁵ Mellon et al., 2015.

⁷⁶ Kies, 2009, Nommesch, 2015.

How to measure the inclusiveness of the platforms?

Firstly, I will give an overview of the **socio-political context** in the Latin American region, as specific political realities clearly influence people in their decision to participate or not in public discussions⁷⁷. As stated in the Council of Europe Recommendation for Electronic democracy⁷⁸: “The impact of e-democracy depends on the democratic nature of the state and the public authorities, and the extent to which they respect and safeguard fundamental human rights and minority rights and encourage democratic processes, including active political participation”⁷⁹. Variables⁸⁰ such as **trust in politicians** and personal **perceptions of the quality of democracy** demonstrate the interest, motivations and claims of the citizen in the public space and show the path to follow in tackling inequality problems. If citizens have difficulties seeing a relation between what they vote for and the real management of power and decision-making, they will tend not to engage in public discussions in a sort of collective learned helplessness situation. Thus, as already mentioned in the theoretical part of this work, people rationally decide not to engage in the public space (and devote their time to something else) because they do not feel they have the power to decide⁸¹. Here, a **powerlessness situation**⁸² dependent on the sociopolitical context can be seen as the first barrier that undermines the inclusion of people in politics and consequently, in online forums like Virtual Senator and Votenaweb. Significantly, the nature of the first limitation that prevents citizens participation is not only related to online behaviour, but it also explains the lack of interest in politics in general.

Secondly, another barrier appears in the form of the **digital divide**⁸³: both Chile and Brazil are countries with considerable political and economic inequalities which are also translated into a lack of equal access to computers and information via the Internet. Therefore, if democratic innovations want to include all voices in the public space,

⁷⁷ Welp, 2010, Arnold 2012, Jannsen and Kies, 2004, p. 7.

⁷⁸ Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2009)1 and explanatory memorandum, p. 19.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Data collected from Latinobarómetro.

⁸¹ Barber, 1984; Fishkin, 2009; Wagenknecht, Re:publica Conference Berlin 2015.

⁸² Other authors use the terms “apathy” (Phar, Putman and Dalton 2000), “cynism” (Nye et al. 1997) or impotence in regard to political power (Gastil 2000, Eisenberg and Cepik 2002).

⁸³ United Nations E-Government Survey, 2014, pp. 123-140.

concrete actions are needed: 1) promoting access to computers or other devices such as mobile phones (e.g. in public libraries) and education on the use of the Internet and 2) providing alternative offline spaces for interaction.

Thirdly, the variable of **inclusion** will be analysed in the two case studies. Inclusion is about the participation of all social groups affected by a specific legislation in the decision-making process. The main findings related to that criterion will be presented by analysing the data obtained thanks to the collaboration of the Information Department of the Chilean Senate⁸⁴ and Votenaweb's site coordinator⁸⁵. The **number of people registered** on the platforms and their **frequency of participation** demonstrate how representative is the population that engages in that kind of initiatives in comparison with the total population in the country, and to what extent different voices are taken into account on these platforms. Furthermore, other details on participant's profile such as **gender, age or region** will show if certain groups tend to be underrepresented in the selected online forums.

Fourthly, there are other parameters that definitely impact the level of participation (and consequently of inclusion) on these websites. For instance, Faria⁸⁶ studied the **technological interface**⁸⁷ of several online parliamentary forums (including Virtual Senator), relating their design with the type of participation that they allowed. McLuhan's⁸⁸ famous quote "The medium is the message" exemplifies how the way a given material is structured affects the contents of the message that it is intended to transmit⁸⁹. In addition, the **moderating platform** and the coordination of the forum is an important part of the analysis, as it structures the interaction, participation and deliberation potential of the forum. Moreover, the **accessibility** of information and even the **type of language**⁹⁰ used is decisive in a platform being successful, as legal vocabulary may hinder citizens' comprehension of the subjects. Furthermore, the

⁸⁴ María Eliana Peña (Head of Senate's Information Department)

⁸⁵ Daniele Amaral, Votenaweb's coordinator.

⁸⁶ Faria, 2013.

⁸⁷ Studies as Wright, S. and Street, J. 2007 are focused on the design of online forums.

⁸⁸ McLuhan, 1997.

⁸⁹ Faria, 2013, p. 154.

⁹⁰ Peixoto and Ribeiro, 2009.

Media coverage⁹¹ and publicity of the initiatives are important factors that influence the success of a platform in terms of making people aware of the existence of alternative channels for participation.

Finally, the variable of **external impact** examines to what extent online participatory practices have a real influence on decision-making at the legislative institutions. In both of the case studies the final outcome of the online discussions is sent to the National Congress. However, as there are no legal obligations between what the citizens vote for and the decisions taken at the legislative institutions, measuring the real influence of such practices remains complicated. As Faria⁹² highlights, projects of this type do not involve the participants in the actual decision making, their opinions being merely suggestive in nature. Again, that horizon also becomes a barrier for inclusion: as already stated if citizens were sure that the time that they would potentially devote to democratic forums would bring a tangible benefit in their lives, meaning that they could actually influence political agenda, higher levels of participation and inclusion would be expected. What is more, researchers such as Wagenknech⁹³ suggest that e-participation becomes meaningless if it is not binding to a certain extent. As a consequence, the profile of potential users of the forum is generally reduced to those that are already interested or involved in politics, but not to those who might in fact be underrepresented⁹⁴. However, it is not possible to generalise, as online forums are a complex reality their success depending on many variables⁹⁵, reason that supports the need for deep analysis in such initiatives.

⁹¹ Griffith and Leston-Bandeira, 2012.

⁹² Faria, 2013, p. 181.

⁹³ Wagenknech, Re:publica Conference Berlin 2015.

⁹⁴ There are two general positions of scholars regarding online communication and inclusion of people that are generally indifferent to politics: 1) the so-called cyber-optimists (Grossman et al. 1995, Levy 2002) who believe that the absence of geographic barriers and the multiplicity of forums encourages everyone to participate, 2) the “cyber-pessimists” (Davis 1999, Maldonado 1997) who think that the lack of time, skills and access to Internet prevent certain sectors of the population to participate.

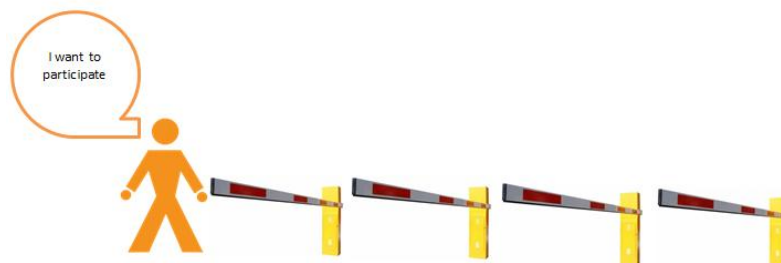
⁹⁵ Janssen and Kies, 2004, p. 4.

2.3 Hypothesis

This dissertation will study the existing barriers that prevent citizens from participating in online democratic debates. If Democracy is understood as a work in progress, the process of citizen's empowerment through inclusive mechanisms of participation plays an essential role. E-democracy theories were at the beginning very enthusiastic about the potentialities that the web could bring to Democracy⁹⁶. However, "the Web" is just a neutral space if no action is taken: powerless groups will definitely not find the solution in an online platform if they: 1) cannot access the Internet or do not know how to use the platforms, 2) do not have enough information about the political processes and 3) have difficulties to see a relation between their claims and political actions.

On the one hand, implementing participatory and deliberative processes can contribute towards reducing democratic deficits by making information more accessible to the citizen and enabling new flows of communication among the representatives and the represented. But on the other hand, e-democratic projects urgently need to search for solutions in order to make sure that everyone receives equal tools and mechanisms to participate in the public space. Indeed, the main hypothesis of the present work is that e-democracy projects cannot actively engage and include all voices in the public space on their own, especially in very unequal countries. There are serious barriers (political, economic, social and educational) that hinder the democratisation of society.

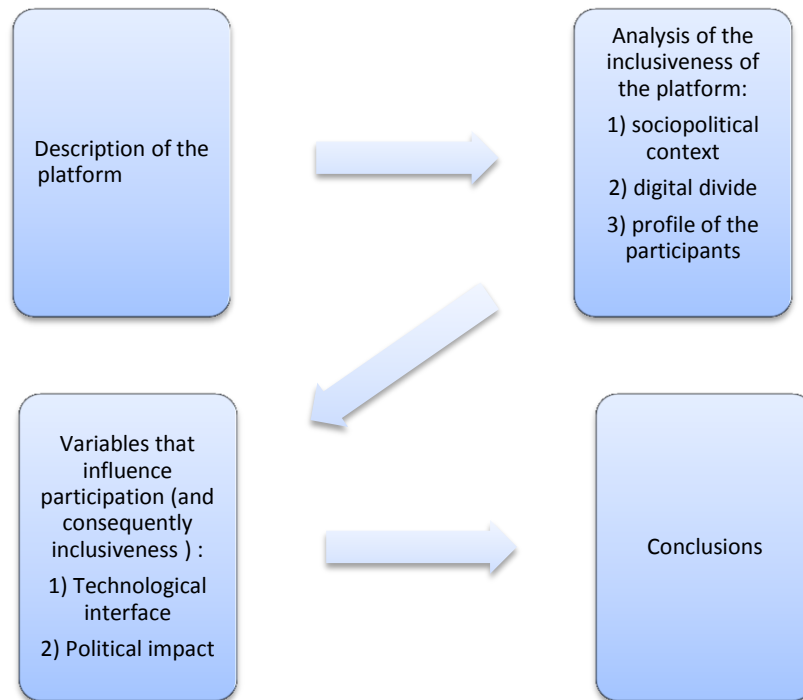
Illustration 3 Barriers for participation in democracy



Source: prepared by the author

⁹⁶ Hague and Loader 1999, Coleman 1999, Morris 2001.

The scheme set out below will guide the analysis of the case studies:



2.4 Data

The data used for the empirical analysis is a mix of quantitative and qualitative information collected in:

- 1) Parliamentary, institutional and civic society websites.
- 2) Senador Virtual and Votenaweb platforms.
- 3) E-mails exchanged with the Information Department of Chilean Senate and Votenaweb website coordinator.
- 4) Secondary sources related to the case-studies.
- 5) Statistics: mainly Latinobarómetro

2.5 Limitations

First at all, it is important to highlight that the methodology used for the analysis of the two initiatives is essentially the same, although in the case of Votenaweb it is possible to go further in the research as the forum allows citizens to deliberate, whereas with Virtual Senator that option is not feasible.

Secondly, it is worth mentioning here that data on inclusion in online forums is particularly difficult to obtain. In fact, the information available regarding the profile of online participants tends to be scarce. Nevertheless, thanks to the collaboration of the Chilean Senate's Information Department and Votenaweb Platform, enough data has been obtained. Certainly, it is possible to draw some conclusions about the predominance of certain groups on the selected online platforms.

Thirdly, the identity of the users remains difficult to check as there is no legal obligation to provide true data when registering on these online platforms. Nevertheless, this dissertation proceeds on the basis that the majority of users tend to give true information about themselves in this kind of participatory project, as there is no apparent need to hide their identity. In fact, in the particular case of Virtual Senator all the comments remain anonymous.

Finally, it would have been interesting to incorporate other variables for the analysis of inclusion on the selected case studies, such as ethnicity (indigenous populations), language, disabilities and level of education. However, the information available regarding these aspects is almost non-existent.

3. Latin American Democracies

3.1 Socio-political context

As already mentioned, representative democracy started to be contested in the seventies by scholars and civil society movements that advocated for more participatory mechanisms in the public space. A lack of trust in institutions and the lower numbers of people going to the polling stations were a sign of disconformity with the way power was managed.

In the case of Latin America the majority of countries started the transition from dictatorship to democracy in the eighties during the so-called “third wave” of democratisation⁹⁷. Hence, the lack of traditional structures of democracy signified that a great effort needed to be made in a short period of time in order to consolidate electoral democracy, fight corruption and cronyism, reinforce weak party systems and organize civil society movements. Nowadays, even when the region has witnessed an extremely large reduction of poverty and a great improvement in the living conditions, especially in terms of education and economic growth, democracy is still constantly undermined by political and economic inequality. In fact, inequality, discrimination and poverty are major challenges in a region where 69% of the population live in economic hardship, a growing 30% is part of the middle-class and only a 2% belong to the so-called upper-classes of society⁹⁸. All these matters contribute to generate polarized environments and social and political exclusion of a great majority of people⁹⁹. We speak about two Latin Americas: one is growing and blooming, the other is only witnessing the process from a distance.

One essential feature that characterizes the region’s democracies is the prominence of presidential rule: the figure of the head of state is essential and in general terms, Parliaments have a weaker power¹⁰⁰. This is sometimes translated to political legislatures in which the President does not count with the support of the majority in the Parliament

⁹⁷ Huntington, 1991.

⁹⁸ Latinobarómetro, 2013.

⁹⁹ Rojas, 2014, p. 2.

¹⁰⁰ Arnold, 2012, p. 443.

and consequently tends to legislate by decree. In such a context, citizens find it more difficult to understand the relation between their vote at the parliamentary elections and political outcomes. Statistics¹⁰¹ suggest that the general trend among citizens in the region when assessing democracy is by concrete results in their daily life: for instance, if a citizen lives in a situation of social and economic exclusion and their parliament does nothing for them, they will tend to evaluate the quality of democracy as unsatisfactory, especially where there are low levels of education and information is highly politicized by the media. On the other hand, those citizens who have higher levels of **education** and knowledge of the political process will tend to give more abstract and normative judgements on democracy, such as their perception of the separation of powers, equality before the law and the existence of mechanisms for participation.

In addition, the crisis of representation in Latin America is not only explained by the lack of participatory mechanisms, endemic corruption and weak states unable to respond to citizens' claims, it is also explained by the predominance of fragmented civil societies that have difficulty articulating a strong common interest¹⁰². As revealed in the first chapter of this dissertation regarding the debate between Lippman and Dewey, the eternal dilemma between participation and quality of democracy emerges once again. Here Macpherson's¹⁰³ contribution is remarkable: **it is not possible to achieve more democracy without a previous shift in social inequalities and conscience, but at the same time, this is unfeasible without more participation in democracy.**

Following this line of argument, it is essential to mention that online democratic innovations can function as a means to distribute power and participation if- and it is a big "if", as Chadwick¹⁰⁴ suggests- designed correctly and being understood as a medium, long-term process. Contrary to liberalist perspectives that assume that citizens' political behaviours are pre-determined by their own personal interests, deliberative and participatory democrats defend the idea that citizens can transform their own visions by engaging in public reflective discussions.

¹⁰¹ Latinobarómetro 1996-2013.

¹⁰² Roberts, 2012, p.49.

¹⁰³ Macpherson, 1977.

¹⁰⁴ Chadwick, 2009, p. 13.

In any case, a full understanding of the Latin American situation requires assessment of every particular case in the specific socio-political context: this explains the limitation of this analysis to two specific case-studies: It is true that Chile and Brazil have developed an interesting combination of initiatives that aim to promote transparency and accessibility in legislative procedures, increasing the interest of scholars in such practices. However, citizens still do not rank their democracies highly and this suggests that institutional efforts of this sort might not be tackling core democratic problems such as the protection of civil and social rights (especially in relation with the Mapuche population in Chile), the fight against corruption in the case of Brazil or the improvement of the slow functioning of the judicial system. Indeed, following the analysis of Freedom House¹⁰⁵, only half of Latin American democracies are considered free (in terms of political rights and civil liberties) and regarding the perception of corruption, Chile and Uruguay are the only countries ranked with an acceptable mark for transparency.¹⁰⁶

3.2 Citizens' perceptions of democracy

Before moving on to the two case studies, a general overview of citizens' impressions on the quality of democracy will be given¹⁰⁷. The socioeconomic context has an influence on citizens' participation in democracy, as will be explained later. There are two main different variables to take into account: 1) satisfaction with current democracies and 2) support for democratic ideals. Citizens are generally unsatisfied with the way democracy functions but at the same time they defend democratic ideals. That can be translated into a symptom of great expectations from democracy and at the same time, a claim for improving current deficiencies in the system.

