



E-participation

Document Version

Accepted author manuscript

[Link to publication record in Manchester Research Explorer](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Cantijoch Cunill, M., & Gibson, R. (2019). E-participation. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedias: Politics* Oxford University Press.

Published in:

Oxford Research Encyclopedias

Citing this paper

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E-PARTICIPATION

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Oxford Research Encyclopedias

Published: Jan 2019

DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.580

<https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-580>

Summary

The study of e-participation is a young and growing discipline in which controversies are vibrant. One of these is the lack of a widely accepted definition of “e-participation.” Online political activities that involve little effort from the participant, such as liking or sharing political content on social media, are particularly divisive. Some scholars are reluctant to label expressive forms of online behavior as political participation. Others argue in favor of an adaptation of previous definitions to accommodate recent technological changes.

Levels of engagement in different types of e-participation are increasing steadily over time. While differences between democracies are often stark, the upward trend has been consistent, especially since the emergence and expansion of social media. Whether this means that previously unengaged individuals are now taking part is one of the central questions of the literature on e-participation. To date, research has shown positive but modest results in support for a mobilizing effect. Particularly promising are findings suggesting that online tools are attracting younger participants to the political arena.

Online forms of political engagement are often placed in a more general process leading to online and offline political participation. “Lean-forward” models that provide a contextualized understanding of the drivers and effects of e-participation are particularly insightful. In order to provide robustness to some of the questions that remain unresolved, scholars exploring e-participation should consider expanding their methodological repertoires. The trend is toward mixed designs that combine surveys and other forms of data (big data collected from social media or qualitative data).

Keywords

e-participation, political participation, political engagement, political behavior, Internet, social media, digital technologies.

Introduction

During election campaigns, political parties and candidates rush to the Internet. Websites are relaunched, YouTube channels filled up with videos, and Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram accounts created (or revived) in the hope that Internet users will read, “like,” and share the election message of the day. More often than campaign strategists would like, however, the websphere then goes on to produce an alternative selection of online campaign hits with unofficial videos, jokes, and memes going viral across social media timelines and walls. By the end of the campaign, a fair proportion of voters will have engaged with both official and unofficial information about the election on the Internet. Smaller but not insignificant groups also express their views and comment on the election with their peers, perhaps even encouraging others to vote for a particular candidate. Does this mean that people are engaging more in politics? Are these online activities new forms of political participation?

Studies of online political behavior have explored these and other nonelectoral online political activities, such as signing online petitions, discussing politics on a forum, or joining a political group on social media. The list is getting longer as online tools and platforms become more widespread. It is common practice to refer to these activities as online political participation, or e-participation. But it is actually not widely accepted whether all of them qualify as such (see [“What is Political Participation”](#)). The emergence and expansion of Internet-based forms of political engagement reopened debates in the political participation scholarship. Is our classic understanding of what constitutes political participation and of the motivations driving this behavior still valid when the activity takes place online?

This article offers an overview of the various attempts to analyze this ambitious question in the e-participation literature and of the controversies still open in the responses provided. It describes some fundamental unresolved questions but also argues that there are plenty of options available to address these gaps in future research. The article has three core sections. The first describes the arduous process of defining what e-participation is. It discusses the controversies that arise when labeling as political participation different activities performed on the Internet and on social media in particular. The second section explores the levels and profiles of those engaging in e-participation in order to address questions about the mobilization potential of online tools. The final section places e-participation as part of a more general process leading to political engagement and argues for a contextualized understanding of the drivers and effects of e-participation. In the conclusion, we discuss the implications of these debates and offer some suggestions for future research.

Defining e-Participation: A Slippery Process

The Expansion of the Definition of Political Participation in the Digital Age

Scholars’ attempts to define political participation have traditionally addressed an apparently simple question: What can people do if they want to influence the decisions made by those in power? A couple of decades ago, the answer to this question typically included voting along with an inventory of political actions such as signing a petition, attending a demonstration, or joining a voluntary group

(Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Since then, addressing this question has become more problematic. For many, political participation now includes a new set of online activities such as e-mailing a politician, posting political comments on a forum, or sharing messages on social media in support of a political cause. These activities are often called online political participation, or e-participation. But not everyone agrees with an expansion of the definition of such a fundamental concept in the study of political behavior. So what is “e-participation,” and more important, what is not?

