

The rise of participatory despotism: a systematic review of online platforms for political engagement

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to present a systematic literature review of empirical studies into online platforms for political participation. The objective was to diagnose the relationship between different types of digital participatory platforms, the real possibilities of participation generated by those initiatives and the impact of such participation on the decision-making process of governmental representatives.

Design/methodology/approach – A systematic literature review was conducted using pre-defined terms, expressions and criteria. A total of 434 articles from 1995 to 2015 were gathered from the Web of Science database. And, 32 studies were selected from those articles for meta-synthesis, and the cases investigated were evaluated according to the e-participation ladder model (Smyth, 2001).

Findings – The results indicated that online political participation worldwide remains timid both in quantity and quality. We have witnessed the growth of a kind of “rhetorical participation” promoted by policy-makers and the rise of a “participatory despotism”, in which only the privileged partake, while the majority remains silent.

Practical implications – The solutions found to promote increased participation and ensure its effectiveness ranged from shaping the platform design in accordance with citizens’ capacities and interests to a need for profound political-administrative change, which includes the world’s public agencies adopting a more transparent, inclusive and collaborative approach to decision-making.

Originality/value – This paper proposes a systematic review, mapping the studies on online platforms for political participation, analysing the questions, methods and conclusions found by the authors and evaluating each case study with a participation ladder.

Keywords Systematic review, E-voting, Political participation, Digital participatory platforms, Political decision-making

Paper type Literature review

Introduction

In these times of profound crisis of faith in political institutions, new digital technologies have been adopted both by social movements and by the politicians of various countries ranging from Latin America to the Middle East, affecting the contemporary political scenario.

The advent of the internet brought about unprecedented possibilities for social interaction and the dissemination of information, but how it is used for effective political engagement and transparency remains a moot point amongst researchers of this area. Its influence seems to depend on a series of factors, such as the context into which the new technology is introduced, by whom it is used and with which purpose it is applied (Pickard, 2008; Vaccari, 2011; Shen and Liang, 2015).

In view of the constant technological transformations and discrepant interpretations, there is an evident need to analyse the social and political impacts of online platforms



designed to engage citizens in political issues, whether that engagement is promoted by motivating people to discuss and vote or simply facilitating access to public information. Those initiatives are defined as digital participatory platforms, a “specific type of civic technology explicitly built for participatory, engagement and collaboration purposes” (Falco and Kleinhans, 2018, p. 3).

Such is the case of *Momentum*, a new campaign organisation founded in 2015, that has played a key role in driving the surge in popularity of the Labour Party under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn in the UK, or *DemocraciaOS*, a free software developed in Buenos Aires in 2012 to broaden public participation in political decision-making. Digital participatory platforms, which encompass those created by social groups, activists, hackers and academics, as well as those provided by governments, offer new forms of citizen engagement in the political sphere.

The aim of this article is to diagnose the relationship between the different types of online political engagement platforms, the real possibilities of participation generated by those initiatives and the impact of such participation on policy-makers and their decision-making process. Therefore, the research question is: to what extent does citizens’ participation in digital platforms influence the decisions taken by public managers?

A systematic review, based on refereed and peer-reviewed articles, identified the state of the art of this theme within the scientific community, the types of cases studies and the practical and theoretical conclusions reached to date. A systematically executed review also allows for meta-synthesis of the method types that can be (re)applied in further primary studies.

This article is split into six sections. Firstly, the concepts related to the theme are briefly explored. Then the method is described, explaining the criteria and decisions made during the systematic process. Section 3 presents the data collection and analysis of the results, highlighting analysis of the case study description, such as year of publication, author’s nationality, methods used and types of platforms investigated. Section 4 is a meta-synthesis of the outcomes found in the primary studies, and in Section 5 the cases are evaluated according to the levels of political participation based on the e-participation ladder model (Smyth, 2001). Final considerations are then presented in the closing section, reinforcing the most relevant points and limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

Digital engagement and political participation

In recent decades, information and communications technologies (ICTs) have carried the promise of greater mobility of information, transparency and changes to the traditional political model. In the so-called network society (Castells, 2006), the properties of the internet can be significant for the political field, bringing different actors, from civil society and the state, into a mediated channel of communication, allowing citizens to express themselves, interact with and monitor their politicians (Hung, 2003; Coleman *et al.*, 2008).

Gerbaudo (2012) highlights that the Web has provided a virtual space of aggregation, where outrage can be shared and users can be united by a feeling of belonging and solidarity. Likewise, Penteadó *et al.* (2014) reinforce that the multidirectional exchanges in networked spaces modify both the way in which politics is done and society itself, opening the path for debates on the right to public information and new possibilities for citizen participation in different democratic processes.

