

The research project “New media and politics: citizens’ participation in the websites of Portuguese political parties”: main results

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Introduction

The “New media and politics: citizen participation in the websites of Portuguese political parties” project, funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology¹, was carried out by a research group of the Online Communication Lab (LabCom) research centre at the University of Beira Interior (Portugal) between 1 March 2012 and 28 February 2015. The main objective of this chapter is to highlight the core components of the aforementioned project. A full description of the scientific framework of the project can be found in the published book *Political Participation and Web 2.0* (Serra *et al.*, 2014).

As the title implies, the concept of participation is a cornerstone of the project. Citizen participation has always been seen as a fundamental requisite for democracy, whatever model it takes: liberal, republican or deliberative (Habermas, 1994). At the same time, the “refeudalization” of the public sphere has also been understood as a major obstacle to citizens’ political participation in our mediated societies (Habermas, 1989).

With the emergence and development of Web 2.0, we witnessed a renewed interest in the concept of participation as well as in the different forms it may take (Carpentier, 2011). This interest has substantially increased since the Obama election, in 2008, which has showed the internet website’s potential to act as a hub in political-electoral campaigning, in regard to contact between parties / can-

¹ Reference PTDC/CCI-COM/122715/2010.

didates and citizens, the mobilization of members and supporters, the organization of rallies and other events, raising funds, etc. (Gomes *et al.*, 2009; Smith, 2009).

Nevertheless, studies from different countries have shown how the majority of political party and candidate websites tend to favour the informative function over the interactive and participative ones (Gibson, Margolis, Resnick & Ward, 2003; Schweitzer, 2005); they have also shown that, even when participation exists, this participation is predominantly seen as an instrument to project an image of credibility and/or arouse voters' sympathy, in a top-down logic (Rolfe, 2008). And what to think about the Portuguese case? When our research project was designed (2010), we did not know of any significant work in this area in Portugal.² At that time, and based on previous studies, we had the impression that, in general terms, three main obstacles existed to the development of a "digital democracy" in Portugal: the predominance of television in the media system; the political-parliamentary system – little contact with voters; citizens' lack of motivation for political participation (Cardoso, Cunha & Nascimento, 2003). Moreover, an exploratory study conducted on the Portuguese Parliament website about the use of Web 2.0 tools that aim to increase the interaction between Members of Parliament and citizens – forums, blogs, petitions – has seen little participation by either party (Serra, 2012).

It can be said that the Web 2.0 campaigns in Portugal began with the 2009 parliamentary elections. In these elections, the two largest Portuguese parties, the Socialist Party (PS) and the Social-Democrat Party (PSD) (government and opposition, respectively, at that time), launched the "Movimento Sócrates 2009" website (on 2 March 2009) and the "Política de Verdade" website (28 April 2009). The former, the PS website, was clearly inspired by the Obama campaign. They even hired the company Blue State Digital (BSD), which was responsible for organizing and managing the Obama online campaign (see Rodrigues, 2015).

A campaign is a campaign, however. It is a period when parties and candidates mobilize all the material and human resources they have. But what about the periods between campaigns, the so-called "normal" periods? Do political parties use their websites to enable and foster citizens' participation? And do citizens participate? And

² Later, there was a master's dissertation (Silva, 2012), which focused on the interactivity of Portuguese political parties' websites during non-electoral periods, performing a content analysis of those websites.

what kind of participation are we speaking of? In fact, the concept of participation is complex and elusive; it can be used with different meanings in different contexts (Dahlgren, 2011).

In the specific context of this project, by "participation" we mean the actions performed by citizens using internet tools, especially Web 2.0-tools (blogs, Facebook, etc.), and through which they can create and share political content and get involved in social networks (Smith & Rainie, 2008). Narrowing our concept even further, we were interested in the participation that citizens have through/on the websites of Portuguese political parties during non-electoral periods.

However, real participation is different from access and interaction because of "the key role that is attributed to power, and to equal(ized) power relations in decision-making processes." (Carpentier, 2011, p. 29). Hence, we were also interested in finding out if those forms of participation constituted real political participation, with some impact and consequences on the political parties' agendas (themes, actions) or if, on the contrary, they were only a mere simulation of participation with mere propagandistic intentions. That is to say that citizens' participation is not enough; the response that political parties give to that participation is a key factor.

Method

Based on the theoretical framework, the research problem guiding the project was as follows: 'What is the degree of correspondence between the participation that the websites of the Portuguese political parties allow citizens and citizens' expectations about their participation – in non-electoral periods?' In this context, the expression "Portuguese political parties" only includes the parties which had (and have) parliamentary representation: CDS/PP – Democratic Social Centre/Popular Party (Christian democrats, office-seeking, ideological party);³ PSD – Social Democratic Party (vote-seeking, catch-all party); PS – Socialist Party (vote-seeking, catch-all

³ To globally characterize these political parties, we use Strom's distinction between policy-seeking, vote-seeking and office-seeking parties (Strom, 1990) and Kirchheimer's distinction between ideological and catch-all parties (Kirchheimer, 1966). As we know, all these classifications are relative and not fully applicable to all situations. About these classifications of the Portuguese political parties, see also Belchior & Freire, 2012.

party); PCP – Portuguese Communist Party (Marxist, policy-seeking, ideological party); BE – Left Bloc (Marxist, policy-seeking, ideological party). It also must be added that, throughout our research project, the Portuguese government was ruled by a coalition composed of the CDS-PP and the PSD, which had the majority of seats at the Parliament, with the PS, PCP and BE parties in opposition.

From that general problem, three main research questions (RQ) emerged:

RQ1. What are the participatory tools available to citizens on Portuguese political parties' websites? How do Portuguese political parties interact with citizens via the participatory internet tools available on their websites?

