

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND THE INTERNET: DESCRIPTIVE HYPOTHESES AND CAUSAL MECHANISMS

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Summary

The aim of this paper is to outline the theoretical bases of a research project that examines the current influence of the Internet on political participation in Spain. It summarises the main debates identified in this literature and establishes the research questions and hypotheses. In the first phase of the project we are interested in producing good quantitative data in order to test the hypotheses generated by the literature on online political participation, which are, so far, unexistent for the Spanish case. For this, we have designed a survey on this matter that will be carried out by the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (Centre for Sociological Research). However, not all relevant issues can be tackled through survey research, and thus further attention should be paid to the potential use of other research designs.

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Introduction

In recent years, publications on political participation have increasingly focussed on the impact of technology, especially the Internet, on the political activity of the general public (Castells 2003, Sunstein 2003, Norris 2001, Bimber 2001, Davis 1999, van de Donk et al. 2004). Among other aspects, it has been indicated that new technology is having a profound effect on regular political activity in advanced industrial societies, whether by offering new channels for participation or modifying different aspects of the existing ones. On the one hand, it has drastically altered the cost-structure of participation, while increasing the spectrum of possible political activities. It has extended the opportunities for mobilising of traditional political associations while giving prominence to non-organised individuals or individuals organised via non-conventional, flexible structures. New technology has also facilitated an extension of the aims of participation, broadening their territorial scope and enabling coordination and political influence on a trans-national scale to occur with an ease which was virtually unknown until a decade ago. These changes raise the question of how far many of the theories about political participation continue to be valid or whether certain aspects of them should be reviewed and reformulated.

The aim of the project presented here is to examine the current influence of the Internet on political participation in Spain, from a range of different theoretical and methodological perspectives. It aims to prepare the ground in order to be able to produce quality data which will enable the hypotheses generated in this field to be contrasted. It is therefore essential to identify the most relevant research hypotheses and questions. The questionnaire designed by our research team will be soon available in English and can be sent on request.

The Internet and levels of political participation

The first question to consider is whether the Internet has any effect, whether positive or negative, on the amount of political participation: does it contribute to the generation of a more participative society or, on the contrary, does it create an atomised society which has little involvement in general? At the beginning of the debate, some authors argued that a reduction in levels of political participation could be expected as a result of the use of the Internet, given that it brings with it atomisation and a weakening of social cohesion (Davis 1999, Noveck 2000) and can take up a large part of people's free time (Kraut et al 1998, Nie and Erbing 2000). A second possibility is that the Internet has barely affected levels of political participation, as suggested by those who defend the normalisation hypothesis (Bimber 1999, 2002, Schuefele and Nisbet 2002). Finally, other authors have argued that the Internet will contribute towards a more participative society (Negroponte 1996).

However, in our opinion and that of other authors (Krueger 2006) this first general research question has not been presented adequately because in fact a number of different dimensions are intertwined and should be dealt with one at a time. Political participation is a multi-dimensional concept, in which the boundaries between what constitutes participation and what does not are often unclear. The generic question about the effect of the Internet on 'political participation' is confusing. The effect of the Internet on three types of activity should be distinguished: those which are only possible online, those which could be carried out equally in the real world and via the Internet and those which can only be carried out offline. From this standpoint, the research questions are specific to each mode of participation.

Firstly, it is evident that the existence of a new medium allows new forms of political participation which previously did not exist. Some of them have no clear parallels in the non-virtual world. For example, via the Internet one can resend e-mails with political content and try to influence government decisions through comments posted on websites. The existence of new types of action can only serve to increase the total level of political participation. The impact on the levels of participation will depend on the extent to which the new channels are used: if use is marginal, it is unlikely to produce a more participative society.

Associated with this type of action there is a conceptual problem. In the same way that the actions which the Internet has enabled are new, there is not yet any consensus on whether they can be considered as political participation or not. For example, is writing political comments on a website considered to be political participation?¹ Some authors defend that the transmission of e-mails or different forms of political communication should be considered as such (Peretti and Micheletti 2004). For others, the excessive extension of the concept may make it useless on an analytical level (Van Deth 2001). This question should be studied in both conceptual and empirical terms, but in order to do this it is necessary to have data available for both types of participation.

