

E-Democracy and Digital Activism: From Divergent Paths Toward a New Frame

EMILIANA DE BLASIO

MICHELE SORICE

LUISS University, Italy

In this article, we provide an overview of the main theoretical approaches to e-democracy, also considering that their history is intertwined with studies on e-government on the one hand and with research on digital communication on the other. In particular, we have explored the critical issues represented by the different models of e-government and e-democracy. Studies on digital activism have only recently met those on e-democracy, despite an apparent conceptual contiguity. The belated meeting between these two strands of research is to be found in the assimilation of many e-government/e-democracy practices in the context of neoliberalism and its tendencies toward depoliticization. The concept of platform arises at the intersection among studies on digital activism, e-democracy research, and the analysis of new forms of social organization: It seems to be able to constitute a common territory of research and mutual recognition.

Keywords: e-democracy, e-government, depoliticization, platform party, platform society

Studies on digital activism, investigations of the relationship between communication and social movements, surveys on open government, reflections on advanced forms of political communication, and research on digital democracy all share a strong emphasis on the issue of platforms for democratic participation. This body of research also includes studies on the crisis of representative institutions, studies on the postrepresentative transformation (Keane, 2013) of contemporary politics, and, finally, studies on the relationship between depoliticization and democracy. This last category, moreover, is beginning to include even the most recent studies on the processes of dedemocratization in some European areas. From this premise, a substantial organicity of research on issues such as digital activism, open governance, and e-democracy (or digital democracy) is emerging. In reality, these research areas are very often scientific islands with few connections.

The relational difficulty that exists between scientific areas that are so close is, in fact, justified by the background of the various fields of study, as well as by the defining assumptions of the concepts used (think of the forced overlap between e-democracy and e-government, of the ambiguities of the concepts of open government and digital activism, as well as of the polysemantic value of the concept of participation).

Emiliana De Blasio: edeblasio@luiss.it

Michele Sorice: msorice@luiss.it

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Another critical element is research methods, although this aspect is less conclusive today, thanks to the adoption of hybrid research methods and mixed-method approaches.

In this article, we take into account these different study traditions, attempting to identify the critical issues but, above all, highlighting their contact points and the possibility of interaction and reciprocal fertilization. First, we sketch a scenario analysis, wherein we place scientific and social demands for the adoption of digital democracy and digital activism tools as oppositional practices within the postpolitical representative frame. Second, we discuss the different theoretical positions on e-government and e-democracy (which are often too simplistically overlapped). Third, we analyze the controversial relationship between open government and processes of depoliticization (a relationship that is one of the reasons for the "suspect" participatory dimension of open government). Finally, we address the relationship between different forms of digital activism and the scientific literature on participation. The different parts of the article are placed in a precise theoretical framework, which intends to consider how the different scientific approaches can mutually support and strengthen one another.

E-Democracy and Digital Activism in the Era of Postrepresentative Politics

The crisis of the "forms of representative politics" (Tormey, 2015) has produced many different reactions from the social actors. We can group these responses into three major trends. The first is represented by the increase in social apathy: This is a phenomenon that has always been present in liberal democracies; it is structural and, moreover, has been extensively studied. The increase in the percentage of people declaring their lack of interest in politics and institutions is partly connected to the perception of uselessness: The crisis of representation, in other words, sharpens the crisis of legitimacy of the democratic system, which is increasingly perceived as "illusory" and in any case unable to give citizens real power in decision-making processes. The second tendency is specular to the first and results in a request for greater control by citizens of representative institutions. In reality, this request for control is the umpteenth evidence of the crisis of representation: The "representatives" are placed under control, fundamentally deprived of the trust of represented people. The systematic distrust of representatives (elected officials and "politicians") produces what is today defined as sanctioning democracy because it was founded not so much on the desire to have a greater impact on decision-making processes and on the basic choices of policies but on the need for a sanctioning control over the work of the representatives (which therefore becomes unreliable "in principle," except to be denied by the checks).

The third trend is different and consists of the request for new forms of political participation. Most U.S. and European research (see, e.g., the Eurobarometer and the European Social Survey) has shown that the crisis in the credibility and legitimacy of representation, whose most obvious outcome is the crisis of political parties, is accompanied by a strong social rooting of the values of democracy, although sometimes with some critical areas and relative requests for "strong" leadership. Within this trend, we can place the emergence of new participatory actors: from nongovernmental organizations to "grassroots" initiatives promoted by citizens to movements for global justice to spontaneous local initiatives (those that are defined as do-it-yourself politics). In this context, we place both the development of platforms and technologies that are capable of facilitating different forms of political participation (Sorice, 2014, 2018) and the many and diverse forms of active citizenship (Moro, 2013). The experiences and practices of democratic innovation

are two of the possibilities for redefining the relationship between institutions and citizens. It is no coincidence that these practices provide for new forms of representation and are only marginally connected with voting and electoral practice.

