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E-Democracy and Opportunities for Engagement in Mexican States Portals

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Introduction

Issue 34 of *Política Digital* published the State E-Government Index. This document is based upon that portal ranking, but using a specific approach. Democracy and citizen engagement. Some of the indicators used in that document are used and supplemented here with other indicators obtained from literature related to this subject.

The concept of democracy, originally referred to as the government exerted by the people, may still be considered as incipient and in formation. From the constitution of Republics, representative democracies hardly granted citizens basic political rights, that is, the right to elect and be elected, but where decisions related to citizen connivance were taken solely by the Government. That is why the concept of deliberative democracy has recently become important, whereas it recognizes that democracy goes far beyond counting votes and voters. From this viewpoint, current democracy must involve the discussion of public issues based upon equity and inclusion, increase and deepen citizens' knowledge, promote the concern for the interests of others and strengthen the confidence of playing an active role in the management of their community, state and country.

In this sense, it is observed that citizenship does not reside in the fact that the beneficent State tries to mitigate economic inequalities of its inhabitants so they become full members of a community, because this line of action makes them dependent and

passive citizens.¹ That is, recognizing the social rights of citizens is not enough, but also they have to comply with certain common obligations. Likewise, it doesn't only have to do with the fact that the citizens elect their representatives by using their right to vote, and granting them the power of decision-making in public political affairs, but with the purpose of getting better and more efficient actions, it is necessary that people get involved at varying extents and stages in the governmental management process.²

There are several ways in which an active and responsible engagement in the public politics processes can be promoted. In first place, engagement representation may be either individual or collective. In second place, engagement must come from a well-defined citizen identity within his/her community, that is, engagement may have a territorial basis (e.g., neighbor committees), a sectorial basis (e.g., women, youths, seniors, disabled, etc.) or subject-related basis (e.g., environmental, cultural, educational, safety, etc.). Finally, in order for the engagement to take place, there must be some previous requirements, including: information relative to the subjects to be discussed; diffusion of such information; about requirements: obligations, and about engagement processes: well-defined objectives for the engagement strategies; qualified personnel for managing the information resulting from the engagement; and material and infrastructure to support engagement logistics.³

Although the existence of participating forums does not ensure the development of a deliberative and participative democracy, there are certain criteria which may be applied to assess its contribution to this democracy. These criteria include: (1) *Inclusion*, which means the existence of equal rights to be heard in this forums without any exclusion; (2) *Deliberation*, as long as the discussion is guided by equity, freedom, competence, free of disillusion, deception and power; (3) *Citizenship*, where citizen experiences and judgment are publicly disclosed, and where citizens are encouraged to develop a

¹ See Nuria Cunill, "Balance de la participación ciudadana en las políticas sociales. Propuesta de un marco analítico" en Alicia Ziccardi (coord.) *Participación Ciudadana y políticas sociales en el ámbito local*. (México: UNAM-IIS, 2004).

² See Alicia Ziccardi, "Claves para el análisis de la participación ciudadana y las políticas sociales en el espacio local" en Alicia Ziccardi (coord.) *Participación ciudadana y políticas sociales en el ámbito local*. (México: UNAM-IIS, 2004).

³ See Alicia Ziccardi, "Espacios e instrumentos de participación ciudadana para las políticas sociales del ámbito local" en Alicia Ziccardi (coord.) *Participación ciudadana y políticas sociales en el ámbito local*. (México: UNAM-IIS, 2004).

mutual respect and understanding of other citizens; (4) *Legitimacy*, where decisions are made by means of participation, and after a public deliberation period.⁴

Methodology

This work uses an Engagement Opportunity Index to measure all 32 state portals. This index handles above mentioned criteria by observing some components and features that are considered could strengthen citizen engagement as a democratic mechanism. Table 1 relates the democratic criteria to the components that can be observed in the state government portals. (See table 1)

In order to prepare the Engagement Opportunity Index, each democratic criterion was assigned the same percentage, due to the fact that the analysis parts from these criteria. Each criterion is in the range from 0 to 25%, total sum range is 0 - 100%. Thereby, each criterion may differ in the number of components, but finally they have the same value. This Index applies to all State portals in Mexico and the degree of compliance is assessed to each criterion. Portal components defined as part of indicators, include:

- *Agenda*. It refers to the publication of future activities where citizens can get involved (e.g. workshops, lectures, courses, public acts, etc.).
- *Announcements*. It is the promotion of democratic activities (e.g., consultations, plebiscites, referendum, civic acts, etc.)
- *Institutions*. It refers to the existence of participation offices, or issuing of laws and regulations by dependencies dealing with the promotion of citizen engagement.
- *Training*. It refers to on-line courses, tutorials or manuals where the way citizens may be involved in public decisions is explained.
- *Games*. It refers to the interactive *e-learning* tools with which citizens (or future citizens) may learn some democratic culture elements.

