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Government and e-participation programs: A study of the challenges faced by institutional projects

by Francisco Paulo Jamil Almeida Marques

Abstract

This paper examines the difficulties faced by government projects aimed at fostering citizens' political participation by using the Internet. After presenting the participatory tools found on two institutional Web sites (the Brazilian Presidency and the House of Representatives), I examine how the constraints pointed out by a relevant part of the literature in e-participation are reflected in such initiatives. Promoting online participation needs more than providing communication resources, since civic culture and other issues are still key factors in influencing our patterns of political involvement. A participatory use of digital tools depends more on circumstances, such as institutional willingness, than on technical mechanisms available.

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Introduction

An important part of research on digital democracy in the last decade still highlights the political advantages brought about by the Internet (Bucy and Gregson, 2000; Delli Carpini, 2000; Coleman and Gøtze, 2001; Bohman, 2004; Froomkin, 2004; Stanley and Weare, 2004; Gueorguieva, 2007). Particularly regarding the question of citizens' political participation, a common argument is that technical obstacles and other difficulties tied to the promotion of political involvement can be reduced once digital tools are employed. For example, it has been argued that there are several ways to make participation easy, convenient and agile by promoting public consultations, establishing public forums or strengthening social movements (Mitra, 2001; Bennett, 2003; Marche and McNiven, 2003; Salter, 2003; Schussman and Earl, 2004; Gibson, *et al.*, 2005; Marmura, 2008).

On the other hand, however, there are scholars ready to challenge the positive association between the use of digital media and the improvement of democratic practices. Among the main problems listed are the inequalities in access to the Internet; the low quality of the political information available to users; the Internet's growing commercial bias; the threats that freedom and privacy have to face (Carlson and Djupsund, 2001; Dreyfus, 2001; Norris, 2001; Dean, 2003; Gunkel, 2003; Dahlberg, 2005; Seifert and Chung, 2009).

Some of the most skeptical researchers argue that the Internet would harm the public sphere due to a possible fragmentation of public discourse. According to these scholars, people tend to lose interest in discussing issues of common concern once they can choose what information they receive or are exposed to. In addition, it is suggested that digital tools

can be employed to foster the organization of groups averse to debates or diverse differences (Stromer-Galley, 2000; Sunstein, 2001; Scheufele and Nisbet, 2002; Coleman and Spiller, 2003; Shulman, 2004; Hooghe and Teepe, 2005; Dahlberg, 2007).

The discussion about the benefits or the disadvantages of using the Internet for democratic purposes remains important today. However, in order to investigate what kinds of changes the new media actually brings to the political realm, it is necessary to go beyond the synthesis of the potential and the limits of digital communication.

Therefore, in this article I intend to discuss specifically what are the main factors influencing the way political institutions make available tools aimed to strengthen political involvement of citizens. I find it fruitful to understand the reasons behind government decisions regarding digital participation. What are the costs involved once the government offers digital participatory tools? What are the main reasons behind politicians' willingness (or unwillingness) to interact online with citizens? How are costs and political willingness reflected on the design of participatory tools?

In order to answer these questions, the following article presents some of the results of a research whose main objective was to examine how two Brazilian political institutions — the Presidency and the House of Representatives — offer citizens opportunities for political participation by using the Internet [1] (Marques, 2008).

A documentary analysis was conducted to achieve a contextual understanding of e-democracy policy undertaken in both institutions. I carefully examined the official principles guiding how these sites were set up in order to compare to written purposes and practical uses. Interviews with officials working for the sites' Management Committees were organized with a goal of understanding their perspectives about e-participation and how these institutions configure tools and process inputs from users. Monitored access to the sites was conducted between September 2007 and April 2008, paying special attention to participatory tools and their characteristics.

At this point, let me stress that the empirical section developed in this paper is essentially an exercise in qualitative analysis. Tables, calculations and other quantitative instruments are quite important to verify phenomena such as how citizens use digital mechanisms — and I know that not using them may put some of my findings in risk. However, in my view, a qualitative research is the best way to understand some of the factors influencing e-participation initiatives. Only an interpretative study of the attitudes and policies stated in documents and in the interviews seems to be suitable to offer answers to my questions [2].

In the first part of this paper, there is a brief diagnosis of the participatory tools found on the Web sites for the Brazilian Presidency (<http://www.presidencia.gov.br/>) and House of Representatives (<http://www.camara.gov.br/>). I then discuss the main difficulties that government institutions face once they adopt digital technologies in trying to improve participatory practices. In addition I examine the extent to which difficulties previously discussed are reflected in both cases. Finally, I consider another set of problems imposed on most of institutional initiatives aimed at improving participation: the traditional rules of the democratic game continue to influence remarkably the projects of digital democracy.