In recent years, unsurprisingly, scholars have discussed the crisis of national representative politics, which can easily be interpreted as a deficit of citizens' trust in political institutions. In this climate of mistrust, the demands for more participatory forms of democracy are growing, as seen in the reactions that push toward the demand for new forms of representation (e.g., those we can define as "hyperrepresentation" and that are the background of many contemporary populisms). The lack of trust in political and representative institutions generates three possible areas of response from citizens (see Figure 1): The first one is represented by social apathy, which manifests itself as disinterest in politics, often accompanied by strongly antipolitical sentiments. The second is substantiated in the demand for more precise control over representative institutions; this request is expressed in what Rosanvallon (2008) calls *counterdemocracy* and evolves into a sort of systemic mistrust (sanctioning democracy), which often identifies—in the appeal for direct democracy—a solution to encourage greater citizen participation. The third area of response is the request for new forms of participation; these range from active citizenship, to the experiences represented by online platforms for democratic participation, to different forms of democratic innovation (collaborative governance, public debate, participatory democracy, etc.).

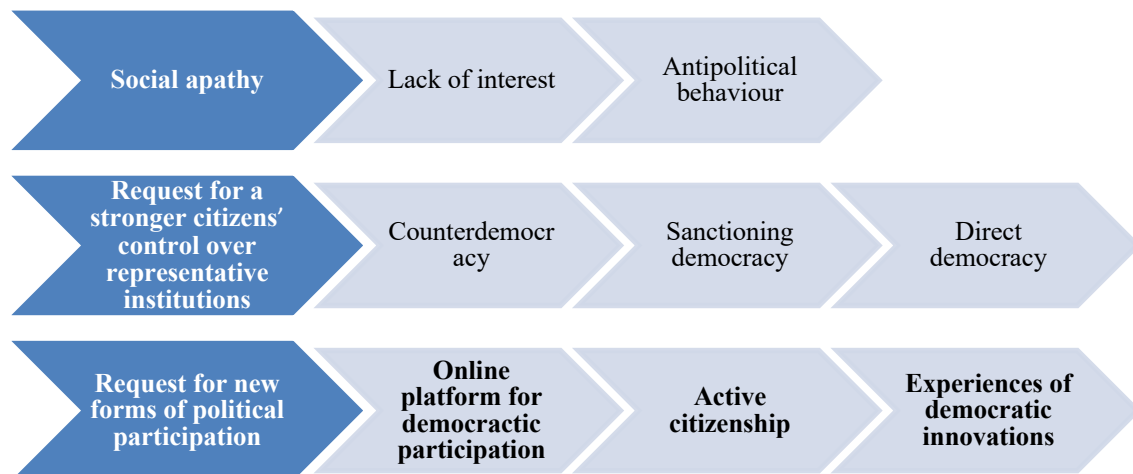


Figure 1. Citizens' answer to the "crisis" of representative democracy.

The element of systemic distrust is the basis of Pierre Rosanvallon's (2008) counterdemocracy, which is articulated in the three counterpowers of surveillance, interdiction, and judgment. According to Rosanvallon, representative-electoral democracy is characterized by a structural ambiguity: On the one hand, we find the political principle of democracy (what Rosanvallon calls the people-as-sovereign); on the other hand, we find the "sociological" principle of democracy (what Rosanvallon calls the people-as-society). The abstract unity of sovereignty, which is implicit in the political principle of democracy, enters into a continual and unsolvable conflict with the concrete multiplicity that lies behind the principle of the people-as-society (Rosanvallon, 2008).

Among the different control powers, Rosanvallon also identifies communication and, in particular, the Internet. In this framework, digital communication technologies enable many "modalities" of political activism, including culture jamming, citizen journalism, various practices of alternative computing (hacking, file sharing, open source software), hacktivism, and advanced forms of common knowledge (as in Wiki logic or, e.g., crowdsourcing). At the same time, however, the Internet can easily be used to amplify antipolitical rhetoric and the crisis of trust between citizens and institutions.