RQ2. What is the opinion of the leaders of Portuguese political parties and the communication managers about the citizens' participation on their websites? Does this participation involve any change to the political party agenda (themes, actions)?

RQ3. What are citizens' opinions about the possibility of entering into interaction with parties via their websites? How do they evaluate their own participation on the websites?

In relation to our research problem, and based upon our literature review, we admitted the general hypothesis that there was a lack of correspondence between the participation that the websites of the Portuguese political parties allow citizens and citizens' expectations about it. As more specific research questions, we defined the following hypotheses:

H1. Citizen participation tends to favour image-based forms of expression (videos, photos), is predominantly supportive (not critical) of the political party, and tends not to depend on the political-ideological orientation of the party.

H2. The leaders of the parties and the people responsible for the management of their websites tend to see citizen participation more as an instrument of delivering their own message than as a way of listening to citizens' messages.

H3. The citizens expect the websites of the political parties to be more open (with fewer constraints) to their participation, and to have more of an impact on the agenda and plans of the political parties.

To answer our research questions, and "falsify" (Popper) our hypotheses, we chose a methodological design based upon what Denzin (1970) calls triangulation, in a triple sense: methodological triangulation, i.e. the use of different methods for gathering data; data

triangulation, i.e. the use of different sources of data; and, in certain cases, investigator triangulation, i.e. the investigation and interpretation of the same topic by different researchers. More specifically, initially, the following research techniques were planned:

1. *Content analysis* – to examine what tools are provided by the Portuguese political parties' websites for citizens to create and share political content and get involved in social networks (research question 1). This content analysis examined the websites of the five Portuguese parties that have parliamentary representation (CDS-PP, PSD, PS, PCP-Verdes, BE).

1.1. Complementarily, and based on the understanding of the importance that social networks in general and Facebook in particular have for the websites of the political parties, we did a content analysis of the three parties profile on Facebook – BE, PS and PSD (the PCP does not have an official Facebook profile and the Facebook page for the CDS/PP is in fact, for its leader, and was completely out of date).

1.2. In addition to the content analysis, and in order to understand how citizens can use the online participatory tools available on political websites, an "interaction experiment" was implemented. By creating 3 virtual identities (positive, negative and neutral), the interaction with political parties via websites was tested to check if the tools for participation available were truly effective, and to what extent. For example: if we send an e-mail, do we receive an answer? And how long do we have to wait for that answer?

2. *Semi-structured interviews* with the five political party leaders and the five communication managers to find out their opinions about citizens' participation on their websites (research question 2). With the interviews, it was expected to determine whether or not the agendas of the political parties (in terms of themes and actions) include citizens' participation on the websites and, if so, how this is implemented.

3. *Internet-based survey* – to find out citizens' opinions about their participation on the websites of the Portuguese political parties, an internet-based survey, using open source tools like Lime Survey⁴, was addressed to a sample of five hundred Portuguese users of the political parties' websites (research question 3).

⁴ Lime Survey Website (<http://www.limesurvey.org/>)

3.1. To complement the survey – since we had fewer responses than we expected – a focus group was organized with a convenience sample of undergraduate and graduate (Master's and PhD) students from the University of Beira Interior.

The application of all the research techniques is further detailed in the next section, in which we present and reflect on the main results of the project.

Main results

As several methods were implemented, this section presents each research technique in detail and discusses the main results obtained.

Content analysis

The objective of the content analysis was to examine the tools that the websites of the Portuguese political parties provide the citizens for them create and share political content and get involved in social networks.

The content analysis of the political parties' websites was performed over a period of one month (May 2013) and involved the five Portuguese parties that have parliamentary representation: CDS/PP – Democratic Social Centre/Popular Party; PSD – Social Democratic Party; PS – Socialist Party; PCP – Portuguese Communist Party; BE – Left Bloc.

Based on a preliminary study, a recording and analysis model was created to identify and characterize the websites' participatory tools (see López del Ramo, 2014, particularly pp. 265-272). The data was collected between 1 March 2012 and 5 October 2012 (López del Ramo, p. 245), and was presented and discussed at the international conference "Political Participation and Web 2.0", at the University of Beira Interior, on 11 and 12 October 2012.⁵

Using the recording model, all tools that give the public an active role were considered and analysed in relation to three dimensions: presence, visibility and functionality. In Table 7.1, we can see

⁵ Further information about the first conference of the research project can be found here: <http://www.political-participation-web.ubi.pt/>

the example of the PS website, which had "the greatest number of participatory resources of the five websites studied", with access to blogs the only aspect missing (López del Ramo, 2014, p. 256):

Resource	Presence-Variety ^{6,7}	Visibility	Functionality
Contact details	100%	100% (3/3)	50% (3/6)
Comments	65%	33% (1/3)	71.4% (5/6)
Suggestions/enquiries	82.5%	33% (1/3)	57.1% (4/7)
Social networks	100%	100% (3/3)	100% (3/3)
Blogs	No	No	No
Surveys	82.5%	66.6% (2/3)	60% (3/5)
Chat/debates	82.5%	100%	57.1% (4/7)
RSS Syndication	82.5%	100% (3/3)	-
Average	74.3% ⁸	76% (3)	65.9% ⁹

Table 7.1: Adequacy level of PS participatory resources. Source: López del Ramo, 2014, p. 256

Resource	Usage ratio	Visibility ¹⁰	Functionality	Overall treatment ¹¹
Contact details	100% PSD, CDS-PP, PCR, BE, PS	53.1%	73.3%	75.4%
Comments	80% PSD, CDS-PP, BE, PS	49.6%	70.2%	66.6%
Suggestions/ enquiries	100% PSD, CDS-PP, PCR, BE, PS	53.1%	71.4%	74.8%
Social networks	100% PSD, CDS-PP, PCR, BE, PS	93.3%	86.6%	93.3%
Blogs	0%	No	No	-
Surveys	20% PS	66.6%	60%	48.8%
Chat/debates	20% PS	100%	57.1%	59%
RSS Syndication	80% CDS-PP, PCR, BE, PS	79.1%	-	79.5%

Table 7.2: Adequacy levels of participatory resource on the range of websites studied. Source: López del Ramo, 2014, p. 257

The analysis of the participatory resources present on the websites of the five parties shows the overall results as presented in Table 7.3:

⁶ According to the PV calculation formula $PV = (E \times 65/100) + (S \times 35/100)$

⁷ E factor – Inclusion of the resource on the website; S factor – diversity of subtypes or variants (López del Ramo, p.251).