Surprisingly, the study of online political behavior was well underway before the question of what constitutes e-participation captured the full attention of scholars. Some of the first empirical analyses of e-participation simply adopted a “matter-of-fact” approach, exploring online activities without questioning their right to be considered political participation. This was motivated by the fact that the activities included in these studies were generally online equivalents of well-established forms of participation such as signing an e-petition, donating money online, or contacting a politician using e-mail (Anduiza, Gallego, & Cantijoch, 2010; Best & Krueger, 2005; Bimber, 1999). Others applied a broad understanding of the term “political participation” and included a new set of political activities that could be performed on the Internet but whose participatory character would be controversial in the offline jurisdiction.

Krueger (2002) was a pioneer in measuring an online participation scale that, along with classic acts such as contacting politicians and donating money to a political cause, included other non-instrumental types of engagement such as visiting a candidate’s website or placing a campaign link on a website. Conscious of the extravagance of this approach, Krueger (2002) argued that the inclusion of non-goal-oriented activities should not be questioned in the study of online participation given the characteristics of the new medium and its ability to blur boundaries between what is active versus passive behavior (p. 483).

In a related vein, Gibson, Lusoli, & Ward (2005) examined 15 activities, ranging from contacting politicians via e-mail to signing up for an online news bulletin or searching for political information on the web. They included all of these activities in an index of “online political participation.” The use of such an unconventional and broad conception of the term was justified in that “the context provided by the Internet means that the activities take on new dimensions and forms that are at once more visual, immediate, self-selected and impersonal” (Gibson et al., 2005, p. 566).

The adoption of an all-inclusive definition of political participation became more appealing to researchers with the expansion of social media. Activities such as friending or liking a politician on Facebook or sharing a political opinion on Twitter soon became the new gems of e-participation research. Vissers and Stolle (2014) included several measures of political expression on Facebook (e.g., sharing an opinion, joining or starting a political group) in their analysis of young people’s online and offline political participation. Vaccari and his co-authors (2015) used an innovative sample of Twitter users in the context of an election campaign in Italy to explore the determinants of using social media to encourage others to vote for a political party.

This approach to studying political participation that adds to the mix anything political done online has become highly controversial. Notably, some of the most prominent experts of political participation of the pre-Internet era have called for a cautious approach in any efforts to revisit the conventional meaning of the concept of political participation:

Will a social networking site like Facebook facilitate the dissemination of political information and encourage models of online and offline political participation, as conventionally understood? Or will these rapidly changing forms of digital interaction dilute the meaning of politically engaged citizenship? Although “liking” a candidate is not the same as taking part in a campaign, will it become the first step in that direction? (Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2012, pp. 532–533)

Soon after the emergence and rise in popularity of social media sites, the jury was out as to whether friending or following a candidate on social media, posting a political comment on a blog, or sharing a political meme could be included in the same category as classic acts of political participation such as voting, attending a demonstration, or signing a petition. Several studies accepted the challenge of addressing this question using different strategies.

Gibson and Cantijoch (2013) developed an empirical analysis comparing 18 measures of online and offline activities collected in the UK. They concluded that online forms of engagement are differentiated into distinct dimensions following a structure similar to what has been observed for offline participation. These results provide reassurance to scholars seeking to include some of these indicators of e-participation in their analyses under the standard label of “political participation.” Moreover, this study also suggested that the emergence of new forms of expressive behavior online, such as posting or embedding political content on social media, could be considered a new mode of political participation.

