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Parliamentary Diplomacy, globalization, and digital transformation of Parliaments in the era of COVID-19 pandemic: past, present and the challenges of the future

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Abstract

Parliaments, generally characterized by their attachment to history and traditions, face the challenge of modernizing and adapting to new technologies. In this chapter, I relate the opportunity presented for parliaments and parliamentarians to focus on the future through the development of prospective tasks and the incorporation, in parallel, of information and communication technologies at the pace of their constant innovation. It thus aspires to interoperability between parliaments, the executive branches of government and science, technology and innovation systems, particularly in the field of foreign policy and international relations, a process that requires not only a high level of development of the electronic government model but also the updating of parliamentary structures, processes and particularly information systems, as well as the political will of its authorities and the good reception from its human recourses, being its organizational culture critical.

Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic constitutes a global phenomenon of high impact not only because of the effects on the physical and mental health of the population but also because of its consequences on political, social, economic, educational, cultural, environmental and many other aspects of modern life, in particular, concerning scientific and technological innovation, especially in terms of use, adaptation, and development of information and communication technologies (ICT).

Although the classic division of governments into branches (executive, legislative and judicial) assigns them different temporal perspectives, even being parliaments the power with the most significant capacity to impact in the long term due to the tendency of laws to remain in time, their capabilities to anticipate the future has been very little developed.

Furthermore, parliaments not only find it challenging to provide foresight but also often adapt legislation belatedly to scientific and technological innovations and their correlation to social behaviour. Laws, like public policies, tend to be generally reactive.

Looking to the future: something relatively recent and unusual

The formidable process of technological innovation in the second half of the last century led to the creation in the U.S. in 1972 of the first parliamentary office specialized in technology assessment: the OTA[1], inspiring the design of similar offices in other parts of the world.[2]

This allowed these new and sophisticated legislative scientific advisory services to carry out prospective studies in addition to producing technical reports based on evidence adapted for consumption by parliamentarians and their teams. Both products are intended to strengthen the field of the classic legislative functions that include the representation of the citizens and the different territorial districts; the construction of political agendas; the law-making; parliamentary control; the treatment and approval of the budget; and parliamentary diplomacy, which includes the power to approve or reject international agreements, among other relevant faculties.

In 1993 the Parliament of Finland created the world's first Committee for the Future to generate an institutional dialogue with the executive branch of government on the main challenges and opportunities that could lie ahead in the future. Its example was followed by other parliaments at

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[1] Created by the Technology Assessment Law, L. N 1º 92-484, on October 13, 1972., 86 Stat. 787, 2 U.S.C. & 471 (1976), the OTA was an office intended to provide the U.S. Congress with early indications about the probable impact, beneficial or adverse, that technology applications could have on society. In 1995, more than two decades later, it would stop working. In just under 24 years, the OTA published over 750 technical reports, receiving all kinds of praise.

[2] In 1983 the French National Assembly created the OPCEST; in 1987, the European Parliament the STOA; in 1989, the British Parliament the POST; and in 1990 the Bundestag, the TAB.

both the national[3] and sub-national[4] levels, with the recent experience of the European Union standing out for its originality. [5]

Both models, that of evidence-informed legislation and that of parliaments with a vision of the future, although they share prospective functions, have different orientations; the first focused on the objective, neutral, impartial and balanced study of current and future matters from the scientific and technological point of view; and the second in the construction of an institutional vision based on the anticipation of what is estimated to happen in the future, that is, it responds to more strategic planning.

Technology Assessment	1972	1983	1987	1989	1990	2021
	OTA United States	OPCEST France	STOA EP	POST UK	TAB Germany	FECYT Spain
Committees for the Future	1993	2004	2005	2011	2017	2019
	Finland	Germany	Scotland	Brasil Chile	Corea Uruguay	EU

Even though these platforms have existed for five and three decades and are considered "good parliamentary practices", they are in their infancy and in just a small group of parliaments in the world.[6]

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[3] Germany created the Parliamentary Advisory Council on Sustainable Development of the Bundestag in 2004; Brazil and Chile created Future Commissions in their respective Senates in 2011; the Korea National Assembly created the Futures Institute in 2017; and Uruguay the Futures Institute of its parliament in 2017.

[4] Scotland created the Scotland Futures Forum in 2005.

