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Conclusions

London, 23rd June 2016. The date that history will remember for the Brexit referendum started under very particular auspices for us. We spent most of that day locked in a room of an almost empty Senate House, a University library building in Central London. Our goal was to develop the first draft of a book proposal on social media and political participation in Western Democracies, which we had been researching since 2012. We spent the day brainstorming, sketching dozens of mind-maps, discussing alternative book outlines, and refining key arguments. After a very intense and productive day of work, we finally left the building and had dinner together while watching the news on TV as polls were closing. Since we had a second day of hard work ahead of us, we resisted the temptation to stay up until the results were called. Instead, we said goodbye and went to sleep unaware of the huge electoral upset that British voters had been delivering while we discussed what our book should look like.

The day after, we woke up in a city, a country, and a continent left shocked and incredulous by the Leave victory. Day Two of our book workshop was definitely less productive than Day One, as we were constantly distracted by news alerts, posts that our contacts were publishing on social media, messages from friends, and even calls from journalists asking for comments. The idea that one of the reasons for the success of the Leave campaign was an aggressive and efficient digital campaign began to gain momentum from that very day. This narrative would reach its peak almost two years later, when the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal exploded, revealing that the UK-based consulting firm employed by the Leave campaign (and subsequently by the

Donald Trump campaign in the US) had illicitly acquired massive amounts of personal data without consent from 87 million Facebook users and had employed such information to profile and target voters online with specifically crafted messages invisible to others (Cadwallar & Graham-Harrison, 2018). In November 2016, the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States provided another, even bigger shock. Like the Leave victory in Britain, Trump's success was also accompanied by concerns for unscrupulous use of personal social media data for stealth political targeting and the mass spread of disinformation online.

As we have already argued in the Introduction to this book, it was on the night between the 23rd and the 24th of June 2016 that the dominant narrative around social media and politics started changing. After that watershed moment, digital platforms were much more likely to be presented as poisoning agents for democratic societies rather than the liberal champions they had often been considered, way too optimistically, in previous years (Tucker et al., 2017; Miller & Vaccari, 2020). Similarly, scholars are reappraising the notion—almost an assumption in earlier research—that citizens tend to act earnestly and fairly when they meet and interact online (Hedrich et al., 2018). The internet is no longer presented as a free-wheeling marketplace where the power of ideas and the ingenuity of outsiders working from their garages can bring down corporate giants (Benkler, 2006), but as a concentrated and hierarchical marketplace of attention controlled by a few, seemingly unassailable, digital monopolies (Wu, 2017; Hindman, 2018). Granted, some scholarly critiques of the internet and its role in social and political life predate 2016 (e.g. Howard, 2006; Tufecki, 2014; Vaidhyanathan, 2012; Zuboff, 2015), but the tide in public and academic discourse turned between June and November of that momentous year (Chadwick, 2019).

<1> Digital Politics and Cycles of Opinion

The post-2016 tidal shift was arguably the strongest observed in the relatively short history of digital media and politics so far, but it was by no means the first. Since the ancient times, philosophers and historians have debated whether history is cyclical or progressive. By the same token, in the last few decades public narratives on the state of democracy, including how digital media contribute to it, have alternated moments of enthusiasm and pessimism.

In introducing his study of public opinion and parties in Western democracies, Russell Dalton (2018) observed that in the previous thirty years, public debate on the state of democracy had ebbed and flowed between optimism and despair. Against the backdrop of such alternating black-or-white narratives, Dalton argued that systematic research must resist "the winds of punditry" (Dalton, 2018: xiii) and strive to understand reality in all its complexities.

Similarly, one decade before the post-2016 reckoning, Andrew Chadwick (2008: 11) pointed out that multiple waves of enthusiasm and pessimism had characterized academic and popular discourse on the internet's potential to transform and improve democratic life. A few years later, Scott Wright (2012) argued against the "schism" between cyber-optimists (e.g., Davis, 2009) and cyber-pessimists (e.g., Margolis & Resnick, 2000). Adherence to the simplistic narratives of "everything has changed" or "nothing has changed", wrote Wright, affected the questions scholars had asked and obscured many important ways in which the internet was transforming democracy.

The 2016 upheavals definitely sparked a new "everything has changed" moment that is still unfolding as we write these lines. The democratic role of social media has been called into question like never before. The digital platforms that were once hailed for making citizens' lives richer and more connected are now blamed for facilitating sinister activities such as discriminatory profiling, shady micro-targeting, voter suppression, foreign electoral interference, hate speech, and the mass spread of disinformation. The title of an article published in the British newspaper *the Guardian* in February 2019 called Facebook "A digital gangster destroying democracy" (Cadwalladr, 2019). This was not an editorial from a fringe commentator, but a news story that quoted the final report of an inquiry by the UK Parliament's Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee into the role of social media in democracy (House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2019). The report called for unprecedentedly restrictive regulation of digital platforms, as did the UK Government's "Online Harms White Paper," released two months later (UK Government, 2019).

