

## **Digital Democracy: A Study on online political participation**

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### **Abstract**

This purpose of this study is to increase knowledge about citizens' online political participation in contemporary democracies. This study discusses mainly on topics including the central concepts of online political participation, e-petitioning and online anonymity democracy in the form of participatory and deliberative democracy. The objective of this study is to gain knowledge about citizens' online political participation in contemporary democracies. When political participation moves online, it becomes interwoven with a central characteristic of the internet; anonymity. Once a greatly debated topic regarding the secret ballot, online anonymity has now revived a discussion about the effects of anonymity on human behaviour, or more specifically, political behaviour in terms of online political participation. This study also sheds light on how citizens use anonymity within the context of e-petitioning and political discussion.

*Keywords - Digital democracy, political participation, e-petition, e-voting, e-participation, anonymity*

## **Introduction**

A democracy requires the involvement of citizens. In a representative democracy, the power of the decision-makers is delegated to them by the people, an arrangement implying that rulers should listen to citizens. For this to be possible, there must be ways for citizens to express their will and make their voices heard. The most common and basic way to participate is by voting in elections, but engagement can take many other forms than this.

It would be difficult to imagine the internet not having an effect on the ways that politics is expressed, depicted, conducted, communicated, and reflected upon. Digital communication certainly affects politics, yet it does not necessarily change politics fundamentally. To investigate the impact of the internet on politics, more empirical investigation is needed instead of theoretical speculation. History has shown that technology is not always used in the ways that the inventors planned, and the internet perhaps makes this lesson clearer than ever as people experience both positive and negative effects of the medium [1]. Also, the internet has changed and redefined the character and practices of political engagement and anything else would be odd since the internet has contributed to transformations on all levels of contemporary society. Certain characteristics of the internet have contributed to this change: information access, diversity and decentralization, interactivity, individual communication possibilities, and unlimited

communicative space. Furthermore, all of the aforementioned communication can occur at instantaneous speed. Nevertheless, while politics only covers a tiny area of internet usage, the invention and adaption of various internet tools “make it easier for the political to emerge in online communication” [2].

### **Online political participation**

Many different forms of political participation are now practiced online. A collection of creative forms of political participation appears to surpass the traditional distinction between private and public life [3-4]. The possibility of political participation online can encourage new groups of people to engage in new forms of expression and open up the political process for more types of political behaviour [5]. Citizens have the option to visit political blogs, search for political information, follow news online, participate in discussion forums, or organize e-petitions [6].

The different communication channels online facilitate communication where individuals can express their views more openly and freely, as a verbal political commitment [5]. Social networks like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have given citizens tools to disseminate information and express political preferences using methods not previously possible [7].

Starting from the introduction of the mass-circulated printed press in the nineteenth century, the media has been interlaced with power structures, both promoting and limiting civic participation, for a long period of time. Radio, television, the personal computer, and the internet have all been thought to have democratic benefits. This

technological determinism is a basic fallacy and discredits the impact of socio-cultural settings. When internet research began to emerge in the 1990s, theorists either predicted an astonishing positive development for democracy or saw doom and gloom in their crystal balls, anticipating the end of democracy [8].

On the one hand, optimists argue that the internet mobilizes citizens and promotes political participation by offering new pathways to participation and engaging people otherwise characterized as passive [9-10]. Pessimists, on the other hand, view the internet as a distracting medium, luring people away from more meaningful forms of participation, thus reducing social capital and generating passive citizens [11-12]. Normalizers represent a third viewpoint indicating that the internet is merely reinforcing participatory trends by mainly involving those already interested in politics. In this view, online political participation is for the already converted, politically active citizens, and therefore fortifies existing power structures and widens the gap between the active and inactive without transforming the way of doing politics [13]. These diverging views result from an older dichotomy between technological determinism (i.e., optimists and pessimists) and social determinism (i.e., normalizers) [13]. This debate on the impact of the internet on political participation has also been described as two competing hypotheses: the mobilization hypothesis and the reinforcement hypothesis [14-15].

