

# Young people, the Internet and Political Participation

## Findings of a web survey in Italy, Spain and The Netherlands

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## **Abstract**

Many sources indicate that young people are not as much involved in politics as their parents were. This grim picture has been nuanced by some authors who claim that young people are interested in politics but in a different way than previous generations. The Internet is said to play an important role in 'new politics'. This raises the question whether the Internet triggers new forms of political participation by young people. We use the results of a large scale web questionnaire among 2163 students in three countries (Italy, Spain and the Netherlands) to answer this question. We conclude that the Internet leads to additional political participation but does not trigger a shift from 'old' to 'new' politics. Traditional politics has managed to rethink its communication formats and therefore still plays an important role in political participation by young people on the Internet.

## **1. Does the Internet reinvigorate political participation?**

Many sources indicate that young people are not as much involved in politics as their parents were (Putnam, 2000; Mindich, 2005). Analyses show that this is not related to their age – the older generations now were more active as youngsters than young people are today – but can be attributed to a changing attitude towards politics. This change is related to a more individualistic, and even hedonistic, attitude. Related to their attitude is their limited attention for reading the news. Generally, young people are much less interested in gathering political information about their community. Mindich (2005: 18 - 33) shows that there is a long-term decline in news interest in the USA: young people spend much less time on reading or viewing the news than their parents. Consequently, their knowledge of politics is limited. This leads to so-called ‘thin citizenship’ (Delli & Skeeter, 1996): young people only follow the outlines of politics and, in many cases, do not bother to engage. The turn-out of youths (18 – 24 years old) at American presidential elections has steadily gone down over the past forty years (Mindich, 2005: 22) from 50.9 per cent in 1964 to 32.3 per cent in 2000. A similar pattern was found in Canada. Blais, Gidengil & Nevitte (2004: 221) write: ‘The most recent generations are less prone to vote in good part because they pay less attention to politics and because they are less likely to adhere to the norm that voting is not only a right, but also a moral duty. The decline in turnout thus reflects a larger cultural change.’ This trend is not specifically North American: similar developments are found in Western Europe, Japan and Latin America (Niemi & Weisberg, 2001) although the EUYOPART research into political participation by young people suggests that the young Europeans’ interest in politics might increase with their age (EUYOUPART, 2006).

This grim picture of low political participation by young people has been nuanced by some authors. Some authors argue that a transformation of politics is taking place: young people are no longer members of political parties and are not involved in formal political debates but rather participate in

single issue movements and networks (Norris 2002, Della Porta and Mosca 2005, Di Maggio 2001). They claim that young people are interested in politics but in a different way than previous generations. Norris (2002) talks of 'a phoenix rising from the ashes', referring to the fact that disengagement from traditional, conventional and 'old' forms of participation appears to have created new resources that feed on innovative, unconventional and 'new' forms of participation. They may not become members of political parties but are active in non-governmental groups. They may not go to general elections but will express their opinion about specific issues. Shah, Kwak & Holbert (2001) suggest that social capital production is related to Internet use among Generation X. Informational uses of the Internet are positively related to individual differences in the production of social capital. These new forms of political participation mirror the sociological changes that Castells (2001) has labelled 'networked individualism': people do not relate to stable (political) groups but form transitory alliances according to dynamic interests. Indeed, networked individualism (see also Wellman 2001) has been used to describe a new pattern of sociability and may also be used to describe transformations of civic and political participation in contemporary society. One domain that is also often mentioned as a domain for political participation by young people is the Internet (see also Loader 2007, for a collection of studies debating 'decline' and 'cultural displacement' patterns of young people political participation).

The Internet is a new public environment which offers a wide array of opportunities for social and political behaviour (Kann et al., 2007; Wellman et al., 2001; Shah, Kwak & Holbert, 2001; Stanley & Weare, 2004). It is easy to build a website and express opinions on a certain issue. E-mail campaigning is a fast and cheap way to spread information and gather support. The most famous example of the role of digital media in politics was the 2004 US presidential campaign of Howard Dean. One could argue that the Internet creates a new 'playground' for politics. Young people spend an increasing amount of time in the digital environment and, thus, one could expect that a part of their political participation takes place on the Internet. Kann et al. (2007) suggest that online

political involvement may have contributed to the recent rise in the turnout of 18-24 year olds at presidential elections in the USA.

Previous studies have highlighted that the Internet is indeed used for political participation.

