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POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND NEW TECHNOLOGIES

Filippo Tronconi*

Abstract

Digital technologies have deeply affected the way people think and act politically, as it has happened in many other aspects of individual and social life. This has led many scholars to update and reconsider some consolidated visions on political participation, starting from the definition of political participation itself. In this article I review the main findings of research on e-participation with respect to different types of activism, from individual acts to activities taking place in collective settings, like those of social movements and political parties. Finally, I reflect on the consequences of new digitally-driven forms of participation for the health of democracy, considering three specific aspects: participation inequality, the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of digital activism, polarization. As we will see, each of these fields shows a lively ongoing debate among observers.

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Keywords

Political participation – Activism – Citizens journalism – Social movements – Political parties - Democracy

1. Introduction

Like many aspects of individual and social life, political participation has been profoundly reshaped by the emergence of digital technologies. Acts like supporting a candidate or a party in an election, funding their campaign, rallying for a political or social cause, signing a petition, or simply keeping up with the news on the current political debate have now a different meaning compared to thirty years ago. They involve different skills and resources, provide different and increased opportunities for the mobilisation of political actors, imply a different division of labour in political organisations. In the early stages of the internet revolution many observed these changes with optimism, highlighting the possibilities "for 'liberation technologies' to expand the horizons of freedom" [1]. In recent years, however, it is common to read dark and gloomy forecasts on the future of democracy, supposedly on a "road to digital unfreedom" [2]. In this article I will review the main scholarly efforts to understand to what extent and how new technologies have transformed the way citizens engage with politics, and whether they have strengthened or weakened democracy. The article has three sections. The first one revises the concept of political participation (or political activism) in the "old world". The second section explores

[1] Larry Diamond and Marc F Plattner, *Liberation Technology: Social Media and the Struggle for Democracy* (JHU Press 2012).

[2] Ronald J Deibert, 'The Road to Digital Unfreedom: Three Painful Truths About Social Media' (2019) 30 Journal of Democracy 25.

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the impact of new technologies on a variety of forms of political participation, and especially for individual actions, for social movements and for political parties. The third section considers the consequences of new digitally-driven forms of participation for the health of democracy. As we will see, many controversies are still open and many questions remain unsolved on this point.

2.What is political participation

According to a widespread definition, political participation, or political activism, refers to the wide range of voluntary activities aimed to influence political decisions. This may happen directly, by affecting the process of formation and implementation of public policies, or indirectly, by affecting the selection of the people that take political decisions in their representative or governmental roles.

The first studies of political participation were uniquely concerned with activities connected to the selection of policymakers. Milbrath [3] considered political participation as a unidimensional pyramid of involvement, going from "easy" activities (e.g. voting, taking part to an electoral rally) carried out by many citizens, to more demanding activities (e.g. being elected to some representational role) carried out by a tiny minority of people, and particularly by professional politicians. The following generation of studies [4] expanded the conceptualization of political participation. A decade of intense protest movements spreading through all major Western democracies made it impossible to ignore that citizens' involvement in politics could take forms different from the act of voting and other election-related activities [5]. Thus, the repertoire of political participation was expanded to include contentious forms of action, taking place outside, or even against, political institutions and a distinction was introduced between *conventional* and *unconventional* participation.

[3] *Political Participation: How and Why Do People Get Involved in Politics?* (Rand McNally 1965).

[4] Samuel Henry Barnes and Max Kaase, *Political Action: Mass Participation in Five Western Democracies* (Sage Publications 1979); Sidney Verba, Norman H Nie and Jae-on Kim, *Participation and Political Equality: A Seven-Nation Comparison* (University of Chicago Press 1987).

[5] Charles Tilly and Sidney G Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (Second revised edition, Oxford University Press 2015).