The types of activities regarded as online political participation seem to be constantly expanding, resulting in a broader palette for citizens wanting to make their

voices heard. The internet has revitalized classic forms of participation and given rise to entirely new forms. Optimists have hoped that the internet can help fulfil the ideals posited by deliberative democracy and participatory democracy, since some of its features seem promising from these perspectives. However, empirical findings regarding the effects of the internet on political participation are mixed. Critics argue that many forms of online participation are ineffective and might even be detrimental to democracy by reducing levels of, more effective, traditional offline ways of political participation. Regardless the effectiveness of online political participation, it can be seen as expressions of opinion worthy of further study within political science. In order to limit the scope of this compilation thesis, I concentrate on two particular forms of online political participation: e-petitioning and online political discussion. This is partly because previous research has urged scholars to specify the varying kinds of participation being analysed to make a clearer distinction between actions rather than summing several activities under the catchall term online political participation. Moreover, it seems impossible to study all forms of online political participation within the framework of one thesis. In the next section, I discuss the rationale for analysing e-petitions and online political discussion in particular as a part of online political participation research [13].

## **E-petitions**

Petitioning is an old form of political participation, with its roots tracing back to the thirteenth century. The right to petition is the an important in democracy and is probably the oldest political right of citizens. The most

recent developments in the right to petition are closely related to the rise of the internet as a communication medium connecting the public and political institutions. The first e-petition system established by a parliament was the Scottish “e-petitioner” in the year 2000.

The acts of creating or signing an e-petition are generally defined and recognized as acts of political participation in the literature [16,17,18]. Electronic petitioning is simply an online variant of an older form, with the main difference that signature gathering is done digitally online instead of offline using pen and paper. Classification of petition signing as a manifest form of political participation, in line with voting or donating money to political parties [19]. However, political discussion, in turn, is not necessarily defined as a form of political participation; for example, urges scholars to differentiate between political participation and political communication and argues that political discussion is a form of political communication, not political participation [20]. In Brady’s opinion, political discussion is not to be regarded as political participation, since such participation should be deliberate attempts to influence others and their decisions [21]. Similarly, view political discussion as a predictor of online political participation [22]. Other scholars define political discussion as a less formal form of political participation than petitioning but still categorize it as political participation [17-18, 23]. Also, political discussion is to be regarded as an action and a form of latent political participation and can be described in terms of civic engagement, closer to more manifest forms of political participation and more manifest than pure attention to politics [19].

## **Importance of e-petitioning**

E-petitions represent a form of democratic innovation, a technologically mediated avenue for political participation [24]. For citizens, petitions have three main functions; they give them a chance to protect rights and interests, they provide influence in politics in general, and help mobilize people for a given cause [25, 26]. E-petitions have the potential to achieve policy change, and, if successful, they can strengthen civic-mindedness and political efficacy among citizens [27]. I identify three main reasons behind the rising scholarly interest for e-petitioning. First, e-petitions are growing in popularity as a form of political participation [28]. Second, several countries have introduced formal e-petition systems linked to parliaments in recent years, thus institutionalizing e-petitioning on a governmental level [29, 30]. Third, as petitioning is transforming from offline to online, a data-driven approach to study petitioning behaviour is now possible [31, 32].

On the one hand, critics write off e-petitions as slacktivism with little or no impact on politics [33]. In this view, e-petitions might represent an example of “sham democracy,” where they are claimed to have policy influence when in reality they do not. Others dislike e-petitions because they actually might have an influence on policy and therefore interfere or stop governmental policies from being realized. Also, some scholars have more optimistic views on e-petitions, describing them as one of the most successful e-democracy tools ever, at least in terms of mobilizing large quantities of citizens [34]. This debate over the merits and perils of e-petitioning

illustrates disagreement about what the actual impact of e-petitions ought to be in a democratic political system [35].

In general, governmental e-petitioning platforms mainly have an agenda-setting function, and in contrast to other democratic processes (e.g., online voting), do not have any binding political consequences. In this line of thought, e-petitioning platforms are intended to complement, rather than replace, representative democratic institutions. Thus, e-petitioning is an easy and low-cost instrument for tapping the political opinions and interests of citizens [36]. Moreover, e-petitioning represents a safe “playing field” from the perspective of representative democracy, since decision-making power remains in the hands of elected politicians [37].