However, the evidence presented in those studies focuses only on certain aspects of political participation. Our approach is sociological and the research focuses on individual use of the Internet for civic and political participation<sup>1</sup>. This paper reports the results of an investigation into various forms of political participation of young people on the Internet. The connection between offline and online political characteristics of individuals is also explored. Our goal is to extend our understanding of this political participation in a digital world. Is the digital world a natural extension of the offline world? Or are there differences in participants and ways of participating ?

If new practices in political participation are to be expected, one would expect to find them among students. Generally, students are at the forefront of technology use because they are young and well educated. Students also tend to be more politically active than other young people. We will explore whether students use the Internet for political participation. Namely, we formulate the following research question: does the Internet trigger new forms of political participation by young people? We aim to extend our scientific understanding of online participation by analyzing how this is related to offline political participation and to the level of Internet use (see also: Calenda & Mosca, 2006; Gerber & Green, 2004).

The research has been conducted in three countries: Spain, The Netherlands and Italy.<sup>2</sup> An online survey was filled in by 2224 students. For the analysis developed in this article we focused on young people and young adults aged below 35. The result is a sample of 2163 cases. The analysis is not comparative since we expect to find similar patterns of participation among students in these three countries. We did, however, check for differences since one could expect that political

participation could take on different forms depending on the political culture and tradition in these countries. As for the indicators we have considered, the descriptive statistics show that the differences between the three countries are limited; for this reason we only discuss differences in footnote and we don't include national statistics in the tables. This allow us to focus here on theoretical explanation for political participation online.. On the basis of our research we will show that political participation in the digital world both reproduces and challenges existing forms of political participation.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

This paper focuses on explanations for variations in extent of online participation. The discussion of the relation between technology and social behaviour has a long history (for an overview: Jasanoff et al., 1995, see also Mongili 2007). Traditional perspectives include a techno-deterministic perspective – i.e. social structures and patterns change because of the use of technologies – and a voluntaristic or social deterministic perspective – i.e. social systems choose how to use technologies to fit their specific situation (for an overview on social-shaping perspective: Williams & Edge 1996; Taylor et al. 2001). We are well aware that sophisticated perspectives such as structuration theory (Orlikowski, 1992), theories about information ecologies (Nardi & O'Day, 1998) and the social construction of technologies (Bijker, Hughes & Pinch, 1987) have been developed to integrate these two traditional perspectives. However, for the sake of clarity we will base our arguments on the two extreme perspectives and we will come back to the sophisticated perspectives in our conclusions with some considerations.

Translated to this research, the techno-deterministic approach poses that the level and manner of use of the Internet will influence political participation. The Internet reduces the costs for political

participation. Additionally, cognitive and organizational skills acquired through the use of the Internet can be used for political participation. Kann et al. (2007) indicate how patterns of Internet use can change the attitudes and behaviour of young people towards politics. They may be more familiar with participatory culture (through websites such as MySpace and YouTube) and have grown accustomed to collect information quickly about a broad range of issues. These patterns of Internet use are applied to their hobbies, social contacts and education but could also influence online political participation.

A voluntaristic perspective states that political participation is leading: online political participation is than expected to mirror offline political participation. The basic idea is that people will not change their political participation just because new opportunities have been created. This fits the idea of reinforcement (Kraemer et al., 1989): the ones that visit political party websites will mostly be the same ones that attend political meetings and party congresses. Young people that read about politics in newspapers will read about it online, the ones that read about sports will not suddenly decide to visit websites providing political information.

The following relations between the Internet and political participation can then be proposed:

- *Technology changes political participation.* From the techno-deterministic perspective one expects that a high level of Internet use will enhance political participation online. The group of young people that are using the Internet most for political participation would then be the group of ‘very high Internet users’. The use of the Internet can also be expected to lead to a shift from more traditional to newer forms of politics.
- *Political participation guides technology use.* The voluntaristic perspective states that the offline participation of young people will be reproduced online. The students that are not at all or little engaged in politics offline will not use the Internet for politics at all while those

highly engaged offline will use the Internet frequently for political participation online. One can also expect that there will be no shift in types of participation: offline traditional political participation will lead to online traditional participation.

In these two explanations the use of the Internet and political participation are assumed to be independent variables. This argument can be summarized in two hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1: Techno-determinism*

- 1.1 Higher use of the Internet corresponds with more online participation.
- 1.2 Higher use of the Internet corresponds with a shift from traditional to new forms of political participation.

*Hypothesis 2: Voluntarism*

- 2.1 More offline political participation corresponds with more online political participation.
- 2.2. The type of online participation mirrors the type of offline political participation.

