Stealth Democracy? Searching for a Democratic Middle-Ground

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Abstract: In this paper, we present a reflection on the need for an in-between, low-threshold type of democracy for involving the so-called "silent majority" of citizens. Based on our findings from various cases, we find indications that this type of system can contribute to what we call stealth or "implicit democracy", i.e., citizen feedback on particular issues raised by politicians. In a recent study, both politicians and participating citizens report that they were happy with the pilot results and would like to continue using the system. The second round of testing, with an extended version of the system, is planned for 2020/21.

1. Introduction - eParticipation Systems and Complexity

In this reflection paper, we ask the question "What is the 'correct' fit between system complexity and democratic outcomes?", as we over the years have observed issues with existing eParticipation systems:

Many technological systems have been, and are being, developed to enhance democracy and participation. In the 1990s, open discussion forums were popular but had limited success (Sæbø, Rose & Molka-Danielsen, 2010). In later years, we have seen a number of complex and advanced systems, designed top-down for decision-makers to receive input on concrete issues. EU FP7 had several calls for the development of participation systems, and in the early and mid-2010s many different tools were presented in academic journals and conferences (See, i.e., Porwol, Ojo & Breslin, 2014)), along with evaluations of pilot projects (Taudes & Leo, 2014). The evaluations seem to conclude that these types of systems provide excellent feedback but are also complicated and time-consuming and therefore struggle to attract enough participants. In social media, the threshold for participation is lower and more people discuss politics (Elvestad & Johannessen, 2017; Enli &

Skogerbø, 2013), but the quality of communication is lacking, and it is difficult to extract meaningful information and handle the conversation (Majumdar, 2017).

As a middle-ground between complex tailored systems and the anarchy of social media, authors such as Hibbing and Theiss-Morse argue for what they call "stealth democracy" (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002), claiming that most people want to heard, but are not interested in taking the time to understand and read up on complex issues. Instead, they argue that a feasible approach to participation is to ask simple questions about issues where citizens can form an opinion without having to read hundreds of pages of documentation.

While stealth democracy is an idea situated in a different context from the European and Norwegian democratic tradition, it nonetheless provides a starting point for discussing the merits of polling-type systems as a bridge between traditional deliberation and involvement and the sarcastic comments found in social media and news.

The purpose of this reflection paper is thus to throw up some ideas regarding a third way/implicit/entry-level type of democratic participation, which could aid in providing a voice to the often silent majority of citizens who choose not to participate in traditional politics. We aim to develop these thoughts into a robust theoretical viewpoint on levels of participation and how different technological systems can act together to strengthen democracy in a time of fake news, post-truth, and polarization. We hope our reflection can contribute to some discussion at the conference and also provide feedback for further work.

2. Democracy and Participation

Signs are indicating that liberal democracy is struggling. The 2015 refugee crisis in Europe, populists, being elected for president or prime minister, yellow vests in France, and "illiberal democracy" in Eastern Europe. The Norwegian paper Morgenbladet, in collaboration with the "breaking bad" research project, has created a map of authoritarian changes in the legal systems of European nations, which shows that several countries, including Western European ones, are moving away from liberal ideals (Reinertsen, Jakobsen & Belgaux, 2019). This trend is aided by social media polarization, fake news, bots spreading propaganda, and an increasing number of activist web sites positioning themselves as alternatives to mainstream media (Sunstein, 2018). The so-called alt-right find each other on online platforms such as 4chan, Tumblr, and 8chan to coordinate campaigns against political opponents, and disinformation is an issue high on the EU's agenda (Comisión Europea, 2019).

In Norway, most of us still report high levels of trust in the political system and institutions, but a significant minority is less trusting, and choose not to vote in elections (Kleven, 2016). Voter turnout is lower among the young, and few are actively trying to influence policy. Those who do tend to be in the high income/higher education demographic, which typically would be labelled as elites (With, 2017). As trust is an essential determinant of intention to use eParticipation systems, a socio-technical approach to eParticipation is necessary (Naranjo Zolotov, Oliveira & Casteleyn, 2018). Earlier research has shown that eParticipation systems need a clear purpose and form

(Hurwitz, 2003), concretization of the outcomes of participation (Kolsaker & Kelly, 2008) and feedback mechanisms, so citizens see the impact of participation (Kolsaker, 2005).