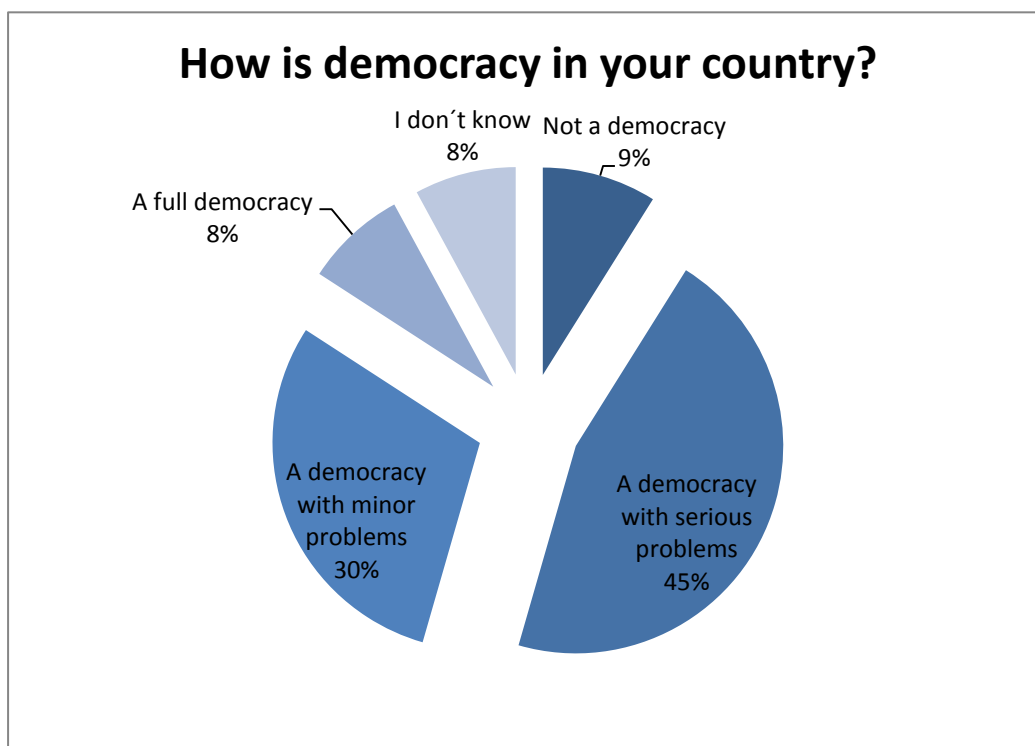
In terms of perception and **satisfaction** with democracies, citizens answer the question "How do you perceive democracy in your country?" as displayed below.

¹⁰⁵ Freedom House Index, 2015.

¹⁰⁶ Transparency International Index, 2014.

¹⁰⁷ Data collected from Latinobarómetro 2013.

Graph 1 Perception of democracy in Latin American countries

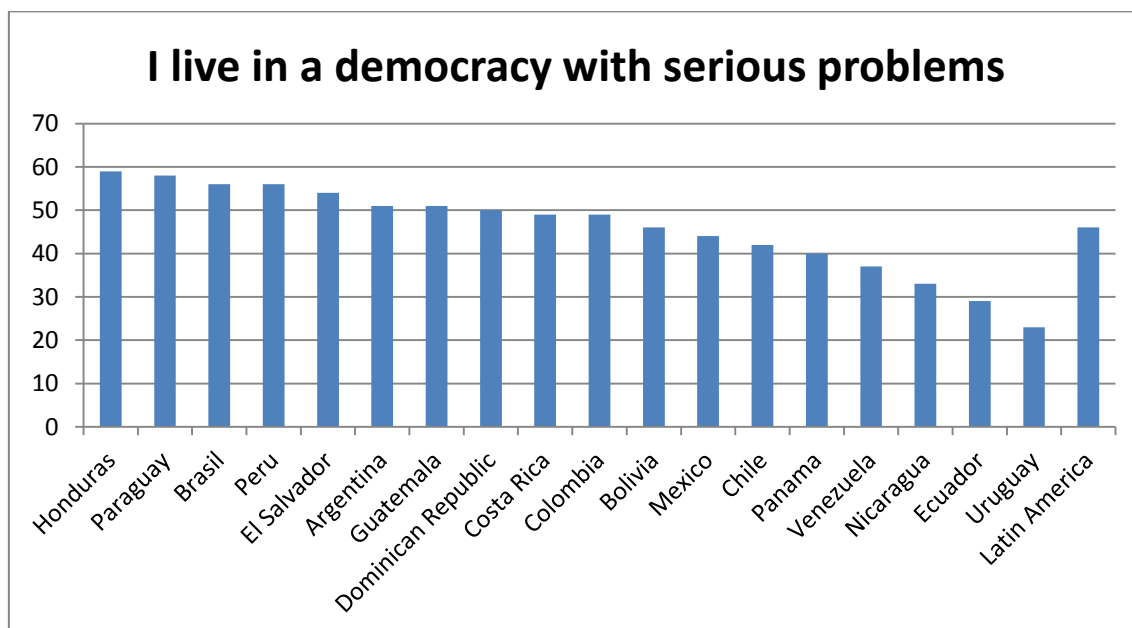


Source: Prepared by the author based on Latinobarómetro 2013, p. 33.

As can clearly be seen from the pie chart, the majority of citizens are not satisfied with how democracy functions in their countries. Indeed, more than half of respondents asserted that they did not consider the regime in which they live to be a democracy or that their democracy had serious problems, whereas only 8% of those polled were happy with the political outcome of the regime and 30% considered it to have some minor problems.

The situation does vary slightly from country to country, as shown in the graph below, which shows the percentage of respondents that valued democracy as being very problematic, by country of origin.

Graph 2 “I live in a democracy with serious problems”

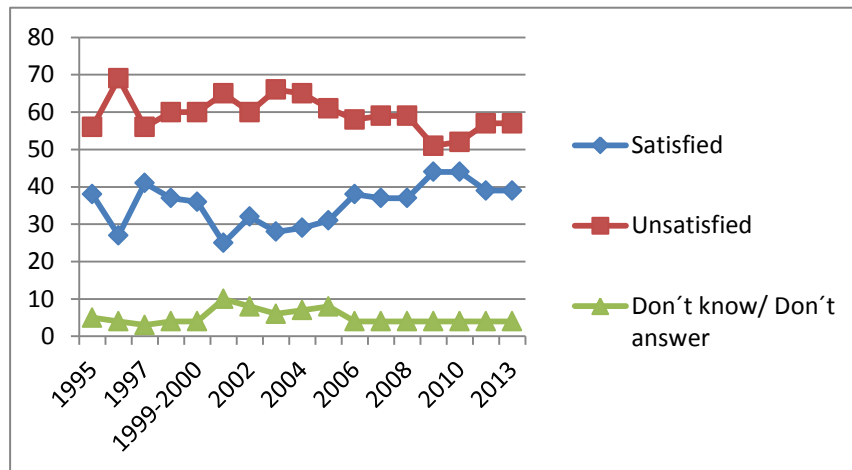


Source: Prepared by the author based on Latinobarómetro 2013

The people of Honduras, Paraguay, Brazil and Peru considered their democracies as being poor at responding to citizens’ needs and demands with the highest percentages (59, 58, 56 and 56% respectively). Conversely, Uruguay is the regional leader with only 22% of respondents viewing democracy as problematic, followed by Ecuador (29%) and Nicaragua (33%). In the cases in our study, the 56% of Brazilian and 42% of Chilean respondents considered their democracies to be in serious trouble. Later on, the main problems that each country faces will be exposed.

In any case, satisfaction with democracy in 2013 (39%) is not very different from the data in 1995 (38%), which suggest that despite the progressive economic growing, endemic political problems continue to be unsolved, negatively affecting citizens’ perception of current political systems, as displayed in the illustration below (see graphic below).

Graph 3 Evolution of the level of satisfaction with democracy in Latin America

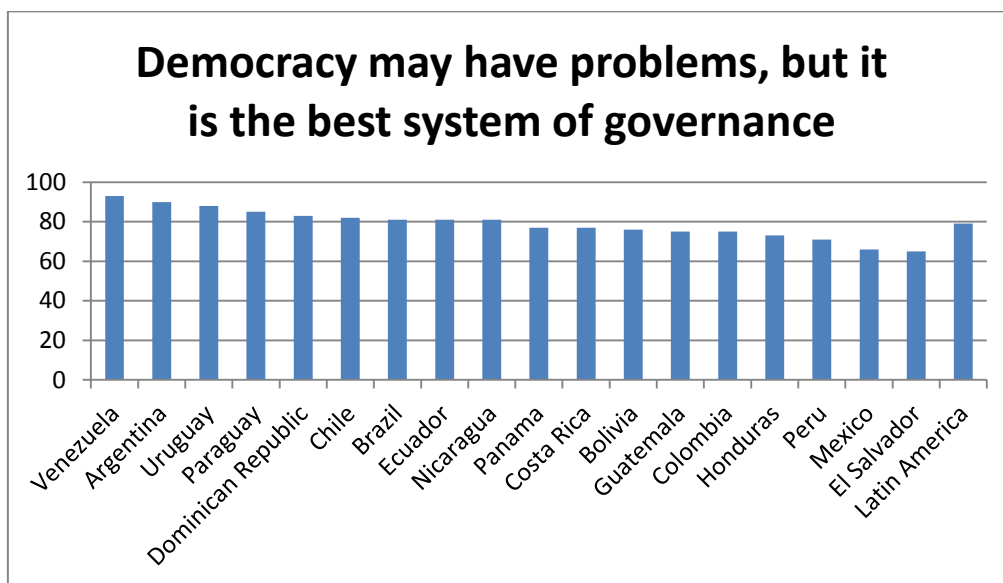


Source: Prepared by the author based on *Latinobarómetro 2013*

Nevertheless, even when democracies in the region are far from perfect, the citizenry answer positively to the question: “Is democracy the best system of governance, even if it has problems? In keeping with Churchill’s quote¹⁰⁸ on democracy: “No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time”, is it possible to assert that there is a great majority of people in the region that **support** democratic ideals above other systems of rule. In the case of Chile, 82% of the population prefers democracy than any other system and in Brazil the support is 81%. The table below illustrates the results.

¹⁰⁸ Churchill, House of Commons, 11 November 1947. Available online: [http://wais.stanford.edu/Democracy/democracy_DemocracyAndChurchill\(090503\).html](http://wais.stanford.edu/Democracy/democracy_DemocracyAndChurchill(090503).html) (last consulted 10 July 2015).

Graph 4 Support for democracy in Latin America



Source: Prepared by the author based on Latinobarómetro 2013

Notwithstanding the above, when the question about support for democracy is worded differently, following the scheme of Morlino and Linz¹⁰⁹, the result varies. Here the question gives three possible alternatives: democracy, dictatorship or indifference:

“Which one of the following statements do you agree with the most?”

-Democracy is preferable to any other form of governance

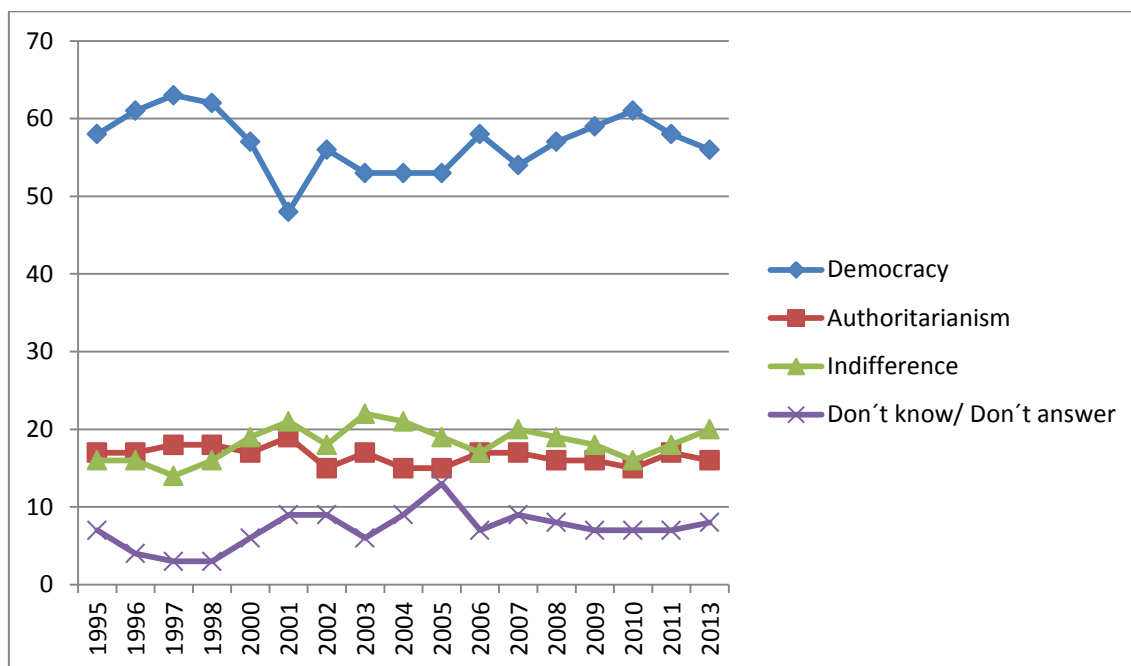
-In certain circumstances, an authoritarian government might be preferable to a democratic one.

-For people like us, there are no differences between democracy and dictatorship”.

The table below displays the variety of answers.

¹⁰⁹ Using Morlino and Linz indicator, p. 6 Latinobarómetro.

Graph 5 Support for democracy in Latin America (Morlino and Linz)



Source: Prepared by the author based on *Latinobarómetro 2013*

In this case, the results show that an important part of the population conceives authoritarianism as a legitimate alternative in certain circumstances, and that there are also considerable levels of indifference. It can be deduced that inherited traditions from dictatorship regimes are still present for a minority of Latin America’s population.

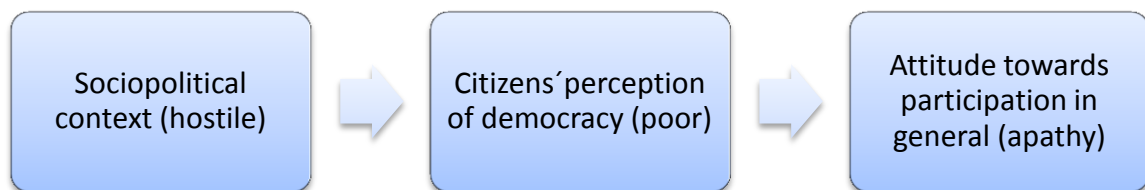
3.3 The three barriers for participation

In conclusion, the sum of the five graphs above suggests that, at the regional level, citizens are generally not happy with the functioning of democracy whereas the majority of people support democratic ideals as the best form of governance. Nevertheless, an important percentage of the population legitimizes authoritarian regimes (at least in certain circumstances) and a significant number of those polled showed indifference to the type of regime. Notably, this data is in line with the crisis of representative democracy:

Citizens support the democratic ideals although their expectations have not been matched by reality.

Consequently, the real socio-political context is not perceived as especially favourable by the citizen, who feels frustrated, disconnected and not represented in the political world. That powerlessness can indeed be seen as the **first of a series of barriers** that hinder public participation: it is the psychological attitude towards politics that has previously been studied as a learned helplessness situation (at the collective level), supported by scholars such as Fishkin¹¹⁰ or Barber¹¹¹, as already mentioned (“people are apathetic because they are powerless, not powerless because they are apathetic”).

