



An empirical analysis of e-participation. The role of social networks and e-government over citizens' online engagement



María Rosalía Vicente ^{a,*}, Amparo Novo ^b

^a Applied Economics, University of Oviedo, Campus del Cristo s/n, Oviedo, Asturias 33006, Spain

^b Sociology, University of Oviedo, Campus del Cristo s/n, Oviedo, Asturias 33006, Spain

ARTICLE INFO

Available online 26 July 2014

Keywords:

e-participation
Internet
Information and communication technologies (ICT)
Resources approach
Digital skills
Social networks
e-government

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to further explore the drivers behind the decision of citizens to engage in social and political participation on the internet, since mixed empirical evidence has been found in the literature. Using data from the 2011 survey on the use of information and communications technologies by households and individuals in Spain, the following two types of e-participation are analyzed: reading/giving opinions about social/political issues and signing/taking part in online petitions/public consultations. Relying on an updated version of the resources approach, we investigate as to what extent e-participation is explained not only by traditional participation-related resources (i.e., socio-economic characteristics) but also by digital skills, social networks and the online development of public administrations. Results show that, while online participation is mainly associated with internet-related skills, there is a significant gender gap. Interestingly, the unemployed tend to engage socially and politically online more than the rest of the population.

© 2014 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The last decade has witnessed the revolutionary spread of information and communication technologies (ICT), which have become a major element in daily life. As Castells (1998) highlights, the access and use of these technologies have become “the critical factor in generating and accessing wealth, power, and knowledge in our time” (p. 92). In this sense, ICT have revealed themselves as a key tool for social and political activities. Hence, political parties and government stakeholders are using ICT as the main instrument in order to get closer to voters and citizens. Obama's 2008 electoral campaign is a well-known example of the intense use of the internet to diffuse his program and interact with electors. At the same time, an increasing number of people engage themselves and others in e-participation, that is, in social and political participation by means of ICT and mainly of the internet.

However, it is important to take into account that ICT diffusion has not taken place uniformly across either territories or individuals. “Inequalities in Internet access” (Castells, 2001, p. 276) were early identified and described under the term digital divide.

About a decade before this term was coined, Murdoc and Golding (1989) had quite premonitorily warned against the close link between

inequalities in information technology access and those traditionally observed in political participation. In this sense, political scientists had been long observing that the most advantaged groups (in terms of income, education, connections, ...) were ones the most likely to engage in (offline) social and political participation (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).

Norris (2001) was among the first authors to explore online political engagement. While she brought attention over the potential of the internet to expand individuals' opportunities for social and political participation, she also highlighted the risk that the emerging digital divide would reinforce and widen participation inequalities as previously suggested by Murdoc and Golding (1989).

Research on political engagement has generally found mixed evidence on the factors associated with citizens' e-participation. While some research points out that, once the internet access divide has been overcome, traditional socio-demographic variables, such as income, education, or gender, become irrelevant to explain online participation (Krueger, 2002), other authors find that these factors are important predictors of online political engagement (Best & Krueger, 2005; Hansen & Reinau, 2006). The only consensus around this issue seems to arise regarding the role of digital skills. Hence, several papers have found evidence that the higher the level of digital skills, the more likely an individual is to engage in participatory activities online (Anduiza, Cantijoch, Gallego, & Salcedo, 2010; Anduiza, Gallego, & Cantijoch, 2010; Best & Krueger, 2005; Krueger, 2002). However, the role of other internet-related resources (such as social networks or the

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: mrosalia@uniovi.es (M.R. Vicente), anovo@uniovi.es (A. Novo).

online development of public administrations) remains little explored, and research usually focuses on one of these resources independently from the other (Gibson, Lusoli, & Ward, 2005; Saglie & Vabo, 2009).

Within this context, the aim of this paper is to contribute to this line of research and further explore the factors driving individuals' political and social participation on the internet. Using data from the 2011 Survey on ICT usage collected by the Spanish National Institute of Statistics (2011), the following two types of e-participation are analyzed: reading/giving opinions online about social/political issues and signing/taking part in online petitions/public consultations. In order to explain these two online activities, we rely on an updated version of the resource theory (Verba et al., 1995). This theory states that participation is explained by four types of resources: individual resources and socio-economic characteristics; political views and attitudes; group resources; and the institutional and political contexts. With the emergence of e-participation, this approach has been extended to include some internet-related resources. Attention has focused on digital skills, while little is known about the role played by group resources and the institutional context. Therefore, this paper will take into account not only traditional participation-related resources and digital skills, but also social networks and the online development of public administrations.

The paper is organized as follows: first, a review of the literature; then, data, methodology and variables are shown; finally, results are presented, and some concluding remarks are drawn.

2. Review of the literature

2.1. Offline participation: the resources approach

Political scientists have long been interested in the analysis of citizens' engagement in social and political participation, which can be defined as those activities that have “the intent or effect of influencing government action — either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies” (Verba et al., 1995, p. 38).