The current, broadly pessimistic, reckoning around the role of social media in democratic life is clearly rooted in valid concerns and real, important facts on the ground that scholars have a duty to investigate—and many, including us, are doing just that (e.g. Chadwick et al., 2018; Giglietto et al., 2019; Tucker et al., 2018; Miller & Vaccari, 2020; Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). Studies have shed light on the role of social media in the spread of misinformation and disinformation, the propagation of hate speech and intolerance, and the empowering of shadowy and unaccountable groups who aim to manipulate public discourse (see Phillips, 2015; Persily, 2017; Alcott &

Gentzkow, 2017; Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Kim et al., 2018; Waisbord 2018; Bastos & Mercea, 2019; Rossini, 2020).

It is therefore somehow ironic that the two of us came together to draft the structure of this book exactly on the cusp of such a momentous turning point in public debate around the democratic role of social media. If we had to follow the predominant opinion tide, until the 23rd of June 2016 we should have written this book in the form of a fairytale. Conversely, from the day after, we should have progressively turned it into a tragedy. As our readers already know by this point, this volume is neither a fairytale nor a tragedy.

In this book, we have strived to provide a nuanced, empirically grounded account of the relationship between social media and political participation in Western democracies. We have shown that social media can contribute to the quality of democratic life, at least to the extent that the breadth of citizens' political participation, and the diversity in the types of citizens who participate, is an important component of the complex, delicate, and constantly evolving machinery of democracy. However, we have also shown that the relationship between specific political experiences on social media and political participation is not so strong to justify unmitigated enthusiasm. Social media cannot and will not "save democracy," at least not on their own, from citizens' political apathy, distrust, and disconnection. Social media are also not well placed to help mitigate the damages caused to democracy by norm-breaking political elites and failing government policies (Przeworski, 2019). Whatever social media might do to help some citizens exercise their political voice, it may not be that voice that sways elections and determines policies, as Achen and Bartels (2017) have argued. And while we also

showed that political experiences on social media do not seem to disproportionately stimulate participation among ideologically extremist citizens, nor among those who voted for populist political actors, we refrain from drawing sweeping conclusions about the normative desirability of *any* kind of citizen participation, irrespective of the aims it pursues and the means it employs.

What is more, evaluating the democratic contribution of social media mainly or exclusively based on the color of the sails they fill in a given moment and in a given context would effectively prevent us from exiting the cycles of optimism and despair described above. As we are putting the final touches on this manuscript, Joe Biden has won a US Presidential election in the midst of a pandemic. To ensure the safety of volunteers and voters, Biden strongly limited door to door canvassing and get-out-the-vote efforts (Alter, 2020) while making social media the centerpiece of its campaign (Suciu, 2020). And yet, social media were also used during and after the election to spread misinformation and disinformation, some of which shared by ordinary voters who were aiming to persuade others, on the fairness and legality of the vote, which ended up being the last, desperate peg on which President Trump decided to hang his reelection hopes (Benkler et al., 2020). In sum, technology is far from neutral, and so is political participation, but disentangling democratically desirable and undesirable relationships between social media and participation was not among the goals of this project. We hope readers keep these caveats in mind when interpreting our results, but we equally trust they will deem our findings relevant for how we understand, and enhance, democratic participation and governance.

In the next pages, we summarize our main theoretical and empirical contributions, suggest some avenues for future research, and discuss how our study relates to the broader contemporary debates on social media and democracy summarized above.

<1> Affordances Matter, But So Do Individuals' Experiences

We have argued that platforms and their affordances matter, but so do individuals and their concrete political experiences on social media. Digital platforms' affordances shape the kinds of contents people are exposed to, the users they interact with, and the activities they are encouraged to undertake. These nudges are very important, and are rightly the focus of research, public debate and, possibly, regulation. However, they do not fully determine the kinds of political content and interactions people experience online. As we have shown in Chapters 3-5, different users approach and employ platforms' affordances in different ways, which in turn results in distinctive political experiences that in turn shape behaviors in different ways among different groups. For instance, while most social media platforms have some built-in mechanisms that prioritize affinity (of backgrounds, interests, and, often, political views) over encounters with difference, in the aggregate most social media users report that they are exposed to roughly equal proportions of political content they agree and disagree with. Similarly, although social media may be designed to let users indulge their preferences and escape their nemeses, it is not only political junkies who encounter news on social media. Instead, as many as half of our respondents claimed to accidentally stumble upon political news and one-third received direct encouragements to vote for a party or candidate on these platforms.

These findings stand in contrast—but not necessarily in contradiction—with the much bleaker figures on web traffic reported by Hindman (2018: 134), who showed that "news sites get only about 3 percent of web traffic." Three percent surely entails a small amount of time and effort compared to the cumbersome requirements of an informed citizenry. Hindman (2018) demonstrates that most web traffic is directed towards search engines, social media, email, and pornographic sites. What people see on social media is therefore crucial. Even if the actual amount of news and political content users see is limited compared to other types of messages (Fletcher et al., 2020), we have shown that rather large portions of social media users in a variety of Western democracies encounter politics as part of their everyday experience of these platforms. It is possible that our survey questions may have overestimated the frequency with which these experiences occur or the number of users they involve (Prior, 2009), but at a minimum our results suggest that we should not write off social media as sources of meaningful encounters with political content for large sectors of the population. Since most people are not spending much time actively looking for news online, social media may serve as a partial but helpful supplement to news diets that would otherwise be even more devoid of public affairs information.