Illustration 4 First barrier for participation: socio-political context



Source: Prepared by the author

¹¹⁰ Fishkin 2009.

¹¹¹ Barber 1984.

What is the profile of democrats?

Before moving on to the two selected countries, it is essential to highlight that the only socio-demographic variable that truly influences citizens' support for democracy in Latin America is **level of education**, which in the region is indeed directly proportional to **economic income**: in general, the higher income, the greater level and quality of education and the more education, the greater support for democracy¹¹².

Table 2 Support for democracy by educational level

18 years old	Secondary education	54%
20 years old	Incomplete higher education	59%
22 years old	Higher education	65%
30 years old	Higher education complete	70%

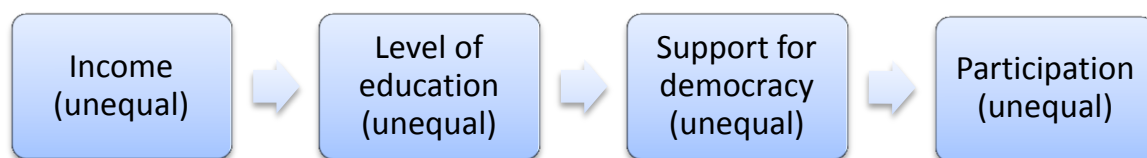
Source: prepared by the author based on Latinobarómetro 2013

The above table shows the differences in terms of democratic support by degree of education achieved. Clearly, support for democracy increases with higher levels of education: the difference between people with secondary education levels and people with completed higher education diplomas is 16 points.

So, the following argument presents a second barrier to participation: Families with lower levels of income generally have fewer opportunities to achieve high levels of education. If lower levels of education are generally translated to lower levels of democratic support, it is evident that those citizens that do not support democracy will tend not to participate in democratic mechanisms and participatory initiatives. Consequently, a second barrier for participation arises from different levels of income.

¹¹² Latinobarómetro, p. 23.

Illustration 5 Second barrier for participation: income and education



Source: Prepared by the author based on Latinobarómetro

Finally, there is a **third barrier** that prevents citizens from participating in the public space, and more specifically the access to participate in online democratic initiatives: the **digital divide**.

The UN E-Government survey 2014 stated that the “ultimate objective [of e-government] remains the inclusion of all in development¹¹³”. There is clearly a disparity in access to technology in Latin America, which means that certain people or groups do not have the possibility of getting online and consequently to access valuable information in a democratic society, such as data on legislative procedures and other administrative procedures. Those groups tend to be the poorest among the population, lacking the economic conditions which would allow them to buy or access a computer.

Moreover, the challenge of the digital divide is not only an “issue of access to relevant information technology infrastructure”¹¹⁴, but it is also related to the real skills and knowledge on how to effectively use this technology for the benefit of citizens.

This situation is especially delicate if taking into account that societies are progressively relying on online delivery of services that were traditionally provided face-to-face (including administrative support and social services): if access to the web is not equally

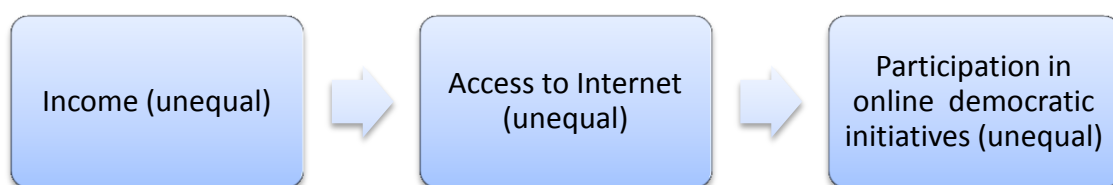
¹¹³ UN E-Government Survey 2014, p. 3.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. p. 9.

distributed there is a need to combine online and offline projects to ensure that everyone has the same opportunities in terms of accessing the information and participating in democratic mechanisms.

In relation to the present dissertation, democratic innovations which are based solely online, especially in very unequal regions (as is the case in Latin America) start from the premise that a high percentage of the population is excluded from the participatory process. That is why the digital divide will be considered as the third barrier which hinders citizen participation in online forums, but also in general. In fact, the access to information is a highly valuable tool not only because it allows participation in deliberative forums, but also because it makes knowledge affordable for all citizens.

Illustration 6 Third barrier for participation: digital divide



Source: Prepared by the author

In conclusion, the link between the digital divide and inclusion is clear. A lack of access to technology is translated into a lack of access to certain public debates and valuable information on political processes. Having the opportunity to follow legislative sessions in Parliament that are streamed on their official webpages, participating in collective actions organized by the Social Media, or simply accessing information about the work of the prime minister are indeed essential liberties for citizen empowerment.

3.4 The relation between participation and inclusion

As already mentioned in the methodology section, inclusion is one of the essential variables in order to measure the participatory or deliberative potential of democratic initiatives, also applied in the case of internet based projects. Indeed, the inclusiveness of the debate is an important factor because it guarantees that all voices are taken into consideration, enriching the process and outcome as a consequence. Thus, it is possible to relate participation and inclusion directly: the higher number of voices participating in a debate, the greater levels of inclusion.

Consequently, the three barriers for participation explained above affect inclusion at the same level: 1) hostile socio-political contexts generally exclude people from participating in the public space, 2) lower levels of income exclude people from accessing quality and higher levels of education and therefore, from participating in the public space, 3) unequal access to Internet excludes people (especially the poorest sectors of the population) from participating in the public space.

4. Empirical Analysis: Chile

4.1 Socio-political context

Chile is considered to be a prosperous country at the economic and political level, with an unemployment rate of 6.3%¹¹⁵ and an HDI of 0.8¹¹⁶ in 2014. The democratic transition, started in 1990 by Aylwin, is generally seen as successful and most international rankings cite Chile as a role model in terms of transition to democracy and development, also in terms of e-participation practices. However, as stated by Garretón¹¹⁷, democracy is incomplete in a country where some of the authoritarian mechanisms inherited from Pinochet's dictatorship have not been totally overcome. In fact, the current Constitution is the only one in the world that has not been totally replaced after the dictatorship regime finished, (however, President Bachelet announced in April 2015 that the text will be changed and the constitutive process will begin in September 2015). For all these reasons, the country is characterized by **low citizen participation in elections, mistrust of institutions** and an **increase of alternative participatory mechanisms**¹¹⁸.

Even though the Chilean population has increased their support for democracy by 11 points since 1995 (63%), 10% still legitimize dictatorship regimes and a significant 21% remains indifferent (see table below). In fact, apathy is especially prevalent among the young populations¹¹⁹.

¹¹⁵ World Bank Data 2014.

¹¹⁶ PNUD HDI 2014.

¹¹⁷ Garretón, 2010

¹¹⁸ PNUD, 2014, p. 41.

¹¹⁹ Latinobarómetro 2013.

Table 3 Support for democracy in Chile: evolution

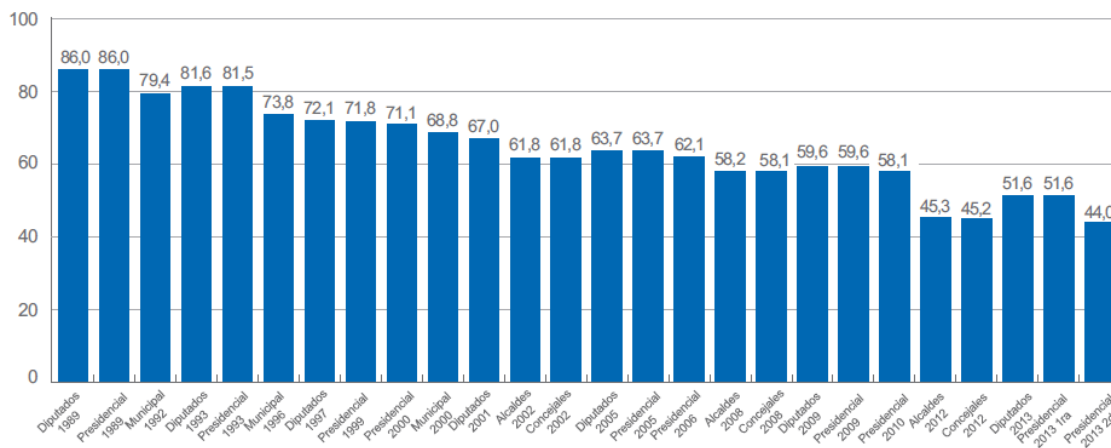
Chile																				
	1995	1996	1997	1998	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2013	Promedio 1995-2013	1995-2013	Dif. Promedio - 2013
La democracia es preferible	52	54	61	53	54	45	50	51	57	59	56	46	51	59	63	61	63	55	-11	-8
Gobierno autoritario	18	19	16	16	17	19	14	14	14	11	13	21	14	10	11	14	10	15	8	5
Da lo mismo	25	23	20	29	26	28	30	32	27	25	26	29	30	25	22	22	21	26	4	5
NS/NR	4	3	2	2	3	8	5	4	3	6	5	5	6	6	4	3	5	4	-1	-1

Source: *Latinobarómetro 2013*

Translation by the author: “Democracy is preferable to Dictatorship”, “Support to dictatorship” and “Indifference”.

One of the main features of Chilean democracy is the decrease of participation in elections over the years, as shown below.

Graph 6 Decrease of participation in Chilean elections



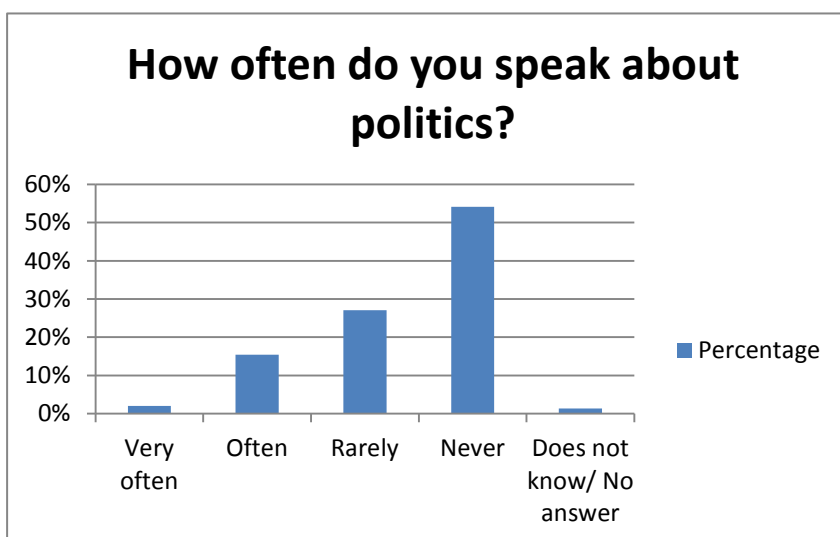
Source: www.elecciones.gov.cl

Whereas 86% of the voting age population exercised their suffrage rights in 1989, in the presidential elections of 2013 only a 51.7% participated. Indeed, in the last 24 years Chile experienced the sharpest fall in electoral participation in the Americas, and the 4th largest fall at globally¹²⁰ (only surpassed by Slovakia, Gambia and Madagascar).

Moreover, there are high levels of general mistrust and disaffection with political institutions¹²¹. National statistics¹²² that collected citizens' perception on democracy show that the majority of the population graded democracy with a 5-6 out of 10 (38% of those polled), 33% were satisfied (with marks from 7 to 10) and 23% graded it as failure (1 to 4 out of 10). In addition, when looking for an answer to low levels of citizen participation in elections, 58% of the population stated that they did not vote "because politics was not a matter of interest to them, or did not deal with important issues¹²³".

The graphic below presents the responses to the question: How often do you speak about politics with your friends?

Graph 7 "How often do you speak about politics?"



Source: Prepared by the author based on *Latinobarómetro*

¹²⁰ Data from IDEA: <http://www.idea.int/vt/countryview.cfm?id=45> (last consulted on 15th May 2015).

¹²¹ PNUD 2014.

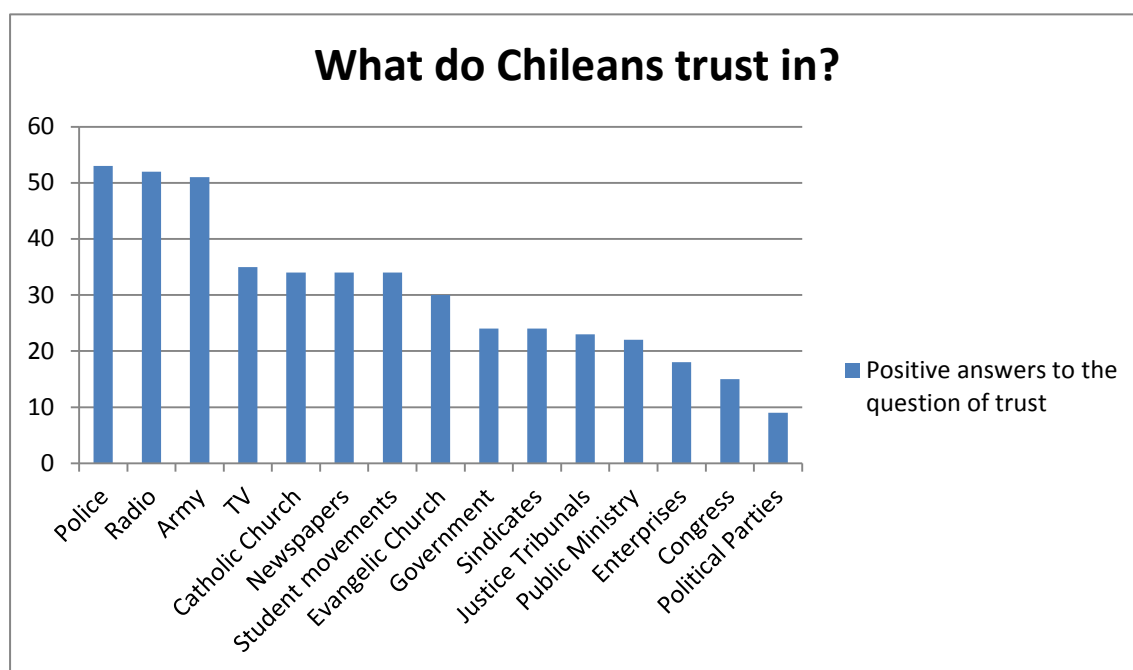
¹²² Auditoría a la democracia 2012.

¹²³ Auditoría a la Democracia, 2012.

It is clear that more than half of the population confirmed that they never speak about political matters with their friends, a fact that demonstrates the low levels of politicization in Chilean society and likewise the high levels of apathy.

On the other hand, the table below shows what Chileans do trust in¹²⁴. The participants of the survey had to answer the following question: How much confidence do you have in the selected institutions? The results show the percentage of people who answer positively (a lot of trust or significant trust).

Graph 8 Confidence in Chilean institutions



Source: Prepared by the author based on Latinobarómetro

¹²⁴ Ibid.

As revealed by the graph, Chileans have significantly low levels of trust regarding Congress and Political Parties whereas the Police, the Radio and the Army count with the greatest support. In fact, the data obtained about trust in Congress and Political Parties is strikingly low.

The flat participatory numbers in elections in Chile, combined with the low levels of trust in Congress, are not uniquely justified by the generalised representative crisis that affects many countries in the world, but there are certain particularities that prevent citizens from engaging in the public space. These include the **absence of real participatory channels**, a complicate process of voluntary registering for voting that was only changed in 2011 and the **lack of guaranteed civil rights** (especially those related to the defence of minority rights and Mapuche rights¹²⁵). Although there have been a growing number of civic society movements and collective claims in recent years which have become alternative spaces to the almost non-existent institutional participatory mechanisms (such as several protests related to education reform and historical land claims by Mapuche population¹²⁶), citizen participation is still hindered by the actual constitutional mechanisms in place. This can be explained as an institutionally designed democracy which does not consider the citizen as being an essential part of the political process, which translates into a distant relationship between representatives and the represented.