Since 2010, social movements such as Occupy Wall Street in the USA, Indignados in Spain and the beginning of the Arabic Spring in the Middle East and North Africa have used the internet as an important tool to achieve and mobilise citizens. According to Castells (2017), within the space of a few years, feelings of indignation and hope have

given way to a complete distrust and rejection of traditional political institutions. Attempts to change the rules of political participation with online support have proven insufficient to avoid a crisis regarding the legitimacy of political institutions. Rather, technological innovations, democratic governments and a viable civil society seem to be following very different logics.

Digital technology was seen as the means to achieve the utopian goal of a more democratic society, but as Gerbaudo (2018) affirms, the transformation is not only technological but also political. What is delivered in practice differs rather significantly from the promises made by politicians. Participatory platforms seem to be used more as a tool for leaderships to constantly verify consensus or measure their popularity, rather than a space for authentic decision-making and pluralism (Gerbaudo, 2018). Public participation in the political agenda is not frequently encouraged by most governments, leaving it up to the population to seek and demand the mechanisms for participation and exploration of new technologies for their own benefit.

Nevertheless, several online governmental initiatives have begun to emerge with the promise of promoting civic participation, but little is known about their effectiveness and impact on the decisions taken by policy-makers. One of the greatest dangers of the use of online platforms is the discourse of participation as an opportunistic rhetoric of political representatives.

The euphoria surrounding online platforms for political participation has brought back to the fore the classic nineteenth century work of Alexis de Tocqueville, "Democracy in America" (2000) in which the author discusses the potential, but also the cultural and social dangers of the development of democracy in the USA at the time. Tocqueville feared that the democratic conditions of participation in America might lead to a kind of "democratic despotism" – which he also calls a "tyranny of the majority" – and would represent the silencing of the minority and their points of view, crushed by popular opinion. Tocqueville condemns such "democratic despotism" as being capable of increasing the centralization of power by governmental departments and generating a culture of depoliticization.

In view of this, it is pertinent to ask whether we are now facing a new version, or even an inversion, of that tension between the majority and the minority, a problem belonging to the current democratic conditions, that includes technology mediation, and what we might describe as "participatory despotism". In the online environment, rather than a majority silencing the opinion of a minority of the population, there is a dominant and privileged high-tech minority, which is in fact able to participate and can end up covertly silencing the voice of the majority.

An increasing number of citizens are connecting through mobile device apps or collaborative software, transforming the local community into a huge digital nervous system (Pentland, 2014). As the use of online networks intensifies, digital participatory platforms are being developed, and new forms of interaction between the public and civic spheres needs to be tested.

Method

For the research question previously mentioned, systematic literature review (SLR) was considered an appropriate method for finding and organising the primary data. SLRs are used to verify how researchers have studied practical cases, which questions have been addressed, which methods have been chosen and what results found. The main advantages of this methodology are the rigour of the research, transparency of the information and reproducibility of the method, enabling comparison of the results.

An SLR should comprise three main stages: a research protocol, execution and reporting of results (Kitchenham *et al.*, 2009). For analysis of the results, a meta-synthesis was performed, considering its interpretive rather than deductive intents. Whilst the quantitative meta-analysis aims to increase certainty in cause and effect conclusions, the meta-synthesis seeks to understand and explain a phenomena (Urquhart, 2010), working as a method of interpreting and synthesising qualitative findings across case studies (Nye *et al.*, 2016).

To perform the first stage of the SLR, it was necessary to define in advance the database to be used, as well as which terms, expressions and search filters would be adopted in the study. The Main Collection of the *Web of Science* (WoS), a database maintained by *Thomson Reuters*, which covers articles from approximately 12,000 leading periodicals in the world, was selected for this work. The terms were applied in English, the language in which all the articles need to present their basic data for the WoS database and in strings, to encompass plurals and all other variations derived from the stem of the original word. Some pilot tests were performed in the database search to evaluate the term combinations and of the 35 initial terms, nine were selected: *political participation*, *political engagement*, *civic participation*, *democracy*, *citizen*, *technology*, *internet*, *platform*, *online*. Those that were individually discarded failed to produce useful results in the search – either digressing too far from the subject matter or leading to an excessive number of articles.

The final form of the expression was reached, with the results varying in number following the simultaneous application of filters, namely: research conducted between 1995 and 2015, the subject matter of the study directly related to the advent of the internet, the general dissemination of which broadly began in the mid-1990s; the inclusion of only those documents characterised as scientific papers, which are the main sources of primary research; term search only in the titles, based on the understanding that the research theme should be exposed in the title and that terms found only in the topics could overextend the search.