An alternative explanation focuses on common traits. Personal traits such as being entrepreneurial and being open to new developments have an impact on both technology use and political participation. This would mean that those highly engaged in politics offline are also the ones that experiment with technology. The three explanations are summarized in figure 1.



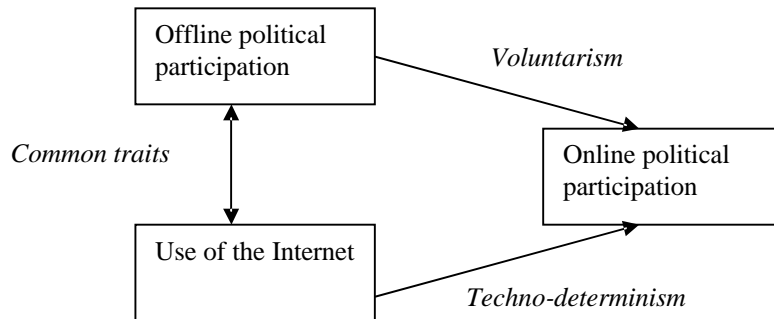


Figure 1. Overview of the hypotheses

The three concepts in this paper are online political participation, the use of the Internet and offline political participation. In this section we will present a conceptualization of these three concepts.

This conceptualization forms the basis for our empirical analysis.

Let us start with the concept ‘offline political participation’<sup>3</sup>. A study of political participation of young people needs to focus on two dimensions: ‘traditional politics’ (i.e membership of political parties, voting in elections, campaigning for elections, fundraising for political candidates) and ‘new politics’ (i.e membership of single issue movements, involvement in non-partisan networks).

This means that we can distinguish between four different orientations towards political participation:

1. *Traditionals (engaged in traditional politics, little engaged in new politics)*. These people exhibit traditional political participation such as participation in political parties and trade unions. These are the young people that are members of established political parties.
2. *Transformers (low on traditional politics, high on new politics)*. Transformers show new forms of political participation such as membership of environmental groups such as Greenpeace and active networking around specific issues such as child labor. These people

are members of political movements and protest groups. They have a limited level of trust in the political system.

3. *Highly engaged (high on both forms of politics)*. They engage in both traditional and new forms of political participation. These people are involved in both traditional and new forms of politics. Politics is in their genes. They have trust in the political system but feel that additional forms of political participation supplement it.
4. *Little engaged (low on both forms of politics)*. These people show little political participation in old and new forms of politics. They are not members of political parties nor of political movements. These people feel that they can exert little influence on political issues. An alternative view is that they do not care: they value political issues less than issues in their personal lives.

These categories can also be used to conceptualize the *extent* of offline participation. Transformers and traditionals are both regarded as a middle category in the level of participation. The idea is that both are different when it comes to the type of online participation but equal when it comes to the extent of offline participation. Little and highly engaged are the extreme categories when it comes to the extent of political participation.

These distinctions result in two dimensions: participation in traditional political organizations and participation in non traditional political or politically-oriented organizations. These two dimensions formed the basis for our operationalizations of offline political participation. Offline participation in traditional political participation is operationalized by measuring membership of political parties and membership of trade unions; non-traditional or new participations is operationalized by measuring participation in networks and movements, participation in squads and in environmental associations.

Political participation can be influenced by the use of the Internet which is our second concept. The use of the Internet can be studied in many different ways. One can focus on the types of technologies used, the time spent on the Internet, the reasons for using the Internet, etc. Approaches also vary in the importance that can be assigned to the various indicators. A dominant line of research is the work of Barry Wellman and Caroline Haythornthwaite (2000) and in our research we follow their approach. For our research we borrow from Rogers' (1962) theory on the diffusion of innovation and focus on groups of users. The assumption is that the Internet has a greater influence on experienced users of the Internet than on so-called 'newbies'.

Rogers' theory is of a general nature. A specific application of this theory to the Internet has been developed by Howard, Rainie & Jones (2001). On the basis of empirical research they distinguish between the following groups of Internet users: newcomers, experimenters, utilitarians and netizens. These groups differ in the extent to which they have integrated the Internet in their daily life. A strong indicator for the degree of integration is time spent online. Generally, people spend more time online when they have integrated it further into their daily lives (i.e for working, buying, studying, communicate, informing.).

One can distinguish between four groups of users:

- *Low users*. This group has not (yet) integrated the Internet into their daily lives. Low users have limited access to the Internet and few competencies for using the opportunities available online. They use the Internet only a limited time per week and for a restricted set of activities.
- *Medium users*. Medium users have better access to the Internet and more competencies for using the opportunities available online. They use the Internet for some time per week and for a more extensive set of activities.