The growing distance between the representatives and the represented due to high levels of electoral absenteeism is not a homogeneous process: the young and the poor are the ones that vote the least whereas adults with medium-high incomes exercise their right to vote in higher proportions¹²⁷.

As already mentioned, this lack of interest in political institutions is not only explained by the general crisis of representation faced by a number of countries but citizens' perceptions and expectations are strongly influenced by the institutional and constitutional structure of the country and the performance of political actors. Traditionally, structures inherited from the Dictatorship (high quotas in decision-making) impeded citizens' claims to be translated

¹²⁵ Both the OHCHR in Latin America and the Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Rights have condemned such legislation.

¹²⁶ Auditoría a la Democracia, 2012.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

into political and legislative acts as a minority in power related to the Military regime vetoed almost every attempt to improve civil and social rights. In addition, the bi-nominal system did not favour a variety of voices being represented in political institutions and the system of voluntary registration and mandatory voting complicated citizen participation in elections¹²⁸.

However, it is essential to mention that in the most recent years the democratic structure has progressively changed¹²⁹: in May 2015, the bi-nominal system was replaced by a representative one that will be applied for the first time in the 2017 elections; in 2012 the voting procedures were simplified with the introduction of automatic registration and voluntary voting¹³⁰ and President Bachelet is currently preparing a constitutive process for September 2015.

The last point to highlight in terms of socio-political structures that might be hindering citizen participation is the question of civil rights for the Mapuche population, an aboriginal group that is continually excluded in Chilean society. A significant number of land claims have not been accepted by the State¹³¹ and there are other issues related to the unequal treatment of the Mapuche population by Police officials. Consequently, this group is facing an **additional barrier** to public participation by not benefitting from the same set of rights that the rest of the population.

In conclusion, the socio-political context in Chile can be seen as the first barrier to citizen participation in politics explained by a lack of real structures for translating citizens' demands to political, legislative decisions. Nevertheless, in recent years there have been a growing number of constitutional amendments that aim to tackle current democratic deficits, a fact that consequently reduces the gap between representatives and represented.

¹²⁸ Araya M. and Barría D., 2009.

¹²⁹ Data gathered from National Congress Library: <http://www.bcn.cl/leyfacil> (last consulted on 1 July 2015).

¹³⁰ There are different positions pro and against mandatory voting. However, what is relevant is the simplification of the process by automatic registration, which makes the voting procedures easier for the citizen.

¹³¹ Both the OHCHR in Latin America and the Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Rights have condemned such legislation

4.2 Virtual Senator

4.2.1 Description of the online forum

Chile's Virtual Senator is an online platform that aims to strengthen the link between representatives and represented by providing a public space for the citizens, who have the possibility to vote on draft bills processed by the National Congress.

The original idea came from a Senator and the Secretary of the Committee of Treasury when a highly controversial draft about divorce procedures was being discussed in 2001. The topic was hotly debated by the Media and certain groups in society. The platform was then created for political purposes in order to collect information regarding people's opinion. With the help of the IT Coordinator, the support of various Committees and staff from the Information Department, the Press Department and the National Congress Library the platform was launched in August 2001 (then called e-Legislation). Finally, by July 2003 the final version of the site, Virtual Senator, started to function as an online space that enabled citizens to participate by giving their votes and opinions¹³².

The main aim of this initiative is to make information on legislative process more accessible to the citizens, whom are then able to analyse the draft bills as if they were real senators (hence the name of the platform). Moreover, the participant can also submit an alternative text to the bill and write comments. Once the voting period is over, the final outcome is sent to the committee in charge of analysing the bill.

¹³² Ibid., pp. 166-167.

Steps in the participatory procedure

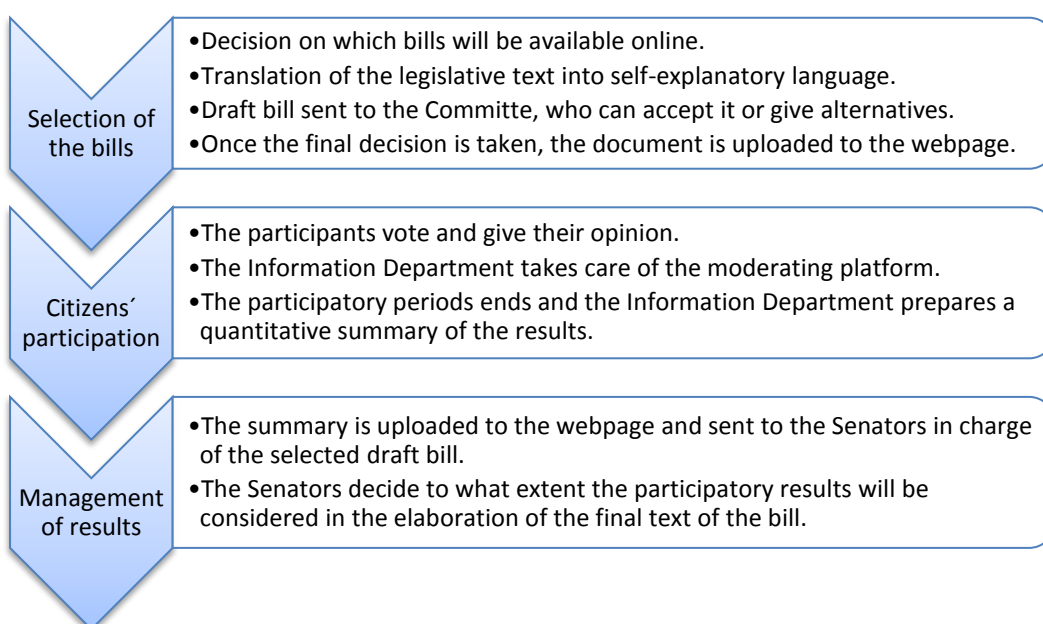
On the one hand, secretary of the Selected Committee, the head of the Press Department and the Head of the Information Department select those draft bills that will be available on the online platform (not all legislative drafts are open to participation). In general, the selection of the material is based on: 1) topics that are most relevant to the public, by being highly polemic or by proposing important social changes, 2) topics that are generally easy to understand and do not require citizens to have any specific legal knowledge.

The draft legislation is then translated into understandable information, which means that legal vocabulary is explained in a simple way. Subsequently, the text is sent to the Information Department which is in charge of managing and moderating the information accessible on the platform and the received comments.

On the other hand, citizens need to register in order to participate by giving their name, e-mail address, professional activity, gender, age, country and region. Once the registration is successful, participants can vote and give their opinion on selected draft bills: they have the possibility to give a general opinion on the draft as a whole and on particular points and they can vote in favour, against or abstain from voting at the end. In every topic subjected to voting, citizens receive an explanation about the bill in clear language, and they also have access to the official text under discussion. Moreover, participants can access the webpage of the official procedures of the Senate and are able to visualize the status and history of the draft bill in question.

Finally, after a limited period of time during which citizens can vote (generally about two months), the Information Department prepares a short report with the final voting outcome and other participation statistics (such as number of people that participated, number and relevant suggestions, etc.). Those reports are made available online and are sent to the Senators working on the Committee in charge of that draft bill. It is up to the Senators to decide to what extent they take into consideration what has been voted by the public.

In summary, the whole participatory process has the following structure:



4.2.2 Measuring inclusion

In order to identify the level of inclusiveness in the selected online initiative, first it is essential to examine the primary potential barrier that automatically excludes an important number of people from the process:

*The Digital divide*¹³³

The percentage of individuals using the Internet has increased significantly in recent years: whilst in 2000 only 16.6% of the population had access to such services in 2013 the percentage is 66.5%. The table below displays this evolution in detail.

Table 4 Evolution of digital divide in Chile

2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
16.6	19.1	22.1	25.5	28.2	31.2	34.5	35.9	37.3	41.5	45.0	52.2	61.4	66.5

Source: International Communication Union, 2013.

¹³³ Data from International Communication Union: <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/default.aspx> (last consulted on 1 July 2015).

In addition, the proportion of households with at least one computer is 50.5% and with Internet access at home is 40.9%¹³⁴. In the case of individuals, 42.8% of the population use a computer regularly, having access to Internet 52.2% and 60.5% owning a mobile phone. However, the latest official data available is from 2011, so the situation has undoubtedly changed considerable, especially taking into account the growth of the mobile internet device market.

What this data clearly indicates is that there is still an important section of the population that does not have the possibility of accessing the Internet with frequency (33.5% in 2013) and this supports the argument of the problems related to unequal participation in online democratic forums. Accordingly, another barrier for inclusive democratisation appears in the form of the digital divide, which is normally most prevalent in the poorest sections of the population.

Therefore, starting from the premise that Internet access is unequally distributed, the next section of this work will analyse the representativeness of the platform and its participatory trends.

Analysis of data

By May 2015, the **number of people** registered on the forum rose to 108,499 participants, whereas the active users remained at 104,709. However, the number of users that voted at least once is 73,907.

The number of active users (104,709) represents 0.6% of the total population of the country. Clearly, the percentage of participation is very low and consequently it is possible to predict that not all voices will be collected by the platform, especially taking into account that Internet access is not equally distributed among the population and also that the interest in participating in such online initiatives tends to be a characteristic of specific social groups, as will be explained.

An interesting manner of measuring inclusion on the platform would be to analyse the real profiles of participants voting on selected draft bills. For example, one of the most controversial draft bills discussed in recent years was related to the decriminalization of

¹³⁴ Data from 2011.

abortion in certain cases¹³⁵. 10,270 votes and 2,053 comments were submitted via the platform and if one takes the time to read the comments, a variety of voices are included: those who defend abortion as a human right, those who consider that abortion should be legalized only in certain circumstances, those who are doubtful, those who are totally against any medical interruption of the pregnancy, etc. However, from an empirical point of view, there are clearly limitations in measuring the inclusivity of the debate due to various reasons: 1) there is no information available to relate the position defended and the profile of the participant (e.g. women, men, members of pro or against-abortion groups, Mapuche population, rural or urban population, members of the church, women that have had an abortion, etc.), 2) due to the design of the platform itself, which does not allow citizens to engage in debate, it is impossible to measure the deliberativeness of the platform, and consequently any attempt to measure the inclusiveness of the debate remains unattainable; 3) as there is no information related to the extent that those comments are taken into consideration by the senators when discussing the draft bill, it is also difficult to measure whether the representatives are actually including the various opinions of the citizens in their debates.

Nonetheless, it is possible to formulate various relevant premises on the use of the forum. The table below displays the frequency of citizen participation in the forum: more than half of users have only participated in the forum once; this suggests that a high percentage of the population may have voted specifically on a topic of personal interest but do not use the platform for voting routinely. However, the number of users that have voted between 2 and 5 times is still considerable and the fact that 1,933 participants have voted between 21 and 80 times also demonstrate that some people are really interested in these platforms.

¹³⁵ Draft bill from Senators Allende, Lagos, Rossi and Gómez for decriminalizing abortion in cases of violation, risk for the mother or unfeasibility of the pregnancy, 2014.

Table 5 Frequency of participation in Virtual Senator

Participation frequency	Number of users
1	40 707
2-5	21 800
6-10	6 211
11-15	2 099
16-20	982
21-80	1 933
81-260	177

Source: Information Department (Chilean Senate)

Again, it would be useful to analyse the profile of participants in relation to their voting frequency in order to gain a better insight into what social groups are most interested in taking part in these initiatives on a daily or monthly basis. That information would certainly shed light on the relation between a person's socioeconomic profile and their interest or willingness to participate in public decision making, and consequently could help in the search for **more inclusive forms of engagement**. This fact supports the idea that further mechanisms for measuring public engagement are needed in the case of online initiatives as it is especially difficult to access quality data.

Notwithstanding the lack of accessible information on the selected platform, several studies¹³⁶ have proven that the majority of Internet users that participate in this kind of initiatives have certain common features: they are male, white, with higher educational levels and already politically active. Consequently, lower levels of participation are to be expected from less privileged sections of the population. In the specific case of

¹³⁶ Jensen, 2003, p. 45; Hoff et al., 2003, p. 54

Chilean society, it is foreseeable that the following social groups would be underrepresented in the forum:

- 1: the poorest sections of the population which have very limited internet access.
- 2: the less educated sections of the population, who tend to have less information on the political process and consequently less tools to participate in the platforms.
- 3: the aboriginal Mapuche population, who are more likely to be excluded from any participatory device due their current relation with the State
- 4: the oldest sections of the population who are less likely to have a basic knowledge of internet use.

What is the profile of Virtual Senator users?

Table 6 Profile of users of Virtual Senator: Region and Gender

Region	Female	Male	(not disclosed)	Total
1	704	1,110		1,814
2	1,127	2,132		3,259
3	387	733		1,120
4	1,093	1,836		2,929
5	5,265	7,377		12,642
6	1,376	2,035		3,411
7	1,221	2,214		3,435
8	3,030	5,317		8,347
9	1,413	2,185		3,598
10	1,259	2,130		3,389
11	201	350		551
12	428	624		1,052
13	26,155	32,451		58,606
14	589	971		1,560
15	281	464		745
(not-disclosed)	1,513	526	2	2,041
Total	46,042	62,455	2	108,499

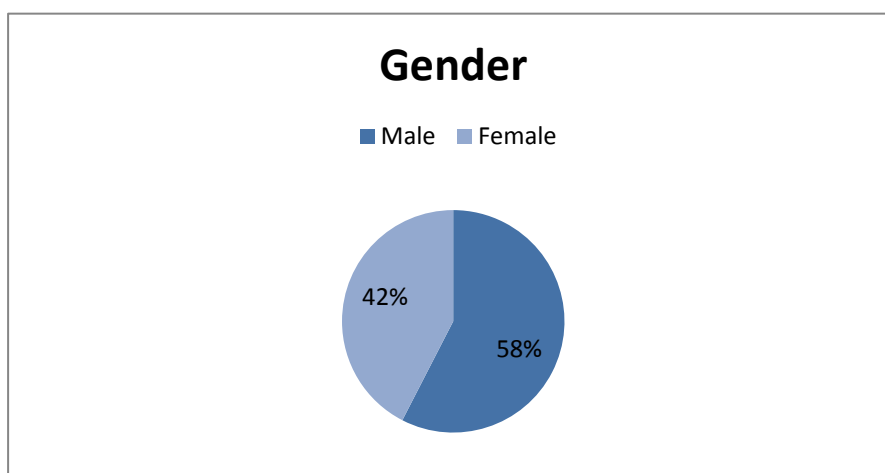
Source: Prepared by the author based on data collected from the Information Department (Chilean Senate)

The above table presents two demographic features that are relevant for the analysis of inclusiveness in the forum: the gender of the participants and their region of origin.

- *Gender*

Significantly, in all 15 Chilean regions, the participation of women is lower than men's. Female voices are underrepresented on the platform. That data is consistent with previous studies, which suggest that "gender imbalance online is the result of a wider political exclusion, not digital exclusion¹³⁷". On the other hand, when women are politically active in offline environments, they are equally active in the digital world¹³⁸.

Graph 11 Profile of users of Virtual Senator: Gender



Source: prepared by the author based on Information Department

¹³⁷ Fallon, F., Williamson A. and Pack M., 2011.

¹³⁸ There is a great debate on Women & Democracy. For instance, Pateman et al., 1992.