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Since the seventies the opportunities for citizens' involvement in politics have constantly increased, thanks to the increasing information and resources available to them (education in particular). The diffusion of digital forms of participation represents a further leap in that direction. Academic definitions have since struggled to keep pace with such expanding repertoire of action. In first place it is difficult to set clear boundaries of *political* participation. Sharing an article on social media, displaying a sticker advocating for some environmental campaign on the back of the car, boycotting a company for ethical reasons, giving money to an NGO as an appreciation for its praiseworthy social activity are all low-intensity forms of engagement. However, it is disputable, in first place, that they have an impact on the political system. Activities such as preferring a certain brand of coffee over another, fund-raising for a local school, volunteering for an NGO (that have been labelled as "consumer politics" or "lifestyle politics") have traditionally been associated with the economic or social spheres; their impact on the political agenda is at most indirect. Second, they pose a problem of conceptual stretching. Following this ever-expanding definition of political participation, almost every conceivable nonprivate activity can be thought to be politically relevant. However, if everything is political participation, the specific meaning of political participation is lost.

A useful map to keep track of the evolving forms of political participation without losing sight of the different impact of each type of activities is presented by Kitschelt and Rehm [6]. They consider three *contexts or arenas* of participation; and for each of them different degrees of *intensity*. The three arenas are the community (ranging from the local community to public opinion at large); the policy makers in the institutions (members of parliament and members of the government, but also representatives and rulers at local level); the selection of representatives. For each context, different levels of personal involvement are possible: in the first context, for instance, participation may involve taking part to a rally or donating to some NGOs, mobilizing friends and neighbours to participate to a certain campaign, creating and personally running an association and thus become a public leader at local or national or even international level. As it can be seen, each level of personal engagement requires increasing resources (time, education, knowledge). Similarly, in the second arena,

[6] 'Political Participation' in Daniele Caramani (ed), *Comparative politics* (Fifth Edition, Oxford University Press 2020).

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one's effort can be limited to signing a petition to an elected representative or become a full-time professional activity, as it can be that of a leader of a national trade union. Finally, in the third context activities can range from voting for a candidate or party to being elected to high national offices. When participation takes place as a coordinated effort, instead of being a merely personal fact, it usually takes the form of social movements in the first context, of interest groups in the second and of political party in the third. These are in fact the most diffused agencies of political activism in contemporary societies.

Kitschelt and Rehm [7] also point out that different levels of *riskiness* are associated with different levels and types of activism. Not only political participation can take the form of legal or illegal actions (with some grey areas between the two), but its riskiness heavily depends on the type of regime in which it occurs. Taking part to a rally organized by an opposition party is a safe activity in a liberal democracy, but can lead to costly personal consequences in an authoritarian country.

The answer we give to the question "What is political participation?" is not just a matter of conceptual clarity. From a normative standpoint, it involves different ideas of democracy and different evaluations of the state of democracy in a country [8]. A Schumpeterian vision of democracy, mostly focused on the electoral process, leads to consider only election-related participation as relevant. Those who embrace this perspective are likely to have a pessimistic vision of the present state of democracy: many citizens are more and more sceptic of party politics and feel increasingly distant from representative political institutions [9]. Others, following the footsteps of Tocqueville, advocate a "participatory" vision of democracy, where citizens are

[7] ibid 319–321.

[8] Jan W van Deth, 'What Is Political Participation?', *Oxford Research Encyclopedias* (2016) 1; Pippa Norris, 'Political Activism: New Challenges, New Opportunities', *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics* (2009) <https://www-oxfordhandbooks-com.ezproxy.unibo.it/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199566020.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199566020-e-26> accessed 7 December 2021.

[9] Ingrid Van Biezen, Peter Mair and Thomas Poguntke, 'Going, Going, . . . Gone? The Decline of Party Membership in Contemporary Europe' (2012) 51 European Journal of Political Research 24; Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (Verso Books 2013); Marc Hooghe and Anna Kern, 'The Tipping Point between Stability and Decline: Trends in Voter Turnout, 1950–1980–2012' (2017) 16 European Political Science 535.

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extensively engaged in community level, decentralized political activities, between and beyond election days [10]. This leads to place a strong emphasis on unconventional forms of participation and possibly to conclude that citizens are sceptical of the most *traditional* democratic practices, but have discovered and are routinely engaged in new forms of political participation. Thus, in most countries democracy is today more lively than it has ever been, because politics enters the lives of citizens in ways and in a measure that was unknown to previous generations.

