

**The Gender-Gap in Political Online-Participation**  
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**Abstract**

Why do people not participate politically? “Because they cannot, they do not want to or nobody asked”, as Brady, Schlozman and Verba argued in 1995. The internet has given rise to numerous new and innovative possibilities as the opportunity to participate in politics and social decision-making processes in a low cost way. Motivation and Participation should be equally accessible and workable for all citizens. The aim should be the participation of everyone: men and women from all social groups. Unequal motivation as well disparate opportunities for (online-) participation can lead to social inequality: If you do not involve yourself politically, your interests find no expression in the political decision making process. If the demographic profile is not sufficiently representative of all political views and genders, political decisions are not legitimate and not democratically. The awareness of gender inequalities in political participation is not always demonstrated in politics and administration. Are there any differences in political online-participation between women and men in the municipalities of North Rhine-Westphalia? Databases are the government budgets of Cologne and Bonn and data will be analyzed in a descriptive way. In conclusion, based on theoretical rationale, the reasons for these potential differences will be considered, possible cause-effect relationships deduced and hypotheses presented. In the context of a sociological experiment, these suppositions should be tested. The research results can be utilized in practice in the communities under research. Future online tools could be created to enable participation of those otherwise excluded, or who exclude themselves. The potential for online-participation should consequently be used as widely as possible, especially at the community level. This presents a group of themes as regards social inequalities that have hitherto been investigated insufficiently.

## **Discussion Paper**

The internet has become a widely used medium alongside television and radio. It influences more or less all areas of daily life, and the threshold for users is low, making access easy. Through the spread of the internet, numerous new and innovative possibilities have emerged. One example is online involvement in political decision-making processes. Citizen participation can take place not only offline, but online too. This can be both on a local and national level; the citizen budgets of large cities in Nordrhein-Westfalen such as Bonn and Cologne are good examples of this, where people were asked for their opinion and suggestions for the use of community funds. If the chances to participate expand beyond the tradition, tried-and-tested forms, which are long established in numerous forms, citizens, politicians and lawmakers will face new challenges. Over the last few years, online participation has been more and more on the up. Community democracy can be made energetic and close to people's lives through online participation, and present a valuable opportunity to allow political processes and decisions to be followed as they unfold. Many municipalities seek citizen opinions in different ways, and in different formats, on specific community topics. In this way, citizens can take part in the decision-making in community politics. New and innovative forms of online participation are gradually being tested and becoming established. The cities of Cologne and Bonn are carrying out citizen budgets for the fourth or the fifth time in a row. If you direct your attention to the participants in these processes, there are few points to note. The aim should not be to marginalise certain social groups, but to create an ideal participation of all citizens. Men and women should be involved in equal numbers, just like people from all social groups, areas, classes and backgrounds. Citizen participation should be equally accessible for everybody, and exclude nobody.

Unequal motivation and a great range of possibilities and opportunities for (online) participation can however lead to social inequality. If you do not express your political views, your interests do not find their way into the political decision-making process. This presents a danger to democracy. Ongoing and comprehensive involvement in online participation is particularly important for municipalities comparatively small in comparison to the German state level. Otherwise, political decisions, political decisions cannot be made representatively or legitimately. If a political cross-section of society is formed insufficiently, the legitimacy of political decisions is not a given – including in terms of gender diversity. There can be further outcomes associated with this phenomenon. If women and men do not take part in equal number in decision-making processes, there are far-reaching consequences. For example, if women do

not take part in debates on political topics, the effect is as if they have nothing to say. If women contribute markedly less to online forums, and if they comment and vote less, they have less of a say than men. The needs and interests of women are not heard if they not enter into the opinion-forming process, and achieve no influence on decisions made. The needs and views of women and men are not, however, the same. Looking back over recent history shows that it is men who have predominantly led politics, and therefore made decisions for both men and women. They have made decisions for the other sex, by which they have not been as affected in the same way as women. This statement does not apply to all areas of politics, but should still be taken into account. According to Ina Bieber, women “have other needs, experiences and interests [...] that must be brought into politics in a more appropriate and personally relevant manner” (Bieber 2013: 40). Accordingly, political decisions and laws must be discussed and agreed upon by both sexes.