- *Regional distribution of participation*

The two regions with the highest number of participants correspond to the areas of the Metropolitan Region of Santiago (13th region) and Valparaiso (5th region). Notably, both areas are two of the most developed in the country and also two of the most populous (with Biobío). On the other hand, the regions with the lowest participation levels are Aysén (11th), Arica and Parinacota (15th), Magallanes (12th) and Atacama (3rd). Those regions account together for about 3% of the Chilean population so the low participation figures are explained by the fact that the regions do not have many inhabitants. Indeed, in relation to population, it is predictable that the most populous areas have the highest proportion of participation. However, in order to provide more accurate data regarding the percentage of people participating by region, the numbers for each region will be divided by the total population of each region (see table below). What it is interesting at this point is the relation between a region's degree of development and the participation numbers: **those regions with a higher Human Development Index (HDI) show higher levels of citizen proportional participation.**

The table below displays the data used for obtaining this relation:

Table 7 Relation between Human Development Index and participation in Virtual Senator

Region	HDI¹³⁹	Percentage of people living under economic difficulties¹⁴⁰	Participants in the forum [A]	Total population of the region¹⁴¹	[A/B] (proportional participation)
Metropolitana	0.92	9.2	58 606	7,288,581	0.008
Magallanes	0.90	5.6	1 052	163,748	0.006
Antofagasta	0.90	4.0	3 259	613,328	0.005
Tarapacá	0.89	8.2	1 814	328,789	0.005
Valparaíso	0.86	15.6	12 649	1,808,300	0.006
Atacama	0.85	7.3	1 120	308,247	0.003
Coquimbo	0.84	16.2	2 929	759,228	0.003
Aisén	0.83	6.8	551	107,334	0.005
O'Higgins	0.81	16	3 411	883,368	0.003
Biobío	0.80	22.3	8 347	2 100,494	0.003
Los Lagos	0.80	17.6	3 389	834,714	0.004
Maule	0.79	22.3	3 435	1,035,593	0.003
Araucanía	0.79	27.9	3 598	983,499	0.003
Los Ríos	No data	23.1	1 560	401,548	0.003
Arica	No data	14.6	745	235,081	0.003
Paranicota					

Source: prepared by the author based on data collected from the Information Department (Senate of Chile).

¹³⁹ PNUD, HDI 2010.

¹⁴⁰ Casen Survey 2013.

¹⁴¹ INE 2014.

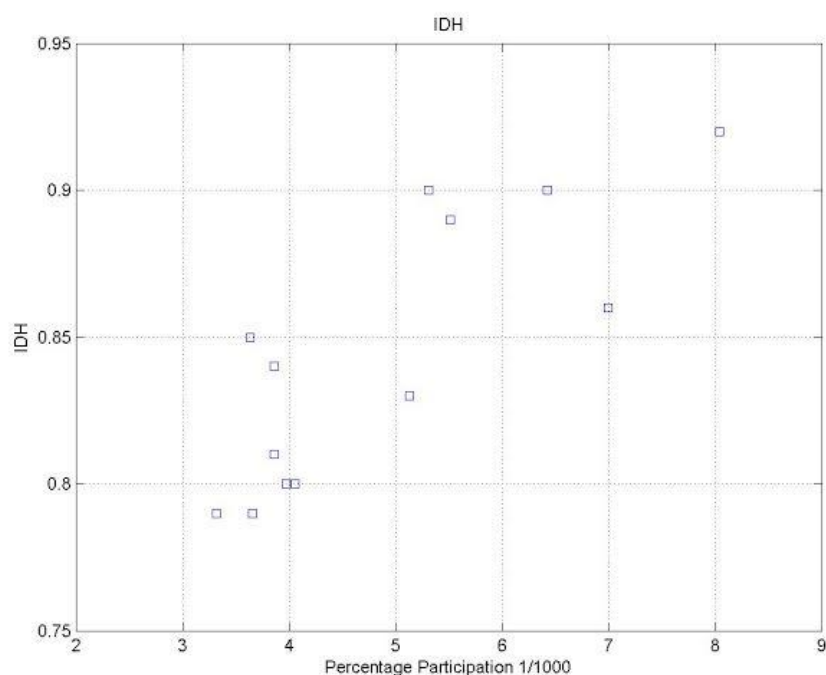
The table shows that the five regions with the highest HDI are the ones with the highest participation levels (in comparison with the total population of the region). In addition, although the Aisén region is situated in a low position, it is in fact one of the regions with a lower percentage of people living under economic difficulties (6.8%), a fact that may explain the higher participation levels (0.005).

This data is in line with previous studies¹⁴² that show that citizens with higher levels of income tend to participate more in online democratic initiatives. That can also be applied at regional levels, meaning that the richest regions will tend to count with higher proportions of participants. In the case of Chile, this fact can be explained by two factors: 1) people with higher income levels tend to have greater access to computers whereas the poorest population may have difficulties accessing the internet 2) In Latin America there is a strong relation (as already mentioned) between economic income and educational levels (which means that the most privileged sectors of the population generally have better access to University studies). Additionally, people with higher educational levels tend to have more abstract knowledge on the functioning of democracy -and consequently more tools and information for participating in political discussions- so consequently economic inequality is translated into unequal participation.

The graph below displays the relation between HDI and participation (1 out of 1 000). The higher levels of HDI concentrate the highest levels of participation on the platform.

¹⁴² Jensen, 2003: 45; Hoff et al., 2003: 54

Graphic 10 Human Development Index and percentage of participation in Virtual Senator



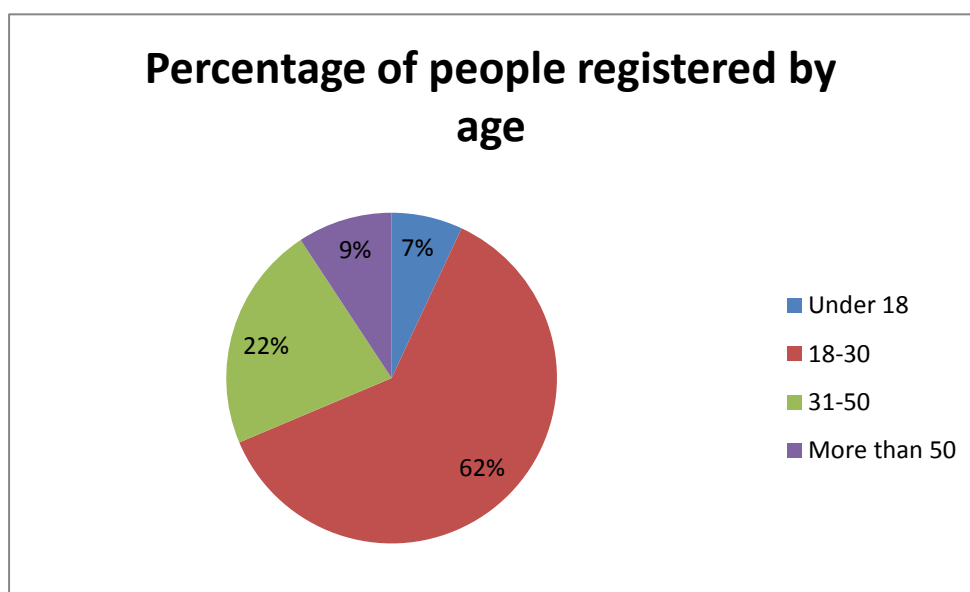
Source: Prepared by the author

- *Age*

Significantly, the figure below shows that the great majority of participants are less than 30 years old. That is particularly meaningful in the case of Chile due to the fact that young absenteeism in elections is a common feature of the country’s democracy. This apparent ambiguity is explained by Dezelan¹⁴³, who states that “young people have turned to more personalised, issues-based and non-institutionalised platforms”, which supports the idea that the lack of participation in elections does not equal apathy towards political matters.

¹⁴³ Dezelan, T., Conference “A Conversation about the Participation of Young People in Democracy: Time to Act? 25 February 2015, Brussels.

Graph 11 Profile of users of Virtual Senator: Age



Source: Prepared by the author based on data from the Information Department

In summary, taking into account the data analysed it is possible to draw the conclusion that there is a predominance of **young, male users from regions with higher HDI**, or in other words, from the richest regions of the country. That is consistent with previous studies on the topic. For instance, several scholars have found that age is a relevant predictor of online participation: young populations tend to form the majority of users in online forums¹⁴⁴. However, the overall influence of age on online participation in democratic forums is unclear, since “age tends to impact public participation positively but negatively impacts Internet use”¹⁴⁵. As Colin¹⁴⁶ suggests, institutional barriers to off-line participation, such as voting age or political interest could explain young people’s public engagement being strongly driven by the Internet. In terms of gender, most studies¹⁴⁷ identified that men tend to participate more in political debates than women, both online and offline. Similarly, populations with higher economic positions tend to engage more in participatory platforms than their poorer counterparts¹⁴⁸.

¹⁴⁴ Bridges et al., 2012, Dahlgreen and Olsson, 2011, Vromen 2008.

¹⁴⁵ Lutz, C., Hoffmann, P. and Meckel M., 2014.

¹⁴⁶ Colin, 2008.

¹⁴⁷ Calenda and Meijer, 2009, Albrecht 2006, Gibson et al., 2005.

¹⁴⁸ Gibson et al., 2005, Wang, 2007, van Dijk, 2006.

4.2.3 Other variables

Technological interface

An analysis of the design of the website is essential in a study of this nature, as several scholars¹⁴⁹ have already pointed out the relation between the web interface and an online forum's potentialities for participation and deliberation.

Illustration 7 Sample of technological interface of Virtual Senator

The screenshot displays the user interface of the Virtual Senator website. On the left, a vertical navigation menu includes options for 'TRAMITACIÓN', 'VOTACION PERSONAL', and 'RESULTADOS PRELIMINARES'. The main content area shows the user is logged in as 'Maria Barreiro' and provides a 'DESCONECTARSE' button. The central focus is a voting page for the proposal 'ELIMINA EL FUERO PARLAMENTARIO. (Boletín N°: 9922-07)'. It includes an introductory text explaining the purpose of the vote and a table with three questions for voting. Below the table is a text box for additional comments and a final voting section with radio buttons for 'A FAVOR', 'EN CONTRA', and 'ABSTENCIÓN'. At the bottom, there are 'ENVIAR' and 'LIMPIAR' buttons.

N°	Ideas Fundamentales	Sí	No	Abstención
1	¿Considera necesario eliminar el fuero parlamentario?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2	¿Cree que la eliminación del fuero perjudicaría el ejercicio de la función parlamentaria, afectando la independencia de los legisladores?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3	¿Es partidario de conservar la inviolabilidad de las opiniones que manifiesten y de los votos que emitan los diputados y senadores en el desempeño de sus funciones?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Source: *Virtual Senator website*

¹⁴⁹ Janssen and Kies, 2004, Farias 2013.

The above is an example of a draft bill subject to voting on the online platform. The different elements displayed in the voting process are the following:

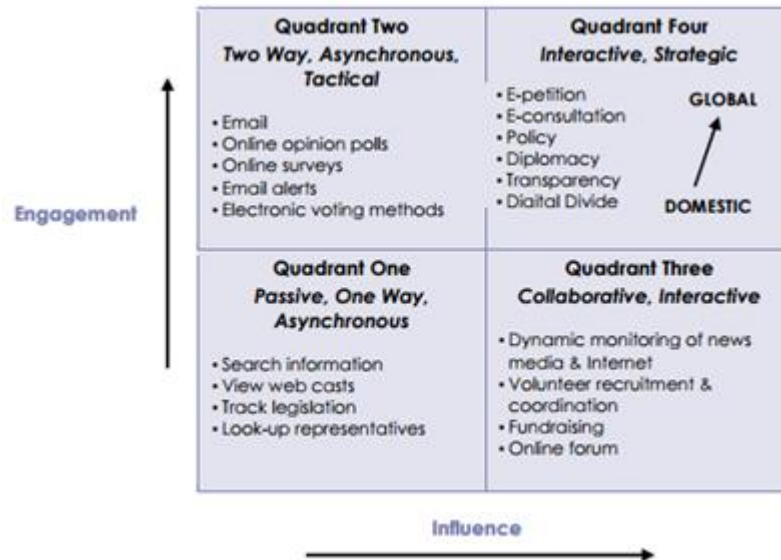
- 1) The content of the draft bill is translated from legal terms into simpler language at the top of the page.
- 2) Three simple, concrete questions are displayed afterwards, with the option to vote “Yes”, “No” or to abstain.
- 3) It is possible to include alternative ideas that the participant considers to be important and related to the issue in question.
- 4) Finally, the broader question about the draft bill is given: “In general terms, do you vote for, or against the draft bill or abstain?” Then the participant sends their information.

Virtual Senator’s interface is simple and easy to follow. However, the communication structure of the platform does not favour deliberation, as all the comments are sent to the moderating platform privately, and only after being processed by the moderator, they will be placed in the forum with no reference of who was the author. Participants are able to read others’ comments but the architecture minimizes the potential for deliberation and interaction. In addition, the platform does not include elements of the Web 2.0, such as quick links to share information via social media platforms, an act which helps to spread the data.

Several scholars have already studied the various ways of communication that the architecture of a webpage can offer. For instance, the image below explains the possible relations between the representatives and those represented through the web, following the scheme from the Institute of Electronic Government¹⁵⁰.

¹⁵⁰ Caldow, J., 2004.

Illustration 8 e-Democracy Model



Source: Institute for Electronic Government

Quadrant one contains individual actions on the Internet not intended to obtain any form of interaction but mainly searching for information. Consequently, the levels of engagement (between citizens and representatives) and influence (in decision- making) are expected to be low. Quadrant two includes higher levels of interaction as there is a two-way process between the institutions and the people: the relation is defined by the exchange of e-mails, participation in opinion polls or receiving certain e-mail alerts on issues of interest. Quadrant three creates a collaborative network by opening multiple channels of participation, not only between governmental bodies and citizens but also between citizens: fundraising initiatives and participation in online forums are some examples of this type of interactive communication. Finally, quadrant four represents the higher level of commitment between public authorities and the citizenship, as collective popular actions can lead to influencing legislative procedures and political decisions.

Virtual Senator mainly falls into Quadrant three, as it presents the majority of elements of an online forum (participants can vote and give their opinion, which is available online). However, the structure of the platform itself does not envisage multiple

discussions among the participants or two-way discussions between citizens and political representatives. Therefore, the webpage, rather than being an instrument for deliberation, could be defined as an “opinion tank” on which an individual enters, votes, gives an opinion and leaves. Consequently, Virtual Senator’s technological interface opens a new channel for participation but does not truly create a space for deliberation among the participants.

In addition, the moderating platform is almost automatic, which simplifies the work of the Information Department. From an empirical point of view, the design of the moderating platform could hinder the communication process because it does not allow participants to directly post their opinions on the site, as all comments are processed before being available on the platform. However, what can really prevent people from participating is the lack of a space for deliberation and communication among the rest of participants, as already mentioned. In this sense the forum cannot be categorized as deliberative for a simple reason: it was not created following deliberative theories because the main aim of the platform was to provide accessible information on legislative procedures, not to develop a dialogue between participants and politicians. Indeed, a deliberative forum would need greater efforts both from an economic point of view and in terms of human resources. According to a technical staff member working on the platform “The Senate’s unwillingness to give priority to investing financial resources to the development of new functionalities for the Virtual senator¹⁵¹” explains the failure of the platform to include a space for deliberation or a better design which would facilitate citizen engagement.

All in all, the initiative does provide accessible information about legislative procedures, thereby partially reducing the gap between representative and those represented and contributing to citizen empowerment by making access to knowledge a reality¹⁵². Legislation is translated into easy-to-follow language and every draft bill is linked with the official text under discussion. What is more, the webpage is connected to other institutional initiatives managed by the Library of the Chilean Congress, for

¹⁵¹ Farias, 2013, p. 176.

¹⁵² For all those who count with an Internet connection at least.

instance “Ley fácil¹⁵³” (easy law). Both the accessibility of information and the language used favor participation, and consequently do not give rise to any additional barrier that would otherwise block the participation of certain groups¹⁵⁴.

