POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND THE INTERNET: A FIELD ESSAY

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Summary

The aim of this paper is to review the main questions dealt with by the literature on the effect of Internet on political participation. The paper distinguishes three relevant aspects: the estimation of the impact of Internet on the levels and types of political participation; the analysis of the causal mechanisms that lie behind the relationship between Internet use and participation; and the effect of the Internet on participatory inequalities. We conclude by identifying the aspects on which there is a relative consensus among scholars, the debates surrounding controversial conclusions obtained from different empirical analyses, and those questions where further research seems particularly necessary.

Key words

Political participation, Internet, information and communication technologies

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 (van de Donk, Loader, Nixon and Rucht 2004; Castells 1997; Sunstein 2003; Norris 2001, 2002; Bimber 2001; Davis 1999). The aim of this paper is to provide a review of the state of the art of the analysis of the implications of the Internet for political participation. This is a relevant question because new technology is having a profound effect on regular political activity in advanced industrial societies, by either offering new channels for participation or modifying different aspects of existing ones. The Internet has drastically altered the cost structure of participation, and has also increased the spectrum of possible political activities. It has extended the opportunities for mobilising traditional political associations, while giving prominence to the use of certain extra-representative modes of participation (Montero, Teorell and Torcal 2006), such as direct-action politics and new social movements (Norris 2002). New technology has also facilitated the 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 paper is structured in three sections addressing related but analytically different questions. Section 1 deals with the estimation of the effect of the Internet on the levels and types of political participation. The emphasis here is placed on the challenge that the online/offline dimension poses for the conceptualisation of political participation and its modes. Section 2 tries to disentangle the different causal mechanisms that,

according to the literature, underlie the relationship between Internet use and political participation. Internet may provide resources for participation and access to political information, it may change attitudes and values which in turn influence political behaviour, and may be considered to be a new arena for political mobilisation. Finally, section 3 deals with the question of how the use of Internet can enhance or diminish existing inequalities in political participation. Neither Internet access nor political participation are equally distributed across the population, and although the debate is still open, there are reasons to think that the Internet may actually contribute to reduce some of the socioeconomic bias in participation.

1. <u>The effect of the Internet on political participation</u>

The Internet and levels of political participation

The first question that has been addressed in the literature is whether the Internet has any effect - 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 with 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 (Noveck 2000; Davis 1999), and can take up a large part of people's free time (Nie and Erbing 2000; Kraut et al 1998). An alternative view, put forward by those who defend the normalisation hypothesis (Bimber 1999, 2002; Schuefele and Nisbet 2002), stated that the Internet has barely affected levels of political participation. Finally, other authors have argued that the Internet will contribute towards a more participative society (Negroponte 1996).

In the opinion of other authors (Krueger 2006), however, this first general research question has not been presented adequately, since a number of different dimensions are intertwined that should be dealt with separately. 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 question should be formulated specifically with reference 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 forward 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.

Related to this question is a conceptual problem. To the extent to which Internet has enabled new actions, there is not yet any consensus on whether they can be considered to constitute political participation or not. For example, is writing political comments on a website considered political participation?[1] Some authors argue that the sending 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 render it useless as an analytical tool (Van Deth 2001). This question should be further studied in both theoretical and empirical terms. We need theoretical proposals concerning which online activities can be considered new forms of political participation, typologies of participation modes that incorporate the online dimension, and systematic comparisons of online and offline participation. This will only be possible if we have data for both types of participation in a wider range of countries than is currently available.

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 a given problem by telephone, in person, by letter, e-mail etc. Other activities which share this characteristic are petition-signing and the 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 here: that it is unaffected, that it is increased or that it is reduced. Does the public express its views more or less equally

when it has access to the Internet? Do Internet users vote more? Are they more likely to participate in political parties? In each of these cases, the causal mechanisms by which the Internet influences offline participation should be explained. These mechanisms are dealt with in section 2.

A variant of these hypotheses can be found in those authors who argue that the use of the Internet does not bring previously inactive members of the public to participate in the political process, but rather 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, resulting in greater inequality in political participation[2]. Finally, it is worth underlining that the effects of the use of the 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 have decreased in recent decades in most industrial countries (Franklin 2004; Mair 2002; Wattenberg 2002; Blais 2000; Caul and Gray 2000; Lane and Ersson 1999). At the same time, this decrease has been accompanied by a pronounced increase in activities which differ from traditional ones, such as political consumerism and anti-globalisation mobilisations (Stolle, Hooghe and Micheletti 2005; Micheletti, Follesdal and Stolle 2004; Cain, Dalton and Scarrow 2003; Norris 2002).

Different studies have also 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 attitudes 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, such as boycotting a product, attending a demonstration or signing petitions. In this context, Internet offers an alternative medium for carrying out political activities beyond the scope of the classical institutions, and therefore facilitates the use of 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 imposed by the offline world. These characteristics favour single-issue mobilisations (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 1997). Recent mass mobilizations such as a demonstration against the armed group FARC in Colombia in February 2008 have been organized by individuals who did not belong to any organization, and were coordinated via Internet.