This literature has unveiled the reasons why some individuals get involved in these kinds of activities while others do not. The most popular explanation, in both traditional literature (Barnes & Kaase, 1979; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & Macphee, 1986; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948; Milbrath, 1965) and in more recent studies (Ekman & Amna, 2012; McCarthy & Zald, 1977, 2002; Norris, 2001, 2002, 2009; Putnam, 2000), relies on the resources approach. This theory emphasizes the idea that social and political participation is an activity that involves some costs in terms of time, money, and energy, among other factors; therefore, people who have more resources are more likely to carry out participation activities than those with few of them (McCarthy & Zald, 1977, 2002; Verba et al., 1995). This approach contrasts with prior theories which argued that deprivation and grievances were the forces to explain social and political engagement (Gurr, 1970; Smelser, 1963; Turner & Killian, 1972). Furthermore, the resources approach widens the scope of the previous literature by considering that engagement in participation activities takes place not only among those who will directly benefit from them but also among individuals who support their goals, though they will “not receive the direct output of the policy/political changes” (McCarthy & Zald, 2002, p. 535). Hence, the resources theory draws attention to the fact that the relevant resources for participation are also located in the society at large (McCarthy & Zald, 1977, 2002).

In order to explain social and political participation four types of resources are distinguished (Anduiza & Bosch, 2004; Morales, 2001; Novo, 2012).

The first type of resource refers to individual resources and socio-economic characteristics (i.e., age, gender, education level, income, and employment status, among others). Such elements define the position of an individual in the framework of his social and economic relationships and hence determine the extent to which he will be able to access the information and develop the necessary skills to participate.

Thus, the more resources that the individual has, the more likely he is to participate. In this sense, income has been largely claimed as a key resource for participation, since these activities can be considered as some “sort of luxury good” (Barro, 1996, p. 24); thus, only those with enough money and time can afford to engage (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993, p. 12). In this sense, Milbrath and Goel (1977, p. 92–106) found early that people who belonged to the upper class were more likely to engage in political activities than those in the lower classes. Research in this area has confirmed such first results and provided further evidence on the positive association between participation and income, education, age, and employed individuals, living in urban areas, and married men (Armingeon, 2007; Brady, Verba, & Scholzman, 1995; Kaase, 1989; Norris, 2002; Parry, Moiser, & Day, 1992; Teorell, Sum, & Tobiasen, 2007; Verba & Kim, 1978; Verba et al., 1995). Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that some recent research has questioned this conventional approach: the book by Krishna (2008) collects a series of papers which consistently show evidence of the fact that “poor people do not value democracy any less than their richer counterparts,” but also that “they participate in democratic activities no less (and sometimes more) than other citizens” (p. 9). According to Krishna (2008), this change in the relationship between income and participation can be explained by the growing support for democracy worldwide and by the spread of education.

The second type of resource is related to political views and attitudes since they mirror individuals' preferences on public issues which might influence the decision to participate (Armingeon, 2007; Dalton, 2008; Pattie & Seyd, 2003). In particular, participation has been found to be associated with an individual's political interest (Armingeon, 2007), his knowledge on political issues, personal efficacy (Pattie & Seyd, 2003; Vráblíková, 2010), feelings about citizen duty (Dalton, 2008; Vráblíková, 2010), ideological position (Holm & Robinson, 1978; Miller & Shanks, 1982; Robinson & Fleishman, 1988), and (dis)satisfaction with politics, politicians, and the policy measures that they implement (Armingeon, 2007).

The third type of resource includes group resources (i.e., networks of friends and colleagues). A major part of social and political participation is developed by groups of people: such are the cases of demonstrations, boycotts, etc. Individuals might get information about these activities through their social networks of friends and through the civic/professional organizations or the community that they belong to. Therefore, individuals' involvement in such kind of organizations and networks tends to drive their social and political participation. The association between participation and networks can be explained from the social capital approach (Putnam, 2000) which states that social networks produce trust which increases the level of social capital and leads to more participation (Putnam, 2000; Stolle, 2007). Nevertheless, other authors emphasize that these networks play, above all, a *mobilizing* role in bringing citizens into participation (Goldsstein & Ridout, 2002; Nagel, 1987; Norris, 2002; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993).

Finally, the fourth type of resource takes into account the institutional and political environments as two key elements to explain participation. In particular, participation is likely to increase when governments and institutions implement channels for citizens to access the decision-making processes so that their voices can be heard. Eisinger (1973) early distinguished between *open and closed political opportunity structures* depending on whether institutions facilitate the access to the political system. According to Kriesi, Koopmans, and Duyvendak (1995) and Kriesi (2004) participation is easier when state power is not concentrated in a single actor but several, since this implies more possible points to access, which increase the number of channels to influence and therefore reduce the costs to participate. Furthermore, recent research has found evidence that the institutional environment exerts an indirect effect over participation (Marien & Christensen, 2013): institutional characteristics not only influence individuals' political trust, efficacy, and satisfaction (Aarts & Thomassen, 2008; Freitag & Bühlmann, 2009; Karp & Banducci, 2007) but also their political attitudes (Norris, Walgrave, & Van Aelst, 2006), which at the same time influence their participation.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1024404>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1024404>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)