⁸ Calculation obtained in relation to the total number of possible resources, whether they are found on the website or not

⁹ Calculation obtained in relation to the resources found on the website

¹⁰ Calculation obtained from the sum of all the websites on which this participatory resource is found.

¹¹ The average is obtained from the Usage ratio, Visibility and Functionality.

Party	Aspects			Total
	Presence-Variety ¹²	Visibility	Functionality	
PSD	43.4%	41.1%	77.9%	54.1%
CDS-PP	52.2%	56.5%	85.1%	64.6%
PCP	42.6%	66.6%	78.5%	62.5%
BE	52.2%	73.2%	67.8%	64.4%
PS	74.3%	76%	65.9%	71.9%
Average	52.9%	62.6%	75%	63.5%

Table 7.3: Adequacy level for participatory resources by category. Source: López del Ramo, 2014, p. 259

Summing up, the overall results of the content analysis were as follows (see López del Ramo, 2014, pp. 260-2):

- Despite differences in number and characteristics, all websites included participatory tools (presence dimension).
- Only 3 of the 8 tools were implemented on all websites: contact details, suggestions and social media.
- Comments and RSS syndication existed on 4 websites (Comments: PSD, CDS-PP, BE, PS; RSS: CDS-PP, PCP, BE, PS).
- Forum/chat was present on only one website (PS).
- None of the websites included a blog.
- Social media was the most common interactive tool and the most visible (visibility dimension).
- The websites are ranked higher in regard to functionality, because they are generally clear and simple to use, although their visibility could be significantly improved.

In terms of political parties, the PS website clearly stands out from the others in regard to all aspects; nonetheless, the adequacy score for all websites exceeds the 50% threshold.

The website with the lowest overall score is the PSD website, but also there are significant negative points on both the BE and PCP websites. The former for its inconsistent structure, since it actually comprises one main website and three independent sub-websites,

¹²According to the PV calculation formula $PV = (E \times 65/100) + (S \times 35/100)$

which creates dispersion and a certain incoherence in the participatory resources. For the PCP website, the lack of comments or its own profile on social media gives it a restrictive and opaque nature that does not fit the naturally open approach of Web 2.0. (López del Ramo, 2014, pp. 261-2).

The data collected in an exploratory study about the comments section showed a trend towards a lack of participation (publication) and a very low frequency of comments as well. One explanation for the low number and frequency of comments, and the almost non-existence of debates, may be the transfer of political opinion debate to the social media environment, particularly Facebook. This hypothesis was further analysed in a content analysis of Facebook and the interaction experiment that is described below.

Facebook content analysis

One of the results of the content analysis of the websites of the five political parties was that social networks were “the best-treated participatory resource, whose score is close to what may be considered optimal level [...], which is in itself an enlightening result in terms of the value assigned to them by parties as a political tool” (López del Ramo, 2014, p. 261). Among those social networks, Facebook was clearly the most important.¹³ This result therefore fully justified a content analysis of the way the different political parties used Facebook.

The Facebook content analysis focused only on the BE, PSD and PS. It did not consider the CDS-PP for two reasons. Firstly, because despite being included on the party website, the Facebook page was not for the CDS/PP, but rather for the party leader, Paulo Portas, and secondly, because it was not updated (the last post was made on 7 July 2011). The content analysis also did not consider the PCP because the party did not have an official Facebook page.

The analysis took place from 6 May to 21 June 21 2013 and analysed a total of 26 days, distributed over the following weeks: 31 December to 6 January; 4 to 10 February; 11 to 17 March; 22 to 26 April (27 and 28 April were excluded, due to the PS convention).

¹³ According to a recent report, in 2013, 98.0% of the Portuguese users of social networks had a profile on Facebook, 13.7% on Google+, 10.4% on Hi5, 9.0% on Twitter, 7.5% on LinkedIn, and 3.2% on Badoo (Cardoso *et al.*, 2014, p. 16).

The analysis categories for each post were: Date, Author, Title / Theme, Semiosis (text, photo, video, etc., alone or as an addition), Likes, Comments, Shares, Authors of the comments (Sex: M – men, W – women, NI – not identified), Tone of the comments (F – favourable to the party, U – unfavourable to the party, N – neutral to the party), and S – Comments with suggestions for the party (initiatives, actions, strategies).

The questions raised in the analysis were:

i) What are the characteristics of the messages posted by political parties, in terms of their political authors, topics, and semiotic characteristics?

(ii) Does the frequency of citizens' participation depend on their gender (as apparent in the comments)?

(iii) Does the frequency of citizens' participation depend on the political-ideological orientation (right/left) of the parties?

(iv) Is citizens' participation determined by their previous, existing political attitudes (those who are "already convinced")?

(v) Do citizens' comments include suggestions for political initiatives?