Another outcome of the democracy of organized distrust is the emergence of new forms of social vigilance and political activism, ranging from advocacy groups to instances of active citizenship (Moro, 2013), nongovernmental organizations, online petitions (organized through platforms such as MoveOn.org, Change.org, the Italian Progressi, etc.), and localized activist campaigns against free-trade treaties (such as the Stop-TTIP, No-Ceta campaigns, etc.). In many cases, such organizations (first and foremost campaigns but also different advocacy groups) do not "represent" in the traditional sense but advance claims for representation (Saward, 2010). They do not have membership structures and are mostly single-issue (i.e., oriented to a specific cause), performing activities of influence and, in some cases, of lobbying (Ceccarini & Diamanti, 2018, p. 351). From the perspective of new organized forms, representative democracy seems to give way not only to counterdemocratic demands, but also to what Keane (2009) calls *monitory democracy*. Monitoring is carried out both through lobbying practices and through the legitimization of tools from the tradition of deliberative democracy (Sorice, 2014), such as citizen juries, deliberative polls, city assemblies, online consultations, and petitions, as well as consumer movements and control associations focused on respect for human rights. The Internet is a "place" that facilitates the emergence and rooting of these experiences, although it does not constitute the activation element.

The *monitorial citizen*—in the expression of Michael Schudson (1998)—tends, in fact, to substitute both the citizen elector and even the "critic citizen" (Norris, 1999). In this new scenario, representative democracy—based on a direct relationship between citizens and legislative assemblies—gives way to *postrepresentative democracy* (Keane, 2013), in which citizens experience forms of creative activism that are not always coherent with the traditions of political representation through party organizations. The breaking of the relationship's trust, typical of a representative system, also produces a sort of request for more direct forms of representation. "Indirect representation is characterised by an apparently inevitable fracture between the representing centre and the represented outer layers" (Coleman & Blumler, 2009, p. 79). In this fracture, forms of direct representation are developed, which can move along two paths, not necessarily antithetical: (a) on the one hand, the use of the Internet and, sometimes, banal forms of participation such as "clicktivism"; (b) on the other hand, the synthesis between hyperrepresentation and forms of direct representation, or those in which people become representatives of themselves and, for practical reasons, delegate a leader (often the media) to become the depository of the representation.

Between E-Government and Digital Democracy

E-Government concerns the administrative and governmental functions of public administrations and institutions. These functions are made more efficient and potentially transparent through the adoption of digital technologies and, in particular, the Internet, whose governance thus becomes a strategic factor for the democratic functioning of the system. On the other hand, e-democracy is conceivable only because

there are technologies and environments (such as the Internet) that make it possible. At the same time, however, technologies are placed within a political framework that identifies participation and equality as its reference poles. It can be useful to remind that the Internet has also represented the hub for a cognitive and political acceleration of democratic innovation processes and, more generally, for the possibilities offered to citizen participation in territorial governance. However, the possibility that technologies could facilitate participation and encourage greater social involvement was already present well before the rise of the studies on e-democracy. Thierry Vedel (2006) situated in the 1950s the first efforts to use communication technologies as qualifying tools for the growth of participation.

An aspect not to be underestimated when talking about both e-government and e-democracy is the role of technologies. Technologies do not strictly define the modalities of participation but, at the same time, they are not neutral. To give a very simple example, the modalities of civic engagement and political participation can vary significantly depending on whether a participation platform provides only for the possibility of voting or, alternatively, it also includes a "space" for deliberation. On the other hand, even before the digital shift, it was known that the peculiar characteristics of the media played a nonsecondary role in political behavior. Although rejecting a banal deterministic view, it is nevertheless clear that the characteristics of the media (and of the entire media ecosystem) have played (and still play) an important role precisely in participatory processes. This observation has been recently highlighted by van Dijk and Hacker (2018), who also note that there is "no consensus on how Internet or digital media usage increases and changes political communication in relation to democracy" (p. 50).

There are different types of e-government—as Reddick (2011) highlights—and there is no single definition of e-democracy because the practices of use and theoretical approaches are very disparate.

Table 1 highlights the differences in e-government models, which have influenced the debate on both e-democracy and open government in different ways. First envisioned in the 1980s, the managerial model came to fruition in Great Britain in the 1990s and, approximately in the same period, the United States. The basic idea—which also spread to Italy in the debate on the role of technologies for the development and implementation of public communication—was in fact "mediacentric." It hinged on the hope that these technologies could guarantee better levels of efficiency in the services provided by the public administration. Beyond the fact that no technological innovation can work miracles if it is not supported by political design choices, the managerial model rested on the idea of the "citizen-customer," to whom the administration needed to provide information but not necessarily give space for participation. In other words, the managerial model is rooted in the idea of the company-state (Crouch, 2003) or, in the theoretical paradigm of *new public management*, as it was interpreted by British conservative governments in the Thatcher era and, in part, by the governments led by Tony Blair. Apart from providing an increased amount of information, this type of e-government is not supportive of a real opening of institutions to citizens. To be sure, there are also less pessimistic theoretical positions on the "managerialist" approach. Indeed, if one adopts a holistic and transformative perspective, the Internet could contrast the fragmented vision of new public management (Dunleavy, Margetts, Bastow, & Tinkler, 2005): "The new media overturn the trend of New Public Management to the fragmentation of public services because they encourage a holistic approach to the policy agenda, connecting the policies together and reconstituting the unity of different components" (Roberts, 2014, p. 77).