The next step involved reading the 434 titles, abstracts and keywords found, assessing them in accordance with previously defined inclusion and exclusion criteria in question form:

- does the article address the political participation or engagement of citizens?
- does the article address online media, the internet or ICT?
- does the article analyse citizens' political participation through the use of online platforms, social networks or any other online tools in general? and
- does the article present empirical research based on one or more case studies of online platforms designed to promote citizen political participation?

The first two criteria were developed to select those articles which actually matched the general subject matter. The studies that met the first criterion should address the possibilities of political engagement, especially that of citizens. Here political participation can be considered as various activities or situations in which an individual directly or indirectly contributes to a political decision, whether that be by the act of voting and partaking in protests or by spreading information and discussing political events (Sani, 2004). Meanwhile, the articles that matched the second criterion should address the use and impacts of the online environment or initiative, and not just analyse a non-internet-based technology or platform.

The third and fourth criteria have the effect of setting apart the articles to be analysed at the end of the review. It was of no interest to review studies about the online environment in general based on the use of social networks like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube or on blogs

and online communities. The focus of this study is on articles that present empirical research based on case studies of online platforms that were specifically designed for civic and political participation, such as the *e-governments*, online discussion forums, mobilising platforms, amongst others.

The articles retrieved through the search were reviewed at two different moments in time: in April and October 2016. The interval between these analyses allowed for the concepts to mature and the assessment of the articles to be validated according to the defined criteria.

Results

By applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria to the abstracts, keywords and titles of the articles, it was found that almost half (200 articles) address the political participation of citizens, whilst the majority (324 articles) address the internet or online environment in general (see Figure 1). Those that failed to match the first two criteria deal with an array of issues related to the development of education and citizenship, newspaper content analysis, public policy theories and consumerism or user behaviour on social networks, for example.

Where the two initial criteria overlap, which covers studies about the internet and political participation, a total of 171 articles were found. Of those, 139 address the general aspects of the usage of the online environment or social networks, which corresponds to the third exclusion criterion. Finally, a total of 32 articles were defined as pertinent to this study, presenting empirical research into online platforms for the political participation of citizens.

For a more detailed analysis of the results, the 32 articles were organised according to the year and periodical of publication, field of study, university where the authors work and other variables. The number of pertinent articles grew considerably over the course of the years. From 1995 to 2000, only three articles were found, whereas from 2001 to 2005, seven were found, and from 2006 to 2010, eight were considered pertinent to this study. The last range of years, from 2011 to 2015, produced 14 articles, which reinforces the perception that the subject is being increasingly addressed, both in practice – with more digital participatory platforms being created – and in theory, with studies that seek to understand, critically discuss and foresee social and/or political transformations generated by the use of these initiatives.

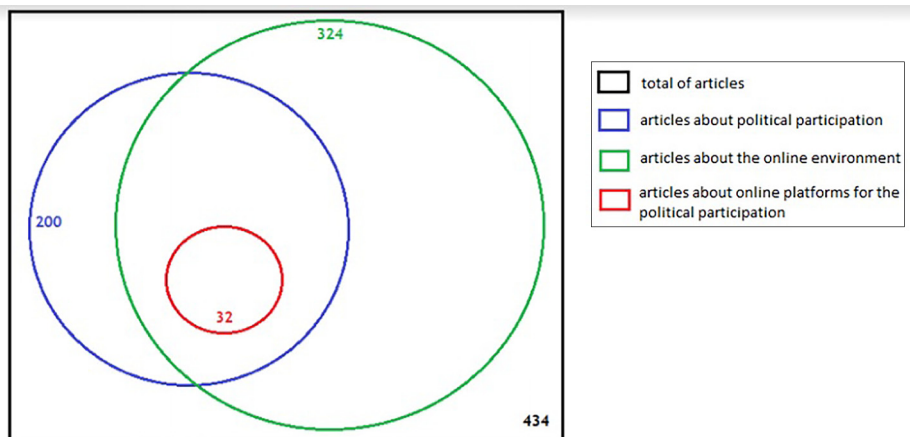


Figure 1.
Amount of articles
applied to the
inclusion and
exclusion criteria

The 32 selected studies were conducted by 55 different researchers from around the world. Upon grouping the nationalities of the universities where each author works a strong prevalence of universities in the USA (21) could be observed, compared to those in the UK (six), Germany (six), Austria (three) and others with only one or two authors representing the countries, like Turkey (two) and Spain (one). These numbers can be confirmed by the periodicals in which the pertinent articles were most frequently published: *Information, Communication and Society* (five); *New Media and Society* (three); and *The Information Society* (two). The other periodicals had published just one article each.