What can be seen as a **barrier to freedom of participation** is the design of the platform itself, on which not all possible channels for deliberation are opened. If the site were designed differently, with functionalities that would allow citizens to engage in dialogue with representatives and public debates among the population, more participation would be expected¹⁵⁵.

Another variable that influences the success of an online platform is the population’s awareness of its existence. In the case of Virtual Senator, certain newspapers included articles specifically referring the initiative as an example of citizen participation. For instance, a regional paper from Biobío region mentioned it in April 2015 as follows: “Have you always wanted to give your opinion and vote on legislative processes discussed in Congress? Now you can do it from home, thanks to the citizen platform from the Congress¹⁵⁶”. Undoubtedly, these kinds of actions make people conscious of such projects and encourage participation.

¹⁵³ Ley fácil: <http://www.bcn.cl/leyfacil> (last consulted 7 July 2015).

¹⁵⁴ For instance, if the legal vocabulary were not translated, participants with few or no knowledge of legislative procedures would face difficulties for participation.

¹⁵⁵ The relation between the design of online forums and the quality of deliberation has been studied in detail by scholars such as Wright S. and Street, J., 2013 and Janssen and Kies, 2004.

¹⁵⁶ Text translated from Spanish.

External impact

Finally, the variable of external impact examines to what extent the outcomes obtained from the forums have a real influence in the legislative process of decision-making. As already mentioned, the Senators in charge of the individual draft bill receive the information about public opinion via the Information Department (both print and virtual copies). The reports are simplified statistics with general information on the discussion and there is no clear evidence for making a connection between citizens' suggestions given on Virtual Senator and the content of the bill. Indeed, technical staff from the Information Department confessed that their team did not know what Senators do with the documents: "Our work ends when the participation reports are delivered because we leave it entirely up to the senators whether they read them or not. Personally, I believe that some of them at least take a look at the results but we don't know if these reports are in fact taken into consideration when the decision is made."¹⁵⁷

In addition, there is a lack of information for citizens on what happens with their proposals, whether the Senators have taken them into consideration, have discussed them or not. It would indeed be interesting if citizens could follow their claims by a tracking system and check whether their proposals are materialized or debated in the Senate, as suggested by Farias¹⁵⁸. That kind of incentive would make participation more appealing and would improve the quality of deliberation. Several studies¹⁵⁹ have proved that if citizens see a link between their opinion and official decision-making, they will devote more time and effort in the participatory process and will tend to be more constructive with their comments. On the contrary, if they feel that they are devoting their time discussing political issues with no real impact, they will tend to abandon the site¹⁶⁰. Indeed, the majority of participants (40,707) only engaged with the forum once, and this suggests that they did not find enough motivation to continue with it.

¹⁵⁷ Interview with Peña, M. E., Head of the Senate's Information Department, from Farias, 2013, p. 180.

¹⁵⁸ Farias, 2013.

¹⁵⁹ For instance Coleman et al.2002, Jensen 2003, Beirle 2003, Monnoyer-Smith 2004.

¹⁶⁰ Janssen and Kies distinction between major and minor discussion spaces specifies the relation between the quality of deliberation and the expected external impact, 2004, p. 7.

4.3 Conclusions of the case study

Virtual Senator is an interesting democratic initiative that reduces the gap between representatives and those represented by providing accessible information on legislative issues. However, the design of the website does not allow the citizens to engage in public discussions as the possibilities for communication are very limited. Taking into account that current web structures grant multiple ways of interaction, the project fails in supporting the proliferation of online public spaces. Indeed, the initiative has not received enough political attention and consequently it is not possible to categorize it as a platform fully in line with participatory democracy theories: there is no space for communication between citizens and politicians and the impact of the voting procedure on legislative decisions remains incognito. In summary, the project partially reduces current democratic deficits by making legislative information accessible to the citizen but does not provide a real space for discussions, both among the population and with representatives.

In terms of inclusion, the platform itself does not exclude any particular group from participating as the language used is clear and every user receives the same treatment. The main barriers that can prevent citizens from engaging on the site are related to economic and social conditions, especially relevant in terms of the digital divide. In line with previous studies on similar online platforms, users are predominantly young, male and from the richest regions of the country. This data supports the idea that further action is needed in order to empower less privileged groups by engaging them in public debates. What is clear is that political will is essential for the correct development of this kind of projects that aim to progressively include all voices in the debate. Without concrete actions and strategies, the risks of reinforcing current inequalities arise, repeated in the online space.

5. Empirical Analysis: Brazil

5.1 Sociopolitical context

Brazil is the world's fifth largest country and has an economy which grew especially fast until 2010. This translated into the fact that almost 40 million people came out of poverty in the last decade and the country achieving unemployment levels as low as 5.9%.

Being part of the BRIC group the country has attracted the attention at international forums and progressively became an important actor in the regional and global arena.

However, the biggest challenges that the country faces are related to inequality, insecurity, poverty and corruption.

In the political field, Brazil started the transition to democracy in 1985 after a period of military dictatorship, being one of the countries in the region with lower support for democracy (significantly, in 2001 only 30% of the population considered democracy as the ideal form of government). As the table below shows, the support for democracy is volatile, increasing and decreasing over time until reaching 49% in 2013. In addition, the support for authoritarian regimes is significant, with levels of 19% in 2013. The importance given to the figure of a strong leader is significant: 77.3% of those polled agreed that a determined leader is essential in order to solve all the problems whereas 16.2% were opposed to that idea (6.4% did not answer).

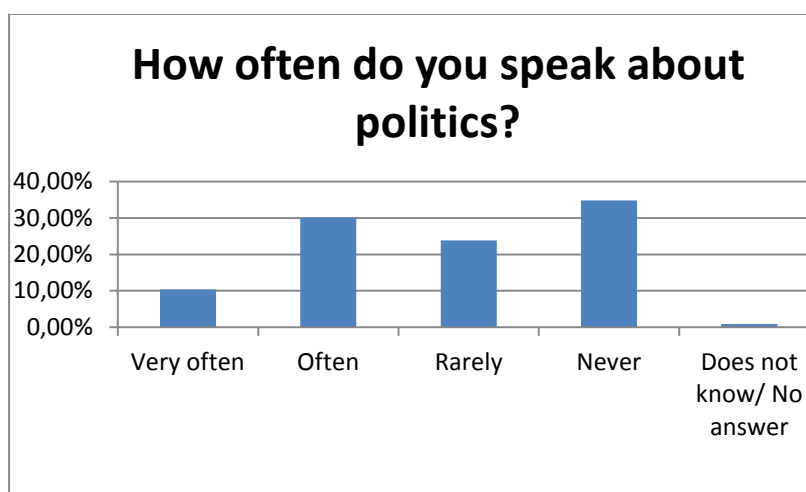
Table 8 Support for democracy in Brazil: evolution

Brasil		1995	1996	1997	1998	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2013	Promedio 1995-2013	1995-2013	DiF. Promedio - 2013
La	democracia	41	50	50	48	38	30	37	35	41	37	46	43	47	55	54	45	49	44	-8	-5
es preferible	Gobierno	21	24	19	18	25	18	15	19	18	15	18	17	19	18	19	19	19	19	2	0
autoritario	Da lo mismo	23	21	20	28	28	31	26	35	26	28	21	26	22	17	15	22	21	24	2	3
NS/NR		15	5	11	6	9	21	22	11	15	20	15	3	12	10	12	13	11	12	4	1

Source: *Latinobarómetro 2013*

In 2013, the level of satisfaction with democracy was not high: only 3.9% of the population considered that they lived in a full democracy, 25% said it had minor problems and 56.5% stated that their democracy had serious problems (5.1% did not even consider it democracy, and 3.5% did not understand or did not answer the question). Furthermore, 76.1% stated the country was governed by powerful people for their own benefit and only 18.3% considered the institutions to look for the common good of the people (5.6% do not answer). It can be seen that levels of trust in public institutions are low. What is particularly relevant in that country is the rise of social movements and protests triggered since 2013 due to citizens' opposition to the way the government was administering the national budget in relation with major sporting events in 2014 and 2016 (Soccer World Cup and Olympic Games). The topic itself is controversial, nevertheless these mobilizations can be seen as a picture of Brazil's unequal society: on the one hand, the government makes large expenditures on the construction of soccer stadiums aimed at presenting an image of progress to the world whilst, on the other hand, the poorest sectors of the population living in "favelas" have to abandon their houses for such constructions. In fact, if Democracy in Chile is characterized by high levels of political apathy, in Brazil the picture is different: 40.5% of Brazilians speak about politics with their friends frequently (see table below), 27% usually tries to convince someone about their political ideas and 13.9% work for a party or a candidate.

Graph 12 "How often do you speak about politics" in Brazil



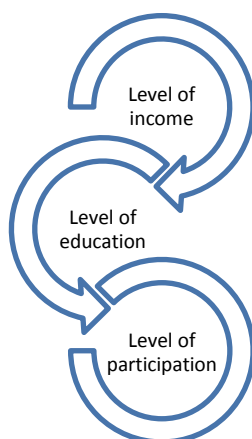
Source: Prepared by the author based on Latinobarómetro

Participation is especially visible at the local level: in Brazil experiences of participatory budgeting¹⁶¹ date back to 1989 and they have been the inspiration for other countries to develop similar kinds of participatory initiatives.

Brazil does have spaces for public participation and, in general, civil society groups and trade unions have a certain voice. **Inequality** is the greatest problem that the nation faces at all levels, as economic disadvantages are translated into poor levels of education and consequently less opportunity to engage in public discussions.

In fact, as already mentioned, the variable that most affects political participation in the whole region is the level of education, which is generally proportional to the economic power of the household. That applies in Brazil at high levels, the relation being as follows:

Illustration 9 Relation between level of income and level of participation



Source: Prepared by the author

For instance, crossing the variables “age of finalisation of studies” with “readiness to participate in a protest for the improvement of health and education”, the following table is obtained:

¹⁶¹ Participatory budgeting is a democratic process in which the members of a community decide how to spend part of a public budget.

Table 9 Relation between level of studies and willingness to participate in public protests in Brazil

	TOTAL	Age of 11-19 finalisation of studies: 10	11-19	20+	Currently studying	Did not study
Not willing to participate	15.4	37.9	12.8	12.7	10.1	27.6
2	2.9	-	2.5	4.0	3.6	4.1
3	3.4	10.3	3.8	2.5	2.2	3.1
4	2.7	3.4	3.6	2.3	0.7	3.1
5	7.4	6.9	8.0	7.1	4.3	9.2
6	8.0	3.4	8.8	8.2	6.5	7.1
7	9.1	3.4	8.6	10.5	9.4	9.2
8	13.4	13.8	15.5	12.5	12.9	11.2
9	6.4	3.4	6.3	6.2	10.1	6.1
Very willing to participate	28.9	17.2	28.3	32.6	38.8	11.2
No answer	0.7	-	0.6	0.6	-	3.1
Does not know	1.8	-	1.3	0.8	1.4	5.1

Source: Prepared by the author based on Latinobarómetro 2013

As the table shows, of those citizens that finish their studies at age 10, 37.9% were not willing to participate, and of those who did not study, 27.6%. On the contrary, those

citizens with higher levels of education were more willing to participate (32.6% finishing their studies aged 20 or older and 38.8% studying at the time of the poll). A similar scheme applies when crossing the same variable “age of finalisation of studies” with other acts of citizen participation, such as signing a petition, actual participation in a protest, the frequency with which one speaks about politics, etc.¹⁶². Consequently, there is a relation between the levels of education and the willingness to participate in public protests: the higher levels of education, the higher the inclination to participate.

Regarding online participation, there is no data that directly relates the level of studies with participation in online forums. However, it is possible to make an indirect association by comparing the level of studies and the frequency of connecting to the internet:

Table 10 Relation between level of studies and frequency of connecting to the Internet

	Total answers	Level of education: Illiterate	Basic incomplete	Basic (complete)	Secondary, Further education (incomplete)	Secondary, Further education (complete)
Everyday	29.3	1.0	7.1	19.8	32.2	42.6
Occasionally	15.8	-	8.0	20.4	32.2	24.0
Rarely	6.3	1.0	4.0	6.8	8.0	10.8
Never	46.8	98.0	78.4	50.0	27.6	21.0
Does not know/ No answer	1.7	-	2.6	3.1	-	1.5

Source: Prepared by the author based on Latinobarómetro 2013

This table clearly shows the situation: the higher the level of education, the higher the frequency of connecting to the internet. Significantly, 98% of illiterate people have never connected to the internet (and 78.4% of those who have incomplete basic levels of

¹⁶² For more information and data, check Latinobarómetro: <http://www.latinobarometro.org/latOnline.jsp>

education). On the other hand, those who tend to connect more to the Internet have a complete secondary and further education (42.6 % every day, 24.0 % often). Consequently, by proportion, it is expected that citizens with higher levels of education participate with higher frequency in online democratic forums, the same as other forums in general.

Indeed, due to the inequality in terms of access to internet connections, several measures have been taken including - for instance - Senator Rodrigo Rollemberg's (and others) amendment¹⁶³ for the federal constitution with the aim of including the right to internet access as a social right (art. 6 of the Federal Constitution). The initiative, which started in March, 2011 is pending in front of the Commission on Constitution, Citizenship and Justice¹⁶⁴. The *raison d'être* of the action is explained on the basis that everything increasingly depends on access to ICTs and consequently digital inequality is also translated into reduced educational opportunities for populations that are victims of the digital divide.

In conclusion, the socio-political context in Brazil is not per se a barrier to participation in the country. There are various constitutional mechanisms for citizen participation and the citizenship is in general more organized as a civil society than in Chile. Even the problem of corruption triggered citizen protests in the streets instead of creating apathy. At that point, the issue of civic cultures could be subjected to debate in order to explain political behaviour and public participation¹⁶⁵. What it is really relevant in the case of Brazil is the problem of inequality that affects all areas at the same time, including public participation. That could surely be considered as a barrier for citizens' engagement in online discussions, especially when there are clear differences of access to the Net, as it will be explained later.

¹⁶³ Available online: http://www.senado.gov.br/atividade/materia/detalhes.asp?p_cod_mate=99334 (last consulted 10 July 2015).

¹⁶⁴ By 10 July 2015.

¹⁶⁵ However, it is not the aim of this dissertation to enter in further details. For further information, check Dahlgreen 2003, Muller 1994, Almond 1989.

5.2 Votenaweb

5.2.1 Description of the online forum

Votenaweb is a deliberative online platform that aims to reduce the gap between citizens and representatives from the National Congress of Brazil (which includes the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate).

The project was initiated in November 2009 by a Brazilian enterprise called “Web citizen”, composed of law students, journalists, designers and publicists interested in politics. Thus, it is a civic society initiative driven by a business with a definite social target. As stated on their website, the main objective of the project is to strengthen democracy by facilitating the information currently discussed in Brazil’s legislative institutions. Citizens are able to give their opinion, to vote against or in favour of the measure and to download the official full version of the draft bill.

The main aim of this initiative is to make information on legislative procedures more accessible to the citizen and to promote citizen discussion and engagement in public issues.

