

# Online politics for citizens in the twenty-first century

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**Abstract** This article looks at models of political representation. It examines the ways in which social network sites and a faster exchange of information have influenced political engagement in general. Moreover, it looks at how political networks run by young people are reacting to the changing environments by trying to create unique experiences.

**Keywords** Online politics · Political representation · Youth engagement · Anonymity · Improvements · SNS in politics · Student organisations · Experience

## Introduction

Politicians need to answer more questions than ever before. And more than this, they need to provide answers more rapidly, and answers need to be more comprehensive. Due to the increase in the use of social network sites (SNS) and data being exchanged faster than ever, the challenge for politicians is to live up to the new and additional requirements involved in communicating with constituents. Online politics tries to offer tools to listen to constituents better and to reach out to them through new methods.

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## Laying the groundwork

Online tools are supposed to enhance democracy and make politics more efficient and effective. The online tools help citizens and politicians alike to exchange information in the process of reaching decisions. Nonetheless, Europe has seen not more but rather less political engagement in recent years—at least within political parties. Is public deliberation feasible through online politics, and if so, how can new tools be used to pave the way?

To answer these questions, it is necessary to take a step back and define the levels of representation. Traditionally, there have been ‘two sets of competing philosophies of representation’, as Ferber et al. (2007, 391) point out: ‘The trustee... model, where representatives act in accordance with their own judgement, versus the delegate, where representatives follow the wishes of their constituents.’ The authors go on to say that legislators do not conform completely to either type. However, it seems reasonable to believe that the delegate model is becoming predominant. The way politicians carry out their work is changing as a result of new ways of exchanging information: the increased use of SNS, websites, email, Internet forums and chat rooms. In all these ways citizens are placing new demands on their representatives, and in this situation, the delegate model of representation is more appropriate.

Political representation exists for a reason. Decisions in society are delegated to governmental bodies, which then conduct a process of deliberative decision-making with the aim of reaching the best solutions. Hence, the trustee approach makes sense even in the twenty-first century. The profession of politicians can and should be understood as a profession of decision-making. Politicians need to master and become specialists in their respective portfolios. As a result of the increasing complexity of politics and society, a successful politician faces increasing pressure to be a good ‘explainer’. Political actions need to be elucidated. Politicians have to answer critical questions and provide insight into their decision-making processes and objectives, their considerations and how they have reflected on the content provided by stakeholders. The demands involved in consulting all stakeholders and providing feedback to them have risen also as a result of the increased use of SNS.

Moreover, politicians of all levels are urged to explain the objectives of top-tier political decisions, such as those made at the European level during the recent economic and financial crises. Politicians had to justify the conclusions drawn by the heads of government. With new technologies available, decisions were taken almost instantly. Coordination took place in the physical meetings of the European Council and beyond. Views and information were exchanged beforehand not only over the phone, as in the old days, but also through the Internet.

Criticism of the decisions taken to stabilise the eurozone also focuses on how those decisions were taken. While the responsiveness of politicians is referred to by some as a blessing, critics stated that the normal process, involving extensive consultation with stakeholders, was not followed. This is a crucial point since, at a European level, decisions can be more far-reaching than had they simply

reflected a national concern. Decisions are taken for a wider society, and the process is at times more complex than at a national level. However, in the case of mechanisms to save the euro, they have proven rather stable; political decisions taken in a short time matched the needs required to calm the international financial markets. From that example, it can be argued that, in times of crisis, the model tends to shift from the delegate to the trustee.

Another argument that needs to be raised with respect to the increased use of SNS is the real effects it has on politics. If a shift from the trustee to the delegate model of representation had been realised over the past years, this would have had to be supported by an increase in legislative bills arising from citizens' initiatives. However, most legislative action is still carried out on the initiative of the legislator rather than that of constituents.

### **How to succeed in political communication**

One might argue that legislation and political initiative should apply for all instances that laws need to be applicable universally and not be case dependent. This is true for the *content* of (political) messages and decisions. However, this article focuses on successful *communication* in policymaking. To do this, it is necessary to take a closer look at the different players in the political decision-making process and examine how they communicate.

