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► **To cite this version:**

Joachim Åström, Martin Karlsson. Will e-Participation Bring Critical Citizens Back In?. 8th International Conference on Electronic Participation (ePart), Sep 2016, Guimarães, Portugal. pp.83-93, 10.1007/978-3-319-45074-2_7. hal-01637235

HAL Id: hal-01637235

<https://inria.hal.science/hal-01637235>

Submitted on 17 Nov 2017

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Will e-Participation Bring Critical Citizens Back In?

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Abstract. This paper sets out to critically examine the mobilizing potential of e-participation. The extent to which citizens beyond the usual suspects are engaged is studied by way of survey data from two novel e-participation case studies: one Swedish, one Finnish. Besides from the traditional socio-demographic variables, the analyses highlights cultural attitudes and ask: Do e-participation processes succeed in mobilizing citizens dissatisfied with the way democracy works? Can e-participation bring critical citizens back in? Certainly, the empirical analysis indicates critical citizens are clearly overrepresented in these two cases.

Keywords: e-participation, mobilization, critical citizens, political culture, democratic satisfaction

1 Introduction¹

The nature of civic engagement has changed from participation in political parties and other traditional organisations to more direct and individualised forms. 97% of Swedes and 92% of Finns are not members of one of the eight political parties currently in parliament. In Sweden over 70% do not feel affiliated to any one political party [1, 2]. At the same time, campaigns in favour of individual political issues often draw widespread involvement, not the least online and on social media [3].

To accommodate this development many parliaments, governments, and municipalities have begun adopting ‘democratic innovations’, an umbrella term for several new methods of participation used by a representative democracy to bolster diminishing civic engagement and to bring citizens closer to the decision-making process. The myriad methods available include: citizen panels, councils, participatory budgeting, and e-participation.

One of the goals ascribed to e-participation is to increase civic engagement in the representative democracy’s institutions. But even if e-participation, by virtue of having lower barriers for entry, often do increase civic engagement, it is far from certain that the higher level of participation corresponds to a less unequal division of political activity. If e-participation mostly mobilizes already politically active individuals, groups, and organisations, the consequence instead is that it replicates, or intensifies, existing inequalities. For this reason it is important to assess who participates [4].

¹ This work was supported by The Swedish Research Council Formas

This paper sets out to critically examine the mobilizing potential of e-participation by investigating whether or not citizens beyond the usual suspects are engaged in e-participation processes. In addition to investigating the socio-demographic characteristics of participants in two e-participation cases, we engage in empirically analysing an often forgotten but arguably important dimension of political inclusion: the cultural attitudes of participants. Do e-participation processes succeed in mobilizing citizens dissatisfied with the way democracy works? Can e-participation bring critical citizens back in?

2 Political culture in change

Over the course of recent decades, major challenges to representative institutions have offered a breeding ground for reflection on the future of democratic governance. Concerns usually relate to the very low levels of political support. There is no evidence that publics in established democracies are expressing diminishing levels of support for the ideals and aims of democracy. People agree on democracy being the best form of government, but are increasingly critical towards how current regimes meet public expectations in practice [5, 3].

Although there are different trends in different countries and fluctuations rather than secular trends in individual countries, many commentators now argue that levels of trust are dramatically low [6, 7]. In the 2012 European Social Survey, where trust was measured on a scale from 0 ('no trust at all') to 10 ('complete trust'), the mean trust score for politicians across all 23 countries was 3.2 [8]. Sizeable proportions of mass publics thus lean towards the view that representative institutions and actors are failing to accurately reflect public values and preferences. An even more generalized attitude of support is the degree to which people feel satisfied with how democracy works in their country. The fact that fewer than half of the citizens in many European countries are now satisfied with democracy have drawn further attention to the need to better understand how and why support for the functioning of democracy varies [7].

The prevailing assumption has been that we should look at outcomes rather than processes [9]. However, due to evidence of shifting patterns of political participation, this view has been increasingly challenged. Political parties are commonly regarded as faced by one of the most profound crises in their history, in terms of their ability to attract members and provide meaningful cues to voters [10]. Moreover, a clear rise in non-institutionalised forms of political participation can also be identified. Political participation is not necessarily declining, but it is changing, from the narrow domain of party politics and electoral campaigns to increasingly autonomous, issue-specific forms of expression. Interestingly, empirical research reveals a relationship between political support and patterns of participation: namely, that support for representative institutions and actors is positively associated with conventional participation, and negatively associated with newer forms of participation [11, 5].

