

Glossary of Digital Politics and Society

Edited by
Michał Jacuński, Marco Lisi, and Elżbieta Szulc-Wałecka

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Introduction

The rapid intersection of digital technology and political life has fundamentally transformed the functioning of democracies. In contemporary society, there is an increasing tendency for political organisations, public administrations, civic society organisations, and citizens themselves to operate within an environment in which traditional frameworks of communication, participation, mobilisation, representation, and governance are being continuously reshaped by technological innovations and constant modernisation. Electoral campaigns are now inextricably linked to data infrastructures, civic participation is mediated through digital platforms, and algorithmic systems increasingly influence access to information, political visibility, and public deliberation. Thus, digitalization has redefined not only political systems, but also the very relationship between the state and society.

The *Glossary of Digital Politics and Society* draws on a substantial and expanding body of research on digital democracy, digital governance, and the digitalization of politics, while aiming to address areas where further conceptual integration could be valuable. Important contributions to our understanding of the communication, participation, and institutional dimensions of digital transformation have been made by early works related to "internet politics" (Chadwick & Howard, 2008) or "internet technologies" (Vaccari, 2013) and more recent handbooks and edited collections (Coleman & Freelon, 2015; Coleman & Sørensen, 2023). However, the rapid evolution of technological environments and political practices has also generated new concepts, relationships, and research domains that continue to reshape the field. Many existing publications, including works such as Dutton (2020), offer valuable insights into

emerging research directions and future challenges. However, their primary objective is often to identify new avenues of inquiry rather than to offer a comprehensive conceptual framework that systematically relates the diverse terminology of digital politics and society. Similarly, encyclopaedic collections, such as Cerón (2022), offer accessible and comprehensive overviews of a wide range of key concepts. However, their format restricts the development of an integrated structure that interconnects themes.

Monographs and publishing series, including *Oxford Studies in Digital Politics* and Springer's *Studies in Digital Politics and Governance*, have substantially advanced our understanding of specific phenomena, actors, and technological developments. Nevertheless, the increasing specialization of the field means that key concepts are often examined within separate disciplinary or thematic contexts, making it more difficult to trace their interconnections and evolving meanings across the broader landscape of digital politics and society.

Against this background, the *Glossary of Digital Politics and Society* aims to complement existing scholarship by providing a coherent and accessible reference point. It aims to clarify terminology, highlight relationships among key concepts, and support a more integrated understanding of the political, social, communicative, and governance dimensions of digital transformation.

This phenomenon is also evident in the remarkable rate at which digital technologies are transforming not only political systems but also scholarly vocabularies. The accelerated growth of generative artificial intelligence, algorithmic moderation, platform governance, predictive analytics, and data-driven campaigning has led to a transformation in both the practices of politics and the conceptual vocabularies employed within the discipline—a transformation that has not been matched by earlier reference works.

Rather than presenting static or definitive definitions, the *Glossary of Digital Politics and Society* seeks to provide concise, yet critically grounded, conceptual reference points that map key ideas, explain their intellectual origins, and situate them within broader debates surrounding democracy and technological change. The glossary is intended to serve two purposes: firstly, as an introductory guide for readers entering the field; and secondly, as a specialized resource for advanced scholars seeking conceptual coherence across disciplinary boundaries.

The entries included in the glossary reflect the dual-track reality of modern digital politics. On the one hand, there is the unprecedented potential for permanent campaigning and connectivity, for democratic innovation and civic empowerment. On the other hand, there is the emergence of systemic vulnerabilities, inequalities and divides, and new forms of political control leading to the overuse of technology. The volume is organized around several interconnected thematic pillars that focus primarily on the political dimension of contemporary digital politics and civic society. Nevertheless, some entries remain closer to general social, educational, or technological debates, concerning the role of AI, blockchain technology, etc.

Firstly, at the foundational level, this collection provides a comprehensive overview of changes in the process of governing that shape contemporary political and citizens' behaviour, thereby demystifying automated power and data management towards a more citizen-centred approach. Contrary to the instrumental approach (Bannen, 2018) of regarding technologies as politically neutral instruments, the contributions in this volume investigate the active role of algorithms, data infrastructures, and automated systems in the organization of political visibility, participation, and governance. This is particularly pertinent in the context of the growing influence of algorithmic systems in democratic processes. Entries on algorithmic governance and algorithmic bias explore how systematic distortions embedded in automated decision-making systems may generate discriminatory or inequitable outcomes, thereby reshaping public administration, political legitimacy, and civic trust. Discussions pertaining to this subject are closely related to those on algorithmic censorship.

The glossary also refers to rudimentary issues, including entries that allow for a deeper understanding of digital transformation within the state, strengthening a new digital governance approach with a more citizen-centric focus, and redefining the nature of civic participation. At the same time, these developments raise major challenges at the global level, especially with the growing use of artificial intelligence, which is increasing demands for clearer regulation, stronger democratic safeguards, and more effective accountability mechanisms. This new wave of technological progress has also significantly altered power relations, with important implications for state sovereignty and for the capacity of public authorities to retain control over strategic infrastructures, information flows, and decision-making processes.

The glossary also explores the emergence of data-driven political dynamics. Concepts such as data-driven campaigns (DDC) and data-driven microtargeting examine how political actors increasingly rely on large-scale data analytics to design highly personalized electoral strategies. These developments have transformed the relationship between political communication, behavioural prediction, and democratic accountability.

Secondly, a central concern is the uneven and asymmetrical nature of digital transformation. Whilst e-government and e-governance systems hold the potential to enhance accessibility and efficiency by offering new digital tools in response to digital transformation, there is a concomitant risk of exacerbating existing forms of social exclusion and democratic inequality. Such exclusions risk creating an "inequality loop" in which social and digital marginalization reinforce one another. Further entries delve into the examination of targeted vulnerabilities that have a particular impact on specific demographic and social groups. These include the underrepresentation of minorities within AI systems, the spread of online disinformation, and the circulation of digitally mediated hate speech, aimed at undermining institutional trust and democratic cohesion. Concurrently, the glossary explores potential re-linkage practices through

which political institutions, civic and social intermediaries, and public administrations may employ inclusive, transparent, and privacy-respecting digital tools to reconnect with politically marginalized or digitally excluded citizens. In this particular context, the glossary explains such terms as digital activism, digital empowerment, digital engagement, digital inclusion, public consultations, political crowdsourcing, and Urban Participatory Innovation (UPI).

Thirdly, in parallel with the risks associated with digitalization, the glossary also documents the emergence of new forms of civic participation, decentralized governance, and the transformation of political organisations, such as political parties. Entries dedicated to different forms of civic participation provide a broad overview of their transformations from political, more election-focused, to more direct, innovative and digital ones. The entries also provide a reference for understanding the relationship between civic engagement and the empowerment process. While also focused on collective intelligence, the glossary examines how digitally networked groups develop shared capacities for problem-solving, learning, and political coordination through horizontal communication structures. Other concepts address the democratic implications of distributed ledger technologies, such as blockchain, as well as organizational models, including cybercratic centralism. These concepts challenge or transform traditional understandings of political representation, party organisation, and state-provided digital services.

Last but not least, the competencies that enable citizens to navigate digital environments critically and effectively are described, bringing together terms of digital literacy and media and information literacy. These competencies facilitate engagement with e-government and e-governance systems, which use digital technologies to deliver public services and support governance processes. Within the democratic sphere, digital democracy encompasses the broader transformation of democratic practices through digital technologies, while e-democracy refers to specific digital mechanisms supporting democratic decision-making.

Collectively, these entries illustrate that digital politics cannot be reduced to either technological optimism or technological pessimism. Instead, the field is characterized by ongoing tensions between innovation and resistance, participation and exclusion, decentralization and surveillance, transparency and manipulation.

The development of the glossary was the result of a rigorous, collaborative, and coordinated effort. In order to ensure both conceptual comprehensiveness and practical academic utility, the selection of terms combined two complementary methodological pathways. Firstly, a top-down identification process was employed, with a focus on foundational concepts already recognized across a range of disciplines, including political science, sociology, communication, and media studies. Secondly, a bottom-up synthesis incorporated direct feedback, emerging case studies, and evolving terminology contributed by researchers from numerous European countries.

Each entry included in the glossary underwent an internal peer-review process with the objective of ensuring conceptual coherence, terminological consistency, and contextual precision. The entries are not intended to function as isolated dictionary definitions. Instead, they serve as dynamic conceptual anchors, designed to facilitate comparative analysis, interdisciplinary dialogue, and mixed-method empirical research into the democratic consequences of digital transformation.

Entries are accompanied by a list of additional references and sources, with the aim of encouraging further study of the topic. At the same time, each entry includes the broader context of a given concept and its relevance to understanding digitalization. It therefore discusses the significance of the term in academic, policy, and social debates. To ensure consistency and analytical rigour across entries, contributors were provided with a standardized template for the elaboration of each definition. The template comprises two main components. The first is a concise definition of the term, aimed at capturing its core meaning in a clear and accessible manner. The second is a contextualization section, in which authors were invited to examine the main debates and controversies surrounding the concept, trace its evolution in the literature, discuss its empirical applications, and reflect on its relevance and academic usefulness. Each entry is complemented by a list of key references, allowing readers to engage further with the existing literature on the concept.

It was not possible, nor was it the aim of this glossary, to provide an exhaustive map of all the conceptual terms associated with the digitalization of politics. The field is too broad, fast-changing, and internally heterogeneous for any single collection to claim full coverage. Instead, two criteria guided the selection of entries. The first was relevance: priority was given to concepts that are central to understanding the main political, institutional, and organizational transformations associated with digitalization. The second was contestation or ambiguity: particular attention was paid to terms that are used inconsistently, debated across disciplines, or vulnerable to conceptual stretching. The glossary is therefore intended as an analytical tool to clarify the most important and contested concepts in the field, rather than as an exhaustive inventory, and it should be read as a selective and evolving contribution to an area of research that continues to develop rapidly.

The glossary is indicative of the inherently interdisciplinary character of digital politics research. This plurality is both a strength and a challenge. While it enables richer analyses of complex technological phenomena from a non-engineer's perspective, it also generates conceptual ambiguity and fragmentation. The editors are aware that the glossary presents a less technical overview of digital infrastructures, using more social science-related terms relevant to social, organizational, and institutional transformations driven by digitalization. The glossary has been developed to facilitate conceptual interoperability across different disciplines, whilst retaining analytical detail. To this end, contributors from a variety of intellectual traditions have been brought together.

This publication endeavour was undertaken within the framework of the COST Action RELINK² (CA23114): *Regaining Linkage? Digital Technologies Improving Civic Engagement, Political Organisations, and Democracy* (see: relink2.eu). It is a product of a collaborative, international effort to strengthen the conceptual clarity and foundations in the study of digital politics. The glossary was authored by 38 contributors from a wide range of different disciplinary, institutional, and national backgrounds, participating in RELINK². The project, which was initiated in 2024, is ongoing. Funded by the European Union, it offers opportunities for the publication of academic work with open access. Therefore, this volume is freely accessible and disseminated.

At the time of publishing, the glossary includes 83 entries, with further concepts and definitions planned as part of the project's ongoing development. This collaborative structure reflects one of the glossary's central ambitions: to establish conceptual clarity, standardize terminology across diverse European contexts, and foster interdisciplinary dialogue among researchers, students, policymakers, journalists, civil society actors, and practitioners. *Glossary of Digital Politics and Society* is driven by a broader democratic concern of its editors and co-authors. As digital technologies become increasingly embedded within political institutions and everyday civic life, conceptual clarity becomes essential not only for academic analysis, but also for democratic accountability and informed public debate.

Finally, the editors would like to express their gratitude to all the contributors and the reviewer, as well as to Wrocław University Press, for their enthusiasm, constant support, and dedication in preparing and producing this publication.

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GLOSSARY OF DIGITAL POLITICS AND SOCIETY

AI-Enabled Analytics

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Definition

AI-enabled analytics refers to the use of artificial intelligence (AI) techniques—such as machine learning, natural language processing, and computer vision—to analyse large and complex datasets. These systems go beyond traditional data analysis by identifying patterns, generating predictions, and offering insights without explicit human programming. AI-enabled analytics are increasingly utilized across various domains to inform decision-making, automate tasks, and enhance performance.

Context

In the age of digitalization, AI-enabled analytics has transformed how organizations process information and make strategic decisions. From political campaigns using voter sentiment analysis to platforms personalizing content in real-time, AI systems allow for unprecedented scale and speed in data interpretation.

These technologies are widely used in predictive policing, automated content moderation, targeted advertising, and policy forecasting, often operating invisibly in the background of digital infrastructures. As Louise Amoore (2019) and N. Katherine Hayles (2025) highlight, such analytics are not neutral tools—they embody assumptions, priorities, and historical datasets that shape their outputs.

Concerns around algorithmic bias, transparency, and accountability are central to debates about AI-enabled analytics. As shown in cases like facial recognition failures or biased risk assessment tools in criminal justice, flawed training data or design choices can produce harmful outcomes, especially for marginalized communities.

Moreover, the datafication process underlying AI analytics raises critical methodological questions. What is considered valuable data? Who defines success? These tools often prioritize efficiency over contextual understanding, potentially narrowing democratic deliberation and reinforcing technocratic governance.

Despite these challenges, AI-enabled analytics are also being harnessed for social good—supporting public health, climate monitoring, and humanitarian response efforts. The key tension lies in who controls these systems, how they are designed, and for whose benefit they are deployed.

Related Concepts: algorithm; algorithmic censorship; artificial intelligence act; data-driven micro-targeting; digital democracy; e-governance; e-government; platform politics

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Algorithm

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Definition

An algorithm is a set of step-by-step instructions or rules designed to perform a specific task or solve a problem. In digital contexts, algorithms operate as computational processes that drive everything from search engines and social media platforms to decision-making systems and artificial intelligence. While traditionally perceived as neutral and objective, algorithms are increasingly recognized as social and political constructs with significant implications for power, bias, and governance.

Context

Algorithms are foundational to the infrastructure of digital societies, mediating how information is filtered, prioritized, and acted upon (Cheney-Lippold, 2018). They play a crucial role in personalization, recommendation systems, surveillance, automated decision-making, and predictive analytics. However, as they increasingly determine visibility, opportunity, and even freedom, critical scholarship has questioned their neutrality and transparency (Pasquale, 2015; Noble, 2018).

Cases like Twitter's image-cropping controversy—where the algorithm favoured certain races and genders—highlight concerns about algorithmic bias, a recurring theme in public discourse and scholarly research (Crawford, 2021). Some researchers argue that, under the GDPR, algorithmic enforcement is now recognized in law as "automated decision-making" with significant impacts on individuals (Frosio, 2019). Researchers such as Sasha Costanza-Chock and the Algorithmic Justice League advocate for understanding algorithms in their sociotechnical context, emphasizing that harm often accumulates across marginalized groups (Tsamados et al., 2022).

Moreover, thinkers like N. Katherine Hayles and Louise Amoore conceptualize algorithms not merely as code but as agents within a technogenesis—a co-evolution of human cognition and computation (Amoore, 2019). From high-frequency trading

to sentencing algorithms, they operate within complex and often opaque ecosystems of interaction, making them difficult to audit (Pasquale, 2015; Eubanks, 2018). This has led to calls for accountability frameworks and new methods, such as bias bounty programs, like the one Twitter initiated to scrutinize its algorithm (Gillespie, 2018).

In essence, algorithms are both technical tools and sociopolitical actors (Kalpokas, 2019), raising urgent questions of ethics, regulation, and methodology. Within the framework of the RELINK^2 project, algorithms are central to understanding how digitalization reshapes political organizations and their interactions with citizens. Algorithms structure visibility, participation, and communication within digital platforms, thereby influencing who gets heard and represented in political processes (Klinger & Svensson, 2018). The project's focus on secure and inclusive digital transformations makes algorithmic governance a key concern: biased or opaque algorithms can reproduce digital and political marginalization (Eubanks, 2018), while transparent and accountable algorithmic systems can foster participation and trust. Examining how algorithms mediate access to political information, regulate online debates, or personalize campaign content directly supports the RELINK^2 project's broader aim of promoting fairness, inclusivity, and evidence-based policy-making in the digitalization of European political life.

Related Concepts: AI-enabled analytics; datafication; e-democracy; e-governance; e-government; fluid representation; liquid democracy; platform politics

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Algorithmic Bias

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Definition

Algorithmic bias refers to systematic errors or distortions embedded in automated decision-making systems that produce discriminatory or inequitable outcomes. These biases are not merely technical malfunctions, but structural manifestations rooted in the data used to train algorithms and the sociocultural assumptions encoded in their design. Rather than operating as neutral tools, algorithmic systems tend to reproduce and amplify pre-existing social inequalities—related to gender, age, geographic origin, or cultural capital—affecting domains such as candidate selection, deliberation processes, and political representation within organizations and institutions.

Context

Algorithmic bias has emerged as a critical concern in scholarly and policy debates surrounding the digitalization of democratic institutions, and particularly the internal governance of political parties. As parties increasingly adopt automated tools for candidate selection, membership engagement, and deliberation, the risk of embedding and amplifying structural inequalities through algorithmic design becomes a pressing analytical and normative challenge.

In the domain of candidate selection, predictive algorithms trained on historical data tend to reproduce patterns of political success that reflect past distributions of power rather than normatively desirable criteria of representation. This dynamic aligns with what scholars have termed "statistical discrimination": the use of group-level proxies—gender, age, geographic origin, or educational background—as predictors of individual suitability, producing outcomes that systematically disadvantage members of underrepresented groups (Eubanks, 2018). The apparent neutrality of data-driven optimization obscures the normative choices embedded in the design of these systems, naturalizing exclusionary criteria as if they were objective.

In deliberative settings, the deployment of natural language processing (NLP) and sentiment analysis tools introduces additional layers of bias. As Bender et al. (2021) have extensively documented, large language models encode the sociocultural assumptions and power asymmetries present in their training corpora, rendering them far from neutral interpreters of political discourse. When such tools are used to aggregate or evaluate membership preferences, discursive registers that deviate from dominant political idioms—whether due to class, ethnicity, regional identity, or ideological heterodoxy—risk being systematically misread or devalued. This produces what Noble (2018) has described as "algorithmic oppression": the reinforcement of social hierarchies through ostensibly technical systems.

The political consequences of these dynamics are compounding. Drawing on feedback loop theory, scholars have demonstrated that when digital systems consistently render certain voices invisible, affected members progressively disengage from participatory platforms (O'Neil, 2016). This behavioural withdrawal generates datasets that are even less representative of marginalized groups, reinforcing the underlying bias in subsequent algorithmic iterations. The result is a self-reinforcing cycle of exclusion that undermines the pluralist foundations of intra-party democracy, narrowing the range of perspectives that shape collective decision-making and concentrating effective political agency among those whose profiles and discursive practices already align with algorithmic defaults.

Related Concepts: algorithm; algorithmic censorship; cybercratic centralism; digital activism; digital engagement; digital exclusion; digital governance; digital party; intra-party democracy; political participation.

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Algorithmic Censorship

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Definition

Algorithmic censorship refers to the automated regulation, suppression, or downranking of digital content through algorithmic systems, often without direct human intervention or transparent oversight (e.g., Cobbe, 2021; Master & Garman, 2023). It includes both explicit actions—such as content removal or shadowbanning—and more subtle mechanisms like filtering, decontextualization, or content dilution through distraction and overload (Chayka, 2024). Algorithmic censorship operates across public and private domains: publicly, it governs collective visibility and discourse through platform moderation and policy enforcement; privately, it shapes individual experiences of expression and self-censorship through personalization and recommendation systems. Beyond enforcing community standards or policies, it has a *performative role* in shaping public discourse: by determining what is visible, prioritized, or silenced, it constructs hierarchies of attention and legitimacy. In this sense, it reflects political, commercial, and ideological logics embedded in algorithmic infrastructures and redefines the conditions of freedom of expression, access to information, and digital participation.

Context

In contemporary digital environments shaped by algorithmic personalization and platform logics, algorithmic censorship has emerged as a central mechanism for regulating visibility, shaping discourse, and structuring access to information. Unlike conventional, state-driven censorship associated with authoritarian regimes and exercised through bans or legal prohibitions, algorithmic censorship operates more subtly and systemically, embedded within the infrastructures of social media platforms and search engines (Dai & Nisbet, 2022; Pomerantsev, 2019). In liberal democracies, this form of control simultaneously serves content-regulatory and commercial goals, as algorithms prioritize engagement, profit, and attention rather than pluralism or deliberation (e.g.,

Mohydin, 2023; Simon & Mahoney, 2022). The boundary between state and market governance has thus become increasingly blurred.

Algorithmic censorship is frequently presented as a neutral and objective alternative to human moderation, yet this assumption is fundamentally problematic. The premise that algorithms are apolitical and that moderation outcomes are merely meritocratic conceals the extent to which natural language processing systems are trained predominantly on Anglophone corpora, producing systematic performance losses and disproportionate suppression of content in low-resource languages and non-Western political contexts (Joseph et al., 2025). This veneer of neutrality is compounded by a structural lack of transparency: algorithmic moderation systems remain opaque, largely unaccountable, and poorly understood even by the platforms that deploy them, raising the risk that automation will decrease decisional transparency in a domain of content governance that was already notoriously difficult to audit (Gorwa et al., 2020). The combination of perceived objectivity and actual opacity is particularly consequential for political speech, as it allows platforms to depoliticize and obscure the value-laden choices embedded in moderation rules while presenting their outcomes as the neutral product of technical systems rather than contestable political decisions.

Algorithmic censorship is not experienced uniformly. It is closely tied to the construction of digital identities, value-driven filter bubbles, and user participation in shaping their own information silos. Through biased data sets and software design, algorithmic systems may reinforce stereotypes and marginalize certain voices, normalizing structural inequalities under the guise of neutrality. Censorship, in this context, functions less through explicit prohibition than through algorithmically conditioned visibility, decontextualization, and information overload.

At the same time, users are not passive. Responses to algorithmic censorship include forms of self-censorship, as individuals internalize the logic of platforms and adjust their expression to algorithmic expectations. Conversely, proactive resistance emerges in creative adaptations such as *algospeak*—coded linguistic practices designed to evade automated moderation and preserve critical discourse. Recognizing algorithmic censorship as both a communicative and epistemological phenomenon therefore enables a deeper understanding of how digital infrastructures govern what can be seen, shared, and known, and how users negotiate these constraints through acts of compliance and resistance.

Related Concepts: algorithm; algorithmic bias; digital dementia; digital divide; digital engagement; digital empowerment; digital protest; digital state; platform politics; political discourse

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Artificial Intelligence Act

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Definition

The Artificial Intelligence Act (AI Act), adopted in 2024, establishes the first horizontal and comprehensive framework for the regulation of AI systems in the European Union (EU). It applies to providers placing AI systems or general-purpose AI models on the market or putting them into service in the EU, irrespective of whether they are established within the EU or in a third country, as well as to deployers of AI systems that are established or located in the EU (Article 2(1) AI Act).

The AI Act adopts a risk-based regulatory approach, under which obligations are graduated according to the level of risk associated with the AI system. Stricter rules apply to high-risk AI systems, including systems intended to be used as safety components of products, or systems that are themselves products, covered by EU harmonization legislation and subject to third-party conformity assessment, as well as systems listed in Annex III of the Regulation (Article 6(1)(a), (b), and (2) AI Act). The classification of an AI system as high risk reflects its potential to adversely affect human health or safety or to jeopardize fundamental rights (Madiega, 2024).

Context

With the approval and implementation of the AI Act, the EU legislator explicitly recognized that certain AI systems, depending on their specific application, context of use, and level of technological development, may generate risks and cause harm to public interests and fundamental rights protected by EU law.

Notably, the AI Act does not directly regulate political participation or democratic processes. Instead, it establishes a legal framework for assessing and mitigating risks arising from the deployment of AI systems, in particular those that qualify as high-risk. This is the case, for example, where AI systems are used by public authorities or in areas closely connected to public governance, such as biometric identification, access to public

services, recruitment and selection procedures, or decision-making processes that may affect individuals' legal status or opportunities.

In this context, the AI Act contributes to the broader governance of the digital technologies that shape the conditions under which politically and socially relevant activities take place in increasingly digitalized environments. It does so by subjecting such uses to stricter regulatory requirements, including *ex ante* conformity assessments (which also serve as a precondition for access to the EU market), human oversight obligations, and ongoing monitoring.

Related concepts: AI-enabled analytics; algorithm; collective intelligence; digital governance; e-democracy; e-government; recommender systems

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Blockchain

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Definition

Blockchain is a decentralized, distributed digital ledger technology that records transactions across multiple computers in a way that ensures the data cannot be retroactively altered. Originally designed for cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin, blockchain has since been adapted to numerous other domains where secure, transparent, and tamper-resistant record-keeping is valued, including voting systems, smart contracts, and supply chain management.

Context

Blockchain emerged as a radical response to issues of trust and centralization in digital infrastructures. By enabling trustless verification—where participants do not need to trust a central authority—blockchain has been championed as a tool for democratic empowerment and transparency (Atzori, 2015; Tapscott & Tapscott, 2016). Its underlying architecture ensures data immutability and distributed consensus, features that have captured interest across political, financial, and technological fields (De Filippi & Wright, 2018).

Blockchain emerged in the late 2000s as a technical solution to enable decentralized, peer-to-peer transactions without trusted intermediaries. Initially developed to support cryptocurrencies (most notably Bitcoin), it functioned as a distributed ledger secured through cryptographic mechanisms and collective verification (Dodd, 2017). In its early phase, blockchain was closely associated with monetary innovation, cryptography, and critiques of centralized financial and institutional authority (Golumbia, 2015).

In the context of digitalization, blockchain technologies intersect with governance, identity verification, and new models of political participation. Advocates tout applications such as blockchain voting as solutions to electoral fraud and exclusion (Atzori, 2015). Others, however, critique blockchain's association with techno-solutionism,

high energy consumption (especially with proof-of-work systems), and libertarian ideologies that may sidestep broader questions of equity and accountability (Golumbia, 2015; De Filippi, 2019). Moreover, the use of blockchain in smart contracts—self-executing agreements with coded terms—raises issues around algorithmic enforcement and legal responsibility (De Filippi & Wright, 2018). While blockchain can decentralize control, it can also obscure accountability, reinforcing what some scholars term "code as law" (Lessig, 1999; Introna, 2011).

In the late 2010s and early 2020s, blockchain entered a phase of institutionalization and diversification. Governments, corporations, and international organizations experimented with permissioned blockchains, while new use cases emerged in areas such as supply-chain management, digital identity, voting, cultural production (e.g., NFTs), and decentralized finance (DeFi) (Tapscott & Tapscott, 2016). At the same time, debates intensified around scalability, environmental impact, regulation, and power concentration.

More recently, the evolution of blockchain has been shaped by Web 3.0 narratives, emphasizing decentralization, user sovereignty, and new forms of digital governance. This phase has been marked by both heightened expectations and growing scepticism, as practical limitations, regulatory interventions, and market volatility have tempered earlier techno-utopian claims.

Academic debates increasingly scrutinize the mythologies surrounding blockchain: Is it truly empowering the many, or re-centralizing control through complex technical knowledge and unequal access (Vidan & Lehdonvirta, 2019)? These tensions make blockchain a crucial site for investigating the promises and perils of digital transformation.

Related Concepts: algorithm; cyber security; digital sovereignty; digital transformation; e-democracy; e-governance; platform politics; zero-proof knowledge

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Cheapfakes

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Definition

Cheapfakes are manipulated media content, produced by low-tech, low-cost, or non-algorithmic methods, including cropping, slowed or accelerated video, recontextualization, selective editing, mislabelling, or false subtitles. These manipulations are carried out using free programmes, which is why the phrases "cheap" and "fake" are used. Contrary to deepfakes, which are AI-generated, cheapfakes are made with simple tools and do not require any technical skills. Despite their relative simplicity, cheapfakes may be very deceptive. They use shortcuts in perception, platforms dynamics, and preexisting political or social conflicts to misrepresent meaning, create events, or manipulate popular opinion. Cheapfakes have become so popular because they are simple to generate, quick to produce, and cheap to disseminate at scale, making them a ubiquitous form of low-effort visual and audiovisual misinformation in the modern digital ecosystem.

Context

Cheapfakes have become a significant type of content in the broader context of mis- and disinformation, particularly with increased interest in more sophisticated tools of synthetic media such as deepfakes. Although deepfakes are highly problematic, research and policy reports indicate that most of the manipulated media encountered on online platforms today are cheapfakes (Gërguri, 2025). They are not based on technological advances but on strategic editing and distortion of context, which is not new in the field of political propaganda, but which now proliferates quickly via digital platforms.

Their applicability to digitalization lies in their ability to take advantage of the velocity, volume, and interactivity of online communication. Cheapfakes achieve misleading impressions by capitalizing on the affordances of social media, such as short video formats, engagement-based algorithms, and highly polarized interpretative communities. The main forms of cheapfakes are: intervention in the context of an image;

intervention in the context of a video; video acceleration; and slowing down a video (Gërguri, 2025). Such manipulations tend to produce a powerful emotional response, and this virality further enhances biases and strengthens existing prejudices.

Cheapfakes can undermine public discourse or lead to misunderstandings, mistakes, and the spread of false narratives, among other repercussions on society. Cheapfakes and other visual deception may appear convincing (Weikmann & Lecheler, 2023); therefore, they can be used to influence public opinion on significant topics, especially in political situations (Schick, 2020). They can also be used to libel or blackmail people (Paris & Donovan, 2020).

Related Concepts: deepfakes; digital literacy; media and information literacy; online disinformation

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Civic Participation

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Definition

Civic participation refers to the ways in which citizens actively engage in public life, community affairs, and the processes of governance. It results from the right to participate and to take part in specific initiatives, activities, and/or decision-making processes. The aim of civic participation is involvement in civic and political processes through formal and informal participatory tools. This includes voting in elections, volunteering, attending public meetings, participating in protests, or being a member of community organizations. The core of this concept is a bottom-up approach, driven by citizens and dependent on their willingness to be part of public life. This process can be organised by both public authorities and citizens themselves. There are different ladders of civic participation, depending on citizens' interest and presence in civic or community activities. Civic participation is often characterized as short-term, event-based, or issue-specific. As a theoretical concept, it occupies a central place in democratic theory, informing our understanding of the relationship between citizens and governance.

Context

Civic participation refers to the various ways in which citizens engage in public decision-making processes. Traditionally, the core is a representative democracy, where an elected body acts on behalf of citizens. However, since the late 20th century, the concept of representation has evolved significantly under the influence of governance (Bevir, 2011; Levi-Faur, 2012). This evolution reflects a shift from the formal electoral mandate towards participatory and deliberative forms of engagement (Urbinati & Warren, 2008; Fischer, 2008), commonly described as a shift from traditional government to governance (Bevir, 2011). In this approach, representation no longer suffices to legitimize authority; legitimacy increasingly depends on the active involvement of

citizens in shaping public decisions. Moreover, digitalization has intensified this transformation. Digital technologies, such as participatory platforms, e-consultations, and online deliberation tools, allow citizens to contribute to policy design and public service delivery in real time (x). Consequently, local governments, particularly in large cities, have expanded tools for civic participation, introducing participatory budgeting, local initiatives, or citizens' panels, which institutionalize participatory decision-making.

In contemporary academic and policy debates, civic participation is viewed both as a response to the crisis of representative democracy and as a practical method for addressing complex problems of public governance (Carstensen, Sørensen & Torfing, 2022). As a result, public authorities are expected to respond quickly and effectively and to adapt to a dynamically changing reality, including the search for strategies that improve both governance processes and institutional performance. In this sense, civic participation becomes a cornerstone of modern democratic governance, digitally mediated, collaborative, and adaptive to turbulent societal contexts.

Within the RELINK^2 Cost Action, the concept of civic participation holds key importance. The project examines changing patterns of citizen engagement in public life, with particular attention to marginalized groups such as the elderly and young people. It also explores the participation of political organizations and their communication with citizens in the context of digital transformation. RELINK investigates how digital tools influence civic and political participation, focusing on: a) the impact of digitalization and the emergence of new forms of mobilization; b) how the digitalization of political organizations affects the engagement of members, supporters, and citizens at large; and c) the types and affordances of digital participatory tools, the profiles of citizens participating online, and their attitudes towards new digital opportunities.

Related Concepts: digital exclusion; digital inclusion; digital empowerment; digital engagement; participation; public consultation

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Collective Intelligence

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Definition

Collective intelligence is the aggregated capacity of a group to think, learn, and solve problems through interaction. It emerges when diverse individuals or agents coordinate via deliberation, division of labour, or aggregation of independent inputs (Woolley et al., 2010). Digital platforms and crowdsourcing tools can scaffold these processes by organizing contributions, creating feedback loops, and enabling real-time coordination, which can improve the quality and robustness of group judgments (Barandiaran et al., 2024; Pentland & Tsai, 2024). Collective outcomes need not exceed any particular individual's judgment; their quality depends on design, facilitation, and process. Democratic practice can be understood as a form of collective intelligence: voting, debate, and consensus-building can turn dispersed knowledge into public decisions (Boucher et al., 2023). Under the right conditions, broader participation provides a "democratic advantage," improving error detection and truth-tracking, helping societies revise beliefs more quickly and avoid groupthink (Landemore, 2013).

Context

In the digital age, collective intelligence (CI) functions both as an analytic lens on group decision-making and as a democratic imaginary: a vision in which public decisions improve when many contribute, compare reasons, and correct mistakes together.