As regards the areas of research, some other points of interest can be identified: 12 articles were categorised as related to the area of communication, with focus on the design and functioning of an online platform, user behaviour or citizen interaction with the government. A further eight articles fell under government and rights, covering cases of governmental initiatives, elections, comparison between political regimes and assessing the exercise of citizenship. Five more articles were categorised as in the field of sociology, whilst four fell under information science and four in computer science. Each study could be categorised as within more than one area of research, which is why the sum of the articles in each area is more than 32.

To afford greater depth to the review and further organise the studies found, a series of analysis criteria were adopted. Each case or article was separated according to the initiative model studied, where or by whom it was created, type of research question and method applied. Online discussion forums were found in 11 articles, four of which were created by governmental departments, with debates on agriculture, employment or even road safety and seven by non-governmental organisations, promoted by various sectors of society, such as newspapers, scientists, private companies or everyday citizens. Governmental portals – both in the form of local government websites and national e-governments – were analysed in nine pertinent articles.

Five articles expounded case studies on participatory platforms, which range from sites geared towards the civic engagement of youngsters to online platforms of social movements. Analyses of public opinion polls appeared in three other articles, two about the health system reform plans in China and one focusing on participatory budget in Germany. Only two articles presented cases of online voting, both relative to the primary elections of Arizona in 2000, which offered an online voting option. Lastly, one paper addressed the case of an online petition promoted by an Italian newspaper, and another analysed examples of online voting advice applications.

Regarding the origin of the initiatives, 13 articles were found to study platforms created by governmental departments, whilst nine belonged to other non-governmental organisations. Ten documents, however, relate to both types of creators in the same article, such is the case of the comparison between the official governmental website and the experimental site created by designers and scientists, or the online voting requested by politicians and applied by experts, thus representing a merging of actions by government and private companies, universities and community leaders in the same initiative.

The reading process of the 32 articles also highlighted the types of research questions raised and methods used by the authors. And, 21 articles discuss the relationship between the public and the platform, the use and/or consequence of the new technological tool and aspects thereof which favour citizen participation. The relationships between government departments, citizens and platform are examined in six of the papers, analysing the interactions between political representatives and citizens through online platforms or even the effects of creating and using such platforms for citizens and politicians alike. Three of the articles focus on the platform, its functionalities and characteristics, without directly

looking at its relationship with any user or creator. The final two papers present questions about the relationship between governmental representatives and the platforms: the first about the construction of local governmental websites in Norway and the other about e-government portals in 18 Latin American countries.

The methods were organised according to the definitions given by the authors of the articles. Five main types were identified, with it being understood that each study can make use of more than one distinct methodology. As such, the vast majority of the studies involved a content analysis of platforms (25), followed by comparative analysis studies (15), both between different platforms and on the relationship between a platform and data previously extracted about it. Nine papers used surveys, four made use of interviews with users and creators and two articles worked with experiments.

Meta-synthesis of the case studies

In addition to the aforementioned analysis criteria, the information found in the articles could also be analysed qualitatively in terms of the advantages and disadvantages that the online platforms present for public political engagement, distinguishing them by the type of initiative and their main features.

In most cases of online discussion forums, advantages could be found such as the alleviation of spatial, temporal and financial barriers, when compared to traditional forums that do not use the digital environment (Klein, 1999). On the other hand, some forums studied did not present any significant increase in quantity and diversity of participants: they seem to be limited to citizens from a privileged background, with a high level of education and political interest (Tettey, 2001; Westholm, 2002; Strandberg, 2008), especially in countries that are at more advanced stages of democracy and with freedom of speech (Shen and Liang, 2015).

Even in countries under authoritarian regimes, such as China or Kazakhstan, digital participatory platforms bring advantages and could represent an emerging public space for engaging citizens in politics, with important social changes (Hung, 2003; Shklovski and Valtysson, 2012). However, Shen and Liang (2015) identify that most users of the investigated forums consume more information than they actively contribute to the debate, which reinforces the conclusion that online discussion forums present a low level of deliberation or are far from presenting a genuinely deliberative standard; in other words, they are unfinished and subjective debates, arranged in truncated and episodic structures (Strandberg, 2008; Loveland and Popescu, 2011). One solution may reside in the design of the tool, which if better shaped for citizen usage could be capable of exerting a positive impact on the degree of deliberation (Wright and Street, 2007).