First of all, we present the overall results of the Facebook analysis in regard to Posts, Likes, Comments and Shares. For each party, we show the total for the 26 days and the average per day:

		Posts	Likes	Comments	Shares
BE	Total	104	3158	202	3149
	Average	4	121.46	7.76	121.11
PS	Total	84	12233	1680	3200
	Average	3.23	470.5	64.61	123.07
PSD	Total	76	2620	318	1095
	Average	2.92	100.76	12.23	42.11

Table 7.4: Posts: Party

As we can see, all parties published an average of between 2.9 and 4 posts per day.

The BE was the most active party in terms of posts, both in total number and daily average, followed by the PS and the PSD; however, in terms of Likes, Comments and Shares, the PS was in first place, followed by the BE in Likes and Shares, and the PSD in Comments.

i) Characteristics of the political parties' posts

Our first research question was: What are the characteristics of the messages posted by political parties, in terms of their political authors, topics, and semiotic characteristics? The data follows below.

Authors and topics

The authors of the posts were exclusively members of the party organization, their leaders and their colleagues. The main author was, undoubtedly, the party leader. Citizens could not post, only comment. Consequently, the topics of the posts were invariably linked to the life of the party and its positions on the several political questions at stake.

Semiosis

As we can see in Table 7.5, most posts consisted of text + photograph (53.79%), followed by text only (15.91%), text+video (12.5%), text+poster (9.09%), and text+icon (5.68%), while the other forms barely registered. If we consider all the posts that are not exclusively composed of text, i.e. those that include any kind of image, we have a result of 84.09%. As regards parties, the PS does not use text only, and the PSD is the party that has the greatest proportion of text-only posts (almost a third of all its posts).

ii) Characteristics of citizens' comments

The other research questions we posed dealt with the characteristics of citizens' participation (comments) on the political parties' Facebook pages in regard to: a) the relationship between the frequency of citizens' participation and their gender (as apparent in the comments), their political-ideological leaning (right/left), and their previous, existing political attitudes (the "already convinced"); b) the inclusion of suggestions for political initiatives.

	BE	PS	PSD	Total	Per cent
photo+graph	1	0	0	1	0.38
text	18	0	24	42	15.91
text+diagram	1	0	0	1	0.38
text+front page+photo	0	0	2	2	0.76
text+icon	0	2	13	15	5.68
text+photo	59	58	25	142	53.79
text+poster	12	8	4	24	9.09
text+poster+photo	2	0	0	2	0.76
text+postit	0	0	2	2	0.76
text+video	11	16	6	33	12.50
Total	104	84	76	264	100.00

Table 7.5: Posts: Semiosis

Ideology/gender

Table 7.6 shows that, in ideological terms, the PS has an overwhelming number of comments compared to the BE and the PSD, and that men comment much more than women (74.97% versus 22.61%). Cross-referencing both categories, ideology and gender, we see that the participation decreases from left to right (BE – 34.52%, PS – 21.46%, and PSD – 18.30%).

		Men ¹⁴	Women	Not identified	Total
BE	Total	122	68	7	197
	Per cent	61.93%	34.52%	3.55%	100%
PS	Total	1119	315	34	1468
	Per cent	76.23%	21.46%	2.31%	100%
PSD	Total	122	28	3	153
	Per cent	79.74%	18.30%	1.96%	100%
	Total	1363	411	44	1818
	Per cent	74.97%	22.61%	2.42%	100.00%

Table 7.6: Comments: Ideology/Gender

¹⁴Gender was determined by the name of the author of the comments

Party/tone

Overall, as shown in Table 7.7, the comments are more favourable than unfavourable or neutral, and suggestions form the category with the lowest value (only 0.31%). This may lead us to conclude that the participants are mainly the “already convinced”, i.e. members and supporters of the political parties. However, when we look at each of the three parties, we see that while in regard to the BE the comments were overwhelmingly favourable (81.73%), in regard to the PS they were only slightly favourable (38.22%), and in regard to the PSD they were more unfavourable (40.53%). We can explain the results of the PS by the fact – empirically evinced in the comments – that its leader at the time (António José Seguro) was not fully accepted by the party. The results of the PSD can be explained by the fact that the coalition of which it was part, which took power on 21 June 2011, had taken severe measures to fight the economic and financial crisis that began in 2008, which the members of the party themselves disliked.

		Favourable	Unfavourable	Neutral	Suggestions ¹⁵	Total
BE	Total	161	12	24	0	197
	Per cent	81.73%	6.09%	12.18%	0	100%
PS	Total	561	460	414	33	1468
	Per cent	38.22%	31.34%	28.20%	2.24%	100%
PSD	Total	42	62	40	9	153
	Per cent	27.45%	40.53%	26.14%	5.88%	100
	Total	764	534	478	42	1818
	Per cent	42.03%	29.37%	26.29%	2.31%	100.00

Table 7.7: Comments: Party/Tone

Moreover, with these quantitative results, we must note that dialogue, when it took place in the comments, was not between party and commenters, but rather among the commenters themselves – usually among those who defended and those who attacked the party's position. And this was more frequent on the PSD Facebook page than on the BE page; the number of those attacking the party was higher on the former as well.

¹⁵Independently of whether they were favourable, unfavourable or neutral.

Interaction experiment

To understand how citizens can use online participatory tools available on political parties' websites (for example: if we send an e-mail, do we receive a reply? How long do we have to wait to receive that reply?), we carried out an interaction experiment. To implement this experiment, three different (fictitious) virtual identities were created, each with a different position regarding the party: negative, neutral, and positive.

The experiment took place over a month, from 1 to 31 May 2013, and was implemented by a group of post-graduate students and one project researcher.¹⁶ The interaction was tested by e-mail, comments and suggestions, both on the website and on the Facebook page. Later, the interaction with each party was described and analysed in a succinct report. It is these five reports that constitute the basis of the conclusions we summarize next. Before discussing those conclusions, we present the example of the profiles created to interact with the CDS-PP.¹⁷

1. Neutral profile (Alberto Ferreira)

Email:

Good afternoon,
I was reading about the budget cuts that the government plans for 2014.