To understand whether social media may contribute to citizens' participatory repertoires, we need to assess concrete and politically relevant outcomes of social media use at the individual level. In this research, we have focused on three such outcomes: encountering political agreement, accidental exposure to news, and being targeted by electoral mobilization. These are by no means the only relevant experiences scholars can and should study. Exposure to disinformation, targeted political advertisements, uncivil political talk, and hate speech, just to name a few examples, are

equally as relevant. It should also be noted that our measures gauged the kinds of content users encountered but did not discriminate between different sources (for instance, strong ties versus weak ties, individual users versus news media or political actors, and accounts exhibiting authentic or inauthentic behavior). The quality of the content users are exposed to should also matter. For instance, future research may investigate the effects of political experiences on social media that include different types of content, such as candidate biographies, issue positions, social and partisan identities, or horse race coverage of the campaign. And while in our analyses we did not differentiate political experiences based on the social media where they occurred, future research should disentangle whether they are more or less likely to occur and have different effects across different platforms.

<1> Political Experiences on Social Media Have Positive Implications for Political Participation

We have shown that political experiences on social media are positively associated with the breadth of citizens' repertoires of participation. Users who predominantly see political content they agree with on social media tend to participate more. The more often people accidentally encounter political news on social media, the more they participate. And citizens who are targeted by messages trying to persuade them to vote for a party or a candidate also participate more. Our research design does not warrant strong causal statements, although we enhanced our analyses with all available statistical techniques to bring us as close as possible to that goal. Yet, these topline findings confirm and specify a vast body of research, which we summarized in Chapter

1. In absolute terms, the magnitude of the relationships we uncovered is not so strong to justify claims that social media can in and of themselves lead most of their users to become massively more active. Our results suggest that the effects of social media on participation are more appropriately compared to a light but steady breeze than to a wind gust. Yet, the breeze does blow, and it is felt by substantial numbers of citizens in a variety of Western democracies.

<1> Political Experiences on Social Media Bridge Participation Gaps

We have demonstrated that political experiences on social media enhance participation among the less politically involved more than the highly involved. Most early work on digital media and politics argued that the internet may eventually reinforce existing inequalities, so that the more active would become even more engaged and the less involved would, at best, fail to notice the new opportunities afforded by the web and, at worst, become even more distracted by the panoply of entertainment available online. We took a different approach and argued that political content encountered on social media may be more impactful on less involved citizens, who should be less interested in it but are also less likely to see it elsewhere, than on more involved citizens, who may be more interested in it but are more likely to have already been exposed to it. First, while political junkies are definitely the main target of political content on social media, they are by no means the only one, as less involved users do experience some meaningful encounters with news and campaigns on these platforms. Second, when these encounters happen, they tend to have stronger, positive relationships with participation among less politically involved citizens than among more involved ones. Thus, instead of deepening political inequalities, social media can bridge at least some of them.

This is by no means the final word in this important debate. While social media may help reduce participatory inequalities between those with high and low levels of political involvement, they may be exacerbating other forms of inequality rooted in gender, education, and social class, as argued by Schradie (2019) and Schlozman and colleagues (2010). We only explored one of the reasons why people do not participate, as theorized by Verba and colleagues (1995): that they "do not want to" because they are not sufficiently involved in politics. We partially addressed another reason, that "nobody asked them to", in our investigation of electoral mobilization via social media. We showed that such mobilization is widespread and that it has the strongest relationship with participation among the three experiences we analyzed. Hence, social media enable many organized and unorganized actors to "ask" others to get involved, and when that happens, levels of participation among those who are asked increase. However, we did not investigate the first reason identified by Verba and colleagues (1995): that citizens "cannot" participate because they lack the time, knowledge, and resources that are necessary to bear the individual costs of participating.[1] In an age of growing economic and social inequalities, which are arguably reshaping political

[1] In Chapter 3, our multivariate models predict the likelihood that individuals of different gender, age, education, employment status, and income undergo the three political experiences on social media that constitute our key independent variables in Chapters 4-6. As the results of these models show, male, younger, and better educated citizens are more likely to engage with supportive viewpoints on social media (Table 3.1, Model 1); female, younger, unemployed, and poorer citizens are more likely to accidentally encounter political news on social media (Table 3.2, Model 1); and male, younger, better educated, and employed citizens are more likely to be targeted by electoral mobilization on social media (Table 3.3, Model 1). Thus, accidental exposure to political news on social media mostly caters to socially peripheral voters, while engagement with supportive viewpoints and electoral mobilization mostly benefit users who are more socially central. All three experiences are more likely to involve younger voters, who are generally less politically engaged. However, our models do not assess whether these experiences differentially enhance participation among voters of different socio-economic status.

cleavages and patterns of electoral competition, this is a relevant issue for future research.