For the cases of governmental portals, addressed in nine articles, the advantages include immediate access to the genuine voice of the government and reduced distance between citizens and politicians (Mambrey *et al.*, 1999). One of the disadvantages for public political participation, however, lies in possible increased state surveillance and control: e-government facilitates political propaganda and the maintenance of social order (Jiang and Xu, 2009; Polat and Pratchett, 2014). Just like online discussion forums, government portals primarily attract citizens from privileged classes with a higher level of education (Mambrey *et al.*, 1999).

Some authors also consider that governmental portals see the citizen more as a consumer of information or of public services than as citizens who are participating or engaging in the decision-making process (Saylan, 2009; Polat and Pratchett, 2014; Liste and Sorensen, 2015). Meanwhile, other studies acknowledge that the online initiative is under development and increasingly geared towards contemplating citizen needs and less focused on administrative

processes or on promoting the government (Welp, 2008). Once again, the solution to increase political participation would seem to lie in adaptation of the tools: portals with greater perceived utility and ease of use present more positive attitudes and increase citizen engagement (Cegarra-Navarro *et al.*, 2014).

The third most frequently found type of platform in the SLR, participatory platforms, enable the practice of different democratic forms, such as deliberative, pluralist and even radical democracy, based on open code, publication and open editing (Pickard, 2008). One of the advantages can be seen when those platforms allow free interactions between users, which opens the path for more expressive involvement and, therefore, attracts greater youth participation (Wells, 2010). On the other hand, Desouza and Bhagwatwar (2014) found that the majority of these platforms fail to generate any collaborative effort between citizens and public agencies, but rather only by one side or the other separately. Few tools present an effectively two-directional channel of communication, whereby citizens actively participate in decision-making (Steinmann *et al.*, 2005).

Just like in other initiative models, online opinion polling and internet voting attract greater participation of “politically sophisticated” and socially privileged citizens (Balla, 2012), meaning that participants with a low level of education and income feel intimidated when using the tools (Solop, 2001; Gibson, 2001). The positive side of online opinion polling is that it affords the citizens greater exposure to democratic principles and also supports a partnership between the public and their political representatives (Balla, 2014). Online voting, in turn, enables more voting options and even increases the participation of those who might initially have been less engaged with the democratic process (Solop, 2001; Gibson, 2001).

Likewise, the vote counselling initiatives, platforms which help citizens get to know the political candidates and decide for whom to vote, promote the mobilisation of new members who would not usually be politically involved, especially young women. The disadvantage is that, amongst older citizens, the initiative model has a normative effect, maintaining the engagement of those who were already interested in and informed about politics, generally, men with a high level of education (Hirzallaa *et al.*, 2011).

Finally, examples of online petitions created by an Italian newspaper were found. These represent an important component in the repertoire of collective political actions, both by actors from civil society and political institutions and by electoral campaigns. However, they end up restricting space for the creation of new topics and reducing citizen autonomy and are, therefore, prone to becoming a mere reflection of the political interests of their organisers, as in the case of mass media outlets (Vaccari, 2011).

As regards the characteristics of online platforms, both advantages and disadvantages were identified that could further enrich our understanding of the theme. Platforms that use simple, cheap and user-friendly technologies, for example, might attract the attention of youngsters with limited resources (Hirzallaa *et al.*, 2011), but if they are too simplistic, they might fail to exploit the full potential that new technologies possess to promote public political participation (Musso *et al.*, 2000). On the other hand, platforms with complex functionalities can bring a greater degree of interactivity, but if they are too complex, their use may be prohibitive towards the elderly and those with low technological skills (Steinmann *et al.*, 2005). In other words, a balance must be struck between the simplicity and complexity of the platforms so that its full potential can be exploited whilst also affording ease of access.

The communication flow in an online platform can also affect positively or negatively the political participation of citizens. For Musso *et al.* (2000), initiatives which support vertical communication allow access to political representatives, whilst those based on horizontal

communication allow only interaction between users. Ideally, both directions should be encouraged, thus guaranteeing the proximity between the public and politicians, as well as an open dialogue between the citizens themselves. However, the most frequently found model is vertical communication with a top-down information flow. In these cases, the platforms become an extension of the political outlook of their creators, instead of allowing the public to collaboratively participate through a base channel for them to express their opinions and set the public agenda (Pickard, 2008; Vaccari, 2011).