The establishment of a link between participation and support has fuelled the debate on how various decision-making processes actually match citizens with different attitudinal predispositions. The classification and interpretation of these predispositions is

done in various ways, but they often relate to political support as well as to political interest. Christensen distinguishes four predispositions commonly found in the literature: Traditional Ideal Citizens, Stealth Citizens, Critical Citizens, and Disenchanted Citizens [12]. The first of these corresponds to traditional understandings of what an ideal citizen should be like in a representative democracy [13]. Traditional Ideal Citizens are supportive of political institutions and actors and politically active, preferably in conventional forms of participation. Stealth Citizens [14], though, tend to support political institutions but do not (nor want to) participate in politics beyond the vote. As Bengtsson and Christensen rightly point out, formal representative structures still have many supporters satisfied merely by choosing their leaders on Election Day. Although this group is detached from the political sphere, it is quite happy leaving the dirty work to the authorities, who are held in rather high esteem.

Yet when it comes to dissatisfied citizens, very much at the centre of current debate, it is necessary to differentiate between Critical Citizens [3, 5] on the one hand, and Disenchanted Citizens [15, 16] on the other. Pippa Norris argues that positions of distrust and dissatisfaction sometimes aim to improve the political system [3]. Criticism, in this variant, does not imply disengagement. On the contrary, critical citizens are widening their repertoire of political intervention and appear to favour a more direct participatory relationship with rulers. Other citizens, however, grow disenchanted with politics and abstain from political activity altogether [15, 16].

How do these various predispositions – ideal, stealth, critical, and disenchanted – affect who (e-)participates?

3 Method and measurements

The empirical analyses of this article are conducted on survey data from two e-participation case studies. A survey of participants in the *Malmö Initiative*, an e-petitioning system used in the city of Malmö, Sweden, was conducted as an online survey, and collected 1,470 responses in total. As sample selection targeted all citizens who had participated in the system, the total number of contacted citizens was 7,024, which produced a moderate response rate of 21%. While a low response rate is problematic, it is important to stress that the survey was based on a census selection and not a sample of participants.

A survey to participants of *Täsä*, a mobile participation process hosted in the city of Turku, Finland, was distributed through the mobile participation app used in the project and hence distributed to all 780 registered participants in the project. The survey received 186 answers equal to a response rate of 24%. Again, a very low response rate, yet based on a census of all participants in the participatory process.

Pre-existing large scale survey studies were consulted in order to gather comparative data on the general public in the two contexts of the participatory processes that make up the cases of this study. In the case of the *Malmö Initiative*, extensive survey data was available on a random sample of residents of the county of Skåne in which the city of

Malmö is located through the SOM-survey studies [17]. In the case of *Tästä*, no corresponding regional or local survey data was available, compelling us to turn to surveys covering the whole nation of Finland. The European Values Study (wave four) was used to get information about the political participation and satisfaction with democracy among Finnish citizens [2].

In order to investigate the potential of these e-participation cases to mobilize participants beyond the “usual suspects”, comparative descriptive analyses were conducted where the characteristics of e-participants were compared to the characteristics of the general public in the respective contexts. Comparable data was analysed regarding the age, gender, education, and satisfaction with democracy and interest in politics of the participants, as well as the general public. Descriptive data is presented and compared between the groups, as well as confidence intervals calculated through bootstrapping (with 1000 samples) in order to produce statistical significance measures of the differences between groups.

The measurements used in the analyses are described in table 1 below.

Item	Survey question	Scale	Categorization
<i>Age</i>	What year were you born?	-	0-43: low, 44 or higher: high
<i>Gender</i>	What is your legal gender?	-	Male/female
<i>Education</i>	What is your highest completed level of education	[dependent on the education system in the country]	<Bachelor degree: low, Bachelor degree or higher: high
<i>Interest in politics</i>	To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "I am interested in politics"?	1 (fully disagree) - 4 (full agree)	1-2: low, 3-4: high
<i>Satisfaction with democracy</i>	How satisfied are you with the way that democracy works in [country]?	1 (not at all satisfied) - 4 (fully satisfied)	1-2: low, 3-4: high

Table 1. Measurements.

4 Analysis and results: who participates?

In this section the results of the analyses are presented, discussed, and compared to earlier studies in two separate sections. The first section focuses on resources and socio-demographic characteristics, the second on cultural attitudes.