That being said, the implications of our finding that political experiences on social media reduce involvement-based gaps in participation merit some further reflections. Beside the already involved "usual suspects", who eagerly take advantage of social media to get informed about, discuss, and find opportunities to participate in politics, less familiar faces are joining the political arena as a result of their politically relevant experiences on social media, whether they encounter news by accident, because someone else prompted them to support a party or candidate, or because they find comfort in engaging with sympathetic discussants online.

This quantitative expansion of the pool of participants may entail a more profound, and potentially more consequential, qualitative change. Possibilities for political self-expression and serendipitous encounters with political content have become part of many social media users' habits. Thus, social media have contributed to changing what it means and what it takes to participate in politics—particularly, our data show, among people who are less involved in politics. This is an example of technologies' ability to *transform the context of participation* once they become so embedded in people's lives that they are no longer noticed as new (Bimber et al., 2012). The relatively new entrants that, according to our analyses, social media more strongly draw into politics, are not cut from the same cloth as the people we normally expect to undertake political action. They are less interested in public affairs and pay less attention to elections. While our study could only shed some partial light on these users' political preferences and values, it is possible that they may be different from those of textbook political activists that

feature prominently in scholarly accounts of participation. It is also conceivable that such "unusual suspects" may respond to, and contribute to the success of, unconventional types of political leaders, organizations, and ideologies, thus facilitating the surge and success of outsiders at the expense of established political actors. Social media may thus be contributing to some of the vivid examples of political disruption that we have witnessed over the past few years across and beyond the Western world. Our analysis thus highlights some of the factors that explain the "political turbulence" described by Margetts and colleagues (2016). Some of the volatility in contemporary mass political behavior may be related to a qualitative expansion of the pool of participants in politics—a story in which we show social media play an important role. But is such expansion of citizens' voice democratically desirable in and of itself?

<1> Political Participation and Democratic Values

Theorists and empirical researchers of political participation do not always assume that more participation is always beneficial for democracy, or for most of its citizens. One radical position maintains that increased citizen participation can impede democratic governance by overloading over-stretched political systems with excessive demands (Lipset, 1960; Huntington, 1975). According to this perspective, the solution to some of the challenges faced by contemporary democracies is to restrict participatory spaces or to leave citizens alone in their apathy, so that elites can guide a docile public towards what is best. The limits of this elitist approach are evident. While politicians and technocrats may enjoy "ruling the void", in Peter Mair's (2013) eloquent formulation, the legitimacy of this arrangement is weak and its sustainability doubtful. We concur with Russell Dalton that "the cures offered by the elitist theorists are worse than the

problem they address; democracy's very goals are ignored in its defense" (Dalton, 2018: 267). An all-out, across-the-board increase of citizen participation may not be the cure to all democracy's ills, but the opposite approach – reducing participation, or letting it fade away – resembles the once popular leech therapy. Drawing blood from an ailing organism may help its recovery in a few circumstances, but in most cases, it ends up weakening it, harming it, and sometimes killing it.

But if less participation is not the answer, is more participation what democracies need today? When we started this project, a vast body of literature (e.g. Dalton & Wattenberg, 2000) argued that a decline of political participation – at least in its institutional forms such as voting, party membership, and volunteering for campaigns – was occurring, that this was problematic for democracy, and that at least part of the responsibility lay in how the mass media, particularly television, had reconfigured the relationship between citizens and political actors (Entman, 1990; Putnam, 2002; Dahlgren, 2009). A more nuanced, "realist" position suggests that citizen participation does not affect public policy as much as the most enthusiastic proponents of democracy suggest, because most people vote on the basis of partisan loyalties and group identities that have little to do with punishing or rewarding governments and parties for their records or proposals (Achen & Bartels, 2017). Still, the proponents of this view highlight that democratic processes and procedures, chief among which popular participation in elections, entail some important democratic benefits, such as legitimizing who shall rule, facilitating turnover in government, incentivizing power holders to tolerate opposition, and helping citizens develop civic competence and other democratic and human virtues (Achen & Bartels, 2017: 316-9).

However, we should not simplistically assume that reversing the participatory decline that occurred towards the end of the 20th century, an endeavor to which social media seem to be contributing, is necessarily a positive end in and of itself. The *quality* of participation is as important as its *quantity*, if not more. An important debate is taking place on this issue. Hedrick and colleagues caution us against what they see as "a central assumption shared among the research communities that study political, civic, and fan participation: […] that all participation is earnest and well-meaning" (Hedrick et al., 2018: 1062). Andrew Chadwick (2019) observes that this assumption, which he terms "the engagement gaze", has led scholars to overlook the goals of those who participate, the risk that some forms of engagement may threaten democratic norms, and the longer-term implications for political and civic cultures. Thorsten Quandt has proposed the concept of "dark participation" to identify the ways in which citizens make "negative, selfish or even deeply sinister contributions" to online news (Quandt, 2018: 40). Participation has always come in many shapes and sizes, and treating all of it as equal, let alone as equally desirable, obscures important nuances that are key to evaluate its contribution to democracy.