The internet and related applications have deeply affected the way people think and act politically, as it has done in many other aspects of individual and social life. This has led many scholars to update and reconsider some consolidated visions. How has the internet changed the way ordinary citizens take part in politics? Which technologies, devices, platforms, languages have been most successful or innovative? Have they expanded the possibilities of citizens to be active in politics? Have they changed the social profiles of activists, bringing unequal advantages and disadvantages across social groups? And overall, has the quality of democracy improved as a consequence of such changes? To these questions I will turn my attention in the following sections.

3. New technologies and political participation

The issue of new technologies and political participation has considerably grown in recent years, in parallel with the growth of the role of technology (online technology in particular) in every day's life, to the point that it is now conceivable as an autonomous field of research [11]. New (or renewed) forms of participation have emerged, restarting the debate about the definition of participation in the context of online platforms and devices [12]. Once again, much of this debate revolves around the

[10] Benjamin R Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (University of California Press 1984).

[11] Andrew Chadwick and Philip N Howard (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics* (Routledge 2009); Shelley Boulianne, 'Twenty Years of Digital Media Effects on Civic and Political Participation' (2020) 47 Communication Research 947.

[12] Christina Ruess and others, 'Online Political Participation: The Evolution of a Concept' [2021] Information, Communication & Society 1; Rachel Gibson and Marta Cantijoch, 'Conceptualizing and

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quantum of activity that is necessary to define a certain behaviour as activism. In its updated version, this old conceptual issue is made more salient by the fact that online technologies expand the possibilities for new forms of low-intensity participation (e.g. signing an online petition, sharing some content on the social media) that some see as a form of *communication* more than a form of participation [13]. Gibson and Cantijoch [14] propose an integrated perspective on offline and online activism, that focus on the degree of personal effort involved in each of nine categories of action: (Active) *Participation*, thereby, is composed of (1) voting, (2) party/campaign activities, (3) protest activities, (4) contacting, (5) communal actions, and (6) consumerism, while so-called *passive engagement* consists of (7) news attention, (8) discussion, and (9) the expressive mode.

I propose here a different (but somehow complementary) perspective, classifying activism on the basis of the effort put in the coordination of individual political activism, ranging from individual acts to activities taking place in the context of highly institutionalised settings, like those of political parties.

3.1. Varieties of digital participation: From individual to collective activism

On the one extreme of this continuum we find forms of political activism that are totally individual, meaning that they do not involve any form of coordination, nor rely on institutionalised rules and procedures. Think for instance of someone writing a letter to a newspaper to raise a problem to the attention of the newsroom and the readers; or someone chaining themselves up to a tree to protest against the cutting of a forest. In the new online context, individual forms of participation are readily

Measuring Participation in the Age of the Internet: Is Online Political Engagement Really Different to Offline?' (2013) 75 The Journal of Politics 701; Marta Cantijoch and Rachel Gibson, 'E-Participation' in Marta Cantijoch and Rachel Gibson, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (Oxford University Press 2019) <http://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-580> accessed 21 December 2021.

[13] Lindsay H Hoffman, 'Participation or Communication? An Explication of Political Activity in the Internet Age' (2012) 9 Journal of Information Technology & Politics 217.

[14] (n 12).

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available and much easier: they require less effort and only a minimum of technical equipment and knowledge. Social networks, for instance, allow direct connections and interactions between elites and ordinary citizens. It is common to see politicians managing social media accounts not only as a top-down form of communication, but also engaging in discussions with their followers [15]. This form of communication is especially relevant for underdog or emerging politicians, who do not have an easy access to mainstream media, or unconventional and extreme messages, such as those often conveyed by populists [16]. It is of course disputable the extent to which the potential for a real interactive communication is exploited, as this requires extensive resources on the side of the politician and in many cases a dedicated staff. In fact, it is rare for social networks to radically transform the top-down nature of elite-citizens communications [17]. More generally, it is questionable that the internet and social networks in particular have increased transparency and accountability of individual politicians and political institutions [18].