[5] https://futureu.europa.eu/?locale=en

[6] The European Parliamentary Technology Assessment Network (EPTA) has only 13 full members, 11 corresponding to national parliaments, one subnational (Catalonia) and one supranational (European Parliament), while another 12 are associate members, ten national, one subnational (Wallonia) and one supranational (the Council of Europe).

The weight of parliamentary components

As the doctrine describes it, parliaments are complex organizations whose functioning responds to at least five assembled elements: the human factor, the culture, its structure, the processes that regulate them, and the information systems.[7] Since both the general organization and the powers and functioning of parliaments are usually defined by constitutional norms, the processes of modernization and digital transformation to be implemented must respect both the spirit and the letter of those norms, in the same way as has happened generally through history, whether the changes come from formal reforms, by way of interpretation, or are generated by mere custom.

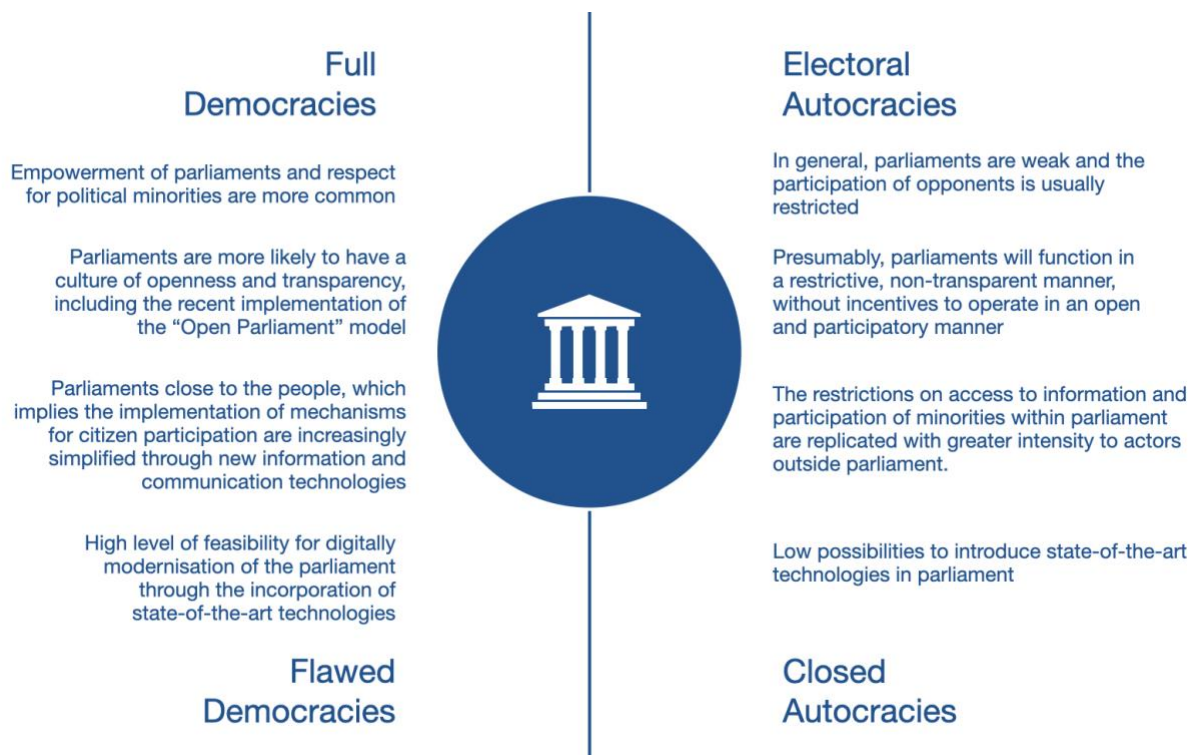The "human factor" includes to the parliamentarians and to the parliamentary officials, agents, and employees.

A parliament's institutional culture stems from its history and traditions, practices and values, its vision, mission, and role in society. That culture is collectively constructed and represented by its people and is part of the general culture of the community to which it belongs.

The structure, processes, and information systems of a parliament respond inexorably to its "people" and the "culture" with which the institution is imbued.

It is curious to observe how democracy and its institutions have spread in the modern world due to multiple factors, including globalization and technological development. However, there is still a very high percentage of defective democracies, electoral autocracies, and closed autocracies, whose culture and people are less likely to empower parliaments and allow the existence of systems that guarantee public access to information and data, their processing, and the expansion of participation not only internally but also and fundamentally with actors external to the organization.