Mapping e-participation tools on institutional Web sites: Two Brazilian cases

Brazil is one of the largest democracies in the world. The country's compulsory voting law takes 120 million citizens to the ballot boxes every two years. Since the approval of the Constitution of 1988, the country is one of the most prominent democracies considering citizens' political involvement: Brazilian experiences, like participatory budgeting and local councils, have drawn the attention of a growing number of scholars (Keck, 1992; Abers, 2001; Baiocchi, 2005; Fung and Wright, 2001; Avritzer, 2009; Wampler, 2008).

In addition, Brazil has a large number of Internet users. Some research suggests that Brazilians spend more time connected to the Internet than any other people in the world. About 80 percent of Brazilian Internet users have a personal profile in social networks like Orkut or Facebook [3]. This makes the country a leader in the use of new digital technologies and explains why Brazil is regularly mentioned in reports about innovations related to digital democracy (Gibson, 2001; Norris, 2001; Netchaeva, 2002; Balnaves, *et al.*, 2004; United Nations, 2005; 2008).

This paper draws on empirical research (Marques, 2008) examining the Presidency and the House of Representatives Web sites. In that work, I described briefly the history on how these institutions adopted digital media. Then, I presented the main guidelines that officially orient the employment of digital media by these two institutions. Next, the participatory tools found on both sites were analyzed taking into account: (a) their ability to provide information and to strengthen citizens' cultivation of political skills; (b) the degree they

encourage users' political involvement; and, (c) the variety and depth of participatory inputs (Verba, *et al.*, 1995; Delli Carpini, 2000; Creighton, 2005).

My second reflective step looked into two other questions: (a) the political effects that the participatory tools technically provided by the Internet can cause on the institutional decision-making process. Latter, I examined (b) how the constraints discussed in the literature about e-participation are reflected in such initiatives. Last, I made some suggestions to improve these experiences (Marques, 2008).

I cannot completely describe all of the findings pointed out by tmy earlier research. I can briefly show — grounded on my own investigation and on later works by Pereira (2009) in his doctoral thesis — that these Web sites employ digital tools quite differently.

The Presidency site focuses on strictly providing (a) information about government structure; (b) biographical data about the Brazilian President Lula da Silva, his ministers and secretaries; and, (c) information about programs, news, speeches, interviews, and other promotional publications related to the Federal Government. There were a few mechanisms directed to foster the acquisition of political skills. In other words, the analysis did not find elements addressed to encourage citizens' political involvement in public policies.

For example, none of the government's leaders scheduled meetings to interact with users, which would certainly improve citizens' sense of political effectiveness (Almond and Verba, 1963). Moreover, citizens who access this site cannot track messages they eventually send, since the technology adopted by the Presidency does not offer this option. Besides, the most sophisticated participatory channels identified in different experiences (like public forums, opinion polls, and chat rooms) are not available (Musso, *et al.*, 2000; Fung, 2003; Janssen and Kies, 2005; Wright and Street, 2007). E-mail addresses and Web forms are the single tools at users' disposal to contact the Brazilian Presidency. My research concluded from the analysis of the Presidency site that despite (a) the current leftist (Bobbio, 1996) government in Brazil, and (b) the official discourse prone to emphasize a participatory use of the Internet (Brazil, 2004a), little has been done to increase opportunities for political participation through digital media.

On the other hand, it has to be stressed that the House of Representatives gives citizens opportunities to know how Congress works, supplementing their cognitive repertoire and making it possible to closely track how Parliament members act or spend public money. A considerable amount of information aimed at allowing consultation and a remarkable variety of political and technical articles are also accessible. The existence of opinion polls, blogs, chat rooms, public forums and other channels (many of them counting direct involvement of some Parliament members) complement the participatory cycle (Braga, 2007; Marques, 2008).

Further, the House of Representatives site presents a more diverse informational apparatus. It is true that this site does provide institutional information dedicated to improve its own public image but the House Web site also encourages citizens to watch work done by representatives. For example, a huge amount of data previously restricted is now available. For example, it is possible to know how much money is spent by each parliamentary office and to secure information on the staff nominated by each one of the 513 Brazilian representatives. Texts and other materials discussing up-to-date issues are easily accessible in pages such as *Stay Inside* and *Know more about the Legislative Process*.