As an analytic lens, CI is treated as a measurable group property (a general "c-factor") that depends less on individual IQ and more on group interaction patterns (Woolley et al., 2010). Research shows that groups solve problems effectively when they bring together diverse perspectives and combine their judgments in well-designed ways. Functional diversity, network configuration, and feedback structures can help groups learn from one another and refine their estimates, while other structures (e.g., strong conformity pressures or popularity-based dynamics) undermine independent

thinking and accuracy (Hong & Page, 2004; Lorenz et al., 2011). These findings offer practical guidance for designing and evaluating democratic processes.

As a democratic imaginary, CI re-envisions democratic engagement and institutional legitimacy by positioning governance as organized participation. When platforms, rules, and facilitation structure how broad input is aggregated and deliberated, CI offers an alternative to top-down decision-making models (Boucher et al., 2023). Digital tools like Decidim and Pol.is illustrate this design philosophy: Decidim enables citizens to propose, debate, and select policy options collaboratively, while Pol.is uses machine learning to map consensus and disagreement in large groups (Barandiaran et al., 2024; Pentland, 2024). Both have supported real-world policy-making, such as in Taiwan's vTaiwan initiative.

Integrating CI into democratic practice aligns with the RELINK^2 project's focus on how digital tools shape connections between political organizations and citizens, especially younger and older groups. CI offers a perspective on why some digital participation processes fail to engage people and a vision for more inclusive decision-making.

Related Concepts: digital activism; digital empowerment; digital engagement; e-governance; e-government; liquid democracy; platform politics

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Cybercratic Centralism

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Definition

Cybercratic centralism is a transposition of the concept of democratic centralism in a technologically advanced society. It refers to the working principle and method of a collective organization in which decisions and steering functions are centralized through digital tools and platforms, ensuring firm internal discipline. The control and management of digital platforms and affordances by small groups allow them to design the channels of participation, to decide the timing and implementation of procedures, orienting the members' debate in the digital space up to the point of inducing decisions that in most cases are consistent with the leadership's will.

Context

The concept of cybercratic centralism was developed in recent years within a context of a societal and political digitalization. It has been introduced in relation to parties that have adopted digital tools and platforms as constituent and structural elements of their own organizations, such as the Five Star Movement in Italy (De Rosa, 2013; 2022; Calise, 2015; 2016; Mosca, 2015). Specifically, the literature has adopted this concept to indicate the betrayal of the promises of participatory democracy through the use of the web (Calise & Musella, 2020): the opportunities for individual expression and participation offered by digital platforms are often accompanied by strict control mechanisms on the part of platform managers and the centralization of agenda-setting by the disintermediated leadership.

Related concepts: digital crowdfunding; digital crowdsourcing; digital intra-party democracy; digital leadership; digital party; online primaries; personalization; platform politics; political organization

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Data-Driven Campaign

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Definition

A data-driven campaign (DDC) refers to the design of political parties' electoral campaigns, in which digital technologies and the use of data are central to all activities. Every phase and objective of the electoral campaign—including strategic decision-making, the development of proposals and campaign messages, the implementation of voter mobilization strategies, the generation and allocation of resources, and overall campaign organization—is guided by the collection, use, and analysis of data. This encompasses the application of advanced data analysis techniques, profiling, and other voter modelling strategies, as well as continuous testing throughout the campaign, and the promotion of effective communication through micro- and even nano-targeting. A data-driven campaign fosters the growth of data analysis expertise and the provision of technological support. In its ideal form, DDC marginalizes the role of professional politicians and traditional campaign practices, replacing them with the centrality of data in the making, implementation, and evaluation of every aspect of the electoral campaign.

Context

The concept characterizes the so-called fourth phase of communication, or post-modern communication, in which digital tools and the web acquire centrality (Norris, 2004; Gibson, 2020). This phase of communication is characterized by the parties' development of political marketing strategies built around voters and their needs. Within these electoral strategies, data collection and analysis play a predominant role (Munroe & Munroe, 2018; Gibson 2020; Dommett et al., 2024). This also affects the type

of professionalization of party actors, with the acquisition of a fundamental role for those specialized in communication, data analysis, and information gathering. Some authors (Kefford et al., 2023) point out that the spread of DDC can have perturbative effects on democracy as it fragments political discourse, weakens traditional accountability systems, contributes to the personalization of organizations, affects the fairness of elections by strengthening parties with larger resources, and increases the possibility of manipulating voters. At the same time, however, with the exception of the United States, most of the parties in other European and Western democracies do not have the economic and professional capacity and resources to implement DDC. Also, they might not admit they use it, especially in highly regulated data contexts such as the EU, where targeting can be politically risky. That is why measuring DDC is a challenge. In some cases, it seems that newcomers as well as "digital parties" might be more active in adopting it than major parliamentary parties (Bon et al., 2025).

Related Concepts: data-driven microtargeting; digital activism; digital engagement; e-democracy; digital party; participation; platform politics

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Data-Driven Microtargeting

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Definition

Data-driven microtargeting refers to the granular targeting of voter groups, and even individual voters, through online ads and other more subtle appeals, based on comprehensive data and its accurate interpretation through psychological or other profiling methods and models (Kruschinski & Haller, 2017). Political microtargeting can be defined as a particular political communication strategy located at the intersection of: a) segmentifying specific voter groups (and even individuals); b) tailoring messages according to these segments; and c) conveying messages to these groups (or individuals) (van Dalen, 2024). Since microtargeting is deployed to interact with different individuals in large groups, it can work most efficiently through digital and algorithmic means. Data-driven microtargeting in politics, therefore, is a method of digitally (or algorithmically) modified propaganda based on digital traces, detailed data, and profiling that does not only target specific voter segments but also constantly tests the effectiveness of this communication using digital means (Baldwin-Philippi, 2017; Lavigne, 2022). Data-driven microtargeting can also be defined as a type of personalized political communication based on digital data and means (Decker, 2025).

Context

With the development of political marketing, opinion polls, and advertising since the 1930s, economic and political entrepreneurs have faced situations requiring the targeting of specific consumer and voter groups with different messages. They deployed data from various conventional sources to tailor their messages accordingly, even before the advent of digital data (Sosnik et al., 2006). In commercial realms, the need to appeal to individual tastes gained new economic importance following the rise of flexible production and post-Fordism. These transformations required "microtargeting" strategies in commercial marketing (Agan, 2007). With the rise of social media

and new online surveillance capacities, companies and political parties started to obtain huge amounts of data, not only on clusters of people but also about individuals and their online searches and behaviours. This transformation triggered a debate on "microtargeting" in politics as early as the mid-2000s, with scholarly and journalistic attention focusing on the sophisticated use of digital data in American presidential elections (Howard, 2006; Shaw et al., 2024).

Data-driven microtargeting works with principles similar to those embraced by social media platforms and the broader "surveillance capitalism": digitally accumulating huge amounts of behavioural data about individual users, accurately interpreting the psychological and behavioural patterns in this data, and algorithmically providing incentives to direct current or future behaviour towards preferred goals, such as keeping the user for longer periods of time on the platform and directing them towards particular consumer choices (Zuboff, 2019). These digital techniques are increasingly deployed for political purposes. The Cambridge Analytica scandal is emblematic in this respect, showing that the political consultancy firm was illegally collecting personal data in order to analyse voters' psychological profiles and send personalized political messages during the 2016 US Presidential campaign (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018).

The problem with data-driven microtargeting is that its effective use depends on considerable resources, and mostly resource-rich political contenders and established parties may fully benefit from this strategy. Therefore, data-driven microtargeting may deepen problems of resource asymmetry in democratic settings (Anstead, 2017; Kruschinski & Haller, 2017), even though its smart and efficient use may provide new and/or minor parties and actors with a competitive edge (Kreiss, 2017). However, most notably in semi-democratic regimes, it can be expected that microtargeting may deepen the "uneven playing field" since incumbents in these regimes tightly control resources as well as the institutional context (Levitsky & Way, 2002). Although evidence is scant, data-driven microtargeting may also be useful for autocratic incumbents in need of information regarding attitudes towards autocratic regimes among the citizenry in more hegemonic and barely competitive political systems (Kalathil, 2020). More hegemonic autocratic regimes may use microtargeting to identify vulnerable segments of the population for regime propaganda and broaden the regimes' support base.

Democracies aim to control microtargeting by regulating the use of personal data and advertising or by protecting freedom of expression (Dobber et al., 2019). Although the risks posed by microtargeting for democracy are widely discussed (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2018), the alarmism surrounding it may be exaggerated since the evidence regarding its electoral effectiveness is still debatable (Baldwin-Philippi, 2017). One of the problems with political microtargeting and broader tailored, personalized political communication, however, is that it may become one of the factors that undermines a shared public sphere that has facilitated mass democracy so far by confining voters into self-referential individual echo chambers (Bayer, 2020).

Related Concepts: data-driven campaign; deepfakes; digital engagement; digital party; digital sovereignty; online disinformation; personalization; platform politics; virtual communities

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Datafication

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Definition

Datafication refers to the process through which aspects of social, economic, and cultural life are transformed into quantifiable and analysable data through digital technologies. Unlike digitization, which merely involves converting analogue information into digital formats, datafication entails a deeper epistemological and institutional transformation, whereby social practices are increasingly conceived, monitored, and evaluated through metrics and algorithms. This process translates human actions, emotions, and interactions into units of information that feed systems of analysis, prediction, and management. Datafication is closely linked to the expansion of big data, the platform economy, and algorithmic governance, and is widely regarded as one of the structural pillars of digital modernity and contemporary surveillance capitalism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013; Van Dijck, 2014).

Context

The concept of datafication has gained significant academic relevance over the past decade, in parallel with the diffusion of digital infrastructures capable of recording and analysing virtually all dimensions of everyday life. Its emergence is closely associated with the big data paradigm, which promotes the belief that large-scale data collection can reveal objective patterns about human and social behaviour (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013). Critical scholarship, however, has emphasized that datafication is not merely a technical innovation but also a political and economic process.

For authors such as Van Dijck (2014), datafication operates as an ideology, referred to as "dataism," which privileges quantification and traceability over other forms of knowledge production. Couldry and Mejias (2019) argue that datafication constitutes a new form of colonialism, whereby human interactions are appropriated and transformed into economic resources by digital platforms. This process of "data colonialism"

underpins the model of surveillance capitalism, in which value is generated through the extraction, processing, and circulation of behavioural data (Zuboff, 2019).

Within sociology and media studies, datafication is examined as a force that reconfigures the relationships between subjects, institutions, and information. By enabling the quantification of practices that were previously qualitative, it reshapes power relations, privacy, and individual autonomy. Data-driven governance thus emerges as a new regime of knowledge and control, in which algorithmic systems increasingly replace human judgement in social and political decision-making processes (Beer, 2019).

Contemporary academic reflection on datafication therefore seeks to address its epistemological, ethical, and political implications, highlighting the need for critical approaches that recognize both its transformative potential and its structural risks for democratic and social life.

Related Concepts: algorithm, data-driven campaign, digital colonialism, digital disconnection, digital governance, digital natives, Digital Service Act, digital transformation, e-government, platform politics

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Deepfake(s)

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Definition

Deepfakes refer to highly realistic, AI-generated audiovisual content that fabricates the appearance, speech, or actions of real individuals. These synthetic media are produced using deep learning techniques—particularly generative adversarial networks (GANs)—trained on extensive biometric data. While deepfakes can be used for entertainment, satire, or educational purposes, they are increasingly associated with ethically contentious and malicious implications. Unlike traditional disinformation, deepfakes simulate perceptual realism, making it appear as though someone said or did something they never actually did. As such, deepfakes blur the boundaries between reality and simulation, introducing a new form of advanced disinformation into the digital media ecosystem.

Context

In the post-digital era, characterized by the algorithmic curation of content and the collapse of stable sources of verification, deepfakes have emerged as a paradigmatic form of synthetic disinformation. Their technological sophistication lies not only in fabricating visual and auditory likenesses of individuals—either real or fabricated—but in producing affectively charged simulations that are increasingly difficult to distinguish from authentic recordings.

Unlike other forms of manipulated media that rely on low-tech or non-AI methods, deepfakes depend on sophisticated algorithms and require substantially greater technical expertise and resources to produce. For instance, cheapfakes typically involve basic editing practices such as cropping, altering playback speed, or misleading recontextualization. Overall, the key distinction lies in the level of technological sophistication, with deepfakes going beyond conventional editing and contextual manipulation.

The communicative threat of deepfakes lies in their dual function. First, they can fabricate entirely fictional events with the potential to incite unrest, manipulate electorates, or destabilize public trust. Second, they enable strategic denialism/ambiguity—the dismissal of real events as fake, providing a rhetorical escape for political actors. This phenomenon, referred to as "the liar's dividend" (Chesney & Citron, 2018), shows how deepfakes weaponize doubt while eroding accountability in the public sphere. Notable examples include the deepfake video of Ukrainian President Zelensky urging surrender during the Russian invasion, and the public suspicion that a real video of Gabonese President Ali Bongo was fabricated—both of which triggered confusion and destabilization, regardless of their factual status.

Importantly, deepfakes signify a paradigmatic shift from textual "fake news" to immersive, affectively charged synthetic realities that exploit human perceptual trust. They circulate within algorithmically optimized environments that prioritize engagement over accuracy, emotion over evidence, and personalization over plurality. In this sense, the real danger lies not only in what deepfakes show, but in the conditions under which they are believed.

From a communication studies perspective, it is to conclude that deepfakes are not merely deceptive artefacts—they are symptoms of a broader communicative disorder. This disorder arises from a digital ecosystem shaped by algorithmic mediation, in which content is filtered, ranked, and distributed based on opaque, profit- or power-driven logics. Such mediation fragments the public sphere, isolates epistemic communities, and destabilizes shared cognitive ground making it increasingly difficult to sustain democratic discourse, ethical deliberation, or any common understanding of truth. Addressing deepfakes thus requires moving beyond technical detection to reconsidering the foundations of communicative trust, reality construction, and media ethics in the post-digital age.

Related Concepts: AI-enabled analytics; algorithm; cheapfakes; data-driven campaign; digital divide; media and information literacy; online disinformation

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Democratic Innovation

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Definition

Democratic innovations are processes, mechanisms, institutions, or instruments that refer to new approaches aimed at enhancing citizen participation and deliberation, as well as their impact on governing processes and governance. Some researchers consider them simply participatory instruments. Others highlight their connection with new technologies and, therefore, their greater potential to reach and engage citizens compared to previously existing mechanisms. Democratic innovations encompass a variety of instruments, including institutionalized participatory mechanisms (e.g., advisory councils, referendums, or recalls), new deliberative democracy instruments (various forms of mini-publics), and instruments involving new technologies ("e-participation") that facilitate citizen engagement in the public sphere. Among many innovative practices, such as citizen panels and citizens' assemblies, democratic innovations include participatory budgeting. Democratic innovations address the deficits of representative democracy by creating new mechanisms, institutions, or tools to engage citizens with complex policy issues and enable them to contribute to decision-making processes. These innovations continue to evolve, creating new forms and more open, non-traditional ways of connecting citizens with political actors.

Context

Democratic innovation is a term that refers to new practices, institutions, and tools designed to strengthen citizen participation, deliberation, and the responsiveness of democracy. In the context of digitalization, the meaning of democratic innovation has gained increasing significance due to the impact of digital technologies that offer unprecedented opportunities for reshaping citizen engagement with political institutions and decision-makers (Elstub & Escobar, 2017; Flesher Fominaya, 2022). Diverse online tools, such as online platforms, digital deliberation forums, or participatory

budgeting tools, exemplify how digitalization can lower barriers to participation, enabling contributions of ideas and influence on policy outcomes beyond the traditional possibilities to which electoral cycles belong.

In academic research, the term is central to public debates about how technology can help counter democratic deficits such as political disengagement, declining trust, or limited representation. Scholars investigate whether digital platforms support meaningful deliberation or risk amplifying polarization and misinformation. Similarly, at the policy level, governments across the world experiment with e-democracy tools, from Estonia's pioneering e-voting system to participatory digital platforms used in cities like Barcelona or Helsinki (Geissel, 2013; Smith, 2006). These cases exemplify how digital tools can be harnessed to give citizens a stronger voice in shaping governance. At the same time, socially, public opinion confirms the demands among citizens for transparency, accountability, and inclusive decision-making, including online tools. While digitalization offers new avenues to reconnect citizens with institutions, it also raises fundamental questions about data privacy, inequalities, and algorithmic impact. Therefore, democratic innovation refers to the potential of digitisation for democracy, but also highlights the need for risk analysis in this process (Council of Europe, 2020).

In the RELINK[2], the terms include digital tools, including AI, on political organisation, civic participation, and democracy. Thus, the core point of the project is to answer the question related to the opportunities but also challenges of digitalisation and its tools to regenerate democracy by reconnecting citizens with political institutions and actors.

Related Concepts: participation; civic participation; citizen engagement; political participation; digital inclusion; digital transformation

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Digital Activism

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Definition

Digital activism corresponds to (digital) activism practices that, using platforms, aim to interrogate top-down power structures of both state and market levels, giving greater visibility to struggles and disputes located at the margins of society. Its modalities include key elements such as group formation, opportunity structures, action and communicative repertoires, framing and meaning work, collective identity, dynamics, tactics, and many others. These modalities include online engagement such as virtual campaigns, discussion groups, forums, chats, petitions, to assemblies, public acts, marches, pamphlets, protests, and street actions.

Context

Digital activism is also a "qualitatively different way of conceptualizing, strategizing, and implementing collective action" (Waisbord, 2018, p. 2). It is, ultimately, a contemporary form of activism beyond the participation of institutional channels, including the use of platforms as diverse modalities of meaningful and marginalized participation, albeit with unintended consequences such as the rise of hierarchies in participatory processes (Fominaya, 2016). The framework of digital activism puts into practice a new way of seeing, feeling, and acting politically in contemporary and digitally mediated society by proposing common ideas and actions through the vernacular and instantaneous use of digital technologies (Milan & Barbosa, 2019). There is a remarkable amount of scholarly interest in digital activism that has produced a rich body of research on the possibilities and practices of platform-based movements (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Castells, 2012; Earl & Kimport, 2011) mostly based in the Global North. The "movements of indignation" that shook the world at the beginning of the2010s, such as the Egyptian Revolution, the 15-M movement in Spain, and Occupy in the United States, showed themselves, despite their limits, capable of oxygenating

democracy and sharing the following common characteristics: low confidence in conventional forms of political institutions, and mobilization via digital technologies and internet-based platforms.

The rise of chat apps from the 2010s, combined with platformization era, allowed both direct communication between individuals and the distribution of information in diffusion processes (Barbosa, 2021). There are key dimensions of digital activism widely investigated in the literature. The first is "contentious," that is, in the sense of dispute, subject to contention through a broader, creative, and sophisticated set of communication platforms (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007). The second dimension is "dynamics" (Accornero & Pinto, 2015) insofar as the appropriation of how new political subjects appropriate platforms collaboratively (between the user and the platform/between the platform and the user). The third dimension is how "collective action" shapes tactics through social media platforms (Gerbaudo & Treré, 2015; Margetts et al., 2016). The fourth dimension derives from the first three and is the "contingency" factor, since the set of different forms of interaction with platforms does not follow by principle a programmatic character and reveals different levels of behaviour, subjectivities, and constraints of activists during the process of mobilization that can be characterized as short-term or long-term and depends on the specific context of each location and organic growth.

The modalities of digital activism include:

1) Digital petitioning, which focuses on low-effort digital participation (e.g., signing petitions) to raise awareness without immediate physical disruption.

2) Hashtag activism—creating hashtags to frame issues, challenge dominant discourses, and amplify awareness globally, and is mainly used on social media platforms.

3) Connective action, which relies on personalized content sharing through platforms rather than formal organizations to mobilize participants around a specific cause.

4) Chat-app activism—employs encrypted, peer-to-peer networks to bypass state censorship, organize localized dissent, and coordinate street actions.

5) Hybrid media activism, which combines digital mobilization strategies with traditional, on-the-ground mobilization and direct-action movements.

6) Hacktivism—using technical skills, such as distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks, leaks, or site defacements, to directly drive political or ideological change.

7) Data activism—proactive and reactive activism involving the analysis, transparency, and subversion of big data and algorithmic governance to resist corporate or state power.

8) Counter-disinformation activism, which focuses on actively debunking state or corporate propaganda, bot networks, and inaccurate content operations to protect the public discourse.

Diverse scholars have investigated digital activism (Barassi, 2015; Kaun & Uldam, 2018; Kavada et al., 2023; Schradie, 2018; Tufecki, 2017) through popular analytical

interpretations such as the "movement of the squares" (Gerbaudo, 2017), "choreography of assembly" (Gerbaudo, 2012), "cloud protesting" (Milan, 2015), "hybrid media activism" (Treré, 2018), "nerd politics" (Postill, 2018), "WhatsAppers" (Barbosa, 2021), and "connective action" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). All these frameworks share the common goal of capturing the emergence and unfolding of specific forms of digital activism, dynamics, and mobilization (Melucci, 1989), with growing attention to the new era of platform dominance (Pickard & Yang, 2017).

However, the current challenge is to understand digital activism through its paramount importance at the local level to organize day-to-day activities, to unite for a common political cause with low participation costs, and to promote local social change. It is also to situate digital activism and contextualize its digital appropriation in the Global South countries. In other words, the challenge is to capture digital activism modalities beyond large-scale mobilizations in Western Europe and the United States, and to reinvent how emerging forms of digital activism can also be disseminated in a massive and creative way from and within the Global South(s) (Barbosa, 2025).

Related concepts: digital engagement; digital literacies; digital protest; e-democracy; fluid representation; liquid democracy; political participation

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Digital Citizenship

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Definition

Digital citizenship refers to the ways in which individuals exercise rights, assume responsibilities, participate in public life, and construct political identities within digitally mediated environments (Ceccarini, 2021; Colomer & Blumler, 2009; Mossberger et al., 2007). It captures the changing relationship between citizens, political communities, and democratic institutions in societies where access to information, participation, communication, and public debate are increasingly shaped by digital technologies.

The concept is closely related to e-participation, digital engagement, and digital activism, but it should not be reduced to these terms (Isin & Ruppert, 2015; Mossberger et al., 2007). While e-participation usually refers to institutionalized forms of citizen involvement through digital tools, and digital engagement or digital activism emphasize specific forms of online political action and mobilization, digital citizenship has a broader analytical scope. It concerns the status, rights, responsibilities, capacities, practices, and identities through which individuals relate to political communities in digital societies.

Context

Scholarship highlights the conceptual complexity of digital citizenship by identifying different approaches to its study (Jaeger, 2021; Oyedemi, 2020; Richardson et al., 2021). The first, normative approach understands digital citizenship as an ideal and examines the ethical principles, rights, and responsibilities that should guide citizens' behaviour in digital environments. The second, contextual approach analyses how digital citizenship is shaped by socioeconomic, political, and cultural conditions, paying particular attention to inequalities in access, participation, and recognition. The third perspective focuses more directly on media and digital literacy, emphasizing the skills,

competences, and resources that individuals need to navigate, evaluate, and participate effectively in the digital sphere.

Digital citizenship provides the wider normative and conceptual framework within which practices such as online participation, digital campaigning, platform-based mobilization, or digital activism can take place. The concept is, therefore, generally understood as multidimensional (Isin & Ruppert, 2015; Jones & Mitchell, 2015; Schou, 2018). It does not refer only to the technical ability to use digital tools, but also to the political, social, cultural, and normative conditions through which individuals become citizens in digitally mediated societies.

The first dimension concerns rights, access, and political inclusion. From this perspective, digital citizenship is linked to the capacity of individuals to participate effectively in society through digital technologies. This includes access to digital infrastructures, digital literacy, privacy, freedom of expression, data protection, and the ability to engage in civic and political activities online (Council of Europe, 2019). The second dimension concerns identity, belonging, and political socialization. Digital citizenship is not only a legal or institutional status, but also a process through which individuals develop a sense of membership in political communities (e.g., Ceccarini, 2021). Digital environments contribute to this process by creating spaces in which citizens encounter information, express opinions, build collective identities, and distinguish themselves from other groups.

Digital citizenship should, therefore, be understood as both an extension and a transformation of citizenship. It extends citizenship because many traditional rights and duties are now exercised through digital means. It transforms citizenship because digital technologies reshape the spaces, practices, and identities through which citizens act politically. Rather than being reduced to responsible internet use, digital citizenship captures the broader relationship between digitalization, democracy, participation, rights, and political identity.

Because digital citizenship is a multidimensional concept, it is usually operationalized through a combination of structural, behavioural and attitudinal indicators (e.g., Choi, 2016; Connolly, 2022; Reichert, 2025). At the structural level, it refers to access to digital infrastructures, frequency of internet use, digital inclusion, and the skills required to participate effectively in digital environments. This dimension is central in Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal's (2007) approach, which links digital citizenship to access, regular internet use, inclusion and democratic participation.

At the behavioural level, digital citizenship can be measured through online civic and political practices, such as searching for political information, discussing public issues online, contacting institutions, signing petitions, joining digital campaigns, or participating in online consultations. Jones and Mitchell (2015) also emphasize respectful online behaviour and online civic engagement as key measurable components. These indicators overlap with e-participation, digital engagement, and digital

activism, but should be understood as specific expressions of digital citizenship rather than as equivalent concepts.

At the attitudinal and normative level, operationalization may include awareness of digital rights, privacy and data protection, respect for others online, perceived efficacy in digital environments, critical capacity towards online information, and feelings of belonging to political communities. Choi (2016) and Choi, Glassman, and Cristol (2017) are particularly useful here, as they operationalize digital citizenship through dimensions such as digital skills, political engagement, critical perspectives, networking agency, and local/global awareness.

Overall, digital citizenship should not be measured by internet use alone. It requires attention to the conditions that enable citizens to act politically online, the practices through which they participate, and the rights, responsibilities, and identities that shape their role in digitally mediated democracies. In sum, digital citizenship is a fluid phenomenon, evolving not only historically as technologies and democratic practices change, but also across countries, according to different institutional settings, political cultures, and patterns of digital inclusion.

Related concepts: digital activism; digital democracy; digital engagement; digital literacy; digital skills; e-participation; media and information literacy; platform politics

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Digital Colonialism

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Definition

Digital colonialism refers to a form of digital control, extraction, and dependency through which a small but powerful group of tech corporations, primarily based in the Global North (particularly in the US) and China, establish a form of domination over digital spatialities (both data and digital infrastructures). Although the concept appears in the literature under related denominations—such as technological colonialism, data colonialism, or algorithmic colonialism (Nothias, 2025)—the term "digital colonialism" is preferred here, as it more comprehensively captures how control, extraction, and dependency operate across the social, economic, and material dimensions of data and digital infrastructures as instruments of global power.

This form of domination is sustained by the extension of digital sovereignty (through digitalization processes) over the production, use, and ownership of digital spatialities—designing their infrastructures to fit their economic interest, creating long-term dependencies—both digital (the use software, networks, cloud services, etc.), and physical (network infrastructure, submarine cables, hardware supply chains, etc.). In this context, digital colonialism is not only a corporate strategy but also a form of structural power that reshapes and produces global inequalities, often closely tied to the strategic interests and policies of the states under whose jurisdiction these companies operate.

Context

Digital colonialism is being conceptualized through the lens of the exploitative dynamics of technological dominance, becoming a key concept for understanding contemporary digitalization as a continuation and reconfiguration of colonial power relations rooted in the modern capitalist era. While historical colonialism relied on the extraction of resources, labour, and value from colonized territories and imposed epistemic, political,

and economic hierarchies, digitalization extends these dynamics into data, infrastructures, and platform-mediated relations generating dependencies, social injustices, and inequalities produced by colonial power and its geopolitical legacies of "broligarchy" (Divon & Ong, 2025) rather than being neutral providers of innovation or connectivity (Pinto, 2018). The harmful impact of tech corporations and digital powers can be identified as manifesting through three interrelated components.

First, digitalization allows the occupation of "new digital territories" (Mejias & Couldry, 2024), data, and digital infrastructure(s). The control over "critical digital infrastructures" (data storage facilities, computing power, submarine cables, or 5G networks) allows dominant actors (state or non-state) to shape the flow and accessibility of information and other types of automation of control, such as algorithmic censorship (Vatreš, 2025).

Secondly, digital systems infiltrate every aspect of life—from smartphones, smartwatches, digital assistants, smart home solutions to state institutions and public services, both in authoritarian and democratic societies. Much like historical colonialism, operating under self-proclaimed missions of emancipation and empowerment, these systems are designed to serve corporate interests, through mechanisms such as the attention economy or surveillance. Hence, tech giants act as digital rentiers, extracting value from user activity and behaviour (Varoufakis, 2024). Finally, digital colonialism is sustained by the exploitation of people, labour, and physical resources across interconnected global systems, thereby aggravating global inequalities rather than neutralizing or overcoming them. The reliance on invisible digital labour (unpaid digital labor of users and outsourced workers, engaged in training and manually "feeding" of AI models with (meta)data and moderating content, mostly in the Global South), referred to as "ghostwork" (Dachwitz & Hilbig, 2025), highlights the hidden, precarious, and exploited human labour behind the seemingly autonomous digital systems. On the other side, the extraction of rare natural resources such as earth minerals essential for hardware manufacturing also reveals the material foundations of digital technologies, rooting virtual infrastructures in deeply unequal global supply chains.

It is important to recognize how digital power relations embedded in contemporary capitalism are experienced, contested, and resisted differently across geopolitical contexts. Therefore, envisioning the decolonization of the digital also requires an epistemic decolonization—of how digital colonialism itself is written about and theorized beyond reducing it under the cover of "digital universalism" (Milan & Treré, 2019). Rather than treating colonialism as a passive or static condition, critical digital and data studies must remain attentive to situated knowledge and adopt a proactive orientation that foregrounds alternative sites of knowledge production and digital imaginaries beyond the Global North (Valente & Grohmann, 2024). Digital colonialism should thus be approached not as an isolated phenomenon that objectifies those affected by it, but as a relational analytical framework developed in dialogue with broader critical

traditions within the humanities and social sciences, enabling the articulation of emancipatory digital imaginaries beyond techno-centric understandings of data.

Related Concepts: algorithm; cyber security; digital democracy; digital divide; digital sovereignty; digital transformation; e-democracy; e-governance;

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Digital Dementia

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Definition

Digital dementia describes a growing phenomenon in which important digital traces—tweets, posts, websites, archives, files, or any other digital data—disappear, become inaccessible, or are deliberately erased, leaving gaps in our shared memory. It refers to the systematic erasure, suppression, or inaccessibility of politically and socially relevant digital information, resulting either from intentional acts such as censorship, content deletion, or algorithmic marginalization, or from the structural features of digital infrastructures. Unlike its medical origin, where dementia denotes a clinical neurocognitive disorder, digital dementia is a metaphorical concept used to describe the societal and cognitive consequences of overreliance on digital technologies, particularly the erosion of memory, attention, and long-term knowledge retention.

This concept also moves beyond its conventional medical and psychological meaning to capture how political, social, and historical content is lost in digital environments—not only through censorship or deletion, but also through neglect, overload, or algorithmic invisibility. As more of what we know, remember, and discuss moves online, we also risk forgetting in new ways. From a communication perspective, digital dementia raises questions about how digital infrastructures shape what societies remember—and what they are allowed to forget.

Context

In the post-digital age, the integrity of collective memory and historical discourse is shaped not only by what is remembered, but by what is rendered invisible or forgotten (Mayer-Schönberger, 2009). Digital dementia captures technologically mediated

forgetting—where content can be erased, buried, or decontextualized through platform governance, algorithmic design, or sheer information overload. As platforms are poor at preserving context, through a deleted tweet, vanished website, or a broken hyperlink, conversations can lose their frame of reference leading to misinterpretations, discursive fragmentation, or loss of accountability (Helmond, 2015). What further enables this digitally mediated, automated erosion of memory and cognitive ageing (Ali et al., 2024; Sandu & Nistor, 2020; Moledina & Khoja, 2018) is our growing reliance on short-form content and a spectacle-driven logic of visibility where, as described by Guy Debord (1970), lived reality is displaced by its representation, making digital forgetting not only easier, but more readily accepted as part of a continuous scroll of distraction.

In discussions of digital dementia, the concept is often illustrated through concrete forms of informational loss and decay in digital environments. One common example is link rot, whereby hyperlinks embedded in academic articles, policy documents, or online journalism gradually become inaccessible as webpages are moved, restructured, or taken offline, undermining the durability and verifiability of digital knowledge. A related phenomenon is the deletion or modification of digital archives, including social media content, government webpages, or platform-hosted datasets, which may be removed due to policy changes, commercial decisions, legal pressures, or shifting political priorities, resulting in gaps in the public record. Digital dementia is also exemplified by the loss of born-digital content, such as early websites, online forums, blogs, or multimedia materials, which disappear because of obsolete file formats, discontinued software, or the closure of hosting services. Together, these processes highlight how the increasing reliance on digital storage and access can paradoxically produce collective forgetting, eroding institutional memory and complicating historical reconstruction.

In a political context, digital dementia can have significant implications, contributing to a fragmented and unstable collective memory. In this regard, we focus on two strategies of digital forgetting. This forgetting can be intentional, such as the manipulation of visibility by states or powerful actors, or accidental, when critical content is drowned in the flood of real-time updates. For instance, algorithmic personalization and content prioritization may re-route collective attention away from socially urgent issues, while shadowbanning or downranking render some content practically invisible. Moreover, the platformization of political discourse means that entire archives are subject to commercial logics—content can be modified, deleted, or decontextualized without public consent or oversight. On the other hand, knowing they are under digital surveillance, users may engage in self-censorship or avoid storing politically sensitive material altogether, fostering a culture of forgetting as a means of self-protection, one that leaves little to no trace behind.