Others, like Theocharis (2015), adopted a theoretical approach and developed an intuitive strategy: determining whether an activity is considered political participation by assessing the characteristics of these online acts against established definitions of political participation. What are the qualities that any activity called “participation” needs to fulfill and do these online forms of political engagement satisfy them? Theocharis applies this reasoning to a series of activities including posting political comments, sharing stories, or encouraging others to engage politically on social media, and concludes that most of them do qualify as political participation. He is unequivocal however about the exclusion from this categorization of expressions of political preferences on social media such as “liking” content on Facebook. He argues that these are not actions “aimed at raising awareness or exerting any kind of political pressure for the solution of a social or political problem” (Theocharis, 2015, p. 8). He does acknowledge that the public character of an online expression of a political preference can lead to other forms of engagement and, ultimately, participation.

Old and New Controversies in the Conceptualization of Political Participation

Studies like those by Gibson and Cantijoch and Theocharis show that determining whether an online activity can be classed as participatory is actually not a simple task, as it depends largely on the adopted definition of “participation.” The pre-Internet literature on political participation is not free of its own controversies. The main debates arise around two key issues: first, the degree to which an activity needs to be instrumental or whether symbolic and expressive behaviors can be included in the definition of participation; second, does participation require an actual action, as opposed to passive forms of engagement that should be treated as antecedents of manifest political behavior? Let us see how each of these criteria can be interpreted differently in the case of e-participation.

One of the key controversial features of any potential participation activity is its degree of instrumentality—defined as having the objective of achieving an influence over those in power, who are explicitly identified and targeted. The dispute over this criterion lies in the interpretation of what constitutes an actual influence. A strict view of the definition means having influence over politicians and the government, either directly or indirectly, by affecting their selection (i.e., voting). A looser view of the term “influence” accepts that other nongovernmental agents, such as private corporations, can also become the targets of participatory actions given their de facto powerful condition (Micheletti, Follesdal, & Stolle, 2003).

There is an even less restrictive interpretation of the level of influence a participatory action requires. This interpretation considers all attempts at affecting public opinion and the public agenda more generally as valid forms of influence that can indirectly but ultimately affect government and other powerful agents (Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004). Krueger (2002) adopted this view when he developed the first scale of e-participation. Other researchers may have embraced it out of convenience for the purpose of analyzing a new range of indicators. But it is worth reconsidering whether certain expressive activities performed to get one’s voice heard in the public sphere should be included in the definition of participation. The e-participation literature would largely argue that the public and open aspect of the online environment where these forms of political expression take place justify such an “upgrade” (cf., Theocharis, 2015). Arguably, these activities cannot be considered fully noninstrumental or inconsequential.

This relates to the second controversial trait used to define political participation: the degree to which the behavior needs to be “active” as opposed to passive forms of engagement that involve little costs or efforts for the participant. There is little discussion about which forms of online engagement are considered passive. Unlike Krueger’s original proposition (2002), today most studies agree that acquiring political information online should be treated as a form of passive preparatory behavior (Vaccari et al., 2015, p. 225). Similarly, demanding activities that require an active investment of effort, time, and even money such as e-mailing a politician, donating money, or joining a political group on social media would join the “active” category without much, if any, debate.

There is however an in-between transitional category where there is no consensus among scholars about whether these forms of online engagement are active enough. For example, liking or sharing someone else’s political views on Facebook or Twitter only takes a couple of “clicks.” Some have taken a normative stance in their conceptualization of these activities. Labeled as “slacktivism” or “clicktivism,” they are perceived as lazy forms of involvement driven by purely egotistic and self-fulfilling goals and producing little, if any, political impact (Morozov, 2009). According to this view, these activities should join the passive group at the bottom of the hierarchy of costs.

Yet there is an inherent paradox in the exclusion of some of these activities from the definition of participation using the arguments of how costly they are to participants when other “non-actions” such as boycotting a product or not turning out to vote as a form of protest are included without hesitation. It could also be argued that the level of skills and technical competence required to perform some activities on social media justifies their inclusion in a category of costly behavior. Finally, another key argument would suggest that the public aspect of the environment in which the activity takes place and the risk associated with leaving a trace of one’s views is higher than in other