How, then, to assess the implications of our findings for the quality of participation? An honest first answer is that we did not specifically measure such quality, as intended by the authors we have just cited. What we measured is citizens' recall of engaging in six specific behaviors, as explained in Chapter 2: financing a party, candidate, political leader or electoral campaign; taking part in public meetings and electoral rallies; distributing leaflets to support a political or social cause; contacting a politician to support a cause; signing petitions and subscribing referenda; and trying to convince someone to vote for a party, leader, or candidate. We did not measure the quality of

these behaviors, neither by comparing one action against the others ("Is donating money to a party more democratically desirable than attending rallies?"), nor by discriminating the performance of the same action based on the goals it pursued ("Is financing party X more democratically desirable than financing party Y?") or the means it employed ("Is trying to persuade others based on accurate information more democratically desirable than doing so based on false information?"). These are by no means rhetorical questions but speak to core normative democratic values. We will now address each of these limitations.

Instead of differentiating the democratic desirability of different modes of political action, we used an additive index combining six activities, each of which weighted equally as the others. Consistent with our definition of participation repertoires as multi-faceted and hybrid, we developed an inclusive compound measure that captures a variety of relevant behaviors without discriminating between them. However, in Chapter 4 we also shed light on the specific relationships between the political experiences on social media we study and each of the six modes of participation we assessed. This exercise showed that the relationships differ in magnitude when comparing different forms of political action, but the findings mostly point in the same direction, i.e., that political experiences on social media are positively associated with most forms of participation. Readers who attribute different values to particular modes of participation can thus assess social media's contribution to democracy based on those specific analyses.

The issue of which goals participation pursues and how well, or poorly, those goals fulfill democratic ideals is more complex. We did not ask participants what type of

political outcomes they were hoping to advance when they took the actions we inquired about. Measuring the quality of the objectives people aim to achieve when they participate would have required us to decide whether, for instance, trying to convince someone to vote for Hillary Clinton in the US 2016 Presidential election entails higher or lower participatory quality than trying to convince others to vote for Donald Trump—or for any of the other candidates. While we share the widespread public and scholarly concern with the rise of authoritarian populists, we also believe in Max Weber's lesson that social scientists should strive as much as possible for value freedom when conducting research (Weber, 1922). Using normative criteria to empirically differentiate acts of participation on the basis described above would have, in our view, jeopardized this principle.

This does not mean that we cannot ask empirical questions about the relationship between social media and participation among voters of different ideological leanings, or among voters who did and did not vote for populist political actors. These questions have clear normative implications amidst widespread concern that authoritarian populists aim to weaken democracy, damage rational debate, and sow intolerance in our societies (Norris & Inglehart, 2019), but can be answered without confounding empirical and value-based concerns. When we tackled these issues in Chapter 5, we found very few differences in the relationships between the political experiences on social media we studied and participation among voters who placed themselves at different points in the left-right spectrum. Notably, we found no evidence that respondents who are ideologically more extreme receive a larger participatory boost from these experiences—if anything, the opposite occurred. Moreover, we did not detect any differences between respondents who voted for populist parties or

presidential candidates and those who voted for other political actors. From a normative standpoint, these null findings provide some grounds for moderate optimism on social media's contribution to democracy. At the very least, our analyses fail to substantiate the argument that digital platforms are disproportionately aiding populist political actors.

Finally, illuminating the means by which individuals participate is crucial at a time when concerns for disinformation, hate speech, inauthentic behavior, and intolerance online are on the rise (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Chadwick, 2019; Miller & Vaccari, 2020). That political actors and their supporters sometimes rely on these means as part of their online and offline propaganda is concerning for anyone who believes in democracy. Regardless of how widespread and effective these behaviors are, they poison the well of public debate and could, in David Karpf's words, "undermine the democratic myths and governing norms that stand as a bulwark against elite corruption and abuse of power" (Karpf, 2019). If self-interested elites come to believe that most voters can be duped by disinformation or coerced into submission by trolling and hate speech spread via social media thanks to sophisticated targeting and digital mobs of supporters and botnets, they may be less likely to restrain themselves and abide by implicit and explicit democratic norms. The possibility that voters can "throw the rascals out", i.e., replace a government that does not benefit them, is a powerful constraint on elite behavior (Sartori, 1987) but it rests on the assumption that citizens can identify the rascals and make their voices heard against them before and during elections. If digital media help pollute mass political behavior with unfair means, many cracks risk opening in the delicate edifice of democratic governance.