Secondly, there are offline activities that have online equivalents. For example, it is possible to contact a politician, a government department or the media to protest about some problem by telephone, in person, by letter, e-mail etc. Other activities which share

¹ The traditional definition of political participation contains various fundamental elements: it should be an activity carried out by individuals outside of their employment remit, the aim of which is to influence a political decision (Verba and Nie 1972, Parry, Moyser and Day 1992, Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995). The last point has been gradually extended to include activities such as protests, which on occasion attempt to influence political opinion rather than decisions taken by government agents, or such as political consumption aimed at company activities (Barnes and Kaase, 1979, Norris 2002, Peretti and Micheletti 2004).

this characteristic are petition-signing and donation of contributions. In these cases we are faced with a contra-factual question: would those who participate online have participated offline if they had not had access to the Internet? If people who are normally inactive become active, the volume of participation increases. The total impact on the volume of participation will also depend on the number of people who have become active through the Internet. On the other hand, if traditional methods are replaced by those offered online –for example if someone who would have written a letter writes an e-mail instead—then the volume of activity remains stable.

Thirdly, there is the question of whether the use of the Internet affects the level of offline participation. There are three hypotheses: that it is unaffected, that it is increased or that it is reduced. Does the public express its views equally, more, or less, when it has access to the Internet? Do Internet users vote more? Do they participate more in political parties? In relationship to this research question in particular, the causal mechanisms by which the Internet influences participation should be explained. These mechanisms are dealt with in sections 3, 4 and 5.

A variant of these hypotheses can be found in those authors who defend that the use of the Internet does not bring previously inactive members of the public to participate in the political process, but it offers new channels for those who were already participating through traditional channels (Norris 2002, Hill and Hughes 1998). Therefore, the total number of participatory acts increases, which would result in greater inequality in political participation². Finally, it is worth underlining that the effects of the use of the

² This research does not include a comparative view but it is important to point out that the use of Internet may not be the same in all contexts. For example, Bimber (2002) has argued that in countries such as the USA where there are numerous existing opportunities for participation and few restrictions on the circulation of information it would have very little effect: those who want to participate would already

Internet on participation may depend on factors such as the amount of time spent online and the type of use (Shah et al 2001).

The influence of the Internet on different types of participation

Electoral and conventional participation has decreased in recent decades in most industrial countries (Wattenberg 2002, Lane and Ersson 1999, Blais 2000, Caul and Gray 2000, Franklin 2004, Mair 2002). In parallel, this decrease has been accompanied by a pronounced increase in activities which differ from the traditional ones, such as political consumerism and anti-globalisation mobilisations among others (Norris 2002, Cain, Dalton and Scarrow 2003, Micheletti, Follesdal and Stolle 2004, Stolle, Hooghe and Micheletti 2005).

Different studies have identified a growing level of public discontent with the mechanisms and institutions of representative democracy (Dalton 2004, Pharr and Putnam 2000, Dalton and Wattenberg 2000, Norris 1999). This political dissatisfaction could be a consequence of the apathy among some sectors of the population. However, changes in attitude are concentrated in members of the public with high levels of education and large cognitive capacities who are convinced of the democratic ideal. These people are not willing to renounce their capacity for intervention in the political sphere despite their lack of confidence in the traditional players. Critical members of the public reject the hierarchical and traditional forms of participation and prefer actions of a horizontal nature, with low costs of entry and exit. One of the hypotheses we propose in this research is that the use of the Internet emerges in this scenario, offering an alternative medium for carrying out political activities beyond the scope of the

have been able to do so via traditional channels. On the other hand, in countries where the government controls the flow of information, Internet could significantly increase the possibilities for action.

classical institutions, and therefore offers recourse to new repertoires (both offline and online). There are two arguments which justify this hypothesis.

First, some of the characteristics of the Internet favour certain activities over others. Through the Internet, anybody can access and expand on the available information about questions of specific interest. At the same time, they can make contact with other individuals and organisations without the physical and temporal limits in the offline world. These characteristics favour single-issue mobilisations aimed at a specific theme (Sunstein 2003, Ward and Lusoli 2003). But horizontal exchanges online also contribute to giving greater autonomy to those members of the public who want to organise and mobilise themselves, thereby promoting the involvement of groups and individuals from outside the institutional ambit (Castells 2003).