This issue is central to addressing the study of any of the powers assigned to parliaments in the face of the challenges and opportunities arising from the digital transformation we are experiencing as a global society, including those linked to parliamentary diplomacy and the international relations of parliaments.

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[7] Koryzis, Dalas, Spiliotopoulos and Fitsilis (2021).

Full Democracies

Empowerment of parliaments and respect for political minorities are more common

Parliaments are more likely to have a culture of openness and transparency, including the recent implementation of the "Open Parliament" model

Parliaments close to the people, which implies the implementation of mechanisms for citizen participation are increasingly simplified through new information and communication technologies

High level of feasibility for digitally modernisation of the parliament through the incorporation of state-of-the-art technologies

Flawed Democracies

Electoral Autocracies

In general, parliaments are weak and the participation of opponents is usually restricted

Presumably, parliaments will function in a restrictive, non-transparent manner, without incentives to operate in an open and participatory manner

The restrictions on access to information and participation of minorities within parliament are replicated with greater intensity to actors outside parliament.

Low possibilities to introduce state-of-the-art technologies in parliament

Closed Autocracies

Regarding the organizational design of parliaments and beyond the classic divisions between the structures to which purely parliamentary powers are assigned, and those that are in charge of administrative matters, more and more units and teams enjoy functional independence and a high level of specialization, capable of keeping up with the depth and speed of change.

In the same sense, the old operating rules of parliaments, derived from written regulations (standing orders) and traditions rooted over time, generally very long-standing, must be adapted to new technologies in everything that means an improvement in the fulfilment of their competencies. Resisting these changes constitutes malpractice.

The new intra- and inter-parliamentary information systems, aimed at enriching the functions in charge of parliaments and their normal operations, must also progress at the pace of technological innovation and their assimilation capacity by the other branches of government, especially executives, science, technology and innovation systems; civil organizations, particularly those that act in unregulated markets, and by society itself as a whole, without prejudice also to consider the comparative experiences of peer parliamentary institutions in other parts of the world.

In short, nations' level of development and competitiveness must have a direct correlation with the quality of democratic institutions, including parliaments, and their status of adaptation to change, primarily scientific and technological innovation.

Adaptation of the
Community to constant
Technological innovation

Executive
Branch of
Government

Science,
Technology and
Innovation
System

Parliamentary

Technological
Systems

Civil
Society

Private Sector
(especially
corporations
and companies in
unregulated markets)

Comparative experiences with
advanced parliaments in their
digital transformation process

Examples of parliamentary functions that require expert advice and the use of advanced technologies

Before referring to parliamentary diplomacy and international relations, we describe below what happens, for example, with the powers of parliaments in terms of budget control, one of the most complex, sensitive and high-impact chapters for modern societies, since it is about the planning of income and expenses of funds of different sources and types; and the allocation of investment or

public spending in all areas in which the State intervenes, including the parliament itself, as a whole, and in each of its fields of intervention.

The competencies of parliaments in budgetary matters require specialised technical advice, structures, procedures, and systems that guarantee access to proprietary statistical information and big data, such as information systems managed and developed by other jurisdictions, especially by the executive power of governments.

For this reason, the parliaments of a small group of countries in the world[8] have independent fiscal institutions (IFIs) that provide an impartial analysis of the promoted economic and budgetary policies. In 2014, the OECD adopted a series of recommendations[9] that include the need for IFIs to have full access to information promptly, including access to the methodology and assumptions adopted for budget preparation.

Let us see what also happens with parliamentary oversight. The greater the development of e-government, the more efficient and sophisticated the controls that its parliament develops should be. To that end, much remains to be done to achieve adequate levels of digital governance and government interoperability to enable near-online controls.

Not by chance, the best-ranked countries in the world in e-government are, in all cases, developed countries with high GDP per capita, although they present disparities between them.[10]

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[8] Institutions of the type are recorded in Belgium (1936), the Netherlands (1945); Denmark (1962); Austria (1970) and the USA (1974). Currently, 34 of 38 OECD member countries have some IFI.

[9] Called "principles", they were developed by the Network of Parliamentary Budget Officials and Independent Fiscal Institutions (PBO) together with the Working Group of Senior Budget Officials (SBO) and the Committee on Global Governance of the OECD. In addition, for its preparation, they had the support of the European Commission, the IMF and the World Bank.