I wonder what the CDS' opinion on the subject is.

Sincerely,

Alberto Ferreira
ferreira.alberto@outlook.com
Sent 5 May, 9:35am

Suggestion:

Good morning,

¹⁶ Master's students: Felipe Bonow Soares, Gonçalo Morais, Joana Morais, Lurdes Rocha; PhD student: Rosália Rodrigues.

¹⁷ These profiles, like the others, were created by our Master's student Felipe Bonow Soares, and were used after being analysed and discussed by the research group.

I have doubts about the government's economic plans.¹⁸ I would like to suggest that the CDS publish a document with details and the party's opinion.

Alberto Ferreira

Sent 23 May, 11:05am

Comment:

I couldn't tell if that is the MEP's way of thinking or also the party's... What is the CDS' position?

Sent 13 May, 2:40pm

¹⁸ As has been stated before, at the time, the Portuguese government was formed of a CDS-PP-PSD coalition.

2. Positive profile (José Machado):

Email:

Dear friends of the CDS,

The latest news I read about the position of the CDS-PP on the need to think about the economy and not just about finance made me feel good. I agree with the party's position. We need a change of attitude!

Best regards,
José Machado

machadojose833@gmail.com

Sent 3 May, 9pm

Suggestion:

Friends,

I was reading about Paulo Portas'¹⁹ position on pensioners. I share the party's view. I suggest you continue to defend the interests of pensioners in Portugal.

Best regards,
José Machado

Sent (with error) 8 May, 3:15pm, 10 May, 10:35pm, 13 May, 1:35pm and 16 May, 1:30pm

Sent (without error) 22 May, 9:55pm

Comment:

Friends, I agree with Nuno's²⁰ speech. The CDS is trying to rebuild Portugal in the best possible way. Join the CDS for a better Portugal. Congratulations!

Sent 27 May, 10:25am

3. Negative profile (Maria Francisca Arruda):

Email:

Good morning,

¹⁹ Paulo Portas was, at the time, the leader of the CDS-PP.

²⁰ Nuno Melo, a CDS-PP Member of the European Parliament and a very influential member of the party.

I see more and more contradictions in the government and disagreements between the PSD and the CDS/PP. I honestly don't know how internal problems can help our country to end the crisis. I hope for a change in government for the good of the Portuguese people.

Maria Francisca Arruda

mfarruda01@hotmail.com

Sent 3 May, 6:45pm

Suggestion:

This no longer working! The PSD-CDS government is not getting along. I suggest you rethink your attitudes and unite again for the sake of Portugal! Or separate immediately! But make a decision and have a proper discourse.

Sent 23 May, 3:30pm

Comment:

I disagree with Abel Baptista's²¹ position. The CDS has to change its position. We need to think more about the people and get closer to the people!

Sent 25 May, 9:50pm

About the main conclusions of our interaction experiment, we can say that overall the 5 websites had very low levels of interaction; in one case, there was no interaction (CDS/PP) and in another contact was only available via e-mail produced feedback (PCP). All the websites enabled contact via e-mail after registration, however, only two parties actually replied to the e-mail (PSD and PCP). In the case of the PSD, the reply came from a PR professional. In the case of the PS website, the e-mail address did not work.

Of the 3 websites that allowed comments (for example, on news or videos), only one (PS) published them. However, comments did not receive any answer and the negative comment was deleted/censored after a short period. In the comments section, the only interaction was between website users (horizontal communication) and there was no official reply from the political party.

²¹ An important member of the CDS-PP who was a Member of the Portuguese Parliament.

Interviews

At the beginning of the project, ten interviews were planned with the five leaders of the political parties and their communication managers. However, due to scheduling problems – and also interest, in fact – only the interviews with the communication managers went ahead. In certain cases, it was also very difficult to arrange a meeting.

The semi-structured interviews with the communication managers of the five political parties, which took place in Lisbon between 4 February and 3 April 2014, lasted between 30 minutes and one hour and were digitally recorded and transcribed for accuracy. The interviews aimed to find out their opinion about the use of participatory tools on websites, and confront them with the data collected through the content analysis and interaction experiment (see the interview questions in Appendix 1).

First of all, Table 7.8 summarizes the main characteristics of the communication management structure of the five political parties:

	BE	PCP	PS	PSD	CDS
Communication management	Team: 7	Team: 4	Team: 4	Team: 7	Team: 3
Most important social media	Facebook Twitter	YouTube (not on Facebook)	Facebook	Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, Instagram	Facebook (closed group, not official)
Comment moderation	Comments with offensive language forbidden/deleted				
Emphasized functions	Information	Information – disintermediation ²²	Information – disintermediation	Information – contact with the militants	Interaction
Integration of citizens' suggestions	No	No	No	No	Yes

Table 7.8: Communication management structure

Communication management team: with the exception of the PS, which at the time of the interview had a professional communication director who was not affiliated with the party, the parties' management teams were directed and composed of members and/or supporters of the party, some as volunteers.

Social media: for all the parties, with the remarkable exception of the PCP (which prefers YouTube), the most important social network was Facebook, which tends to be where the discussion that could have taken place on the website is held. However, all the parties consider that it is virtually impossible to develop a systematic process of interaction and discussion with citizens on Face-

²² In the sense of sending the message directly to citizens, bypassing the traditional media and journalists.

book, due to a lack of time and/or human resources. This confirms our own content analysis which showed that citizens interact with citizens on the social network commenting on other commenters' comments, rather than interacting with the parties.