Table 1. E-Government Models.

Model	Main characteristics
Managerial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information and communications technology as information tool • No (or poor) interactivity • Top-down communication flows
Consultative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information and communications technology as tool for improving efficiency of public policies • Interactivity with defined stakeholders • Bidirectional communication in a top-down frame
Participatory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information and communications technology as tool for democratic innovations • Wide interactivity • Horizontal communication flows (dialogic dimension)

Source. Elaboration from Reddick (2011, pp. 169–171).

Second, the consultative model has developed in several European countries and has played an important role both in the rethinking of e-government and in the contemporary theoretical revision of the concept of open government. In this case, the bidirectionality of the information flow (although often limited to specific stakeholders and not available to all citizens) represented the qualifying element of e-government. The transformation of the citizen from “customer” to “stakeholder” is not only a change in terminology, but also a different positioning of the various social actors (the state, citizens, businesses).

Finally, the participatory model represents the meeting point between e-government theories and practices and some of the most recent perspectives on open government. In this model, communication technologies are included in a much larger framework: On the one hand, they represent instruments for facilitating participation; on the other hand, they are meant to provide a dialogic dimension, that is, a horizontal relationship between the state and its citizens. In reality, participatory forms of e-government are very difficult and require a clear “democratic” transformation of administrations at all levels. It is no coincidence that the participatory model of e-government has often been superimposed on the concept of e-democracy, thus contributing to the inevitable conceptual confusion. At the same time, the development of e-government models based on the idea of participation has contributed to the opening of the recent debate on open government. This approach has some points in common, but also important divergences with the theoretical framework elaborated by Hoff, Horrocks, and Tops (2000), which is based on four models of democracy: consumer, demoelectist, neorepublican, and cyber. The evolutionary process of e-government platforms has been more recently discussed by van Dijk, van de Wijngaert, and Ebbers (2015), who use a perspective based on the services provided by the platforms themselves. This discussion creates an interesting link with the scientific perspectives of the 1990s, when e-government and e-democracy were both considered the outcomes of the public sector’s Information and communications technology implementation (van De Donk, Snellen, & Tops, 1995). A similar analysis was conducted by Kampen and Snijkers (2003). The 2010 turning point in e-democracy studies has been clearly described by Grönlund (2010).

E-democracy (or digital democracy) is a different entity compared with e-government, at least when compared with the managerial and consultative models of e-government. Although it is true that there is no unequivocal definition of digital democracy, it is also true that it is necessary to identify the boundaries between e-democracy and e-government with sufficient clarity. At the same time, the theoretical approaches to digital democracy are also very disparate. In this respect, the classification proposed by Lincoln Dahlberg (2011, p. 857) is useful. Dahlberg identifies four different "positions" of digital democracy, which we can summarize as follows.

The first position constitutes the basis for the expression and aggregation of individual instances in the decisional processes of a representative type. These include many local experiences, civic and petition-based initiatives (e.g., Amnesty International, Avaaz.org, Move On, etc.), and obviously institutional initiatives of e-democracy, especially those that include e-voting technologies and the collection of detailed information from public opinion. In essence, this is a "Schumpeterian" position in which citizens rather than a collective entity are the sum of individualities who have the right to pursue and achieve their own aims. The same democratic ideal is here an aggregate of individual wills. Digital media are tools for enhancing the communication of individual subjects. This position, however, does not have the impetus to reach cyber-libertarian positions.

The second position—the deliberative one—consists of processes aimed at building rational consensus in digital media. Based on the procedures of deliberation, it refers to an articulated and conscious use of communication tools within a substantially Habermasian vision of the public sphere.

The third position considers digital media as a place of conflict and not as tools for individual rational action or for the activation of consensus-building practices. In essence, what Dahlberg (2011) calls the *counterpublics position* frames the dynamics of inclusion–exclusion as structural and believes that conflict and social antagonism guarantee the existence of a critical public sphere. In this frame of reference, digital media function as instruments for the empowerment of racial, social, and political minorities. Activism protest movements and the global justice movement of the early 2000s are part of this position, along with other forms of protest and digital "radical politics" (Fenton, 2016).