How democratically clean, or poisoned, is the water springing from different media wells is an important question for contemporary political communication research (Van Aelst et al., 2017). In this book, we could not shed adequate light on these issues because survey self-reports are poorly equipped to precisely measure all these problematic behaviors, especially in combination with one another. Spreading disinformation, engaging in hate speech, trolling, and manifesting intolerance are socially undesirable conducts, and thus people who perform these acts tend to be reluctant to admit to them when answering survey questions. Moreover, for their most egregious perpetrators, these activities would not even qualify as problematic. To a racist, racism is commonsense. To a callous partisan, disinformation is clever propaganda. To a troll, trolling is just fooling around. To a hater, hatred is legitimate retaliation against some injustice or conspiracy. We do not aim to push this argument to the extreme position that none of these behaviors can be measured in a survey—after all, we and many other scholars have employed surveys to measure the spread of misinformation and disinformation on social media (Chadwick et al., 2018; Rossini et al., 2020). However, these measurement challenges become much more severe when survey research tries to simultaneously measure multiple political behaviors and to gauge whether people employed problematic means while performing them. For these reasons, most research has focused on one set of antinormative behaviors at a time. As we were interested in studying multiple forms of participation across face-to-face and digital environments, we decided to focus on *what* our respondents did when they participated in politics rather than *how* they did so.

<1> Political Participation and Democratic E(Quality)

Our findings directly address another important normative argument: that democracy is founded, among other things, on political equality and inclusiveness. Large inequalities in who participates weaken this foundation. Two main strands of the literature have addressed this issue: research on political participation, mainly rooted in political science, and studies of deliberation and the public sphere, mainly rooted in communication.

Scholars of political participation often emphasize the value of equality in who participates and the dangers for democracy when participation becomes a weapon of the strong and leaves out relevant sectors of the population. As Verba and colleagues (1995: 509) eloquently put it, "meaningful democratic participation requires that the voices of citizens in politics be clear, loud, and equal" and participatory equality is necessary "so that the democratic ideal of equal responsiveness to the preferences and interests of all is not violated." Participation communicates information to policymakers on the preferences of the population and provides incentives for elites to take those preferences into account in governing. Equality of participation is also an important way in which the broader democratic value of equality among all citizens comes to life (Dahl, 2006)—which, as we will see below, is a relevant point for deliberation theorists as well.

In their study of the United States in the 1980s and 1990s, Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) found Americans' political voice to be loud and clear, but deeply unequal. In a follow-up analysis covering the first decade of the 21st century, the same authors noted that "the disparities in political voice across various segments of society are so substantial and so persistent as to preclude equal consideration" (Schlozman et al.,

2013: 6). Similar studies in the United Kingdom concurred with this somber assessment (Pattie et al., 2004; Whiteley, 2011). Declines in voter turnout across Western democracies have been linked to reduced levels of mobilization of socially marginal voters, meaning that their interests and preferences are less likely to affect election outcomes (Gray & Caul, 2000). And while participatory inequalities are partly explained by socio-economic status, the strongest predictor of participation is political interest (Verba et al., 1995). Interest in politics, however, is not just a transient individual preference but tends to be very stable over time (Prior, 2010). This is why our finding that political experiences on social media can narrow, or even close, participatory gaps among voters with different levels of political interest – as well as attentiveness to campaigns, which is a more context-sensitive measure of involvement – is particularly important in terms of democratic equality.

Political scientists mostly focus on equality of participation because of the *outcomes* it is expected to generate—holding accountable elites based on democratic electoral mandates that reflect as broadly as possible the interests and preferences of the population. By contrast, communication scholars are predominantly interested how equality of participation contributes to the quality of the *process*es by which citizens interact with political elites and with each other. The paradigm of democratic deliberation is arguably the most important theoretical, conceptual, and normative backbone of these approaches.

Deliberation entails a complex set of principles and mechanisms that enable individuals to "arrive at a well-reasoned solution after a period of inclusive, respectful consideration of diverse points of view" (Gastil & Black, 2007: 2). In its pure form,

deliberation requires many conditions that are hardly, if ever, fulfilled in public debate, regardless of whether it occurs in face-to-face conversations, town hall meetings, mass media, the internet, and social media. However, deliberation has been one of the key normative cornerstones of political communication research (Gastil & Black, 2007). How the theoretical requirements for deliberation can be fulfilled in the messy practice of everyday life has been widely debated. For Habermas (1989), deliberation is only possible in an ideal speech situation, where open discussion can facilitate reasoned exchanges and enlightened understanding among participants endowed with equal rights. However, critics have claimed that this understanding of deliberation is an eminently liberal edifice that accepts, rather than striving to overcome, many entrenched social inequalities that affect who is entitled to speak and to what extent (Calhoun, 1992). A genuinely egalitarian public sphere needs to provide more inclusive spaces that are hospitable to a broader variety of groups, topics, and styles of discussion than those typical of bourgeois liberal democracy as discussed by Habermas (Fraser, 1990). Similar normative tensions have characterized theory and research on how digital media can facilitate various forms of public deliberation. In an overview, Coleman and Moss (2012) argue that most applications of online deliberation have tended to exclude groups that cannot, or do not want to, engage in the formalized practices required by the most orthodox models (see also Hartz-Karp & Sullivan, 2014). Chadwick (2008) observes that, largely as a result of this disconnect between theoretical assumptions and practical constraints, most real-world experiments of online deliberation failed to include more than a few dozens of unrepresentative citizens, a far cry from the scale and inclusiveness required by mass democratic governance. This is a classic conundrum in democratic politics. As Dahl (1989), among

others, explained, the more effort participation requires, the less inclusive and the more unequal it tends to be.