A satisfactory model of intelligent and suitable discussion via the Internet that summarises, filters and classifies input has not yet been established. There is still no real sustained interactivity between legislators and citizens. Only in the run-up to elections, or for specific issues, have there been attempts to foster interactivity with citizens on a larger scale. Nonetheless, the awareness of politicians has risen, and parliaments are increasingly trying to take stock of constituents' opinions. To improve communication streams, Internet forums and diverse tools have been introduced to allow people to comment or vote. This should be done not only as part of political sites but also as part of SNS and on the sites of news organisations. However, the debate remains largely unmoderated, in part to avoid accusations of censorship.

It remains difficult both to channel the flow of information and ideas from various sources and to distinguish clearly in an exchange-based model who is sending information and who is receiving it. And there is yet another matter that remains worrisome: public discourse is not conducted in a fair way. The principles of privacy and the 'right to be forgotten' (known in the US as 'Retain your name') do not justify unmannerly behaviour. Posts and comments in political online forums often seem unconstructive. Ferber et al. (2007, 397) state: 'Almost all of the participants wrote under some sort of "screen name", with very few postings associated with what appeared to be a real name. Although this may be typical of electronic discussion, it also avoids serious ownership of one's ideas.' It has another downside: it puts politicians in a situation of having to respond to an anonymous mass of people. It is all the more difficult to address precise issues when the identity of one's counterpart is unknown. Successful communication



will always be a result of responses that are adapted to the knowledge of the recipient and his or her intention and need for information, which is more difficult when little is known about the recipient of the information.

Another overlooked item in the discussion is that a commitment to communicating politics online involves the expenditure of resources. Thorough work on social network sites and the whole stream of communication on them is not a task that can be accomplished half-heartedly. Political statements are under more severe observation than before and consequently require close attention. An individual, 'tailor-made' reply becomes almost impossible. It was only in 2015, that the German government launched its Facebook site (2015). This reveals the dedication required to set up serious political communication online. The site provides insights into the work of the government, describes its institutions and introduces initiatives. It also offers an unconventional way to get in touch with the government's communications team. Facebook sites existed much earlier for individual politicians, such as the chancellor and members of the cabinet and of political parties. And other online tools such as weekly podcasts and informative websites have been in existence for years. The launch of the government's Facebook site was meticulously planned and is staffed with a team large enough to interact with citizens and the wider public.

Citizen-government interaction will always remain limited, however, and the reiteration of arguments will be inevitable if the government intends to reply to each citizen on SNS. Hence, moderation remains crucial, especially to ensure that key stakeholders and decision-makers receive a comprehensive overview of the concerns and issues raised by citizens. The moderation process is not easy because it will inevitably involve judgements about which comments should be deleted and why. There is a thin line between eliminating a comment that might contain insults, and censoring content and infringing on the right to speak one's mind.

It remains for society as a whole and for politicians in particular to improve the way decisions are made. There is a gap between the everyday lives of citizens and politics, and efforts to strengthen online communication are only one way to fill this gap in connecting the two. Another way is to re-address grass-roots initiatives and to reach out to citizens in new ways that stretch beyond SNS. The German government's Facebook site aims at what has been described as the need to explain politics. Other governments have also taken steps to move away from the image that politics is only dealt with behind closed doors. Some have reintroduced town hall meetings to create political gatherings that make it possible for citizens to get in touch with politicians on a personal level.