Secondly, these same characteristics have favoured the quicker and more effective adaptation of certain players to the Internet. This is the case of the social movements – pioneers in the use of new technology – versus the political parties and the institutions of representative democracy. The intrinsic characteristics of these movements (types of horizontal organisation, use of symbolic resources, predominance of post-materialist values and decentralised and networked work logic) have all offered an advantage for adaptation to the new medium (López, Roig and Sábada 2003).

For all these reasons, disaffected members of the citizenry seeking a participative strategy can find in the Internet an alternative which supposes an impulse for the new modes. Therefore, the divorce from conventional politics is accentuated (Frau-Meigs 2002). These arguments are valid for those who already participate in conventional

mechanisms and who would find in the digital sphere a stimulus to make them change their modes of action. But additionally, it is especially pertinent to consider the possibility that this alternative opened up by the Internet can act as an impulse for previously inactive members of the public, where their inactivity can be explained by the classical institutional mechanisms of participation not fitting in with current needs (Innerarity 2002).

It is therefore appropriate to consider the influence that the Internet can have on different types of participation. We intend to outline the profiles of participants and non-participants both among users and non-users. This distinction should allow the observation of differences in the methods used by different groups when they are active. Additionally, the Internet does not have to be limited to being a channel in order to influence participation, but it can produce activities which would not otherwise have been generated. For that reason it is not only the differences in the types of activities carried out by participating users and non-users that need to be addressed, but also the changes which can occur in the intensity of participation.

What is the link between the Internet and Political Participation? Causal Mechanisms

The Internet and resources for participation

According to one of the most influential models in the study of political participation – civic voluntarism (Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995) – the ability to face the costs of participation is a determining factor in the decision of whether or not to participate: the

higher the cost, the lower the activity. Depending on the resources available, people can participate more or less easily. For members of the public with little time, money or cognitive or organisational resources, the costs of participating are too high and they choose not to participate. So the impact of costs on participation is conditioned by the level of resources they have.

However, when this model was developed, the Internet did not exist or it was not as widely used as it is now. The first explanatory hypothesis of why it influences the level and type of political participation is that this tool is a new resource in itself and modifies the costs of participation.

On one side, one can argue that technological skills provide a resource for participation. Workers in information-intensive sectors develop specific skills in the medium which are then made central to the production processes in the knowledge society (Castells 2003). In the same way, these skills can be useful when carrying out an effective action with a political end: having a good knowledge of the virtual world and being able to engage in specialist uses enables both the preparation (information acquisition, searches for other successful campaigns, etc), and the practice of acts of political participation in a simple and efficient way. For example, knowing how to advertise a campaign on the Internet and develop attractive interactive materials, such as videos or banners, as political messages can be decisive in achieving an aim.

On the other hand, the use of the Internet can increase the availability of other resources. Carrying out certain tasks online supposes savings of time and often money, and therefore the increased availability of these resources which are fundamental for

participation. The use of the Internet, a largely written medium which is at the same time sophisticated and interactive, can have a positive effect on the cognitive skills with which one is equipped. For example, searching for information about a specific subject necessitates a series of complex cognitive operations such as selecting the relevant information, evaluating the credibility of the sources and summarising and using some of the data found to satisfy the aim of the search. In this sense, in many cases the use of the Internet offers experience in the processing and analysis of the information, which can be very useful for those wishing to carry out a political activity.

Finally, the characteristics of these medium result in a reduction in some of the costs associated with participation. For example, the possibility of acting anonymously on the Internet transforms some of the limitations which are characteristic of protest actions. The use of the Internet therefore provides a new configuration of resources for participation and the associated costs, which means an impulse for participation in general and especially for certain specific activities.

Access to political information

Access to the Internet reduces the cost of acquiring political information given that it allows almost unlimited, fast, cheap access to it. The best-informed members of the public tend to participate more (Milner 2002). One can therefore expect cheaper access to political information to bring with it an increase in the level of the information itself, which in turn has a positive influence on participation. In fact, according to experiments carried out, some authors have shown that exposure to more information via the Internet

produces a greater interest in politics and favours participation (Lupia and Philpot 2005). However, there is some academic debate about the validity of such an argument.