Researchers have asserted that, with local initiatives, such as those covering neighbourhoods or towns, citizens can experience the services offered first hand and become more involved, thus taking direct action in the democratic process (Musso *et al.*, 2000). Liste and Sorensen (2015) recall that the advantages of local initiatives can vary according to the geographic characteristics of each municipality. The conditions of internet access and use to which a population is subject also directly affect the degree of political participation in the online environment (Saylan, 2009). According to Jiang and Xu (2009), online structures are not naturally participatory or emancipatory tools, but rather they rely directly on the political and cultural environment in which they are inserted.

Assessment of political participation in online platforms

There are several ways in which civic participation, political participation or the participation of volunteers or youngsters can be assessed, including presentation in the form of a matrix, chart or even tree (Karsten, 2012). In the papers selected by the review, a few different assessment models of participation were found: the e-participation framework used by the United Nations to analyse government portals (Jiang and Xu, 2009); the framework about Obedient/Administered and Self-Actualizing/Autonomous Citizenship (Wells, 2010; Vromen, 2011); theories of normalisation and mobilisation (Hirzallaa *et al.*, 2011); and the four archetypal participatory platforms enabled by technology (Desouza and Bhagwatwar, 2014).

To evaluate political participation in the selected cases, we used the e-participation ladder (Smyth, 2001) method, which focuses on interactivity between platform, citizens and those responsible for the decision-making process. The model was originally inspired by Arnstein's Ladder of Civic Participation (1969), the first and most recognised metaphor about the different levels of G2C (government to citizens) participation (Hansen and Proserpi, 2005). Adapted to the online environment, Smyth's ladder aims to understand how participation grows in certain online political actions.

At the first step on Smyth's ladder (2001), called "Online Service Delivery", communication is one-way, whereby the user can only access information or use the services offered. The next steps are characterised by having to overcome the communication barrier, moving from one- to two-way communication. "Online Discussion" and "Online Opinion Surveys" refer to the two levels where citizens can debate an issue and express their opinion, without knowing whether it will be taken into consideration in the decision-making process.

It is understood that the difference between these two levels lies in the possible impact of the citizen's opinion on the political decision: an online discussion can be held amongst the members of the public with no governmental interference, whereas opinion surveys are triggered by governmental sectors, with the aim of including those opinions in political definitions. Nevertheless, at both levels of the participation ladder, citizens remain bereft of control over the agenda and receive no feedback about the effect of the discussions and/or surveys on the decisions taken by the representatives. In this regard, the final step, "Online Decision Support Systems" represents the overcoming of the previous limitations, where

citizens can be actively involved in the decision-making process, gaining more participatory power by suggesting ideas to be implemented by the political agents.

To assess the 32 articles selected according to [Smyth's e-participation ladder \(2001\)](#), the results and conclusions of each study were considered, as well as the type of study object. An e-government or participatory platform, for example, may be classed as being at the first or last step of e-participation, depending on the available functionalities and level of interaction between government representatives and citizens. Therefore, this assessment is primarily based on the description, and analysis made by the authors of the papers found in the SLR.

[Figure 2](#) shows how the 32 articles are distributed amongst each of the steps of e-participation. Four articles were found to be below the communication barrier. At the next steps, ten were about online discussions, four analysed online opinion surveys and only two articles focused on cases that corresponded to an online decision support system.

The remaining 12 articles were accounted for differently, as they analysed more than one case. These were assessed separately and could be classed at different steps. Two of them brought examples of service delivery and online discussion; eight examined cases at the level of service delivery, online discussion and online opinion survey; and the other two addressed various cases which together covered all the steps. Therefore, four articles stood out as those that exposed online platforms that allowed the highest level of political participation.

The two papers that only analysed cases of online decision support systems addressed the primary election of Arizona in 2000, which involved online voting for the first time. In "Digital Democracy Comes of Age: Internet Voting and the 2000 Arizona Democratic Primary Election", [Frederic Solop \(2001\)](#) discusses the demographic and behavioural differences between electors who voted in the traditional fashion and those who opted to use the new online tool. Meanwhile, in "Elections Online: Assessing Internet Voting in Light of the Arizona Democratic Primary", by [Rachel Gibson \(2001\)](#), the case of the Arizona primary election was used to test arguments for and against online voting. [Solop \(2001\)](#) finds that online voting contributed towards an increased level of active political participation by the citizens of Arizona, whilst [Gibson \(2001\)](#) identifies that the method has the potential to attract youngsters who do not tend to take an interest in the democratic process, but that online voting cannot be seen as a substitute for other forms of voting but rather as a complementary tool.