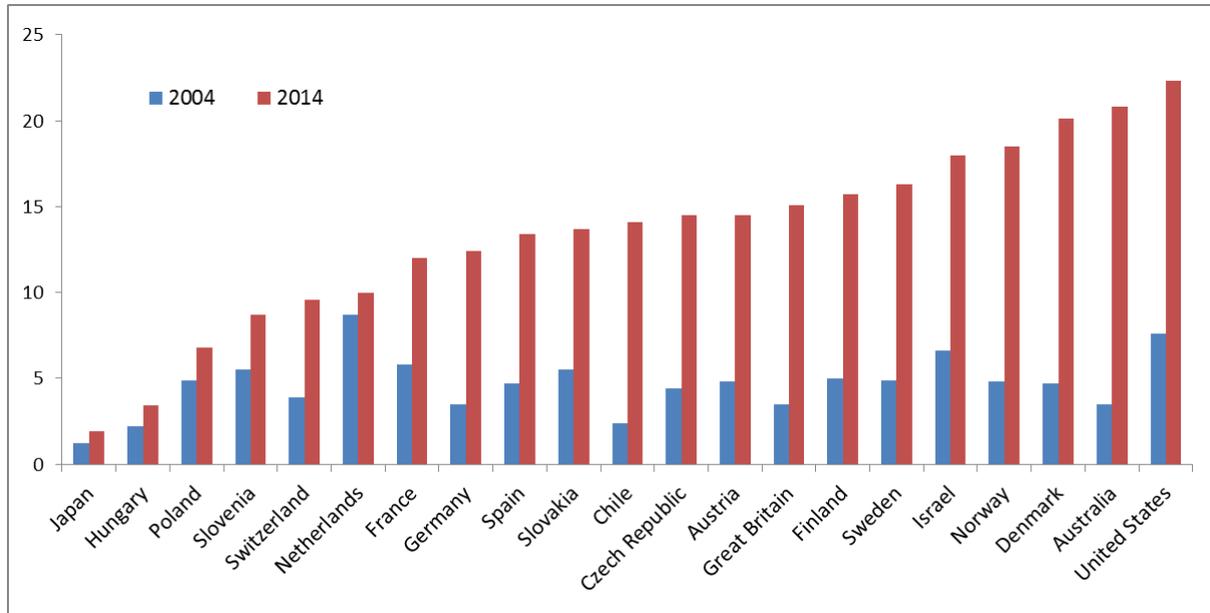
“real world” accepted forms of expressive participation, such as wearing a badge or displaying a sticker.

All in all, the reluctance expressed by some to taking a very broad view of what political participation means cannot be ignored as we risk rendering the concept effectively useless in both operational and substantive terms. Every new debate about what it means for citizens to become politically active should be developed with clear reference to theory and not just because new indicators become available (Ekman & Amna, 2012, p. 296). Having said that, typologies of political participation have been elastic enough in the past to accommodate changes both in the normative understanding of political behavior and in the contextual factors affecting how citizen politics were executed. A new adaptation of the discipline should not be considered an unreasonable expectation, particularly after two decades of research in the subfield of e-participation has yielded some interesting findings about who and how people engage in politics in the digital age.

How Much e-Participation?

Levels of online participation vary across contexts but have increased steadily over time in line with the rapid expansion of Internet technologies. Figure 1 shows levels of engagement in expressive forms of e-participation in 21 democracies. In 2004, the percentage of people having joined a political forum or discussion group online was relatively low across all contexts. In the country with the highest percentage, the Netherlands, only one in ten reported ever having joined a discussion group on the Internet. A decade later, engagement in expressive forms of e-participation has increased in all countries. In the United States and Australia more than 20% reported having expressed political views on the Internet.