Related Concepts: Algorithm; algorithmic censorship; computer-mediated communication; datafication; digital disconnection; digital engagement; digital ethnography; Digital Service Act; digital transformation

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Digital Democracy

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Definition

Digital democracy denotes the use of digital technologies to conduct and shape democratic politics and policy-making, in both online and offline environments. It builds on the classic formulation of digital democracy defined by van Dijk & Hacker (2018: 20) as "the collective use of information and communication technology for practices of politics and democracy in both online and offline environments." The distinction between politics and policy-making separates the digitally mediated contest over who governs (e.g., e-elections) from the digitally mediated exercise of authority once in office (e.g., an online referendum on a policy), corresponding to what Fuchs (2025) terms "representative" and "direct" digital democracy, respectively. The pairing of "conduct" and "shape" signals that digital technologies function both as a medium for existing democratic practice and as a force reconfiguring what that practice looks like.

Digital democracy should be distinguished from a closely related but narrower concept of e-democracy. E-democracy typically denotes discrete, tool-based applications of ICT that support or enhance existing democratic procedures (online consultation, e-petition, participatory budgeting) without necessarily reconfiguring the underlying institutional architecture (Lindner & Aichholzer, 2020). Digital democracy often operates at a broader level of abstraction: it captures the open-ended transformation of the state, political representation and the public sphere under conditions of pervasive digitalisation.

Context

The proliferation of near-synonymous labels in this field reflects the conceptual and historical layering. The first cluster of terms names medium- or period-specific variants of essentially the same idea of using a particular communication technology to enhance existing democratic procedures and is generally used interchangeably with

e-democracy: electronic democracy and teledemocracy (1980s cable-television/town-hall model); virtual democracy, cyberdemocracy, internet democracy, and online democracy (1990s cyberspace framing); and network democracy, new media democracy, and social media democracy (2000s Web 2.0/platform framing) (Berg & Hofmann, 2021). The second cluster designates specific instruments or institutional designs operating within digital or e-democracy rather than competing umbrella paradigms: civic tech (technology built for civic engagement and government accountability), civic media (community-oriented media production supporting participation), liquid democracy (a delegative-voting model combining direct and representative elements), and blockchain democracy (voting or governance mechanisms secured through distributed-ledger technology). The third, more recent cluster comprises aspirational neologisms that extend digital-democratic thinking into data-driven and algorithmic territory: augmented democracy, smart democracy, and "new democracy". These are typically associated with specific authors or prototype projects rather than consolidated analytical categories. Digital democracy functions as the encompassing frame within which these historical predecessors, specific instruments and emergent extensions can each be situated.

Berg and Hofmann (2021) map this transformation across four domains: (i) democratic governance and citizenship, spanning open government and open-democracy initiatives at one end and data-driven, managerial modes of governing populations at the other; (ii) the public sphere, reshaped by the platformization of political communication; (iii) the relationship between participation and representation, including new repertoires of political action such as civic tech and platform parties; and (iv) emerging forms of domination and rights tied to the concentration of communicative and infrastructural power in a small number of platform companies.

A systematic literature review by Congge et al. (2023) of 230 Scopus-indexed articles provides an empirical counterpart to this theoretical mapping. Bibliometric clustering identifies democracy, the internet, and movement as the most frequently co-occurring concepts, with thematic clusters ranging from citizen control of government and public participation to a cluster explicitly linking digital democracy to capitalism and elite control of the virtual public sphere. Notably, Congge et al. (2023) observe that much of the applied literature uses "digital democracy" and "e-democracy" interchangeably to describe ICT-enabled campaigning, deliberation and mobilisation—a looser usage than the analytically distinct, systemic sense proposed by Berg and Hofmann (2021) and adopted here.

Operationalizing digital democracy for empirical measurement remains a persistent challenge. Kneuer's (2016) influential e-democracy framework, developed partly in response to this gap, proposes three indicator families: free and equal access / internet freedom (technical infrastructure and legal safeguards against censorship); e-participation (disaggregated into information, dialogue, monitoring, and decision-making

sub-indicators covering both top-down and bottom-up interaction); and e-government (the effectiveness of digital information and transactional services). Other major assessments built on comparable logics evaluate individual e-participation platforms against criteria such as sustainability, institutional embeddedness, and user-friendliness (Korthagen & Van Keulen, 2020). Such frameworks operationalize e-democracy at the level of discrete, measurable practices; they illustrate, by contrast, the more systemic orientation of digital democracy in the Berg and Hofmann (2021) sense, which is less concerned with scoring individual tools than with tracing how the overall relationship between self-government and its mediating infrastructures evolves over time.

Related Concepts: digital activism; digital empowerment; digital engagement; digital intra-party democracy; digital society; e-democracy; e-voting

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Digital Disconnection

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Definition

Digital disconnection is a concept that takes into account people's limitation of digital connectivity in order to improve their well-being. As some authors (Beattie, 2020; Nguyen, 2021; Syvertsen, 2020) underlined, the concept of digital disconnection originates from social sciences and humanities, and refers to limiting one's use of digital media. There are assumptions that show that digital disconnection is motivated by people's choices guided by their perception of "the harms of the digital media" (Vanden Abeele et al., 2024). Digital disconnection has been described as an "agentic response," claiming "the individual's control over digital media use" (Karsay & Vandenbosch, 2021). Some studies (Kaun, 2021) highlight the use of digital disconnection, in conjunction with "hyperactivity," as a negative choice, i.e., a decision not to participate in digital platforms. Sociologist Eva Illouz (2019: 21) mentioned that digital disconnection became an expression of "negative bonds" or "negative bonds."

Context

The pervasiveness of technology in everyone's lives led to a phenomenon of growing digital disconnection. The same technologies that may improve and simplify life can also complicate it, leading to other phenomena such as the spread of disinformation, the prevalence of cyber bullying, and cyberattacks. This is the paradox of technology. While digital disconnection may improve the mental well-being, some studies show that it can also enhance productivity (Olivares, 2025).

In recent years, digital disconnection has become a priority for human resources policy, prompting transformations in organizational culture. Companies and organizations have started to put more emphasis on investing in people's mental health, motivation, and productivity. This trend is also increasingly recognized in national regulatory frameworks. For example, the Labour Chamber of the French Supreme

Court's decision regarding the right to disconnect highlights the importance of the balance between work and private life, and allows digital transformation to have a positive effect on workers' lives.

In a hyper-connected world, this concept is relevant to the RELINK[2] project because it has real implications for social and political life. It can influence political participation, how preferences are formed, and affect civic engagement. Digital disconnection may lead to political disconnection, but while disengaging from digital platforms may lead to limited exposure to political news and discussion, political disconnection "may arise from disinterest in politics itself" (von Nostitz, 2024). Yet, even if individuals are disengaged online, this does not mean that they are politically inactive. Digital disconnection is not about rejecting the benefits of technology or the digital world. Rather, it is about defining boundaries so that we can choose to reconnect or disconnect whenever we want and when it is necessary, while preserving mental and physical health.

Related Concepts: datafication; digital activism; digital engagement; digital literacies; digital society; media and information literacy

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Digital Divide

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Definition

Digital divide refers to the multidimensional gap in access to, use of, and outcomes from digital technologies (Norris & Inglehart, 2013; Van Dijck, 2019). Contemporary scholarship distinguishes three main levels: access, usage, and outcomes. It also recognizes emerging dimensions such as affordability, content relevance, intersectionality, algorithmic awareness, and institutional or policy divides. The digital divide is inherently socio-digital, reflecting and reinforcing broader social and economic inequalities. Factors such as age, gender, education, income, and geography intersect to shape individuals' capacity to benefit from digital connectivity. Beyond material access, the divide also extends to the structure of algorithmically mediated experiences and the quality of disparities in digital literacies and informational exposure. This divide fragments the digital public into micro-realities shaped by echo chambers and filter bubbles. It thus represents not merely a technological gap, but a structural condition that reproduces differentiated visibility, epistemic isolation, and unequal participation within the shared digital public sphere.

Context

The digital divide is central to understanding the complexities of digitalization in contemporary societies. Beyond material inequality, it now encompasses a more subtle form of fragmentation, often shaped by algorithms, datafication, and platform logic. This evolving divide is best captured through the concept of "networked segmentation," which highlights how digital platforms algorithmically sort users into ideologically and emotionally homogeneous micro-communities (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Such segmentation erodes the foundations of a shared, pluralistic public sphere and contributes to a crisis of social cohesion, where people are hyper-connected digitally but increasingly alienated from one another politically and socially.

These processes fundamentally reshape how social relations, trust, and collective belonging are formed and maintained. In the sphere of political organizations, digitalization has transformed modes of engagement, participation, and communication. The shift from hierarchical to networked forms of interaction creates new opportunities for visibility and mobilization, yet also reinforces divisions and echo chambers (Castells, 2012; Van Dijck, 2013). While digital platforms enable rapid coordination and symbolic expressions of solidarity, such as hashtag movements, these actions often remain fleeting and performative, lacking the sustained collective effort needed for structural transformation (Fang et al., 2018).

The literature on the digital divide has progressively moved beyond a binary understanding of access toward a multidimensional framework. The first-level digital divide concerns inequalities in physical and material access to digital technologies (van Dijk & Hacker, 2003; Bagchi, 2005), while the second-level divide shifts attention to disparities in digital skills, competencies, and patterns of use (DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001; van Dijk, 2006). More recently, scholars have proposed a third-level divide, which focuses on the differential outcomes and benefits individuals derive from internet use, rather than mere access or skills (van Deursen & Helsper, 2015). Measurement strategies have evolved accordingly, moving from simple connectivity indicators to composite measures of digital skills, usage diversity, and tangible socioeconomic outcomes. However, the literature has noted persistent terminological inconsistency and a lack of theoretical grounding across studies (van Deursen et al., 2017). A further empirical contribution has shown that even in technologically advanced countries, the first-level divide remains relevant when access is measured through material dimensions—device diversity, peripheral availability, and maintenance costs—rather than treated as a binary connected/non-connected variable (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2019).

Understanding these dynamics is crucial for grasping how digital infrastructures influence the capacity for social cohesion and democratic participation. This expanded view of the digital divide emphasizes not only *who* is online, but *how* individuals and groups are connected, and within what kinds of communicative realities they operate. By examining the nexus between connectivity, segmentation, and political organization, it becomes possible to better understand the reconfiguration of trust, belonging, and agency in the digital age.

Related Concepts: algorithm; digital activism; digital citizenship; digital engagement; digital exclusion; digital inequality; digital transformation; e-democracy; hashtag activism

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Digital Empowerment

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Definition

Digital empowerment is the process of enabling people to realize their full potential using digital technology. It equips individuals with the necessary tools, skills, and resources to actively participate and engage effectively in social and public life, make informed decisions, advocate for their interests and needs, and achieve their goals. It refers not only to access to technology but also to the ability to use it effectively to create positive change and achieve social benefits. This includes being aware of one's rights, making informed decisions, and ensuring voices are heard, using digital technologies to improve lives. This process focuses on strengthening the capacity of citizens and developing effective strategies to bridge the gap between those who have limited access to digital tools and those who do not, thereby creating a more inclusive and equitable society. It also aims to expand opportunities for those who currently derive limited benefits, for example, by enabling broader possibilities for interacting with public institutions or building networks.

Context

Digital transformation is rapidly growing and changing everyone's lives. Governments worldwide face the challenge of implementing various digital solutions equitably and safely for their citizens (Sharma et. al., 2022; Kumar, 2023). There is no doubt that new technologies have transformed the role of citizens and their participation in public affairs. For some, this transformation means exclusion from public life, while for others it means empowerment through digital tools (Aryal, 2024; Bernholz et. al., 2023). Digital empowerment is not only about access to information and communication but also about enabling ordinary citizens to take an active role in society (UNDP, 2024). The significance of digital empowerment lies in providing individuals with the ability to participate in, influence positive change, and achieve their social and political

inclusion through digital means. Technology plays a crucial role in this process by offering the tools and resources necessary to engage meaningfully. For example, basic internet access enables people to acquire knowledge, access information, connect with others, participate in social and political activities, initiate actions, share interests, and exchange opinions (Lingling, 2023). It enables individuals to present their voice and advocate for their rights through online platforms, such as social media networks, online petition platforms, civic participation portals, blogs, digital communities, and other participatory tools that amplify individual and collective agency in the digital public sphere. Additionally, digital empowerment addresses the challenge of reaching those who lack access to traditional forms of participation, allowing participation through distance learning and online engagement from anywhere, including a new form of participation through social media, the so-called "digitally networked participation" (Ibidem). It's also a burning issue across governments' policies and strategies.

Within the context of RELINK^2 COST Action, digital empowerment is highly relevant to understanding how digital transformation impacts political organizations and citizen engagement. It highlights the cross-cutting issue of who becomes empowered and who remains excluded in this process, including young people and the elderly. RELINK^2 focuses on developing re-linking strategies for marginalized groups based on the responsible use of digital tools and reconnecting intermediary structures with society to ensure inclusive democratic participation.

Related Concepts: digital divide; digital exclusion; digital inclusion; digital transformation; e-democracy; participation; participatory budgeting; political participation; public consultations

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Digital Engagement

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Definition

Digital engagement refers to any form of interaction or participation through digital environments and technologies, including both software and hardware. It encompasses a wide spectrum of engagement and online behaviours—not only engaging within the digital, but also over the digital—ranging from its passive usage (reading the news, listening to your favourite music, etc.), to symbolic support (reporting online misinformation, sharing or liking a cause-related post on social media), and technical intervention (programming, coding, or contributing to open-source projects). Therefore, digital engagement is a broader concept than digital activism, and the two should not be conflated, as digital activism—the use of digital tools and platforms to promote, organize, or mobilize around a particular political or social cause—represents only one aspect of digital engagement.

Context

Based on the level of effort (low, medium, or high) and modes of participation, three types of digital engagement can be identified. Low-effort digital engagement typically involves minimal effort and passive forms of participation. This includes activities such as browsing websites, reading articles, watching videos, or casually scrolling through social media feeds without actively contributing or interacting, as well as using digital services and technologies like digital wallets or smart systems (watches, television, etc.). Low digital engagement is often characterized by its convenience and low time commitment, making it accessible to a broad audience but offering limited influence on digital discourse or collective action. Medium digital engagement involves more active and intentional participation. It can be used for showing support for a cause through online/hashtag activism, changing profile pictures, or signing online petitions. While these activities primarily aim to raise awareness, they tend to have a relatively low impact

on their own (Morozov, 2012), but still might be helpful in finding like-minded people, especially under authoritarian regimes and within contexts where open dissent is risky (Tufekci, 2017). At the higher end of this spectrum, medium-high involvement includes deeper engagement in using digital platforms to organize, mobilize, or contribute to causes in real life. This level of participation seeks to create tangible real-world outcomes (policy or regime change, voter mobilization, etc.) by using social media, apps, or content tools (Castells, 2015). Finally, the high level of digital engagement involves the use of technical expertise such as encryption, cyberattacks, digital sabotage, as well as computing, coding, and programming as forms of political or social action, protest, or resistance. It also encompasses constructive efforts like promoting open access to technology, software, and information (Wark, 2004) to support digital freedom and user autonomy. Hacktivism, as a form of high-effort digital engagement, seeks to challenge the dominant control exerted by big tech companies, advocate for open data and transparency, and drive long-term, infrastructure-focused change.

Lower levels of engagement are typically associated with simple, widely accessible tools, such as basic social media functions (likes, shares, comments) or free applications, that require no advanced expertise. Within today's information ecosystem, which is saturated with AI-generated content and other forms of synthetic "machine creativity," even seemingly passive uses of everyday tools are often leveraged by technology companies for data extraction and appropriation (Bender and Hanna, 2025, 102–103). While the promotion of media and information literacy may be beneficial for individual users, it also inevitably contributes to deeper forms of moderate digital engagement that generate value primarily for technology companies and platform governance, often in ways that remain opaque and beyond the control or awareness of ordinary users. Therefore, in contrast, higher levels of digital engagement involve more complex practices, such as coding, encryption, or participation in open-source platforms, which demand specialized knowledge and sustained commitment. What is crucial, however, is that digital engagement must also be pursued in a hybrid manner—not only within digital frameworks themselves, but also through struggles over the digital as a common (Schneider, 2024), reaching far beyond online spheres, which nonetheless hold the potential to become sites of creative, radical, and democratic renaissance.

Related Concepts: connective action; digital activism; digital protest; e-democracy; e-governance; hacktivism; hashtag acitivism; participation

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Digital Ethnography

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Definition

Digital ethnography can be defined as a research methodology that involves collecting and analysing primary data within digital environments. It is primarily focused on situated and localized, discursive and visual digital practices and is comprised within the field of mediated technology communications research (Varis, 2015). Digital ethnography studies digital communication artefacts, exploring, through analytic mediation frameworks, the political, cultural, and social responses and dynamics entailed by those artefacts (Coleman, 2010). As a research methodology, digital ethnography builds on the growing intersection between technology and culture and is, therefore, interconnected with questions pertaining to digital literacy skills and the digital divide (Underberg & Zorn, 2013). Ethnographic research is fundamental in highlighting how digital technology constructs virtual worlds that produce meanings, which can be collected and analysed (Kaur-Gill & Dutta, 2017). As a methodological approach, digital ethnography comprises virtual ethnography studies, cyberspace ethnography, and new/social media ethnography (Kaur-Gill & Dutta, 2017). Digital ethnography is, however, a contested methodological terrain since the distinction between non-participatory digital analysis and digital ethnography remains understudied (Forberg & Schilt, 2023).

Context

Digital ethnography assumes that virtual environments and online events can be considered as cultural contexts in which ethnographic approaches can be applied (Varis, 2015). It is, therefore, a useful research methodology for those interested in studying how social relations and communities are constructed, represented, and narrated in the digital sphere (Kaur-Gill & Dutta, 2017). Social researchers had to adapt to a world where the distinction between "digital lives" and "in-person lives" is increasingly

blurred (Forberg & Schilt, 2023: 1). Coleman (2010: 488) argues that ethnographic research on digital media encompasses three distinct realms, namely: the relationship between digital media and the cultural, digital (re)imagining and communication of identities and social representations; the analysis of what the author designates as the "vernacular cultures of digital media;" and the study of how digital media mirrors and influences other social practices, namely political, religious, or economic practices. Since digital ethnography's fields of study inhabit virtual spaces, they are not hindered by geographic and national boundaries associated with more physical spaces (Kaur-Gill & Dutta, 2017). However, it should be noted that the digital universe comprises and bears social, class, economic, power, and educational hierarchical structures that raise ethical concerns and positionality issues that the digital ethnographer should take into consideration (Kaur-Gill & Dutta, 2017). Forberg and Schilt (2023) argue that digital ethnography requires an epistemological negotiation regarding the presence and status of the ethnographer in the digital arena that other qualitative research methodologies do not involve. When exploring how social identities, behavioural patterns, and identities are structured in digitally empowered platforms, distinct levels of analysis may be addressed, namely the micro-level of social networks interactions, the meso-level of community building, and the macro-level of power hierarchies enacted and reproduced in the cyberspace (Kaur-Gill & Dutta, 2017). In all three levels, digital data collection and analysis are done through participatory and relational forms of ethnographic interaction (Forberg & Schilt, 2023).

Digital ethnography has been widely employed to study political phenomena associated with digitalization, by examining how political actors and citizens interact within online environments. For example, researchers have used digital ethnographic methods to observe deliberation, mobilization, and identity formation within social media platforms, online activist communities, and digitally mediated party organizations. By combining participant observation, analysis of digital traces, and engagement with platform cultures, digital ethnography enables scholars to capture the everyday practices, meanings, and power relations that shape contemporary digital politics.

Related Concepts: computer-mediated communication; digital divide; digital literacy; digital transformation

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Digital Exclusion

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Definition

Digital exclusion refers to the condition of being effectively shut out from full participation in society due to limited or no meaningful engagement with digital technologies. It is distinct from the related, yet narrower, concept of the digital divide, which describes the binary gap between those who have, and those who do not have, access to digital technologies (van Dijk, 2006), and from digital inequality, which captures more graduated differences in skills and usage among those who are already connected (DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2002). Digital exclusion specifically names the social consequence of these gaps: the inability to convert digital participation into meaningful economic, civic, and social outcomes. It is characteristically self-reinforcing—pre-existing social disadvantages restrict digital engagement, and limited digital engagement in turn deepens marginalization, creating what the literature describes as an "inequality loop" (Ragnedda et al., 2022).

Context

Digital exclusion is a multidimensional concept. The main dimensions identified in the literature are: resource exclusion (lack of devices, affordable internet, or adequate infrastructure); skills exclusion (insufficient knowledge or ability to use digital tools effectively); and motivational exclusion (low confidence, technophobia, or perceived irrelevance of digital tools) (Ge et al., 2025). To these may be added attitudinal dimensions—notably willingness to engage—which empirical research identifies as among the strongest individual-level predictors of whether someone remains excluded (Wilson-Menzfeld et al., 2025). Measurement of digital exclusion typically relies on binary access metrics (whether someone has used the internet recently), frequency-of-use measures, demographic predictors of exclusion, and barriers faced by "limited users"

such as data poverty, device constraints, low skills, and reliance on others (Hernandez & Faith, 2022).

The concept's defining feature is its recursive relationship with social inequality. Those already marginalized by low income, low education, older age, disability, or gender are not only more likely to be digitally excluded in the first place but are also least able to leverage digital tools to improve their circumstances when they do have access. This produces a stratified landscape: the most digitally included groups extract the greatest economic, social, and civic benefits from connectivity, while those on the edge of exclusion obtain the fewest benefits even from basic access (Ragnedda et al., 2022). The self-reinforcing dynamic operates at multiple levels. At the individual level, lack of digital skills reduces labour market opportunities, which reduces income, which in turn limits access to devices and connectivity. For older adults, resource, skills, and motivational barriers interact with physiological conditions such as sensory loss or cognitive decline, and with psychological states such as anxiety and low confidence, producing social isolation that further deepens disengagement (Ge et al., 2025). For women, the cycle begins with educational disadvantage, which cascades into weak digital skills, unemployment, financial dependence, and lack of device ownership, creating a formidable and self-perpetuating trap (Gupta & Kiran, 2023). In higher education, students from low-income backgrounds face a "vicious cycle" in which socioeconomic disadvantage restricts both access to ICT and the development of digital skills, which in turn limits participation in digitally-mediated academic environments (Khalid & Pedersen, 2016).

Crisis contexts reveal the stakes of this dynamic with particular clarity. During the COVID-19 pandemic, digital access shifted from a convenience to a prerequisite for access to education, healthcare, employment, public services, and social connection, dramatically magnifying the consequences of exclusion for women, low-income households, migrants, elderly people, and other marginalized groups. The pandemic also revealed new dimensions of digital disadvantage—not only gaps in access and skills, but in digital autonomy (the capacity for independent, unmediated digital engagement) and in digital identity (the ability to prove one's identity online in order to access services), both of which compound exclusion in ways that basic connectivity measures fail to capture (Ji & She, 2025).

Beyond its socioeconomic dimensions, digital exclusion poses a fundamental threat to democratic citizenship. As digital tools become the primary infrastructure through which citizens access public services, obtain political information, engage in civic consultation, and interact with government, exclusion from these channels increasingly amounts to exclusion from democratic life. The digitalization of government amplifies this risk. When policies and services are conceived from the outset as digital-by-default, when public data and transparency mechanisms are delivered online, and when participatory tools—consultations, petitions, party programmes—are primarily or exclusively

digital, the premise of universal access that underpins democratic inclusion is structurally undermined for those without meaningful digital engagement (OECD, 2025).

The relationship between digital exclusion and eHealth illustrates a broader paradox in digital inclusion policy. Technologies presented as simplifying access for marginalized groups frequently reproduce the very inequalities they are designed to address. Barriers to use are routinely framed as individual deficits—low digital literacy, lack of motivation, language difficulties—while the burden of implementation is placed on patients, informal caregivers, and healthcare workers, rather than on the systems that design and deploy these tools. Marginalized groups are treated as homogeneous rather than as heterogeneous populations with differentiated needs, and solutions that privilege personalized or user-centred design are proposed without the co-creation processes that would make such tailoring meaningful (Coetzer et al., 2024). This pattern of attributing structural problems to individual deficits and mislocating responsibility for inclusion is not specific to eHealth, but recurs across digital inclusion research and policy more broadly.

Addressing digital exclusion, therefore, requires moving beyond narrow access-based interventions. Device provision and connectivity are necessary but not sufficient conditions for inclusion. Policies that focus on access or short-term skills training without addressing the underlying social inequalities that generate motivational and attitudinal exclusion risk leaving the problem intact. Effective approaches need to engage with the full chain of dimensions—resources, skills, motivation, and attitudes—and to recognise the structural factors—age, education, income, gender, disability, geography—that determine who can convert digital access into genuine social, economic, and civic participation.

Related Concepts: civic participation; digital citizenship; digital divide; digital engagement; digital inclusion; digital inequality; digital literacy; e-democracy; e-government; rhetorical citizenship

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Digital Governance

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Definition

Digital governance refers to the structures, mechanisms, systems, and strategies used to manage digital processes within an organisation. It is a key concept within governance theory, referring to a paradigm that extends beyond traditional management by emphasizing coordination, regulation, and interaction across multiple actors in the digital sphere. It is understood as a complex approach to managing digital assets, including norms, rules, principles, roles, decision-making processes and procedures, strategies, programmes, and policies that guide the organisation to ensure the adoption of responsible digital standards and practices. The concept refers to the development and implementation of digital processes among various entities, including governments, civil society organizations, and the private sector, in order to address digital challenges and ensure alignment with organizational objectives and legal frameworks. It is a complex concept that tackles issues ranging from technology adaptation to systemic transformations. Key areas include, in particular, strategic alignment, risk management and digital safety, accountability and transparency, accessibility, ethical considerations, data protection, policy and standards, resource allocation, innovation, and agility.

Context

Digital governance is a crucial concept in the context of the rapid transformation of society and institutions, as well as a key response to emerging digital challenges. For organizations and governments, the importance of new technologies is growing, as they increasingly rely on them to provide public services, manage data, and interact with citizens and customers. Digital governance provides a framework for managing digital processes, decision-making, and establishing standards for the ethical and responsible use of technology, adapted to existing needs and ongoing change. Thus, digital governance is a prerequisite for effective and sustainable digitalization. While

digitalization is a process involving digital transformation and change, digital governance defines the framework for managing that process (Levi-Faur, 2012).

In academic discourse, digital governance is widely studied across many disciplines such as political science, public administration, and the field of information systems. Scholars investigate, among other things, how digital governance influences political and institutional transformation, citizen participation and engagement, public services, as well as regulatory strategies and frameworks (Hanisch, 2023; Engvall & Flak, 2022).

In policy debates, digital governance is a central topic around issues such as data privacy, cybersecurity strategies, or the regulation of artificial intelligence, e.g., the AI Act at the European Union level. Governments and international institutions such as the OECD and the United Nations emphasize digital governance as a pillar of digital government strategies and digital rights protection (OECD, 2021; United Nations Development Program, 2021).

From the societal perspective, digital governance addresses burning issues such as disinformation and misinformation, digital inclusion and exclusion, and non-discrimination, as well as transparency, accountability, and fairness. For example, EU regulation under the Digital Services Act creates the basis for a direct application of digital governance principles.

Related Concepts: Artificial Intelligence Act; datafication; digital engagement; digital equalities; Digital Services Act; digital transformation; e-democracy; e-government; internet and political trust; public consultations

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Digital Inclusion

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Definition

Digital inclusion means all the activities necessary to ensure that everyone, including the most disadvantaged individuals, has access to and opportunities with new technologies, services, and infrastructure, as well as the ability to engage online whenever needed or wanted. This is not only an approach but also a fundamental right that creates opportunities to become digitally equal, capable, and safe, regardless of people's situation, access to digital technologies, or the skills needed to use them effectively. It aims to eliminate structural inequalities and barriers such as a lack of internet access, appropriate devices, or digital skills, ensuring that everyone has an equal chance to fully participate in the digital world and both contribute to and benefit from it. The minimum standards of digital inclusion typically include access to digital devices, connectivity, digital skills and knowledge, as well as adequate support when needed.

Context

Digital inclusion is crucial for ensuring that all individuals in society are able to participate fully in the digital world. This approach is even more relevant, considering the rapid changes and ongoing digital transformation, where access to information and services, as well as citizen participation, increasingly depend on digital technologies and their development, supported by up-to-date knowledge. The concept involves not only physical access to the internet, but also focuses on skills and knowledge, as well as creating equal and safe opportunities to make meaningful use of these digital tools. It is also closely linked to the topic of digital divides, which are tied to broader socioeconomic inequalities. For instance, limited access to reliable connectivity or devices tends to disproportionately impact low-income individuals, while disparities in digital literacy may reflect educational and generational divides (United Nations; Nowak & Kowalski, 2025; Kacar & De Luca, 2024).

In academic discourse, research highlights the relationship between digital inclusion and exclusion, seeking appropriate strategies that address both topics while putting people at the centre. The topic is also particularly important in policy discussions, including those within the European Union (EU) and the United Nations (UN), which aim to create and promote policy frameworks that ensure accessibility for all and address the skills gap. In terms of societal relevance, the topic is present in areas such as education (e.g., digital literacy, critical thinking), civic participation (online tools, digital democratic innovation—DDI), and public services delivered online (European Commission; United Nations; Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, UK, 2025).

The issue of digital inclusion becomes even more critical when considering groups at risk of digital marginalization, such as the elderly, young people, those with disabilities, or disadvantaged populations. Thus, the RELINK^2 COST Action focuses on access to rights and opportunities to engage in the digital sphere and on expanding these opportunities. It also specifically aims to connect older adults, who are digitally excluded but politically engaged, with young citizens, who are digitally active but politically marginalized. The COST Action aims to connect these target groups and develop re-linking strategies for marginalized populations based on the responsible use of digital tools and the concept of digital inclusion.

Related Concepts: civic participation; digital divide; digital empowerment; digital exclusion; digital governance; digital transformation; e-democracy; political participation

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Digital Inequality

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Definition

Digital inequality refers to disparities in the knowledge and ability to use digital and information technology, based on socio-demographic categories (age, gender, residence), socioeconomic backgrounds (unemployed, employed, NEETs) and information technology experience and skills (low, basic, high).

"Digital inequalities" and the "digital divide" are concepts used interchangeably because both refer to differences among members of society in terms of digitalization, and both have "roots" in social inequalities, which is why "digital inequality, or the digital divide, tends to reflect and reinforce existing social inequality" (van Dijk, 2020: 120).

Digital inequality does not only refer to the individual but also to the differences between households, communities, and countries. Also, it refers not only to the differences between them, but also within them: ""the gap between individuals, households, businesses and geographical areas at different socioeconomic levels, both in terms of their opportunities to access information and communication technologies and the use of the internet for a wide variety of activities. The digital divide indicates differences between countries, but also within countries" (OECD, 2001: 5).

Both the OECD and other authors (Kyriakidou et al., 2011; Hincu et al., 2011) talk about "the digital inequalities gap" or "digital divide gap" when they aim not only to highlight the existence of differences, but also to measure the distance, the size of inequalities regarding access, knowledge, and use of information technology between members of society or between societies. Thus, the concept of the gap becomes in this case an indicator, a unit of measurement of digital inequalities or the digital divide.

Context

Early studies on digital inequalities focused on access to technology—the first level of digital inequality (Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2019; Attewell,2001). At this stage,

digital inequalities were strongly correlated with the socioeconomic status of different population categories, but also with the environment of residence. Digital inequalities at this level reveal the differences between those who have financial resources to purchase technology and live in urban areas and those who do not have such resources, and who, as a rule, live in rural areas.

The generalization of access to technology has reduced this level of digital inequalities, but has generated another challenge: skills and usage (Hargittai, 2002). Researchers have distinguished between those who have digital skills and engage with technology beyond basic uses, and those with limited digital skills, who use technology for simple actions, such as communication, games, social networks. Increasing levels of education and the growing digitalization in all fields of activity, have generated inequalities in terms of the benefits of using technology—the third level of digital inequalities (van Deursen & Helsper, 2015). There is a direct relationship between the three levels of digital inequalities (Ragnedda, 2017): the benefits associated with the use of technology depend on the existence of equipment (computers, telephone, internet, etc.), as well as on the level of digital skills (the ability to use this equipment and understand its usefulness and importance).

Because "digital inequality is the digitalized version of social inequality" (Çelik, 2023), an important part of the analyses has focused on identifying the main factors likely to generate this type of inequality. Among the factors generating digital inequalities on all three levels, we identify: gender—women are disadvantaged compared to men (Cooper, 2006); age (Papí-Gálvez & La Parra-Casado, 2023)—the elderly are disadvantaged compared to the young; the place of residence (Feurich et al., 2024)—where rural areas lag far behind urban areas; socio-professional category (Czaja & Urbaniec, 2019)— people in manual occupations have lower access, skills, and digital benefits compared to those in non-manual occupations; and education (Barragán Moreno & Lozano Galindo, 2025)— digital inequalities manifest themselves between the population with a high level of education and that with a low level of education to the detriment of the latter.

The development of ITC has generated high expectations regarding the revitalization of civic and political participation of the population due to its ability to disseminate information in a very short time, the encouragement and development of new forms of participation (blogging, social networks, signing petitions, etc.) that are much more accessible. But the same factors generating digital inequalities risk limiting the civic and political engagement of the population rather than encouraging it, leading to what some researchers call the "democratic divide" (Norris, 2001; Min, 2010). Thus, digital inequalities have the effect of excluding certain categories of the population from civic and political life: on the one hand, because people belonging to these categories lack access and digital skills, and on the other hand, because, due to these limitations, political and civic actors cannot include them in their online

projects (De Marco, 2021). De Marco (2021) even warns that second- and third-level digital inequalities risk leading, at least from a civic point of view, to the separation of the population into "first-class" citizens and "second-class" citizens.