Citizens journalism, or participatory journalism, is another phenomenon linked to individual activism. The term has been coined to describe the increased role ordinary citizens play in news collection, organisation and dissemination through blogs and

[15] Raffael Heiss, Desiree Schmuck and Jörg Matthes, 'What Drives Interaction in Political Actors' Facebook Posts? Profile and Content Predictors of User Engagement and Political Actors' Reactions' (2019) 22 Information, Communication & Society 1497.

[16] Nicole Ernst and others, 'Favorable Opportunity Structures for Populist Communication: Comparing Different Types of Politicians and Issues in Social Media, Television and the Press' (2019) 24 The International Journal of Press/Politics 165; Michael Hameleers and others, 'Interacting with the Ordinary People: How Populist Messages and Styles Communicated by Politicians Trigger Users' Behaviour on Social Media in a Comparative Context' (2021) 36 European Journal of Communication 238.

[17] Jennifer Stromer-Galley, 'On-Line Interaction and Why Candidates Avoid It' (2000) 50 Journal of Communication 111; Roman Gerodimos and Jákup Justinussen, 'Obama's 2012 Facebook Campaign: Political Communication in the Age of the Like Button' (2015) 12 Journal of Information Technology & Politics 113.

[18] Andrea Ceron, *Social Media and Political Accountability: Bridging the Gap between Citizens and Politicians* (1st ed. 2017, Palgrave 2017).

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social media [19]. This has contributed to redefine the landscape of (professional) information, while the distinction itself between producers and consumers of news has become blurry [20].

We have until now considered *individual* forms of political participation. In large polities, such as nations-states, such forms have often little impact on decision making processes. It is no surprise, then, that people invest energy in coordinating their *collective* actions to reach social or political goals. Social movements and political parties are the most common vehicles of collective political activism in modern societies. The former employ non conventional forms of action ("street politics") in pursuit of a collective goal, outside or against institutions, while the latter participate in electoral competition with the goal of placing their candidates in the legislative or executive bodies of government. In social movements, the coordination effort is minimal, connections between members are often informal and fluid, the duration of the mobilization is sometimes ephemeral or in any case unpredictable. On the other side, parties are sometimes very complex and long-lasting organisations, with internal rules and hierarchies, a well defined division of labour, many tasks delegated to professionals, systematic connections with other political actors and institutions. These differences in goals and organisational formats explain why new technologies have been employed differently, and with varying impact.

3.2. Networked social movements

For social movements the internet and particularly social media represent in first place a strong organisational tool. Solving problems of coordination among loosely connected members has always been a challenging task for collective actors like social movements, lacking a solid centralised organisation. Internet-mediated

[19] Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis, 'We Media: How Audiences Are Shaping the Future of News and Information' (The Media Center at The American Press Institute 2003) <https://www.hypergene.net/wemedia/download/we_media.pdf>.

[20] James Stanyer, 'Web 2.0 and the Transformation of News and Journalism' in Andrew Chadwick and Philip N Howard (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics* (Routledge 2009); Stuart Allan and Arne Hintz, 'Citizen Journalism and Participation' in Karin Wahl-Jorgensen and Thomas Hanitzsch (eds), *The Handbook of Journalism Studies* (2nd edn, Routledge 2020).

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communication makes this task easier. Its polycentric and horizontal nature is well suited to mimic the non-hierarchical nature of these communities. Beyond its instrumental use in the organisation and logistics of demonstrations, it is useful to reinforce the identity and feeling of belonging of the participants [21]. Not only social networks facilitate organisational communications within the movement, but also help reaching the general public, another challenging task for actors often promoting issues that are excluded from the agenda of mainstream media, if not explicitly censored. It has often been claimed, for instance, that online communication tools have been critical in starting revolutionary movements like the 2011 Arab spring in Tunisia and Egypt [22]; others have underlined the relevance of social networks in the organisation of anti-austerity movements following the Great Recession of European economies [23].

The previous examples, however, should not overshadow the "dark side" of social media use to spread information and foster political participation. As other communication and networking tools of the previous eras, online networks are instruments that can have different uses, more or less inclusive, more or less committed to nourish democratic institutions and practices. The internet and social

[21] Donatella della Porta and Lorenzo Mosca, 'Global-Net for Global Movements? A Network of Networks for a Movement of Movements' (2005) 25 Journal of Public Policy 165; Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Second edition, Polity Press 2015); Anastasia Kavada, 'Creating the Collective: Social Media, the Occupy Movement and Its Constitution as a Collective Actor' (2015) 18 Information, Communication & Society 872; Dustin Kidd and Keith McIntosh, 'Social Media and Social Movements' (2016) 10 Sociology Compass 785.