- *High users*. High users have good access to the Internet and adequate competencies for using the opportunities available online. They use the Internet for many hours per week and for an extensive set of activities.
- *Very high users*. This group has integrated the Internet fully into their daily lives. Very high users have extensive access to the Internet (through broadband) and all the competencies for using the opportunities available online. They use the Internet all the time and for all activities.

These groups of users of the Internet can be expected to vary in three dimensions: access to technology, technological skills and use of technology.<sup>4</sup> On all these three dimensions one can expect ‘very high users’ to have the highest score and ‘low users’ the lowest. These dimensions form the basis for our operationalization of the concept of Internet use. Access to technology is measured by looking at the type of Internet connection at home<sup>5</sup>, competencies are measured through familiarity with the GNU-Linux system and personalization of web sites (by setting contents and services preferences) and use of technology is measured by looking at the average number of hours per week online and the use of the Internet for selected activities (work, study, purchase, download files, communication, obtaining information).

One could expect that the impact of the Internet on political participation will be stronger for the group of ‘very high users’. An alternative expectation could be that the level of use has no influence on political participation. We will come back to these expectations later. The important point now is that different groups of users can be distinguished on the basis of a variety of indications such as knowledge of technology, time spent online, etc. We will present a specific operationalization of ‘use of the Internet’ later.

Online political participation can be conceptualized in terms of the extent of online participation and the orientation towards political participation. The extent of political participation is measured by looking at the variety of forms of political participation which results in the categories low, medium high and very level of Internet use for political participation<sup>6</sup>.

The orientation towards online political participation can be conceptualized on the basis of the same dimensions as used for offline political participation (traditional, transformers, not engaged and highly engaged) but different indicators are used. Two indicators are used for online participation in traditional political organizations: use of websites of political parties for finding information during electoral campaigns in 2004 and reception of email messages with political contents from political parties. Two indicators are also used for online participation in non traditional political or politically-oriented organization: use of websites of political movements that are not parties for finding information during electoral campaigns in 2004 and reception of email messages with political contents from non-party associations and organisations<sup>7</sup>.

Online information and communication flows of students that refer to parties bring to the category 'traditional'; those flows that refer to networks and movements bring to the category 'transformers', flows that refer to both types bring to 'highly engaged' and low levels of information and communication bring to 'little engaged'. We will use this index later in order to check whether the use of online resources by students and the political communication flows in which they are involved, reflects their offline political characteristics<sup>8</sup>.

This theoretical exploration has resulted in a conceptualization of use of the Internet and political participation. Expectations concerning the relation between these concepts have been presented. These different expectations were tested in our empirical research. The results of this research are presented in the following section.

### 3. Descriptive statistics

Our first variable is offline political participation. On the basis of the indicators we built an index of offline political participation. The resulting groups are shown in table 1.<sup>9</sup>

	Traditionals	Transformers	Highly engaged	Not engaged
Men [32]*	6	18,6	8,4	67
Women[68]	3.9	16.4	4.8	74.8
Younger (18-24)[79.5]	4,1	16.6	5.1	74.2
Older (25-35)[20.5]	6.5	19.2	9.5	64.8
<i>Overall</i>	4.6	17.2	6.0	72.3

\*Proportion in the sample

Table 1 Offline political participation (per cent) [aprox. here]

This table shows that in our sample most students (72.3 per cent) are neither engaged in new forms nor in traditional forms of offline political organizations. Nearly three-quarter of the sample has never participated in political or political-oriented organizations. In general, most of students who participate politics are engaged in new forms of political or politically-oriented organizations (transformers). The groups of students that engage only in traditional forms of politics or on both new and traditional forms of politics are rather small. There is a significant difference between men and women: men participate more than women ( $Z=-4.026^{**}$ ). Young students are more likely to be

engaged in new forms of participation while aged colleagues are more engaged in traditional forms if compared with younger students, but they also are more active in general.

Our second variable is the use of the Internet. The results for this variable are shown in table 2.