The House of Representatives pays attention to the possibility of users contacting a ll its sections by e-mail. This institution also encourages interaction by providing a track number for each message sent through the site. The availability of participatory mechanisms , such as opinion polls, public forums and chat rooms, rely on the involvement of political representatives and increases a sense of political efficacy of users.

To what can we attribute these differences? Although it is obvious that each one of these institutions has its own scope and responsibilities in a democratic state, my approach looks into these experiences and their management practices to find out why these political Web sites are so diverse considering their use of e-participation tools. My hypothesis is that there is a set of constraints that shapes the ways how these two institutions make use of digital media to improve democratic participation.



Exploring the difficulties faced by e-participation projects

In research on e-democracy, there is a remarkable pessimistic tone about the political effectiveness of most digital initiatives undertaken by state institutions. This reveals that the interactive capacity of the new media is far from being fully exploited (Stromer-Galley, 2000; Scheufele and Nisbet, 2002; Polat, 2005; Ferber, *et al.*, 2003; 2005; Gomes, 2005). Why? I discuss three main points.

Some scholars asserts that the there is an unwillingness of political representatives and state institutions to use new media to enhance their relationship to citizens. It has been suggested that the traditional emphasis on strict representation — a feature proper to modern democracies, according to Held (1987) and Manin (1997) — *tends* to resist to changes in the decision-making process. Their argument affirms that some representatives would be uncomfortable with a notion of sharing political power with citizens (Noveck, 2004; Stanley and Weare, 2004; Froomkim, 2004; Prattipati, 2003). Certainly, a number of e-government projects take citizens as mere clients in the political process (Vintar, *et al.*, 1999). Others, such as Stanley, *et al.* (2004), stress then the particular need for public authorities to give greater consideration to the institutional adoption of digital mechanisms in order to encourage more citizens to become politically involved.

Other scholars focus on resistance based on the costs of digital initiatives. Some argue that there is a convenience factor and lower costs for users (Chadwick, 2003; Borgida and Stark, 2004; Aalto-Matturi, 2005). Others state many of these costs are passed on to representative institutions, which have to deal with a large number of data processing tasks (Arterton, 1987; Balnaves, *et al.*, 2004; Coglianese, 2005). Answering satisfactorily a larger number of digital questions requires a huge investment in equipment and employees [4].

Some researchers have indicated that the design of digital tools influences the success of e-participation initiatives (Dahlberg, 2001; Wright and Street, 2007; Ferber, *et al.*, 2003; 2005; Stanley and Weare, 2004). Noveck (2004) argued that most official Web sites include participatory mechanisms that were conceived and configured not by experts familiar with the needs of democratic governance, but by technology consultants.

“With an eye toward improving efficiency, they [technology consultants] simply `put paper online` and digitize the rulemaking process without regard to impact on public engagement. [...] this directs resources away from the interactivity of the technology ... and shifts the center of attention from active participation toward passive information gathering.”
[5]

Noveck’s point is reinforced by empirical investigations conducted by Ferber, *et al.* (2003; 2005). They examined how technology consultants responsible for developing and maintaining the Web sites of 50 state legislatures in the United States do their work. They found that most of these professionals tended to underline technical aspects — mainly the ones tied to Web sites’ usability — at the expense of democratic values such as transparency. The availability of videos and representatives’ biographical information were considered “interactive” among the professionals interviewed by Ferber, *et al.* (2003; 2005). Officials must pay attention to how participatory tools are configured if the purpose is to foster political involvement.

At a first glance, it may seem odd to compare the roles and the political activities undertaken by the Presidency, on the one side, and by the House of Representatives, on the other one. For example, a menu item called “Plenary Assembly” does not make sense on the Presidency site [6]. It is possible to compare their managerial strategies regarding the new media. In other words, the study of aspects such as the design, the variety, and the depth of the participatory mechanisms found on these two sites allows one to understand efforts to promote political participation.



Case studies: Merits, difficulties and challenges

The Brazilian Presidency Web site

There is a strong suspicion that the political unwillingness and the financial costs are the most prominent aspects affecting the Presidency site. On the issue of political willingness, one can point to a set of problems concerning the management of the Presidency project. According to a report released by the Brazilian Court of Auditors (TCU) (Brazil, 2006), the two main entities directly involved in the national policy of e-government — the Brazilian Electronic Government Executive Committee (CEGE) and the Secretariat of Social Communication of the Presidency (SECOM) — are currently struggling to control the policy of digital communication in the country. On the one hand, the CEGE is the federal entity responsible for “planning policies, setting guidelines up, coordinating and articulating actions aimed to carry out the national Electronic Government and to provide citizens services and information” (Brazil, 2000). On the other hand, the SECOM has as its main duty to coordinate a system of communication that connects the ministries, public companies and other entities of the Federal Executive. In other words, the Secretariat of Social Communication provides political information through different media and tries to positively highlight the government’s performance.