In fact, the need to shape encounters is just as important as the need to point out that a single voice can be important, even in the vast field of politics. This is emphasised by Bauerlein (2008) and in Jacoby's findings (2008). Both authors contend that, despite increased budgets and government investment in 'democratic' information technology, young Americans are increasingly unaware of current issues and disengaged from civic involvement. The same holds for Europe. In some parts of Europe, political youth organisations are struggling to

attract members. It would appear that the younger generation is not prepared to make the commitment entailed in joining a political group—as opposed to supporting a specific, time-limited cause. It seems untrendy to stick to one organisation when society is constantly changing and posing new challenges. Institutions that try to provide more holistic approaches and solutions to societal challenges will eventually take a decision or adopt a position that is unpopular and does not reflect the mainstream consensus. Since these institutions are and will always be run by people, over time they will all make mistakes and reveal imperfections. Recent political consulting takes the approach that the success of political parties lies in having the flexibility to change their views and political discourse. This approach also admits that, at some point, validated positions will conflict with current challenges and the party will have to develop a new position. The larger the entity or institution, the longer the repositioning process. During that time, the entity or institution will be in the line of fire. People do not like to take the fall for decisions and views that a previous generation has made and that time has proven wrong or outdated. Consequently, there is a reluctance to join parties because they will have made faulty decisions at one point or another. And this reluctance is only made greater by the fact that parties carry the weight of decisions that can affect the whole of society.

The use of SNS can be one way for citizens to express their concern about a particular issue. The European level is particularly emphasised since more and more decisions are being taken at a European or multinational level. The transnational decision-making bodies are larger than their nation-level counterparts and have more stakeholders. This makes it even more critical to point out the relevance of the individual in the decision-making process.

### **Student organisations creating unique experiences**

European Democrat Students (EDS), the official student organisation of the European People's Party, operates on a European level. Its approach is not only to encourage the use of the social networking sites, Twitter and Instagram but also to reach beyond their conventional means of conducting political conferences and discussions on a multinational level. EDS tries to combine the requirements of both the trustee and the delegate model. It has been responding with more and more timely statements aimed at stressing particular issues that it believes are not covered sufficiently in the media. More importantly, however, it has created new formats of activities and events which focus on the individual and the exchange of best practices. The goal is to educate young people to become experts in particular areas so that they can help society develop. Peer leaders are chosen to participate in the events, where they can gain insights and develop a more comprehensive overview of particular concerns. The main conclusions are then summarised in statements that are communicated not only to the political leadership but also through SNS. By using this approach, the impact is substantially broadened: results find a much



bigger audience and the involved peers spread it to further stakeholders and citizens that otherwise would not be affected by policy-making. The communication of the results and the outcomes also becomes easier. By sharing their experiences on SNS, the young peer leaders communicate politics towards friends and family.

EDS closes the gap between politics and society by engaging with both. In each event, a campaign works at drawing in citizens as a way to practice outreach. Additionally, internal reporting structures have been changed. The internal reports focus on outreach and attempts that have been undertaken to broaden the network and enhance the experience before other agenda items are dealt with.

Above all, personal experience is the decisive part in the changes introduced in recent years within the organisation. During the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine, young European politicians took part in a mission to Kyiv to look into the developments at the Maidan. They met with think tanks, governmental institutions and non-governmental organisations. However, it was the experience of the Maidan itself that had an impact on the work of the young politicians and their respective home organisations from all over Europe.

Similar experiences occurred during regional study trips. A good example is the trip through the Western Balkans, during which EDS focused on immigration and corruption in education. It helped the young politicians gain insights into the situation in the region. It enabled them to detect shortcomings there, but more importantly, it enabled them to discover similarities in the challenges faced by the entire European community.

These experiences are mirrored back into online politics but through a personalised lens. The experiences are shared extensively on SNS and through other communication tools. In today's societies, it remains relevant to point out the importance of (political) action and the involvement of the individual. In that regard, EDS was able to make a substantial contribution and set examples of how politics can be communicated.

## Conclusion

The main question remains to be answered: how can interest triggered by the quick sharing of information lead to real action and interaction? Democratic participation remains key for political decision-making. Structures in decision-making become more complex in order to allow for more stakeholders to be involved and heard. However, the lack of knowledge persists of what government is and how it works. It remains difficult to explain these mechanisms and objectives in the 140 characters that are allowed on Twitter. And how is one to communicate complex ideas when only a few moments' attention is given to single posts on SNS?

Therefore, consideration has to be made to develop accepted means through which citizens can begin to interact to support democracy and strengthen our societies.

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