<i>Access to technology</i>	Time spent online (n: 1853 -2020)
Type of Internet connection at home	0.199**
<i>Competencies</i>	
Familiarity with the GNU-Linux system?	0.214**
Personalization of web sites (by setting contents and services preferences)	0.177**
<i>Use of technology</i>	
Index of activities made online	0.353**

Table 2 Internet use (access to technology, competencies, use of technology) [aprox. here]

Table 2 shows that the indicator of time spent online is highly correlated with almost all of the indicators included in the table (competencies and use of technology). This indicator splits the sample in groups of low, medium, high and very high users and we will use this classification in order to explore the relation between technology and political participation. This choice is argued by the fact that there is a ‘quasi-linear’ relation between this indicator and other indicators for Internet use.<sup>10</sup>

A next step is to provide an insight in these groups of users. How big are the various groups? How many low, medium, high and very high users can be found within our population? And who are

these low, medium, high and very high users in terms of gender and age? The characteristics of these groups are shown in table 3.

Time spent online	Low (1-3 hours)	Medium (4-7 hours)	High (8-10 hours)	Very High (more than 10 hours)
Women	18	30.8	19.2	32
Men	9.6	19.1	19.4	51.9
Younger (18-24)	15.7	29.2	19.0	36.1
Older (25-35)	13.8	18.7	20.1	47.3
<i>Overall</i>	15.3	27.0	19.3	38.4

Table 3 Description of groups of Internet users (in terms of the countries, gender and age) (per cent)

[aprox. here]

The table shows that most of the students connect to the Internet more than 8 hours per week (above 50 per cent). This could be expected for a student population and is not representative for the whole population since students are higher educated and students require the Internet for many study related activities. Women are less wired than men; we have a clear gender divide here.<sup>11</sup> This seems to contradict signals that women have already closed the gender gap and use the Internet more than men do.<sup>12</sup> There is not a clear linear relation between age and the access to the Internet. Younger students are less wired than their older colleagues, however the cleavage is not high as it is for gender. Indeed, the correlation between age and time spent online is not significant and the test for the two groups is significant but not dramatic ( $Z = -4,308^{**}$ ).

The third variable is online political participation. We distinguish in the extent of online political participation (we do not distinguish here between traditional and new) through using the aggregated index of online participation. The results of the analysis are shown in table 4.



(N. 2157-2163)	Low level of online political participation	Medium level of online political participation	High level of online political participation	Very high level of online political participation
Men	21.3	17.5	21.3	40
Women	31	23.5	22.4	23.1
Younger (18-24)	31.5	24.0	22.7	21.9
Older (25-35)	29	21.3	21.3	28.3
<i>Overall</i>	27.9	21.5	22.1	28.5

*Table 4* Online political participation (per cent) [aprox. here]

The table shows that over 50 per cent of the students use the internet to participate quite a lot online. Consistently with data on engagement in organizations, the table shows that males are more engaged in online participation than females ( $Z = -8.039^{**}$ ). Age matters but not such as gender does (correlation =  $0.75^{**}$ ; test:  $Z = -1.752^*$ ).

To enhance our insight, we also measured the different activities in online political participation. Not surprisingly, the Internet is widely used by our students for getting information on public and political issues (93.6 per cent). Participating in online campaigns and surveys related to relevant public issues is also very common among students (79.6 per cent). A significant group of students also use the Internet to discuss of politics or at least of public issues (30 per cent). Membership is not common, though almost 200 students are members of human rights, charity and political online communities (8 per cent).

Gender differences in political participation are reproduced online: females are less engaged in online political participation. The only exception is the engagement in online awareness campaigns and surveys; the gap between females and males is here less relevant, which might confirm that females are more likely to be committed with ethical issues and NGOs than with traditional politics and traditional political organizations. Age differences are not dramatic, though younger students are less likely to get political information online; they seem to be more interested in the Internet as a new playground for political participation (i.e blogs, communities).

#### **4. Explaining online political participation**

First, we'll try to explain the variance in the extent of political participation. Before we'll test the hypotheses, we need to check for common traits underlying both offline political participation and use of the Internet. We checked for common traits by focussing on a combination of the use of the Internet – in terms of the indicator 'time spent online' – and offline political participation. The analysis showed that there was no significant correlation between time spent online and offline political participation. This shows that there is no support for personal traits underlying both Internet use and offline political participation. This means that we can proceed to online political participation in an attempt to explain this in terms of the technological deterministic and voluntaristic explanations.

To test the technological deterministic explanation, we related the extent of online political participation to the time spent online. The key finding is that Time Spent Online is strongly correlated with the Index of Online Participation: 0,210\*\*, which seems to suggest that students engaged in politics and that have integrated internet in daily life, will use more the Internet for

political purpose. This finding provides support for the technology-deterministic explanation. We will discuss this later.