### **Petitioning as a democratic instrument**

The term petition is not generally well-defined and its meaning varies between countries, institutions, and levels of government [38] [39]. A petition has been defined as a formal request to a higher authority (e.g., parliament or other authority) signed by one or a number of citizens [40]. We can define petitions as requests to a public authority with which citizens try to “change public policy, call for an official statement, or evoke a certain act by a public institution.” In another way, we can define petitions as formal requests to an authority, usually a governmental institution”. By using a wider definition, petitions targeting private corporations or actors are not excluded [41]. Hence, petitions targeting political actors or institutions are a form of political participation [42].

Petitions can be understood as a form of asymmetric communication between an individual or a



group on one side and an institution on the other. A petitioner forwards a matter of concern to an addressee who may react [43]. Petitions can be distinguished from mere expressions of opinion since they have the purpose of changing policy, evoking a certain act, or calling for an official statement [44]. Scholars generally position petitioning between representative democracy and direct democracy in the category of advocacy democracy, where acts of participation are aimed at influencing the decisions of elected representatives. Petitioning is, in this view, a possibility for citizens to participate in policy formation, even though final decisions are still made by elites. Therefore, petitioning mitigates the risks of weakening existing democratic institutions. In petitioning, citizens' concerns are legitimized by a "strength of numbers" strategy, where the number of signatures determines the petition's weight or representativeness of public opinion [45].

### **Challenges for e-petitioning**

Despite the potential of combining modern technique with one of the oldest forms of political activity, e-petitions have received criticism and present challenges on both a theoretical and practical level. The force or potential impact factor of an e-petition is usually determined by the number of signatures. However, it remains difficult to determine how representative public opinion expressed via e-petitions is. E-petitions do not necessarily represent the general will of the people [46]. They worry about the lack of deliberative features in formal e-petition systems and suggest that political parties supporting e-petition systems demonstrate a symbolic

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willingness to listen to citizens. These are all possible negative scenarios for democracy as a whole if e-petition systems fail in the eyes of citizens.

### **Online political discussion - a cornerstone of democratic politics**

Most democratic theorists would agree that engaged discussion about public matters and a talkative electorate are essential in a healthy democracy. Some scholars even call political discussion “the soul of democracy” since it has been resonated with democratic theories for centuries [47-50].

Discussion among citizens can contribute to better-informed opinions and foster civic engagement, and frequent political discussion in cross-cutting networks has the potential to increase interest in politics and social tolerance. Political discussion is a key element in democratic societies where citizens are supposed to make informed decisions on issues of civic importance. Political discussion has been found to increase political knowledge, and it is believed that a democratic system where citizens engage in discussions could increase both the performance and the legitimacy of that system [51]. On the contrary, a lack of meaningful and regular political deliberation results in poor public policy and political alienation. Scholars have argued that providing citizens with opportunities to deliberate about policy issues is an effective response to high levels of disillusionment and disenchantment with the political process. According to this thinking, critical discussion grounded in information and reasoning should create enhanced public opinion, which, in turn, influences actions of elected officials. The internet seems promising to deliberative democrats in

particular, since their view of democracy emphasizes the need for citizen discussion about policy issues, rather than mere aggregation of opinions [52]. The importance of political discussion in a democracy is summarized as:

“It is through political conversations that members of society come to clarify their own views, learn about the opinions of others, and discover what major problems face the collective. Through such conversations, political participation is made possible, enabling citizens to affect the practices and policies of their elected leaders and ultimately ensuring a democratic process of governance” [51].

Political discussion provides information shortcuts to voters and can activate latent political attitudes. Moreover, persuasive political discussion might also alter citizens’ attitudes and presumptions. Another important role for political discussion is to construct trust across social divisions, hence contributing to participation in mutual political activity and reciprocity among discussants, producing a more vibrant society. Nevertheless, political discussion does not always produce positive results for democracy. It may result in unintended consequences, biases and further fragmentation of already polarized societies. Discussion can either build consensus among participants or cement political predispositions. Conflicting findings call for further exploration of the characteristics of political discussion.