[22] Philip N Howard and Muzammil M Hussain, *Democracy's Fourth Wave?: Digital Media and the Arab Spring* (Oxford University Press 2013).

[23] Donatella della Porta and Alice Mattoni, 'Social Networking Sites in Pro-Democracy and Anti-Austerity Protests: Some Thoughts from a Social Movement Perspective' in Daniel Trottier and Christian Fuchs (eds), *Social Media, Politics and the State. Protests, Revolutions, Riots, Crime and Policing in the Age of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube* (Routledge 2014); Mauro Barisione and Andrea Ceron, 'A Digital Movement of Opinion? Contesting Austerity Through Social Media' in Mauro Barisione and Asimina Michailidou (eds), *Social Media and European Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan UK 2017) <http://link.springer.com/10.1057/978-1-137-59890-5_4> accessed 13 January 2022.

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media have indeed helped extremist groups [24] and populists [25] to emerge and expand their support. Also, misinformation and conspiracy theories have often been associated to these online tools [26]. However, it is worth reminding that such phenomena have always been present in mass politics (and possibly earlier). All the most careful empirical research warns in fact not to interpret this association as evidence that online media promote conspiracy beliefs or fosters the electoral success of extremists. These phenomena are most likely the result of complex interactions, where the support for extremist ideas and false perceptions of reality is antecedent to – and not driven by – an intense use of new communication technology. Social media might help to magnify dubious beliefs, but they do so because they exist in our societies, as they used to do when political communication mostly happened through newspapers and TV screens.

3.3. The rise of digital parties

Political parties, the most distinctive form of organisation of modern politics, have not been exempt from the transformations brought by the internet revolution. For the sake of simplicity, we can distinguish here two stages of evolution of parties in the internet era, corresponding to different stages of evolution of new information and communication technologies. Since the mid-nineties, parties have started to crowd the online environment. In those days, sometimes referred to as the internet 1.0, the most common online presence of individuals and organisations was in the form of static webpages, used as digital notice boards [27]. There, parties could profit from an affordable tool to make their platforms, candidates, activities visible to a wide public. This was, and still is, particularly valuable for small and emerging parties, which have

[24] Manuela Caiani and Linda Parenti, *European and American Extreme Right Groups and the Internet* (Routledge 2016) <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/e/9781315580845> accessed 13 January 2022.

[25] Paolo Gerbaudo, 'Social Media and Populism: An Elective Affinity?' (2018) 40 Media, Culture & Society 745.

[26] Adam M Enders and others, 'The Relationship Between Social Media Use and Beliefs in Conspiracy Theories and Misinformation' [2021] Political Behavior <https://link.springer.com/10.1007/s11109-021-09734-6> accessed 13 January 2022.

[27] Helen Margetts, 'Cyber Parties' in Richard S Katz and William Crotty (eds), *Handbook of Party Politics* (Sage Publications 2006).

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little chances to appear on mainstream media. The main innovation, at this stage, was the possibility to autonomously create linkages with the general public without having to refer to established media outlets like TV channels or newspapers. In addition, a quick and cheap way to disseminate informative material (leaflets, posters, campaign material, leaders' interviews and public statements) from the centre to the periphery of the organisation itself was available through the website and mailing lists.