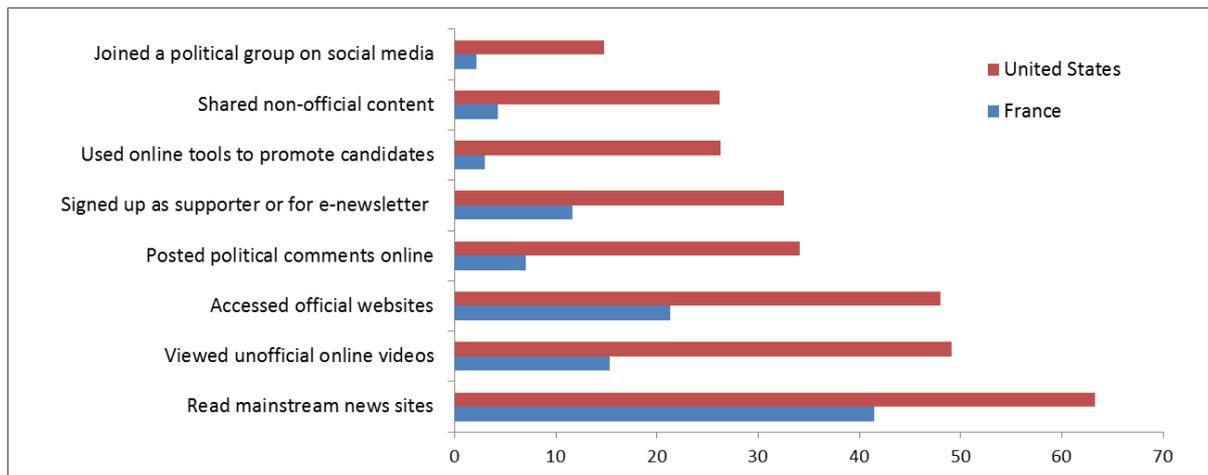
Figure 1. Percentage of people having joined a political forum or discussion group (2004) and expressed political views on the internet (2014) in 21 democracies.



Source: International Social Survey Programme: Citizenship I (2004) and II (2014) modules. Available from the GESIS Data Archive.

Opportunities for e-participation increase during election campaigns when citizens can engage with the official campaigns or with materials disseminated through unofficial channels. Figure 2 presents levels of engagement in different types of activities in the 2012 presidential elections in the United States and France. It shows that the American electorate was generally more engaged in the online campaign than the French electorate. In both elections, the most popular type of engagement with the campaign was consultation of mainstream news media. This was followed by accessing party-produced sites and watching nonofficial videos (e.g., on YouTube). The differences between France and the United States remain when levels of engagement in the more active types of e-participation are compared. In France, just over one in ten Internet users signed up as a candidate supporter (e.g., a Twitter follower or Facebook fan). In the United States three times more people did this. In France, the least common activities included joining a discussion group, posting comments, and sharing political content online. Helping to promote a party or candidate was particularly uncommon in France but not in the United States, where engagement in active modes of e-participation was higher.

Figure 2. Percentage of engagement in online activities in the 2012 Presidential elections in France and the United States in 2012, internet users.



Source: Cooperative Congressional Election Study 2012 (US) & Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, Election Study 2012 (France). Available from the UK Data service.

Overall, while engagement in e-participation is expanding over time, the differences observed across countries indicate that the context matters. Political structures and historical and cultural dispositions need to be taken into account in studies of e-participation. This is particularly important for researchers seeking to make generalizations and for those developing single-case studies. Irrespective of relative levels in each context, e-participation emerges consistently as a multidimensional concept (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013). E-participation takes different shapes and some types are more popular than others. Engaged individuals do not always target political parties or candidates. Among the most common forms of e-participation are expressive forms of engagement in which all interactions take place strictly among peers. Online mobilization is not a prerogative of the elites. Unofficial content is shared in a horizontal system and critiquing or joking about the elite is standard behavior. We know from the pre-Internet literature on political participation about the importance of distinctions between elite-directed and elite-challenging forms of engagement (Barnes et al., 1979). E-participation researchers should expand the attention paid to these distinctions.

Who Are the e-Participants?

Scholars have tried to ascertain who e-participants are. The conundrum is simple: if e-participants are the same individuals who are already active outside the Internet, this would reinforce, and even exacerbate, existing political inequalities among citizens. On the contrary, if the Internet is shown to mobilize previously unengaged citizens, it would be seen as an equalizing tool that improves the plurality of voices that are heard in the political sphere. The “who” question matters particularly in a context where disillusionment with formal politics has been linked to a transformation of patterns in

the way some engage with politics (Norris, 2002). Could the expansion of the Internet contribute to this process?