	Täsä				The Malmö Initiative			
	General public	Participants	Difference	Sig.	General public	Participants	Difference	Sig.
<i>Socio-demographic characteristics</i>								
<i>Age (44 or older)</i>	46%	36%	-9%	***	51%	42%	-8%	***
<i>Gender (female)</i>	51%	40%	-10%	**	54%	52%	-2%	-
<i>Education (bachelor degree or higher)</i>	56%	61%	+5%	-	33%	59%	+26%	***
<i>Political interest</i>								
<i>Interested in politics</i>	40%	72%	+32%	***	57%	87%	+30%	***
<i>Satisfaction with democracy</i>								
<i>Satisfied with how democracy works</i>	53%	56%	+3%	-	81%	56%	-25%	***

Notes: Confidence intervals were produced using bootstrapping with 1000 samples at 90%, 95%, and 99% levels of statistical significance.

Sources: Statistics for the general public in Finland were collected from the European values survey wave 4. Statistics for the general public in the Skåne region of Sweden were gathered from the SOM-survey of 2011. Statistics for the participants in Täsä and the Malmö Initiative were gathered from surveys conducted by the authors.

Table 2. Characteristics of e-participation participants in comparison with the general public.

4.1 Resources and socio-demographic characteristics

What we know about civic engagement is that, generally speaking, it is higher among the better educated middle class, and also generally higher among men and older people than among women and the young [4]. One explanation for this involves socio-economic resources in terms of education, income, and social status.

Resources are important, as civic engagement carries with it certain costs for individuals. Citizens need to be assured the gains of participating are greater than the costs; if not, they refrain from engaging. Therefore, the belief in the potency of the specific method is important, while it is also equally important that the form of participation is not too demanding. The challenge facing political institutions lies in developing forms of civic engagement that both enables citizens to influence politics in a meaningful way and that takes into account the limitations of their individual situations.

E-participation processes are often shaped in a way that makes participation easier, but it is unclear how this affects different individuals. Some scientists argue that the internet can contribute to mobilising previously inactive citizens. Digital resources can reduce the significance of traditional resources, while digital social networks can contribute to redistributing political engagement between various social groups. It is often younger citizens who catch the interest of researchers in this field. They are the group with the most developed digital abilities and take part in most digital social networks, which could spill over into political engagement. More knowledge in navigating the online environment enables these users to effectively search for information on topics of interest and get in contact with other users with similar interests. This increases the likelihood of a user being stimulated into participating in politics online.

Other researchers, however, argue that e-participation will primarily only activate those who are already politically interested, rather than mobilising previously inactive citizens. When it becomes easier to take part in political information, and more convenient forms of online participation are developed, it becomes clear that it is mostly those already involved and motivated that are attracted to them. Resources are also considered important. Higher education levels are expected to provide a greater understanding of political issues and societal problems.

The pattern emerging from our empirical studies seems to suggest continued inequalities (see table 1 below). Based on our own studies of the *Malmö initiative* and *Täsä*, it seems there is a lasting socio-economic imbalance in relation to education as participants have a higher level of education than the general population. However, women and men participate in largely equal numbers, and the average age is notably lower than among the general population. Hence young citizens are finding an attractive form of political engagement in these e-participation processes, corresponding to what the many earlier studies of e-participation have also shown.

While e-participation arguably makes participation easier, these results support the idea that resources still play an important *indirect* role. In a Spanish study, Anduiza et al. showed that digital competency is significantly more important than traditional socio-economic factors in terms of explaining participation in the e-participation processes [18]. If everyone had the same digital competency, then socio-economic status

would matter, but since socio-economically strong groups have greater access to the internet (and thereby can develop their digital competency), they still play an indirect role.

Similarly, Carman's studies of the Scottish parliament's e-petition system shows that socio-economically strong groups have a significantly higher degree of knowledge about how to participate compared to weaker groups [19]. Age also plays a part. Middle-aged people tend to be more aware of the opportunities available in comparison to both younger and older respondents. These differences in awareness, in turn, determine the likelihood of signing and writing petitions. Among people with very good awareness of how to participate in Scottish politics, the likelihood of participating was more than ten times higher than it was for those less aware. If the awareness of available opportunities for participating were equal, then socio-economic factors would be insignificant in terms of who would participate.

That the effects largely seem to be indirect suggests there is long-term mobilisation potential if the information regarding new forms of participation and digital competency were spread further. But the imbalance that arises still poses a relevant inequality issue today.

4.2 Motivation and cultural attitudes

Interest in politics.

Although the results presented above indicate that socio-demographic characteristics, not least level of education, play an important role in e-participation engagement, the striking difference between the participants of the two cases and the general public instead concerns the level of interest in politics among participants in e-participation processes.