Second, these same characteristics have helped certain actors to adapt more quickly and effectively to the Internet. This is the case of social movements such as the global justice movement – pioneers in the use of new technology – rather than 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 modes of functioning) have all made the adaptation to the new medium – Internet - much easier (López, Roig and Sábada 2003).

For all of these reasons, disaffected members of the citizenry seeking a participative strategy can find in the Internet an alternative that constitutes a means of stimulating the emergence of new modes of participation, thus accentuating the divorce from conventional politics (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 a driving force for previously inactive members of the public, whose inactivity can be explained by the fact that the classical institutional mechanisms of participation fail to fit in with current needs (Innerarity 2002).

It is therefore appropriate to consider the influence that the Internet can have on different types of participation. The profiles of participants and non-participants both among users and non-users need to be outlined as Best and Krueger (2005) have done for the US case or Gibson, Lusoli and Ward (2005) for the UK. This distinction should

allow the observation of differences in the methods used by different groups when they are active. Additionally, the influence of the on participation does not have to be limited to its role as a channel for participation, since it can produce activities which would not otherwise have been generated. For this 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.

2.   Causal mechanisms: What links Internet use to political participation?

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. Thus, the impact of costs on participation is conditioned by the level of resources available.

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 the Internet influences the level and type of political participation is that it is a new resource in itself and modifies the costs of participation.

On the one hand, 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 1997). In the same way, these skills can be useful when carrying out 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, since 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 those resources that 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 requires 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. This is particularly relevant in the framing of controversial and technical issues. In this sense, the use of the Internet frequently offers experience in the processing and analysis of the information, which can be very useful for those wishing to carry out political activity.

Finally, the characteristics of the Internet involve 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 that are characteristic of protest actions. The use of the Internet therefore provides a new configuration of resources for participation and of the associated costs, thus stimulating participation in general and certain activities in particular.

Access to political information

Access to the Internet reduces the cost of acquiring political information given that it allows almost unlimited, fast, cheap access. The best-informed members of the public tend to participate more (Milner 2002), although the direction of the causal relationship between these variables is debatable. Cheaper access to political information can be expected 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 (McDonald 2008; Lupia and Philpot 2005).

However, there is some academic debate about the validity of such an argument. On the 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 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, even though the information is available, it requires the initiative of the user to access it For example, the receipt of bulletins and newsletters requires a prior subscription, or, more generally speaking, in order to consult certain online information pages one has to access them actively. 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, users are active in the search and selection of the content they expose themselves to. Thus, the consequences for behaviour and political attitudes would only be valid for certain of 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 (Sunstein 2003).

As a counter-argument it could be said that the characteristics of the Internet 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 to unplanned exposure to political or social content. Many users receive emails with non-solicited political information sent by friends or family members (Gibson, Lusoli, Ward 2005). In turn, these political stimuli can have an impact on motivations and attitudes and lead to a greater interest in political issues.

In sum, the literature has generated opposing arguments to the debate on the contribution of the Internet to providing political information and on its impact on political participation. On the one hand, there are reasons to think that increased access and exposure to political information on the Internet may favour participation. On the other, it is probable that a positive effect depends on the motivation of the individual. Finally, one could argue that even those individuals who are not actively searching for political information may involuntarily gain access to it, with a positive impact on their degree of 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 that are characteristic of the Internet. For example, one of the most notable possibilities of new technology is that it allows interactivity and multidimensional exchange where the

emitter and the receptor merge, acting together without hierarchies (Yildiz 2002). Contact and exchange mechanisms such as Internet forums and chat rooms 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 individuals 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; Putnam 2000). According to McDondald (2008) these are mainly the conclusions of early research, while there is more recent evidence that Internet may have beneficial effects on civic engagement, promoting political knowledge and increasing interest in politics.

A more nuanced hypothesis 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 different from the one in which they were learned. The attitudinal effects of the general use of the Internet would be especially evident in new practices of communicating and

of establishing relationships with others (Hill and Hughes 1998). New technologies enable a new form of communication that emphasizes interaction. This is specially the case for web 2.0 applications. Interactivity online allows for multiple-participant based communication, not limited to a dialogue between an emitter and receptor, in a way similar to offline group meetings (Polat 2005). However, online interactions take place without the conditionings of spatial proximity and they do not necessarily imply face-to-face communication. Even so, new mutual trust forms are developing as well, and as such Internet users can become members of an online community and develop a feeling of belonging (Rieffel 2001).

Through the Internet, interactions can be developed anonymously. In fact, this is why the main criticism of new communication patterns lies in the argument of the risk of alienation: individuals can construct alternative virtual lives on the net, which can lead to a sense of disruption or confusion regarding reality (Nie and Erbring 2002). The counter-argument is that anonymity may allow many people to put into practice attitudes or express opinions that otherwise would not come out in the offline sphere for diverse reasons, such as shyness or fear of rejection (Bryan, Tsagarousianou and Tambini 1998). Anonymity helps to avoid prejudices and hierarchical logics of relationships, as individuals interacting under its shield are not restricted by the previous status of each other.