To test the voluntaristic explanation, we analyzed the relation between the extent of offline and online political participation. The analysis shows a positive relation. The students who are highly engaged offline also show the highest online participation, the students who are little engaged offline also show the least participation online. The offline transformers and offline traditionals are in between these two categories with online participation of transformers being somewhat higher. The correlation between the two indexes of participation was also calculated. This turned out to be quite strong: 0.268\*\*. The results provide empirical evidence for the conclusion that political characteristics of students matter when we look at the extent of online political participation.

However, the analysis of the correlation between the extent of offline and online political participation also shows that the students who are in the categories 'low' and 'medium' offline are quite likely to be active online. This finding is in line with the previous finding for the relation between extent of Internet use and extent of online participation and provides support for the techno-deterministic explanation.

On the basis of our analyses we found support for both the techno-deterministic and the voluntaristic explanation. But which one of these explanations best explains students' participation? We used two methods to answer this question. The first method was a comparison of the correlations between the Index of Online Participation and both a) the indicator of Time Spent Online and b) the Index of Offline Participation, we find the strongest correlation between the Index of Offline Participation and the Index of Online Participation (a:0.233\*\*; b: 0.275\*\*). These results seem to indicate that the voluntaristic explanation explains student participation somewhat better than the techno-deterministic explanation. We then developed a more detailed analysis. In the

following table we compare the correlations between the four online political activities and Time Spent Online and Offline Participation.

Online political activity	Time Spent Online	Offline Participation
Getting Information	0.216**	0.171**
Discussing	0.197**	0.193**
Campaigning and Surveying	0.111**	0.213**
Membership of communities	0.150**	0.230**

*Table 5* Voluntaristic and Technological drivers of online participation (N. 2068-2163)

As suggested before, voluntaristic and techno-deterministic explications work together. However, voluntaristic approach best explains students' attitudes towards online actions (campaigning and surveying) and engagement in online communities. For these students, the Internet represents a useful resource to integrate offline organizational participation; let's say: the Internet might help to carry out social and political activities that students experiment into their offline organizations (i.e. Calenda and Mosca 2007). Conversely and unsurprisingly, the Internet triggers political information, it contributes to cut-down information access's barriers: techno-deterministic explication seems to work well in this case. Online discussion seems to require both good levels of internet use and engagement in politics.

Secondly, we'll try to explain the variation in the type of political participation. How can we explain that certain students are involved in traditional politics online whereas others are involved in transformative politics? Online political participation is measured through looking at the type of online political information and communication channels of students as described in §2. The

aggregation of single indicators produced the Index of Political Information and Communication Online.

The techno-deterministic explanation focused on the relation between online political participation and time spent online. The correlation between the Index of Political Information and Communication Online and the indicator of Time Spent Online, is low: 0.084\*\*. This means that there is no support for the technological explanation when it comes to explaining online political participation.

To test the voluntaristic explanation, our analysis focused on the relation between offline political characteristics of students (Index of Offline Political Participation) with their online political participation (Index of Political Information and Communication Online). The analysis shows that offline political traits are likely to be reproduced online. We have a clear trend: highly engaged offline are also highly engaged online; little engaged offline are also not engaged online; traditional offline are likely to visit web sites of parties and receive emails by parties while transformers online are likely to visit web sites of movements and receive emails from no-party networks and movements. The correlation between the two indexes is very strong: 0.344\*\*. <sup>13</sup>

## **6. New politics invigorates old politics**

In this paper we presented two possible explanations for differences in online participation: a techno-deterministic explanation, a voluntaristic explanation<sup>14</sup>. Hypotheses were formulated to test these explanations and in the previous sections the hypotheses were tested on the basis of our empirical research in three countries. The results are summarized in the following table:

<b>Hypothesis</b>	<b>Supported?</b>
<i>Hypothesis 1: Techno-determinism</i>	
1.1. Higher use of the Internet corresponds with more online participation.	Supported
1.2. Higher use of the Internet corresponds with a shift from traditional to new forms of political participation.	Not supported
<i>Hypothesis 2: Voluntarism</i>	
2.1. More offline political participation corresponds with more online political participation.	Supported
2.2. The type of online participation mirrors the type of offline political participation.	Supported

*Table 6* Overview of the testing of the hypotheses

How can we understand these findings? The first finding is that the extent of online political participation is influenced by both the level of Internet use and the extent of offline political participation. The latter factor explains the variance somewhat better but the technological explanation also showed good results. The second finding is that the level of Internet use cannot explain the orientations towards online political participation. These orientations are only explained by the orientations towards offline political participation. This provides strong support for the voluntaristic explanation.