The internet revolution started at a moment when parties were facing the challenge of a declining legitimisation and attractiveness. Parties reacted to this crisis by expanding the range of options to keep contact with their affiliates. Beyond traditional members and activists, parties started connecting with potential supporters through new forms of light membership. Some parties established a list of "party friends" or "party sympathisers", normally excluded from being a candidate for internal leadership positions, but sometimes allowed to vote in intra-party decisions. Others created special registers of "virtual-" or "cyber-members" for people recruited through the official party's web page. Websites were clearly a prerequisite for establishing these new membership categories, and mailing lists were often used to reach these supporters and inform them about party initiatives and activities. In the following years, social networks like Twitter and Facebook allowed to expand the list of contacts further, and the same networks were – and are – heavily used by individual leaders and representatives as well. All these new opportunities, coupled with a steep decline of traditional membership, created what have been labelled as "multi-speed membership" parties [28]. In these organisations, the border between members and non-members is less clear than it was in the past: "Today's Party Friend may never become a full-fledged party member, but she may serve as a digital ambassador, for instance by forwarding Twitter messages to her friends, sharing a link to a partisan YouTube video, or letting her Facebook friends know that she 'likes' her party and its leader. She might even be inspired to make a one-time donation by text message, making her a Sustainer, even if she never pays regular membership dues" [29].

[28] Susan Scarrow, *Beyond Party Members: Changing Approaches to Partisan Mobilization* (Oxford University Press 2015).

[29] ibid 32.

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In the last decade, a new kind of political organisation has emerged, linked to the revolution brought by the diffusion of social media and other online platforms that rely on user-generated content. The so-called digital party, or platform party, mimics (some aspects of) the organisation of digital companies like Facebook or Amazon. This includes the collection of a vast amount of data from users, a free membership model, the reliance on free labour of members [30]. Online platforms allow a sharp reduction of salaried staff – even for companies that are gigantic in terms of market size – and the elimination of the mediators that represented the interface between users and companies in pre-existing organisations. For example, Facebook users can publish their thoughts on their own page without the need of any intermediator, instead of sending a letter to the local newspaper and hoping to be published after the intermediation of an editor.

Digital parties adopt similar solutions. The organisational backbone is here represented by online platforms, allowing members to have a non-mediated role in the internal life of the party. As in online companies, for these parties membership is free and easy, as it only requires a few clicks on a webpage; the heavy bureaucracy of salaried staff of mass parties is replaced by a limited number of IT specialists, members are profiled through their online activity; many decisions are taken via online referenda. Without the intermediation of cadres and local bosses, digital parties promise a new opening of political participation for members and unprecedented levels intra-party democracy.

The Pirate Parties, based on the LiquidFeedback voting platform, were the first example of parties heavily relying on online tools for organisational – not only communication – purposes. Though they have generally achieved a limited electoral success, they have paved the way for more relevant experiments, like those of Podemos in Spain and the Five Star Movement in Italy [31]. These parties developed their own platforms (Plaza Podemos and Rousseau), through which a number of organisational tasks were performed, among which the selection of leaders and

[30] Paolo Gerbaudo, *The Digital Party: Political Organisation and Online Democracy* (Pluto Press 2018) 70.

[31] Filippo Tronconi, 'The Italian Five Star Movement during the Crisis: Towards Normalisation?' (2018) 23 South European Society and Politics 163; Marco Lisi, 'Party Innovation, Hybridization and the Crisis: The Case of Podemos' (2019) 49 Italian Political Science Review / Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica 245.

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candidates, expulsion of members, decisions over government pacts, parliamentary alliances and motions of no confidence. The frequent use of online consultations, however, does not equate to a higher quality of internal democracy [32]. Far from being just a neutral instrument for deliberation, platforms are in fact a powerful tool for controlling and steering decisions in ways that are anticipated by the party leadership, which retains the control of the subject, framing and timing of the voting procedures [33]. The low number of active participants confirms that most members do not feel their voice is actually heard through the platform [34]. Furthermore, the limited possibilities for horizontal interactions among ordinary members lead to an atomized participation, which in turn limits the occasions for challenging the leadership. Party platforms are presented by their promoters as a revolutionary tool for a decentralised, inclusive form of democracy; in reality, they have possibly brought a new generation of citizens close to party politics, channelling the anger and disillusion toward traditional political actors; however they have done so favouring a new centralisation of power within parties and lowering the quality, if not the quantity, of participation.