Therefore, internet users may find spaces to communicate beyond the traditional boundaries associated with issues and status positions (Gastil 2000). All these forms of interaction with others may create new patterns of construction of trust and self-confidence. It is not just a question of gaining the ability to communicate to others

(cognitive capabilities), but also a new form of self-actualization and of conducting relationships in a non-hierarchical way. By the transformation of the attitudes implied in social exchanges, Internet use for communicative means could also be affecting the individual in his or her political practices.

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 for 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 that 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. It also allows a very decentralised kind of mobilisation because anyone with access to the Internet can send e-mails or write comments on online forums and websites to motivate people to vote for a certain candidate or to organise an action or activity. Thus, 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 and Brady 1995; Rosenstone and 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 that qualify this general proposition.

First, 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 develop a negative attitude towards it. Thus, 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.

Second, 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 stops 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. Recent research has 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, Loader, Nixon and Rucht 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). Anti-sweatshops campaigns are a good example of the characteristics and power of this kind of mobilization. Anyone with access to e-mail can become a mobilising agent by sending/forwarding 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 in the days following the attacks of 11 March 2004 (Sampedro 2005).

3.   Inequality in participation and the Internet

A third relevant question which needs to be developed more fully is the impact of the use of the Internet on inequalities in political participation. In order to address this matter 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 of society (Teorell, Sum and 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 egalitarian. 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 as such they are the priority target of the mobilising agents (Brady, Schlozman and Verba 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 expected effect 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 the political system through online participation. However, there is no agreement on this point. Other authors argue that it is mainly by young people who use of the Internet for non-political purposes, and thus does not lead to more political involvement (Shah et al 2005). Consequently, it is unlikely that Internet use disproportionately fosters the participation of this group and thus reduces inequality due to age.

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 online activities are different from those in

traditional modes, 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 could question whether the lack of access to it has different implications when a small minority has access, when the proportion of uses and non-users is similar, and when – the most likely scenario - 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?

<u>Conclusion</u>

New technologies, particularly the Internet, are having a significant impact on several aspects of society and politics. This has become a new challenge for social scientists, who face the need to adapt traditional concepts and review established explanations of attitudes and behaviours. In this paper we have identified the main research questions and open debates related to the impact of Internet use on political participation. Because the transformation of political phenomena as a consequence of new technologies is a recent process, we are still far from definitive answers. However, we can try to identify aspects where there seems to be a relative consensus, aspects where the debate is clearly open and other aspects that need to be addressed.

We may conclude, without risking too much controversy, that there is broad agreement around the proposition that the Internet provides new opportunities for new modes of online participation. It is also generally accepted that the Internet modifies and often reduces costs of information and participation online, and that technological resources and skills are important for online participation. After an initial period of negative expectations, today it seems that Internet use produces changes in attitudes not unfavourable to political participation.

However the debate is still open in a number of important matters. First of all, can we qualify the new forms of political activity carried out via the Internet as political participation? More specifically, is online communication political participation? This question is clearly related to the ongoing debate on the enlargement of the meaning and empirical referent of political participation.

We also find opposing views on the question of whether Internet use affects offline participation. Is there a significant effect of Internet use on offline participation controlling for other relevant variables? Does Internet use lead to a change in the levels of offline participation? If so, is the change positive or negative? Does Internet use disproportionately foster involvement in specific non-conventional activities? Does the Internet provide better information for participation purposes? Early debates offered contradictory theoretical expectations. Empirical research is beginning to offer some specific answers to these questions, but at this point it is premature to state that there is agreement on the conclusions.

Another important debate is whether the Internet may increase or reduce participatory inequalities. Some authors point out that it reinforces inequalities because it allows interested and resourceful citizens to have more means to be informed and involved in politics. For others, it reduces some traditional inequalities particularly by increasing the political participation of young citizens. It is unclear if and how these statements are compatible with each other.

There is obviously need for further research before conclusive answers can be given. But there are also other aspects that need to be addressed and have not been so far. We need typologies of participation modes that include online activities, and must also pay further attention to the question of mobilization: are individuals who use the Internet more likely to be the targets of attempts to mobilise them politically? Are the initiators of these requests different from those who mobilise using other methods? Do online appeals result in more participation in non-traditional activities? Are new media and particularly the Internet one of the reasons why the repertoire of action is changing in

advanced industrial democracies? Are new participatory inequalities emerging because of the unequal distribution of online skills?

Most of the evidence gathered thus far refers to English-speaking countries, but the arguments provided are more general in scope. Thus, in addition to research focusing on the aforementioned questions, there is need for further comparative analysis.

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[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).

[2] This review does not explicitly 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 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.

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