[10] According to the latest United Nations survey on electronic government (2020), which includes its 193 member countries, the list of the most advanced countries in the world is led by Denmark, Korea and Estonia, followed by Finland, Australia, Sweden, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, USA, Netherlands, Singapore, Iceland, Norway and Japan.
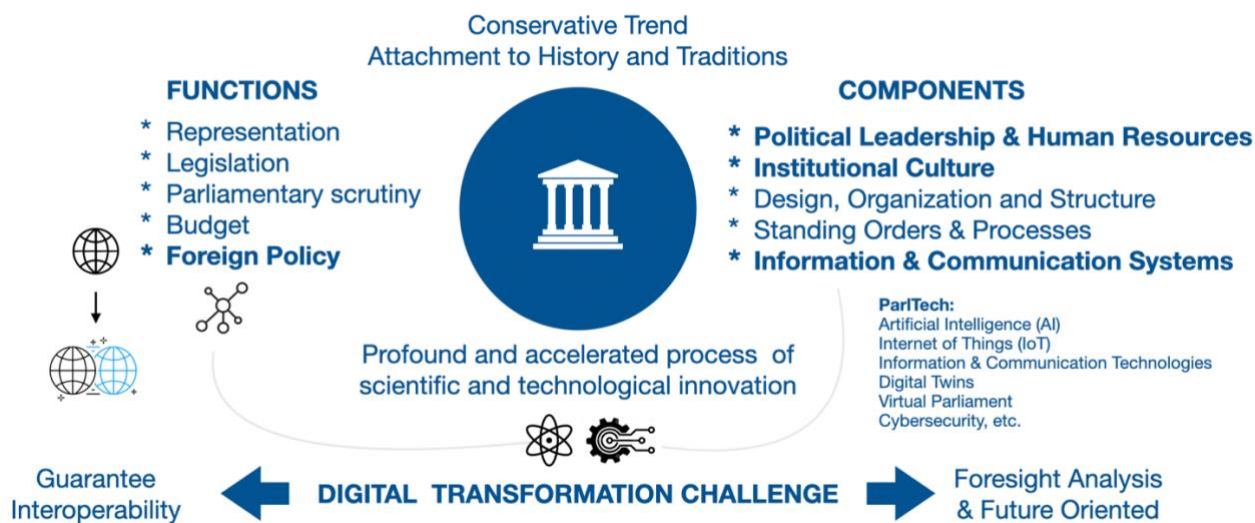
Parliamentary diplomacy and international relations of parliaments

The same reflections expressed in the previous point apply to parliamentary diplomacy and the international relations of parliaments, a function that includes, of course, their powers in foreign policy matters (Trillo:1997; Velázquez: 2010; Giménez Martínez: 2013; Stavridis: 2019).

Instead of citing a specific definition of parliamentary diplomacy, of which there are many and with different scopes, I prefer to quote the following question from Stavridis (2019) and his consecutive answer: "do all international activities of parliaments represent "parliamentary diplomacy"? ... the international activities of parliaments should be incorporated within the framework of a political project, in a design that defines the agents, goals and deadlines, and contributes to the consolidation of the country's international role in synergy with government policies " (according to Volante, cited by Giménez Martínez: 2014); clarifying that these activities try to "impact on an international or internal issue with international implications.

Parallel to the different meanings of the term "diplomacy" applied to the executive branch of governments[11], in the case of parliaments, the term refers to:

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[11] See Berridge and James, "A Dictionary of Diplomacy".

a) the main means of communication between parliaments and parliamentarians, through instruments (missions, visits, friendship groups, interparliamentary commissions, political dialogue, among others) and their own platforms (organisations, summits, networks, among others):

b) the use of tact in dealings between parliamentarians in the field of interparliamentary relations (diplomacy as a skill);

c) the intervention of parliaments and parliamentarians in promoting international efforts or negotiations through dialogue to avoid the use of force and armed conflicts (soft power); and

d) the exercise of constitutional powers by parliaments, associated with foreign policy (agreement for the appointment of diplomats; authorisation to declare war or peace; authorisation for the entry and exit of troops; ratification or rejection of signed treaties by the executive power; foreign trade and foreign investments; among others, depending on the particularities of each case).