Comment moderation: all the parties say that they do not have the time or human resources necessary to perform this task; the only moderation that exists involves erasing or not publishing comments that use offensive language. However, as we saw in the section on the interaction experiment, there was a comment by one of the members of our project that was erased by one of the parties not because it was offensive but because it was unfavourable (critical) to the party.

Emphasized functions: as discussed below, all the parties tended to emphasize the function of their website to provide information on their history, initiatives, proposals, etc. not only for members, supporters, and citizens in general but also for journalists. Functions that are Web 2.0 specific, like interaction, discussion, participation, etc. only come in second place. In a certain sense, it is as if the parties had Web 2.0 tools – social networks, blogs, etc. – only to attract citizens, and do not make them function in an effective way.

Integration of citizens' suggestions: in line with what has been said, and with the exception of the CDS/PP, all the parties confess that they do not integrate citizens' suggestions into their plans or proposals – mostly because they have not enough time and resources to read and consider those suggestions.

The analysis of the interview transcripts employed a broad thematic discourse framework, in which findings were based on the recurrent themes, patterns and categories that surfaced in the discourse (Deacon *et al.*, 2007). Conclusions were drawn by comparing the thematic findings from all interviews. The representative quotations provided are in italic type and have been edited into a narrative form (i.e. repetitions and interjections removed) for ease of understanding.

Three main themes emerged regarding how the five political communication managers perceive and recommend the use of the participatory tools available on political websites: 1. Information and disintermediation; 2. Private answers to public questions; 3. Fostering web users' discussions.

Information and disintermediation

All interviewees acknowledge the central role played by the online media in the political parties' current communication strategies. They view websites as structural elements in the parties' information strategies, as an essential means to disseminate political standpoints quickly and, above all, without third-party mediation. That is, avoiding possible distortion of the message – something that is usually called “disintermediation”. As some of the communication managers stressed:

Online vehicles let us tell the story exactly as it is. Most people in their daily lives read about the political situation in the media, which in turn have filters. On our channels, we present the situation exactly as it is for us, the message as we believe it should be conveyed to our audience, whether they are members or not. (PS)

Right now, the strategy is to be more informative rather than to engage people in discussion. For people to realize what we are doing. The discussion is on the TSF forums, SIC, TVI 24 etc., and not on our FB. [...] We now have another concern, which is to reach out to younger people (16-18 and 25): they are very alienated from politics. There is a deficit of information and political training. In the future, we want to develop a Facebook strategy for youth, through civic messages to test those involved. (PSD)

Disintermediation does not mean interaction, however. In fact, the communication managers acknowledge that their parties do not have the conditions – time, space and human resources – necessary to establish real interaction with citizens. The quantity and diversity of citizens' questions make interaction and discussion with them an almost impossible task. As two of the communication managers emphasize:

I wish we had time to interact but, right now, we have neither the time nor the space on Facebook to do so. (PS)

The greatest difficulty in managing interaction lies in the amount of requests, comments, but also in the vastness of issues that citizens raise with us. Everyone has a different concern. It is very difficult to answer to all of

them, there are too many topics. With the resources we have here it is very complicated. We don't have an army behind the machine! (PSD)

Private answers to public questions

As we saw in the previous section, parties do not reply to (comment on) the comments posted by citizens. However, they say that this does not mean they do not answer those comments – only they do so in private. In doing so, they aim to avoid online discussions that can be confusing, controversial and quickly get out of control. So, what we have here is a kind of inversion: (public) parties answer public questions from (private) citizens with private answers. In the words of some communication managers:

We do not react because we do not want people to feel that we are limiting their discussion. (BE)

We choose not to debate issues on Facebook (...) It is too much of a risk to start a dialogue with citizens and have to justify standpoints. It would be a never-ending discussion. (PSD)

Therefore, the main objective of each party website and its different tools is, in the words of the communication managers, to observe and monitor the on-going discussions among the citizens, how they react to the party's proposals, what they think about different political issues, etc., i.e. to function as what Luhmann terms an “observing system”. An observing system that, in the future, should provide the party with the kind of reflexivity that observing systems are made for.

Fostering web users' discussions

The communication managers of all parties acknowledge that the websites and their tools, besides providing information and allowing interaction, foster online discussion. However, they do not necessarily equate this online discussion with political participation. It could even be the case that online discussion is seen as contradictory with (real) political participation, as in the case of the PCP:

Effective political participation cannot be mostly through digital channels. However, these channels may add something and provide an incentive, because of the information they make available (...) An interesting aspect for those who study these areas lies in the reverse situation: I believe that it would not be impossible to empirically prove that in many circumstances these [online] instruments are a factor in reduced participation. (PCP)

In fact, if we remember the concept of participation discussed in the introduction, participation involves power, that is to say, the possibility of contributing to changing things. One way of doing that would be for parties to integrate citizens' contributions into their plans, proposals and initiatives. However, this is a major problem for all parties, with the remarkable exception of the CDS/PP:

The main problem is that we do not have time to choose relevant things. (BE)

[...]When we made these forums, we often took ideas for ... even for our proposals, here at the Assembly, draft resolutions, and working groups within the party. We took several ideas. I wouldn't say that we took all of them, that would not be true, but we took several ideas, even for the birth group, several things, for the fiscal area... (CDS-PP)

Internet-based survey

The objective of the internet-based survey was to find out citizens' opinion about their own use of the participatory tools on political parties' websites. The questionnaire was created on the Lime Survey platform²³ hosted at Labcom (www.labcom.ubi.pt), and was available during two different periods: between 1 February and 11 May 2014 and between 4 December and 8 January 2015.