As is evident from table 1 (below), the share of participants in the two e-participation cases that declare to be interested in politics far exceeds the corresponding share in the general public in each context. Among the *Tärsä* participants, 72% are interested in politics, compared to about 40% of the general Finnish public (+32%, $p < .01$). A staggering 87% of the participants in the *Malmö Initiative* are politically interested, compared to 57% of the general public (+30%, $p < .01$). Hence, these e-participation projects do not seem to be able to mobilize the politically disengaged to a very large extent. Rather, the previously engaged, politically interested citizens dominate participants in the two cases.

This bias was also highlighted in a previous study in which the participants in the Malmö initiative were compared to the general population with regard to experiences of political participation. The first group has significantly more often contacted politicians and civil servants, discussed politics online, and worked in political parties and NGOs. The majority of the population of Skåne, Sweden's southernmost province where Malmö lies, has not participated in any of these types of activities during the last year, while more than nine out of ten of those participating the Malmö initiative had [20].

Satisfaction with democracy.

When looking at who participates in e-participation processes, it is interesting to note their dual nature. On the one hand, e-participation exists as an informal process dependent on activities among citizens and civic society (from below). On the other hand, they exist as a more formalised process created by institutions to encourage civic engagement (from above). The first category makes up part of a broader set of mobilisation channels and protest movements on the internet, without mechanisms guaranteeing a response from the authorities. This variant of e-participation is often seen as the archetype for the individualising, anti-establishment, and independent forms of civic engagement used by "critical citizens" in order to, as Inglehart and Welzer expressed it, "organize resistance and mobilize people power" [21]. These independent forms of civic engagement are considered especially compatible with the new generations' demands and wishes: they would rather spend money than time and support democratic principles but are critical of how democracy currently works, and they engage in politics but are not fond of party politics and joining traditional organisations.

Institutionalised forms of civic engagement, such as voting in elections, being a member of a political party, or contacting politicians has traditionally been more connected to the electoral process. Participants have "become a part of the system" in a different way than when independent platforms, which offer critical distance, are used. For this reason, institutionalized forms have foremost engaged citizens who are already relatively satisfied with the way the democratic system currently works. Some newer "democratic innovations" have similarly been biased towards already satisfied citizens. Curato and Niemeyer have shown, for example, that those who agree to participate in deliberative consultation meetings tend to be less critical of political institutions than the public in general. Because of their dual nature, e-participation processes can therefore be seen as a critical case: if a form of civic engagement with its roots in protest movements on the internet is not able to engage critical citizens, how will institutionalised forms of civic engagement succeed?

Our analysis shows that participants in the Malmö Initiative are significantly less satisfied with the way democracy currently works in Sweden than the general public. Among the public, 81% are fairly or very satisfied, while the corresponding number for our respondents is 56% (-25%, $p < .01$). In the same spirit, Schmidt and Johnsen have shown that, compared with the general public, the participants in the German Parliament's e-petitions system tend to be relatively sceptical towards politicians, and that a significant portion have participated in demonstrations and other protests. To this can be added that those who participated in the Scottish parliament's e-petition system, to a much greater extent than the general public, reported having no party affiliation. While 13% of the general public were not affiliated with a political party, the equivalent number for participants was 35%.

The same pattern is not apparent in the Finnish context. While the *Täsä*-participants share the same level of discontent with the state of democracy (56% of participants in both cases are dissatisfied with how democracy works), these participants share this evaluation of the state of Finnish democracy with the general public (+3%, $p > .1$). Hence, there is no statistically significant difference in the values of the e-participants

and the general public. Still, it is evident that the *Täsä* case also succeeds in mobilizing critical citizens.

These result, therefore, suggests that critical citizens did not abandon these institutionalized e-participation processes. Rather, it seems that e-participation have been able to attract some of those with weak connections to the party system and who feel there is a discrepancy between how democracy should work and how it actually works. Even if those using e-petitions were already politically active critics, this raises, as Schmidt and Johnsen put it, a hope that e-participation “can bring people who are critical towards politics closer to the parliamentary system and thus prevent them from becoming political cynics or even politically apathetic citizens.”

Combining political interest and satisfaction with democracy

Following the previous research presented above, the attitudinal predispositions of citizens can be combined to produce a division into four divergent types of political cultural ideal types: (1) *Disenchanted citizens*, who are neither interested in politics nor satisfied with democracy; (2) *Stealth citizens*, who, despite having low political interest are satisfied with how democracy works; (3) *Critical citizens*, who combine high political interest with dissatisfaction with democracy; and, finally, (4) *Traditional ideal citizens*, who are both politically interested and satisfied with democracy.