The concept of "parliamentary diplomacy" in this academic work includes the four meanings mentioned, and each one must apply a digital modernization strategy.

The main characteristics and elements of parliamentary diplomacy are as follows:

a) the active subjects are parliaments and parliamentarians;

b) the object is public affairs;

c) the recipients are other parliaments and parliamentarians, but also other subjects, including governments, international organizations, and publics of all kinds;

d) the scope is multi-level (unilateral, bilateral, regional, multilateral, international and global);

e) the means used are formal and informal;

f) how it is exercised is complementary to official diplomacy, but usually adopts its own notes, depending on the level of independence of each parliament concerning the executive branch of government;

g) represents for those who exercise it a combination of interests (of the country, of the parliament, of the political bloc to which the parliamentarian belongs, of his district, and of his own interests);

h) pursues, preferably, the defence of national interests; the protection of human rights; the promotion of peace and democratic values; helps to deal with global challenges; and facilitates parliamentary management; and

i) the context responds to an increasingly inter-dependent and hyper-connected world.

The question under study can be analysed from different points of view, but we chose on this occasion to enunciate three: within the parliament; in the interaction between parliament and the institutions of the same State, and the field of inter-parliamentary relations, that is, between peers.

Within parliaments, parliamentary diplomacy, in the broad sense, must have highly specialised human resources, culture, structures, processes and information systems.

Unlike other fields of parliamentary action, foreign policy and international relations focus not only on domestic audiences but also on external ones. This leads to a series of peculiarities, including different legal frameworks, action guidelines, protocols, time zones, languages, idiosyncrasies, cultures, political regimes, geographies and information about countries and regions other than the countries which parliaments and their parliamentarians belong. Among its interlocutors, on the other hand, are in addition to the parliamentary peers (legislators, officials and employees), the foreign ministries and diplomatic corps, both local and foreign; other government portfolios in practically all areas, especially defence and intelligence; investment and international trade; migrations; ambient; human rights; international organisations and institutions; the foreign communities settled in the country and the national ones distributed in different parts of the world; as well as corporations and institutions and personalities of all kinds.

To correctly execute the functions associated with this competence, parliaments must have specialised advice of a legislative nature to guarantee their independence from the government and the plurality that characterises them. In parallel, they must develop and maintain a relationship as articulated and coordinated as possible with their chancelleries, which assist the Chief of State or Government in leading the foreign policy.

The incorporation of state-of-the-art technologies constitutes an essential aspect of successfully managing parliamentary diplomacy, which must deal with increasingly complex and sophisticated issues.
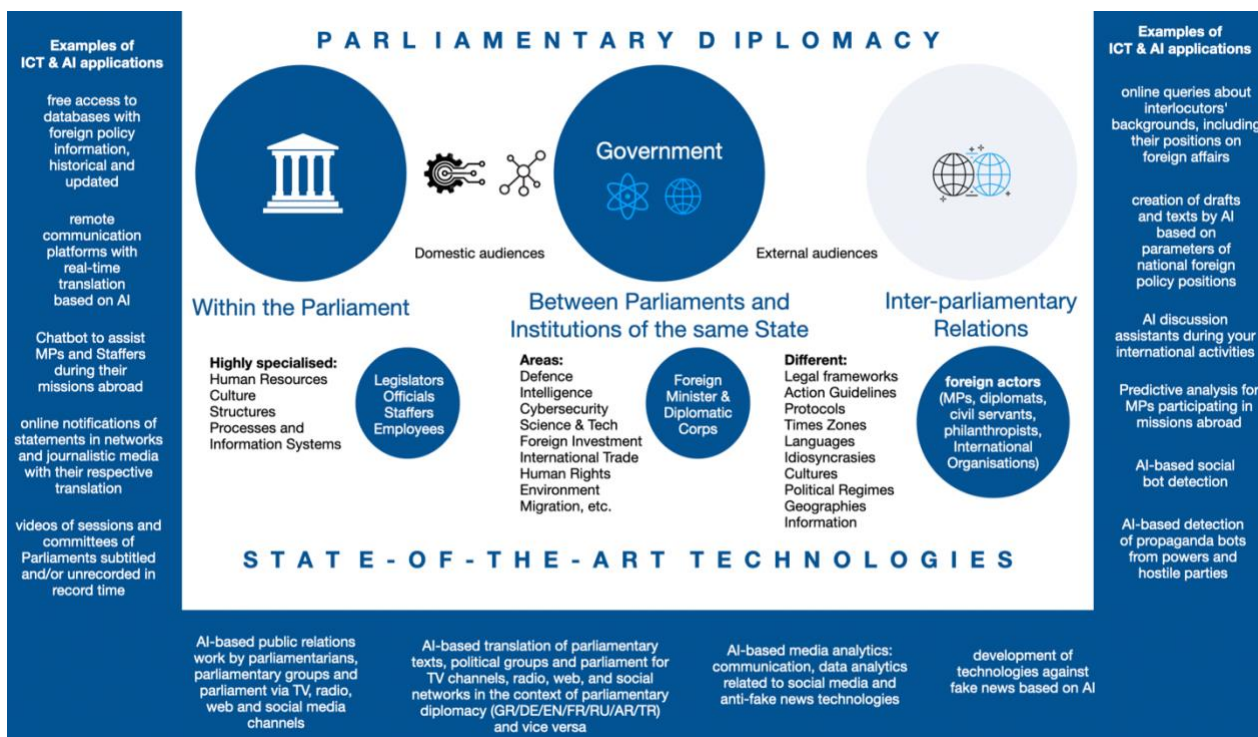
To cite just one example, the Panel for the Future of Science and Technology of the European Parliament issued a report in December 2021 focused on the technological sovereignty of the EU.