The fourth position, which Dahlberg (2011) lists as the autonomist-Marxist position, refers to digital media as counterpower tools that are capable of going beyond the capitalist system while promoting alternative forms of sharing and creating (digital) common goods. In other words, digital networking becomes an instrument of social democratization. The conquest of hegemony represents a key element of this position, and the digital media themselves can become a tool for the organization of social protests, including those of transnational social movements. If the defining features of the third position are the construction of identity and the oppositional practices, sharing and networking are the distinctive features of the fourth position.

E-democracy, therefore, takes on a different perspective if we place it within the paradigms of participatory and deliberative democracy. As we have seen, technology is both a tool to facilitate voting, as is the case with e-government (*krátos* dimension, κράτος), and a cultural space wherein social wills can be formed through deliberation (*démos* dimension, δῆμος). Thus, we can affirm—by forcing the terms

of the question, which in reality is very complex—that digital democracy is such when communication technologies combine the facilitation of episodic participation (voting) with a continuous deliberative practice within a framework of social interconnection and sharing of political processes.

Indeed, the semantic overlap between e-government and e-democracy, although widespread and misleading, has some historical causes. The scientific and political debate on the two concepts, in fact, developed almost simultaneously. The Government Direct document produced by the British Conservative Government in 1996 exalted the potential of “electronic government,” which—it was said—could reduce costs and make the communication flow (i.e., the structural backbone) of government action and decision-making processes more efficient. In the public documents produced in the United Kingdom and the United States in those years, the conceptual overlap between the “efficiency” of decision-making processes and “increase in participation” is evident (a causal link that is, in reality, anything but easily demonstrable). Although it is conceptually better defined, the 2002 European Union document (eEurope 2005 Action Plan) does not resolve the ambivalence of these terms and concepts. In practice, therefore, the concepts of e-government and e-democracy show an inextricable common history (De Blasio, 2014). Hence, we also have the “de facto” overlap between the participatory model of e-government and e-democracy. In essence, e-democracy allows for the transition from an intermittent and low-intensity democracy, in which political participation takes place and is exhausted only during the electoral moment, to a participatory democracy capable of committing citizens. It should be added that whereas e-democracy provides people with channels of communication, exchange, and participation that are activated voluntarily and spontaneously, e-government (and open government) instead provides specific inputs according to a top-down logic, promoted by public administrations and functional to the optimization of citizenship activities. A good application of forms of e-government can be a necessary starting point for implementing and promoting forms of e-democracy; at the same time, however, the two processes are very different (Sorice, 2014, pp. 159–160). According to Andrew Chadwick (2006), the basic lines of e-democracy are twofold: On the one hand, it could allow the implementation of the processes of government and popular consultation (and therefore it would also take forms that are typically those of e-government); on the other hand, it could find its ideal place of realization in deliberative practices. The latter aspect is what appears to us as more qualifying.

In 2009, when the United Kingdom had already launched several important e-democracy experiments and, at the same time, decided to abandon electronic voting, Stephen Coleman and Jay Blumler published a book that would have a powerful influence on the experts and scholars of e-democracy. Coleman and Blumler analyzed, among other things, two different approaches to e-democracy: The first, from above, is the result of initiatives financed and managed by state institutions; the second, the bottom-up, is an expression of the activities of associations, groups, and individual citizens who show a willingness to participate in political action via the Internet:

Beyond the realm of official politics, in which public discussion has tended to be institutionally shaped and managed, there is a vast sphere of autonomous interaction, taking place within and between publics and counter-publics. In this public sphere, people encounter one another intentionally as well as accidentally, purposefully as well as promiscuously, rationally as well as affectively. Such encounters are increasingly taking place online, and, although the Internet might not qualify as a public sphere in the Habermasian sense, it does provide particular opportunities for citizens to interact beyond, around and across institutionally-controlled communication channels. (Coleman & Blumler, 2009, p. 117)

More recently, other points of contact between studies on digital activism and those on e-democracy have been favored by the emergence of social movements (e.g., Occupy in the United States and M-15 in Spain) and by digital parties that have led to a rethinking of relations between democracy and communication technologies.