The other two articles which analysed mixed cases presented at least one initiative at the highest level of participation. This is the case of "Latin America in the e-government era. Analysis of the introduction of new technologies to the improvement of democracy and government", published in 2008. In this study, [Yanina Welp](#) analyses all the government

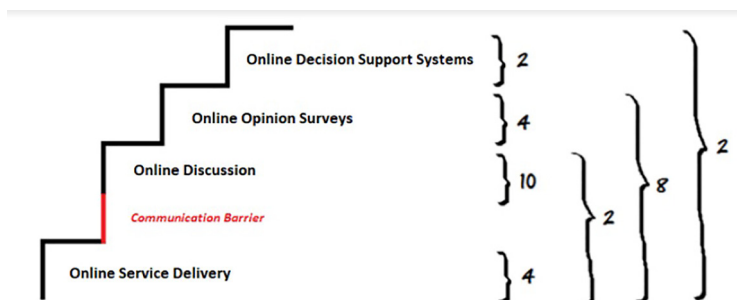


Figure 2.
Assessment of
pertinent articles by
step on the
e-participation ladder

portals of 18 Latin American countries, and only six countries were found to offer portals that the author classed as being at the complete level of participation: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Guatemala, Mexico and Venezuela. Whilst evolution is observed in the portals, which are becoming increasingly citizen-oriented, the author recognised that it is necessary to identify the differences between the proposals offered and the actual consequences of citizen participation (Welp,2008).

Finally, the paper entitled “Technology-Enabled Participatory Platforms for Civic Engagement: The Case of U.S. Cities”, from 2014, presents an analysis of 25 technological participatory platforms from the most populous US cities. Its authors, Desouza and Bhagwatwar, classified the platforms into four main models of collective intelligence, and only seven could be considered as “Online Decision Support Systems”, in which there is a two-way information flow and citizen-proposed solutions are implemented by means of monitoring public agents or through partnerships between citizens and politicians. As found in the study, most the platforms are not the result of any collaboration between civil society and policy-makers, but rather action by one or the other agent (Desouza and Bhagwatwar,2014).

According to the cases raised in this SLR, active civic participation in the political decision-making process appears timid both in number and quality. In the two cases of online voting, the citizen enjoys direct participation in elections, but control of the candidates and the voting methods themselves are defined by representatives of the parties involved. In the other two articles, regarding governmental portals of Latin America and platforms in the USA, a minority of initiatives stand out with a high level of citizen participation, and the respective studies fail to bring any concrete analysis of the consequences or effectiveness of that participation.

On the other hand, it is also important to highlight the cases found at the other steps of the ladder. Most the articles are concentrated above the communication barrier, which might mean that the platforms have been perfected and are allowing two-way communication, which is essential for interaction between citizens and politicians. Online discussions and exchanges of opinion, as well as the information accessed, allow public themes to be brought closer to the citizens, who are becoming increasingly able to voice an opinion and participate in the political decision.

Conclusion

The rapid development and global dissemination of the internet has generated expectations about its potential to strengthen democracy in view of the exhausted traditional political models for representativeness. The growing adaptation of politicians and citizens to digital environments has allowed the creation of various initiatives with the promise of increasing civic participation in political matters. However, it is pertinent to question to what extent the use of these platforms, as occurs currently, is truly capable of broadening the political role played by citizens and influencing the decision-making of political representatives.

This article discusses the possibilities of political participation generated by online platforms. Therefore, the SLR was aimed at mapping the current state of empirical studies into the use of online platforms for citizen participation and to discuss their real impacts on the political decision-making process. The choice of database, search terms and expressions helped systematise the review and guarantee that the results adhered to the research question. However, the systematisation of the process itself presents limitations, seeing as one single scientific database does not represent the entire material academic universe. On the other hand, a lack of standardised terms and concepts to designate a single problem or object is characteristic of social sciences and humanities, thus representing a drawback in any such literature review.

Another limitation of the method is that the analysis is unable to consider variations regarding the political setting, actors involved, motivations and dangers behind the participation initiatives. Furthermore, few authors clearly address the matter of effectiveness or concrete results of the participation in political decision-making, which hinders a comparative evaluation. Despite the majority of the papers presenting detailed descriptions of each platform and its use, very little critical reflection is found.

Although digital participatory platforms began to emerge concurrently to the popularisation of the internet in the mid-1990s, the results of the SLR reveal that studies into the theme only began to gain significant volume from 2001 onwards. A turning point occurred between 2011 and 2015, during which period, almost half of the pertinent articles found were published. This historical moment coincides with the attempt to implement such initiatives in different contexts and countries, and with exposure of the theme in the global public arena.