The strength and condition of a modern representative democracy can be seen in the degree of political participation, both quantitative and qualitative. Unequal participation by some social groups, classes or backgrounds does not correspond to the vision of participatory democracy theory. Such a democracy should be labelled “deficient” (Geißel & Penrose 2003; Sauer 1994; Holland-Cunz 1998). Many classical democracy theories do not regard equal participation and representation of women and men as necessary for the success and functioning of a democracy (Massing & Breit 2003; Schultze 2003). The sex of participants plays no particular role in most theoretical approaches. This is made clear, for example, in Abraham Lincoln’s classical formula (Lincoln; translated by Krippendorff 1994). Sexual equality in political participation and representation of interests is not seen as pivotal for a functioning democracy by many different theories. In the classical writings of political theory, men and women are not described as equal in public and political life. Instead, men are seen as those who supersede women in every aspect of public and political life. Men are seen to have more wisdom and strength than women, who are seen as “incomplete” members of society, and just subjects or even slaves (Hobbes 1996; Locke 1977; Rousseau 1977). Other classics of political theories of state see the preserve of women purely as the house and the family. They are barred from public and political engagement. According to these writing, women have no access to the political sphere, and no rights or opportunities (Aristoteles 1986, 1998; Platon 1982; Hegel 1952; Machiavelli 2016). In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft recognised and pilloried this state of affairs. With a pamphlet called „The Vindication of the Rights of Women“(Wollstonecraft 2008), she mentioned these points. This piece of writing can be set at the beginning of feminist theory in political sciences. It precipitated a first and powerful revolt against male supremacy in public and private life.

Compared with these theories of state, participatory democracy theory pursues a different approach. It strives for the

“[...] political participation of as many people in as many ways, in the sense of participation in terms of giving and taking on the one hand, and inner participation in the goings-on and fare of the body politic on the other” (Schmidt 2000: 251).

According to participatory democracy theory, the sex of the participant is an important factor, and is included in the theoretical explanation of participation and democracy. In terms of gender, democracies in which men and women are not equally able to represent their interests or take part in the political process are not complete, and therefore seen as deficient as already noted (Geißel & Penrose 2003; Sauer 1994; Holland-Cunz 1998). These democracies are incomplete and deficient because women, as other social groups, must be represented equally. No fundamental part of the population may be excluded from the decision-making process. Furthermore, it can be assumed that men and women do not bring the same experiences, needs and interests to politics and participation. In many ways, they have different backgrounds in terms of life and experience. An example for this is clear in political debates on the right to a woman's self determination, and on the legalisation of abortion. Politics must not exclude half of the population (c.f. Geißel & Penrose 2003: 2; Meyer 1987; 1992). The same is true for public life in all respects. For these reasons, the equal and just participation and representation of interests of women and men is a prerequisite for successful, functional modern democracies. Sexual equality must not go unnoticed in this regard. Against the backdrop of the points mentioned, it is more than important and trendsetting for the democracies of tomorrow. A comprehensive awareness of these problem is not always a given from the realms of politics and administration, and must in some circumstances be created such that social inequalities are not reproduced or even generated afresh. Rather, they must be removed, or at least contained.

Attention should now be turned to which points should be pulled into focus, and which forms of citizen participation and online participation should be observed more closely. The emphasis of the research project envisaged will lie partly in the citizen participation processes in the Federal Republic of Germany and the state of North Rhine-Westphalia. Furthermore, there will be a focus on municipal online-participation in Germany such as in cities like Duesseldorf, Cologne or Bonn. Online participation is defined in this research such that it revolves around citizen participation processes that included citizens in political decision-making. This enables an overview of the different views and dominant opinions in a population concerning a planned

project or other issue to be generated and made clear. Examples of this are the citizen budgets already mentioned in the cities of Cologne and Bonn in North Rhine-Westphalia. Citizens have the opportunity to declare their views on the use of public money, and influence decisions. Over and above that, processes in the area of town planning and development are part of this initiative. Citizens can therefore be included right from the early planning phases of upcoming political decisions, such as when ring roads are to be built, or new swimming pools and recreational areas. Regional management of deficiencies, major construction proposals or noise-reduction planning on the municipal level also count among the possibilities of online participation processes at the community level in Germany.

In the ideal-case scenario, as many citizens as necessary are included in electronic participation processes of this kind, with as much variety to background as possible. As many opinions as possible should find their way into the process, and therefore be considered. It is normally the case that citizen participation processes are preceded by drawn-out negotiation, leading to a great degree of work and administration. Generally speaking, these online processes do not lead to decisions being made, but present an impression of opinion that community representatives can then consider for the final decision on the points in question. After completing the respective online citizen participation process, a representative committee such as a town council makes the decision. This committee, to whom the final decision falls after the online phase, is elected and therefore democratically legitimate. For this reason, online participation processes are by no means comparable with elections (also see Märker 2014). The topics discussed in online participation processes, and which must be decided upon, are often suggested and set by policy. Generally speaking, they are of interest and importance to a broad public.