Open Government and Depoliticization

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the evolution of Western democracies had allowed the emergence—among journalists and scholars—of rhetoric about the victory of liberal democracy and the triumph of political freedom and of the free market. In addition, because of this rhetoric, over the course of the 1990s and throughout the beginning of the 21st century, the idea of overcoming the “old” categories of right and left became hegemonic. Preceded by the literature on the “end of ideologies” (Fukuyama, 1992), the idea of overcoming the political categories of right and left quickly became a feature of modernity. Different positions have been emerging, some more markedly technocratic, others that identified the development of shared deliberative processes and the affirmation of collaborative governance as the only elements necessary for the qualitative growth of democracy.

The beginning of the 21st century, however, has been marked by various phenomena: (a) the rebirth of nationalism and religious fundamentalism; (b) the explosion of the Western economic crisis, generated precisely by those economic recipes that had achieved media and political success, but which had proved unsuitable to solve the structural problems of the world economy (Crouch, 2011); (c) the rebirth of the various populisms, often connected to the criticism of the liberal system; (d) the development of digital activism as a specific mode of opposition to the establishment; and (e) the onset of numerous popular protest movements, which attacked the outcomes of liberal democracy by claiming participatory demands and calling for more democracy. This last aspect, in particular, highlighted the democratic short circuit, not only the historical inconsistency of the alleged overcoming of the right and the left, but also the apparent paradox of a criticism of liberal democracy because it is not very sensitive to the demands of popular participation.

The concept of depoliticization has been studied by several authors (Mouffe, 2005; Rancière, 2010; Žižek, 1999), sometimes with different accents but always due to the idea of a substantial loss of centrality of the perceived value of politics as belonging and project: a sort of reduction of politics to the policy dimension, with a substantial marginalization both of the ideological conflict and of the polity as a project community.

In 2007, Colin Hay published *Why We Hate Politics*, a book that constitutes a turning point in the study of the relationships among processes of depoliticization, the emergence of postpolitical society, and recent transformations of the public sphere. The issue of depoliticization—easily accepted in the study of social movements and present in research on digital activism—did not immediately find a place in the study of e-democracy and of democratic innovations. This situation is not strange considering that some digital innovation experiments replicated the logic of representation, obtaining a double unintended result. On the one hand, the failure of these initiatives to increase popular participation and make it more informed was striking as compared with the established objectives. On the other hand, these initiatives were rejected by the popular classes, which perceived them, not without reason, as “top-down” instruments and thus as strategies of the elites. Furthermore, some institutional reforms have been added to these forms of innovation and use as tactics and tools for the realization of a neoliberal postpolitical project (Flinders & Buller, 2006). Both the institutional reforms and some experiences of democratic innovation have thus revealed themselves as “mechanisms used by politicians to depoliticise issues, including delegation, but also for the creation of binding rules and the formation of discursive preference shaping” (Fawcett, Flinders, Hay, & Wood, 2017, p. 5).

The concept of *antipolitics* (which is intertwined with that of depoliticization, but distinct from it) has been variously defined. A useful definition, for our purposes, is that which links antipolitics to “public disillusionment and disengagement, associated with declining turnout at elections, declining membership of parties and political movements, and public opposition to paradigmatic policy agendas” (Fawcett et al., 2017, p. 6). In many cases, the emergence of antipolitical rhetoric is associated with public calls for “more authentic” forms of government, which are based on—as in some populist phenomena—“minimal governance actions” (Albertazzi & Mueller, 2013). It is precisely the semantic shift from the idea of “government” to the notion of “governance” that is one of the elements that accompanies the emergence of the so-called “postpolitical.” Rather than being simplistically reduced to the mere refusal of political institutions and intermediate bodies, the shift from government to governance is instrumental to a “reduction of the politician to the economy.”

It is no accident that the passage from government to governance has been associated with the idea of “innovation,” an innovation capable of letting “ordinary” citizens retake control of their daily lives. Implicit in this position, however, is the idea that the government—and, with it, politics as a strategic activity—belongs to political elites, whereas governance, which develops at the microterritorial level, allows for greater citizen control. Indeed, as noted, the transition from government to governance carries even less weight for citizens, who are often limited to the management of important but subordinate issues, but strategic issues—also due to the loss of centrality of political parties—are now in the hands of technocracies and large economic-financial companies. At this level, we are talking about depoliticization, which, therefore, constitutes a bridge that activates connections among microtrends (disengagement of individual citizens), institutional mechanisms, and reforms at the meso level (the modes of governance we have just mentioned) and the macro level of dominant economic ideologies and models (Fawcett et al., 2017). Sørensen and Torfing (2017) argue that governance is a preferential path to depoliticization. It would, in fact, be a sort of rhetorical strategy to justify a presumed “efficiency” of government deprived of effective forms of participation. From this perspective, some deliberative democracy experiments and digital democratic innovations should not be considered instances of politicization but, on the contrary,

as techniques and procedures for depoliticizing decision-making processes (Urbinati, 2014). The idea of the centrality of experts in the creation of collaborative governance experiences would demonstrate, in this dimension, the centrality of the power of technocracy. At the same time, some cultural perspectives—for example, new public management—have very often constituted formidable tools for legitimizing the replacement of once-important political debates with the narration of the efficiency of “governance,” usually interpreted as a mere collation of “public policies.” In this field, we can trace some lines of research that are commonplace in the analysis of digital activism and the study of e-democracy, such as that of technopopulism (Bickerton & Invernizzi Accetti, 2017; Deseriis, 2017).

