

The New Face of Political Participation

Everywhere in Europe, democracies are struggling with a decline in political participation. Meanwhile, digital media and social networks are experiencing a steady increase in usage. Could a more politically focused use of social networks in our societies solve our participation problem?

Several different measures of political participation show a decline in political engagement in most of the European democracies: decreasing voter turnout, a decreasing number of citizens actively engaged in political organizations, an increasing average age in political party membership and a divide in participation between social classes are just a few examples of this trend.

At the same time, the use of digital media and social networks such as Facebook and Twitter is steadily increasing. In the coming years or even decades, creating new incentives and returning to former levels of political participation will be a major challenge for many policy-makers. Could the politicization of digital media lead to a more politically active populace?

The decline in political participation

Even though the European democracies differ greatly, a common and cross-border trend can be observed: A decline in political participation which undermines the Western ideal of a participatory democracy. According to this ideal, political participation is an important prerequisite for a government's legitimacy, efficacy in the decision-making processes and general acceptance by the population. The normative goal of participatory democracies is the participation of as many citizens as possible. This ideal is currently in jeopardy due to the decline in political participation.

While voter turnout in Norway is still over 70 percent, the last national election with over 80 percent voter turnout was in the 1980s. In other countries, the decline is even more visible. Voter turnout in France is traditionally lower, but nevertheless reached a historical low of 48 percent in 2017. In Germany, voter turnout increased during the 2017 election, but still remains below the level of previous decades.

The growing socioeconomic divide

There are several other ways of measuring political participation; the political engagement of citizens in a democracy is not only limited to election time. One alternative method is to analyze the average age of political party members. In most European democracies, this age has increased significantly with young people rarely entering political organizations. Political participation among all age groups can therefore no longer be taken for granted.

In previous generations, a large proportion of the population was politically active, but in recent years political participation has become increasingly dependent on the economic and cognitive resources

of the individual. Economic resources in this context refers to an individual's money and time. Relevant cognitive resources are an individual's educational attainment and their cognitive capacity to understand complex political processes. An abundance of both types of these resources lowers the opportunity cost of and reduces barriers to political participation.

The link between political participation and individual resources has also found empirical support in the 2016 European Social Survey. This Europe-wide study showed the increasing importance of educational attainment in determining political participation. The higher a person's educational attainment is, the more likely a person is to be politically active. A similar trend could be seen with respect to household incomes. Increasing income levels correlate with a higher probability of participation in elections and at other forms of political event. Finally, the European Social Survey showed a positive correlation between voter turnout and increasing age – an indication that in future years, ageing Western democracies may see a decline in voter turnout, if this tendency is not reversed.

Social networks as platforms of participation?

Could social networks such as Facebook and Twitter play a role in establishing new patterns of political participation? In contrast to older people, younger people are more likely to engage in so-called «slacktivism.» Slacktivism is an expressive form of political participation encompassing digital activities such as sharing, commenting and liking media with reference to a political intention. However, if the like of a Trump-Tweet, a comment under Solberg's Instagram post or the sharing of Jeremy Corbyn's newest Facebook-video are not translated into real participation in the political system, voter turnout amongst the youth will remain low.

The «social contagion» of Facebook

The question of how slacktivism can contribute to a higher level of political participation was also part of a '61-million-person experiment in social influence and political mobilization' carried out by the American political scientist Robert M. Bond and his colleagues. The experiment studied the impact of a purely informative message on Facebook about an upcoming election in comparison to a personalized social message showing an «I-voted» button combined with a friend's profile picture.

At first glance, Bond and his colleagues found evidence for what they call «social contagion.» This refers to the effect of a social message in increasing the probability

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that a recipient will take part in an election. The probability of participation increased further when the sender's profile picture was shown next to the «I-voted» button. In comparison, the purely informative message had a less significant impact. It appeared that an individual's slacktivism was influenced by that of their Facebook friends. However, upon closer examination it became clear that political mobilization on social networks was mostly based on strong pre-existing social ties in the non-digital sphere. Social and economic resources were found to be important factors in the creation and maintenance of these social ties. It follows that the degree of social mobilization is determined by the same resources that also lead to an increased probability of non-digital participation. Thus, the politicization of social media will not be enough to diminish the participation gap.

Non-participation as participation

What else can be done to mitigate the previously described socioeconomic divide in political participation? According to the study *Non-Participation in Digital Media* by the political scientist Nathalie Casemajor and her colleagues, the perceived gap in participation could be only a matter of perspective. The study proposed the introduction of a new category: non-participation. From this perspective, intentional non-participation can paradoxically be seen as participation because it can also have an active character of refusal. Non-participation could express an individual's political opinion or help to reach certain political goals.

According to their study, active non-participation refers to an intentional, conscious form of digital participation. It encompasses digitally destructive activities including the interruption of existing political structures by sabotage of democratic platforms or withdraw from platforms to express protest. From this point of view, the character of political participation

has morphed into a more conflictual form of non-participation which nonetheless counts as participation.

The future of participation

It is questionable if non-participation will ever translate into real actions within in the political system. Digital participation is still based on the same resources as non-digital participation. In order to close the participation divide, both slacktivism and digital non-participation need to be more than just expressive forms of political participation. They must achieve independence from non-digital resources. The political use of social media must be more equally distributed than current economic and social resources are. At present, slacktivism and non-participation on social networks can only help to define and express political opinion. Obviously, the definition and expression of an individual's opinion is important, but this is only the first step in a process. To achieve full political participation these individuals have to find approval in the political system by taking part in elections or becoming members of political parties.

However, as long as digital activism is barely translated into real actions within the political system, policy-makers must search for new solutions outside the digital sphere. Reducing the socioeconomic divide cannot be done simply by providing access to Facebook. Nor will voter turnout increase just because everyone has a Twitter-account. Possible solutions include the redistribution of relevant resources, a critical reconsideration of an individual's responsibility in contributing to a functioning democracy or a simplification of the mechanisms of political participation. Politicization of the digital world may yet become influential, but is still far away from substituting the non-digital sphere's importance in making democracies «the government of the people, by the people, and for the people.» ■