

Does digital democracy improve democracy?

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The advancement of tools of information and communications technology (ICT) has the potential to impact democracy nearly as much as any other area, such as science or education. The effects of the digital world on politics and society are still difficult to measure, and the speed with which these new technological tools evolve is often faster than a scholar's ability to assess them, or a policymaker's capacity to make them fit into existing institutional designs.

Since their early inception, digital tools and widespread access to the internet have been changing the traditional means of participation in politics, making them more effective. Electoral processes have become more transparent and effective in several countries where the paper ballot has been substituted for electronic voting machines. Petition-signing became a widespread and powerful tool as individual citizens no longer needed to be bothered out in the streets to sign a sheet of paper, but could instead be simultaneously reached by the millions via e-mail and have their names added to virtual petition lists in seconds. Protests and demonstrations have also been immensely revitalized in the internet era. In the last few years, social networks like Facebook and WhatsApp have proved to be a driving-force behind democratic uprisings, by mobilizing the masses, invoking large gatherings, and raising awareness, as was the case of the Arab Spring.

While traditional means of political participation can become more effective by reducing the costs of participation with the use of ICT tools, one cannot yet assure that it would become less subject to distortion and manipulation. In the most recent United States' elections, computer scientists claimed that electronic voting machines may have been hacked, altering the results in the counties that relied on them. E-petitions can also be easily manipulated, if safe identification procedures are not put in place. And in these times of post-facts and post-truths, protests and demonstrations can result from strategic partisan manipulation of social media, leading to democratic instability as has recently occurred in Brazil. Nevertheless, the distortion and manipulation of these traditional forms of participation were also present before the rise of ICT tools, and regardless, even if the latter do not solve these preceding problems, they may manage to make political processes more effective anyway.

The game-changer for democracy, however, is not the revitalization of the traditional means of political participation like elections, petition-signing and protests through digital tools. Rather, the real change on how democracy works, governments rule, and representation is delivered comes from entirely new means of e-participation, or the so-called digital democratic innovations. While the internet may boost traditional forms of political participation by increasing the quantity of citizens engaged, democratic innovations that rely on ICT tools may change the very quality of participation, thus in the long-run changing the nature of democracy and its institutions.

First, digital innovations may change how democracy works by making it more inclusive and more deliberative. Real democratic inclusion takes place when the latter is understood not in terms of the number of citizens and volume of participation, but in terms of the groups targeted and the policy issues addressed by the new means of e-participation. Several digital democratic innovations have been

created that specifically address women, youth and other vulnerable groups that usually have not only a lower participation in electoral politics, but also have their interests left aside by elected politicians. Mechanisms for digital oversight have evolved to specifically allow women to raise their voices against the multiple forms of gender violence, and in many cases help law-enforcement officials to identify offenders and increase surveillance. Several new policies addressing the youth have been drafted in interactive policymaking platforms, making use of inputs directly provided by young citizens, who tend to prefer their computers' keyboard to the ballot box. Such new spaces of participation have been teaching the new generations to not simply understand their political preferences as static manifestations of choice that are aggregated by voting mechanisms every two to four years, but instead to collectively express their demands and construct their political opinions through continuous deliberation. Historically excluded groups can now participate in new institutional spaces designed to address issues that specifically concern them, making their own (digital) voices count in the drafting and implementation of policies.

Second, digital democratic innovations may change how governments rule by making them more accountable and effective. In a short time, E-government and open data have become so widespread as tools for enhancing transparency that one can barely still call them innovations. The most innovative and democratic institutional designs are today found among those who rely on ICT tools to allow citizens to collaborate with their government by interacting with the public administration. Forms of interactive administration have evolved as both internet sites and mobile applications (apps), where citizens can identify problems in their cities and propose solutions to fix them. Mechanisms of collaborative mapping have quickly increased, allowing citizens to use geo-localization tools to do things as varied as crime reporting, spotting foci of diseases, singling out areas of deforestation or denouncing corruption. Both types of digital innovations have been designed to include citizens in the policy process, allowing them to play a role in the implementation and evaluation of policies while improving public service delivery, enforcing the rule of law, and rendering governments more accountable.

Third, digital innovations may change how representation is performed by turning it more responsive. Whereas sometimes millions of votes are not enough to ensure that elected politicians take the preferences of their constituencies into consideration; in certain cases the e-participation of a few thousand citizens have proved to be more effective to make those preferences heard. Processes of crowdsourcing legislation are perhaps the most innovative change that has taken place in parliaments over the last centuries, enabling citizens to collaboratively draft new legislation, and thus take part in lawmaking. In some cases, this form of online citizen participation is not only restricted to agenda-setting, but also to the formulation stage of the policy cycle by adding, changing or removing parts of new laws to be enacted by representatives. A growing number of political parties have also been using open sourced platforms to allow citizens to contribute suggestions to their political agendas, oppose their adopted policies, and vote online on the issues they must vote on in parliaments. The use of such tools enables parties and their incumbents to strengthen liaisons with their members and possibly win new supporters. Interestingly enough, digital innovations have been making representation less virtual by virtual means.

These new digital institutional designs mentioned above not only enhance participation, they also improve democracy by increasing political inclusion, generating accountability, enforcing the rule of law and augmenting responsiveness. They may also foster social equality, as they include traditionally disadvantaged groups and provide channels to voice their underrepresented demands. Just a few years ago one could argue that the digital divide rules out low-income citizens, but today the widespread use of smartphones is almost making computers as a device necessary to access the internet obsolete. It is not by chance that higher numbers of active smartphones per capita are found in some of the poorest countries, and that such mobile internet devices have proved an efficient tool to include citizens in highly unequal societies. By correcting some of the deficits of representative governments and providing new ways to deal with social inequality, new forms of e-participation may not change democracy as quickly as they evolve and spread, but they have certainly already made it more diverse and inclusive through institutional digital innovation.

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