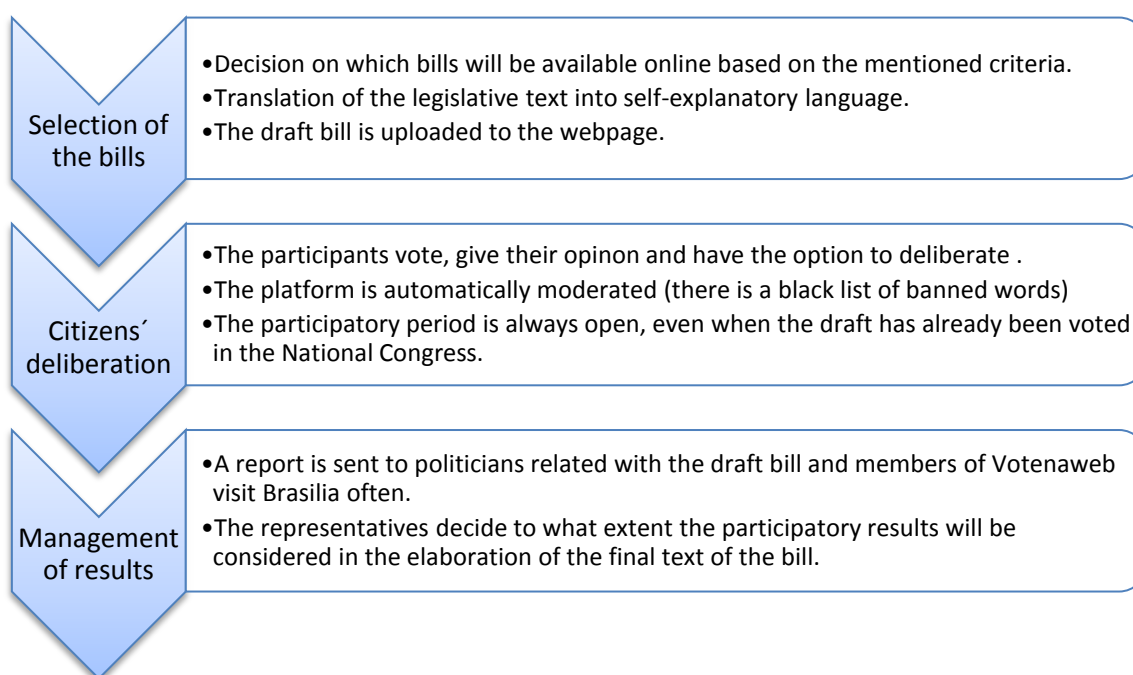
Steps in the participatory procedure

In order to participate, citizens need to register by giving their name and surname, gender, date of birth, postal code, state, city, e-mail and optionally they can give a short biography of themselves and their twitter account. In addition, citizens can directly log in via their Facebook or Google account.

Once the registration process is finished, participants are ready to vote and give their opinion on current legislative proposals. This information is periodically collected by the staff who ensure that the data is effectively passed to the representatives in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, both via e-mail and by visits to the institution in Brasilia. Apart from voting and following legislative agenda, the citizen can consult the laws and original draft bills, check current or final voting results, send direct messages to their parliamentarians, follow the work of their politicians and check the current legislative agenda. Furthermore, since October 2014 an application called “Boteco” extended the same service to mobile devices.

The projects available on the platform are managed by a team of collaborators that translate legislative proposals into understandable language. As the volume of projects is really high (for instance, in January and February 2015 alone, the parliamentarians and senators created almost 1,000 draft bills), the selection of the bills that are put in the platform are based in the following criteria: 1) at least one draft bill per parliamentarian/senator is uploaded, 2) draft bills that the participants directly communicate that they want to discuss, 3) draft bills that attract the attention of the Media and Parliamentarians, 4) draft bills that the Parliamentarians want citizens to discuss in the forum, 5) draft bills that the team consider to be important or relevant for Brazilian society.

In summary, the whole deliberative process has the following structure:



5.2.2 Measuring Inclusion

As in the case of Chile, when analysing the inclusiveness of voices in digital initiatives, the first problem that appears is related to the actual access to such services.

The Digital divide

The percentage of individuals using the internet has increased radically during recent years in Brazil. In 2000 the percentage of users was only 2.9% of the total population but by 2013 the figure had risen to 51.6%. The table below shows the evolution of the numbers in recent years, which is especially significant in a country that has a population of 200 million citizens living in very diverse conditions.

Table 11 Evolution of digital divide in Brazil

2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
2.9	4.5	9.1	13.2	19.1	21.0	28.2	30.9	33.8	39.2	40.6	45.7	48.5	51.6

Source: International Communication Union, 2013.

Additionally, the proportion of households that have a computer is 45.8% and internet is accessible at home for 39.6% of the population (both data are from 2012). Moreover, 44.1% (2010) and 48.8% (2012) of individuals have access to a computer and to the internet, respectively. In the case of mobile phones, 75.8% of individuals have one (2010). Again, the data is probably outdated, especially taking into account that the technology is continuously - and rapidly - evolving.

It is worth emphasizing the efforts made by Brazil's Government and civic society to tackle technological deficits by linking the use of ICTs with social inclusion and education, especially in relation to vulnerable groups. For instance, a NGO from Porto Alegre in Brazil "Rede Marista de Solidariedade"¹⁶⁶ have developed a project that aims to reduce the digital divide in the country by creating a Centre for Digital Inclusion. The various

¹⁶⁶ UN E-Government survey 2014, p. 130.

benefits for the population include training in hardware and free software for vulnerable groups and computer donations.

The next section of this work analyses the representativeness of the platform and its participatory and deliberation trends, starting from the premise that internet access in Brazil is unequally distributed, consequently excluding a large percentage of the population from this process.

Analysis of data

By May 2015, the **number of people** registered on the platform ascended to almost 300,000. In addition, the total number of votes on draft bills (more than 7 million), the number of comments (more than 230,000), and the number of draft bills available on the platform (almost 6,000) suggests that the level of participant engagement is high.

The number of people registered represents 0.15% of the total population of the country. Significantly, the percentage of participation is very low and consequently it is possible to predict that some voices might be missing from the debates. However, it is appropriate to mention that, according to the statistics collected by the platform coordinator, hundreds of users have already voted in almost 6,000 draft bills available on the web. In addition, thousands of people access the website as a matter of routine, which is especially relevant in relation to the younger populations. Furthermore, since the development of the mobile application “Boteco”, participation has increased to considerable levels. In fact, mobile-based applications have showed great potential for engaging citizens in public matters¹⁶⁷.

In terms of predominance of certain groups over others, the essential data on the profile of participants obtained directly in collaboration with the Votenaweb coordinator will be displayed. As in the case of Chile, it is foreseeable that certain groups will be underrepresented on the platform:

¹⁶⁷ An interesting example: Ureport of Uganda, available online: <http://ureport.ug> (last consulted 1 May 2015).

1: the poorest sections of the populations affected by the digital divide.

2: the less educated sections of the population, who generally have less information on political processes

3: the aboriginal populations from Amazonia, who are more likely to be excluded from such processes due to cultural and accessibility reasons.

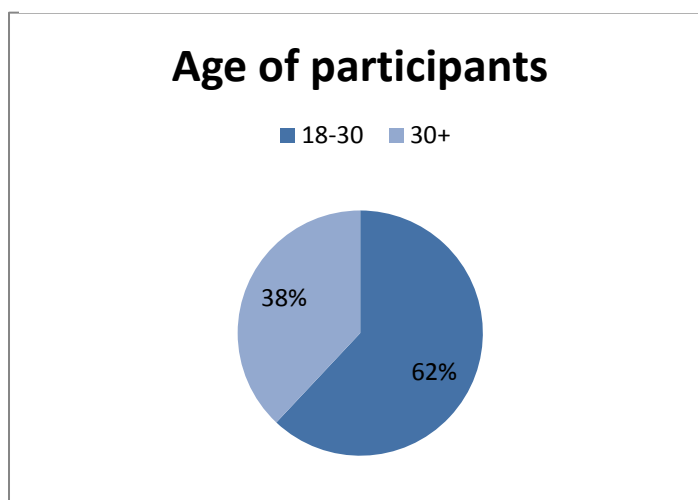
4: the eldest sections of the population with a lack of skills on the use of internet.

Clearly, income, education, culture and lack of knowledge are essential variables that influence public participation, not only on web- based projects but also online.

What is the profile of Votanaweb users?

- Age

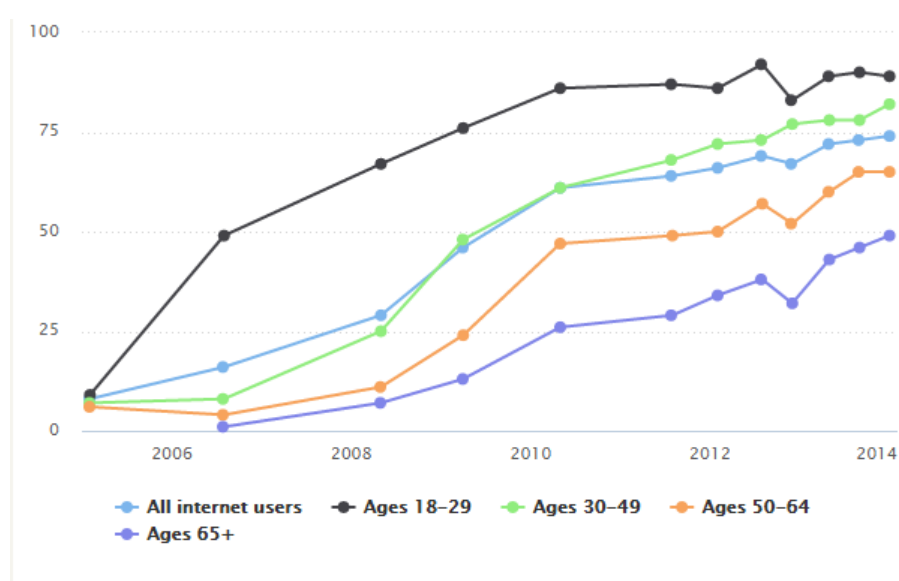
Graph 13 Profile of users of Votanaweb: Age



Source: Prepared by the author based on data collected from website's coordinator

The great majority of participants are aged between 18 and 30 (see above chart). That implies that the average platform user is young (62%). The reason for that preponderance might be at least partially explained by the link that the platform provides to social media platforms. Indeed, data by the Pew Research Center¹⁶⁸ shows that people aged 18-29 are the ones that most used Social Media platforms (see table below).

Graph 14 Relation between age and use of social media



Source: Pew Research Center

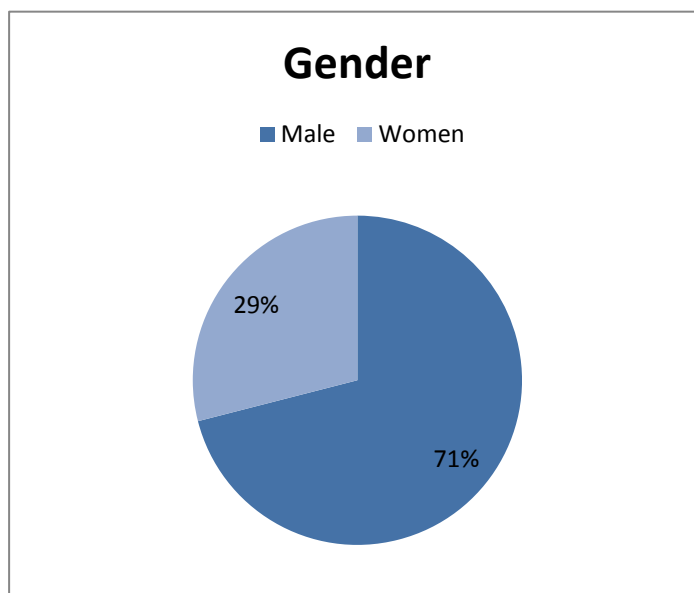
In addition, as already explained in the case of Chile, institutional barriers such as voting age and political interest can explain the predominance of young people on online-based platforms. Consequently, the inclusion of voices from other age groups could be distorted, especially those opinions coming from the oldest sections of the population, which generally lack knowledge of internet uses¹⁶⁹.

¹⁶⁸ Pew Research Center: <http://www.pewinternet.org/data-trend/social-media/social-media-use-by-age-group/>

¹⁶⁹ Barber (2006) highlighted the fact that the digital divide does not only applies to the lack of access but also to the lack of knowledge of how to use Internet.

- *Gender*

Graph 15 Profile of users of Votenaweb: Gender

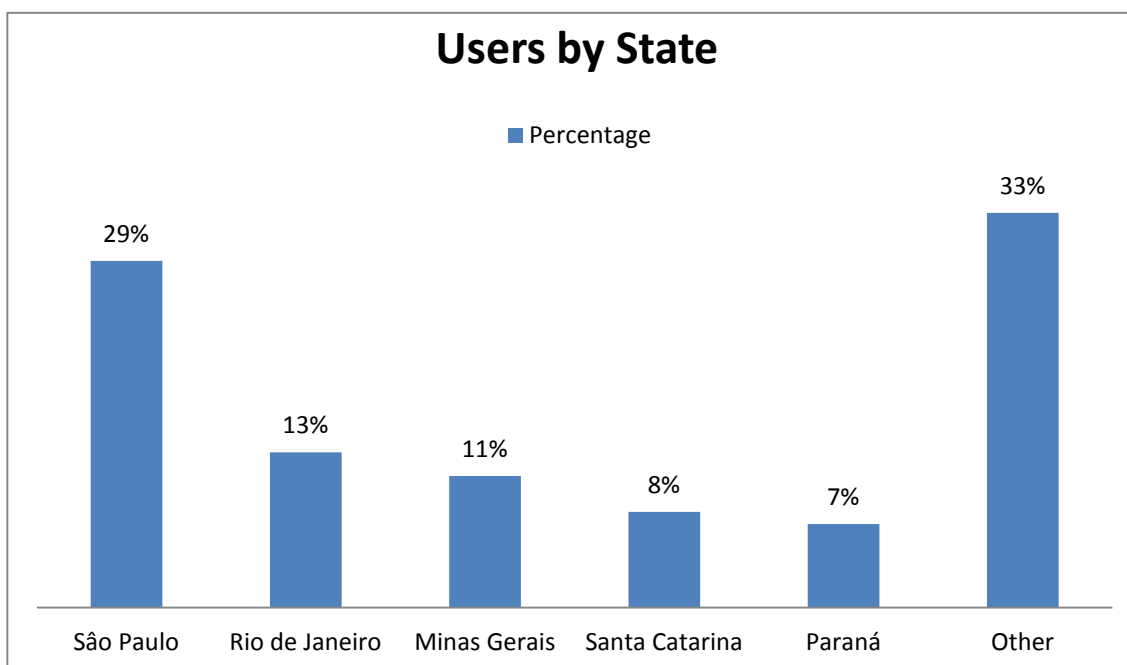


Source: Prepared by the author based on information from staff members

As displayed above, there is a clear majority of male users on the forum, with only 29% of female participants. Consequently, female voices will be underrepresented on the platform. As stated in the case of Chile, gender imbalance online is the result of other kinds of exclusion, such as socio-economic inequalities and difference to the access to education.

- *Regional distribution of participation*

Graph 16 Profile of users of Votenaweb: State



Source: Prepared by the author based on data from staff members

Finally, in relation to the predominance of participants from certain regions over others, there is a clear majority of users from São Paulo, followed by Rio de Janeiro and Minas Gerais (see above graph). Again, the regions with higher HDI are the ones with more participants (although they are also some of the most populous regions of the country). In any case, although the data obtained here does not allow for an in-depth analysis in the same vein as that made for the Chilean platform, it is relevant to mention that São Paulo (0.896), Santa Catarina (0.893), Rio de Janeiro (0.893) and Paraná (0.885) are, after Brasília, the regions with the highest HDI in a country that is made up of 27 regions. Thus, the relation between levels of participation and HDI are also present in the case of Brazil.

In summary, taking into account the data analysed, the profile of participants on the forum is predominantly young, male users from regions with a higher HDI. Again, this analysis is at odds with previous studies of participation in online forums and specifically with the case of Virtual Senate. It is possible to conclude that the inclusion

of all voices in the selected study cases is unequally distributed, as there are groups that are habitually excluded from the platform due to physical and educational barriers to internet access (digital divide) and that certain groups are underrepresented in the debates.

5.2.3 Other variables

Technological interface

Regarding the platform interface, it is certainly user-friendly and full of images that catch the attention: every draft bill is supported by a graphic that shows the number of people that already voted for or against it, and a map of Brazil illustrating the majority of votes from the different regions, as displayed in the image below.