Open government has also become, in some cases, the instrument that facilitates the theoretical legitimation of depoliticization practices. In reality, there exist different concepts of open government, although we can—by simplifying—reduce them to two major conceptual and operational trends. Whereas the first trend is close to the tradition of new public management (Allegretti, 2018) and is fundamentally top-down, the second emerges at the intersection of public value theory and the concept of cooperation and can be thus inscribed under the paradigm of participatory democracy. Table 2 highlights the differences between the two macro approaches, in particular on the side of participatory dynamics. In the first case, participation is limited to the consultation of citizens, who are primarily considered customers to whom a service is provided. In the second case, citizens are called to active participation, in a bidirectional communication logic, and they themselves are above all social actors, subjects endowed with political value and political capacities. In other words, they are subjects with *democratic citizenship*, within the boundaries of a possible resolution of the antinomy between democracy and citizenship (Balibar, 2012). Furthermore, the literature on open government agrees to define it as the intersection of three variables: (1) transparency, (2) participation, and (3) collaboration (De Blasio, 2018). Each of these variables has some specific dimensions on which there is a broad and articulated literature (Margetts, 2014; Mulgan, 2014; Riddell, 2014; Teicher, Hughes & Dow, 2002; Vedel, 2006). In Table 2, we cross the three variables with the two approaches highlighted above.

**Table 2. Open Government Variables:
Comparison Between the New Public Management Approach and Participatory Logic.**

Open government variable	New public management	Participatory democracy
Transparency	Open data (efficiency)	Open data (democratic control)
	Accountability (outcome)	Horizontal accountability
	Performance measurements	Public policies monitoring Citizenship (pedagogical function and interlocution logic)
Participation	Citizen as customer	Citizen as social actor
	Feedback of the performance measure	Codecision (citizen as communicative partner)
	Forms of direct democracy (but framed in the representative institution's logic)	Forms of participatory democracy (platforms for "liquid" democracy, offline and online deliberative-participatory assemblies)
Collaboration	Consultation of citizens	Deliberative processes
	State as market (light-weight state)	State as relational "platform"
	Public-private partnership (horizontal subsidiarity)	Public-private-civic partnership (circular subsidiarity)
Digital technologies	Linear relation	Transversal relation
	Managerial model	Participatory model

It should also be noted that in the various ideas of "state" present in the two approaches to open government, digital technologies also play different roles, further demonstrating that communication is never neutral and that the adoption of an informative logic or of a dialogical perspective is not a purely terminological question. The adoption of one model of open government or another, then, is not a neutral choice but entails a greater or lesser emphasis on the power of citizens, a different consideration of deliberative talk, and a rethinking of the relationship between representation and democracy, as well as a renewed focus on the theme of power and its relationship to people's daily lives (Saward, 2000). The literature that refers to participatory instances can easily be connected with theories of digital activism and protest movements (Jasper, 2014). On the other hand, approaches close to new public management show a clearer distance from this body of literature. In this context, the conceptual difference between the quality of participation and the centrality of efficiency appears clear and perhaps unbridgeable.

Repoliticization Between Digital Activism and the Democratic Platform for Participation

Recent studies on the so-called platform party or digital party model represent meaningful elements of the complicated relationships between the research on e-democracy and that on digital activism (De Blasio & Sorice, 2018; Mosca, 2018). Placing the platform parties in the field of e-democracy is a complicated, albeit legitimate operation. The platform party develops as one of the outcomes of the crisis of intermediate bodies. Intermediate bodies are born within participative logic; however, in many cases, they are revealed as results of hyperrepresentation. In this case, the "hyperleader" creates a symbolic connection with the "superbase" (Gerbaudo, 2019), which is represented by individuals who are active in digital participation platforms. The participation evoked in this type of party is individualistic, and the emphasis is on online direct democracy, not necessarily on "discursive" or "deliberative" procedures through digital platforms. In other words, the digital party uses technology as an organizational method and as a structural architecture. At the same time, it uses digital participation platforms as mobilization tools, as spaces for policymaking (the presentation and discussion of proposals), and as decision-making places (voting on proposals and policy decisions). On the other hand, platforms have often legitimated storytelling about participation (participationism) despite the real empowerment of citizens. One mode of participationism precisely concerns the ambivalence of the platform parties: They often risk becoming tools for legitimizing the logic of hyperrepresentation. From this perspective, participation itself loses its character of collective action and ceases to be a collection of actions undertaken by citizens who seek to influence political decisions (Morlino, Berg-Schlosser, & Badie, 2018, p. 203) to reduce themselves to individual action expressed in the binary dimension of the vote.