Bimber (1999) addressed some of these questions using a simple yet effective approach: He compared the profiles of individuals who used e-mail to contact government to those who had written a letter or used the phone. He concluded that the two types of participation were similar in that the same classic predictors of “traditional” forms of contact also emerged when the activity was conducted online. However, some of these factors had a diminished effect when predicting the online type of participation.

Given that these analyses used data collected in the late 1990s, when access to the Internet was concentrated among individuals from higher social backgrounds, the results could be promising in terms of the mobilizing potential of the new medium as access expanded. Bimber (1999) concluded that “citizens who are outside of traditional political networks and less engaged in other arenas of public life are likely to be more expressive on-line, at least by a little” (p. 425).

This approach was soon replicated and expanded in the United States and in other European contexts, yielding more nuanced results (Anduiza et al, 2010; Best & Krueger, 2005; Gibson et al., 2005). These analyses considered the relevance of new Internet-specific variables, such as online skills, in explaining engagement in e-participation activities. The main conclusion was that e-participation was altering the profiles of politically active individuals, specifically in regard to the type of resources necessary for political action. While classic measures of civic skills did not seem to affect whether people engaged in e-participation activities, Internet-related skills emerged as a key factor. However, given that this resource is not distributed evenly in the population or among Internet users, the general conclusion was that political inequalities linked to social stratifications and classic demographics, such as gender and race, were still in operation on the Internet. Online tools had become a new weapon of the strong (Schlozman et al., 2010).

A silver lining emerging from these studies is the pattern of e-participation among young people. The classic pattern of older people being more politically active seems to vanish in most of the models analyzing e-participation. Therefore, assuming that online skills are distributed more uniformly among young people, whose access to the Internet is near universal in most affluent societies, it seems plausible to expect that the inequalities associated with an uneven distribution of these resources will fade over the years, as a generational replacement occurs.

This optimistic expectation is reinforced by the potentialities brought up by social media sites, which were not included in any of the studies mentioned previously (because they were not as relevant at the time the studies were conducted). Used by the young in high proportions, social media would provide the ideal mix of ingredients for a mobilizing process, at least in theory. The experience of production, manipulation, and exchange of political content with peers as part of a social, enjoyable, and fulfilling activity is in accordance with the role that personal and collective gratifications play in driving e-participation (Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2017).

This is also consistent with arguments about changing patterns in the way citizens take part in politics, which have been linked to an increase in postmaterialist and individualistic values (Dalton, 2015; Norris, 2002). A new breed of young critically engaged citizens would emerge and the Internet would contribute to this process by providing tools such as social media, which appeal to their

lifestyle and cultural choices. What is more, social media promotes a channel of expression where citizens can monitor, hold accountable, and challenge those in power, but, crucially, where political activity can be developed without interference from this elite.

Baumgartner and Morris (2010) tested some of these ideas empirically in the United States. Using a sample of 18–24-year-old university students, their analyses showed that getting news from social media sites is positively associated with engagement in three e-participation activities: forwarding a political message, signing an e-petition, and posting a political opinion on a blog. This was after controlling for a set of classic socioeconomic factors (but not Internet-specific skills). Their conclusions were not overly enthusiastic however, given that their study also showed that young people did not seem more engaged offline as a consequence of their use of social media. This would seem to support the idea that younger citizens may become engaged only via the Internet.

This is partially disputed by Vissers and Stolle (2014) in their study of online and offline political participation. In their study of young adult Canadian students, they show that a high proportion engages in both online and offline modes of participation. A reinforcement of traditional inequalities seems to be in place when comparing this group to the rest. But they also identify a small group of young people who are only politically active on Facebook. These e-participants seem to be less defined by resource-based factors, and interestingly, their political attitudes are indistinguishable from those of nonparticipants. This finding provides some preliminary evidence supporting the most optimistic expectations regarding the mobilizing impact of social media among young people.