2.1.   Models of Participation and Democracy

Democracies should involve citizens through elections, political parties (Dewey, 1927; Oppenheim, 1971), and citizen/politician dialogue in various channels and media within the frames of representative democracy (Brooks & Manza, 2007). While the meaning of the term "citizen" has varied over time, with restrictions based on gender, land-ownership, age, and social class (Schreiner, 1992), modern definitions include every adult in the nation. Contrary to proponents of elitist democracy, Dewey (1927) argued that "only the public can decide what public interest is". Dewey and later Habermas emphasized the need for dialogue in order for "such a thing as public opinion to be formed (Habermas, 1991). For practical reasons, most democratic countries follow some representative model, where citizens elect representatives to look after their interests, accompanied by rights such as freedom of information, association and expression, and a universal right (for adults) to vote in elections (Urbinati, 2011).

Even within a representative democracy, there are several idealized models, with different normative criteria for participation. One example, from Ferree and colleagues (Ferree, Gamson, Gerhards & Rucht, 2002), describes four different models of democracy; Representative liberal, Participatory liberal, Discursive, and Constructionist. The models outline the amount of citizen participation, based on « who should speak, the content of the process (what), style of speech preferred (how), and the relationship between discourse and decision-making (outcomes) that is sought (or feared)." (s.290). While some countries focus mostly on the act of voting, others, such as Norway, see it as a democratic value that citizens engage in dialogue and are involved in decision-making between elections (participatory liberal model), and participation in the public debate is seen as a value in and of itself (Habermasian discursive model). The Norwegian constitution (§100, part 6) states, "government is required to facilitate open and rational public discourse". Even so, membership in political parties is in decline, with only 7 percent of the adult population being members of a political party, according to Statistics Norway. Thus, there is a need to find new ways of communicating between politicians and citizens.

3. eParticipation Complexity and Activity

eParticipation as a field is defined as a range of different activities with varying outcomes and effects, targeting different democratic ideal-types (Sæbø, Rose & Skiftenes Flak, 2008). This means that when discussing specific systems and applications, researchers should be clear about the type of democracy the system supports.

Figure 1: eParticipation Actors, Activities and Outcomes. Based on (Sæbø et al., 2008)

Actors	Activities	Outcomes
Citizens Politicians Government institutions Voluntary organizations	voting political discourse decision-making eActivisim eConsultation eCampaigning ePetitioning	Civic engagement Deliberation Democratic

The activities identified can be set on a scale based on the potential democratic outcomes and the effort needed for participation. In the 1960s, Arnstein addressed this issue and created a "ladder of participation", showing the democratic outcomes of various activities (Arnstein, 1969). While we have yet to develop the full theoretical argument, section 2.1 is a beginning towards this end - finding a normative distinction between the outcomes of different eParticipation activities. Future work on our framework will extend this.

Deliberation or political discourse, as Sæbø (et al., 2008) defines it, is a time-consuming and demanding process, requiring us to understand the facts and arguments from all sides and them engaging in reasoned debate about the best possible outcome (Habermas, 1991). On the other hand, voting or rooting for a party or a politician requires less of the citizen. In voting campaigns, the work lies with the politicians who have to argue and campaign for the citizens to cast the votes in their direction (Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018). Simplified, one can argue that eParticipation systems aimed at more demanding activities such as deliberation require more of the user in terms of handling complex arguments and spending more time, while activities such as choosing whom to vote for requires less from the citizen (table 1), as we have seen in section 1.

Table 10: Political Activity and System Complexity

	Political activity	
	Voting	Deliberation
System complexity	Low complexity/time	High complexity/time

4. Stealth/Lightweight/Implicit/In-Between Democracy?

Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002) found that many citizens were tired of politics and political debates as they play out in the media and do not wish to become too involved. At the same time, citizens want to be able to express their opinion and be heard. They are happy to participate in surveys or contribute in other ways, such as through FixMyStreet-type services related to their areas of interest (Berntzen, Johannessen, Böhm, Weber & Morales, 2018).

Over the past few years, we have participated in several studies examining how lightweight participation can contribute to democracy. Based on these, and the findings from evaluations of both more and less complicated and structured systems, we argue that systems for rapid feedback have the potential to be a missing link between the open and unstructured debate found in social media

and the more tailored and complex systems for participation. Lightweight, "stealth" participation in the form of surveys, data analysis through sensors or apps such as FixMyStreet and similar allow citizens to participate in a way that gives valuable insights to decision-makers, without having to spend too much time and effort.

In 2019, we evaluated a system built for this purpose. A mobile app designed as a tool for consultation, where politicians ask questions, and citizens answer. The outcome is both increased civic engagement and general democratic effects, depending on how the politicians decide to use the system. After a pilot study in five municipalities, we found that a vast majority of citizens were happy with how the system was applied, and they felt politicians were hearing them without them having to spend too much time or effort on politics.

The question is if this can facilitate a new form of participation, situated between voting and deliberation in terms of participatory outcomes, and low/high complexity and time on the system side. Also, future testing of the app will examine if and how this can lead citizens towards investing more time and effort in deliberative political activities.

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