To limit digital inequalities, it is important to consider the views of van Dijk and van Deursen (2014). They argue that there is a simultaneous need for access to equipment and the accumulation of experience and skills that influence the quality of processing and interpreting information and knowledge, so that the latter can be transformed into opportunities and benefits, such as access to education and vocational training, finding a job, for all.

Related Concepts: digital divide; digital literacies; digital natives; digital skills; digital citizenship

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Digital Intra-Party Democracy

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Definition

The concept of digital intra-party democracy analyses how information and communication technologies shape participatory and deliberative processes within political parties. The emergence of the concept signals the rising relevance of digitalization for the dynamics related to party politics (Lupato & Meloni, 2023). The concept of digital intra-party democracy is related with the umbrella concept of digital democracy and builds on the contentious discussion of how party digitalization and the development of party-centred digital ecosystems might strengthen or otherwise weaken democratic dynamics, particularly regarding the digitalization of internal electoral processes and the promotion of what Maati et al. (2024: 922) designate as "informational agnosticism" and non-democratic attitudes (Sandri, 2025). Mapping digital intra-party democracy involves studying differentiated approaches to party digitalization that range from full to selective digitalization (Barberà & Fitzpatrick, 2024). The analysis of digital intra-party democracy considers the consequences associated with party digitalization, namely concerning elections, participation, deliberation, communication, and resource procurement (Sandri et. al., 2024). Digital ethnography approaches constitute preferred research methods for the analysis of digital intra-party democracy (Fitzpatrick, 2021).

Context

The academic and policy significance of intra-party digital democracy is associated with the need to understand how digital technologies increasingly influence the way political parties organize, communicate, and shape their intra-party democratization processes (Sandri, 2025). At the beginning of the 21st century, political parties began to employ websites as political communication tools (Sandri et al., 2024). In 2025, political parties' digital strategies comprise websites, social media, and diverse online platforms which allow for digital campaigning, as well as intra-party participation

and decision-making, namely digital voting and membership (Barberà & Fitzpatrick, 2024). However, the belief that digital technologies necessarily empower intra-party democratization should not be taken for granted and should, instead, be critically discussed (Maati et al.,2024: 922). What Barberà and Fitzpatrick (2024: 1) designate as the "digital transformation of political parties" has internal and external dimensions (Barberà & Fitzpatrick, 2024). Following Fitzpatrick's (2021) five-pillar model and the DIGIPART Dataset (Sandri et al., 2024), five core dimensions are fundamental to map digital intra-party democracy, particularly, elections, deliberation, participation, resources, and communication. Literature acknowledges that technology has a differentiated impact across those five dimensions (Lupato & Meloni, 2023). However, there is a divide between authors arguing that political parties' digital transformation strengthens internal participation and democratization and authors claiming that digital technologies favour the centralization and personalization of intra-party leadership (Barberà & Fitzpatrick, 2024). The diversity of case studies already explored allows to conclude that the use of digital tools to shape new forms of party membership, deliberation, and participation may empower conflicting trade-offs, namely disintermediation and centralization (Barberà & Fitzpatrick, 2024; Maati et al., 2024: 922). Case studies on digital intra-party democracy have focused on national parties, mainly differentiating between age, size, and ideology (Sandri et al., 2024). Such criteria of case selection can be explained by the traditional relevance of national political parties and by the fact that existing datasets on party digitalization cover, mainly, the digital transformation of national political parties (Sandri et al., 2024).

Related Concepts: cybercratic centralism; digital leadership; e-democracy; political organizations; platform politics; online primaries

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Digital Leadership

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Definition

The concept of digital leadership refers to leadership processes and practices mediated by technology. Digital leadership considers that type of leadership that focuses on emerging technology, centring on data and digital tools. Digital leadership can be defined as "a social influence process mediated by information technology" *(*Avolio et al., 2000: 617). The essence of the definition of digital leadership, as Tanniru (2018: 94) shows, refers to the concept as a process for sustaining the culture of innovation, using information technologies (IT) and business architecture. As some researchers (Tuschner et al., 2025) underline, the key component of digital leadership is technological competence. If digital leadership mostly refers to a leader's ability to generate a culture of digital transformation, leadership in digital environments takes into account specific abilities to influence people directly using digital channels.

Context

The implication of technology for leadership purposes dates from the early 1990s, once with the extension of the internet and online tools. The literature reminds the existence of leadership in IT mediated contexts in the form of e-leadership, digital leadership, and virtual leadership. As some authors noted, e-leadership refers to leadership mediated by digital tools; digital leadership is perceived as a process of influence through technological resources and tools; and virtual leadership implies the leader's capacity to manage and organize teams using technological instruments (López-Figueroa et al., 2025).

The significance of digital leadership was revealed in the changes induced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Organizations with strong digital leadership were able to adapt more rapidly to the challenges brought by COVID-19 pandemic (home working, online meetings, etc.).

The rapid development of generative artificial intelligence creates new challenges in the organizational environment. In this sense, information technology and business leaders interact more often to build an agile system, so that organizations have an advantage to adapt and grow to become future market leaders (Tanniru, 2018). Digital leaders help their employees to adapt to new technologies, developing followers' digital literacy and skills. As Abbas et al. (2024) underlined, leaders must possess digital competencies to inspire employee innovation.

Regarding political leadership in a digitalized environment, leaders should be able to adapt to the new dynamics of institutions, parties, and voters *(*Villaplana & Fitzpatrick, 2024: 4*).* According to these authors, leaders with digital abilities should possess three skills*:* presence, interaction, and engagement. In the authors' view, a digital leader has to be present on different social media platforms, posting content and engaging in debates with other politicians and citizens through digital platforms.

Related Concepts: cybercratic centralism; digital governance; digital engagement; digital party; digital society; digital transformation; personalization; political organization

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Digital Literacy

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Definition

Digital literacy is broadly defined as the development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that provide an essential framework for critical lifelong engagement through and within platforms. It has become a paramount component of public debate today, as many experts have encouraged media education and literacy programs within both formal and informal education settings. The umbrella of digital literacy marks a significant "paradigm shift" in the way we locate, evaluate, produce, and use digital media critically. It has also transformed how we achieve digital citizenship with the skills to navigate the platform society towards public values.

Context

Digital literacy can flatten the richness, plurality, and diversity of data cultures, infrastructures, "everyday data literacies" (Burgess et al., 2022), and "critical data literacies" (Sander, 2023), practices that emerge on and from the margins (Rodriguez, 2021), privileging engagement with digital technologies that promote critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) beyond a narrow, one-dimensional view of the world (Loukissas, 2021). It is a combination of literacy (learning how to read and write) and digital everyday life (learning how to use and engage with platforms). It aims to promote the dissemination of critical knowledge produced in the broader areas of social sciences and digital humanities (Lindgren, 2022), particularly by stimulating critical debates around the main challenges of contemporary democracies related to the platform society (van Dijck et al., 2018). Despite platform society often being linked to resurgent authoritarianism, subjectivities of platformization, and cyberlibertarianism of digital hate and political disinformation campaigns worldwide (Golumbia, 2024), the rise of digital literacy serves as a valuable antidote, enabling individuals to access, manage, understand, communicate, evaluate, create, and disseminate information safely and

appropriately through digital technologies (European Commission, 2022: 11). It also stimulates the construction of an ecology of knowledge towards an inclusive, fair, and democratic society oriented to understanding and transforming digital reality and promoting interventions (Tygel & Kirsch, 2016: 109). As Hintz et al. (2018) remind us: "We cannot simply be seen as users of digital tools. The digital world is embedded in our lives and the larger structure that governs them" (2018: 16).

Sefton-Green (2021) explores the relationship between platforms pedagogy and the pedagogicization of everyday life. The author delves into pedagogy to explain how people engage and interact with platforms: "paying particular attention to how users learn or are subjected to norms and behaviours as they read and write their section on digital platforms" (2021: 2) and how this relationship requires human agency within a larger process of control and re-conceptualization (2021: 10). Furthermore, digital literacy creates critical knowledge about everyday routines on and with platforms, motivating users to be challengers while creating forms of pedagogical intervention (Carmi et al., 2020). Thus, the pedagogical sessions of digital literacy are implemented to execute a co-creation approach based on critical experiences within platforms beyond technological solutionism, while learning with each other (Barbosa, 2024). To conclude, Jones (2025) designs the concept of "literacies of repair" based on seven "repairs," namely: action, attention, affect, affinity, visibility, truth, and humanity. Each one of the seven repairs offer insights into how agency, emotions, relationships, knowledge, and "intelligence" emerge through our entanglements with digital technologies.

Related Concepts: digital divide; digital empowerment; media and information literacy; virtual communities

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Digital Media and Ethnic Minorities

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Definition

This entry examines how online platforms and social media shape public attitudes and behaviours regarding ethnic minorities. Digital media often circulate hate speech, targeting people based on race, ethnicity, or religion, as well as disinformation—false or misleading content designed to deceive. Populist actors frequently use these tools to erode trust in democratic institutions, traditional media, science, and minority groups. Together, these dynamics heighten social tensions and undermine democratic debate.

Context

For the first time in a decade, online content generated by bots now exceeds that produced by humans (Imperva, 2026). Research indicates that bots play a significant role in spreading hateful content online (Stella et al., 2018; Albadi et al., 2019). However, online interethnic political discussions, especially on X, are associated with lower ethnocentrism, suggesting social media can promote cross-group contact (Gelovani et al., 2025; Boulianne et al., 2020). In this context, a central question arises: when digital platforms cover ethnic minorities, how do they shape public opinion?

The first meta-analysis, conducted by Simons and colleagues (2026), examines majority attitudes toward various groups classified under the umbrella term "ethnic minorities," including racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, and refugees. Drawing on 155 studies involving approximately 350,000 respondents between 2010 and 2022, the authors investigate three mechanisms: media salience, media valence, and overall media consumption.

Media salience—the visibility of minorities in the media—shows only a weak positive correlation with negative attitudes toward immigration and no significant association for other minority groups. However, the limited number of studies and scarcity of experimental designs prevent firm causal conclusions. Valence, or the tone of media

coverage, emerges as the most robust mechanism. Positive and negative portrayals influence attitudes in the corresponding direction, although effects remain modest.

A consistent asymmetry emerges: negative portrayals have roughly twice the impact of positive ones, confirming the well-established negativity bias. Among media formats, only valence from traditional media shows a significant association with attitudes, while no positive association appears between valence and intentions or behaviours, such as engagement in collective action or intergroup friendships. Lastly, media consumption itself is not linked to more negative attitudes: the few available studies even suggest a negative association with hostile intentions and behaviours. Overall, across all mechanisms, valence is the factor most strongly associated with attitudes.

The second meta-analysis, by Saleem et al. (2025), corroborates these findings. Examining 60 studies published between 2006 and 2023 across a wide range of media genres—including news, television, film, and digital platforms—the authors find that negative portrayals consistently lead to more unfavourable evaluations of minority groups, while positive portrayals lead to more favourable evaluations. No moderating variables, such as minority group type, media genre, medium, or study design, alter these effects.

Recent empirical studies extend and nuance these meta-analytic insights. Xia (2024), using data from 17 Western countries, demonstrates that frequent internet users tend to perceive less cultural threat from immigration. However, this effect emerges among individuals who regularly consume left-leaning digital media, disappears among those exposed to right-leaning media, and weakens or reverses among intensive social media users or individuals on the ideological right.

We now consider the relationship between digital media and behaviour. Arcila Calderón et al. (2024) examine three years of Spanish data from X, Facebook, and police records to explore the link between online discourse and offline behaviour. They find a strong correlation between online hate speech and hate crimes, with machine learning models predicting up to 64% of weekly variations in crimes against migrants. Toxic language—including threats, identity attacks, and aggression—predicts crimes better than simple mentions or sentiment. Facebook data are more accurate than X's. While causality is not claimed, the results suggest that online toxicity mirrors a social climate that can foster violence.

Another crucial dimension concerns the role of political actors in shaping online engagement. Heidenreich et al. (2024) examine Facebook and Twitter posts by national politicians in five European countries. Messages about migration generate far more engagement than other topics, especially on Facebook. Security framing produces the strongest effect, while economic and social framings also increase engagement on Twitter. Engagement is highest when posts align with the negative attitudes of a party's supporters, doubling on Facebook and nearly sextupling on Twitter. Extreme attitudes, whether positive or negative, do not boost engagement.

Beyond human-generated content, emerging research also examines how AI systems represent minority groups. Breazu and Katsos (2024) analyse how ChatGPT-4 represents Eastern European Roma migrants in the context of the Brexit referendum, comparing AI outputs with headlines from the *Daily Mail* and *The Guardian*. Across 65 prompts, ChatGPT neutralizes sensationalist language, individualizes actions, and situates them within broader socioeconomic contexts such as homelessness and poverty. It adopts a cautious tone, warns against stereotyping, and references the historical stigmatization of Roma people. The study raises critical questions about AI's capacity to reflect the full spectrum of media perspectives.

Taken together, these findings show that digital media do not uniformly amplify hostility toward ethnic minorities. Instead, the tone of coverage, the ideological orientation of users, and the broader political environment shape whether online content mitigates prejudice, reinforces it, or translates into real-world harm.

Related Concepts: algorithm; digital divide; digital engagement; digital exclusion; digital inclusion; media and information literacy; online disinformation; political discourse; political discourse; political organization

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Digital Natives

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Definition

Building on Ellen Helsper and Rebecca Eynon (2010), a "digital native" can be understood as someone who develops in a media-rich environment, routinely turns to the internet for information, multitasks with ICTs, and uses online resources for a wide range of activities. Crucially, this view treats digital nativeness as learned: it is continuously performed and reshaped, not simply possessed.

The term initially circulated in a more essentialist vein, implying a quasi-natural attribute of a generational cohort, popularized through the native/immigrant contrast and most associated with Marc Prensky (2001). He argued that post–Generation X cohorts, raised with digital technologies, would "think and process information fundamentally differently" (1), an argument resonant with earlier generational labels such as Don Tapscott's *Net Generation* (1998). Across these accounts, digital natives are portrayed as characterized by rapid information intake, parallel processing and multitasking, networked collaboration, and a preference for interactive, visual, or game-like media, paired with expectations of immediacy and frequent feedback.

This framing contributed to a period of technological-exceptionalist debate sometimes described as the "Prensky Decade." Given that digital environments have changed substantially over time, some authors propose referring to different waves of digital natives instead, as infrastructures, platforms, and norms vary across cohorts (e.g., Generation Z, Millennials) (cf. Dingli & Seychell, 2015).

Context

Subsequent research reviews and empirical studies, however, have repeatedly challenged the idea of a uniform cohort (e.g., Evans & Robertson, 2020; Bennett et al., 2008; Bennett & Maton, 2010; Judd, 2018; Lee, 2005; Li & Ranieri, 2010; Margaryan et al., 2011; Mertala, 2024; Mertala et al., 2024; Ng, 2012; Reid et al., 2022), and the label is now

widely treated as a contested shorthand resting on limited evidence and common-sense assumptions about digital generations. In this sense, the digital native is best understood as a myth, namely, the claim that a birth-cohort label can reliably predict technical fluency, multitasking capacity, learning style, or, more strongly, cohort-wide cognitive change.

Three critiques usually recur: a) strong neurocognitive claims are difficult to substantiate and risk lapsing into technological determinism; b) overgeneralizations about young people's technological sophistication—where everyday familiarity is taken as evidence of competence—can lead institutions to presume digital literacy rather than teach it, despite substantial variation in critical skills such as effective searching, source evaluation, and information literacy; and 3) it has fuelled policy moral panics, legitimizing techno-optimism and technology-first reforms even as evidence suggests that students' learning uses are often conventional, and that observed digital differences are frequently differences of degree rather than kind. Ethically and politically, native discourse may also obscure inequalities in support, safety, privacy, and opportunity, while aligning with processes of datafication and the expansion of educational technology markets.

These criticisms did not eliminate the term; rather, they prompted its reformulation. A common defensible usage shifts attention from "being digital native" (emphasizing internal processes and exposure) to "becoming digital native" (emphasizing social processes and preparedness), foregrounding the roles of education, experience, breadth of use, gender, and social context.

Even if Prensky-style claims persist in public and policy discourse, on this account nativeness does not denote a homogeneous generation. Rather, it refers to immanent developmental processes, best conceptualized as learned capacities and languages for proficient participation in a digitally mediated social world (cf. Castells, 2010). Such capacities are shaped by uneven trajectories of access, resources, support, and experimentation. Digital experience is rarely binary; it is cumulative, irregular, and contingent on digital transitions. It concerns whether subjects can interpret digital communicative codes, navigate changing interfaces, search for and evaluate information, manage privacy and security, create and share content, collaborate in networked environments, and adapt to platform change, while remaining attentive to the uneven distribution of risks associated with visibility, datafication, and social control.

Related Concepts: digital activism; digital citizenship; digital divide; digital engagement; digital exclusion; digital inclusion; digital literacies; digital skills; liquid democracy; media and information literacy

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Digital Party

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Definition

A digital party is a political party whose organizational infrastructure and routine activities are predominantly based on digital affordances, such as online platforms. Digital parties rely on these tools to recruit and mobilize members, raise funds, deliberate and make decisions on the selection of candidates, leadership, or party programmes, organize meetings or offline events, and elaborate parties' ideology. Their defining feature lies not just in the use of digital tools but in their integration into the party's internal structure, communication, and mobilization strategies. While digital parties need not meet all these conditions, their everyday functioning largely depends on digital infrastructures.

Context

Political parties have been profoundly affected by the digitalization of contemporary societies (Gibson et al., 2013; Sandri et al., 2024). The adoption of digital tools by parties has evolved alongside technological innovations, to the point that maintaining an online presence has become essential for any political activity. Over the last thirty years, parties have been creating websites and mailing lists; they embraced social media and mobile applications; and, more recently, integrated advanced technologies such as chatbots and artificial intelligence (Dommett et al., 2024).

However, it is crucial to distinguish the general process of party digitalization from the concept of a digital party. Whereas most parties use digital tools for campaigning or for a limited number of activities, digital parties exist because of their digital infrastructure, which allows them to perform key organizational functions (Fitzpatrick, 2021; Vittori, 2020). Given these boundaries, few parties can be classified as fully digital, and those that can are typically digital natives. Traditional parties that predate the digital era have incorporated online tools but have not (yet) evolved into true

digital parties. Among the most electorally successful examples of digital parties are Alternativet in Denmark, the Czech Pirate Party (and other Pirate Parties across Europe), the Five Star Movement in Italy, and Podemos in Spain. Despite falling under the same broad definition, these parties differ in organizational structures, reflecting their distinct techno-political cultures ranging from more bottom-up to more centralized models (Deseriis, 2019; Vittori, 2020). Moreover, some, such as the Five Star Movement and Podemos, have retreated from several digital affordances in recent years, raising ongoing debates about whether they can still be considered genuinely digital parties (Meloni and Lupato, 2022).

Related Concepts: cybercratic centralism; gamification; digital intra-party democracy; digital leadership; digital transformation; online primaries; platform politics

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Digital Political Campaigning

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Definition

Digital political campaigning refers to a set of campaign practices in which political actors use digital technologies and online platforms to prepare, disseminate, and manage campaign messages directed at broad and/or targeted audiences. In this broader sense, digital political campaigning encompasses digitally mediated forms of voter communication, mobilization, persuasion, media engagement, and campaign organization, including the deployment of political advertising across online and hybrid media environments (websites, social media, applications, television). Within this broad category, data-driven campaigning constitutes a more specific mode of digital political campaigning.

Data-driven campaigning is characterized by the systematic collection and analysis of data from public and private sources to profile, model, and (micro-)target voters with tailored political messages and advertising. Whereas digital political campaigning may involve digital tools without extensive data analytics, data-driven campaigning relies on databases, algorithmic tools, and modelling techniques that integrate data analysis directly into campaign strategy, organization, and decision-making. We, therefore, define digital political campaigning as an umbrella concept that includes data-driven and (micro-)targeted approaches alongside other forms of digitally mediated campaigning. In this sense, all data-driven campaigning is digital political campaigning, but not all digital political campaigning is data-driven.

Context

Electoral campaigning has been profoundly reshaped by the digitalization of political communication and the diffusion of digital media infrastructures. Over time, campaigns have moved from early uses of websites and email lists to the widespread adoption of social media platforms, online advertising systems, and increasingly automated and algorithmic tools. As a result, maintaining a digital presence has become a standard component of contemporary electoral campaigning.

Against this backdrop, digital political campaigning denotes more than the simple use of online communication channels. It captures a mode of campaigning in which digital environments structure how campaigns communicate with voters, organize internally, and deploy resources. These practices involve a diverse set of actors, including parties, candidates, and campaign organisations, as well as consultants, platform providers, data brokers, and, in some cases, foreign or non-party actors engaged in disruptive or covert activities.

The scope of digital political campaigning extends beyond voter persuasion and mobilization to encompass resource generation, media influence, and internal campaign management. While digital political campaigning may enhance campaign efficiency, coordination, and outreach, the literature also associates its expansion with a range of normative and regulatory concerns. These include risks linked to manipulative targeting practices, disinformation, privacy infringements, the fragmentation and polarization of political debate, and forms of opaque or dark political participation. These developments have prompted growing scholarly and policy attention to the governance and regulation of digital political campaigning, particularly in contexts where existing regulatory frameworks address its components in a fragmented or indirect manner.

Related Concepts: data-driven campaigning; data-driven micro-targeting; digital activism; digital engagement

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Digital Protest

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Definition

Digital protest is a form of collective action that uses digital technologies—such as social media, websites, messaging apps, blogs, and online forums—to express dissent, mobilize support, and promote social or political change. It includes various activities, from hashtag campaigns and online petitions to live-streamed protests, digital art, the coordination of offline actions through online networks, and more confrontational tactics such as electronic civil disobedience (Wray, 1999: 110).

Rather than relying on traditional institutions, digital protest often advances its goals through awareness campaigns and online advocacy, as Carty (2013: 1) described. Some actions are spontaneous and decentralized; individuals or activist groups carefully organize others. As Garrett (2006: 205) argues, the reduced cost of accessing and sharing movement information online has significantly lowered the barriers to political participation. However, it also raises ethical questions: leaking—releasing confidential information—is often framed as civil resistance, while doxing—publicly exposing personal data to shame or threaten someone—is typically seen as coercive. In an age shaped by digital media, digital protest has become a vital tool of political expression.

Context

Digital protest is a key term for understanding digitalization, as it reflects how technology is reshaping political participation, collective action, and public visibility. As societies increasingly operate through digital platforms, protest has moved beyond the streets and adapted to digital environments. This shift is not just about tools, but a transformation in how, where, and by whom dissent is expressed.

Digital protest enables individuals to participate in political action with minimal cost, risk, or ties, facilitated by a decentralized architecture in which opportunities to

engage are dispersed across numerous sites rather than controlled by centralized organizations (Earl, 2006: 369–370; Earl, 2010: 214–215). People can express their voice across borders and time zones through online petitions, hashtag campaigns, virtual sit-ins, or coordinated social media actions (Chamberlain, 2004: 141–142; Earl & Kimport, 2008: 453). The anonymity, immediacy, and scalability offered by digital platforms lower barriers to entry and allow participation from those who might otherwise be excluded due to geography, repression, or institutional affiliation.

This form of protest has altered assumptions about collective action (González-Bailón, 2015:. 512–513). Instead of relying on organizations or physical presence, digital protest can emerge from loosely connected networks, often forming spontaneously and spreading rapidly. These decentralized actions are flexible, adaptive, and capable of mobilizing wide audiences without centralized leadership (Hatuka, 2022: 383–386).

In policy discussions, digital protest has raised urgent questions about freedom of expression, state surveillance, platform regulation, and algorithmic bias. Governments and private companies now influence the boundaries of digital visibility—who gets heard and who gets silenced—turning protest into a negotiation not only with political power, but also with algorithms, platform rules, and digital systems that determine what is seen, shared, or suppressed online (Parham, 2019: 284–286).

Societally, digital protest has become one of the defining practices of civic life in the 21st century. From the Arab Spring uprisings to the Fridays for Future climate movement and global hashtag campaigns like #MeToo, digital protest has shown its ability to translate online expression into offline impact, while expanding the meaning of protest in a digital world.

Related Concepts: algorithmic censorship; cybercratic centralism; digital activism; digital engagement; hacktivism; hashtag activism; platform politics; public consultations

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Digital Services Act

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Definition

The Digital Services Act (DSA) is a regulation that entered into force in the European Union in November 2022 and became fully applicable in February 2024. Building upon and modernizing the framework established by the E-Commerce Directive (2000), its overarching objective is to contribute to the proper functioning of the internal market for "online intermediary services" by establishing harmonized rules aimed at ensuring "a safe, predictable and trusted online environment that facilitates innovation and in which fundamental rights enshrined in the Charter, including the principle of consumer protection, are effectively protected" (DSA, Article 1(1)).

The scope of the DSA is defined in Article 2(1) of the Act and, which states that the regulation "shall apply to intermediary services offered to recipients of the service that have their place of establishment or are located in the Union, irrespective of the place of establishment of the providers of those services." Among its innovations, the DSA regulates the liability of intermediary service providers and introduces a robust set of due diligence obligations that vary according to the size and societal impact of the provider. The strictest obligations apply to very large online platforms and very large online search engines (collectively, VLOPs and VLOSEs), whose extensive reach subjects them to enhanced regulatory scrutiny. These obligations include mandatory risk assessments, audits, and mitigation measures designed to address systemic risks such as disinformation, manipulation, and the amplification of harmful or illegal content (Husovec, 2024; Husovec & Roche Laguna, 2022).

Context

The DSA reshapes the legal and institutional conditions under which democratic participation and civic discourse take place in digital environments. It does so by imposing due diligence obligations on online intermediary service providers, particularly

VLOPs and VLOSEs, whose widespread reach enables them to shape information flows, public debate, and political participation at scale.

In this respect, the DSA explicitly recognizes the systemic risks that very large online platforms and very large online search engines may pose to democratic discourse, electoral processes, and the protection of fundamental rights. Articles 34 and 35 of the DSA require these providers to identify, analyse, and mitigate systemic risks, including those that may affect civic discourse, political participation, or electoral integrity.

The link between digital infrastructure and democratic processes has gained particular political prominence, especially in the run-up to the 2024 European Parliament elections. In this context, in September 2023, the European Commission published the *Election Package* and the accompanying *Guidelines for VLOPs and VLOSEs*, commonly referred to as the *Election Toolkit*. While not legally binding, the toolkit provides practical guidance on how VLOPs and VLOSEs should carry out risk assessments and mitigation measures under the DSA, with specific attention to online political advertising, disinformation, generative AI, and the manipulation of electoral information.

Related Concepts: e-democracy; e-governance; digital governance, digital transformation; disinformation

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Digital Skills

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Definition

Digital skills (UNESCO, 2018) refer to the ability to use various devices (computers, telephones, the internet, etc.) to carry out school, professional, civic, and entertainment tasks under safe and legal conditions. The concept of digital skills has evolved in line with technological development: from optional to critical, from the simple use of a computer, telephone, or internet to the ability to apply methods and use programmes. Due to the direct link between them, the concept of digital skills is used with the same meaning as that of digital competence, although there are significant differences between the two (Vuorikari et al, 2022: 3). Digital skills refer to the practical knowledge necessary to use digital devices and networks (involving manual dexterity and the use of methods, materials, tools, and instruments), while digital competence is a broader concept that also includes digital skills and refers to both the knowledge and attitudes of the individual (responsibility, ethics) in relation to the digital world. Responsible use of technology also means understanding it; that is, the ability to read and understand information circulated in the digital environment (text, image, video, etc.), but also to produce information in digital format (Bawden, 2008). In this case, we are talking about digital literacy, a complementary dimension to digital skills.

Context

Digitalization has a holistic nature determined by the diversity of situations in which it is used (school, workplace, participation in society), the multidimensionality of the skills it implies (use of devices, methods specific to digital technologies), and also by typology (e-government, e-health, e-commerce). This fact makes digital skills one of the priorities of decision-makers: the EU objective for 2030 is that at least 80% of people aged between 16 and 74 have at least basic digital skills (European Commission, 2023)

In order to establish the position of each state, but also of each citizen in relation to this objective, systems for measuring the level of skills have been created. The Digital Skill Indicator (DSI) uses the following levels of digital skills: above basic level skills, basic level skills, at least basic level skills, low level skills, narrow level skills, limited level skills, and no skills (Vuorikari et al., 2022). Levels from the DSI are combined with the domains established by another system of indicators, DigComp (Digital Competence Framework), which focuses on the domains/areas of use of digital skills: information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, digital content creation, safety, problem solving. (Vuorikari et al., 2022; Ferrari,2012). If DSI focuses on a single dimension (measuring the level of digital skills), DigComp has a multidimensional approach, being the result of both the speed with which technology develops and the fact that all areas of life are strongly digitalized (Elstad & Christophersen, 2017). The evolution of technology from simple access to equipment to content development, forces assessment systems to adapt and evolve in turn. In addition, some researchers believe that if skills, including digital ones, are developed through diverse, direct experiences, through contact with facts, processes that take place in real life, then assessment systems "must reflect real-life situations as faithfully as possible" (Reichert et al.,2020: 2987) to examine each specific skill for each dimension. Specifically, the population must have a high level of digital skills, but at the same time, it must be assessed whether they know how to use these skills safely, and whether they use them only to get information or also to create content, for example.

Based on these systems in the EU-27, 31.43% of the population is characterized by above basic overall digital skills (all five areas are at above basic level), 28.97% with basic overall digital skills (all five areas are at basic or above basic level, without being all above basic), 17.40% with low overall digital skills (four out of five areas are at basic or above basic level), 9.04% with narrow overall digital skills (three out of five areas are at basic or above basic level), 4.41% individuals with limited overall digital skills (two out of five areas are at basic or above basic level) (Eurostat, 2026). The reality reflected by the data is far from the objective set at the EU-27 level for 2030.

This system aims to measure key elements of functional digital skills (ability to use ICT) but also critical (understanding how content is produced) (Helsper et al., 2021; De Coninck et al., 2023), so that decision-makers can intervene to support the development of these types of skills specifically as soon as possible.

In a digital environment that abounds in information, users need not only the ability to use ICT equipment, but also to distinguish between real, credible information and disinformation or manipulation (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). Only a population with high digital skills is not enough to contribute to the development of democracy in a society. The ability to analyse and accept different points of view, to distinguish between real and false, to formulate opinions based on credible, verified information is an important skill in the information society (Andersson, 2021). Decision-makers,

in turn, have the obligation to protect the population from disinformation and other risks specific to the online environment (Matasick et al., 2020), ensuring the transparency of decisions and the credibility of information. Also, other studies have demonstrated (Saglie & Vabo, 2009) that it is very important for all actors (parties, public administration, civic organisations) to adapt to the digital society and to come up with opportunities that not only trigger and support civic engagement, but also ensure online access for large categories of the population through the development of e-government, e-voting services, etc.

Related Concepts: digital divide; digital inclusion; digital inequality; digital literacy; digital natives; media and information literacy; digital citizenship

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Digital Society

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Definition

Digital society refers to a state of societal or economic development characterized by a high level of digitalization, where interconnected flows of information permeate society and spread through networks at high speeds. This involves both a significant adoption of and dependency on digital technologies and infrastructure that mediate society, the economy, and political systems (Dufva & Dufva, 2019). Also referred to as a "network society" (Castells, 1996; van Dijk, 2012), this advanced stage of economic and technological development is often viewed as the next step in the development of capitalist economies, with Jeremy Rifkin (2011) referring to it as a "third industrial revolution" and Manuel Castells (1996) calling it the "information technology revolution" in *The Rise of the Network Society*. Digital society also refers to the totality of new forms of social relations and social interactions that occur under this advanced state of development as a result of society's integration with digital technology.

Context

Contemporary advanced economies have become integrated with digital technology to such an extent that it permeates most of our social relations. The digital society is characterized by an advanced stage of digitalization which touches nearly every aspect of a society. Some of the major technological advances that have transformed social life and are now commonplace include the internet, artificial intelligence, social networks, smartphones with mobile internet, GPS systems, cloud computing, e-commerce and digital payments, media streaming, and remote work technologies. This advanced stage of digitalization is understood to be a stage of development as well as a form of dependency on digital technologies which mediate social relations and entangle the structures of society (Berry, 2011). The three main sources of this digitalization that

are leading to an increasingly digital society are said to be machine learning, platform thinking, and crowd-based action (McAfee & Brynjolfsson, 2017).

As with previous stages of economic development, it is also characterized by new forms of social interaction. This can be seen in the wide array of social issues that have arisen over past decades such as (but not limited to) "fake news," "slacktivism," "hacking," "echo chambers," "digital addictions," "trolling," "online dating," "AI psychosis," "sexting," "bots," "crowdfunding," and being "chronically online" (Attwood, 2017; Chayko, 2020; Lorenz, 2023; Wajcman & Dodd, 2016). The digital society has changed the way in which we participate in political activism (e-voting, hashtag activism, online protest coordination), engage with institutions (online services), and conceive of individual and collective rights (rights to personal data, surveillance over algorithms, digital sovereignty). At the same time, it has also expanded structural inequalities among those with a lack of internet access (rural populations, lower classes), lack of skill sets (the elderly), and lack of digital literacy (misinformation).

Due to the intensive emphasis on big data, data mining, and video technology, the digital society is also commonly associated with increasing levels of oversight, surveillance, and privacy issues (Chayko, 2020; Zuboff, 2019), while the central role of multinational tech companies in the economy is associated with dynamics of creative destruction, increasing market concentration and oligopolistic relationships, and influence over information diffusion (Castells, 2023; McAfee & Brynjolfsson, 2017; Zuboff, 2019).