All in all, this is still an open question that calls for further examination. Ideally, future research should use samples of young people extracted from the broader population (as opposed to samples of university students). Future studies should then distinguish between traditional civic skills and Internet skills in order to confirm the assumption that the latter are more evenly distributed among young people. Most important, researchers should avoid analyzing generic, one-size-fits-all measurements of e-participation that do not differentiate between key distinctive internal dimensions (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013). Analyses of both the determinants and further effects of social media–based forms of participation must distinguish between elite-challenging types of activity (such as joining protest groups on social media, posting critical comments or pictures containing a protest message) and elite-driven behavior (such as liking a political candidate or forwarding campaign material). The classic conventional-unconventional distinction seems to be largely ignored in the analysis of e-participation, yet it arguably holds the key to obtaining some potential mobilizing effects, in particular among young people.

The Links between the Online and Offline Environments

One of the key lessons obtained from previous research is that considering e-participation in isolation is, at least intuitively, a bad idea. Some potential exceptions aside (like young groups who would only be active online), it is more reasonable to conceive the personal experience of political engagement of the individual as a mixture of activities of different intensities and conducted through different channels. For example, in the same way that audiences of music talent shows engage in a discussion of the performance of the night with their peers on social media, a similar process of dual screening has been observed during salient political events such as candidates'

debates. People combine watching the event on television with a discussion on social media just as it unfolds. Recent research shows that this type of behavior can then lead to further engagement in both offline and online political participation activities (Vaccari et al., 2015).

Political participation is a multitasking, multistep affair. Identifying the pathways linking different participatory behaviors performed either simultaneously or successively (or both) is one of the central questions in the e-participation literature. An advantage of this line of research is that it places some of the most controversial online activities (in terms of not being considered actual or manifest participation) in a process that does eventually lead to political participation. Commonly, access and consumption of political information online is placed in the timeline of events as the first antecedent to other activities, such as using online tools for political expression. A subsequent path would then connect these behaviors to well-accepted forms of online and offline participation.

Shah, Cho, Eveland, and Kwak (2005) used a three-wave panel survey to identify all three steps in the process. Furthermore, their models did not only explore offline political engagement as the final outcome, but forms of communication using different types of media, traditional and online, were included along the pathway leading to it. Their conclusions were insightful as they provided refutation of “the perspectives (a) that there are two discrete communication pathways to civic engagement, one online (online information seeking to interactive civic messaging) and the other offline (newspaper use to political talk) and (b) that political uses of the Internet sap civic actions by fostering an ersatz experience of engagement leading to a dead end” (Shah et al., 2005, p. 553).

Once again, the emergence of social media boosted expectations of more positive findings in “lean-forward” processes of political engagement, also called “spill-over” models. Regarding the first step in the causal chain, obtaining political information on the Internet does not require an active and intentional effort to access news websites. Political news reaches people even when they do not actively seek it, such as when their friends share stories or comment on topics that are salient in the media agenda on social media. As Vaccari, Chadwick, and O’Loughlin (2015) show, many people read about the candidates’ debates on social media by accident. They happened to be online catching up with friends or seeking entertainment when a debate was on and they came across stories and comments about it.

Second, if a key intermediate step in these pathways involves political expression and conversations with others, the features of most social media sites seem fit for purpose in that regard. The significant role of interpersonal contact in determining political participation has been well known since the pre-Internet literature (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). People are influenced by others when they engage in informal political discussions. Through these interactions they gain political knowledge, feel social pressure toward engagement, and may even be explicitly encouraged to take action. These effects are particularly powerful when the discussant is someone known and trusted. If a spouse or a good friend praises a candidate and tells us that we should vote for her, we are more likely to do so, other things being equal. All of this happens through face-to-face interactions and also in online settings, thanks to social media.

Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, and Zheng (2014) confirmed these associations and offered a convincing argument to understand the mechanisms that link experiences of political expression online and political participation (online and offline). Social media, they claim, is a space in which people can express themselves and develop their identity while connecting with different social groups. These

interactions can take different forms and revolve around many topics. But “for many people, one of these ‘faces of expression’ that is performed (and thereby developed) for others is a political face. And the more often that practice is given, the more a person may develop their political self, eventually leading to political action, even outside the context of social media” (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014, p. 627). Once more, these mobilizing effects are particularly promising among young people (Bode, Vraga, Borah, & Shah, 2014).