Political discussion is one of the political participation forms that optimists hoped would be promoted by the internet by extending it beyond social

networks and making information instantly available [52]. As democratic theory took a “deliberative turn”, the internet became especially interesting to scholars due to its potential to fulfil some of the characteristics of an ideal public sphere envisioned by deliberative democrats. The internet has features which might be favourable to democratic discussion between citizens because it: enables many-to-many communication, bridges time and place, enables easy transmission of large quantities of information, gives citizens easier access to the public sphere, is of horizontal nature, and lowers the (social and economic) costs of publication [53]. In other words, it erodes physical, psychological, and social barriers which can have a restrictive impact on offline political discussion. Online, citizens can engage with authorities and participate in their own pace. Moreover, large numbers of people can be involved in political discussion online; participation can be scaled up without producing costs of physically bringing people together.

“The unique characteristics of the Internet enable citizens to produce, comment on, edit, remove, and recommend portions of a global dialogue. This has set it apart as a medium with the potential to transform the democratic landscape at large and expand the public sphere” [51].

Even though the internet is potentially expanding the public sphere and increasingly functioning as an arena for political discussion, online discussions have been criticized for causing polarization and lacking in deliberative quality. Findings show that forum design matters because it has effects on the deliberative quality of the online discussion [54, 55]. One of the

characteristics of the internet, anonymity, seems to be challenging for the quality of online discussion. This has fielded interest from scholars since democratic discussion traditionally does not occur between anonymous participants, yet many online discussions characterized by anonymity [56].

### **Anonymity in participation and communication**

Given that political participation is moving online, it becomes intertwined with a central characteristic of digital communication: online anonymity. This characteristic is perhaps the most prominent of several important psychological components distinguishing the internet from the offline world [57]. The subsequent chapter discusses the concept of anonymity, starting from its definition to its potential effects on communication and, consequently, political participation. Here, I identify merits and perils of anonymity from the literature. The aim of this chapter is to review previous research on anonymity and to argue for a need to take anonymity into account in online political participation research. An understanding of anonymity becomes relevant for my research query as the internet arguably has made it easier to perform acts of political participation anonymously. Given the dearth of research on anonymity in political participation, I take a wider approach to the concept of anonymity in this chapter, by referring to findings from disciplines such as social psychology and communication studies.

### **Anonymity – the non coordinability of traits**

Why is it interesting to analyse anonymity? The internet's ever-increasing importance in society combined with the

ease of anonymous communication, are factors that help to make the subject interesting. Historically, anonymity played a relatively minor role in a world where the potential audience for anonymous communication was limited. The internet has made anonymous communication more common and enlarged its reach to an audience consisting, at least theoretically, of an infinite number of people. In pre-internet eras, anonymous communication was more expensive and time consuming than today [58]. At the same time, digital technology facilitating anonymous communication coexists with technology promoting identification using tracks that citizens leave behind when browsing the web. Anonymity can be seen as something that is built into the properties of the internet and therefore worthy of study for scholars seeking a deeper understanding of the internet's democratic potential.

Thus, the concept of anonymity is central in discussions concerning the internet. Analyses of the political, economic, psychological, and legal aspects of the internet are often associated with the medium's ability to offer anonymity to its users [59].

### **Theories relating to anonymity**

Studying online political participation is essentially about studying human behaviour, and as anonymity is a social construction and, theories from social psychology have discussed anonymity of human behaviour in groups. Three theories in the literature seem relevant to online anonymity: deindividuation theory, the social identity model of deindividuation effects, and the theory of the online disinhibition effect. According to deindividuation theories, deindividuation is a psychological state of