In the last decade, the two scientific traditions have been refusing the old and simplistic idea of a presumed neutrality of digital communication. Both have recognized its capacity to influence the organizational modalities of participation and to accelerate the deconstruction of old intermediary bodies. At the same time, it seems evident that digital technologies feed the perspectives of "liquid" democracy, thus contributing both to the launching of new perspectives in e-democracy studies and to the reframing of digital activism. Ten years ago, a simplistic analysis would have given us back the idea that digital activism refers to mobilization and e-democracy has something to do with policymaking. Now, many scholars do not hesitate to combine analyses of mobilization, studies of policymaking, and even research on decision-making procedures. This hybrid approach has been made possible by the meeting of the research on digital activism and of e-democracy studies, which have converged in the common ground of the analysis of the risks and opportunities emerging from the adoption of participation platforms.

The new media ecosystem also constitutes the framework in which the increasingly overbearing centrality of the platforms develops. It is no coincidence that the expression "platform" is used as a polysemantic reference to (a) the new frontiers of digital capitalism (Srnicek, 2017) as well as the new (and sometimes disturbing) working methods coordinated by algorithms; (b) digital participation architectures, whether they are those adopted in open government procedures (De Blasio, 2018) or whether they are used as support for deliberative processes; (c) new forms of political organization, as in the case of the aforementioned digital parties; and (d) the digital reorganization of the state (platform state) in connection

or not with instances of democratic innovation. In this framework, it is entirely consistent that some scholars have resorted to the concept of the platform society to describe the way participation platforms

are gradually infiltrating in, and converging with, the (offline, legacy) institutions and practices through which democratic societies are organized. That is why we prefer the term *platform society*—a term that emphasizes the inextricable relation between online platforms and societal structures. Platforms do not reflect the social: they produce the social structures we live in. (van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018, p. 2)

The multiform concept of “platform” constitutes a meeting space between research on digital activism and e-democracy studies. It could represent a possible new frame, capable of reconnecting strands of research that have been too distant for a long time and that could, instead, acquire greater strength from a mutual collaboration on the theoretical level and on research methods.

Conclusions

The tradition of research on digital activism has its roots in the encounter among media studies, journalism studies, and research on social movements and protests. From this point of view, the perspective of Stuart Hall (2016, 2017), which used a Marxist approach to communication models and was capable of combining methods and tools from political sociology with those from media studies and social analysis of antagonistic cultures, represented a fundamental theoretical framework. Studies on e-democracy initially merged with, on the one hand, research on digital technologies and, on the other, research on public policies, in which studies on open government have existed for a long time.

Digital media studies—although initially confined as a sort of media studies colony—have over time provided a meeting point. Studies on social media and digital citizenship represent in fact a solid bridge between the literature on e-democracy and open government and research on digital activism, creating a hybrid domain of knowledge that is not always rewarded by the disciplinary logic of academic evaluation (see, e.g., Castells, 2015; Castells, Fernandez-Ardevol, Qiu, & Sey, 2009; Ceccarini, 2015; Chadwick, 2009; Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Coleman & Shane, 2012; della Porta, Fernández, Kouki, & Mosca, 2017; Fenton, 2016; Pilkington & Pollock, 2015; Robertson, 2015). The recognition of social movements and their participatory architectures as instruments of participatory democracy and, more specifically, the identification of social movements as “agents of democratic communication” (della Porta, 2013, p. 90) constitute other important factors supporting the bridging between these two fields of research. In this area, we could also frame recent works that are trying to merge big data analysis with the bottom-up instances of participation (Mattoni & Pavan, 2018). Finally, the concept of the platform, in its various uses, has become an extraordinary meeting point between initially very differentiated traditions. It then entered the frame of sociopolitical transformation (postrepresentative politics, depoliticization, and so on) and finally intersected with large overlapping research fields. In this respect, the concept of platform might represent the most effective conceptual bridge between digital activism and e-democracy studies.

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