	General public	Participants	Difference	Sig.
<i>Täsä</i>				
<i>Disenchanted</i>	27%	12%	-15%	***
<i>Critical</i>	20%	32%	+12%	**
<i>Stealth</i>	29%	14%	-15%	***
<i>Traditional ideal</i>	24%	42%	+18%	***
<i>The Malmö Initiative</i>				
<i>Disenchanted</i>	8%	5%	-3%	*
<i>Critical</i>	10%	39%	+29%	***
<i>Stealth</i>	34%	7%	-27%	***
<i>Traditional ideal</i>	48%	49%	+1%	-

Notes: Confidence intervals were produced using bootstrapping with 1000 samples at 90%, 95%, and 99% levels of statistical significance. Sources: see table 1 above.

Table 3. The political culture of e-participation participants and the general public.

When this typology is used to compare the participants in the two e-participation cases with the general public (see table 2 above) we find that participants are less often *disenchanted* or *stealth citizens*. Hence, citizens that have opted out of politics are not getting engaged in e-participation, regardless of whether they are satisfied (*Stealth*) or

dissatisfied (Disenchanted) with the state of democracy. This is the case in both contexts although the underrepresentation of *disenchanted citizens* is much less flagrant in the *Malmö Initiative* compared with *Täsä* (-3%, $p < .1$ compared with -15%, $p < .01$). Further the underrepresentation of *Stealth citizens* is stronger in the *Malmö Initiative* (-27%, $p < .01$, compared to -15%, $p < .01$ among *Täsä* participants). These results confirm the difference between the two e-participation processes explicated above: level of satisfaction with democracy is a much stronger predictor for participation in the Swedish case, as participants in the Malmö initiative are much more dissatisfied with the workings of democracy than the general public.

One prominent difference between the two e-participation cases relates to the representation of *traditional ideal citizens*, the group that most prominently represents the “usual suspects” when it comes to political participation. In the case of *Täsä*, this group is strongly over-represented compared to the general public in Finland (+18%, $p < .01$). In the case of the *Malmö Initiative*, in contrast, the share of *traditional ideal citizens* is representative for the general public in Scania (+1%, $p > .1$). Hence, there is among these two cases a great variation in the tendency to mobilize the usual suspects; i.e., citizens that are more prone to be engaged in traditional forms of political participation as well.

The two cases are similar in the overrepresentation of *critical citizens*. In the Malmö Initiative almost 40% of the participants fall into this category, compared to only 10% of the general public in Skåne (+29%, $p < .01$). About a third of the *Täsä* participants are *critical citizens*, compared to a fifth of the Finnish general public (+12%, $p < .05$). Both e-participation processes investigated in this study show evidence of successfully bringing *critical citizens* back in, and thus form pathways for (semi-) institutionalized political participation that are attractive to this group of citizens, who are, in earlier studies, found to be more prone to protest politics.

5 Conclusion

The aim of this article was to investigate whether or not e-participation lives up to the goal ascribed to it to increase civic engagement in the representative democracy's institutions by way of mobilizing citizens to participate beyond the “usual suspects”. Our analysis has been conducted through an analysis of two e-participation processes: the *Malmö Initiative*, an e-petitioning system implemented in the city of Malmö in Sweden, and *Täsä*, an innovative mobile participation process in the city of Turku, Finland. The study goes beyond the standard approach to investigating this research topic by way of analysing not only the socio-economic profiles of participants but also attitudinal predispositions creating a framework of citizen profiles with regards to interest in politics and satisfaction with democracy.

Earlier research has shown that citizens who are satisfied with democracy tend to engage in traditional, top-down initiated and institutionalized forms of participation such as voting and party engagement, while dissatisfied citizens tend to engage in bottom-up oriented protest politics. An important question is: Can e-participation pro-

cesses, which position themselves between top-down institutionalized politics and bottom-up citizen originated forms of engagement, bring critical citizens back in to more institutionalized arenas for political participation and function as channels for critical voices to reach political institutions?

The results of our analysis indicate, in agreement with much earlier research, that participants in e-participation processes are not socio-economically representative of the general public. Specifically, citizens engaging in e-participation are often younger, in the case of *Täsä*, more often male, and, in the case of the *Malmö Initiative*, more educated than the general public.

Turning to the attitudinal predisposition, the analysis of the two e-participation cases indicates that e-participation can indeed bring critical citizens back in. Critical citizens who are interested in politics but dissatisfied with democracy are overrepresented in relation to the general public in both analysed cases. This result indicates that while e-participation has a long way to go to bridge the socio-economic gaps related to political engagement and influence, such processes can play a role in engaging critical citizens in constructive political processes. This is an important function in political systems that need to foster an understanding of critical perspectives on policies and democratic institutions.

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