Illustration 10 Sample of technological interface of Votenaweb



Source: Votenaweb, Consulted on 26 June 2015

This is a random example of a draft bill subject to voting on the platform. In contrast to the Chilean case, citizens can give their opinion about all draft legislations currently being discussed in the National Congress, not only those selected by the Committees.

The different elements available are the following, from top to bottom:

- 1) At the upper-right corner there is an option to share the link through Facebook, Twitter and e-mail, facilitating the spread of information via the net.
- 2) The title explains the subject of the law “Permitirá o reconhecimento legal do casamento entre pessoas do mesmo sexo” (Allow the legal recognition of same-sex marriage)
- 3) The draft bill is proposed by Senator Marta Suplicy (from no specific Party; in case the representative belongs to a certain party, it will also appear). The interface is designed in such a way that if participants want to know more details about the politician that initiated the legislative procedure, they can click on their name and access detailed information on their legislative record.
- 4) The option to vote yes (in green) or no (in red)
- 5) The compilation of votes of those who have already given their opinion in graphical form: again, green represents that the majority is for the draft bill (64%). Furthermore, the map of Brazil shows the majority voice of votes within each State.
- 6) The comments on the topic: at the moment, 7 people have given their opinion on the issue.

The platform favours citizens deliberation on public issues with a low level of moderation on the platform; this facilitate a free flow of communication among users.

Following the model of e-Democracy from the Institute for Electronic Government, Votenaweb falls into Quadrant three, as it is a deliberative forum which allows for multiple, collaborative communication among users but does not have a level of engagement from the government to be categorized in Quadrant four. Thus, as already explained, participants can share their opinion and answer to comments from others.

Furthermore, the moderating platform does not hinder citizen participation as it is managed automatically by a system of black list of banned words but there is no human intervention in the process. In terms of accessibility and the type of language used, the team clarifies all legislative information into easy to understand language and makes all draft bills accessible. In addition, citizens know which Senator proposed each draft bill and this also reduces the gap between representatives and represented by allowing citizens to create a link between senators and their proposals. What is more, based on their results, citizens can check with politicians who are closer to their ideas and find similarities and differences between the parties.

In terms of publicity, the platform is promoted on Social Media and it has been mentioned in several newspapers as an example of citizen participation. This work is essential in order to raise awareness of the existence of mechanisms that allow civic participation and dialogue. Additionally, the initiative captured the attention of the Media as the platform was presented at TEDx Sao Paulo in 2009¹⁷⁰.

All in all, the platform itself does not hinder participation in any way, as all channels are open in order to allow debate among individuals, the language is clear and texts are accessible. Hence, in comparison with the Chilean platform, the technological interface of Votenaweb incorporates elements for deliberation and participation, consequently creating a public arena for debates in political matters.

¹⁷⁰ TEDx São Paulo 2009: <https://www.ted.com/tedx/events/7> (last consulted 1 May 2015).

Deliberativeness

There are a growing number of empiric deliberative studies and methods that aim to measure to what extent online forums are in line with theories of deliberative democracy. For instance, the Discourse Quality Index¹⁷¹ (DQI) proposed by Steenbergen et al. and assessed by Habermas¹⁷²; the Kies criteria¹⁷³; the Stromer-Galley analysis¹⁷⁴; and the approach proposed by Wales et al.¹⁷⁵ which incorporates elements of the DQI and Stromer-Galley. However, there is no agreement on which criterions should be used.

A previous study of the deliberative potential of the Votenaweb platform by Mendonça and Pereira¹⁷⁶ used the Stromer-Galley approach, which is based on the analysis of the following criteria: inclusiveness, reason-giving, reciprocity, mutual respect and common good orientation.

It is not the aim of the present dissertation to analyse the deliberativeness of the forum, both due to space restrictions and because the cited authors have done it already¹⁷⁷. However, it is worth mentioning their main findings in order to relate the empirical study to deliberative democracy theories.

In terms of inclusiveness, in line with the main findings of the present dissertation, the authors considered that there is a predominance of young and male users, both in terms of voting and in terms of comments. Consequently, other views might be underrepresented. In addition, the authors identified that the majority of voters were one-timers and this did not favour reciprocity among participants. It is possible to update certain information thanks to recent data obtained directly from the staff working on the platform: there are certain groups that have participated in the forum just once or only for a specific legislation that affected their own interests. For instance, groups related to LGTB rights have voted and shared on Social Media their participation

¹⁷¹ Steenbergen et al., 2003.

¹⁷² Habermas, 2005.

¹⁷³ Kies, R., 2010:

¹⁷⁴ Stromer- Galley, 2007.

¹⁷⁵ Wales et al., 2010.

¹⁷⁶ Mendonça, R.F. and Pereira, M.A., 2012.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

related to legislation on gay marriage, or sport shooters that participated in laws on firearms. Indeed, scholars such as Sæbøa et al¹⁷⁸ have highlighted that forums targeted at specific social groups tend to create a community feeling that favours participation (at the expense of the inclusion of other perspectives).

In terms of reason-giving, comments are focused in the discussion and are justified (mainly based on personal experiences). The analysis of the variable of reciprocity shows that there are lower levels of reciprocity among participants, a fact that negatively affects the quality of deliberation. Regarding mutual respect, there is a predominance of respectful comments and finally, the participants demonstrate higher levels of orientation towards a common good in their arguments. In summary, the selected case study has proven that elements of deliberation in democracy are present but there is, however, still room for improvements: for example, communication between citizens and parliamentarians remains a distant ideal and there is no feedback coming from the institutions regarding citizens' claims.

External impact

Finally, the variable of external impact examines whether the outcome obtained in the forum influences political decisions at the institutional level. The main objective of the platform is to stimulate social participation in political matters by simplifying legislative information through their website. As a result, the distance between representatives and represented diminishes. The platform does not seek to create a legal link between citizens and politicians but rather to engage citizens in matters of public interest. Consequently, it is not expected that the outcome from the online voting and comments are not the only things taken into account, although the team members visit Brasilia often enough to convey the essential message to the institutions.

¹⁷⁸ Sæbøa et al., 2009, p. 419

In any case, it is important to highlight the fact that Votenaweb has been invoked in at least three official voting sessions, according to D. Amaral¹⁷⁹:

- 1) A senator used the platform to persuade her colleagues to approve a draft bill supported by a majority of Votanaweb users.
- 2) A deputy archived a draft bill after looking at the overall voting on the platform (a large majority were against it).
- 3) A civil servant from the Parliament informed the Votenaeweb team that he was using the platform to define the priority of draft bills in the agenda.

In addition, the organizer explained that they do not aim to produce a legal relation with the National Congress and they do not check to what extent the Parliamentarians or Senators are actively using the platform. What they aim for is that politicians get to know the website and “they understand that it is a behavioural trend for the future so consequently they need to make efforts in order to participate in that change and to take care of the relation with their citizens through internet platforms”¹⁸⁰.

The platform does not advocate deliberative-direct forms of democracy against current representative systems, but clearly defends that “the politician has been elected by the citizen and consequently he or she can vote according their own convictions and ideas. The citizen must analyse and follow the work of the politician, but the politician cannot be accountable to a result from an online platform and must have their own freedom to vote¹⁸¹”. Consequently, and as was the case with the Chilean Virtual Senator, the variable of external impact remains difficult to analyse. Again, if citizens were able to see a relation between their participation and political outcomes, more engagement would be expected.

¹⁷⁹ Votenaweb’s coordinator.

¹⁸⁰ Information obtained from direct conversation (e-mails) with Daniele Amaral (23 June- 5 July 2015).

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

5.3 Conclusions of the case study

Votenaweb is, like Virtual Senator, a platform that aims to tackle democratic deficits by rendering information more accessible to the citizen. In this case, the initiative does not come from political institutions but from a business with the concrete social aim of reducing the gap between representatives and represented.

The forum has deliberative elements and favours multiple ways of communication, and this made it possible to empirically study the interactions among the public. In terms of inclusion, the main findings are in line with previous studies and with the case of Chile, as the majority of users are young, male and come from the richest regions of the country. Again, the most privileged sections of the population tend to be overrepresented to the detriment of those most vulnerable groups: the digital divide automatically excludes the poorest populations and also those citizens with lower levels of education tend not to engage in this kind of initiative. Consequently, the presence and voice of a variety of actors is not equally distributed.

It is interesting to mention that the initiative, as it was not instigated by the institutions, functions differently: it does not depend on political will to be successful but rather on social mobilization and actions related to lobbying Parliament. In fact, as stated by D. Amaral¹⁸² the platform wants to strengthen current representative systems (not to advocate more direct forms of democracy) being their main aim to empower citizens by engaging them in public matters. The selected case also shows that online democratic initiatives related to deliberative forms of democracy are not necessarily opposed to representative systems, but want to improve current relations between politicians and citizens and empower citizens by means of access to knowledge.

¹⁸² Votenaweb's coordinator.

6. Conclusions

1. *Are e-democracy projects including a variety of voices and empowering those who need it most?*

The findings of the two case studies suggest that e-democracy projects do not actively include all voices in the online forums, certain social groups being constantly underrepresented. Those groups face barriers to participation of different nature, and tend to be the less privileged sections of the population: people with lower levels of income and education, women, minority groups, groups that do not count with the technological skills needed in order to surf the Web (for instance the elderly). That differentiation is especially visible in countries with higher levels of inequality, as is the case in Latin America: the digital divide immediately excludes almost half¹⁸³ the population from the participation in such initiatives, although these numbers decrease every year. Consequently, online democratic forums can be considered as mirrors that tend to reflect offline inequalities unless specifically designed to promote equal participation¹⁸⁴. Indeed, previous studies have showed that participants in democratic online forums were already interested in political issues as a general rule, which means that the mere existence of such mechanisms does not solve the issue of inclusiveness of all voices. According to Barber¹⁸⁵, technologies are only tools that reflect the features of the society. E-democracy projects cannot empower those who need it most if access to internet and technological knowledge is not equally distributed. However, the situation varies from country to country. Clearly, a holistic approach is needed in order to tackle democratic deficits and to design participatory and deliberative projects adapted to current socio-political realities and citizens' demands.

¹⁸³ Variations depending on the country.

¹⁸⁴ Participedia: <http://participedia.net/> (last consulte don 1 July 2015) counts with a database democratic innovations, also targeted to specific vulnerable groups.

¹⁸⁵ Barber, 2006.

2. *What can we learn from the empirical studies? What is the profile of participants? How are the main findings related to previous studies?*

The empirical analysis is consistent with previous studies of online democratic innovations all around the world: the typical forum user tends to be male, economically stable and with high levels of education. That preponderance can be perceived as a symptom of all sorts of inequalities at the society level.

In addition, there is a predominance of young participants, a fact that is particularly relevant in the case of Chile, one of the countries in the world with the lowest levels of electoral turnout by its young population. That data also supports the idea that the newer generations tend to enjoy participation via web-based channels of communication. Consequently, political participation cannot only be measured by the act of voting in elections.

3. *What groups tend to be excluded from e-democracy projects? Are those groups also excluded from other participatory practices? Why?*

In Latin America the poorest, less educated sections of the population and women tend to be underrepresented in participatory online projects, but they also show lower levels of engagement in other kinds of public participation, such as protests or signing petitions. Consequently, it is not accurate to state that those groups do not engage in online participatory forums just because they do not have access to the internet or are not interested; there are other reasons besides. Following the idea of Verba and others¹⁸⁶, three reasons explain citizen exclusion in participatory mechanisms: 1) they cannot, 2) they do not want to, and 3) nobody asked. In the first case, the lack of internet access, the lack of time and the lack of information are factors that negatively influence citizens' possibility to participate. In the second case, it is understandable that not all individuals are necessarily interested in politics, as a matter of personal choice. However, Aristotle famous quote "The man is a political animal¹⁸⁷" suggests that humans are social by nature and they tend to be interested in public matters

¹⁸⁶ Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 2000, pp. 15-16.

¹⁸⁷ <http://files.libertyfund.org/pll/quotes/164.html> (last consulted 10 July 2014)

that affect their lives. Sometimes, motivating engagement “depends more on a sense of belonging to a political community with shared traditions and values than simply civic duty”¹⁸⁸. In any case, without attempting to enter into political debates, there are studies that show that if citizens are able to see a relation between their claims and political outcomes they will tend to participate and deliberate, enriching the democratic debate. Finally, in the third case, when “nobody asked” or there are no real mechanisms for participation, the citizens will simply devote their time to other interests. Apathy to the political process becomes a rational choice, as stated before. For all these reasons, it is essential not only to investigate current barriers that hinder citizen participation in public issues, but also to research what are the motivations that make people engage in political debates. Being armed with that information is essential for the improvement of current democratic mechanisms that may fail to interest people in public procedures.

4. *What can we expect from e-democracy projects and what we cannot expect from them?*

During the years, many e- democratic initiatives have blossomed all over the world. Practices as participatory budgeting, public policy forums, deliberative polls and online consultations have spread up with a variety of purposes: consultation, public awareness, community-building and co-governance, among others¹⁸⁹. Some of the initiatives have a specific target, for example, to engage youth people in local public decisions, to empower women or to include minority voices, while others are launched for the society in general. Some of the projects are organized by public institutions whilst others arise from civil society movements or NGOs. The picture is diverse but the objective is the same: to reduce the gap between representatives and those represented and to engage citizens in public discussions.

¹⁸⁸ UN E-Government Survey, 2014, p. 6.

¹⁸⁹ Participedia: <http://www.participedia.net/> (last consulted on 1 July 2015)

Internet can strengthen democracy by: 1) making political information accessible to the citizens, 2) creating new spaces for public discussion and social mobilization and 3) enabling new channels of communication between representatives and those represented.

However, the promise of more democracy will be in vein as long as they do not change current institutional political architectures that prevent citizens from participating. In fact, the real impact of the majority of e-democratic mechanisms in decision-making remains vague. Technologies cannot change on their own current structures but there must be a political compromise.

The informational dimension of e-democracy initiatives has been highlighted by Norris¹⁹⁰. The internet allows institutional information in relation of legislation, transparency and justification of decisions taken to be easily shared. Consequently, citizens will demand more from their representatives. Citizen empowerment can be understood as a virtuous cycle: strengthening the power of civil society will influence their capacity to understand political matters and to participate and deliberate with quality outcomes.

5. *What are the main democratic challenges in Latin America and specifically in Chile and Brazil? All in all, is technology rendering societies more democratic?*

The greatest challenges in Latin America are not only related to current democratic deficits of representative systems (which are present all around the world) but there are certain socio-political features that characterize the functioning of democracy in the region. Economic and social inequalities are factors that prevent people from participating and make the gap between politicians and citizens even greater. Weak civil societies do not favour civic participation in democracy, although in the case of Brazil there are a lot of movements in relation to participatory practices coming from local levels, like participatory budgeting, for example. On the contrary, Chile shows important levels of political apathy in general, a fact that does not favour public engagement in political debates. In addition, especially Brazil has serious

¹⁹⁰ Norris, 2001, p. 104.

problems in terms of transparency and corruption. Finally, the digital divide is still an important barrier for the population: while certain groups have access to knowledge and information on a daily basis, there are other sections of the population that have witnessed a process of exclusion because of their lack of resources. Consequently, further action is needed in order to ensure equal access to information and participation on the Web. Technology is not democratic per se but needs to be guided in that direction¹⁹¹ by a strong political compromise. Similarly, online forums need to be used with a deliberative attitude by the citizens, as the uses of any technology are embedded and shaped by the social context¹⁹².

Technology can make a difference IF it is used wisely, IF the dialogue between civil societies is inclusive and all voices are heard, leading to greater understanding and solidarity.

¹⁹¹ Antiroiko 2003, p. 125.

¹⁹² Herring, S. C. and Stoerger, S., 2013.

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