On one hand, some authors have expounded the existence of certain limitations associated with the potential of the Internet to contribute to a more informed society: the availability of information is not necessarily accompanied by capacity to process and interpret it. These cognitive operations are necessary for the information to become knowledge. In addition, an increase in the amount of accessible information does not presuppose an increase in its quality (Polat 2005, Bimber 2003, Clément 2002, Noveck 2000).

On the other hand, even though the information is available, it requires the initiative of the user to access it. For example, the receipt of bulletins and newsletter requires a prior subscription. Or, more generally speaking, in order to consult certain online information pages one has to access them specifically. Additionally, there is an endless supply of more attractive web content: among other sites are those related to leisure and entertainment (which are especially attractive to younger users) or more practical information (health, services, etc). On the Internet, more than other media, the user is active in the search and selection of the content they expose themselves to. So, the consequences on behaviour and political attitudes would only be valid for certain the Internet users. The Internet would promote an interest in politics in those who use it to access social and political content. At the same time it would reinforce the non-participation of those who are not interested in politics, and who are exposed to a multitude of other stimuli, and can therefore easily pass over the political information (Prior 2005). In addition, even in the case of access to political information, there is a

risk of segmentation, given that the possibility of focussing the selection of subjects to be accessed reduces plurality. The Internet enables individuals with specific interests to select only the information which strengthens their position. This behaviour can polarise opinions about certain social conflicts since it radicalises attitudes and impedes contact and deliberation between opposing standpoints.

As a counter-argument one could allege that the characteristics of the new medium favour the reception, by any member of the public, of information which is either unsolicited or has not been specifically requested, especially via e-mail but also through participation in online fora. In addition, the existence of certain components of the Internet (such as browsing without a specific aim) can lead *a priori* to unplanned exposure to political or social content. These activities for which the Internet users cannot control their exposure to content can have an impact on their motivations and attitudes. The use of the Internet itself can enable the user to develop a greater interest in political issues.

So, there are reasons to think that increased access and exposure to political information on the Internet may favour participation. It is probable that a positive effect depends on the motivation of the individual, but even those individuals who are not actively searching for information may involuntarily gain access to it, with a positive impact on their involvement.

Changing attitudes in the virtual world

The use of the Internet can produce changes in attitudes and values which have an impact on political participation. For some authors, the technique is not neutral and

leads to the development of an “electronic identity” (Wolton, 2000). Attitudinal changes, which would occur especially in cases of more frequent access to the Internet, are produced through the interiorisation of the new skills or relational forms which are characteristic of the Internet. For example, one of the most outstanding possibilities of new technology is that it allows interactivity and multidimensional exchange where the emitter and the receptor merge, acting one on top of the other without hierarchies (Yildiz 2002). Contact and exchange mechanisms such as the Internet fora and chatrooms constitute an example of the new lines of communication associated with interactivity.

It should therefore be assumed that new technology brings changes well beyond simple, functional consequences. The transformations adopt a broader, more global character as well as affecting the way in which they are organised; they also modify the mechanisms of exchange, social relations and interaction (Mulder, 1999). Some authors have forecast pessimistic consequences derived from these relational models, suggesting a hypothetical alienation of the individual, who would act in isolation and according to highly focussed concerns (Noveck 2000, Davis 1999). In fact, there are still some doubts as to the capacity of the Internet to become a new public sphere for debate and deliberation (Polat 2005, Dean 2003).

However, one of the hypotheses that we propose is that when certain interactive practices are interiorised in the general use of the Internet (i.e. not necessarily for political purposes but for uses related to leisure, information search, exchange or contact), those attitudinal transformations will in turn have an effect on political attitudes and activities. According to models of cognitive behavioural psychology, the

repetition of any activity is interiorised in the form of patterns of behaviour which are later applied in fields which are different from the one in which they were learned.