Does the Internet trigger new forms of political participation by young people? On the basis of our research we do conclude that the online political world is indeed a natural extension of the offline world. The availability of information on the Internet and opportunities for political participation do not seem to change political participation by young people. An alternative explanation, however, could pose that the relation is reversed. Online political participation does not mirror offline

political participation; offline political participation mirrors online political participation. Kann et al. (2007) argue that new forms of online participation affect offline political participation. People do not visit a website because they were visiting party meetings before but people will visit party meetings because they have visited a party website. Could this be correct?

Our data do not provide a historical overview and therefore we have only measured a correlation and not a causal effect. The effects of Internet use on the extent of political participation, however, seem to indicate that technology is a relevant factor. Online political participation may trigger more offline participation and, conversely, offline political participation may trigger more online participation. The pattern that emerges is a reinvigoration of political participation by Internet use. Technology and social structure interact to form enhanced patterns of political participation. The digital arena forms a significant addition to existing arenas (face-to-face and mass media) and interacts with these arenas in various ways. The new mix of opportunities for political participation is used for both traditional party politics and new political movements.

One can explain the lack of shift from traditional to new political participation by pointing at the way that 'old politics' are influenced by 'new politics'. The introduction of a competitor in the political arena may have forced 'old politics' to change its practices and ways of communication. Political parties have also introduced forums, networked ways of organizing and opportunities to create weak ties between participants. These changes seem to have been successful and this might help traditional political organizations to maintain their share of political participation. Similar developments have been described for the media (Schiffers, Ward & Lusoli, 2007). Traditional media such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) have managed to reposition themselves on the Internet and have succeeded in maintaining a dominant position in the delivery of news to citizens.

At this stage we should make very clear that our findings only refer to a specific group of young people: students. Within this group only the students who have access to the Internet were able to answer our questions. This means that there is a bias in terms of education which is a well-established factor that influences political participation and Internet use. We do not know whether the patterns we found also apply to other young people. To extend the relevance of our findings, research needs to be done among young people with a lower level of education. We propose that students are the forerunners of developments and therefore similar patterns may be expected to develop over time among other groups.

A thorough understanding of these processes of change and new forms of political participation emerging in the online world requires that we go beyond voluntaristic and techno-deterministic approaches. A process of structuration (Orlikowski, 1992) or social construction (Bijker, Hughes & Pinch, 1987) takes place. Previous structures are reinforced since there is no shift in the types of political participation. This does not mean that the technology has no effect. The extent of participation is influenced by the technology which provides support for the idea that young people take practices of participation from different domains (MySpace, YouTube) into their political behaviour. The new practices are thus the result of offline practices of political participation and online Internet participation. One should note that these Internet practices can influence both traditional politics and the so-called 'transformers'. This indicates that traditional political movements have managed to move along with the predispositions young people are developing regarding their Internet use.

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<sup>1</sup> For simplification, from now we use the term ‘political participation’.

<sup>2</sup> The data were collected through a web questionnaire. The questionnaire was hosted on a website of the University of Florence. It was presented in four languages (Italian, Spanish, Catalan and Dutch). There was no time to translate the questionnaire into Dutch but Dutch students are generally fluent in English. Students in Florence, Utrecht and Barcelona were asked to fill out a questionnaire and this was accessible from September to December 2005. The survey was self-selected: students could choose whether they wanted to fill in the questionnaire. This may have resulted in two biases: more students with high Internet use and more students with an interest in politics. This means that we can not generalize our findings to the whole populations of students in the three countries. For this reason we used non-

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parametric statistics. Besides, all results of non-parametric correlations presented in this article have been previously checked with results obtained through cross-tabulation and other descriptive techniques. The significance levels or coefficients presented throughout the paper are reported as follows: \*\* means significance at the 0.01 level; \* means significance at 0.05 level. Where a dichotomous variable was used, we carried out a Chi Square Test (where both variables were dichotomous) and a Mann-Whitney U Test (where the variable was crossed with an ordinal variable). In the article, 'n.s.' means non significant.

<sup>3</sup> We are well aware that forms of political participation – both organizational and non organizational participation - are nowadays recombined and individual engagement in multiple political networks is nowadays more common than it was some decades ago. However, we have considered here young people participation in traditional organizations, new organizations and political networks.

<sup>4</sup> In our research, these dimensions were also strongly correlated to 'trust in technology' which was measured through several questions related to student's perception of the Internet's impact on their lives (i.e. quality of work, study, citizenship). This variable, however, represents an attitude rather than a degree of use and is therefore not included in the analysis.