⁴ See Graham Smith "Toward deliberative Institutions" en Michael Saward *Democratic Innovation*. (Londres: Routledge, 2000).

- **Broadcasts.** Tools used to transmit audio or video to promote public political issues, democratic culture, or citizen engagement.
- **Access.** Tools to facilitate access to the information displayed in the portal (e.g., accessibility, usability, simplicity, user-friendliness, search engines, etc.).

Table 1. Democratic Criteria and Components of Engagement Variables.

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Criterion	Components
1. Inclusion	<i>Agenda, Access, About, Addresses, Telephones, e-Mail, Mailing Lists.</i>
2. Deliberation	<i>E-Forums, Blogs, Chat rooms, e-Requests.</i>
3. Citizenship	<i>Announcements, Training, Games, Broadcasts, Comments, Official Voting, Polls.</i>
4. Legitimacy	<i>Institutions, Position, Cabinet, Surveys, Publications, Statistics.</i>

Source: Own Elaboration.⁵

⁵This table is the result of a thorough investigation in existing literature about Electronic Government, Information and Communication Technologies, and Electronic Democracy. Some of the main references that may be consulted, include: Alvarez y Hall, *Point, Click and Vote: The future of Internet voting*, (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2004); Francesco Amoretti, "International Organizations ICTs Policies: E-Democracy and E-Government for Political Development", *Review of Policy Research*, Vol. 24, No. 4. The Policy Studies Organization, (2007); Lasse Berntzen & Marte Winsvold "Web-based tools for policy evaluation" in Michael Böhlen, Johann Gamper, Wolfgang Polasek & Maria A. Wimmer (Eds.), *E-Government: Towards Electronic Democracy*, (Italia: International Conference, TCGOV2005, 2005); Sarah Birch & Bob Watt, *Remote Electronic Voting: Free, Fair and Secret?*, The Political Quarterly Publishing Co. Ltd, (2004); Graeme Browning, *Electronic Democracy: using the Internet to Influence American Politics*. Pemberton Press (1996); Jean- Loup Chappelet & Pierre Kilchenmann "Interactive Tools for E-Democracy: Examples from Switzerland" in Böhlen, Michael, Johann Gamper, Wolfgang Polasek & Maria A. Wimmer (Eds.) *E-Government: Towards Electronic Democracy* (Italia: International Conference, TCGOV2005, 2005); E-Participate, *The E-Participation Trans-European Network for Democratic Renewal & Citizen Engagement*, [Online]. www.eparticipate.eu., (2004); Ann Macintosh, Angus Whyte & Alistair Renton, *From the Top Down: An Evaluation of E-Democracy Activities Initiated by Councils and Government*, (Bristol: Local E-Democracy National Project, 2005); Ann Macintosh, Andy McKay-Hubbard y Danae Shell, "Using Weblogs to Support Local Democracy" en Böhlen, Michael, Johann Gamper, Wolfgang Polasek & Maria A. Wimmer (Eds.), *E-Government: Towards Electronic Democracy* (Italia: International Conference, TCGOV2005, 2005); Zöe Masters, Ann Macintosh & Ella Smith, "Young People and E-Democracy: Creating a Culture of Participation" in Roland Traunmüller, *Electronic Government: Third International Conference*, EGOV2004, (Spain: Springer, 2004); Agneta Ranerup "Internet-enabled Applications for Local Government Democratization: Contradictions of the Swedish Experience" in Richard Heeks (Ed.) *Reinventing Government in the Information Age*, (London: Rutledge, 1999); Michael Saward, *Democratic Innovation: Deliberation, Representation and Association*, (London: Routledge, 2000); Saebo, Oystein & Hallgeir Nilsen, "The Support for Different Democracy Models by the Use of a Web-based Discussion Board" in Traunmüller, Roland, *Electronic Government: Third International Conference*, EGOV2004, (Spain: Springer, 2004).