decreased self-evaluation and decreased evaluation apprehension causing antinormative and disinhibited behaviour [60]. Thus, deindividuation describes a state where self-awareness and individual identity is lost [61]. Deindividuation is one of the most cited effects of social groups, and deindividuation theory aims to explain expressions of antinormative behaviour in the form of lynch mobs, hooligans, and violent crowds. Deindividuation theory asserts that group size has an effect on anonymity; in larger groups members experience a stronger sense of anonymity which results in more antisocial behaviour. Deindividuation theory focused on the negative effects of deindividuation and posited that the state led to acts of aggression and other deviant behaviours. It has also been used to explain antinormative behaviour in anonymous computer-mediated communication although this context can seem to be far from the maddening crowd and some scholars argue that deindividuation theory cannot fully explain disinhibition in computer-mediated communication. However, empirical testing of the deindividuation theory has produced inconsistent results. In several studies, deindividuation was not enough to induce aggressive behaviour; rather behaviour was dependent on normative cues associated with groups and the situational context of a specific situation. The social identity of deindividuation effects (SIDE) model was introduced as a critique of deindividuation theories [62, 63, 64]. In contrast to deindividuation theories, the SIDE-model posits that anonymity can reinforce group salience and conformity to group norms. Thus, when people are placed in groups and interact anonymously, they are more likely to identify themselves as part of the group, rather than as unique individuals, and will consequently conform to group

norms. Moreover, the type of anonymity mattered; visual anonymity was found to have effects, whereas physical and personal information anonymity did not. In other words, anonymity can foster group identification and conformity to social group norms. In environments where people are more anonymous (e.g., in crowds and online), antinormative behaviour can be guided by norms that emerge in specific contexts. Hence, anonymity can produce both prosocial and antisocial behaviour, depending on contextual factors. According to SIDE-theory, anonymity enhances the salience of social identity rather than personal identity when people feel they are part of a group [65, 66]. Anonymous persons with salient ties to the group will perform according to what their social identity dictates due to the heightened sense of social identity. “Rather than lose themselves in a crowd, de-individuated persons will look more to the social aspect of their identities to guide their behaviours”. Thus, the SIDE-model predicts conformity to specific social identities rather than conformity to any general norms. In essence, the SIDE model deviates from deindividuation theories in that it proposes that deindividuation causes human behaviour to become more, not less, socially regulated. The SIDE-model makes a distinction between two aspects of anonymity when defining the cognitive and strategic sides of the SIDE-model. The cognitive dimension of the SIDE-model refers to how anonymity of or within the in-group can promote the salience of a group identity. This means the sense of who we are is affected by the online representation of ourselves and others. The strategic dimension of the SIDE-model argues that reduced accountability to outgroups due to anonymity to these can allow behaviour that could be sanctioned by the outgroup [51].



The online disinhibition effect refers to the tendency of some people to self-disclose or act out more frequently or intensively online than they would do in person [67]. The term is used for online situations when people say and do things they would not normally do face-to-face; they feel less restrained and express themselves more openly. Disinhibition is difficult to define but has been vaguely described as “any behaviour, characterized by an apparent reduction in concerns for self-presentation and the judgement of others” [68].

## **Conclusion**

This study started from the assumption that democracy faces problems in form of declining levels of traditional political participation. To some extent, citizens seem dissatisfied with the way democracy functions, yet they still support democracy as a principle of government. To counteract declining levels of political participation, ideas originating from both participatory and deliberative democracy have been combined with the emergence of the internet, raising hopes for a revival of the connection between citizens and politics. This study focused on e-petitioning and online political discussion as potential solutions to improve the relationship between citizens and democracy. Furthermore, to widen the focus, analysed both formal and informal political participation, given citizens’ increasing use of informal channels for participation.

The decision-making power is still in the hands of elected representatives. The use of e-petitioning and online political discussion illustrates a citizenry with an interest in politics, and perhaps also a citizenry turning to these forms to express dissatisfaction with the lack of

input given in traditional political participation. Based online, these two forms of participation give citizens the choice to activate themselves politically whenever and wherever they want to rather than having the time and place for their participation determined by others. Participating in e-petitioning and online discussion can be done individually, from the comfort of one's own home, which lowers the threshold for participation. Moreover, these activities can usually be performed anonymously, further lowering the threshold for participation. Thus, these innovations can increase the level of participation and expand the toolbox of political participation.

However, this study has shown that anonymity is not necessarily causing a low quality of discussion online. This highlights a need to examine other determinants of discussion quality. Although the quality of discussion does not always live up to the high standards of deliberation, and despite few e-petitions actually led to policy change, the opportunities to influence the political agenda has perhaps never been greater. Also, by allowing more voices into the public sphere, these innovations have the potential to level the playing field and empower individuals on the cost of established political actors, organizations and parties.

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