4. New technologies and political participation: Good or bad for democracy?

In the previous pages we have reviewed the main forms of online activism. New technologies seem to offer new opportunities for participation at individual level and for weakly structured collective action (social movements), and thus expand the repertoire of non conventional forms of participation. The effects are instead unclear

[32] Marco Deseriis and Davide Vittori, 'Platform Politics in Europe | The Impact of Online Participation Platforms on the Internal Democracy of Two Southern European Parties: Podemos and the Five Star Movement' (2019) 13 International Journal of Communication 19; Paolo Gerbaudo, 'Are Digital Parties More Democratic than Traditional Parties? Evaluating Podemos and Movimento 5 Stelle's Online Decision-Making Platforms' [2019] Party Politics 1; Katharine Dommett and others, 'Are Digital Parties the Future of Party Organization? A Symposium on *The Digital Party: Political Organisation and Online Democracy* by Paolo Gerbaudo' [2020] Italian Political Science Review/Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica 1; Fabio García Lupato and Marco Meloni, 'Digital Intra-Party Democracy: An Exploratory Analysis of Podemos and the Labour Party' [2021] Parliamentary Affairs 1.

[33] Deseriis and Vittori (n 32) 5705.

[34] Lorenzo Mosca, 'Democratic Vision and Online Participatory Spaces in the Italian Movimento 5 Stelle' (2020) 55 Acta Politica 1.

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for conventional party politics. In this case it is questionable that online tools have broadened the pool of participants; furthermore, parties that have pushed the experiment of online platforms farther, have by and large failed to improve the quality of intra-party democracy.

After this (selective) overview, it is now time to go back to the question raised in the first section of this paper. What are the normative implications of the new forms of political participation? Overall, are they good or bad for democracy? I will explore these questions in their relation with three specific aspects: participation inequality, the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of digital activism, polarization. As we will see, each of these fields shows a lively ongoing debate among observers.

The first answer to the question on the normative implications of new forms of participation comes from the analysis of the demographic and socio-economic profiles of participants. We know from a vast literature that political participation has never been evenly distributed among citizens of any given polity [35]. People located at the "centre" of society (educated, wealthy, living in urban areas, belonging to ethnic majority, etc.) tend to be disproportionately active in politics, as they have more cognitive and economic resources and easier access to the people and institutions where relevant political decisions are taken. It remains to be seen whether the internet has narrowed or widened this inequality. Since the first years of the century, many studies have demonstrated that access to the internet is not equal among the population. The phrase "digital divide" is often employed to highlight the difference in access to the digital infrastructure (that is, the possession of a device and the availability of an efficient internet connection). In economically advanced countries, this condition has been achieved, or will soon be achieved, by a large majority of the population. Still, unequal opportunities persist between those who have the necessary skills to use the internet for political purposes, and those who do not. The general conclusion of these studies is that digital participation continues to reflect the

[35] Verba, Nie and Kim (n 4); Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman and Henry E Brady, *Voice and Equality. Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Harvard University Press 1995).

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traditional social stratifications and inequalities. Online tools are a new weapon of the strong [36].

This pessimistic view, however, could be softened in at least one aspect. Young citizens, traditionally less engaged in politics than older people, are more likely to be comfortable with digital technologies and online tools. Is this making their voice louder? Are they more easily heard by decision makers? The jury is still out on this point. While it is certain that younger generations are among the most active online, it remains to be seen if they are among the most *politically* active. It seems safe to state that, if technologies are used for non-political purposes, they are unlikely to help reducing inequalities in political participation [37]. However, even people who do not use digital devices for political purposes can have, and do have, *accidental* encounters with politics. Valeriani and Vaccari [38] show that accidental exposure to political information on social media contributes to citizens' online political participation, and more so among the less interested in politics, suggesting that social media are likely to reduce the gap in online engagement between citizens with high and low interest in politics. Digital and social media are used by most people for recreational activities or to keep in touch with friends, not for political purpose. However, it is possible – and indeed probable – that some contacts of these unengaged users are active in politics and share political news and opinions from time to time. This produces the accidental exposure the authors talk about, and expands the possibility for less involved citizens to come across political messages that would not reach them through legacy media. Repeated accidental exposure to political messages may lead to the development of a political identity eventually leading to political activism [39].

[36] Kay Lehman Schlozman, Sidney Verba and Henry E Brady, 'Weapon of the Strong? Participatory Inequality and the Internet' (2010) 8 Perspectives on Politics 487.