The Brazilian Court of Auditors noted an overlap in the roles fulfilled by these two entities.

The Web site "Government Network" (<http://www.redegoverno.gov.br/>) under the responsibility of the CEGE and the site Brasil.gov (<http://www.brasil.gov.br/>) managed by the SECOM: both have similar content. This duplication would imply "a waste of money." [7]

Another problem signaled by the Court refers as well to the CEGE's administrative organization. The Court highlights the difficulties brought about by a Presidential Decree released in 2000 which requires the presence of the chief minister of the Civil Cabinet and of many other authorities (such as the Executive Secretaries of all other ministries) in all CEGE's meetings. Due to a lack of flexibility to accommodate schedules, the Court argues that the Committee does not get together periodically. As a result, the guidelines set by e-gov managers are rarely applied. Moreover, according to the Court, if a resolution by the CEGE succeeds, every single government institution will have issues in implementing the policies. As stated in the report: "Each agency carries out actions according to its own time, evolution and technological conditions. [...] [T]he guidelines of the program are not sided by financial resources for their implementation." [8]

Such an organizational disorder partially reveals an institutional unwillingness to make use of new media to foster governmental political interaction with citizens. There is a lack of clarity regarding the specific tasks of each entity within the bureaucratic structure that manages e-government projects. There is a difficulty in assembling officials who represent different parts of the government in the CEGE's meetings. Additionally, there is a disparity in conditions and funds among institutions to implement solutions in information technology. Finally, there is a low level of interactivity of digital communication tools on the President's site. If e-participation tools were really a priority a variety of problems would not be so acute [9].

Another fact suggests the little importance that government places on improving citizens' participation through the Internet. The most sophisticated Brazilian experiences in information technology refer to digital systems aimed to increase tax collection and fiscal control. As examples of these initiatives I can mention the site of the Federal Internal Revenue Service (<http://www.receita.fazenda.gov.br/>).

Silvia Ferro, head of the Internet Section of the Secretariat of Social Communication, admitted that the mechanisms for political involvement offered by the site are not satisfactory due to problems related to the lack of structure and staff to manage the interactive tools (Ferro, 2008). Ferro noted that the Presidency site cannot offer deeper participatory tools because it counts only on the work of three technicians to manage two sites (the Presidency itself and Brasil.gov). Other employees are assigned to answer all the messages sent through these same sites.

Hence there is an unwillingness of political agents to promote participatory tools. There are also considerable costs in implementing, operating, and maintaining digital technologies aimed at improving political involvement. Therefore, since there are few people to take care of Internet tools in this case, it seems to be too much to ask for an accurate configuration of e-participation mechanisms. In the end, one has reason enough to believe that the little importance given to digital media by the Presidency (at least with respect to opportunities for participation) is a result of a macro-policy of electronic government.

The House of Representatives Web site

It is possible to identify some features that are truly unique concerning the importance that the House gives to participation through its site. Firstly, let me stress the organizational characteristics of the site. A Special Commission created in 2004 to reshape the site presented a report named *Qualitative Jump* (Brazil, 2004b). This document marks an important point in how the House offers opportunities for online political participation. As stated in the report: "The site must promote communication between the House of Representatives and society by allowing popular participation and interaction with citizens [and] by strengthening participatory processes" [10]

The creation of a Management Committee — which includes different sections aimed at coordinating the site; weekly meetings; and, the availability of direct channels of communication — reflect the care provided by the institution and its political agents since the beginning of this e-participation experience. A special plan — created by the Special Commission mentioned earlier — was also fundamental to configure participatory tools. Therefore, there seems to have been little institutional resistance to digital devices to foster democratic practices in the House of Representatives' case.

But this idea is only partially consistent. If one can say that the Management Committee made efforts to redesign the site in order to provide deeper e-participation mechanisms, the same cannot be said about all the political representatives who in the end lead the decision-making process which takes place in the House. In other words, the House's case adds a nuance not easily noticeable when studying the Presidency site: it is necessary to perform an extra step to convince another set of political agents (the representatives themselves) about the importance of interacting with citizens through digital communication. In some cases, an institution has a staff willing to make e-participation tools feasible, but the political representatives resist in taking part or in decisively supporting this kind of initiative. Indeed, the Management Committee had to pressure Parliament members to reply to messages sent by users (Botelho and Ferreira Filho, 2007). It has to be stressed, then, that there is a

difference between the willingness of staff and representatives to utilize digital technologies.