- *About*. It refers to the publication in the portal of the biography of public officials, or mission and vision of the government or its dependencies.
- *Addresses*. The physical locations of government dependencies or offices, so citizens can mail (by ordinary mail) any documentation requested or visit such offices.
- *Telephones*. Telephone numbers of dependencies.
- *E-Mail*. Electronic mail addresses so public officials may be contacted.
- *Positions*. Points of view held by officials or decision-making people regarding current public political issues.
- *Cabinet*. Description of the cabinet or body of officials that comprise the public administration (background, performance, etc.).
- *Mailing Lists*. Subscriptions via Internet in order to receive periodical issues of newsletters, reports, articles, etc.
- *E-Forums*. On-line forums for discussion and consultation about specific topics regarding public politics or democratic culture, periodically organized, moderated and updated.
- *Blogs*. On-line spaces for contributing with comments, ideas, coverage, articles that promote citizen expression on public issues.
- *Chat rooms*. Rooms periodically opened for chatting between citizens and government officials which are moderated and previously announced.
- *Comments*. Tools for capturing comments, complaints or suggestions done by citizens, addressed to dependencies or public officials.
- *E-Requests*. Tools for citizens or civil organizations to submit on-line requests related to specific public issues to be considered by dependencies or decision-making people.

- *Surveys.* On-line surveys addressed to citizens, related to public political issues, citizen perception about governmental actions, or civic culture.
- *Official Voting.* On-line voting tools for electing representatives or public officials, implemented in the government portal.

Table 2. Evaluation of State Portals by Criterion.

Evaluation of State Portals by Criterion						
Inclusio						
Ranking	State	n	Deliberation	Citizenship	Legitimacy	Total
1	Nuevo Leon	20%	16%	15%	17%	68%
2	Estado de Mexico	14%	20%	13%	12%	59%
3	Baja California	19%	9%	12%	15%	55%
4	Aguascalientes	19%	5%	13%	13%	50%
5	Distrito Federal	18%	5%	13%	13%	49%
6	San Luis Potosi	15%	7%	12%	15%	48%
7	Guerrero	17%	14%	4%	12%	46%
7	Sonora	18%	9%	4%	15%	46%
9	Morelos	17%	9%	10%	10%	45%
10	Jalisco	19%	7%	6%	12%	43%
11	Oaxaca	16%	2%	12%	12%	41%
12	Veracruz	15%	2%	6%	17%	40%
12	Zacatecas	15%	2%	8%	15%	40%
14	Coahuila	14%	2%	10%	13%	39%
14	Durango	17%	5%	8%	10%	39%
14	Guanajuato	17%	5%	10%	8%	39%
14	Tlaxcala	16%	5%	8%	12%	39%
18	Quintana Roo	15%	5%	8%	12%	38%
19	Chihuahua	14%	5%	8%	12%	37%
19	Hidalgo	11%	5%	4%	17%	37%
21	Tamaulipas	17%	5%	8%	6%	35%
22	Nayarit	14%	7%	6%	8%	34%
22	Tabasco	13%	5%	4%	13%	34%
24	Queretaro	14%	2%	4%	13%	33%
25	Campeche	15%	2%	4%	12%	32%
25	Chiapas	15%	0%	13%	4%	32%

Source: Own Elaboration.⁶

⁶ In order to prepare this table all 32 state portals were thoroughly reviewed verifying compliance level with established variables.

- *Polls*. On-line consulting tools by voting about specific public political issues or government actions. The difference between these components and *Surveys* is the deepness subjects are treated. While these include only one question, in the case of *Surveys* citizens should deepen in the topics to be investigated.
- *Publications*. Reports and minutes of meetings held between officials and citizens or organizations where public political proposals have been discussed.
- *Statistics*. Publication of results and statistics about implemented public policies in the states.