This has led some governments to plan to advance towards a "Society 5.0" (Japan) and an "Industry 5.0" (EU), the next developmental step after the information age, which seeks to adapt the digital society in a way that is human-centric, sustainable, and resilient. Japan's Sixth Basic Plan refers to the Society 5.0 as a "vision of the future that Japan should strive towards" which aims for "a human-centred society in which economic development and the resolution of social issues are compatible with each other through a highly integrated system of cyberspace and physical space" (Cabinet Office, Government of Japan, 2015). The EU's Industry 5.0 applies a similar framework to balance economic development with the resolution of societal and environmental problems (Breque, De Nul, & Petridis, 2021).

Related Concepts: datification; digital citizenship; digital democracy; digital engagement; digital state; e-governance; e-participation; Membership 4.0; online disinformation; platform politics

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Digital Sovereignty

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Definition

Digital sovereignty is an umbrella term describing diverse academic, theoretical, and policy-oriented approaches to the self-determination and authority claims of various actors—state and non-state—over the digital environment(s). It can be understood in two main ways: as a discursive practice, it is a political narrative used to frame dependence, autonomy, and control in digital affairs; as a legal concept, it refers to the rules and regulatory powers through which such control is pursued over data, infrastructures, platforms, and technologies. Depending on the geographical, historical, and temporal contexts in which it is framed, it remains necessary to move beyond purely interpretative and descriptive accounts of its various ontic manifestations, which often obscure its conceptualization rather than clarify its key attributes, focusing instead on explaining the political and power relations embedded in its claims. Understood in this way, digital sovereignty can signify two complementary but distinct dimensions: a negative approach, centred on the degree of control over data and digital infrastructures (5G, artificial intelligence—AI, cloud computing, internet, etc.), as well as ensuring independence from external technological influences; and a positive approach, rooted in the idea of gaining agency—authority and autonomy—to independently design, create, govern, and sustain digital tools and environments.

Context

Digital sovereignty occupies a contested space in academic, regulatory, and policy debates, spanning fields such as political geography, international relations, geopolitics, and political theory. The notion of digital sovereignty first emerged in contemporary policy discourse in Pierre Bellanger's *La Souveraineté Numérique* (2011). Set against the backdrop of growing American hegemony over technology, digital infrastructure, platforms, and standards, the bookcalls for the development of a digital industry at

the French and European levels (Glasze et al., 2023: 929). This claim of emancipating from foreign influence reflects not only a negative need for oversight and control over the digital—including questions of who should manage data, how it is used, and where it is stored—but it also carries a proactive dimension that extends into broader issues of ownership. These two dimensions can also be interpreted through two theoretical lenses proposed by Santaniello (2025): an institutionalist approach, grounded in legal principles of restrictions and protection measures against digital threats, such as misinformation and social media infiltration in electoral processes—its negative dimension; and a constructivist approach, promoting a pluralistic understanding of digital sovereignty used to legitimize the exercise of power by specific claimants over the digital, closely aligned with its positive dimension. Therefore, as digital sovereignty also encompasses the hardware components of core digital infrastructure, it rests on two pillars: data sovereignty, referring to the agency and control over the data that an actor develops, produces, and uses; and technological sovereignty, the agency and control over the technologies and components that the actor develops, produces, and uses. It is also useful to distinguish between the economic and political dimensions of digital sovereignty, since the concept covers control over critical economic ecosystems and protection of democratic decision-making ecosystems. Digital sovereignty is thus concerned not only with technological and market autonomy, but also with safeguarding the conditions of collective self-government.

The actors claiming digital sovereignty can include both states, as well as non-state actors such as big tech companies, digital corporations, civil society, individuals, and specific groups like migrants, indigenous communities, and intellectuals (Santaniello, 2025; Bremmer, 2021). The concept of digital sovereignty compels rethinking of the traditional link between state, sovereignty, and territoriality. In the digital age, power is exercised not only through control over a defined territory, but also through regulation of data flows, platforms, infrastructure, and standards that operate across borders. Digital sovereignty, therefore, highlights the increasingly deterritorialized character of authority, while also showing how states seek to reassert political control in spaces that cannot be governed through territorial jurisdiction alone.

Depending on whether their understanding, claims, and goals regarding digital sovereignty are placed on the positive dimension (proactive or responsive engagement) or the negative one (regulation or deregulation), four key approaches can be identified—a proactive and deregulative approach is followed by the United States, emphasizing market-driven innovation and the global expansion of its tech industry. In contrast, China adopts a proactive but highly regulative stance, aiming to assert full control over digital networks, data flows, and domestic technological development. Lacking a strong digital infrastructure of its own, the European Union takes a largely responsive and regulative approach driven by concerns over dependence on dominant non-European tech actors and the resulting loss of control over data. Finally, Latin America's

experiences take both a regulative and proactive approach, but beyond market-driven principles, aligning with decolonial aims to reinforce data protection frameworks and foster regional digital autonomy (Lehuedé, 2024; Pinto, 2018). This principle has also been advocated by various actors from the Global South and by critical scholars, who view digital sovereignty as a common good and a means of decolonizing the digital space. At the same time, digital sovereignty is tied to the use of extraterritorial claims as a foreign policy instrument in the digital age. As states seek to regulate data flows, platforms, and infrastructure beyond their borders, digital sovereignty becomes not only a claim to autonomy, but also a means of projecting regulatory power outwards. It may thus serve both emancipatory and geopolitical purposes.

Related Concepts: cyber security; digital colonialism; Digital Services Act; digital transformation; e-democracy; e-governance; platform politics

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Digital State

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Definition

The term "digital state" is used to describe the new form which the state is adopting as a result of the process of its digital transformation. Different scholars have adopted this and similar notions (such as "digital government," "e-government," "cyber-government") to explore how governments transformed their public administration and public services, and what the consequences are for various aspects of its organization and practical operations. The digital state can be defined as a new state type whose various procedures, practices, and organizational structure are re-organized around digital technology and its specific affordances such as interactivity, instantaneous communication, programmability, and the ability to gather and process vast amounts of data.

Digital technology makes a major difference to the way the state operates, because of the way it radically reshapes how information is organized and how various state procedures and organizational routines are structured. This allows information to be more rapidly retrieved, integrated, and modified, and—most importantly—enables citizens to interact with the state independently of specific locations and opening times, in ways that would have been impossible with pre-digital technology. In this sense, the digital state can be approached historically as the latest chapter in a long history of transforming information technologies used in the field of statecraft (think about tablets in ancient Sumeria or scribes in Pharaonic Egypt). It is a technology which, like its predecessors, leaves a recognizable mark on the state's functioning.

Normally, two different phases are identified in the literature concerning the digital transformation of the state. The first phase involved the "digitalization" of pre-existing services, datasets, and procedures. However, more recently, the focus of this area of practice lies in developing "digital-native" services, designed from day one to be digital, in line with "digital-first" policy recommendations. New services are created from scratch or completely redesigned to tap more fully into digital affordances. More

recent research is concerned with the platformization of the state, namely the way government is acquiring the logics, features, and affordances typical of large digital platforms and their ability to create complex algorithmic and data-driven processes. This also extends to the application of AI technology to the state, leading some to speak of the rise of an "agentic state."

Context

The digital state is a very important topic in the current digital transformation of society, though it has been relatively little studied compared with other fronts of digital transformation. Its relevance lies in the great impact it can have on the functioning of public institutions, but also on a number of other domains affected by the state functioning, ranging from the economy and the effect of state bureaucracy on enterprises, to the experience of individual citizens whose lives are heavily impacted by how the state operates.

Digital transformation can have important benefits by making governments more able to serve their citizens and increasing the transparency and accountability of public institutions. Some scholars argued that digital technology would allow governments to overcome the "silo" tendencies of pre-digital public services and build "user-centred" public services. This vision has been supported by unified government portals and ask-once-only policies aimed at improving citizens' lives.

However, the digital state has also expanded the opportunity for the state to control citizens and increase the "legibility" of the population and territory, with potentially dangerous consequences. There is also mounting concern about the way in which the digital transformation of the state could create new forms of exclusion and inequality, in particular affecting those at a disadvantage in the context of the digital divide. While in most cases this seems like a positive development, its more negative side has long been overlooked. The turn towards digital services can increase the bureaucratic labour of individual citizens, meaning that citizens need to handle complex tasks themselves that were previously performed by trained bureaucrats. Some scholars and experts have denounced how applying "digital-by-default" practices can create many problems for less digitally literate citizens who are left with no alternative ways to access the state administration.

More generally, the study of the digital state and its various practices can provide fertile ground to explore the transformation of organizational structures and individual experience in contemporary society. This involves paying attention to processes of identification, to the way digital technologies mediate power relations, or how digital technology can be used as a massive apparatus of surveillance—all questions that are particularly evident in the digital state and its various practices.

Finally, the digital state is a key site of contention for a country's pursuit of digital sovereignty, given that the state is the institution best positioned to ensure some degree of technological self-reliance. This can be achieved through various forms of regulation aimed at limiting the power of foreign digital corporations, or more actively by making available various digital public services such as public platforms, clouds, or AI systems, as many countries are now discussing as a means to remedy the condition of extreme digital dependence many of them are experiencing. Hence, this is likely to be an area of growing inquiry in the years to come.

Related Concepts: digital governance; digital sovereignty; digital transformation; e-democracy; e-government; platform politics

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Digital Transformation

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Definition

Digital transformation refers to the process of integrating digital changes that fundamentally rebuild an organization, institution, or society. It is a complex, multifaceted process that involves embedding new technologies across all areas of operation and functions, including how value is created, delivered, and perceived. Digital transformation goes beyond the adoption of tools and infrastructure; it demands a rethinking of internal processes, organizational culture, governance structures, and stakeholder engagement. It is also about institutional and cultural change, enabling organizations to adapt to the digital age in ways that improve agility, efficiency, responsiveness, and the ability to meet customer expectations, while equipping staff with the necessary skills and resources. It arises from broader changes in how digital technologies are applied across sectors. In the public sphere, it is also about enhancing service delivery, value creation, and interaction with citizens. Digital transformation reshapes operational landscapes but also affects democratic processes and political systems, transforming how intermediary actors function, how political parties organize and communicate, how people participate in politics, and how democratic institutions operate across diverse political contexts.

Context

Nowadays, digital transformation is a phenomenon inextricably linked with functioning in contemporary reality. It is a central concept in academic, policy, and societal debates, highlighting and confirming the accelerating impact of new technologies on institutions, governance, regulations, and daily life. The concept is present across many disciplines, including political science, public administration, communication studies, sociology, and computer science, which examine structural and organizational

change in both public and private spheres (Ebert et.al., 2018; Zaoui & Souissi, 2020; Verhoef, 2019).

In political science, digital transformation draws attention not only to technological issues, technical adaptation, and infrastructure, but also to the democratic context, participation, impacts on political organization, transparency, institutional responsiveness, and accountability. It is also about the adaptation of technological innovation to different sectors, including the public sector, where it ensures transparency, inclusion, and legitimacy. For example, the adoption of AI tools, online platforms, or digital consultation reshapes communication between citizens and political organizations, decision-makers, and public institutions. Digital adaptations have also affected existing dynamic and power relations, while citizens and organizations can now influence decision-making processes more through available platforms, digital networks, and the use of AI. However, it might have both a positive impact by enhancing citizens' input, but also strengthen opposition and negative results, e.g., digital exclusion and marginalization (Vial, 2021). This concept also bridges theoretical and practical approaches, making it valuable for analysing political communication, comparative governance, digital inequality, and the need for new skills.

In policy discussions, governments and international organizations, for example, the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, n.d.)) and the European Union (European Commission, n.d.)), emphasize that digital transformation is key to achieving modern, citizen-centred public service, economic resilience, and competitiveness. Policymakers develop strategies not only for digital infrastructure investment but also for addressing digital divides, ensuring inclusiveness, and updating regulatory frameworks to reflect new risks and opportunities. Digital transformation also affects everyday life, e.g., government services, banking applications, digital healthcare, e-commerce, and online shopping, etc.

Societally, digital inclusion is a crucial and cross-cutting issue that affects access to government services, democratic participation, and communication with public administration. For example, the public sector increasingly relies on digital platforms for service delivery and to engage citizens. In this context, citizens and civil society organizations often play a key role in designing and producing democratic digital innovations such as civic technologies, platforms, social innovations, and co-production and co-management systems that governments later adopt.

It is also a central concept in RELINK^2 COST Action, which explores the consequences of digital transformation on political organization, democracy, and citizens, and its impact on re-linkage strategies.

Related Concepts: datafication; digital activism; digital divide; digital engagement; digital empowerment; digital exclusion; digital governance; digital inclusion; Digital Services Act; e-democracy; e-government; participation

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Digital Work and Inequalities

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Definition

Digital work and inequalities refer to the ongoing processes by which digital technologies and online labour platforms reshape employment relationships, frequently reproducing or exacerbating historical workforce disparities (Bandi et al., 2020). Digital labour platforms intermediate a broad spectrum of work, ranging from remote freelancing and machine learning data annotation to location-based gig work such as transportation and domestic services (Anwar & Graham, 2020; Lesala Khethisa et al., 2020). While this ecosystem promises flexibility and autonomy, it structurally relies on algorithmic management and non-standard employment contracts, generating intense precarity and a lack of social protection for workers (Roberts, 2022; Franzini & Lucciarini, 2022). Specific structural inequalities in this domain include algorithmic bias in task allocation, gender and occupational segregation, and deep digital divides that consistently privilege workers with higher existing socioeconomic and cultural capital (Munoz et al., 2023; Martindale & Lehdonvirta, 2023).

Context

The proliferation of the gig economy presents profound implications for democratic society, as technology platforms increasingly treat labour as an expendable commodity rather than socially embedded human capital deserving of statutory protections (Bandi et al., 2020). The governance structures of digital work, particularly "algorithmic management," dictate task assignments, track performance metrics, and evaluate workers without transparent human oversight, thereby limiting worker autonomy and collective bargaining power (Roberts, 2022; Anwar & Graham, 2021). This architectural opacity frequently embeds established biases; for example, platform affordances such as photo requirements, language proficiency filters, and client rating systems reinforce

gendered and racialized stereotypes, actively undervaluing the labour of women and minority workers (Munoz et al., 2023; Piasna & Drahokoupil, 2017).

Furthermore, the digital divide profoundly shapes who benefits from digital labour. Rather than democratizing opportunities, online platforms reproduce global and class-based inequalities, where individuals from privileged socioeconomic backgrounds and the Global North dominate high-paying, autonomous professional services (Martindale & Lehdonvirta, 2023; Demirel et al., 2020). In contrast, workers in the Global South are often relegated to precarious, low-wage "micro-work," acting as invisible "data janitors" who train machine learning algorithms under exploitative conditions without access to fair pay or career mobility (Anwar & Graham, 2020; Demirel et al., 2021). Similarly, local gig workers, such as ride-hail drivers and domestic cleaners, face extreme occupational hazards, volatile earnings, and unilateral deactivation by platform algorithms (Lesala Khethisa et al., 2020). Thus, the digital economy frequently extends historical marginalization under the guise of technological innovation (Munoz et al., 2023).

Related Concepts: algorithm; algorithmic bias; digital colonialism; digital divide; digital exclusion; digital inclusion; digital natives; digital society; digital transformation; platform politics

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E-Democracy

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Definition

E-democracy (electronic democracy) concerns the use of digital technologies to foster citizen participation, engagement, and empowerment in democratic processes. It enhances core democratic principles such as transparency, accountability, and public involvement in policy development, decision-making, and governance.

Context

As digital technologies and online platforms continue to expand, citizens increasingly expect digital opportunities to participate in democratic processes. Over the last decade, the widespread use of the internet has allowed e-democracy to evolve from delivering static content to interactive platforms that have transformed how citizens express opinions, mobilize collectively, and engage with public authorities. This evolution has enabled governments to move beyond one-way information provision towards interactive and participatory governance. In e-democracy, the use of digital technologies promotes inclusiveness, for example, through mechanisms such as online public consultations, participatory budgeting, online deliberation, and digital voting.

E-democracy emerges in a context where democratic legitimacy, transparency, and trust in public institutions are under pressure. Digital tools create new channels for consultation, deliberation, co-creation of policies, and civic engagement, allowing citizens to influence public decision-making beyond periodic elections. These tools facilitate two-way and multi-directional communication between public authorities and citizens, enabling continuous dialogue, feedback, and collaboration. Also, through digital technologies, members of local communities who have traditionally been underrepresented can participate in the policy-making process via different digital channels, resulting in more legitimate decisions and effective implementation.

Related Concepts: digital empowerment; digital engagement; digital governance; digital transformation; e-government

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E-Government

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Definition

E-government (e-gov or electronic government) refers to the use of digital technology and electronic systems by government institutions to provide public services, interact with citizens, and conduct administrative operations.

Context

As technologies continue to evolve with the expansion of smartphones and the web, municipal governments have begun to use digital tools to interact with citizens more effectively. The internet has changed the way individuals interact with one another and has also enabled the digital transformation of the public sector. Delivering public services via digital platforms is growing, and citizens' demand for digital public services continues to rise. G2C ("government-to-citizen") has encountered new forms of collaboration and opened new avenues for governments to connect with citizens, distribute data, and participate in conversations that are bilateral. E-government also encompasses interactions such as government-to-business (G2B), government-to-government (G2G) and government-to-employee (G2E).

E-government has grown over the last decade from delivering static services, such as providing basic information and downloadable forms, to offering interactive and transactional digital services, including online tax payments, electronic permit and licence applications, digital identity services, and real-time communication between governments and citizens.

As a whole, digital technology provides opportunities to improve e-service delivery and responsiveness. Citizens can now access public services online, submit applications and documents electronically, track the status of requests in real time, communicate directly with public authorities, and receive faster and more personalized responses. Even members of local communities who have traditionally been marginalized can

access public services through diverse digital channels, leading to more inclusive, accessible, and effective service delivery. The adoption of digital government also has the potential to contribute to the development of local communities to become more socially inclusive and sustainable.

There are several available cross-national indicators and indices to compare e-government across countries. These indicators differ in scope and methods, but all provide systematic, quantitative comparisons. For example, the United Nations E-Government Development Index (EGDI) combines sub-indices such as online service delivery, telecommunication infrastructure, and human capacity to give each country a score that can be compared globally. The OECD Digital Government Index assesses how well countries implement digital government policies and systems across six dimensions.

Related Concepts: digital empowerment; digital engagement; digital governance; digital transformation

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E-Participation

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Definition

E-participation refers to the use of digital technologies to support, enable, or transform citizens' involvement in political and administrative processes (Ferrucci et al., 2020; Ruess et al., 2023). In its narrower meaning, it concerns digitally mediated forms of participation promoted or facilitated by public institutions, such as online consultations, e-petitions, participatory budgeting platforms, digital deliberation forums, crowdsourcing of policy proposals, or other mechanisms through which citizens are invited to contribute to decision-making. In a broader sense, e-participation also includes citizen-initiated uses of digital tools to express preferences, exchange political information, mobilize around public issues, or influence political actors.

E-participation is closely related to political participation, digital engagement, and digital activism, but it should be distinguished from each of these concepts. Political participation is the broader category, referring to activities through which citizens seek to influence politics, government, or collective decisions, whether online or offline. E-participation can therefore be understood as the digital dimension of political participation, although not all online political behaviour necessarily qualifies as participation (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Theocharis & van Deth, 2017). Digital engagement is broader and more diffuse, including low-intensity forms of attention, interaction, or involvement with public affairs, such as reading political news online, following political actors, or reacting to public debates on social media. Digital activism, by contrast, refers more specifically to mobilizational and often contentious forms of collective action, including online campaigns, protest coordination, hashtag activism, or platform-based advocacy. E-participation occupies an intermediate position: it is more specifically political than general digital engagement, but it is not necessarily contentious or movement-based like digital activism.

Context

The study of e-participation is a relatively young and expanding field, marked by significant conceptual and methodological debates. One central controversy concerns its definition and boundaries. Activities that require little effort from participants, such as liking, sharing, or reacting to political content on social media, are particularly divisive. Some scholars are reluctant to treat these expressive or low-cost behaviours as forms of political participation, arguing that they may lack intentionality, influence, or meaningful engagement. While some authors regard these practices as weak or symbolic forms of participation, others argue that they may constitute entry points into more demanding forms of political engagement, especially when they expose citizens to political information, networks, and mobilizing opportunities (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018). On the other hand, the expansive approach brings e-participation closer to the tradition of political participation research, where scholars have long distinguished between institutionalized and non-institutionalized forms of participation, with digital technologies enabling both. From this viewpoint, scholarship argues that definitions of political participation need to be adapted to technological change, since digital platforms have altered the repertoire through which citizens encounter politics, express preferences, and connect with collective causes.

E-participation is not a unidimensional concept but rather a multidimensional phenomenon that can be analysed along several intersecting axes. The first dimension concerns intensity or depth of engagement, ranging from passive information consumption at one end to active co-production of policy and collaborative decision-making at the other. This dimension is captured in ladder or spectrum models, most notably those proposed by Macintosh (2004) and later elaborated by Sæbø, Rose, and Flak (2008), which distinguish between e-enabling, e-engaging, and e-empowering levels of participation. The second dimension relates to the institutional context in which e-participation takes place, distinguishing between participation that is embedded in formal governmental or administrative processes—such as online consultations, digital town halls, or e-petitioning systems linked to legislative bodies—and participation that occurs in more informal or hybrid spaces, such as party platforms, civil society networks, or social media environments (Coleman & Shane, 2011). The third dimension concerns the directionality of communication: whether information flows from institutions to citizens (top-down), from citizens to institutions (bottom-up), or horizontally among citizens themselves, as in peer-to-peer deliberation or networked mobilization (Coleman & Blumler, 2009). A fourth dimension addresses the actor configuration involved, recognizing that e-participation may be initiated and structured by state actors, political parties, civil society organizations, or citizens themselves, each of which implies different power relations, incentive structures, and democratic implications (Chadwick, 2009). Finally, a fifth dimension pertains to outcomes and

impact, distinguishing between symbolic or expressive participation—which may enhance political voice without directly influencing decisions—and instrumental participation oriented towards tangible policy or governance effects (Christensen, 2011; Lindner & Riehm, 2011). Overall, these dimensions underscore that e-participation cannot be reduced to a single scale of more or less, but must instead be understood as a multi-axis space in which different combinations of intensity, context, directionality, actors, and outcomes produce qualitatively distinct forms of digitally mediated political engagement.

These debates have direct implications for operationalization (Cantijoch & Gibson, 2019). Narrow approaches measure e-participation through institutionally organized activities, such as online consultations, petitions, participatory budgeting, or contact with public officials. Broader approaches include a wider range of online political behaviours, such as discussing politics online, sharing political content, joining digital campaigns, or using social media to mobilize others. The choice between narrow and broad operationalizations affects empirical findings, especially when comparing countries, age groups, or trends over time. If e-participation is defined narrowly, it tends to appear less frequent and more dependent on institutional design. If it is defined broadly, it appears more widespread, but the analytical distinction between participation, engagement, and expression becomes less clear.

Empirical research generally shows that online forms of political engagement and participation have increased over time, especially since the diffusion of social media. This shift has mainly been driven by low-intensity forms of online involvement, such as reading, observing, or following political discussions without visible interaction, are among the most widespread forms of engagement in digital political environments (Edelmann et al., 2017). However, the democratic meaning of this trend remains contested. One of the key questions is whether e-participation mobilizes previously inactive citizens or mainly reinforces the participation of those who were already politically interested and engaged. Existing studies tend to find positive but often modest mobilizing effects (Boulianne, 2015, 2020). Particularly relevant is the evidence suggesting that digital tools may lower the costs of participation and attract younger citizens, although inequalities linked to education, political interest, digital skills, and resources remain important. However, research also emphasizes a growing divergence between the quantitative expansion of e-participation tools and mechanisms—as documented in successive UN e-government surveys (e.g., United Nations, 2022)—and more sceptical assessments of their qualitative democratic impact, with persistent concerns about low uptake, self-selection biases, and the limited influence of digital consultations on actual policy outcomes.

E-participation is important for debates on digital democracy (De Blasio & Sorice, 2019). Optimistic perspectives emphasize its potential to broaden access, reduce participation costs, improve consultation, strengthen deliberation, and create new channels

between citizens and institutions. More critical perspectives warn that e-participation may reproduce existing inequalities, generate symbolic or low-impact participation, empower platform intermediaries, or create participation without real influence over decision-making. Its democratic contribution therefore depends less on the mere availability of digital tools than on their institutional design, inclusiveness, transparency, responsiveness, and connection to actual policy outcomes.

Related Concepts: digital activism; digital democracy; digital engagement; platform politics; political participation; slacktivism

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E-Voting (Electronic Voting)

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Definition

E-voting refers to the use of electronic technology to cast a ballot in elections. This umbrella concept encompasses all forms of ballot casting involving technology and can be divided into more specific concepts depending on where and how the vote is cast. The most well-known forms of e-voting are direct-recording electronic (DRE) voting machines, which operate in supervised environments (typically polling stations), and internet voting, which occurs in unsupervised environments and uses voters' own computers or smartphones to cast votes online (Duenas-Cid et al., 2026).

Context

The digitalization of democratic processes is significant because it can reshape electoral practices (Krimmer, 2012). In this regard, the implementation of electronic voting systems may enhance accessibility, improve administrative efficiency, and reduce the costs of managing elections. Nevertheless, the search for convenience and efficiency must be carefully balanced with requirements for security, transparency, and political neutrality to safeguard public confidence in democratic institutions and the legitimate delegation of political authority.

The adoption of electronic voting has neither been regular nor uniform across countries.[1] Different forms of voting machines are currently used in countries as diverse as Brazil, India, Belgium, Pakistan, Venezuela, and several states in the United States. The use of internet voting remains more limited, with Estonia being the leading example, having employed internet voting continuously in all elections since 2005 (Solvak & Vassil, 2016). Other countries that have tested or implemented internet voting

1 For an up-to-date list of countries using electronic voting, we recommend checking the database provided by IDEA, where information is updated yearly: https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/icts-elections-database.

include Canada, Switzerland, France, and Panama, although its use is often restricted to specific types of elections or particular groups of voters. By contrast, some countries have tested and subsequently abandoned internet voting for various reasons, including Norway and the Australian state of New South Wales.

More broadly, the use of electronic voting has generated substantial debate among scholars, policy-makers, and election administrators. Supporters of electronic voting frequently emphasize its potential benefits for both voters and election managers. For voters, electronic voting—particularly internet voting—can increase convenience by allowing ballots to be cast remotely. For election administrators, technological solutions may accelerate vote counting and result reporting, reducing the administrative burden of managing large electorates, such as those in India or Brazil. Furthermore, technology may streamline certain organizational processes and improve the cost-efficiency of elections. Similarly, although the expectation that electronic voting increases voter turnout has only been confirmed in specific groups and contexts (Germann, 2021), it may nevertheless facilitate the participation of large segments of the population in decision-making processes and foster broader engagement with democratic institutions and practices (Borge et al., 2022).

Critics, however, have raised concerns regarding the opacity and complexity of technological systems. These characteristics may make electronic voting systems difficult for citizens and stakeholders to observe, understand, and independently verify, leading some countries, such as the Netherlands and Germany, to largely avoid their adoption. In response to these concerns, international organizations involved in election management have increasingly emphasized transparency and observability as a central principle for enhancing the trustworthiness of electronic voting systems (OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2024; Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, 2017). Moreover, recent approaches tend to frame electronic voting in terms of the broader electoral process rather than focusing exclusively on the technologies or devices employed (Duenas-Cid et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, significant challenges remain. Some scholars argue that existing forms of electronic voting do not fully satisfy democratic requirements and question whether transparency and observability can be implemented consistently and effectively across different technological and institutional contexts. In addition, while technology can improve the speed and efficiency of result reporting, failures in transparency or perceived inaccuracies may undermine public trust in electoral outcomes.

Finally, a further criticism concerns the inherently technical nature of electronic voting systems. Technical risks can never be completely eliminated, and the possibility of failures, vulnerabilities, or attacks may negatively affect citizens' confidence in electoral processes. Recent developments in artificial intelligence have increased the capacity to identify and exploit vulnerabilities in digital systems, while the future

emergence of quantum technologies may create additional challenges for the security of electronic voting infrastructures.

Related Concepts: digital activism; e-democracy, digital democracy, quadratic voting

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Echo Chamber

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Definition

An echo chamber refers to a communicative environment, whether digital, social, or institutional, where individuals are primarily exposed to information, opinions, and beliefs that reinforce their existing views, while dissenting perspectives are excluded or minimized. This phenomenon arises through both social homophily—the tendency to associate with like-minded individuals—and structural or algorithmic mechanisms that favour ideologically congruent content (Garrett, 2009). Within echo chambers, repetition and affirmation strengthen group cohesion, heighten ideological polarization, and reduce openness to opposing evidence (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). Unlike filter bubbles, which emphasize algorithmic personalization, echo chambers focus on the social and discursive processes of mutual reinforcement and selective exposure (Bruns, 2019). The term was popularized in political communication research to describe how ideologically homogeneous networks limit exposure to diverse viewpoints, shaping opinion formation, misinformation dynamics, and the fragmentation of public discourse in democratic societies (Bruns, 2019; Garrett, 2009; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008; Sunstein, 2018).

Context

The concept of the echo chamber has become central to the analysis of information circulation and ideological polarization in contemporary communication research. Cass R. Sunstein (2018) first used the term to describe how online and offline networks of ideologically similar actors amplify shared beliefs and suppress contradictory ones, thereby creating epistemically homogeneous environments. This self-reinforcing dynamic can distort deliberative democracy by reducing citizens' exposure to alternative viewpoints and weakening the shared informational foundations necessary for collective decision-making.

Empirical studies have expanded Sunstein's theoretical framework. Jamieson and Cappella (2008) examined conservative media ecosystems in the United States, showing how repeated narratives within partisan communication networks reinforced ideological identities. Garrett (2009) further demonstrated that politically motivated selective exposure online contributes to informational segregation, although the effect varies among users and platforms.

More recent work by Bruns (2019) and Cinelli et al. (2021) emphasizes that echo chambers are not absolute informational silos but rather degrees of selective exposure shaped by algorithmic curation, social dynamics, and individual choice. While some users actively seek confirming information, others encounter diverse perspectives through incidental exposure. Therefore, the echo chamber serves as a conceptual lens to understand how technological affordances and social behaviour interact to produce varying levels of ideological insulation.

In current scholarship, the term functions both descriptively, mapping patterns of networked discourse, and normatively, as a critique of how media fragmentation undermines pluralism, tolerance, and the deliberative ideals of democratic societies.

Related Concepts: algorithm; digital disconnection; filter bubble; recommender system

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Filter Bubble

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Definition

A filter bubble constitutes a state of informational isolation resulting from the algorithmic personalization of content in digital environments. This phenomenon occurs when platforms and search engines rely on behavioural data, such as browsing history, clicks, and interactions, to tailor results and recommendations to each user's individual preferences. By systematically prioritizing content aligned with prior beliefs and interests, these systems promote an "invisible curation" that limits exposure to divergent perspectives, thereby conditioning perceptions of reality and constraining public debate. The concept, formalized by Eli Pariser (2012), has become central to analyses of the political and cognitive implications of automated personalization, assuming particular relevance in research on digital media, information behaviour, and deliberative democracy.

Context

The concept of the filter bubble has consolidated as a central axis in scholarly debates on the sociopolitical impacts of algorithmic personalization and mediated information consumption. Pariser (2012) warns of the emergence of "personalized information universes," in which each user accesses only a fraction of reality shaped by previous preferences and behaviours. This dynamic raises significant democratic concerns, as it may undermine the informational diversity essential to pluralism and critical public deliberation.

Subsequent research has refined the concept by distinguishing it operationally from echo chambers. Whereas echo chambers result primarily from social homophily and processes of social self-reinforcement, filter bubbles are, in the first instance, produced by algorithmic recommendation systems (Sunstein, 2018). Empirical studies have sought to measure their effects. Flaxman et al. (2016) found that, although

self-selection and algorithmic filtering processes exist, informational isolation is not absolute and varies across platforms. Similarly, Bakshy et al. (2015) observed that Facebook users are still exposed to some politically discordant content, albeit in significantly smaller proportions.

Contemporary literature emphasizes the multifaceted and contingent nature of filter bubbles. Authors such as Bruns (2019) argue that their effects are moderated by variables including platform architecture, users' digital and media literacy, and their intentionality in seeking information. Rather than constituting an insurmountable barrier, filter bubbles represent a continuum of personalization and selective exposure. Their study remains crucial for understanding cumulative effects on public opinion formation, the reinforcement of cognitive biases, such as confirmation bias, and the potential erosion of a shared and informed public sphere.

Related Concepts: algorithm; digital disconnection; eco-chambers; recommender system

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Fluid Representation

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Definition

Fluid representation refers to the dynamic voting mechanism underlying liquid democracy, which combines elements of direct and representative democracy (Valsangiacomo, 2021). This system allows citizens to choose, for each policy issue, whether to vote directly or delegate their vote to a trusted proxy through delegable proxy voting (Brill & Talmon, 2018).

Context

The system's flexibility stems from transitive delegation: proxies can further delegate received votes to others with greater expertise on specific topics (Blum & Zuber, 2016). Votes thus flow through delegation networks like liquid through channels, creating the "fluid" metaphor. Crucially, delegations can be instantly revoked and are topic-specific, allowing citizens to adapt their participation strategy based on their knowledge and interests (Gölz et al., 2021).

Digital technologies are fundamental to fluid representation's feasibility. Platforms like LiquidFeedback enable real-time management of complex delegation networks that would be impractical using traditional voting methods (Bloembergen et al., 2019). These technological tools transform liquid democracy from a theoretical concept to an implementable governance system (Behrens et al., 2014).