In order to deal with this problem, the Management Committee adopted a message tracking system. This system provides a unique number for each message sent through the House of Representatives site. In my opinion it provides at least two advantages. First, this system gives users a greater sense of political effectiveness (Almond and Verba, 1963), since they believe that their messages have a greater chance of being answered. Second, the system gives the Management Committee a means to monitor representatives who do not reply to queries. Once a low answer rate is detected, the Committee asks specific parliamentary offices to reverse the situation. Moreover, the House of Representatives site periodically emphasizes on its news section those representatives who are more attentive to messages sent by users, thus providing positive visibility.

On the economic costs to implement and manage e-participation tools, two of the Web site managers, Mrs. Cássia Botelho and Mr. José Ferreira Filho, confirmed that there are limits to the staff necessary to perform work planned by the Committee (Botelho and Ferreira Filho, 2007). Ferreira Filho said that the Sector that he runs counts only on 16 employees to supervise the entire technical section of the House's information systems (in 2007, the site had over 15,000 pages). Even with a considerable amount of tasks, the interviewees said that they do not face budgetary problems, revealing special attention provided by the institution. Hence in this case, there is an intertwined relationship between political willingness and economic investment over e-participation projects.

Specifically about the design of digital tools, the Management Committee was careful regarding the configuration of e-participation mechanisms. According to Cássia Botelho, a new tool is put at the disposal of citizens only after an internal audit. The Committee is responsible for assessing the human and economic costs involved in this process (Botelho and Ferreira Filho, 2007). There are additional concerns related to the management of the House site, over equipment, Internet connectivity; and staff capacity to handle all the demands created by a new tool (Marques, 2008). The result of this work can be checked online by examining digital forums and chat rooms available on the House of Representatives site.

The House of Representatives Web site performs quite well in spite of various constraints. Additionally, there are other difficulties that have to be carefully examined at this point in order to better understand how traditional politics influences institutions in their adoption of e-participation mechanisms. In order to understand the participatory embracement of the Internet one needs to examine the entanglement between technology and political culture (Street, 1997; Coleman, 1999; Agre, 2002; Seifert and Chung, 2009). By discussing this issue, I want to show that the House of Representatives site has much to do in order to improve democratic practices in Brazil.

A return to the political: Traditional politics and the constraints imposed on e-participation projects

There are other factors that influence the character of government projects aiming to improve participation. I believe that these factors place limits on the potential of new media to heighten democratic practices. However, I think at the same time that they should not be seen as a means to reinforce pessimism towards the effectiveness of communication technologies. Indeed, my main objective is to examine the interface between e-democracy and some of the traditional observations articulated by political theorists trying to understand the complexity of participatory initiatives.

As I noted earlier, the first step in establishing participatory initiatives is to secure a commitment from representative institutions. Second, additional effort is necessary to convince representatives to consider citizens as partners in both the discussion and formulation of public policies (Bohman, 1996; OECD, 2001; Lukensmeyer and Torres, 2006). These two steps are important but not sufficient to put in place an institutional participatory framework.

Another constraint to be given due consideration has to do both with cultivating citizens' "hearts and minds" and with fostering in them a sense of civic responsibility and political competence. Fundamental to the success of any participatory experience is a given political culture and its rules for civic engagement (Putnam, 2000). In other words, political representatives and institutions can expect citizens to feel comfortable in taking part in political processes only if the proper conditions exist to encourage that behavior (Almond and Verba, 1963).

Hence there are a variety of factors, exclusive of technology, that influence any participatory initiative. As Fountain (2001), Blumler and Coleman (2001), Polat (2005) and Balla and

Daniels (2007) pointed out, any serious analysis of the political effects of new media on democracy must avoid technological determinism. The impact of the digital technology on the political realm is always intertwined with cultural factors or, as Agre (2002) noted:

“When institutions change, it is not because a technology such as the Internet descends and, *deus ex machina*, reorganizes the institution’s constitutive order in its own image. Institutions do often change as a result of the opportunities that a new technology makes available, but it is only through the workings of the institution that the dynamics of the change can be found.” [11]

Not all problems affecting the performance of democracies require solutions based on digital communication — and of course not all problems that democracies face are tied uniquely to political participation. In other words, Internet resources do not deal with all democratic deficiency symmetrically. It seems easier to strengthen mechanisms directed at improving government transparency or defending individual rights than to stop the work of lobbyists whose objective is to practice what is called “administrative advocacy”.

