

We want to e-participate

Leonie Rettig

*The latest form of the diverse concept of political participation is “e-participation”. This includes activities by citizens who use information and communication technologies to try to influence political processes. What are the reasons for political participation? An overview of the literature showed a positive influence of political motivation on the offline participation of individuals. For this reason, the motivation for political participation and e-participation in Germany was examined. **Leonie Rettig** writes about the results of the investigation. They pointed out that political motivation influences e-participation.*

#NeverAgain, #BlackLivesMatter, #IranProtests, #TimesUp, #NoGroko

These Hashtags went viral in the last years. They showed the outrage, the dissatisfaction and the drive to fight for change. As keywords and titles of different protests, every single one of them tried to make an impact in the internet as well as on the streets. On the one hand, these movements are examples for the overlapping boundaries between the digital and the analog world. On the other hand, they are one of many forms of political participation. Since the attic democracy, participation is an important base of democratic structures. Whereas participation has been part of democracies for more than a millenium, it has always been changing and adapting, constructing a range of different forms, shapes and sizes of participation. All of them have in common that people undertake voluntary actions to directly or indirectly influence the decision-making process on different political levels [\[1\]](#).

For decades scientist have analyzed the reasons for people to participate or not. Scholars such as Verba, Schlozman and Brady have figured out three main reasons for non-participation: „they can’t, [...] they don’t want to, [...] nobody asked“ [\[2\]](#).

They can’t: People need resources like money, time and civic skills, like reading and writing competencies, to be able to participate. How am I supposed to take part in a demonstration against sexual harassment when I have to work 8 hours a

day and look after my children afterwards? The answer is clear: Without having much time left I won't be able to demonstrate for #TimesUp.

They don't want to: This obstacle relates to the personal motivation to take part in participative activities. Why should I write an E-Mail to a representative trying to change weapons law in order to support the #NeverAgain movement, if I'm in fact just not interested in the issue? If I am not interested in my political surrounding, I do not feel like I could have an impact on policy or do not have an issue or affection that drives me to influence political spheres, I won't participate.

Nobody asked: My social environment is influencing my behaviour. Would I have even noticed that latest #BlackLivesMatter petition I signed, if my neighbor hadn't told me about it? Would I still vote if none of my friends did?

These parameters can explain why political participation is distributed unequally within any society. Many researchers analysed and theorized how the internet could make up for this inequality. There are two sides to this idea: The mobilisation theory argues that the internet will close the participation gap in the long run, while the reinforcement theorists believe that [the gap](#) is becoming even bigger with the internet. These theories mainly concentrate on the impact of resources and networking, because of the obvious change of these features that come with Information Communication Technologies. In order to participate on the internet, I need to have the hardware and specific skills to make use of it. Only when these resources are given, I can connect more widely with people in the internet than I could in person. In contrast, political motivation involves an accumulation of affective and cognitive attitudes which motivate people to engage politically. Logically, we would not expect the internet to have changed the way we are personally affected towards political processes. This begs a question:

How is political motivation correlated with e-participation?

As stated earlier, political motivation anticipates the accumulation of attitudes. However, which attitudes are included in the concept of political motivation? In the existing literature, a number of attitudes are discussed as fragments of political motivation. Political motivation mostly refers to political interest, political information and knowledge, political efficacy, satisfaction with democracy, partisanship, group membership, political value orientations and sense of political engagement as duty^[3]. All of these fragments have already been part of research on offline participation. Political interest, political information

and knowledge, political efficacy and partisanship indicated a strong relationship with traditional engagement activities, whereas group membership, a sense of political engagement as duty, satisfaction with democracy and political value orientations (like left-right ideology, issue and candidate orientations) could not clearly be detected to have an impact on participation offline.

In my bachelor thesis I analyzed to which extent the increase of some of these fragments indicated an increase of e-participation. Surprisingly, the fragments which have shown in literature to have a great impact on the offline participation didn't for e-participation, whereas others, like the overall satisfaction with democracy, were recognized to correlate with e-participation. I conducted the data from the March/April 2018 wave of an individual-level dataset from a national survey of the GESIS Leibniz Institute for Social Science^[4]. The mixed-method (online and offline) omnibus access GESIS Panel is representative for the german-speaking population being at least 18 years old and living in Germany. For this instance, the results found do only broadcast the e-participation for the german population (excluding people under the age of 18).

My results of the empirical analyses showed that only higher political interest, internal political efficacy, satisfaction with democracy, left ideological value orientations and sense of political engagement as a duty increase political e-participation. At the same time, factors such as partisanship, political information and external political efficacy could not be detected influencing e-participation. These results lead me to conclude that political motivation does correlate with e-participation in the German population in 2017.

Results and Conclusion

Political interest is the strongest indicator for e-participation, followed by the internal efficacy. This means I increase my probability to participate online by being rather interested in my political environment and feel like I have the skills to engage in political decision-making. If am satisfied with democracy, classify myself as orientated to political values of the left political spectrum and evaluate political engagement as a duty, then the likelihood of taking part in e-participation is even bigger. On the other side the strength of partisanship, the feeling of being heard by political actors and political information do not increase the probability that I participate online. Surprisingly, other factors of motivation showed to be beneficial to e-participation than for offline participation. Furthermore, the age and the level of education were examined. Individuals who

are younger and highly educated rather taking part in e-participation. This could be related with the ability to use the online tools, but was not further investigated.

These results have a number of limitations: It must be considered that including other or additional activities of e-participation could change the results found in this analyses. For instance, developments like VAAs, e-voting or e-boycott have to be taken into account as e-participational actions in future. As well specific e-participation forms could lead to major difference in results about their correlation to motivation. For example, is the participation in the e-protests #IranProtests related to having an Iranian family background, or how I feel about political values like human rights? Do I post my opinion online to #NoGroKo, because I am having a partisanship, or because I feel unsatisfied with democracy or the last German government?

Moreover, although my bachelor thesis specified on the political motivation, the resources and networks should still be considered as potential indicators of e-participation. In fact, only by considering a combination of all indicators it is possible to approximate an understanding of e-participation. Identifying all indicators is both the solution and the problem of research on political participation.

References:

[1] [Deth van, Jan W. \(2009\)](#): Politische Partizipation, in: Kaina, Viktoria / Römmele, Andrea (Hrsg.): Politische Soziologie. Ein Studienbuch, Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften / GWV Fachverlage GmbH Wiesbaden, S. 141–161.

[2] [Verba, Sidney / Schlozman, Kay Lehman / Brady, Henry E. \(1995\)](#): Voice and equality. Civic voluntarism in American politics. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Univ. Press.

[3] [Schlozman, Kay Lehman / Verba, Sidney / Brady, Henry E. \(2012\)](#): The unheavenly chorus. Unequal political voice and the broken promise of American democracy, Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press.

[4] [GESIS \(2017\)](#): GESIS Panel Standard Edition. GESIS Data Archive, Cologne. ZA5665 Datafile Version 18.0.0, doi: 10.4232/1.12973.

This post represents the view of the author and does not necessarily represent the view of the institute itself. For more information about the topics of these articles and associated research projects, please contact info@hiig.de.