Results

Results obtained in this assessment, once the Index was applied, are shown in the table below:

As can be seen, very few states are above 50% compliance with the democratic criteria. Regarding *inclusion*, this is well beyond expectations. Portal average is 16%, 15 portals above and 17 below average. Highest-ranked portals regarding this criterion are those of Nuevo Leon, Baja California, Aguascalientes and Jalisco. Lowest-ranked portals are the ones of Tabasco, Michoacan, Baja California Sur and Colima. Probably, part of the progress regarding to this criterion may be explained by the good practices and standards followed in the portals design, and the important benefits contributed at international level.

Legitimacy is another criterion highly taken into account within the portals, although not as much as the inclusion criterion. Regarding this criterion, most portals are between 12% and 13%, where 21 portals are above, and 11 are below average. Portals with higher compliance percentage are the ones of Nuevo Leon, Veracruz and Hidalgo. Portals with lower percentage are those of Tamaulipas, Sinaloa, Chiapas and Yucatan. It could be thought that part of the progress in this criterion is due to the importance acquired at political level of government's own image.

On the other hand, although the *citizenship* criterion only got 15% and there are many portals which only comply with 4%, it can be seen

that there are states that are looking for improvement in this aspect. Portals average regarding this criterion is 8%, where 18 portals are above, and 14 are below average. Portals with higher percentages are those of Nuevo Leon, Estado de Mexico, Aguascalientes, Distrito Federal and Chiapas. Lower percentage portals are those of Colima and Baja California Sur.

The last criterion being analyzed is *deliberation*, which is the least-observed in the state portals design, and very few provide tools for the citizens to express their opinions related with public topics. Average for this criterion is 6%, where 9 portals are above, and 23 are below average. Portals with higher percentages were those of Nuevo Leon, Estado de Mexico and Guerrero; while those with the lower percentages were the ones of Chiapas and Baja California Sur.

Although this study is not fully comparable to the State Government Index (IGEE, by its acronym in Spanish)⁷ above mentioned and developed in 2007, in both studies portals of Nuevo Leon, Baja California, Guerrero, Estado de Mexico and Sonora are ranked among the first 10. In both Indexes it was also observed that among the lower-ranked portals were those of Baja California Sur, Puebla, Nayarit, Queretaro, and Campeche. However, there are some portals that hold entirely different positions in both Indexes. For example, the portal of San Luis Potosi is located 13 places above with respect to IGEE and the one of Morelos is located 11 places above. As opposed, the portal of the state of Sinaloa, as well as the one of Michoacan are located 13 places below, and Yucatan is located 23 places below, all with respect to IGEE issued in 2007. These differences may reflect changes from one year to another, because portals are very dynamic, but that also may indicate that in some states citizen engagement channels are more or less important with respect to their general electronic government strategy.

Conclusions

As stated throughout this work, electronic government is a tool that may assist in strengthening democracy. It has been observed through the state portals that governments intend with greater

⁷ See Sandoval, Gil-García y Luna-Reyes, "Ranking de portales estatales, la medición 2007" en *Política Digital*, No. 38 (México: Grupo Nexos, 2007).

responsibility, to improve the quality of their management, but also to provide better citizen engagement opportunities. The implementation of the Electronic Government has had an important progress in Mexico. More and more governmental processes are programmed and standardized by the use of Information and Communications Technologies. Although from the functionality point of view, Mexican portals have shown an important progress, there are still great vacuums that need to be filled. In order to consolidate Mexican democracy, citizen engagement must become more and more important in the digital government strategies. It is not enough or even desirable that decision making is in the hands of very few people. Well-informed citizens in full exercise of their rights must get involved in the direction taken by their government, and technology can be an important ingredient for this process. Hence, it is imperative that citizens begin to demand more opportunities for getting involved in decision making, including electronic means, and face-to-face.

In the assessment done to the state portals of Mexico in this work, it could be observed that state governments considered some of the variables. However, some others are missing in most of them. It is necessary to plan, design, implement and to systematically evaluate the electronic government strategies, and citizen engagement opportunities in each state. It is important to start educating citizens in civic, social and democratic education, by means of some tools provided in the portals. It is also important to explain how the institutions created to serve citizens operate, with the purpose that the citizens fully understand what the purpose of such institutions is. Furthermore, the provision of spaces that allows and promotes the informed deliberation regarding public interest issues, and that such deliberations are taken as a support for decision making, is an effort that may yield important benefits in the mid and long terms.