The survey population was composed of Portuguese citizens aged over 18, living in Portugal or abroad. The selection of the sample of respondents was made using a "snowball technique", asking a first group of five people to send the invitation to another five people as diverse as possible in terms of education, income, residence,

²³<https://www.inqueritos.ubi.pt/admin/admin.php>

etc., and so on. The questionnaire was completed in such a way that the respondents could remain anonymous. We obtained 135 complete questionnaires in the first period, and 94 complete questionnaires in the second one, totalizing 229 complete questionnaires; we should also mention that in both periods there were 14 incomplete questionnaires, which were discarded, thus making a total of 243 questionnaires received.

The questionnaire included two different parts: I. A. Characteristics of the respondent - aimed to identify the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents; B. participation in the political parties' websites - directed only towards those who had answered in part A that they visit political parties' websites; aimed to record their participation on the websites (for the full questionnaire, see Appendix 2).

Below, we present the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, and the main results found about citizens' participation in political parties' websites.

Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents

As we can see in Appendix 3, our sample of respondents included a very similar percentage of men and women (48.47% and 51.53% respectively). They were mostly aged 18 to 35 and 36 to 50 (33.19% and 52.40% respectively), held a higher education degree (Bachelor's degree - 27.51%, Master's degree - 27.07%, and PhD - 37.12%), were predominantly single or married (33.19% and 44.98% respectively), lived in a household with 1 to 4 members, in the north or centre of Portugal (31.88% and 38.86% respectively; however, 24.45% live in the south, Lisbon, Alentejo or the Algarve), worked in the public sector (57.21%), as specialists in intellectual and scientific professions (55.02%), and had an individual income of less than 2,000 euros (monthly net income).

As regards information technologies, all the respondents said they had a computer at home, in most cases a laptop. Almost all said they had a broadband internet connection at home (94.76%) and used internet every day (92.58%), mostly at home or at their place of work/study. This data from the sample is consistent with the data provided by the last official reports concerning Portuguese citizens in general, which showed that at the end of 2014, 63% of households in Portugal had a broadband internet connection (only

2% had no broadband internet), and that 65% of people aged between 16 and 74 accessed the internet. These values were 98% and 98% respectively for those aged 16 to 24 years, and 97% and 97% for those with higher education (while internet use is inversely proportional to age and directly proportional to users' academic qualifications). Among students, the amounts reached 100% and 99% respectively. As for the equipment used to access the internet, a laptop computer was used in 88% of households (INE, 2014). The data also showed that most Portuguese internet users used it on a daily basis (Cardoso *et al.*, 2014).

Regarding political engagement, most of the respondents said they were not members of a political party (89.52%); however, the sample was divided almost in half between those who support and those who do not support a party (51.09% supporters, 48.91% non-supporters). Of the respondents that said they were members or supporters, the highest percentage belonged to the PS (6.11% members, 23.14% supporters).

As it turns out, the people included in the sample were almost entirely heavy internet users and, taking into account their age, education and occupation, they had the greatest tendency to participate on political parties' websites.

Citizens' participation on political parties' websites

Only 20.09% (N=46) of the people in the sample of internet users said they visited political parties' websites, while 79.91% (N=183) said they did not. (Percentage of N=229)

As we can see in Table 7.9, of the 46 visitors, an average of 4.35% said they visited the websites every day, 7.39% several days a week, 14.79% one day a week, 48.70% rarely, and 24.78% never visited them. (However, seemingly contradictorily, there is an average of 24.78% respondents who said they never visited parties' websites; in the question visit/not visit, however, they had said that they visited them).

Frequency/Parties' websites ²⁴	BE	PCP	PS	PSD	Average	CDS
1. Never	26.09	23.91	4.35	34.78	34.78	24.78%
2. Rarely	56.52	56.52	50	36.96	43.48	48.70%
3. One day a week	8.7	8.7	21.74	19.57	15.22	14.79%
4. Several days a week	6.52	8.7	15.22	4.35	2.17	7.39%
5. Every day	2.17	2.17	8.7	4.35	4.35	4.35%
No answer	0	0	0	0	0	0%
TOTAL	100	100	100.01	100.01	100	100.00%

Table 7.9: Frequency of visits to parties' websites (%)

When we consider the sum of the categories "3. One day a week", "4. Several days a week", and "5. Every day", we have an average of 26.53% for all parties. Looking to each party in turn, the PS has the best results (45.66%), followed by the PSD (28.27%), the CDS/PP (21.74%), the PCP (19.57%) and the BE (17.39%).

What are the reasons for visiting the websites? A content analysis of the open answers shows that they mostly visited to update political information (73.91%), with low percentages mentioning civic participation/support for the party (8.7%), or research (8.7%); 8.7% indicated other/different reasons. (Percentage of N=46 respondents).

What are the reasons for not visiting? Most did not visit because they had no interest in politics (52.46%), preferring to receive political information via the mass media, mainly TV (19.1%), distrusting in politics (10.38%), considering websites propagandistic and biased (4.92%), or not having enough time to visit them (2.73%); there was also a percentage of respondents that indicated other/different reasons (10.38%, with each category equal to or less than 4). (Percentage of N=183 respondents).

What do respondents do when they visit the political parties' websites? They mainly e-mailed the party (17.17% citations), participated in social networks (Facebook, etc.) (15.15%), and made comments (14.14%). Other less cited actions were making suggestions (6.06%), sending pictures (4.04%), volunteering for party actions such as meetings, rallies, etc. (4.04%), participating in forums (4.04%), joining the party (4.04%), participating in chats (2.02%), sending videos (1.01%), and making donations (1.01%). There was a percentage of respondents who did other, unspecified actions (27.27%) which we think are mainly to do with information-seeking activities. (Percentage of N=99, multiple answers of the 46 respondents).

²⁴ We do not consider "other" here (other than the parties that our research focused on).

When asked how often political agents react to their contact (by e-mail, comments), respondents answered never (45.65%), sometimes (36.96%), often (4.35%), and always (13.04%). (Percentage of N=46 respondents).

