

Civic and Political E-Participation of Young Immigrants: 'Digital Hope' for Inclusion?

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ABSTRACT

The internet is considered as an important forum to empower and engage groups outside the traditional political systems. However, the 'digital divide' might imply several disparities and even reinforce exclusion of those with low economic and cultural capital. This article intends to question how democratic and inclusive this virtual public sphere is and in which terms the new dynamics in contemporary societies encourage mobility by excluded groups. Through quantitative methodology, we sought to analyse the differences between migrant (Angolans and Brazilians) and non-migrant groups in Portugal, as well as the e-participation forms adopted by them and the factors that could predict such participation. This is essential towards a wider knowledge about this field, strengthening the understanding concerning the ambivalence about the potential of the internet as a space for the inclusion of groups at risk of exclusion from participation and, consequently from real citizenship.

Keywords: Civic and Political Participation, E-Participation, Immigrants, Inclusion, Women, Young People

DOI: 10.4018/jep.2013010103

INTRODUCTION

Current changes in youth participation are characterized both by a withdrawal from the traditional political spheres and a concomitant rise of new alternative forms of participation, including the internet. In fact, the internet has been pointed out as a virtual public sphere, which can have an important role in shaping the new and broader forms of political participation of potentially excluded groups (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Smith, Lister, Middleton, & Cox, 2005). This vision resonates with communitarian views on citizenship and democracy that advocate that participation involves many formats in many contexts (e.g., Walzer, 1989). Nevertheless, it is crucial to overcome the belief that participation is undoubtedly positive and “good” in itself (Ferreira, Azevedo, & Menezes, in press) and, despite the striking impact that the internet has on participation, giving meaning to the global governance and the emergence of a global civil society (Gladwell & Shirky, 2011), it is important to question how democratic and inclusive this virtual public sphere is.

This paper departs from three major issues that emerge on the literature regarding migrant youth civic and political participation and the internet. First, there is the recognition that some groups, particularly young people, migrants and women, are at risk of exclusion from full participation (and from real citizenship) in conventional politics, making their political inclusion a matter of social justice (Dalton, 2000; Ahmad & Pinnock, 2007). Second, we consider the scholar debate on the internet as a tool and space for alternative forms of civic and political participation, potentially more democratic and inclusive. By lowering the barriers for civic and political engagement, the internet reaches young people’s ‘everyday’ concerns, as well as their discursive and practical repertoires (Coleman, 2006). And third, the existence of some studies that question the democratic nature of the internet and its role in promoting an inclusive political participation: even if research recognizes that the online sphere is appealing for those already committed to civic and politi-

cal participation, is it a really pluralistic space including diverse groups (Norris, 2001)? Do young people use the internet as a sphere for civic and political expression and participation? Is the internet promoting equal opportunities for participation for groups at risk of exclusion, namely migrants? What kind of online participation do they prefer? What motivates and hinders this sort of participation?

The goal of this paper is to explore these questions using data from a research project with national and migrant youth in Portugal that considers whether civic and political e-participation is really being adopted by these groups as a way to overcome their relatively marginalized status in conventional politics. The research is part of a larger European study, PIDOP (Processes Influencing Democratic Ownership and Participation), supported by the 7th European Framework. Our sample includes 1010 youngsters, of Portuguese, Angolan and Brazilian origin, divided into two age-groups to explore differences between those who fulfill, or not, the legal definition of full citizen (i.e., the voting age of 18 years).

CURRENT DEBATES ON YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Civic and political participation has become a very trendy subject in scientific research (e.g.: Blais & Dobrzynska, 1998; Dalton, 2000; Putnam, 2000; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006), and many studies concentrate their attention on groups identified as being at risk of exclusion and disempowerment, such as young people, women, migrants and/or ethnic minorities (e.g.: Shaw, 2002; Ahmad & Pinnock, 2007; Marsh, O’Toole, & Jones, 2007; Harris, Wyn, & Younes, 2010). However, some scholars emphasize that changes in attitudes toward politics nowadays must be acknowledged, particularly because young people are clearly transforming their relationship with the political sphere, and traditional forms of political engagement and participation are no longer viewed as attractive (Norris, 2002; Zukin et al.,

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