By way of example, an online project on the topic of bike safety is sketched out. This project took place in the German capital, Berlin, in 2014. It involved an online portal prepared and managed by Zebralog, the Agency for Cross-Medial Citizen Participation. Bike riding is a big, important and emotive topic in Berlin. The city has more than three million inhabitants, and there are numerous dangerous points for bike riders within the city's traffic system. These are not always easy to recognise. There are daily accidents between bike riders and drivers, as well as pedestrians. This online platform asked citizens to list what they saw as conflict points at dangerous locations, and they were invited to leave comments. Furthermore, the police identified objectively verified conflict points. These could also be commented upon. An

interactive map of the city of Berlin made these subjective and objective conflict points visible and geographically locatable online.

After the active phase, the platform was closed and evaluated. The comments left by citizens online were evaluated using qualitative content analysis and text-mining programmes. Following that, the online remarks were then categorised and evaluated. This discussion could not have taken place in such a manner offline. It would not have been possible to question so many inhabitants of Berlin about danger spots for bike riders in the city, and to allow these to be discussed. Another factor is that the scope of opinion is very different online compared to offline. “E-participatory processes are explicitly intended to produce a spectrum of discussion and rationale on a specific issue that is as heterogeneous as possible,” says Oliver Märker, executive partner at Zebralog (Märker 2014: 63). In offline events on similar topics, the audience is usually very homogenous. It is usually only citizens with a sufficient interest and enough time and energy that come to such events and discussions. This online platform can be seen as a success as regards the scope of opinion on biking safety. The senate administration for town development and environment in Berlin has included the results in their work.

“E-participatory citizen participation can be understood as attempts to organise political consultation from the ground up, while keeping the rules of the game and results understandable for the public,”

Märker says (Märker 2014: 65). In the ideal case, online participation leads on the one hand to better problem orientation. In this case, an improvement to politics would be the result. On the other hand, the legitimacy of decisions can be increased on the input side by using online participation. It is not just the citizen participation platform described that counts in online participation; other forms can be named in this regard. Which activities on the internet count as forms of political online participation? Some examples are:

- Writing comments or making contributions on e.g., Facebook, Twitter or by email
- Forwarding or sharing political contributions e.g., via Facebook, Twitter or by email
- By “liking” political contributions on social networks
- By taking part in online petitions
- Using citizen participation platforms from state authorities (budgets, liquid-democracy forums etc.).

(Rattinger et al. 2015).

The need for a cross section of the population to be represented applies to online participation as it does to all other citizen participation processes. If this is not the case, the legitimacy of political decisions, as already posited, cannot be said to be complete. There are consequences to certain groups not participating. This applies both to social minorities such as foreigners as well as to men and women. This research effort focuses for these reasons less on the political and legal aspects, and much more on the sociological. Participants and their intentions and motivation for e-participation, and their actual attitude towards its use, are very much the emphasis. The research considers what motivates people to participate, their underlying intentions, and the differences that can arise. From these results, success factors for online participation can be deduced.

Representative survey data for the Federal Republic of Germany give insight into the distribution of sexes as regards the general use of the internet. According to the ARD-SDF online study of October 2015, 83% of men and 76% of women use the internet at least occasionally. Every day, 64% of men and 58% of women use the internet. When it comes to mobile internet use, for example with smartphones and tablets, there are hardly any differences between the sexes (ARD-ZDF online study 2015). Larger differences arise between men and women when it comes to current political news on the net: a figure of 24% of women is less than 37% for men. 23% of women read political and social articles online, while the figure is 34% for men (ARD-ZDF online study 2015). Women visit the websites of politicians somewhat less than men according to Emmer et al (2011), at 21% and 35% respectively. Political information offerings on the internet are used less by women than men (Emmer et al 2011). Further studies allow statements on additional social-structural characteristics. These put 18- to 36-year-olds as the most active participants online. On the motivation to get involved online, the following points can be mentioned: income plays only a slight role according to this study. Level of education is, however, of importance, as is interest in outcomes and enjoyment of use. Self-efficacy also plays an important role as regards political internet use (Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society 2014). It is therefore possible to assume that relatively worse educated women tend to participate less than better-educated, younger men with higher incomes. The latest studies show this. As regards differences in the use of the different forms of online participation, there are no comprehensive and significant data. Similarly, there is little information on the intentions that lie between different patterns of use.