The comparative analysis of the cases found reinforces the idea that the political system, the origin and type of platform are essential variables for the use of digital technologies and political participation. Digital divide, for example, seems to be one of the problems that most affects the political engagement of citizens through online platforms, especially in less developed countries (Welp, 2008; Saylan, 2009; Desouza and Bhagwatwar, 2014). As well as the cultural and political aspect, difficulty of access and use of online platforms also result from a lack of information and technological literacy, or from precarious social and financial conditions. The results reveal that the main users of online platforms are still citizens from privileged backgrounds, with a high level of education, revenue or political interest (Mambrey *et al.*, 1999; Solop, 2001; Gibson, 2001; Tettey, 2001; Westholm, 2002; Sani, 2004; Strandberg, 2008; Balla, 2014).

Some practical solutions for the problem of citizen political participation are identified in several of the studies reviewed, in most cases looking at the public administrators or designers of the online platforms. Cegarra-Navarro *et al.* (2014) suggest that governmental agents should invest more in mechanisms that increase the technological awareness of the public as a strategy simultaneous to implementing government portals. Another key factor for political engagement through the online environment is the type of communication and information flow, which can attract or deter participants (Musso *et al.*, 2000; Pickard, 2008; Wells, 2010; Vaccari, 2011). Platforms with a planned design can encourage interaction amongst participants (Wright and Street, 2007) and platforms created to satisfy the needs of the citizens might favour participation (Coleman *et al.*, 2008; Cegarra-Navarro *et al.*, 2014).

However, the alternatives for increasing citizen participation can be limited by managers who are indisposed to engaging the public in the decision-making processes. Citizen engagement in public life and sharing decision-making power might equate to a reduced political capital held by public agents, which is not a popular change amongst those agents (Stanley and Weare, 2004). Therefore, it can be noted that, even in the cases assessed with the higher level of participation, a top-down model is followed, in which the power to create the initiative and to make the final decision remains in the hands of the politicians (Solop, 2001; Gibson, 2001; Desouza and Bhagwatwar, 2014).

Many contemporary critiques of public life and digitally mediated citizen participation draw directly or indirectly on the thinking of Alex de Tocqueville. Tocqueville believes that a vibrant and thriving democracy demands a strong measure of public-spiritedness on the part of its citizens, where people are able to act together and realize that their self-interest is inseparable from communal interest. Tocqueville feared that a type of “democratic despotism” can arise if citizen participation withers. And, despotism is possible when people are obsessed with their private lives and care little about collective issues. In such a context,

democratic despotism does not have to rely on direct coercion, for it evolves the silencing of minority viewpoints in the face of the “tyranny of the majority”, promoting an atomized citizenry who have no ties to one another, in which “general indifference” become “public virtues” (Tocqueville, 2000).

Against this backdrop, online participation initiatives can be used as a form of veiled rhetoric or as a political marketing strategy for politicians. Most of the online governmental initiatives for citizen consultations promise to promote civic participation, but in practice, politicians use closed source code platforms, controlled and monitored by their managers and with very little or no feedback about the result of the public participation.

In the contemporary setting, the use of online platforms for voluntary political participation might invert Tocqueville’s logic, giving way to a covert plutocracy or a type of “participatory despotism”, in which only an elite with information and technological skills are able to participate. Participatory despotism is enabled by the internet, which allows the participation of the few with the appearance of representing “the voice of the people”.

The fact that most people lack the critical awareness regarding surveillance mechanisms and the absence of transparency and control to avoid frauds and manipulation strategies on online platforms (such as the use of bots to change a public consultation result, for example), also generate the conditions for this state of affairs. Furthermore, behind the alleged participatory processes, other disguised power structures can be hidden (Pickard, 2008), acting in an authoritarian manner and in the interest of small groups.

The assessment of political participation in the cases found in this study corroborate that argument by presenting very few examples at the top step of Smyth’s e-participation ladder (2001), thus confirming the absence of citizen control over the final political decision. In view of this scenario, the rhetoric of participation promoted by politicians may result in an atmosphere of elitist citizenship, a false politicization, an environment of highly manipulable participation and the rise of a new kind of populism.

This scenario sets a research agenda that considers analytical and critical studies into the practices, uses and concrete results of digital participatory platforms. The need arises to create methods and indicators which can measure the effectiveness and credibility of online participation in political processes around the world, in their different contexts. It, thus, becomes even more urgent to develop empirical studies into the uses of the technology itself to generate fraudulent results, amongst other possible strategies to manipulate online participation for the self-legitimation of political agents in light of the crisis of representativeness and authority that characterises the modern world.

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