Frequent use of the Internet would prompt attitudinal changes and therefore the attitudes and values of users and non-users would be different. Among users, it may result in preferences towards new forms of horizontal organisation and actions without intermediaries or hierarchies (Wolton, 2000). It is significant that this hypothetical description of new attitudes developed online coincide for the most part with the post-materialist values defined by Inglehart (1977 and 1990), and with the fact that it is the youngest segments that are able to develop them. Therefore, if this new attitude or “electronic identity” is transferred to political activities, it could explain why members of the public are increasingly opting for new forms of participation, which are opposed to the predominant hierarchies of the conventional formulae.

Political mobilisation through the Internet

The Internet constitutes a new space for political mobilisation. Mobilising via the Internet can be extremely low-cost compared with other methods such as face-to-face or telephone contact, given that the marginal cost of sending one more e-mail or subscribing an additional person to a bulletin distribution list is practically zero. Secondly it allows a very decentralised kind of mobilisation because anyone with access to the Internet can send e-mails or write comments on online fora and websites to motivate people to vote for a certain candidate or to organise an action or activity. For that reason it is possible that the exposure to appeals to participate in a political activity increase in number – quantitative change – or vary in the type of sender or activity

proposed – qualitative change – simply by having access to the Internet and, in particular, by being an e-mail user.

Political mobilisation is a fundamental element for understanding why some members of the public participate while others do not (Verba, Schlozman y Brady 1995, Rosenstone y Hansen 1993). It seems logical to suppose that the existence of a new, low-cost, decentralised medium of mobilisation will result in a greater number of appeals to participate which in turn might result in an increase in political participation. Therefore, online mobilisation could be an explanatory factor as to why access to the Internet has a positive effect on participation. However, there are two relevant considerations which modulate this general expectation.

Firstly, the behavioural codes of the Internet make it unadvisable for the sender to contact unknown people via e-mail, given that this type of action is considered ‘spam’. A political association which indiscriminately bombards the public with information or announcements may achieve the opposite result to that which it hopes for: that the recipients will have a negative attitude towards it. For that reason, according to Krueger (2006), the Internet constitutes a special case, where the cost of mobilising associations or individuals falls particularly on the recipient. A person has to subscribe to bulletins or distribution lists to receive political information from an association or has to visit certain web pages to read about planned events.

Secondly, the hypothesis that greater mobilisation leads to greater participation assumes that all types of mobilisation are equally effective. However, we know that this is not the case: for example, face-to-face contact to encourage voting is more effective than

other methods which are cheaper for the initiator of the communication, such as telephone, letter or e-mail (Gerber and Green 2000). In this case, it is not evident that greater mobilisation via the Internet leads to greater participation, given that it is possible that the sender of appeals for participation stop using more effective methods such as personal contact. In any case, there is very little empirical evidence on this question.

Mobilisation in the virtual and real worlds may differ qualitatively in relation to the type of activity being promoted and the person who issues the request. It is possible that mobilisation via the Internet is used more intensively for certain kinds of political activities and therefore the opportunities generated by requests to participate can be different from those offered offline. Several recent investigations have shown that both social movements and traditional political organisations have intensified their task of mobilisation thanks to the use of the Internet. While the traditional players use it only as an extension of their traditional means of communication, non-conventional players are experimenting with more innovative kinds of political uses (Della Porta and Mosca 2005, van de Donk et al. 2004, Gibson, Nixon and Ward 2003).

On the other hand, the emergence of a medium which allows mass communication that is fast, cheap and decentralised has meant that many individuals have become prominent figures in an activity traditionally carried out by organisations (Micheletti, Follesdal and Stolle 2004). Anyone with access to e-mail can become a mobilising agent by (re)sending e-mails or writing comments on websites, fora and blogs without the need for any more resources than the time they dedicate to it. This brings with it an immediate organisational capacity which can sometimes even lead to highly significant

political events such as those seen in Spain the days following the attacks of 11 March 2004 (Sampedro 2005).

Inequality in participation and the Internet

Finally, another relevant debate about which there is little conceptual clarity is the impact of the use of the Internet and the new forms of political participation on inequalities in political participation. In order to address this question it is necessary to distinguish between inequality of access and inequality of participation once access to the Internet is achieved (Best and Krueger 2005).