Proponents argue that fluid representation addresses participation deficits in traditional representative democracy by enabling citizens to engage directly on issues they care about while delegating others to trusted experts. This should theoretically achieve epistemic superiority by mobilizing specialized knowledge across the voting network (Blum & Zuber, 2016).

However, critics highlight the risk of disproportionate accrual of power among popular proxies—so-called "gurus" or "super-voters"—which could concentrate influence

and undermine democratic equality (Gölz et al., 2021). Another criticism of the fluid representation is that the system's instant recall mechanism creates a fundamental tension by potentially reducing proxies to mere delegates who must constantly reflect momentary majority opinions rather than exercising independent judgement (Valsangiacomo, 2021). This risk of transforming representation into a simple reproduction of citizen preferences raises questions about whether genuine deliberative representation can occur when proxies operate under such immediate accountability pressures.

Empirical evidence comes from real-world implementations, notably the German Pirate Party's use of LiquidFeedback for internal decision-making, providing insights into the practical challenges and benefits of fluid representation systems (Bloembergen et al., 2019).

Related Concepts: AI-enabled analytics; algorithm; e-democracy; e-governance; liquid democracy; participation; political participation; participatory budgeting; platform politics

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Gamification

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Definition

Gamification refers to the use of game design elements, mechanics, and aesthetics in non-game contexts to engage users, motivate behaviour, and shape participation. It typically involves mechanisms such as points, badges, leaderboards, challenges, or narrative elements to encourage desired actions or learning outcomes. While often applied in business, education, and governance to enhance engagement, gamification also raises questions about manipulation, surveillance, and digital labour.

Context

The concept of gamification emerged in the late 2000s, drawing on insights from behavioural psychology, user experience design, and game studies. It is rooted in the idea that the motivational structures of games—competition, achievement, feedback, and reward—can be harnessed to increase engagement in everyday activities, from learning platforms to civic participation tools. Therefore, gamification is closely linked to nudging (Thaler & Sunstein, 2014) insofar as both involve the strategic design of choice architectures that subtly steer behaviour by leveraging cognitive biases, motivational cues, and incentive structures without constraining individual autonomy.

In political and organizational contexts, gamification has become a prominent feature of digital governance, datafication, and algorithmic management. Governments and political organizations have adopted gamified platforms to stimulate participation, such as through interactive voting education, environmental challenges, or citizen science projects. In particular, gamification has been introduced into intra-party decision-making processes as a means of innovating internal practices and fostering member mobilization (Biancalana & Vittori, 2023). In the corporate world, gamification is widely used in performance tracking, customer loyalty systems, and training

applications, often converting participation into quantifiable data that feed into algorithmic decision systems (Spanellis & Harviainen, 2021).

However, critical scholarship argues that gamification often obscures asymmetries of power. It can transform genuine participation into instrumentalized engagement, where users' behaviours are subtly directed through reward systems designed by institutions or platforms. Researchers highlight parallels with digital labour and surveillance capitalism, where gamified systems extract value from attention and data, blurring the line between play and work. For instance, in creative industries, the rhetoric of "play" and "creativity" often cloaks intensified labour and new forms of control—a critique equally relevant to gamified participation systems.

Gamification also intersects with emerging technologies such as AI-enabled analytics and algorithmic personalization, which tailor challenges and feedback dynamically, making engagement both more immersive and more opaque. As such, it sits at the crossroads of technological design, behavioural governance, and digital ethics.

RELINK^2's focus on digitally and politically marginalized communities provides an opportunity to assess whether gamification empowers or excludes. Investigating how gamified political tools distribute incentives, collect data, and represent participation can inform policy recommendations aimed at fostering ethical, transparent, and inclusive digital governance. In this sense, gamification becomes both a practical strategy and a critical site for examining the cultural politics of digital participation in contemporary democracies.

Related Concepts: AI-enabled analytics; algorithm; datafication; digital engagement; platform politics

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Hacktivism

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Definition

Hacktivism is the fusion of hacking and activism: the use of digital tools and techniques—such as website defacement, information leaks, denial-of-service attacks, or data breaches—to promote political, social, or ethical causes. It represents a form of digitally mediated activism that challenges existing power structures, often operating at the intersection of technological skill, political dissent, and media performance. Hacktivists exploit vulnerabilities in digital systems to expose corruption, protest injustice, or advocate for causes ranging from free information to human rights.

Context

Emerging in the 1990s alongside the rise of cyberculture, hacktivism evolved as both a political tactic and a cultural performance within the expanding digital public sphere. Groups like Cult of the Dead Cow, Anonymous, and LulzSec became emblematic of a new, decentralized form of political engagement grounded in digital expertise, anonymity, and transnational coordination.

Hacktivism occupies an ambiguous ethical space. On one hand, it extends traditions of civil disobedience into cyberspace—acting as a form of digital direct action that draws attention to issues like censorship, surveillance, or corporate exploitation. On the other hand, its tactics often blur the line between protest and crime, raising questions about legality, accountability, and collateral damage. Scholars note that hacktivism functions both as symbolic resistance and informational warfare, operating through visibility: leaking classified data, hijacking digital infrastructures, or disrupting communication networks to reframe narratives of power and control.

From a sociotechnical perspective, hacktivism embodies the politicization of code—an acknowledgment that algorithms, platforms, and data architectures are not neutral but embedded with values and ideologies. Recent discussions around algorithmic

governance, open-source movements, and AI transparency (e.g., OSI's 2025 initiative to define "open-source AI") reveal parallel struggles over access, autonomy, and control that resonate with hacktivist ethos. In this sense, hacktivism shares intellectual roots with digital rights activism and the open-source community, emphasizing collective participation and democratization of information. Moreover, contemporary hacktivism reflects broader shifts in digital political organization, such as decentralized, networked, and often leaderless mobilizations facilitated by encrypted messaging, anonymity networks, and blockchain tools. These movements align with the post-institutional politics of the digital age—spontaneous, adaptive, and globally connected.

Ethically, hacktivism continues to challenge notions of legitimacy in digital politics: When is disruption justified as dissent? Can data leaks be seen as acts of transparency or as violations of privacy? Such tensions highlight the growing need for ethical and legal frameworks that acknowledge the blurred boundaries between activism, cybercrime, and digital civil disobedience.

By analysing hacktivist practices—such as transparency campaigns, whistleblowing networks, or anti-surveillance protests—RELINK^2 can better understand the dynamics of digital empowerment, political marginalization, and ethical governance. Studying hacktivism's decentralized infrastructures and activist imaginaries contributes to RELINK^2's broader aim of fostering evidence-based policies that balance security, democratic accountability, and inclusive participation in digital political life.

Related Concepts: connective action; cybersecurity, datafication; Digital Service Act; digital protest; digital sovereignty; hashtag activism; platform cooperativism; platform politics

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Hashtag Activism

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Definition

Hashtag activism refers to using hashtags on social media platforms to mobilize public support, amplify collective movements, and express opinions or attitudes on specific sociopolitical issues. The process involves tagging individual posts with a shared hashtag to participate in collective online engagement, generally surrounding a social or political cause. Hashtag activism has become a prominent mode of political expression and agenda-setting in the digital public sphere for social movement organizations, individuals, and political parties. It is a form of digital activism in which social movement actors use platforms to mobilize and recruit supporters, draw public attention, and facilitate discussions on important political topics.

Context

Popularized in the 2010s, Twitter hashtags became an important tool for social movements seeking social change worldwide, particularly during the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, where they facilitated communication among activists, articulated grievances, and attracted sympathizers from broader publics. Later, the #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo movements further consolidated hashtag activism as a prominent mode of digital activism. By linking personal experiences and marginal voices to broader structures of racial injustice and gender-based violence, these campaigns expanded public debate and generated pressure for institutional and cultural change.

In the context of political parties, hashtag activism involves party supporters, politicians, and party professionals leveraging hashtags to engage with political causes, shape public discourse, and mobilize people, especially the younger generation, in digital spaces. Besides endorsing a cause by joining a hashtag, politicians sometimes use hashtags to reinterpret, adapt, or undermine their meanings to align them with party ideologies (Östin & Lindgren, 2024). Today, political parties actively monitor

and seek to adapt to hashtag politics. The trend shows how digital platforms and new forms of communication compel traditional political parties to reassess their strategies, organization, and methods of engaging with supporters to remain relevant in a more networked, digitalized political landscape.

Especially in regimes with authoritarian tendencies, where public space for political dissent is shrinking, hashtags can become one of the few remaining powerful tools through which opposition parties and activists make their voices heard. On the other hand, hashtags can be strategically exploited by far-right parties, as seen in the AfD's hijacking of COVID-19-related hashtags, where a small number of highly active accounts effectively polarized public discourse to advance undemocratic agendas (Darius & Stephany, 2022). Hashtag activism is also often criticized as "slacktivism," a term used to describe minimal or superficial forms of activism carried out mainly through social media. This reliance on digital platforms raises concerns that such engagement may remain shallow and fail to build the long-term social bonds needed for sustained collective action.

Hashtag activism is relevant to the RELINK^2 research agenda because it captures how digital technologies reconfigure the linkage between citizens, activists, and political organizations. As a form of digital participation, it can amplify marginalized voices, facilitate mobilization, and broaden participation by creating new channels for issue-based engagement. At the same time, as a double-edged sword, it can reproduce exclusion, polarization, or superficial engagement, a discussion that aligns closely with RELINK^2's broader concern with secure, inclusive, and responsible digital transformation in democracy.

Related Concepts: data-driven campaign; digital activism; digital engagement; digital political campaigning; hacktivism; platform politics; political participation; slacktivism; virtual communities

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Internet and Political Trust

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Definition

Political trust refers to citizens' "basic evaluative or affective orientation" towards government and political institutions—a judgement that those institutions and their representatives are competent, honest, and responsive to public needs (Miller, 1974). It encompasses institutional trust in specific bodies such as parliaments, courts, and the civil service, and is widely regarded as a cornerstone of democratic governance: it underpins legitimacy, encourages voluntary compliance with laws, and enables the public cooperation necessary for effective policy-making.

The literature distinguishes between mistrust (generalized scepticism), distrust (a firm conviction that institutions are untrustworthy), and cynicism (the attribution of self-serving motives to political actors) (Citrin & Stoker, 2018). These distinctions matter for understanding how and why the digital transformation affects citizens' relationship with political authority. By restructuring the information environment in which trust is built or eroded—enabling direct, algorithmically-mediated communication, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers, and producing a more fragmented public sphere—the internet has become a central variable in contemporary research on democratic legitimacy and civic engagement. Within this transformation, two phenomena deserve attention: the effects of general internet use on political trust, and the more specific impact of social media platforms and online news consumption.

Context

The pathways through which internet use erodes political trust are well-documented, but the moderating role of regime type remains contested. A systematic review of 496 studies finds a predominantly negative association between digital media use and institutional trust, most pronounced in established democracies (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023). Yet cross-national evidence from 128 countries complicates this picture: the

trust-eroding effect is strongest not in the most consolidated democracies but in moderately democratic states and in countries with high perceived corruption. In highly democratic or low-corruption settings, the effect weakens or reverses; in authoritarian contexts, digital platforms may serve primarily mobilizing or informational functions that do not straightforwardly undermine trust (Daoudi et al., 2025).

Several conceptual pathways help explain these varied effects. First, internet use can reshape civic expectations of government responsiveness: it may erode deference to authority in less democratic contexts (a "cultural" pathway), while in more democratic settings it tends to raise performance expectations that institutions often fail to meet (an "institutional" pathway) (Huang et al., 2020). Second, the mode and depth of digital civic engagement matter considerably. E-government initiatives that improve information access or facilitate public consultation can modestly enhance perceptions of institutional responsiveness; however, deeper forms of digital co-production of policy tend to expose institutional limitations and raise expectations beyond what governments can deliver, paradoxically eroding the trust they seek to build (Lu, Qi, & Yu, 2019). Third, internet censorship produces mixed effects: blocking content strengthens trust by limiting exposure to critical viewpoints, while surveillance and repression of users provoke civic resistance and distrust. Finally, in a counterintuitive finding, broader national internet infrastructure has been associated with higher political trust in some contexts, possibly because information overload in a high-connectivity environment leads citizens to fall back on established institutional authorities as cognitive anchors (Lu, Qi, & Yu, 2019). Shallow forms of digital civic engagement—governments providing information online and soliciting public feedback—modestly boost trust by signalling institutional responsiveness. Deeper participation, where citizens co-design policy, tends to erode it: greater transparency exposes institutional failures and raises expectations that governments cannot meet (Lu et al., 2019). Together, these pathways suggest that the question is not simply whether the internet erodes trust, but how it is used, by whom, within what political system, and under what conditions of state governance of the digital environment.

Within the broader digital ecosystem, social media platforms and online news sources produce effects on political trust that are qualitatively distinct from those of general internet use. The first and well-documented distinction concerns the source of online political information. Consuming news from professional, editorially-mediated online outlets is positively associated with political trust—an effect comparable to print media—whereas obtaining political information primarily from social media is consistently associated with lower trust (Ceron, 2015; Daminov, 2024). This divergence is partly explained by content: social media environments tend to contain a far higher proportion of anti-political, anti-system, and emotionally negative material than professional news websites, whose editorial processes filter and moderate such content. The

trust-eroding effect is particularly pronounced for citizens who rely on social media as their main source of political information, rather than occasional users (Daminov, 2024). The effect is also moderated by connectivity: broader high-speed internet access increases exposure to polarizing content on social media, amplifying distrust at the regional level (Kiratli, 2023), though in low-connectivity contexts social media can paradoxically boost trust by increasing political awareness among previously low-information citizens.

The second key mechanism through which social media shapes political trust is the amplification of partisan identity. Rather than fostering cross-cutting exposure or deliberation, social media platforms tend to reinforce pre-existing political dispositions, functioning as accelerators of polarization. As a consequence, the effect of social media use on trust is not uniform across the citizenry but is sharply divided along partisan lines: supporters of the incumbent party tend to exhibit increased trust in government following heavier social media use, while opponents exhibit decreased trust, with the pattern reversing when partisan control of government changes (Klein & Robison, 2020). Online misinformation operates through a similar logic: while exposure to fake news consistently erodes trust in the mainstream media across partisan lines, its impact on trust in government is contingent on ideological alignment: pro-incumbent misinformation can counter-intuitively increase institutional trust among its ideological consumers (Ognyanova et al., 2020). Conspiracy beliefs, which spread readily through social media, also erode trust in representative and governing institutions across national contexts—though active, participatory social media engagement can partially buffer this effect by fostering a sense of community and political inclusion (Mari et al., 2022).

Emerging technologies add further complexity to this picture. The increasing use of artificial intelligence in political communication introduces new trust dynamics: well-designed, human-supervised AI-generated government responses can be perceived as more trustworthy than standard automated replies, but this advantage erodes with disclosure of AI use and collapses entirely when AI output is of poor quality (Kreps & Jakesch, 2023). More broadly, specific platform features—algorithmic curation, recommendation systems, and interface design—remain underexplored mechanisms through which digital environments shape political trust. Significant gaps also remain in our understanding of trust dynamics in the Global South and of the long-term causal effects of sustained digital media consumption, most existing studies being cross-sectional in design.

Related Concepts: digital empowerment; digital engagement; digital leadership; digital media and ethnic minorities; e-democracy; e-government; fluid representation; liquid democracy; media and information literacy; online disinformation; platform politics; political discourse; political organization; political participation; public consultations; rhetorical citizenship

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Intra-Party (Digital) Consultations

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Definition

Intra-party consultations (IPCs) are processes through which political parties seek to gauge the opinions or the will of their grassroots on a wide range of issues affecting party strategy, such as electoral coalitions, manifestos, policy positions, or decisions about joining coalition governments, among others. Two main sub-types of consultations are generally distinguished, in line with aggregative and deliberative concepts of democracy: deliberative consultations and party referendums. Key features of such processes include the initiative, inclusiveness, and binding nature. Many IPCs are increasingly conducted with the support of digital means—via websites and/or mobile applications.

Context

Intra-party deliberative consultations are designed to foster in-depth discussion over extended periods of time, allowing participants to exchange arguments and reflect on complex issues (Gherghina, 2025). By contrast, party referendums consist of ballots aimed at obtaining a swift and clear aggregative expression of participants' preferences, either with or without a preceding deliberative phase (Wolkenstein, 2016). In all cases, digital tools might be used, but it is not a defining feature *per se*.

IPCs mirror the role that party primaries play in candidate and party leadership selection. They also share similar key features and their potential consequences (Hazan & Rahat, 2010). So far, the initiative (how and by whom the process may be started) of

such processes is, in many cases, effectively restricted to the party leadership, limiting bottom-up initiatives by party grassroots. The inclusiveness of these processes (who can take part), however, varies considerably. While most IPCs are restricted to party members, others are open to sympathizers or even to the general public. Their binding nature (to what extent the results are compulsory for the party leadership) also differs substantially between parties and even issues.

Digital IPCs have been increasingly used by political parties, in particular by newer digital natives such as the Pirates, the Five Star Movement, and Podemos (Gerbaudo, 2021). Mainstream and established parties have also adopted similar tools, although more selectively and often under even stronger leadership control (Barberà et al., 2021; Sandri et al., 2025). Nevertheless, most parties still do not use this participatory instrument on a regular basis in either in its digital or analogue form (Scarrow et al., 2022; Wuttke et al., 2019). As for consequences, the evidence is mixed: digital consultations can increase the formal relevance of member engagement, yet they may also reproduce or amplify pre-existing participation inequalities, with more active and resource-rich members dominating online dynamics (Boulianne, 2020).

In sum, digital IPCs can be understood as a form of democratic innovation adopted by several parties, both internally and in their role as governing actors (Mikhaylovskaya & Rouméas, 2024). Digital tools such as Participa, Rousseau, and Loomio might facilitate their adoption, foster greater inclusiveness and lower the personal costs of participation. They may also favour greater transparency and collaboration networks (Villaplana, Megías & Sandri, 2023). Overall, taking grassroots preferences seriously might enhance the engagement, legitimacy, and democratic quality of such processes.

Related Concepts: intra-party democracy; digital activism; digital engagement; digital parties; e-democracy; e-voting; online primaries; platform politics; public consultations

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Liquid Democracy

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Definition

The concept of liquid democracy refers to a non-traditional system of communal decision-making that builds on direct voting and voluntary transitive vote delegation. The "liquid" character of such a decision-making system derives from the systemic and flexible relationship between representative and direct democracy (Valsangiacomo, 2022). As a model of collective decision-making, liquid democracy intends to ensure voters may delegate their vote to someone else, particularly a trusted and/or knowledgeable person (Campbell et al., 2022).

Following Blum and Zuber (2016), the concept and practices of liquid democracy comprise four essential elements: direct democracy, flexible citizen participation, meta-delegation, and instant recall. The goal is to empower decision-making accountability while ensuring the division of labour (Golz et al., 2021). The main objective of liquid democracy is to ensure that individuals may participate in collective decision-making by direct vote or by vote delegation to a proxy that is considered an elected representative and that can change according to the topic under decision (Valsangiacomo, 2021).

Context

The concept of liquid democracy was introduced at the beginning of the 21st century (Blum & Zuber, 2016). However, its conceptual roots can be traced back to the late 1960s and the work of James C. Miller (Blum & Zuber, 2016). It is considered an alternative to traditional systems of electoral representation (Valsangiacomo, 2021). Several terms are associated with the concept of liquid democracy , namely "delegative democracy" and "proxy voting," and it is intrinsically related to the notion of "interactive democracy" (Zuber, 2016; Caragiannis & Micha, 2019).

As a collective decision-making model, liquid democracy was empowered by the emergence of technical systems associated with the development of pirate parties and

civic movements, such as the free software LiquidFeedback adopted by the German Pirate Party around 2010 (Paulin, 2020; Valsangiacomo, 2022). Liquid democracy is represented as enabling citizen participation in non-electoral contexts (Valsangiacomo, 2021). Advocates of liquid democracy assume that vote delegation and the existence of qualified proxies increase the quality of decision-making (Caragiannis & Micha, 2019). Meta-delegation occurs when proxies allocate their votes to other proxies with the consent of original voters (Valsangiacomo, 2021).

From a scientific perspective, the concept of liquid democracy is discussed by researchers focused on e-democracy processes, computing, game theory, and artificial intelligence (Paulin, 2020). Policy discussions highlight the relevance of liquid democracy for empowering the relationship between digital technologies and civic participation and engagement (Paulin, 2020). However, the concept remains significantly under-explored (Valsangiacomo, 2022).

Transitive vote delegation builds on relationships of trust, associated with the possibility for instant recall (Golz et al., 2021). However, literature questions the transparency and accountability of systems based on liquid democracy, namely due to the almost inevitable empowerment of proxies (Golz et al., 2021). Contestation around the concept has emerged since the mechanisms associated with liquid democracy potentially allocate considerable influence to a small number of agents, designated as "super-voters" (Golz et al., 2021). There is also a discussion about the relationship between liquid democracy and political representation, namely regarding its eventual contribution to the decline of political parties in representative democracies (Valsangiacomo, 2021).

Related concepts: civic participation; datafication; digital divide; Digital Service Act, digital transformation; intra-party democracy; e-democracy; e-governance; platform politics

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Media and Information Literacy

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Definition

Media and information literacy (MIL) is the ability to engage with information and media critically and effectively across formats and contexts (UNESCO, 2013). It brings together traditions from information literacy (library and information science), media literacy (media and communication studies), and digital literacy (ICT education) (American Library Association, 1989; Lee & So, 2014; Wuyckens et al., 2022), blending skills for finding and judging information with an understanding of how messages are produced, framed, and shared. Rather than treating these as separate abilities, MIL approaches them as a single practice: navigating complex information environments, questioning what we encounter, and contributing voice in ways that are ethical and creative (Polizzi, 2020). Recognized by UNESCO as a core civic competence and embedded in European frameworks such as the EU's Digital Competence Framework (Vuorikari et al., 2022), MIL supports the informed, resilient, and participatory public life on which democracies depend (Kahne et al., 2012).

Context

Media and information literacy (MIL) is a necessary skillset in today's fast-moving information environment. Digital technologies have blurred the lines between information sources and mass media, creating a sphere where news, opinion, advertising, and misinformation compete (Lee & So, 2014; Wuyckens et al., 2022). In such a setting, the ability to find, evaluate, and interpret information, and to understand how it is produced and framed, is essential for navigating daily life, from personal decision-making to civic participation (UNESCO, 2013; Huvila, 2012).

MIL is often presented as a foundation for healthy democratic life. It equips citizens to evaluate competing claims, participate in informed debate, and resist manipulation (Polizzi, 2020). The American Library Association (1989) framed information

literacy as a prerequisite for citizenship, and UNESCO promotes MIL as a universal civic competence. While the American Library Association is frequently cited due to its institutional prominence and standard-setting role in information governance, similar concerns have been articulated by a broad range of scholars, archival institutions, and international organizations engaged in digital preservation and memory studies.

Empirical studies provide some support for these claims: higher MIL is associated with more strategic online search behaviours (Coklar et al., 2017) and greater resistance to misinformation (Vraga et al., 2021). Studies of news literacy interventions show that combining MIL principles with corrective information improves the ability to identify false content on social media (Vraga et al., 2020, 2021).

For RELINK², MIL forms a central re-linkage strategy to reconnect institutions with both digitally marginalized citizens (e.g., older adults) and those active online but politically disengaged (e.g., youth). When explicitly taught, MIL supports civic participation and helps prevent digital exclusion among older citizens, a need increasingly recognized in European policy (Council of Europe Education Department, 2023). For younger, digitally active citizens, targeted MIL education has been shown to increase online civic and political engagement (Kahne et al., 2012). By uniting technical abilities, critical reflection, and opportunities for civic expression into a single practice (Huvila, 2012; Wuyckens et al., 2022), MIL equips people to navigate the digital public sphere ethically and effectively, strengthening democratic participation.

Related Concepts: algorithm; datafication; digital disconnection; engagement; digital literacies; online disinformation

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Membership 4.0

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Definition

Membership 4.0 refers to a model of intra-party participation within political parties in which artificial intelligence (AI) systems are integrated into decision-making, deliberation, and organizational processes, enabling large-scale preference aggregation, real-time feedback, and continuous forms of member engagement. Unlike previous participatory models, it implies not merely a scaling of existing procedures but a structural transformation of participation itself: AI-enabled systems can process natural language, detect exclusion patterns in real time, and generate deliberative syntheses that expand the organization's collective cognitive capacity. In its most developed form, Membership 4.0 represents a cultural shift from episodic and delegative participation towards continuous, reflective, and algorithmically informed engagement — transforming not only the "how," but also the "what" and the "who" of intra-party democracy. Early empirical instances of this shift include AI-assisted deliberation tools deployed in European digital parties and natural language processing systems used to synthesize member input in internal consultation and primary processes (Novelli et al., 2024).

Context

The concept functions at present as both an analytical framework and a prospective horizon. Some of its constitutive elements are already observable in recent party experiments: the Spanish party Podemos piloted large-scale digital consultation through Plaza Podemos; the Pirate Parties in Germany and Iceland developed algorithmic tools for agenda-setting and preference aggregation among members; and more recent initiatives have incorporated AI-assisted synthesis of deliberative inputs in internal primaries. Yet the full institutional consolidation of Membership 4.0, in which AI tools are systematically embedded in formal party governance rather than used episodically, remains emergent.

The concept acquires its analytical value through a genealogy of technological transformations in party organisation. Rather than a sequence of sharp critical junctures, this genealogy reflects overlapping and uneven trajectories: different parties have adopted digital tools at different moments and with different organisational logics, making any periodization necessarily stylised rather than universally applicable. With that caveat, four broad phases can be distinguished analytically.

Membership 1.0 corresponds to the grassroots activism characteristic of the mass party model (Duverger, 1954), in which dense organisational networks and face-to-face mobilization defined member engagement. Membership 2.0 encompasses the dual transition brought about first by the rise of party websites and the broader internet as tools for member mobilization and activist engagement, and subsequently by the social media turn. Vaccari (2013) characterizes this latter phase as a shift from a "politics of broadcasting" to a "politics of conversation," though Scarrow (2014) and others have noted that digital participation in this period remained largely reactive and rarely penetrated formal decision-making structures (see also Kosiara-Pedersen et al., 2021; Barberá et al., 2021). Membership 3.0 saw the introduction of dedicated intra-party digital participation platforms—Decidim, LiquidFeedback, Plaza Podemos, the Five Star Movement's Rousseau system, Pirate Party applications—which transferred analogue deliberative procedures to digital formats at greater scale, without substantially altering the underlying logic of power (Gerbaudo, 2019; Kosiara-Pedersen et al., 2026). Notably, several of these initiatives predate the conventional periodisation: the Five Star Movement began deploying platforms for internal governance well before 2012, illustrating the limits of any rigid timeline.

Membership 4.0 marks a deeper rupture. Parties that have undergone a genuine Membership 3.0 phase—developing participatory culture, digital infrastructure, and membership expectations—enter the AI deployment moment with substantially different incentive structures and path dependencies than those that have not. Early instances of this transition are visible in experiments with AI-assisted deliberation in European digital parties and in AI-supported consultation processes tested in the context of internal primaries, where natural language processing tools have been used to synthesize member input at scale (Novelli et al., 2024).

Crucially, the concept does not presuppose technological determinism. Its normative core lies in posing the following precise question: under what political and design conditions can AI tools enhance, rather than undermine, intra-party pluralism, deliberation, and accountability? The democratizing potential of Membership 4.0 is inseparable from members' critical capacity to engage with algorithmic tools autonomously, which distinguishes genuinely democratizing deployment from its plebiscitary counterpart. This distinction carries concrete implications across several dimensions of party life: the risk of algorithmic capture of agenda-setting by party elites; the tension between personalized AI-driven mobilization and collective

deliberation; the use of AI tools in digital campaigning, where micro-targeting and sentiment analysis may reinforce rather than challenge existing power asymmetries within organizations; and the broader challenge of ensuring transparency and accountability in algorithmically mediated participation processes.

Related Concepts: algorithm; algorithmic bias; cybercratic centralism; digital activism; digital engagement; digital leadership; digital party; intra-party democracy; intra-party (digital) consultations; online primaries; platform politics; synthetic party

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Online Disinformation

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Definition

Online disinformation is related to the creation, dissemination, and amplification of false or misleading information using digital tools. Photos, content, videos, and audio files, manipulated through artificial intelligence, are used by online networks to distort information. Fake news and digital propaganda are spreading fast, especially during crises or wars, and even in electoral campaigns. Using the digital environment, online disinformation raises significant challenges to civic trust and institutional legitimacy.

UN agencies (UNESCO, OHCHR) distinguish between mis- and disinformation regarding the presence or absence of intention. Concerning this, "misinformation has a neutral or good underlying intent, whereas disinformation has the intention to deceive." The spread of both disinformation and misinformation undermines democratic societies, civic trust, and institutional legitimacy. Unlike disinformation and misinformation, malinformation encompasses the explicit intention to manipulate the truth.

Online disinformation operates through coordinated inauthentic behaviour. It is often disseminated through a complex digital ecosystem that consists of "networks of fake, hijacked or duplicated social media accounts" (Murero, 2023) to distort public debate, to harass individuals online, and to amplify narratives. The amplification is based on algorithmic mechanisms, bots, and coordinated networks. Online disinformation also involves FIMI (foreign manipulation and interference)—"a conceptual framework" proposed by the European External Action Service (EEAS). It is characterized by "intentional, coordinated behaviour by a hostile state or non-state actor" that may threaten democratic values and frequently destabilize societies, manifesting often in the form of electoral disinformation intended to influence voting processes and weaken confidence in electoral integrity.

Combating online disinformation requires not only regulatory and institutional responses, but also the strengthening of democratic resilience and digital media literacy, reinforcing civic and public trust in institutions.

Context

The spread of social media and online tools has changed people's ways of accessing information. Social media encourages political engagement (signing petitions, organizing protests, , voting), and populist leaders may use online platforms to speak directly to people, transmitting messages, and slogans. Online platforms are not only tools for connecting groups and people; they can also be used as weapons against democracy. Indeed, social media amplifies populist narratives, encouraging manipulation and disinformation. The spread of false information through social media presents risks regarding the manipulation of individuals' private information, impacting the digital economy (Digital Cooperation Organization, 2024; Ruiz, 2023).

In recent years, with the pandemics and the war in Ukraine, online disinformation has taken on ever-increasing proportions. Online platforms like Instagram, Tiktok, Facebook, or X (formerly Twitter) are used as instruments for distributing disinformation messages, subverting democratic processes. In particular, online networks are used to exploit the distrust in the electoral process (Stănescu, 2024: 362; Dumitrașcu, 2025: 51). Concerns regarding foreign election interference expanded to encompass information and technological vulnerabilities. This was the case in the Romanian elections in 2024, where the presence of a coordinated campaign on Tik Tok assumed to be orchestrated by a foreign state actor, Russia, was revealed.

Online disinformation does not affect all groups equally. Even if young people are more exposed to online information, they are more skilled at identifying disinformation, especially if they have a higher education level. Older and less educated people tend to believe and share false information more often. Digital media literacy is an important factor in spreading disinformation (Buchanan, 2020). Overall, online disinformation is the negative side of digital communication and, in a more digitalized world, how to use online instruments to evaluate and share online information becomes essential.

Related Concepts: algorithm; cheapfakes; deepfakes; digital engagement; digital literacies; digital society; media and information literacy; platform politics

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Online Primaries

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Definition

Online primaries (also called digital primaries or internet primaries) are internal party elections conducted through digital platforms, where party members vote remotely via the internet to select candidates for public office or party leaders. In some cases, such as in Pirate Parties and certain New Left movements, online primaries incorporate liquid democracy mechanisms that allow members to delegate their votes to trusted representatives who vote on their behalf. A critical issue in the choice of the type of technological infrastructure for online primaries is the trade-off between accessibility and security. While the most common approach relies on simplified voting platforms to maximize participation, more sophisticated and auditable voting systems can be employed to increase transparency and vote verifiability, though these may require greater technical literacy and resources. The selection of voting technology reflects deeper normative choices about balancing democratic inclusion against concerns about manipulation, fraud, and the integrity of internal party decision-making processes.

Context

Political parties have expanded the inclusiveness of candidate selection processes by granting members the right to vote for selecting potential representatives. While in presidential regimes party primaries are relatively well institutionalized, in parliamentary democracies this trend is more recent and there are huge asymmetries (Sandri et al., 2015; Sandri & Seddone, 2021). The rise of digital tools has allowed party elites to run primaries through online platforms. From this standpoint, online primaries have been regarded as an important dimension of digital intra-party democratization, as they incorporate digital technologies into candidate selection and, more broadly, into the internal distribution of voice and participation within parties (Sandri, 2025).

This method of candidate selection has been limited mainly to "digital parties" like the Five Star Movement, Podemos, or La France Insoumise. Pirate Parties also exemplify the use of online platforms to select prospective representatives (Folvarčný & Kopeček, 2024). Online primaries have likewise been adopted by Green parties (for instance, in the UK and Germany), as well as by smaller parties that emerged after the Great Recession, such as the centrist NEOS in Austria or the libertarian left-wing party Livre ("free") in Portugal (Cancela et al. 2016). Although older parties often appear more digitally institutionalized than newer ones (Sandri 2025), we still lack systematic evidence on whether new parties are in fact more likely to adopt online primaries.