Furthermore, I can say not only that new media do provide different answers to some democratic troubles, but also that different democratic realities need different solutions for their particular problems. Once political institutions are actually willing to employ digital tools to improve their democratic practices, they will take advantage of these tools considering the appropriateness of each mechanism to the problems they face on a routine basis. The idea of “forms of use” (Salter, 2004), related to the idea that technologies are developed with a particular use in mind, remains compelling in the cases involving the Internet and government institutions.

Am I arguing for sociocultural determinism in this paper? That is, does this paper “present technologies and media as entirely subordinate to their development and use in particular sociopolitical, historical, and culturally specific contexts” [12]? My intention is not to reinforce any determinism, but to bring to light the idea that there is an interplay between new media and traditional politics. Once representative institutions offer democratically useful digital tools, societies will tend increasingly to employ them and as a consequence these mechanisms will become an indivisible part of the political scenario (Marques, 2008).

That means that if in the future a government tries to remove democratic tools offered through its Web sites, it will probably find a remarkable resistance from citizens and civic organizations due to cultural innovation induced by the availability of these devices. An example of this phenomenon is given by the Transparency Portal, a Brazilian government site that publishes information on federal transfers (<http://www.portaltransparencia.gov.br/>). This experience resulted in clear changes to political activities on the Federal level by allowing anyone to monitor public spending in the country. This tool has been used successfully by the press in its watchdog role, for example. I believe that we need further research on this topic, but this example certainly supports the hypothesis that there is a reciprocal influence between politics and technology.



Conclusion


Many scholars have pointed out different challenges faced by government projects aimed at using new media’s participatory potential — unwillingness of institutions and representatives to share political power; resistance due to economic and political costs of implementation; and, inadequate configuration of interactive tools. This study examined how these problems are reflected in two Brazilian cases. Specifically, I investigated the participatory tools available on the Web sites for the Brazilian Presidency and House of Representatives.

As my empirical research demonstrates, the Brazilian Presidency site focuses mainly on the construction of positive public images by following a top-down approach to political information. This case provided insight into problematic management practices and a lack of resources that ultimately resulted in difficulties for users to become involved in decision-making processes. It is quite clear that the priorities of the Executive branch of the Brazilian Government are not directed to improve participatory practices but instead have to do with investments in improving tax collecting systems and self-promotion.

The Web site for the House of Representatives presented a different willingness to make participation tools available. Since the report *Qualitative Jump* was released, the House claimed to be committed to support its site both financially and politically. A considerable amount of participatory mechanisms — public forums, chat rooms, and opinion polls — were developed. However, it is still important to take into account the willingness of representatives to establish political conversations with users.

Since each experience maintains a particular relationship with the participatory tools

available, the challenges faced by e-participation projects have different levels.

To promote citizens' participation requires more than simply offering e-participation mechanisms. Promoting political involvement is a complex task that requires an assessment of a variety of activities, circumstances, agencies, and political actors. The civic culture, the depth of democratic problems and the peculiarities of each democratic society are key elements in influencing patterns of political involvement. 

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Notes

1. As justification for choosing these two institutions, I point out their importance in the structure of the Brazilian State and the influence that they have over other levels of government in this country.
2. There are other works which have a similar perspective considering the importance of qualitative approaches to research about the Internet: for example, Franklin and Lowry, 2001; OECD, 2003; Medaglia, 2007; Thorsen, 2008.
3. For more information, please visit <http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/folha/informatica/ult124u506631.shtml> and <http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/folha/bbc/ult272u532129.shtml>.
4. I highlight another particular fear: once representatives offer deeper opportunities for political participation, they have to handle controversies and questions that might influence their electoral ends (Stromer-Galley, 2000).
5. Noveck, 2004, pp. 4–5.
6. The House's supra-party character influences its willingness to offer participatory resources.
7. Brazil, 2006, p. 38.
8. Brazil, 2006, pp. 23–24.
9. The curious situation is that the Brazilian official e-government documents defend the urgent need to take advantage of the digital media in order to improve citizens' political participation (Brazil, 2004a, p. 10).
10. Brazil, 2004b, p. 29.
11. Agre, 2002, p. 315.
12. Chandler, 1996, p. 2.

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