We know that political participation does not occur equally among the population, but that activists come disproportionately from the more privileged sectors (Teorell, Sum y Tobiasen 2007, Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995, Parry, Moyser and Day 1992, Verba Kim and Nie 1978). Participatory inequality is more intense for some activities than others, with voting being considered the most equalitarian. The most frequent argument to explain the empirical evidence is that people with greater resources have a higher capacity to face the costs of participation and they are the priority target of the mobilising agents (Brady et al. 1995, Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). In terms of the arguments that the Internet modifies the costs of participation and mobilisation, it would seem logical to assume that this has repercussions on the inequalities of political participation.

Many authors have shown that access to the Internet is not equal among the population, but is concentrated among young people and more privileged groups– what is known as the digital divide. Some have argued that this leads to an increase in inequality: a

concentration of tools in the same pairs of hands (Weber Loumakis and Bergman 2003, Norris 2001, Bucy 2000, Hill and Hughes 1998). Those who already tend to be active not only have new channels of influence, but also benefit from more requests for participation and other opportunities that the Internet offers. This pessimistic view is, however, open to a number of criticisms.

Firstly, young people are one of the least participative sectors for many traditional activities. At least in relation to this sector of the population, the effect to be expected could be a reduction in inequalities if the Internet really does promote their political involvement as some research has indicated (Delli Carpini 2000). Even though young people do not participate more in conventional activities, the differences explained by their age may diminish if they find other ways of making their opinions, problems and demands heard in the public sphere and political system through online participation.

Secondly, it is necessary to ask whether, once access to the virtual world has been established, the same factors of inequality described in classical studies are modified or whether they remain. Once again, it is useful to distinguish between inequalities in online and offline participation. In terms of electronic participation it would seem logical to assume that inequalities in this medium are different from those in traditional methods, given that the cost structure for these activities is different: in order to participate online, technical skills, motivation and reasonable conditions of physical access are required (Best and Krueger 2005). On the other hand, the evidence available until now would appear to indicate that factors such as education, money and other traditional resources do not carry the same importance for online participation (Gibson, Lusoli and Ward 2005), although they do influence the possession of new kinds of

resources such as technological skills (Krueger 2006). In other words, traditional resources condition access to the Internet, but once the barrier of access has been overcome, they lose importance. In terms of the impact of the use of the Internet on offline participation, besides the assertion that it could increase the activity of young people, there is little evidence in this respect and it is a field which remains to be explored.

As long as there is no universal access to the Internet the argument of the digital divide remains relevant. In addition, alongside Bimber (2002) one should question whether the lack of access to it has different implications when a small minority has access, when the proportion of users and non-users is similar and in the probable scenario where most of the population has access to the digital sphere while a minority is excluded. Non-access may have serious consequences in this last scenario for vital opportunities for the public. Will access to the Internet become a necessary condition for a fully democratised public?

Conclusions

In this paper, a series of research questions and open debates on the impact of Internet use on political participation have been identified.

- Can we qualify the new forms of political activity carried out via Internet as political participation?
- Does Internet use lead to an increase, a decrease or no effect on the levels of offline participation?

- If it produces changes in the levels of participation, do these occur for specific activities? Does Internet use result in an increase of non-conventional methods of participation?
- What are the causal mechanisms by which Internet contributes to these changes? Does it modify the costs of participation? Does it change the attitudes of the users?
- Do individuals who use Internet receive more attempts at political mobilisation? Are the initiators of these appeals different from those who mobilise using other methods? Do Internet appeals result in more participation in non-traditional activities?
- Does the use of Internet increase or decrease inequalities in political participation? Are new inequalities emerging because of the increase in online skills?

These questions should be addressed through a number of different research tools. A survey is to be carried out in October 2007 by the Spanish Centre for Sociological Research containing questions on:

- online and off line political participation
- uses of Internet, online skills and conditions of access
- consumption of political information and political communication both in the virtual and traditional sphere
- traditional political attitudes (identification with parties, conceptions of good citizenship, ideological self-positioning, etc)
- relevant issues in the public arena.
- perceived the costs and benefits of participation

- attempts of mobilisation received
- organisational and cognitive resources.

However, some specific questions such as the impact of the Internet use on political attitudes, or the logic of mobilization via the Internet should probably be addressed with different qualitative tools such as focus groups, interviews and in-depth case studies.

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