Parties can adopt online primaries for different types of elections (e.g., parliamentary, European elections), and at different levels (both national and local). Online primaries have also been used to select party leaders in a growing number of political parties. An example of this practice is the Liberal Party in Canada, that gave their members the possibility to use online voting for choosing the party leader since 2013. Regarding the dynamics of online primaries, empirical studies show that there has been a decline in turnout rate over time, showing a negative correlation between the institutionalization of these instruments and the capacity to ensure high levels of participation (Mikola, 2017). Despite formal power granted to members through online primaries, research suggests these tools can result in "pseudo-participation" where digital platforms give the impression of member participation in decision-making, but members cannot actually question leadership dominance (Gerbaudo, 2021).

The concept of online primaries is crucial for understanding how digital technologies can transform political mobilization, particularly among party members who are reluctant to engage through traditional organizational structures. Online primaries potentially enable more systematic and inclusive candidate selection processes by lowering participation barriers and expanding the selectorate beyond party congresses or conventions (Gerbaudo, 2019; Lanzone & Rombi, 2021). However, empirical evidence remains limited regarding their consequences compared to conventional selection methods. Specifically, we lack systematic knowledge about whether online primaries produce substantively different types of candidates in terms of sociodemographic profiles, political experience, and ideological positioning. Preliminary evidence suggests that online primaries may be more prone to selecting young or female candidates (Lanzone & Rombi, 2015). Furthermore, existing research has focused predominantly on candidate selection outcomes while neglecting the impact of digital primaries on intra-party dynamics, including the nature of factional competition, the quality and patterns of internal deliberation, power relationships between party elites and grassroots members, and the evolution of connections between candidates and their supporting networks within the party organization. In the Spanish case, online primaries have been criticised for encouraging personalization and plebiscitary dynamics (Raniolo & Tarditi, 2020). At the same time, the rules defining the selectorate may have distinct

implications for internal pluralism. More open procedures tend to favour greater internal pluralism, allowing representatives of different factions to emerge, while more selective procedures—as in the case of Ciudadanos—are more likely to consolidate the leadership's inner core. Further research is therefore needed to examine the electoral integrity of online primaries, particularly with regard to the design, security, and transparency of e-voting systems, as well as their wider consequences for intra-party functioning, internal democracy, and the distribution of power within parties.

Related concepts: digital activism; digital engagement; digital intra-party democracy; digital leadership; digital party; liquid democracy; platform politics

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Participation

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Definition

The word "participation" originates from Latin, from the adjective *particeps*, which means "taking part," "being involved in something," "allowing to participate," "sharing something with someone," or "having a share in something." Participation is a multidimensional concept that builds its proper semantic context in connection with the specific phenomenon to which it is related. This term is accompanied by many additional qualifiers, such as "social," "civic," "public," "political," "individual," "community," "horizontal," or "vertical." In the most general sense, participation means being active and involved in activities, decisions, and processes. It encompasses the right of all individuals, including those who might be marginalized, not to be excluded. Participation involves being invited and encouraged to engage, while also ensuring that opportunities are created for everyone to be seen, heard, and included without any barriers. It goes beyond mere presence; it is about involvement that fosters agency, access, and empowerment. At the same time, participation is shaped by personal capacity, societal attitudes, and responsibilities.

Context

How people participate in public life, particularly through different participatory tools, varies across countries and over time, depending on historical background, values, cultural traditions, and governance models (Pateman, 1970; Brodie et. al., 2009; Loughlin et al., 2012). There is a noticeable declining trend in citizens' interest in public affairs and their involvement in traditional forms of participation. However, the emergence of new technologies has also created new opportunities for citizen engagement (Giugni et.al., 2022). In this context, the concept of participation has gained increased importance, influencing how citizens interact with politics, communities, and institutions,

while reshaping established forms of involvement and/or facilitating the old forms of participation, e.g., online voting.

In academic debates, participation is critical, particularly in the context of democratic deficits such as political disengagement, declining trust, or limited representation (Norris, 2002; Szulc-Wałecka, 2024). Scholars analyse both the promises and pitfalls of digital democracy, and the new forms of citizen participation it entails. At the same time, concerns such as the digital divide, algorithmic biases, and misinformation challenge the assumption that technological access automatically translates into deeper democratic involvement.

In the public debate, participation is considered a cornerstone of democratic functioning. Consequently, governments around the world are introducing various initiatives for participation.

At the societal level, participation has also been transformed through online campaigns and digital social movements, demonstrating how citizens can mobilize and raise global awareness (e.g., climate activism). Ultimately, participation is about ensuring that tools empower all citizens to engage equitably and meaningfully in public life, strengthening democracy, while also addressing new challenges related to inclusion, diversity, and accountability, as well as mitigating the risks of new divides, inequalities, and discrimination.

Under RELINK^2, the concept of participation is fundamental for understanding how citizens engage and communicate with political organizations and decision-makers. The project, therefore, aims to examine changing patterns of participation, with particular attention to specific forms of engagement and considering different target groups, such as young people or the elderly.

Related Concepts: civic participation; digital engagement; digital inclusion; digital exclusion; digital empowerment; digital divide; digital activism

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Personalization

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Definition

Classical definitions of personalization focus on the weakening of institutional and ideational mediation in politics and the more assertive roles of political leaders and elites. Digitalization, however, requires us to think about the concept of personalization along a new dimension that pertains to political communication. From a conventional party politics point of view, personalization is the growing importance of individual politicians and their images in the political process *vis-à-vis* institutional actors and ideational content in politics (Karvonen, 2010; Rahat & Kenig, 2018). Especially with the rise of visual politics, first through the advent of TV, and then through the rise of social and digital media, the process of personalization has been accelerated and tightly connected to the digitalization of politics (McAllister, 2007; Cross et al., 2018). As digitalization accelerated, personalization in politics has gained a specific communicative dimension. Thus, today, personalization in politics should also be understood as the "personalization of political communication": increasingly diversified political messages are targeting increasingly narrow audiences and even individuals based on profiling voters, accurate segmentation of constituencies, micro-targeting and data-driven campaigns with the help of algorithms.

Context

After the victory over Nazism and fascism, Western democracies became deeply institutionalized and offered only limited room for personal leadership. Changes in information and communication technologies, most notably the rise of television, as well as the transformation of social class structures in Western societies, which weakened traditional cleavages, facilitated a process of personalization in politics. Throughout the final decades of the 20th century, ideological and institutional dimensions of politics

based on social divides, and most notably ideological mass parties, declined while personalities gained a new prominence in politics.

Personalization may refer to different realms of contemporary politics such as the growth of the significance of leaders: a) *vis-à-vis* party organizations/government institutions; b) within the electoral competition; and c) in the context of representations of politics in media (Rahat & Sheafer, 2007). Increasing personalization and leader-centred politics pushed ideological and policy-centred discussions to a secondary position and amplified the importance attached to the image of individual leaders not only in the public sphere but also in their private lives. There is convincing evidence in comparative empirical research that demonstrates the rising importance of personalities and leaders in political and electoral competition (Karvonen, 2010; Lobo & Curtice, 2015; Garzia, 2014). The process of personalization, therefore, goes hand in hand with the demise of policy-centred public discussions over politics and the rise of campaigns and discussions around the personal qualities and images of leaders and politicians.

These discussions are not only about leaders' fitness for public office but also about their orientations in private life, which facilitates the "intimization" of politics (Stanyer, 2013). Personalization of politics, therefore, has also been accompanied by the global rise of populism, in which leaders' socio-cultural orientations are key for political communication (Moffitt, 2016). In organizational terms too, personalization of politics, ultimately led to the demise of grassroots politics for certain party models such as "personal parties" (McDonnell, 2013) and "business-firm parties" (Hopkin & Paolucci, 1999) in which temporary organizations became unstable vehicles for powerful and ambitious leaders.

Notwithstanding the above, personal domination over politics has always been part and parcel of party politics in the Global South, the effects of which have only been amplified by increasing personalization in contemporary politics. In this regard, it is also important to highlight the "presidentialization" of politics as a specific reflection of a broader personalization trend in which top executives concentrate increasingly more power in their hands (Poguntke & Webb, 2007). Today, the global rise of "personalistic autocracies" as a result of increasing presidentialization worldwide is a crucial and dangerous trend (Frantz et al., 2024).

In the digital age, personalization is also driven by increasing visuality in politics fostered by social media (Haßler et al., 2024). Social media also allowed parties and politicians to increasingly use emotional appeals to increase interactions in the digital realm (Russmann et al., 2024). In addition, digitalization also unexpectedly drives "presidentialization" within political parties despite initial hopes that it would facilitate intra-party democracy. For example, digital parties like the Five Star Movement paved the way for the rise of "hyper leaders" (Gerbaudo, 2018) or "cybercratic centralism" by undermining mid-level organizational strata within parties and by connecting party leaders directly to the party base in a plebiscitary fashion.

In the context of the digitalization of politics, personalization also gains a new dimension. With the rise of new digital technologies of data gathering and communication, political messages and campaigns are getting increasingly "personalized" based on data-driven political campaigning and micro-targeting techniques. Thus, in our age, personalization is not only about the increasing significance of leaders and individual politicians in politics. It also pertains to the realm of broader communication, including "political communication," and concerns the increasing fragmentation of messages targeted at groups and even individuals, enabled by sophisticated algorithmic data analysis, individual-level profiling, and communication through social media (Petty et al., 2025). Thus, personalization does not only undermine institutional checks and balances via consolidating the power of leaders and individual politicians *vis-à-vis* collective institutions, but it also corrodes a coherent and shared public sphere of ideas and pledges. This, in turn, may facilitate the rise of strongmen with autocratic inclinations even in consolidated democracies.

Related concepts: cybercratic centralism; data-driven campaigns; data-driven micro targeting; digital leadership; digital party; political organization

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Platform Cooperativism

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Definition

Platform cooperativism is an economic and governance model that merges the principles of the traditional cooperative movement with the digital platform economy (Papadimitropoulos, 2021). Introduced by Trebor Scholz, it refers to businesses that rely on websites, mobile applications, or protocols to facilitate the exchange of goods and services while maintaining shared community ownership and democratic control by workers and users (Scholz, 2023). As an ethical alternative to extractive, shareholder-owned digital platforms, platform cooperatives distribute value on a more equitable basis and prioritize social wealth over profit maximization (Zhu & Marjanovic, 2021). This paradigm replaces the algorithmic management and centralized ownership of corporate intermediaries with decentralized, democratic self-governance anchored in the "one member, one vote" principle (Papadimitropoulos & Malamidis, 2024).

Context

Platform cooperativism emerged as a critical response to the negative societal effects of "platform capitalism" or the corporate sharing economy, which is exemplified by monopolistic companies like Uber and Airbnb (Zhu & Marjanovic, 2021). Popularized by Trebor Scholz in 2014, the movement seeks to dismantle the precarious, exploitative labour conditions and surveillance capitalism characteristic of venture capital-backed digital intermediaries (Scholz, 2016). Instead of concentrating wealth and governance in the hands of absentee shareholders, platform cooperatives empower marginalized workers and users through democratic decision-making and collective ownership (Scholz, 2023). This structural shift yields significant benefits for digital labour, including the provision of decent pay, job security, algorithmic transparency, and enhanced data ownership for users (Zhu & Marjanovic, 2021).

The model has demonstrated transformative potential across a wide range of digital sectors (Papadimitropoulos & Malamidis, 2024). For instance, Up & Go operates as a worker-owned home cleaning platform, allowing workers to retain a vast majority of their revenue (Scholz, 2023). In e-commerce, Fairmondo challenges corporate giants through a democratically accountable marketplace (Papadimitropoulos, 2021). Other notable examples include Fairbnb, which mitigates the negative impacts of tourism on local communities, and CoopCycle, a global federation of bike delivery cooperatives that prioritizes fair pay and decentralized digital infrastructure over algorithmic worker surveillance (Spier, 2022; Papadimitropoulos & Malamidis, 2024). By intertwining cooperative values with modern internet technologies, platform cooperativism fosters an equitable, people-centred digital economy (Zhu & Marjanovic, 2021).

Related Concepts: algorithm; digital empowerment; digital governance; digital work and inequalities; digital sovereignty; e-government; platform politics

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Platform Politics

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Definition

Platform politics designates the use of digital platforms—such as online participatory platforms (Adhocracy+, Consul, LiquidFeedback), social networking sites (e.g., TikTok, Instagram, X), and mobile instant messaging services (e.g., WhatsApp, WeChat, Telegram)—to perform political activities such as consuming political news, campaigning, organizing, debating, deliberating, and voting (Deseriis & Vittori, 2019; Lindner, 2016). Political activities within digital platforms are carried out by a variety of actors, including citizens, social movements, interest groups, NGOs, political parties, and institutional representatives. Platform politics is shaped not only by the interactions among these actors but also by the characteristics of the platforms themselves—such as their ownership (private or public), governance structures, and the affordances they provide to users. Moreover, platform design, algorithmic curation, data policies, and broader regulatory and cultural environments influence the conduct of political activities within them.

Context

Digital platforms can be briefly defined as software-based systems that provide a shared digital environment where applications, services, and users connect and interact through common technological features (Gorwa, 2019). With the advent of Web 2.0, characterized by interactivity, user-generated content, and social networking, individuals and organizations gained the ability to create, share, react to, and participate in one another's activities. With Web 3.0, users have become even more central to processes of decision-making, coordination, and governance within digital ecosystems (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2010; Sorice & De Blasio, 2019). In this evolving digital environment, the term "platform politics" refers to political activities conducted through digital platforms—such as campaigning, consuming news, organizing, debating, deliberating, or voting.

Over the past three decades, many activities once performed offline have progressively moved into the online sphere, where they are mediated by platforms. This growing centrality of digital platforms in political life has sparked both enthusiasm and criticism. Techno-optimists emphasize the opportunities for networking, collaboration, and mobilization at lower costs and greater speed. They highlight how social movements and political parties have successfully used digital platforms to challenge traditional power structures. Techno-pessimists, by contrast, point to the risks linked to the design and governance of dominant (mostly private) platforms: the spread of misinformation and hate speech, privacy violations, data exploitation, surveillance, algorithmic bias, and the creation of echo chambers that foster polarization and manipulation.

At the same time, digital platforms have reshaped the forms of political participation themselves (Boulianne, 2015; Deseriis, 2020; Theocharis et al., 2020). Traditional activities—such as campaigning, deliberating, or mobilizing—have been adapted to online environments, while new, platform-specific modes of engagement, such as liking, sharing, or signing digital petitions, have emerged. These new practices broaden access to political participation but are sometimes dismissed as "slacktivism" or "clicktivism": low-cost forms of engagement that may not translate into sustained collective action and are often motivated more by individual self-fulfilment than by collective goals. Despite such criticisms, platform politics continues to expand—both in terms of the variety of activities carried out online and the frequency with which they occur, sometimes replacing activities previously conducted offline. While platform politics has not fully replaced traditional forms of conducting politics, this concept remains central to understanding how political participation is evolving in the digital age (Durotoye et al., 2025).

Related Concepts: digital activism; digital engagement; digital parties; gamification; digital transformation; e-democracy; public consultations; virtual communities

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Political Chatbots

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Definition

Political chatbots are conversational artificial intelligence systems that interact with users through natural language—textual, oral, or multimodal. In the context of political communication, they operate as automated agents in interactions between political actors and citizens. Their range of applications extends from electoral and governmental communication to the mass dissemination of computational propaganda. Unlike conventional political communication, these systems operate continuously, at scale, and in a personalized manner, without the temporal or capacity constraints inherent to human intermediaries, which amplifies both their participatory potential and their manipulative risk.

Context

Political chatbots represent one of the most significant phenomena in the digital transformation of contemporary political communication, with notable implications for both electoral campaigns and the relationship between institutions and citizens.

In the electoral context, these systems have been deployed for various purposes: mobilizing voters, providing information on candidates and platforms, and facilitating donations. Their ability to personalize messages at scale and maintain real-time conversations makes them highly effective tools for microtargeting. Recent research shows that interaction with chatbots designed to advocate for a candidate produces statistically significant shifts in electoral preference, with effects greater than those observed from conventional political advertising (Costello et al., 2024). This persuasive capability raises urgent normative questions regarding the authenticity of political communication and the integrity of the electoral process.

In government–citizen communication, chatbots enable new forms of access to institutional information, guidance in administrative procedures, and consultation

on public policy positions. AI-assisted voting advice applications (VAAs) represent an emerging modality that allows citizens to receive personalized guidance on programmatic affinities with different electoral options, enhancing users' political knowledge (Kim & Lee, 2022).

However, the same technological architecture that facilitates informed participation can be instrumentalized for computational propaganda: the automated and mass dissemination of biased or misleading content through conversational agents. Woolley and Howard (2016) coined the term "computational propaganda" to describe the strategic use of algorithms and automation for manipulating public opinion, a phenomenon empirically documented in contexts such as the Brexit referendum and the 2016 U.S. presidential elections (Howard & Kollanyi, 2016; Howard et al., 2018). The spread of low-credibility content through bots on social media is identified in the literature as one of the primary vectors of political disinformation (Shao et al., 2018).

This duality—genuine participation and information versus covert manipulation—defines the central normative tension in the study of political chatbots and underpins the demand for specific regulation in electoral contexts.

Related Concepts: algorithm; data-driven campaign; data-driven microtargeting; digital political campaigning; online disinformation; platform politics; synthetic politics

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Political Crowdfunding

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Definition

Political crowdfunding refers to the practice of soliciting small financial contributions from a broad base of supporters to fund political campaigns, events, or initiatives. While often facilitated through digital platforms, the method itself predates the digital era and can take both online and offline forms. By fostering inclusivity in fundraising, political crowdfunding empowers ordinary citizens to influence political outcomes and reduces dependence on large contributions from a small number of affluent donors. Actors engaged in political crowdfunding include political parties, social movements, lobbying groups, and civic associations.

Context

Political crowdfunding refers to a form of collective action focused on mobilizing financial resources, often employed by political parties to support their campaigns and initiatives. It embodies characteristics such as the pursuit of social and political change, the presence of collective agency, and, more recently, the use of digital communication tools to activate support. From the perspective of politicians, small donations signal electoral viability and grassroots legitimacy. For citizens, contributing online is a convenient way to express political alignment and civic engagement (Kusumarani & Zo, 2019). Although digital platforms and social media (e.g., Twitter, X, ActBlue, party websites) have accelerated the use of crowdfunding, offline methods, such as direct mail, have historically served similar functions.

The symbolic value of political crowdfunding is just as significant as its financial impact. It reflects horizontal participation, anti-establishment sentiment, and digital democracy in practice. In Spain, for instance, Podemos and the X Party adopted crowdfunding methods to capitalize on the participatory momentum of the 15-M movement (González-Cacheda & Outeda, 2021). Similarly, Italy's Five Star Movement funded its

2013 electoral campaign through donations gathered on its blog. In the United States, Bernie Sanders' 2016 presidential bid raised millions through small-dollar donations, following earlier grassroots fundraising models introduced by Howard Dean in 2004 and scaled up by Barack Obama (Kreiss, 2012).

This trend reflects a shift towards what scholars term "small money democracy," a fundraising model that prioritizes widespread citizen contributions over large donors (Cmar, 2004; Rubenstein, 2022). In Europe, economist Julia Cagé has advocated for institutional reforms to scale this model, while critical views question its actual impact on political equality (Raya & Albert, 2025).

Still, this model brings its own set of challenges. It relies heavily on digital presence and constant online engagement, which can marginalize those with limited digital skills or access. Regulatory concerns also remain significant, including compliance with campaign finance laws, monitoring foreign donations, and holding platforms accountable. In Spain, for instance, political crowdfunding has raised concerns about transparency and donor oversight.

Related Concepts: digital activism; digital engagement; digital party; political crowdsourcing

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Political Crowdsourcing

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Definition

Political crowdsourcing refers to the practice of engaging a wide range of citizens in co-creating political ideas, policy proposals, campaign content, or strategic input. This model enables political organizations to harness collective intelligence, enhance participatory legitimacy, and foster inclusion, horizontal decision-making, and bottom-up approaches. Unlike digital aggregative tools such as online consultations, referenda, or e-voting, which only collect opinions or votes, crowdsourcing implies the co-creation of content and active citizen involvement in shaping political outputs.

Context

The digitalization of politics has significantly reshaped how political organizations engage citizens in decision-making processes, paving the way for new participatory models such as political crowdsourcing. This method enables citizens to contribute meaningfully to policy development, campaign messaging, and strategic planning. This model is rooted in values such as horizontality, inclusivity, and bottom-up engagement, positioning the crowd not merely as voters or respondents, but as problem solvers and co-authors of political content (Vromen et al., 2022).

The rise of digital parties played a pivotal role in mainstreaming political crowdsourcing (Gerbaudo, 2019). These parties developed or adopted online participatory platforms that allowed members and supporters to generate policy proposals, discuss priorities, and collaborate on campaign initiatives. Notable examples include Spain's Partido X, which utilized open-source tools to facilitate direct citizen input across all aspects of its political activities. Italy's Five Star Movement (M5S) utilized the Rousseau platform to enable members to vote on candidates, draft laws, and establish internal agendas. In Finland, the Open Ministry project allowed citizens to collectively draft and submit legislative proposals to Parliament. Other parties across the ideological

spectrum have experimented with similar tools. The Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), in response to historically low polling in 2014, launched a political innovation project called *Evolution Volkspartei*, using a digital crowdsourcing platform (Ideenwand) to engage over 5,000 citizens in co-creating its party manifesto by contributing ideas, commenting, and voting on proposals. Podemos initiated Plaza Podemos as part of its commitment to deliberative and direct democracy, an open, participatory digital platform (2014–2019) that enabled anyone, inside or outside the party, to propose, debate, and endorse citizen initiatives (Meloni & Lupato, 2022).

Political crowdsourcing has been praised for lowering the costs of participation compared to traditional engagement formats such as focus groups or in-person assemblies. It enables the rapid collection of feedback and ideas, particularly when supported by technological infrastructure such as data analytics and automation tools (Taeihagh, 2017). However, the implementation of these platforms has also revealed several limitations. Although many initiatives began with considerable enthusiasm, their use has declined over time due to limited interaction between policy-makers and citizens, as exemplified by the digital tool Lex Eletti used by the Italian Five Star Movement between 2013 and 2021 (Tronconi & Blasio, 2025). This is partly due to the inherent difficulty of digitalizing deliberative processes, which require sustained engagement, dialogue, and trust. As a result, political parties often shift away from deliberative tools toward simpler, aggregative mechanisms that are easier to manage and control (Sandri et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the promise of democratization through crowdsourcing is often tempered by the reality of leadership-driven decision-making. In some cases, participatory tools have been scaled back or removed altogether (Deseriis & Vittori, 2019). For instance, Podemos eventually deactivated its digital participatory platform, which was initially intended to serve as a deliberative space for policy input. This retreat highlights how such initiatives may be vulnerable to internal centralization and platform fatigue. In addition, concerns around digital inequality, exclusion of non-digital citizens, and opaque platform governance continue to pose significant challenges to the inclusive and transformative potential of political crowdsourcing.

Related Concepts: digital activism; digital engagement; digital party; e-democracy; political crowdfunding; public consultations

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Political Discourse

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Definition

Political discourse consists of various communication activities by individual and collective public actors (traditionally) on topics related to politics. Today, every internet user can contribute to political discourse. Discourse—a concept developed in social sciences and linguistics—combines the use of verbal and non-verbal language in specific social situations with the communication of particular ideas, ways of thinking, or perceptions of the world. This concept is broader than deliberation or debate. Discourse is linked to power. It can be a tool of oppression (e.g., when the state imposes the only acceptable patterns of communication and behaviour, as in communist propaganda) or a form of civil liberty (e.g., social movements or protest).

Context

The online political discourse we are focusing on here is part of the broader political discourse. It encompasses all communication activities on the internet (e.g., social media posts or YouTube broadcasts of parliamentary debates). Research on online political discourse often focuses on the use of social media by institutional actors (political parties, state institutions), especially from the perspective of political marketing, and its use by citizens, non-governmental organizations, and protest movements to express opinions, control authorities, and mobilize society. The research also covers new forms of political propaganda, as well as potential abuses and manipulation, particularly those related to the use of algorithms that can influence election results, exacerbate political crises, and deepen social polarisation. Researchers are also focusing on changes in norms and politeness, with many studies describing incivility, which

we are increasingly observing across various forms of political discourse (electoral, media, or parliamentary).

Many studies focus on verbal aggression and hate speech, which characterize online political discourse. This is influenced by algorithms that reward expressive and emotional statements, while simultaneously leading to radicalization.

The use of online tools has changed the circumstances and forms of public discourse. With the rise of social media, new genres of political discourse have emerged, and their styles have evolved—the importance of visual and multimodal messages has increased significantly. Online media have also altered the roles of social actors, providing ordinary citizens with access to a broad audience and facilitating direct contact between politicians and voters. Traditional forms of political discourse, such as parliamentary speeches, pre-election debates, and traditional media content, reach audiences via social media through excerpts, comments, memes, and short videos. Simultaneously, phenomena such as disinformation and misinformation are on the rise. Young people view social media as the primary channel of communication and a key source of knowledge about public affairs. Online participation (mobilization, activism, consultation) is an obvious choice for them.

Related Concepts: algorithms; digital engagement; digital disinformation; participation; rhetorical citizenship

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Political Organizations

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Definition

Like other organizations, political organizations are routinized patterns of human relationships based on division of labour and meaningful interactions (consensual or conflictual) within the group as well as with actors outside, such as other organizations or individuals (Scott, 2003). Political organizations usually exist to achieve specific political aims, such as obtaining and maintaining a position in office and implementing a certain policy or set of policies, alongside ensuring the survival of the organization itself (Wilson, 1995).

While in electoral and institutional politics, political organizations may take formal and official shapes (such as political parties and institutionalized interest groups), in the broader contentious politics it is highly likely that political organizations have at least an informal and unofficial dimension, aimed at achieving movements' political goals, even if they are not entirely informal.

Political parties have a special position within the wider network of political organizations consisting of pressure groups, social movements, civil society associations, international organizations, etc. In almost all cases, parties are the only organizations that are officially entitled to nominate candidates for office and officially control executive authority (Sartori, 2005; Ware, 1995). This is why it is important to define political parties as a special type of political organization that has the official right to take part in the contests for controlling the state apparatus and, ultimately, directly control it.

Context

Classical works of political sociology by scholars such as Weber (1946) and Michels (1966) point to an important—and still valid—dynamic when they argue that organizations are the real source of political power in the modern world. The reason behind the accumulation of power at the hands of small, oligarchic groups, and even individuals,

vis-à-vis ordinary members of the very same organizations and the unprivileged constituents of broader society, is implicit to the phenomenon of organization. Michels coined the term "iron rule of oligarchy" to describe the way in which the need to take numerous decisions and execute them quickly usually benefits elites and inevitably and eventually deprive ordinary members of power, at least to a certain extent.

Formal organizations have been the subject of detailed scrutiny in the literature on political parties as society and information technologies have changed. While the social divisions of industrial societies initially created "mass parties" (Duverger, 1961), the establishment of robust welfare states, and then the transition to post-industrial society, especially in advanced Western democracies, facilitated the rise of "electoral professional parties" (Panebienco, 1988), which appealed to diverse voter segments using new communication and information technologies. This process ultimately led to the personalization of party politics as well.

More recently, digital parties emerged in Western Europe, connecting online grassroots to a "hyperleader" without any meaningful physical organization (Gerbaudo, 2018). True digital parties, or "netroots parties," rely on digital methods or apps for intraparty decision and participation processes. However, digital parties should only be seen as occupying a particularly extreme end of a spectrum of organizational forms emerging as a result of broader digitalization processes. Mainstream parties are also becoming increasingly digitalized with an amplified digital presence in cyberspace and by deploying digital methods for intraparty communications and interparty competition (Ghergina, et al. 2025). Such tendencies usually enhance centralization within parties as they undermine the need for ideologically devoted middle-strata elites and broader conventional and hierarchical organizations in political parties including contending elites. Yet, digitalization also provides new opportunities for grassroots participation within political organizations, and most notably in political parties, depending on the political institutional and cultural contexts.

Nevertheless, digitalization should not be seen as the most important factor shaping political organizations today, since office-seeking parties in Western democracies and other parts of the world still need physical organizations for a variety of functions, ranging from the recruitment of new elites to running conventional political campaigns (Scarrow, 1996). In addition, high levels of institutionalization in political parties, in other words parties' ideational and organizational stability over time *vis-à-vis* the changing individual elites' preferences, may constrain and slow down digitalization efforts, particularly in older parties that were born well before the digital age. Furthermore, especially in developing countries with clientelistic orientations, we still see the need for conventional organizations staffed with members for strategic redistribution (Baykan, 2018). These parties' efforts to appeal to low-income voters through organizations and clientelistic methods are combined with professional and digital strategies targeting swing voters. Having said that, political organizations across the

world today are being shaped by the digitalization process that is altering the conventional organizational dynamics in politics.

Related concepts: data-driven campaign; democratic innovation; digital intra-party democracy; digital leadership; digital party; participation; personalization

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Political Participation

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Definition

Political participation refers to the voluntary activity of citizens aimed at exerting direct or indirect influence on political decisions at various levels of the political system. This term, especially in its classic approach, refers to the actions of ordinary citizens and their impact on the choice of courses of action, as well as on the specific actions taken by public authorities to influence those in power, bring about change, or support the government and its policies.

However, political participation encompasses not only the act of voting in elections, but also other forms of engagement between elections, such as referenda, lobbying, civil disobedience, membership in political parties, participation in demonstrations or political movements, financial support for political organizations, signing and collecting petitions, distributing political leaflets, boycotts, or submitting proposals to public authorities. A key element of political participation is the connection of these activities with the sphere of politics, government, or state, as well as intentionality, which refers to conscious attempts to influence decisions made by those in power to achieve specific political outcomes.

Context

Political participation is widely recognized as a cornerstone of democratic societies, and the rapid digital transformation of political engagement has amplified its relevance. In this context, participation is no longer limited to traditional activities such as voting or representation; it now encompasses a much broader spectrum of digital tools and methods that enable citizens to engage meaningfully in political processes (Brady, 1999; Ekman & Amnå, 2012; van Deth, 2016). This expansion is especially significant, given the decline in voter turnout and the erosion of trust in public institutions, as digital technologies provide new avenues for individuals and groups

to collectively influence decision-making processes. Digital tools can also strengthen traditional forms of participation (e.g., online voting, e-consultations) by mobilizing citizens and reducing barriers to access. At the same time, online platforms enable citizens to exercise greater oversight of those in power, thereby promoting transparency, supporting efforts to rebuild trust, and offering new channels to voice their demands (Ruess et. al., 2022). Understanding the dynamics of digitalization is therefore essential, as it reshapes both the role of political organizations and the relationship between citizens and democratic institutions. Digital platforms foster innovative practices such as online deliberations, e-consultations, and civic initiatives, which can help bridge gaps between representatives and the public, contributing to a more inclusive and responsive democracy (Weiss, 2020).

Academically, scholars highlight how digitalization transforms political participation and civic engagement, pointing to both opportunities (e.g., increased access and new channels for activism) and challenges (e.g., digital divides and issues of online misinformation). In societal debates, there is a growing recognition of the need for political organizations to adapt and for citizens to be empowered through digital means, sparking significant discussion around democratic innovation (Fischli & Muldoon, 2024). Policy discussions increasingly emphasize the need for regulations to safeguard digital political participation, such as protecting online rights, ensuring equitable access to technology, and modernizing legal frameworks for emerging participatory tools, including the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA), General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and Artificial Intelligence Act (AI Act).

RELINK^2 is directly relevant here, as it explores how digital tools can help political organizations restore trust, legitimacy, and connectivity with citizens. It addresses the challenge of promoting secure and inclusive digital transformations while ensuring that representative institutions leverage digitalization to strengthen democratic engagement and participation, especially among marginalized groups.

Related Concepts: Artificial Intelligence Act; collective intelligence; democratic innovation; digital activism; digital divide; digital engagement; digital parties; Digital Services Act; E-participation; participation; political discourse; political organization

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Public Consultations

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Definition

Public consultations are a form of civic participation and citizen involvement in the decision-making process and governance. They entail gathering opinions, comments, and proposals from citizens and other interested parties. This helps improve drafts of legal acts, strategies, programmes, and other public actions before governments make final decisions. While they may shape public policy or influence public spending, the outcomes of the discussions are not always binding on public authorities. The purpose of consultations may be legislative, legitimizing, and policy-making, as well as fostering public trust, civic engagement, and accountability (Damiano & Valenza, 2025; Fuchs, 2023; Kapsa, 2021).

Consultations are open to all interested parties who wish to share their perspectives on the topics under discussion. They can be a bottom-up or top-down process, initiated by authorities (governments or local authorities), non-governmental or civic organisations.

Consultations can take various forms, such as face-to-face or online meetings, the submission of opinions on specific documents or plans, or online commenting. They are mainly used in areas such as legislation, budgets, and spatial planning (Helnelt, 2018; Moysan & Ródenas-Rigla, 2024).

Context

Public e-consultation is a form of e-participation that aims to involve citizens in decision-making through ICT. They form part of the consultation process and are increasingly being used as a substitute for or supplement to offline consultations. Researchers

categorise them as one of the levels of e-participation, following e-information and preceding e-monitoring and e-decision-making. These consultations take place at all levels—from municipalities to supranational communities (such as the EU). The use of digital tools raises hopes for increased accessibility and engagement of marginalized groups. Research confirms the increased inclusiveness of e-consultations, which are also seen as an opportunity for better communication between public administration and residents, or between civil society organizations. At the same time, the following limitations and risks are noted: tokenism, the danger of interest-group capture, participatory fatigue, and limited responsiveness (Ainsworth, Hardy & Harley, 2005).

Public consultations can be used both by the administration to verify the assumptions of various policies or implement accepted outcomes, and by citizen groups (organizations) to initiate specific actions or oppose the plans of local authorities. The opportunity to familiarize oneself with documents concerning public affairs and to encounter other points of view means that public consultations can play an important educational role, especially for young people.