In this regard, "key enabling technologies" (KETs) (advanced materials and manufacturing, life science technologies, micro/nanoelectronics and photonics, artificial intelligence, and security and connectivity technologies) are considered crucial to ensure not just an interconnected, digitized, resilient and healthier society, but also the EU's competitiveness and position in the world economy.[12]

Instead of considering parliamentary diplomacy a threat, the executive powers should try to develop, as a good practice, management that integrates parliament and parliamentarians into foreign policy.

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[12] *Key enabling technologies for Europe's technological* sovereignty. Study Panel for the Future of Science and Technology. EPRS (European Parliamentary Research Service). Scientific Foresight Unit (STOA). PE 697.184. December 2021.

This will benefit not only the building of better bilateral relations and addressing better global issues in multilateral settings but also matters of public diplomacy.[13]

The cooperative play between the competencies, powers and functions of parliaments and parliamentarians in matters of parliamentary diplomacy and international relations and the central role that governments play in cases of foreign policy must have as a correlate with the implementation of information technologies and (ICT) available according to state of the art and the innovations that occur in the future, taking into account the possibility of achieving the most advanced interoperability possible.

In addition, by its very nature, the field of international relations serves as a window for exchanging comparative experiences and good practices, especially in ICT matters.

Big data technologies are essential not only for their ability to process large volumes of information and legal documentation, both domestic and foreign, parliamentary, and extra-parliamentary; but also, to explore trends and discover indicators through information derived from the use of social networks, diplomatic channels, intelligence (declassified) and even current and historical newspapers and publications.[14]

In the executive-legislative relationship, the availability of information and exchanges between powers -preferably online- acquire relevance during the negotiations of international agreements of all kinds, especially trade agreements, since, by their nature, require ratification and, many times, the promulgation of internal laws for correct implementation. This would also contribute to closing the democratic gap that is increasingly evident in international relations, which has generated a

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[13] For example, Canadian diplomacy has the custom that parliamentary delegations travelling abroad produce very detailed reports on previously reported topics of national interest, which helps to build a perception of the opinion of the audience of the country visited through responses and comments from their representatives in parliament.

[14] For example, Toine Pieters (2013) describes the use of data technologies to determine the influence of American culture in the Netherlands through processing publications made over long periods. See also Fitsilis and Stavridis (2021), who investigated which digital tools were utilized in an effort to defend and promote Greece´s stance relanted to the November 2019 Turkey – Libya Memorandum of Understanding on maritime boundaries in the Mediterranean Sea.

distortion that puts governance at risk by eroding the role of parliaments and, therefore, the quality of democracy.

Finally, IT can also play a highly relevant role in inter-parliamentary relations by facilitating exchanges between legislators from different countries and their teams, particularly in multilateral settings.[15]

As in the case of an ill-informed diplomat and, therefore, little or nothing prepared to carry out a particular diplomatic mission, a legislator who assumes functions of parliamentary diplomacy must have the relevant information and specialized technical support to represent the interests of the country. Technologies, in this sense, constitute an essential tool in both preparations.