To overcome these limits, Mansbridge and colleagues (2012) propose the notion of "deliberative systems". This broader perspective on deliberation aims to acknowledge and integrate the role of different actors and communication contexts in making democracy work beyond the more formal and demanding processes highlighted by classic deliberation theories (e.g., Ackerman & Fishkin, 2004). A deliberative system is an assemblage of many different parts, some of which may be very distant from the ideal requirements for deliberation. For instance, partisan media may engage in one-sided propaganda rather than rational argument, but they can still play a useful systemic function if they help voters clarify where the parties stand. This knowledge, albeit acquired in a non-deliberative way, may subsequently enable citizens to engage in deliberative discussions taking place elsewhere. Similarly, conversations where some participants behave in an uncivil way may enable activists to channel their passions and demonstrate their commitment. As highlighted by Diana Mutz (2006), democracy requires both participation and dialogue, but the two do not necessarily occur simultaneously and in the same contexts. Idealized representations of self-contained democratic heavens where all the conflicting and complex values of democratic governance peacefully coexist, always and at the same time, are generally unrealistic models of how democracy actually works.

While it may be impossible to fulfill all the values democracy requires at all places and at all times, a deliberative system as a whole may still achieve those goals. According to Mansbridge and colleagues, a deliberative system should perform three functions:

epistemic (forming opinions informed by facts and logic), *ethical* (promoting mutual respect), and *democratic* (promoting "an inclusive political process in terms of equality"; Mansbridge et al. 2012: 12). It is worth quoting the authors' discussion of the democratic function at length:

> The inclusion of multiple and plural voices, interests, concerns, and claims on the basis of feasible equality […] is the central element of what makes deliberative democratic processes democratic. Who gets to be at the table affects the scope and content of the deliberation. For those excluded, no deliberative democratic legitimacy is generated. In short, a well functioning democratic deliberative system must not systematically exclude any citizens from the process without strong justification that could be reasonably accepted by all citizens, including the excluded. On the positive side, *it ought also actively to promote and facilitate inclusion and the equal opportunities to participate in the system*. (Mansbridge et al., 2012: 12, emphasis added)

Seen as part of a deliberative ecosystem, then, the political experiences on social media we studied contribute to the democratic function of promoting and facilitating inclusion, as they broaden the pool of citizens who participate. While political communication on social media may not consistently and satisfactorily perform the epistemic and ethical functions, our study shows that it can make an important contribution towards the democratic goal of promoting an inclusive political process.

In sum, our review of the literatures on equality in participation from both political science and communication suggests that one component of participatory *quality* has to be its *equality*. Thus, our finding that political experiences on social media can reduce some participatory gaps in society indicates that they help increase the quality, as well as the quantity, of participation. In a democracy, equality does not just rhyme with

quality, but it constitutes it. And while social media may be part of many contemporary problems in democratic societies, they have been part of the solution to at least two important democratic ills—citizen disconnection from politics and inequalities between those who choose to exercise their voice and those who prefer to remain silent.

<1> The Dynamic Relationship Between Social Media and Political Context

In this study, we have aimed to overcome the single-country, often US-focused approach of most existing research on digital media and politics to provide systematic evidence on how the relationship between social media and political participation plays out in different institutional settings. In particular, we have shown that engagement with agreeing viewpoints on social media is more strongly associated with participation in countries where electoral competition is majoritarian than in countries where it is proportional. We have also shown that electoral mobilization via social media makes a bigger difference for participation in party-centric political systems than in candidate-centric ones. Instead, we did not find any evidence that the structural characteristics of mass media systems shape the relationship between accidental exposure to political news on social media and participation. That the variables that mattered, albeit in a limited, nine-country comparison, both pertain to the realm of political institutions, is a reminder of Giovanni Sartori's lesson that political phenomena can be understood first and foremost based on other political phenomena—that politics can be explained by politics (Sartori, 1989).

While we have shown that scholars of social media and politics should take into account institutional characteristics, the system-level relationships we uncovered in Chapter 6

were weaker than we expected, when compared with the individual-level factors we included in our explanatory models in Chapters 4 and 5. However, the relationship between political communication and institutions is best described as a dynamic process, not a static state of affairs. Social media are conditioned, in their relationship with participation, by institutional structures, but they may also promote institutional transformations that might consolidate or disrupt those very structures. From this perspective, we speculate, based on our results, that social media may facilitate two potential pathways for institutional change.