<sup>5</sup> We originally included the indicator 'years of access to the Internet'. However, this indicator depends on the age of the respondents and is thus hard to manage. This indicator is correlated – with age (0.203\*\*) and also with time spent online (0.164\*\*). However, time spent online is not correlated significantly with age, which means that, in spite of the fact that a long experience with the Internet increases the time spent online, young people who started using the Internet recently, are also using this medium quite a lot. This trend can possibly be explained by the recent widespread diffusion of broadband and flat tariff plan of Internet access..

<sup>6</sup> The index of the extent of online political participation aggregates four indexes. 1) Online information (values range 0-3; it includes the following indicators: a) getting information on public issues online; b) reading online newspapers; c) getting information online related to 2004 Electoral Campaigns (European Elections; in the Italian version of the questionnaire we also referred to the local elections that took place in the same period; in the Spanish version we also referred to the general election that took place in March 2004.). 2) Online discussion (values range 0-2; it includes the following indicators: a) discussing in chat or blogs on public issues; b) discussing in forum and mailing-list on public issues. 3) Membership of online communities (values range 0-3; it includes: a) political communities; b) charity communities; c) human right communities. 4) Online action (values range 0-2; it includes: a) participation in online campaigns related to public issues; b) participation in online surveys related to public issues. We considered a total of ten indicators. We then split the sample in four classes of online participation levels. The classification's ratio followed the observation of the score's distribution: we cut the groups when we observed a sharp discontinuity in the distribution. The result is described in table n.4.

<sup>7</sup> We are aware that these choice has two limits: a) receiving emails does not necessarily means that the students are voluntary linked to the senders, in our case parties and movements; b) the main actors of electoral campaigns are parties and we assume that students interested in politics will refer to parties and candidates resources online, beyond their political orientations. Said that, we found significant associations between political orientations of students and the online resource they used during the electoral campaigns.

<sup>8</sup> This index is not described in § 3 in relations to gender and age because not relevant differences from the index of the extent of online political participation have been found.

<sup>9</sup> Sample's proportions by nation, age, field of studies are the following. Nation: Italy 12.5, the Netherlands 30, Spain 57.6. Age: under 21 (30.3), 22 -23 (28), 24-25 (20.7), 26-27 (10.4), 27-35 (10). Study's fields: social sciences (37.6), humanities (24.0), engineering and computer sciences (8.5), bio-medicine (8.1), natural sciences, physics and mathematics (7.1), economics (6.7), other (8.9); missing (1.1).

<sup>10</sup> A factor analysis was made through data reduction method, and time spent online was the only factor extracted explaining almost the 40 per cent of variance (KMO Test = 0.668).

<sup>11</sup> The test coefficient is:  $Z = 9.373^{**}$ . The divide persist even controlling data by classes of age and gender: younger females score less than older females.

<sup>12</sup> However, it is worth to bear in mind that our sample is not probabilistic and this can generate a statistical distortion that we are not fully able to control at this stage of the research.

<sup>13</sup> 47 per cent of students highly engaged offline refers – and is target of – to online information and communication flows from both parties and non-partisan political organizations; 80 per cent of students not engaged offline is also not interested in online information and communication flows. 30 per cent of traditional offline is also traditional online; the proportion increase for transformers offline: 42 per cent of them is also transformers online. Conversely only 3 per cent of traditional offline referred to non-partisans political resources online, while 14 per cent of transformers referred to partisans political resource online. The fact that political parties are the main actors of electoral campaigns helps to explain this difference. Students are well aware of the importance of parties: a consistent group of students accessed parties' web sites and was the target of parties' campaigns through emails, beyond their political orientations. However, the share of online communication and information from political parties (6 per cent) is lightly less than the share of non-parties political organizations (9 per cent) over the total sample's population. Non traditional actors become important referees in electoral campaigns (i.e Bimber 2003; see also the discussion in Bentivegna 2006). Reader should

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bear in mind that we refer here only to information and communication flows during the electoral campaigns, which means that the proportion of students that was defined here as 'not engaged', is here highest than the scores observed on other online political activities (Table 4).

<sup>14</sup>We did not consider the hypothesis of common traits explanation in table 6, since our focus was on voluntaristic and techno-deterministic explications (see the methodological statement in § 2). However, as we already observed throughout the paper, our data do not support this explanation. There is no reason to think that people that are highly active in terms of offline political participation also use the Internet a lot. Young people that do no participate in political parties and non-party movements are just as likely to use the Internet.