The sporadic contacts of the era of the physical world are being replaced by much more dynamic relationships typical of the current digital age, improving the chances of intermediation of diplomats and legislators with their peers from other parts of the world.

However, none of the cases of specialized legislative advice addressed in this study involves conditioning the decision-making capacity of parliamentarians and their respective political forces. Contrary to this, experience indicates that the proper functioning of parliaments results in a higher quality of laws, improvements in government control and auditing of government accounts, more fiscal discipline and transparency, as well as greater consensus around foreign policy and in the articulation and interaction between official diplomacy and parliamentary diplomacy. It also improves levels of trust in parliament and the prestige of parliamentarians.

In addition, with the capabilities added by new data technologies, these specialized legislative services help address agenda items without bias and in the most objective way possible.

The big question is, to what extent are the "people" and the "culture" of parliaments willing to accept change? In the feasibility level of going from words to deeds lies the main challenge of digital transformation projects, including the administration and management of extensive data systems.

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[15] The COVID-19 pandemic brought a great debate regarding the so-called "digital diplomacy".

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced parliaments worldwide to rehearse urgent responses to the paralysis caused by measures taken to prevent contagion. Technology was vital, in most cases, to guarantee the continuity of work in commissions, sessions and other activities that went into digital format. However, these technologies already existed, so their lack of initial implementation was due to regulatory and cultural limitations.
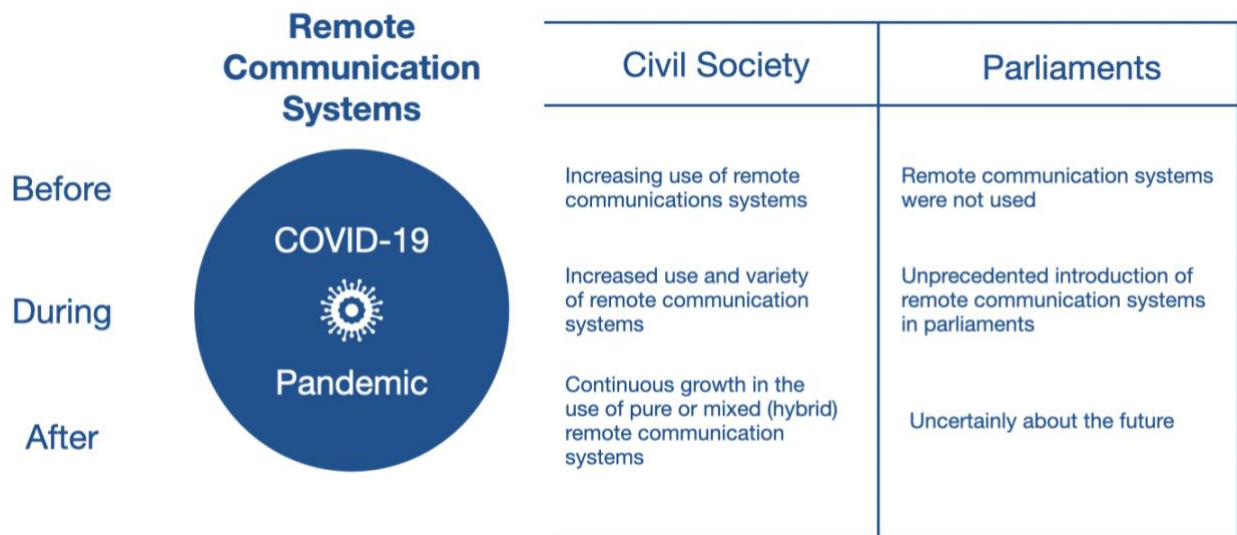
Suppose parliaments focus on the future, as the latest IPU global parliamentary report recommends, and face foresight processes that include an approach to their institutional role in society. In that case, they will surely realize the challenges and opportunities that technologies suppose and the risks of not adapting and moving away from ordinary citizens, especially the younger generations.

Perhaps one of the solutions to adopt is to take advantage of new technologies to expand the channels of participation and dialogue between parliaments and their communities while demanding greater involvement of parliaments and parliamentarians in the international arena to facilitate the construction of consensus, something increasingly difficult to achieve, and one of the most critical shortcomings of modern societies.

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