Majoritarian electoral rules are designed to promote centripetal party competition, but if citizens in majoritarian democracies who encounter politically congruent opinions on social media become more engaged, as we have shown, and then more radical in their political views, as is conceivable (Lelkes et al., 2017), they may subsequently steer their parties towards more extreme positions. The end result of this process may counterweigh the structural incentives of majoritarian electoral systems, which generally reward parties that act as catch-all bridges between different political and social groups (Norris, 2004; Sartori, 2005). In this sense, social media may play an indirect role in fostering political polarization, not by increasing it among the general population—where they may conceivably reduce it by exposing most users to balanced views, as we showed in Chapter 3 (see also Barberá, 2014; Boxell et al., 2017)—but by boosting the voice and political influence of a minority of activists who engage predominantly with viewpoints they agree with. Thus, social media may weaken one of the conditions that make majoritarian party competition more sustainable—the presence of a shared set of widely agreed values among broad sectors of society—and challenge the functioning of democratic governance to a greater extent than in

proportional systems, which can more easily accommodate deep societal divisions through power-sharing among different elite groups (Lijphart, 2012; Powell, 2000).

A similar paradoxical dynamic may be elicited by the differential effects of electoral mobilization via social media between party-centric and candidate-centric systems. In party-centric systems, where we found that online mobilization is comparatively more likely to spur participation, social media may stimulate an influx of political newcomers knocking on the doors of legacy party organizations, eager to take advantage of the structures and opportunities for political action they provide. However, these newcomers may disagree with existing party members and activists about how parties should work and what goals they should pursue, thus becoming powerful change agents within established structures. This new lifeblood of participants recruited via social media may thus disrupt existing equilibria between the organizational "faces" of individual parties—i.e., their membership, their central decision-making bodies, and their elected officials in representative institutions (Katz & Mair, 1995)—as well as between different ideological factions within their constituencies and networks (Bawn et al., 2012). Far from writing parties' obituary, social media may provide additional chapters and compelling plot twists in their biographies, potentially making them stronger but also more internally competitive and, thus, unstable (see also Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016; Gibson et al., 2017; Dommett, 2020).

<1> Social Media and Politics Between Ideal and Reality

Raffaello Sanzio's masterpiece fresco *The School of Athens* can be admired in the Apostolic Palace in Vatican City. Ancient Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle occupy

the center of the scene, which includes many of the classical thinkers, scientists and artists that contributed to founding Western civilization. Plato is on the left, his right hand pointing to the sky, his left hand holding his book *Timaeus*, which claims that a benevolent Demiurge created the universe to achieve order and beauty based on scientific laws. Next to Plato is Aristotle, his right hand, wide open, pointing to the ground, his left hand holding his book *Nicomachean Ethics*, which argues that virtue stems not from a set of universal scientific and philosophical principles, but from the practical wisdom, acquired with experience, that enables individuals to make choices supported by good reasons. The contrast between Plato's pointing at the sky and Aristotle's aiming for the ground has long been considered as a symbol of the dialectic between idealism and empiricism in Western culture.

In the span of a decade, social media have moved from the periphery to the center of political communication ecosystems in Western democracies. New questions and concerns over their role in our societies have arisen as a result, reviving the dialectic between idealism and empiricism. For some, 2016 has meant the end of innocence, the shattering of an idealistic quasi-ideology that defined the internet as an inherently democratic medium—even though this was never an uncontested view among scholars. For others, the post-2016 crisis has finally exposed the internet's structural role in reproducing hegemonic structures and power imbalances, finally lifting the veil on the naive digital utopias of yesteryear. For others still, and we count ourselves amongst them, public discourse around digital media is undergoing a healthy empiricist reckoning that requires scholars—us included—to shed some of the myths, useful and otherwise, that have colored our understanding of digital media's contribution to

democracy and to ask new, difficult empirical questions in the public interest. We hope our book can be seen as a step in this direction.

And yet, the scene at the center of *The School of Athens* reminds us that there cannot ever be a clear, final winner between Plato and Aristotle, between idealism and realism. They stand together at the core of the painting because they need each other. Democracy is not a once-and-for-all accomplishment, but a perennial struggle aimed at embedding lofty ideals in the everyday praxis of how we live together and govern ourselves in complex societies (Bobbio, 1987). As Peter Dahlgren (2009: 59) notes, "democracy can never be reduced to a mantra, and must be continually discussed and debated". Without an ideal to pursue, that perennial struggle and those continuous debates can seem pointless and exhausting. And without a praxis that is grounded on the best available evidence and informed by an ethical understanding of how we should conduct ourselves, the ideal can become futile or, worse, be used as an excuse to perpetrate violence, oppression, and injustice. When he points his finger to the sky, Plato knows he cannot physically reach it. When he gestures to the ground, Aristotle knows he shares that ground with other human beings towards whom we have moral responsibilities that stem from our shared aspiration to improve our earthly condition beyond self-interest. When we strive for valid knowledge that can help individuals, groups, and institutions achieve a more just order for the way we live together in this world, we move one inch closer to the democratic ideal. The distance between us and the ideal may be ever too long, even incalculable, but that has never stopped humanity from trying to shorten it, one inch at a time. There are definitely enough inches, everywhere around us, to make it worth continuing this pursuit.