Offline and online consultations may take the form of public hearings, meetings open to all (town hall meetings), written comments or surveys, or deliberative practices (assemblies, citizen juries). Researchers point out that the evaluation of e-consultation tools and the entire consultation process should take into account accessibility (whether there are any physical, competence, social, or material barriers), suitability (the extent to which the tools used meet the needs and objectives of users), level of activity (whether the process requires real involvement from participants or is merely a sham), and effectiveness (whether the consultation process leads to the achievement of the intended objectives) (Fırtın et al., 2025; Liu, 2017; Mariani et al., 2025).

Related Concepts: digital and media literacy; digital engagement; digital inclusion; digital transformation; e-government; participation; political participation; rhetorical citizenship

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Quadratic Voting

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Definition

Quadratic voting is a voting system grounded in the principles of mechanism design, in which participants do not cast a single vote but instead allocate a limited budget of "voting credits" across multiple options according to the intensity of their preferences. Unlike traditional majority voting—where each voter has equal weight regardless of how strongly they are affected by the outcome—this model introduces an increasing marginal cost: casting n votes for a single option requires spending n^2 credits.

This mechanism discourages the extreme concentration of voting power on a single alternative and enables outcomes that more accurately reflect aggregate social welfare. Its key feature is that it captures not only the ranking of preferences (which option is preferred) but also their relative intensity (how strongly one option is preferred over others).

Credits are typically distributed equally among all eligible participants at the start of each voting round—each participant receives the same endowment, which cannot be accumulated across rounds or transferred to other participants. In experimental and institutional applications, credits have also taken the form of artificial tokens or digital currencies with no monetary value, precisely to prevent their commodification.

Cost example:
1 vote = 1 credit
2 votes = 4 credits
3 votes = 9 credits
5 votes = 25 credits

Context

Quadratic voting emerges at the intersection of social choice theory and welfare economics as a direct response to a structural limitation of conventional majority voting

and its systematic inability to capture the intensity of preferences. Under simple majority rule, a voter who is marginally in favour of an option carries the same weight as one who is profoundly affected by the outcome. This asymmetry can produce decisions that maximize the number of satisfied voters while minimizing aggregate social welfare, particularly when concentrated minorities hold intense stakes in an issue that a diffuse majority regards with relative indifference (Lalley & Weyl, 2018).

The digitalization of political and organizational life has transformed quadratic voting from a theoretical proposition into a practically deployable mechanism. Digital platforms enable the real-time computation of quadratic costs, the secure management of credit budgets, and the transparent registration of voting outcomes at scales that would be operationally unfeasible in analogue settings. This technical feasibility has driven its experimentation across both institutional and party contexts. At the institutional level, the Colorado General Assembly tested quadratic voting in 2019 to prioritize legislative proposals among Democrats, and participatory budgeting platforms have incorporated similar logics to weight citizens' project preferences at the local level. Within political parties, quadratic voting has been explored as a mechanism for intra-party consultations and internal primaries: it allows members to signal not merely which candidate or policy position they prefer, but how strongly they prefer it relative to alternatives—a property particularly valuable in multi-option leadership contests or programmatic priority-setting processes. Decentralized autonomous organizations (DAOs) have also adopted it as a governance tool to counterbalance the dominance of large token-holders in collective decisions (Posner & Weyl, 2018).

Within the domain of digital democracy more broadly, quadratic voting occupies a distinctive position because it simultaneously addresses two of the core challenges of online political participation: preference aggregation quality and minority voice protection. Conventional digital voting systems—polls, click-to-vote mechanisms, or ranked-choice interfaces—replicate the one-person-one-vote logic in digital form without resolving its underlying aggregation problems. Quadratic voting, by contrast, introduces a market-like mechanism into collective decision-making that is specifically designed to surface the distribution of preference intensities across a population, not merely its modal preferences.

Artificial intelligence reinforces the operational viability of quadratic voting in digital environments through three complementary functions. First, explainable AI (XAI) interfaces—systems designed to make algorithmic processes transparent and interpretable to non-specialist users—offer voters real-time simulations of how alternative credit allocations would affect both individual strategy and collective outcomes, reducing the cognitive burden of a non-intuitive cost structure and improving participatory literacy. Second, anomaly detection algorithms monitor credit distribution patterns for signs of strategic collusion—coordinated bloc voting, credit pooling, or synchronized allocation—that could reintroduce concentrated power through the

back door, while preserving individual ballot secrecy. Third, AI-assisted deliberation platforms process large volumes of argumentative content prior to voting, identifying emergent areas of consensus and dissensus and presenting structured syntheses that improve the informational quality of individual judgment (Novelli et al., 2024).

Despite its promise, quadratic voting is not without limitations relevant to political scientists. Its legitimacy depends on the equal and verifiable initial distribution of credits—any mechanism that allows their informal transfer or accumulation replicates the inequalities it was designed to correct. Several design responses have been proposed to address this vulnerability: strict single-round credit expiration prevents accumulation across voting cycles; identity verification protocols—including digital identity systems and, in some proposals, zero-knowledge proofs—aim to ensure that each participant receives and exercises their credit endowment independently; and audit mechanisms embedded in the voting platform can flag statistically anomalous allocation patterns suggestive of coordinated transfer. Nevertheless, no existing implementation has fully resolved the tension between credit integrity and participatory anonymity. Quadratic voting also presupposes a degree of strategic rationality and numerical literacy that may not be uniformly distributed across electorates or party memberships, raising questions of participatory equity. Finally, its application in high-stakes political environments remains largely experimental, and empirical evidence on its behavioural effects at scale is still accumulating (Weyl, 2017).

Related Concepts: AI-enabled analytics; algorithm; algorithmic bias; digital engagement; digital intraparty democracy; e-democracy; intra-party (digital) consultations; liquid democracy; online primaries; participatory budgeting; platform politics; zero-knowledge proof

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Recommender Systems

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Definition

Recommender systems are algorithmic tools that predict and suggest content, services, or actions to users based on data about their preferences, behaviour, or social connections. Originally developed for commercial domains (e.g., shopping, streaming), they are increasingly deployed in public and political spheres. By filtering and prioritizing information, recommender systems shape users' exposure to viewpoints, opportunities, and civic participation pathways. Their design influences what people see, learn, and possibly choose, making them critical infrastructures in digital democracies.

Technically, recommender systems proactively surface a "top-N" subset based on inferred preferences, without requiring an explicit request. They are part of a family of information systems that rank content by relevance or interest, enabling selective exposure (Belkin & Vickery, 1985). Design approaches can emphasize different goals, ranging from engagement to diversity, transparency, or fairness. For example, multi-stakeholder recommender systems balance the interests of users, institutions, and society, incorporating public objectives such as inclusion and democratic relevance.

Context

Recommender systems now play a central role in mediating political knowledge, civic engagement, and democratic participation. From suggesting petitions and consultation topics on participatory platforms (such as Decidim or Consul) to shaping news feeds and issue agendas on social media, these systems influence what citizens perceive as politically relevant or worth engaging with. In this context, recommender systems hold significant potential for fostering more inclusive and responsive engagement. By tailoring access to vast and complex information environments, they help individuals, including younger people, older adults, and underserved communities, overcome cognitive and logistical barriers to democratic participation. These systems can support

smoother and more meaningful civic interactions by guiding users towards relevant opportunities that match their expressed concerns or needs.

When responsibly designed, recommender systems can promote epistemic diversity, highlight underrepresented perspectives, and build trust through transparency. For instance, civic platforms may deploy issue-based recommenders to connect users with proposals aligned to their interests, while explainable systems can clarify why certain items are prioritized.

However, these systems also pose subtle but serious risks to democratic life. When optimized solely for engagement, they may steer users away from critical, diverse, or dissenting content, nudging them towards emotionally charged or ideologically narrow material. Over time, this can distort public understanding, fragment collective attention, and erode motivation for participation. Rather than empowering citizens, such systems may reinforce existing inequalities or obscure key deliberative opportunities, particularly among those with lower digital fluency. For re-linkage strategies to be effective, recommender systems must be designed with explicit attention to fairness, inclusion, and epistemic diversity. They are not neutral tools, but value-laden infrastructures that shape how democracy is encountered and enacted.

Related Concepts: algorithm; algorithmic censorship; digital activism; digital participation; deliberative platforms; media and information literacy; platform politics; zero-knowledge proof

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Reverse Mentoring

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Definition

Reverse mentoring is a developmental relationship that inverts traditional organizational hierarchies by pairing a younger, junior employee as the mentor with an older, more senior colleague as the mentee (Marcinkus Murphy, 2012). In this model, junior members share their specialized knowledge, such as advanced technological skills, current cultural trends, and new conceptual paradigms, with senior executives or older adults (Chen, 2013; Güğercin, 2017). This process actively facilitates bidirectional knowledge sharing, focusing on enhancing the mentee's digital literacy and strategic understanding of generational shifts while simultaneously developing the mentor's leadership and professional competencies (Garg & Singh, 2020). Ultimately, reverse mentoring serves as a targeted professional development tool, designed to leverage the distinct capabilities of younger generations to modernize organizational practices and mindsets (Marcinkus Murphy, 2012).

Context

Reverse mentoring is highly relevant to organizational learning, digitalization, and intergenerational dialogue because it directly addresses the demographic and technological shifts transforming modern environments (Garg & Singh, 2020). The practice is specifically utilized to bridge the digital divide, defined not only as unequal access to technology, but also as the disparity in digital literacy and experience between younger "digital natives" and older generations (Breck et al., 2018). By transferring crucial information communication technology skills from younger mentors to older mentees, reverse mentoring integrates digital competence across the organization (Harrison, 2017).

In the realm of civic engagement and educational service-learning, reverse mentoring empowers the youth voice by placing younger individuals in leadership and teaching roles, which enhances their self-efficacy and civic participation (Leedahl et al., 2019).

This structure updates senior leadership on crucial technological and generational trends, while granting youth a platform to be heard and enact meaningful organizational change (Marcinkus Murphy, 2012).

The benefits of this process are multifaceted: it cultivates mutual understanding, breaks down age-related stereotypes, drives organizational innovation, and fosters a culture of inclusivity and belonging for marginalized or diverse groups (Breck et al., 2018; Gordon, 2022). However, organizations face notable challenges in implementation, including the psychological discomfort of senior leaders relinquishing authority during role reversal, the difficulty of building trust across hierarchical lines, and the potential resistance from older mentees, who may struggle to respect younger mentors (Gadomska-Lila, 2020; Marcinkus Murphy, 2012).

Related Concepts: civic participation; digital divide; digital empowerment; digital exclusion; digital inclusion; digital leadership; digital literacies; digital natives; media and information literacy

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Rhetorical Citizenship

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Definition

Rhetorical citizenship refers to how individuals enact their role as citizens through discourse and communication. It highlights citizenship not merely as a legal or institutional status, but as a practice of argumentation, dialogue, and critical engagement with public issues. Citizens participate in democracy by formulating arguments, expressing opinions, responding to others, and reflecting critically on information. Rhetorical citizenship recognizes both cooperative and confrontational forms of public discourse, acknowledging that disagreement and debate are integral to democratic life. By focusing on how citizens speak, listen, and persuade in everyday interactions—whether in face-to-face discussions, public debates, or online exchanges—it underscores the role of rhetoric in constituting civic participation and democratic engagement.

Context

Rhetorical citizenship might be a helpful concept for understanding democracy and marginalized groups in the digital age. As digital technologies reshape how people connect, deliberate, and mobilize, citizenship is increasingly practiced through communicative acts online—tweets, memes, hashtags, livestreamed debates, or short videos. These forms expand the scope of what counts as public discourse, shifting attention away from elite-driven arenas towards the everyday practices of ordinary citizens. This concept is connected with approaches that emphasize the discursive production of democracy (e.g., Rawls, Habermas, Dryzek et al.).

Within the context of the RELINK^2 Action, rhetorical citizenship is significant because it offers a framework for examining how digital technologies can both strengthen

and weaken democratic connections between citizens and institutions. Instead of reducing civic participation to formal procedures such as voting, rhetorical citizenship emphasizes the communicative competencies needed to engage productively in democratic life: articulating arguments clearly, listening actively, critically assessing information, and negotiating differences. These practices are especially important for connecting digitally active but politically marginalized youth with digitally marginalized but politically active elderly citizens, fostering intergenerational exchange and mutual understanding (e.g., Benkler et al., 2015).

Moreover, rhetorical citizenship helps address challenges to deliberative democracy. Traditional deliberative models often stress consensus (as a goal) and rationality (as a mode), but rhetorical citizenship accepts that disagreement, conflict, and diverse communicative styles are inevitable in pluralist societies. By valuing both cooperative and agonistic exchanges, it offers a more inclusive vision of democratic communication.

Ultimately, rhetorical citizenship reframes digital participation not as secondary to conventional politics, but as active part of democratic life. It allows policy-makers, educators, and civic organizations to design interventions that build rhetorical competencies, reduce inequalities in participation, and cultivate trust in democratic institutions. This makes rhetorical citizenship a powerful framework for exploring how digital technologies can reconnect citizens with democracy.

Related Concepts: civic participation; connective action; digital activism; digital engagement; hacktivism; hashtag activism; media information literacy; participation; political participation; public consultations; slacktivism

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Slacktivism/Clicktivism

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Definition

Slacktivism, interchangeably known as clicktivism, is a form of digital political or civic participation characterized by behaviours that require minimal time, effort, or commitment (Dennis, 2019). This phenomenon encompasses low-threshold online activities such as signing digital petitions, sharing content, and "liking" posts on social media platforms (Lee & Hsieh, 2013). Academically, slacktivism is frequently described as a "token display of support" or a "symbolic action," contrasting sharply with substantive, "real-life" contributions to a cause (Kristofferson et al., 2014; Akhlaghpour, 2018). The term predominantly carries a pejorative connotation, suggesting these digital practices primarily serve to grant personal satisfaction or moral licensing to the user rather than effecting tangible political outcomes (Breuer & Farooq, 2012; Halupka, 2014). Consequently, critics frequently contrast slacktivism with high-cost traditional offline collective actions, such as protests and boycotts, which demand significant personal investment (Schumann & Klein, 2015).

Context

Slacktivism occupies the low-effort, passive end of the broader spectrum of digital civic engagement, raising significant theoretical debates regarding its utility for political organizations (Dennis, 2019). Critics, notably Evgeny Morozov, argue that slacktivism yields a "low impact" on democratic institutions, functioning merely as "feel-good" online activism that breeds a lazy generation (Halupka, 2014; Kristofferson et al., 2014). This perspective introduces the "substitution thesis" or "trade-off hypothesis," warning of the risk that easy digital clicks might replace or derail meaningful, real-world collective action (Christensen, 2011; Greijdanus et al., 2020).

Conversely, some scholars reframe these behaviours as "symbolic networked actions" that play a crucial role as a starting point for awareness and epistemic knowledge

(Dennis, 2019; Schumann & Klein, 2015). Proponents argue that clicktivism represents a "stepping stone" on a ladder of engagement, where low-threshold acts can facilitate subsequent offline protesting and volunteering (Schumann & Klein, 2015). Furthermore, in non-democratic or authoritarian contexts, digital micro-activism provides vital benefits; it acts as a liberation technology that helps citizens find like-minded individuals and coordinate movements under repressive regimes, despite the risks of surveillance (Greijdanus et al., 2020). Ultimately, advocacy groups purposefully leverage these low-effort digital interactions to lower the barriers to entry, utilizing them as one tactical component within a broader organizational repertoire to bridge citizens to sites of institutional power (Dennis, 2019; Karpf, 2010).

Related Concepts: civic participation; digital activism; digital engagement; digital protest; hacktivism; hashtag activism; political crowdfunding; political crowdsourcing; political organization; political participation; public consultations; virtual communities

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Smart Governance

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Definition

Smart governance is a key pillar of a smart city or nation, encompassing changes, reforms, and adjustments to traditional governance that make public administration more efficient, transparent, open, collaborative, and responsive. The transition from traditional government to smart governance (local, regional, national) is enabled by advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, data analytics, blockchain, and the Internet of Things (IoT). Thus, "smart" refers to the intelligent use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), technology, and innovation, with a democratic approach that enhances citizen engagement. Incorporating these components into the city's governance model improves decision-making and urban outcomes, delivering higher-quality, citizen-centric public services. Therefore, smart governance is understood as the ability of those in power to govern the city through a combination of ICT tools, collaboration, evidence-based policy-making, and data-driven decision-making to deliver better results and meet citizens' needs (Gil-Garcia et al., 2014; Pereira et al., 2018; Jiang, 2021; Abdullah, 2024). Key conceptual foundations of smart governance include city government, smart decision-making, smart administration, and smart urban collaboration. Although this conceptualization refers to a distinct theoretical perspective regarding the role of government in society and the need for transformation, it also proposes areas where the government governs in a "smarter" way, having a forward-thinking approach in the use and integration of information, technology, and innovation (Gil-Garcia et al., 2014; Meijer & Bolívar, 2016).

Context

The digitalization of public administration has shifted it from a traditional bureaucratic structure to a smart, interconnected ecosystem driven by new technologies. The rapid growth of big data, AI, machine learning, data analytics, blockchain, and

IoT worldwide marks a pivotal moment in how intelligent cities are managed (Kaiser, 2024; Pereira et al., 2018; Gil-Garcia et al., 2014). They are no longer simply handling vast and complex bureaucratic processes but require a specific governance model that ensures coordination, manages complex processes, and fosters collaboration among a wide range of stakeholders (Jiang, 2021; Meijer & Bolívar, 2016; Augusto, 2021). In this sense, the smart governance concept serves as a means to make better, more informed, and data-driven decisions through new technologies and collaborative frameworks. However, the origin of "smart governance" comes from exploring only how technology, treated as technical infrastructure, could optimize the governing process, rather than a complex institutional dimension that is associated with a broader socio-technical perspective, followed by "smart" governance reform (Nam & Pardo, 2011; Meijer & Bolívar, 2016). Thus, smart governance shifts from merely adapting technology to the intelligent use of information, decision-making, and collaboration to make cities and nations smarter. It is important to note that closely related ideas, like e-government and collective intelligence, help clarify the term. E-government primarily involves using technology to deliver public services, handle administrative tasks, and communicate with citizens. In contrast, collective intelligence involves government institutions using digital tools and electronic systems that combine advanced technologies with the collective knowledge and active involvement of stakeholders. Smart governance leverages these resources to enable proactive and predictive management.

As the scope of data and information continues to expand, cities across the globe seek to manage data generated by IoT sensors, government agencies, and businesses, while social media users seek novel solutions to process, integrate, and exploit this data (Pereira et al., 2018; Duberry, 2022). For example, the city of Dublin uses IoT-based sensors and computer vision applications in flood monitoring and mapping, or drones equipped with scanners to update the city's structural topography. Such an innovative governance system employs data-driven approaches to streamline government processes and promote sustainable development, thereby improving societal outcomes across many domains.

The concept of smart governance is at the centre of academic, policy, and societal debate. In the public context, it is characterized by government efforts to improve the quality of life in urban spaces, enhancing the six city dimensions: people, economy, government, mobility, living, and environment, (Anthopoulos et al., 2016). The idea of a smart city has attracted interest from scholars and practitioners, prompting a necessary effort to become smarter. For policy-makers, it is about making decisions, reforming, using tools to develop the city and public services, anticipating failures, and making decisions faster. In public debate, it is mostly about concrete solutions in services such as intelligent transport systems (London), smart parking assistance (Helsinki), digital identity (Tallinn), or blurring the line between people and objects in public spaces (Amsterdam).

The debate around the operationalization of smart governance has evolved. From a theoretical and research perspective, scientists recommend the following directions. Smart governance is: 1) a socio-technical practice that helps to understand the interactions between technology and society; 2) a transformation of public institutions; 3) a contributor to economic growth and other public values; 4) a political approach that shapes the city (Meijer & Bolívar, 2016). From a practical perspective, a broad range of institutions have created frameworks to assess smart governance, such as the Institute for Management Development's Smart City Index, which assesses aspects including technological adoption, quality of life, infrastructure, governance, and environmental performance (Alshubiri, 2026), or the OECD's Smart City Data Governance (OECD, 2023), which evaluates a city's capacity.

Related Concepts: AI-enabled analytics; algorithm; algorithm bias; collective intelligence; datafication; digital governance; digital transformation; digital sovereignty ; democratic innovation; e-democracy; urban participatory innovation; virtual communities

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Synthetic Politics

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Definition

Synthetic politics refers to forms of political representation, communication, and organization in which political voice is composed through computational systems and staged as a publicly addressable persona. The term does not simply denote the use of AI in campaigning, administration, or analytics. It names situations in which chatbots, avatars, virtual candidates, automated spokespersons, or agentic systems are treated as political figures that can be addressed, quoted, blamed, regulated, or invested with representative authority. "Synthetic" is used here in the philosophical sense of synthesis: the composition of heterogeneous elements, including data, models, interfaces, institutions, and human operators, into a political subject that is not reducible to any one of them. Synthetic politics therefore concerns a shift from AI as an external tool acting on politics to AI staged within politics as a figure of representation.

Context

The concept emerged because prevailing framings of AI and politics were too broad for a new set of cases. Research on politics through AI has largely focused on campaigning, participation, and administration, as in König and Wenzelburger (2020) and Supriyanto and Saputra (2022), while work on the politics of AI has centred on regulation, ethics, and governance, as in Coeckelbergh (2024) and Ulnicane and Erkkilä (2023). Synthetic politics marks a narrower shift: it concerns cases in which AI is publicly staged as a political figure rather than treated only as an instrument or object of

governance, a move García-Marzá and Calvo (2024) approach from the side of algorithmic democracy. Where AI politics tracks effect, synthetic politics concerns enactment.

Its genealogy predates generative AI, but generative systems make it institutionally operative. Staunæs (2025) traces earlier cases such as Wiktoria Cukt's virtual presidential campaign in Poland in 2000 and the Social Democratic dialogue robot Rosa in Denmark in 2001, both of which already staged artificial political voice. The sequence continued with Politician SAM in New Zealand in 2017, Michihito Matsuda's AI Mayor in Japan in 2018, Leader Lars and The Synthetic Party in Denmark in 2022, and later governmental figures such as Romania's ION, Ukraine's Victoria Shi, and Albania's Diella, discussed by Tika (2025). By the Synthetic Summit in 2025, Schneier and Sanders (2025) help show that such cases no longer appeared as isolated curiosities but as a comparable formation spanning electoral, advisory, executive, and oppositional roles.

Synthetic politics also names a tension internal to these figures. Vuković (2024) shows how chatbot politicians combine technocratic logics with a limited populist repertoire: they are framed as neutral, data-driven, efficient, and post-ideological, while simultaneously rejecting established political intermediaries and conventional politics. However, because the constitutive populist opposition between a corrupt elite and a unified people is missing, it may be more accurate to interpret these actors through the lens of techno-optimism rather than populism in the stricter sense. The Synthetic Party in Denmark is exemplary in this regard. As Staunæs and Herrie (2024) show, its attempt to speak in the name of non-voters did not move beyond ideology so much as reorganise it through aggregation, interface, and public reception.

Related Concepts: AI-enabled analytics, Algorithm, computer-mediated communication, data-driven campaign, datafication, platform politics, virtual communities

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Urban Participatory Innovation

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Definition

Urban Participatory Innovation (UPI) refers to diverse practices through which city residents collectively shape urban governance, policies, and everyday life. Unlike traditional models of democratic innovation that focus mainly on institutional reforms or urban social movements that emphasize grassroots mobilization (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2017; Dzur, 2019), UPI addresses challenges such as power dynamics, marginalization, inequality, and governance conflicts by fostering novel forms of participation, protest, and collaboration. UPIs occupy a hybrid space where top-down and bottom-up initiatives intersect. They highlight the role of urban space in building or eroding trust and democracy through tools such as participatory budgeting, citizen science, digital democracy platforms, neighbourhood upgrading, and community action networks in decision-making processes (Halvorsen, 2026; Su, 2025; Wampler & Goldfrank, 2022). What makes UPIs "innovative" is that they not only propose new forms of participation, new practices, and mechanisms, but also intervene in underlying governance structures and power relations (Par-City, n.d.).

Context

Although Urban Participatory Innovation can be carried out without digital means, it is increasingly relevant for understanding digitalization and its impact on democracy (Pospieszna & Pietrzyk-Reeves, 2024; Tseng, 2025). Cities have become laboratories of democratic practice where digital technologies enable new forms of civic participation—through online consultations, liquid democracy platforms, participatory mapping, or hybrid assemblies that blend digital and in-person deliberation (Beveridge

& Koch, 2023; Bua & Bussu, 2023, Tseng, 2025). These tools not only expand decision-making by facilitating access and creating new opportunities, especially for marginalized groups, but also help marginalized voices—such as youth, migrants, or the elderly—shape urban future (Goldfrank & Welp, 2024).

Within the RELINK[2] Action, UPIs are one example of innovation (aside from the digital lab or stakeholder engagement). The initiative seeks to rebuild democratic legitimacy and reconnect citizens with institutions through the secure, inclusive use of digital technologies. UPIs provide mechanisms for achieving this goal by fostering intergenerational and cross-social dialogue within urban contexts, where most citizens experience politics in their daily lives. For instance, participatory budgeting allows residents to allocate portions of municipal budgets directly. At the same time, digital urban democracy platforms enable real-time engagement on issues such as housing, public space, and climate adaptation.

Importantly, UPIs reveal that democracy is not only institutional but also lived through everyday urban practices (such as participatory budgeting projects or participatory neighbourhood upgrading) and is relational, contested, and embedded in local contexts.

Related Concepts: connective action; democratic innovation; digital activism; digital engagement; digital protest; digital governance; digital transformation; e-democracy; participation; participatory budgeting; political discourse; public consultations; rhetorical citizenship

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Virtual Communities

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Definition

Howard Rheingold, in his book *The Virtual Community*, defines virtual communities as "social aggregations that emerge from the Net (...) with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Rheingold, 1994). In his definition, Rheingold highlighted the importance of cyberspace for the ways virtual communities are changing the real world. The author underlines the relational aspects of virtual communities, not just technical interaction. Virtual communities encourage interaction between individuals that communicate through media platforms and networks. These individuals meet in a digital space where they build strong relations. Communication technologies changed the way people relate to each other, how they interact, and how they form online groups. Some researchers underlined that virtual communities are "pseudo-communities" (Harasim, 1993; Blanchard & Horan, 1998) while Rheingold (1994) claimed that virtual communities are "real communities" because the individuals believe they are communities.

Context

While virtual communities in the early 1960s and 1970s were related to ways of interaction between technology and human creativity, in the 21st century, the advent of new software for online connections has led to the rise of social media. Private community chat and messaging platforms encouraged people to interact more often, defying boundaries. Political science and communication science understand virtual communities as social and civic platforms, spaces for political action and for social interaction (e.g., Memmi, 2006; Porter, 2004). Political science focuses on how virtual communities affect political and democratic participation, and communication science highlights social and media interaction through discourse analysis or ethnography. Empirical research highlights the growing role of digitalization and the advantages of

virtual communities in contemporary participation. In particular, survey-based studies show that digitally networked participation constitutes a distinct mode of engagement, enabled by online platforms and networked communication (Theocharis et al., 2021). This form of participation has been found to attract especially younger citizens and individuals who are more critical of traditional political institutions, offering alternative channels for expression, mobilization, and collective action.

Using three case studies, the advantages of virtual communities for community-based participatory research were demonstrated, particularly with regard to the use of online tools to facilitate participation and reduce geographical barriers (Tami-Mauri et al., 2017). More broadly, the literature emphasizes that virtual communities play a crucial role in political and social engagement and in mediated communication, contributing significantly to the digital evolution of both society and politics.

The concept is particularly useful for the study of digital politics because it emphasizes the role of online platforms for continuous dialogue between citizens and political actors, mobilizing volunteers, and encouraging activism for political organizations. Participation within virtual communities built digital trust and a sense of belonging among members. Virtual communities are used as communication and innovation spaces, providing a more responsive form of political organization in the digital age.

Related Concepts: computer-mediated communication; digital activism; digital engagement; digital literacy; digital protest; platforms politics; online disinformation; platform cooperativism

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Zero-Knowledge Proof

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Definition

A zero-knowledge proof (ZKP) is a cryptographic technique that allows one party (the prover) to convince another party or system (the verifier) that a given statement is true, without revealing the underlying information. Its defining characteristic is that what is communicated is not the data itself, but cryptographic proof of the statement's validity. For example, a user may prove that they are over 18, eligible to vote, or in possession of a valid password, without disclosing their date of birth, identity, or credentials.

This mechanism breaks the traditional link between proof and disclosure, which characterizes most digital systems where verification typically requires access to the data being verified, making them particularly valuable in digital environments characterized by asymmetries of power, information, and access.

Formally, ZKPs rely on three core properties: completeness, soundness, and zero-knowledge (Goldwasser, Micali, & Rackoff, 1989; Bellare & Goldreich, 1992). These properties make ZKPs particularly suitable for privacy-sensitive domains such as digital identity, authentication, e-voting, and financial transactions, where verification and data protection must coexist.

Context

A potential domain of application of ZKP technology is electronic voting, which is also where ZKPs become especially significant in light of RELINK[2]'s objectives. Traditional voting systems are organized around two core democratic requirements that must be jointly ensured: ballot secrecy and electoral integrity (Bernhard et al., 2017). Ballot secrecy requires that individual votes remain unlinkable to voters, while electoral integrity requires that each vote is cast by an eligible voter, recorded accurately, and included exactly once in the final tally. In traditional paper-based elections, these

requirements are aligned through physical separation between voter identification and vote casting, procedural safeguards, and institutional oversight (Benaloh & Tuinstra, 1994; Adida, 2008; Garnett & James, 2026).

The broader digitalization of society has progressively extended to democratic processes, encouraging policy-makers and institutions to reconsider traditional voting arrangements. As public administration and political participation increasingly rely on digital infrastructures, electronic voting has been explored as a means to enhance accessibility, administrative efficiency, and engagement, particularly among digitally active citizens. At the same time, the academic and policy literature has consistently highlighted the difficulties of ensuring core electoral guarantees in digital environments (Chaum, 2004; Rivest, 2008).

A central concern is that many e-voting solutions struggle to preserve ballot secrecy while also ensuring protection against external interference, such as coercion or undue influence. In traditional elections, the controlled voting environment plays a crucial role in safeguarding voter autonomy and preventing vote-buying or pressure. In digital voting systems, especially in remote settings, these protections must be reconstructed through technical means, without relying on physical isolation (Benaloh & Tuinstra, 1994). At the same time, voters and observers increasingly demand mechanisms that provide assurance that votes are correctly recorded and counted.

In digital voting systems, voter eligibility checks, vote recording, and result verification are implemented through software-based mechanisms. These mechanisms must simultaneously support verification and preserve secrecy, without generating information that could be used to trace votes or demonstrate how an individual voted (Chaum, 2004). This combination of requirements has contributed to the cautious and context-specific deployment of electronic voting, often accompanied by strict safeguards and ongoing scrutiny (Adida, 2008).

It is against this background that ZKP technology has attracted growing attention. ZKPs allow voting systems to demonstrate core electoral properties, such as voter eligibility, ballot validity and correct tallying, without revealing voter identities or vote content (Marcellino et al., 2024). In doing so, they present themselves as an innovative technological approach capable of supporting verifiable electoral processes while respecting the fundamental democratic requirement of ballot secrecy.

Related Concepts: blockchain; digital democracy; e-democracy; e-government; e-voting; online primaries

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Digital politics is a rapidly evolving field, shaped by conceptual diversity, interdisciplinary exchange and constant technological change. This glossary offers an accessible and authoritative guide to its key terms, bringing together updated contributions from an international community of scholars connected to the COST Action RELINK^2.

Beyond providing fixed definitions, the volume synthesizes the state of the art while keeping concepts open to critical reflection, debate and revision. Its entries situate digital politics within broader questions of democracy, participation, governance, and social transformation, highlighting tensions between innovation and exclusion, empowerment and control, visibility and manipulation, as well as participation and algorithmic mediation.

The glossary is therefore both a reference work and an invitation to inquiry. It maps what we know about digital politics today, clarifies how major concepts are used across different research traditions, and identifies the questions that remain unresolved. In doing so, it not only helps readers navigate a complex and changing vocabulary, but also points towards what we still need to understand about the political consequences of digital transformation.

Dr hab. Izabela Kapsa,
Associate Professor
Kazimierz Wielki University
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The *Glossary of Digital Politics and Society* is a concise, critically grounded compendium of the concepts that are shaping democracy in the digital age. The volume comprises a total of 83 entries, contributed by 39 authors from across Europe. The purpose of the volume is to provide a comprehensive overview of the key vocabulary in the field. In doing so, it covers a wide range of topics, including algorithmic governance, algorithmic bias and data-driven campaigning, as well as digital democracy and civic participation. Drawing upon a range of disciplines, it provides a coherent reference point in a field where key terms are often used inconsistently.

Rather than static definitions, each entry combines a clear definition with context. This includes the term's theoretical origins, main debates and controversies, and relevance for democracy. It also includes recommended further reading. The volume demonstrates how innovation and exclusion, participation and surveillance, and transparency and manipulation are intertwined.

The glossary can be regarded as an accessible resource for students, as well as a valuable source of conceptual clarity for researchers, policy-makers, journalists and civil society practitioners. It supports interdisciplinary dialogue and informed public debate. Edited by Michał Jacuński, Marco Lisi, and Elżbieta Szulc-Wałecka, it is published open access under the COST Action RELINK² (CA23114) by Wrocław University Press.



Photo by Jakub Kalinowski

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Photo by Justyna Mazur-Sorkowska

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