Concluding Remarks and Suggestions for Future Research

After two decades of theoretical debate on, and empirical analysis of, the forms and determinants of e-participation, a few controversies remain unresolved. The main one is the elusive definition of e-participation and, in particular, the lack of a consensus on which activities to include in this definition. The lack of agreement is in part due to the changing nature of the phenomenon. Once scholars seemed to settle on a common position on key aspects of online political engagement—like placing access and consumption of information online outside the definition of e-participation—social media sites kicked in offering a new range of political activities, such as liking a politician or sharing a comment within one’s informal networks. The debate is still ongoing in regard to online forms of expression on social media and whether they belong in the definition of e-participation or as its closest antecedent.

Paradoxically, researchers would benefit from consistency and rigor in the definitions and conceptualizations used when facing these new changes. But analyzing a vibrant environment like the online sphere also involves high doses of perceptiveness and the ability to adapt quickly. Achieving these goals requires a difficult balance but researchers have at their disposal a long and rich tradition in the study of political behavior that cannot be ignored. On the contrary, it is always wise to learn from the best before coming up with bold new propositions. Future research faces this task along with other pressing challenges of a more practical nature.

First, a methodological challenge exists. Most of the empirical research has collected and analyzed survey data. Beyond well-known problems of sampling bias that can be corrected with more or less difficulty, survey data is indeed a very efficient and appropriate instrument to explore trends and mechanisms in e-participatory behavior, just as it has been the gold standard in the study of political behavior more generally. In order to address some of the controversies discussed here, however, researchers should consider expanding their methodological repertoires.

One fashionable option today is the use of big data collected directly from social media and other online platforms. This option can help address issues of self- or miss-reporting typically encountered in surveys. Today, we can observe directly what people are sharing and posting online, how frequently, and in what formats (with caveats regarding access to protected data). However, researchers embarking on this type of analysis need to acknowledge the limitations of dealing with a unit of analysis that is not the individual. Studies employing big data tend to rely on Facebook posts and likes, tweets posted using a particular hashtag or using one of a series of keywords, or other data collected from online platforms. Yet individual-level data is preferable when the objective is to understand individual behavior. Extracting conclusions on individual behavior based on aggregate data collected from social media can lead to misleading ecological fallacies. Probably, the best

solution is to link the two types of data: surveys and social media data collected from respondents to these surveys. Achieving representative samples is the key challenge here and efforts are already being made in this direction.

Another mixed methodology option is a quantitative-qualitative design, in which survey data and qualitative recollections of past experiences, through in-depth interviews or focus groups, are combined to complement each other. For example, if the self-centered and banal character of “slacktivism” is used as an argument against the mobilizing potential of Internet tools, then this should be explored further. What are the motivations driving low-cost activities such as “liking” or sharing political content on social media? Development of a mixed quantitative-qualitative method in which (young) people are given a chance to reflect on their experience of e-participation is an overdue task in the subfield.

Irrespective of the methods used to collect and analyze data, the e-participation research community faces another fundamental controversy: The impact of e-participation is often disputed, not because we lack significant results, but because the size of the effects obtained tends to be small. One could argue that small changes can still be considered powerful. For example, if mobilization effects are detected among young people, whose engagement levels are very low, this could be interpreted as a substantial increment with clear political and social implications. Another response to this criticism is the approach that spill-over models are taking, arguing for the existence of indirect and nuanced effects. The lesson from these studies is that e-participation scholars should perhaps devote less effort to finding the effect and focus more on contextualized models of political participation.

Finally, one of the classic gaps in political behavior studies that seems to also exist in the e-participation literature is the lack of an analysis of the consequences of political participation for the political elites. What impact can we expect of e-participation? Do elites listen and react? Do policies change? Is e-participation taken seriously? Some studies on e-petitions are exploring these questions but we are in need of more evidence, in particular with regard to informal modes of e-participation.

There are possibly other gaps in our understanding of e-participation that have not been mentioned here due to the dynamic nature of online technology and activity. This is a relatively young sub-discipline. The good news is that we can expect a long life for e-participation research.

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