Forms of online participation have not been investigated hitherto in such an extensive manner, or so broadly, as offline forms of participation. When it comes to online communication and

participation and use, studies from Emmer et al (2014) are available. These describe an overview of political participation in Germany, both offline and online, along with different forms of online participation and usage backed up with data. The focus of this study is political communication. The Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society (2014) goes into the depths of online participation and describes concrete usage of different forms as regards participant structure, social structure and sex. This study is, however, not representative for all of Germany. The focus lies in this instance merely on those actively participating. Hoffmann et al (2013) go more into the motivation for online participation.

These studies do not allow statements to be made on what motivates women and men's usage of different forms of online participation, and where potential differences might lie in this respect. Just as difficult is to analyse the different reasons for participation. To settle on statements above and beyond the current state of research, further data on individual online citizen participation processes are gathered. These can then be used to do project-related analyses, as described in the following.

The bandwidth of studies on online-participation is in no way comparable with the abundance of studies on conventional political participation. In sociology and political sciences, there are many essays on the topic. These present approaches to explaining why citizens participate politically or not. In order to explain why citizen political participation does not materialise, reference to the classical explanation of Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) can be made: "Because they can't, won't, or because nobody has asked" (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995: 15). The oft-quoted SES explanation model from these authors is also known as the resources, socialisation and mobilisation model. It determines that participation is mainly dependent on the education, income and career status of individuals. Other studies show indices demonstrating that more highly educated men are most likely to participate politically (Milbrath 1965, Verba et al. 1995, van Deth 2003). Whether these explanation models and factors on political participation online are transferrable is to be considered dispassionately. Fundamentally, a stabilisation of political participation must be assumed as is the case offline in conventional forms of participation. That means that, in line with the replacement thesis, it is mainly those groups of the population who have already participated who then go on to participate again (Althaus&Tewsbury 2000). Other groups of the population tend to be mobilised less, which was the basis of Norris' mobilisation thesis in 2001 (Norris 2001; Gibson et al 2005; Jensen 2013; Shah et al. 2005). More recent studies from Jensen (2013) postulate however that traditional prediction factors behind political participation, such as the SES



explanation model, are losing the potency of their explanatory power ever more (c.f., Jensen 2013: 360). Other and new factors are gaining in explanatory power. For example, technical capabilities can be employed here such as being able to switch on a computer, use it, and find specific websites on the internet such as those of politicians, or online platforms and petitions. Furthermore, individuals must be in a position to carry out discussions online, and vote. These factors are independent of socio-economic status, meaning independent of education and income, which have up to now served as explanations for political participation.

„Internet skills have been identified as having independent influence on political participation distinct from levels of socioeconomic advantage [...]” (Oser et al. 2013: 92).

To achieve more equal and therefore qualitatively better participation online, a survey is essential. Research must be carried out into how participation is lacking, with emphasis placed on certain factors. The theoretical background just outlined leads to the following research questions:

Where do differences in online political participation between men and women actually lie? To what extent does this engender, reproduce or remove social inequality between the sexes? Research should identify whether differences exist and, if so, what the consequences of these are. These questions are to be answered in the context of a research project, which is my thesis as part of the inter- and trans-disciplinary graduate college (NRW Fortschrittsskolleg, “Online Participation”). After addressing the theory pertaining to offline participation processes, these theories will be checked for their transferability to online participation. This will lead to a discussion led by theory on the possible bases of these potential differences. Possible cause-effect relationships will be deduced, and hypotheses presented. For empirical analyses, data from participation processes in Nordrhein-Westfalen will be used, along with representative survey data for Germany. These survey data were gathered initially in October 2015. As part of quantitative analyses, these assumptions will be tested for empirical validity and relevance. There is then an evaluation and discussion of results with a view to the theoretical considerations and research questions posited.

Where are potential differences and inequalities in online participation to be found, and what can be done about this? Political (online) participation should be considered for this purpose at different points in time. Initially, the focus is on aspects of actual participation: motivation, opportunity and access to political online participation. Meanwhile, the use of different types,

forms and designs of (online) participation are of interest. Following on from actual participation, success factors, evaluation and loyalty towards specific forms of participation are relevant, ideally so that repeat participation is the result. The whole cycle of online participation is to be considered and researched in terms of the gender perspective.

Research results can be employed in practice, not least in the municipalities investigated in North Rhine-Westphalia, in order to create future online tools in a way that allows participation of those who are otherwise excluded, or exclude themselves. Platforms such as those for budgets can be designed in a way that takes note of these results, and participants recruited in different ways. Social inequality, and inequality between the sexes, should be removed or at least limited. The potential of online participation should consequently be exploited far and wide, especially on the municipal level. This presents a set of topics with that has, up to now and with regard to social inequalities and the backgrounds described, only been investigated to an insufficient degree.

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