[37] Eva Anduiza, Marta Cantijoch and Aina Gallego, 'Political Participation and the Internet' (2009) 12 Information, Communication & Society 860.

[38] 'Accidental Exposure to Politics on Social Media as Online Participation Equalizer in Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom' (2016) 18 New Media & Society 1857.

[39] Homero Gil de Zúñiga, Logan Molyneux and Pei Zheng, 'Social Media, Political Expression, and Political Participation: Panel Analysis of Lagged and Concurrent Relationships' (2014) 64 Journal of Communication 612.

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Another point on which the debate is open among researchers is related to the effectiveness of online activism. New technologies have made participation easier, lowering its costs. Some forms of participation, possibly the most diffused ones, just involve sharing some political news on a social media, or "liking" a political opinion. This form of low-cost participation has sometimes been labelled as "slacktivism" or "clicktivism" and defined "the ideal type of activism for a lazy generation" [40]. Slacktivism, the argument goes, may serve to reinforce the self esteem and social identity of the performer, but hardly has any political consequence. The counter argument is that online activism, even in its most elementary forms, should be considered as one step only in a multitasking environment. E-participation should be considered as one of multiple activities that take place through different channels, online and offline, and contribute to shape the personal experience of political engagement. For example, people sometimes watch political events on television, while commenting on them on social media. This practice of "dual screening" has been shown to produce, in some occasions, spill-over effects leading to further forms of political participation [41].

A third point of concern is the possibility that new media increase activism only among a subset of citizens, namely those with extreme views. Polarization, the fact that extremist views spread among parties and citizens, and that people increasingly dislike or even loathe their political opponents, is known to be a danger for citizens' trust in political institutions and ultimately for democratic stability. Social media can be the perfect environment for the spread of extremist, emotionally charged messages through two distinct mechanisms. One is the overload of information, available through multiple channels 24 hours per day, 7 days per week. Social media users, in order to cope with this intractable amount of news, resort to cognitive shortcuts, turning to sources that are in line with their pre-existing opinions. Second, the algorithms of social networks themselves guide users to find only the kind of information they like and feel comfortable with. This creates "echo chambers" or

[40] Evgeny Morozov, 'The Brave New World of Slacktivism' (*Foreign Policy*, 19 May 2009) <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/05/19/the-brave-new-world-of-slacktivism/> accessed 20 January 2022.

[41] Cristian Vaccari, Andrew Chadwick and Ben O'Loughlin, 'Dual Screening the Political: Media Events, Social Media, and Citizen Engagement' (2015) 65 Journal of Communication 1041.

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bubbles, where people are less and less likely to encounter non-aligned views, and where political opponents are always and only depicted in negative terms. The spread of bots and fake accounts to reinforce partisan views and disinformation is part of the problem, a problem that social media companies are rarely willing to face, as long as that their core business is gathering subscribers [42]. While some studies lend support to these pessimistic claims [43], others maintain that echo chambers are nothing new in politics. Vaccari and Valeriani [44], based on a large nine-country survey, demonstrate that extremist views are not boosted by social media activism. The concept itself of echo chamber has been criticised, as it does not consider accidental exposure to opposing opinions and fails to take into account the complexity of current media landscape. Even if echo chambers can be detected in the behaviour of users on a single platform, that does not necessarily imply that users are unable to search for alternative sources of information on other online and offline outlets. Individuals tend to use multiple media to access political information. In this high-choice media environment, it is important to consider the whole range of different options citizens use to build their own media consumption habit [45].

[42] Deibert (n 2).

[43] Yphtach Lelkes, Gaurav Sood and Shanto Iyengar, 'The Hostile Audience: The Effect of Access to Broadband Internet on Partisan Affect' (2017) 61 American Journal of Political Science 5.

[44] *Outside the Bubble: Social Media and Political Participation in Western Democracies* (Oxford University Press 2021) 166.

[45] Elizabeth Dubois and Grant Blank, 'The Echo Chamber Is Overstated: The Moderating Effect of Political Interest and Diverse Media' (2018) 21 Information, Communication & Society 729.

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