Regarding the way political parties answer citizens, the respondents said that they used e-mail (51.35%), replies to their comments on posts (16.22%), replies to their suggestions (5.41%), replies to their comment on a news story (2.70%), and other, unspecified ways (24.32%). (Percentage of N=37, multiple answers of the 25 respondents that did not answer "never" in the previous question).

Which political parties' Facebook pages had respondents already visited? The top site was the PS website (28.97%), followed by the websites of the PSD and the BE (each of them with 17.93%), the PCP (13.10%), the CDS/PP (11.72%), and Others (10.34%). More important than the percentage each party got is the fact that they all were or had been visited by citizens. (Percentage of N=145, multiple answers of the 46 respondents).

Do you usually share or comment on news you read on the parties' websites on social networks (e.g. Facebook)? To this question, 34.78% of the respondents answered yes, and 65.22% answered no. (Percentage of N=46).

What about the usefulness of the parties' websites as a means of communicating with citizens? Respondents believed that they were not very useful (10.87%), somewhat useful (19.57%), useful (45.65%), or very useful (23.91%). (Percentage of N=46 respondents).

What are the websites useful for? According to the content of our respondents' answers, most mentioned obtaining information or getting more in-depth information about the political parties (56.4%), encouraging closer contact and direct communication with the parties (23.1%), allowing citizens to participate politically/exercise citizenship (5.13%), or other, varied reasons (15.38%). (Percentage of N=39).

Focus Group

To complement the information obtained in the online survey,²⁵ and bearing in mind that young students are the heaviest internet users – practically 100% of them use the internet every day – we decided

²⁵ Initially, we intended to obtain around 500 completed questionnaires, but, as we said, we received only 229.

to organize a focus group, which took place on 31 December 2014 at the University of Beira Interior (UBI). Ten students participated in the focus group, and was formed of participants of both genders from the undergraduate and graduate courses in Communication Sciences at UBI.

The session, which was videotaped and observed by one of our PhD students, focused on five main issues: the concept of political participation, the relationship between the political parties and the citizens, forms of political communication, the position of political parties regarding communication, and the internet and social networks as means of political communication. Next, we highlight the main conclusions for each of these topics.

The concept of political participation

The general opinion was that political participation goes far beyond the simple act of voting. The technologies are seen as facilitators, leading one participant to say "currently, the only people not taking part are those who don't want to". Access to information is the core element. One participant raised the hypothesis of education for citizenship. There was a clear perspective of criticism of a certain apoliticism, namely in other social groups, which are perceived as being uninterested in political and civic life.

The relationship between the political parties and the citizens

A critical discussion emerged about the explicit and/or implicit idea of a confrontation between generations and the power of education. One participant alerted to the fact that politicians use inaccessible language: "They speak to people who cannot understand". It is a communication strategy, favouring form over function, and overlapping to form the content. Individual responsibility in shaping policy was also emphasized. That is, it is up to citizens to seek information.

The forms of political communication

According to some of the participants, communication strategies should focus on interpersonal communication. New technologies were criticized because they are impersonal and it is not always possible to get feedback. Interpersonal communication should be prioritized, but the costs are enormous. Some participants, from courses such as engineering, politically think like older people. The politicization of young students often emerges when searching for their first job.

The position of political parties in regard to communication

The causes of the gap between citizens and their political representatives lie in the fact that party organizations close in on themselves, using language that is inaccessible to ordinary citizens. The platforms are seen as something approaching one-way only communication. According to various participants, today one type of use based on "disclosure" is dominant. There is no real dialogue. The figure and leadership are seen as prevailing over platforms that people can use.

Internet and social networks as means of political communication

Politics are designed as a continuous process. There was some criticism about each individual's capacity to mobilize: "Nobody moves. There is a great deal of conformity". Again, the dilemma of finding information emerges and with it something that is underlying the principle of "self-responsibility" for the purposes of mobilization and political and civic participation.

Discussion and conclusions

At this time, we must ask ourselves if and how our research data allows us to answer our research questions and validate our hypotheses – and, finally, to give an answer to our research problem. Let us begin with our research questions (RQ) and hypotheses (H).

Research questions

As we said in a previous section, our research problem was: What is the degree of correspondence between the participation that the websites of the Portuguese political parties allow citizens and citizens' expectations about their participation – in non-electoral periods? From this general problem, we derived three research questions, which we discuss below.

RQ1. What are the participatory tools available to citizens on the Portuguese political parties' websites? How do Portuguese political parties interact with citizens via the participatory internet tools available on their websites?

Our content analysis of the participatory tools showed that the adequacy score of all websites exceed 50%, while the overall average was 63.5%, with presence-variety scoring 52.9%, visibility 62.6%, and functionality 75%. More specifically:

Presence: regarding the eight participatory tools, all the websites included contact details, suggestions and social media. However, Facebook, surely the most important social network at the moment, was not found on the websites of the PCP and the CDS/PP. Four websites had comments and RSS syndication (Comments: PSD, CDS-PP, BE, PS; RSS: CDS-PP, PCP, BE, PS). Only one website (PS) had a forum/chat facility. None of the websites included a blog.

Visibility: Social media was the most common and most visible interactive tool, but the scores of the others tools were also very satisfactory (as we said, the average was 62.6%).

Functionality: The websites were ranked higher for functionality, because they are generally clear and simple to use, although their visibility could be significantly improved.

Therefore, in terms of the presence, visibility and functionality of the participatory tools, the websites seemed to be quite good. The problems began when we tried to use those tools to interact with the political parties. As we saw in our analyses of the Facebook pages (of the BE, PS and PSD) and our interaction experiment – and as confirmed by the interviews and the survey – the parties do not pursue interaction. Whether this is because they do not have enough resources, or because they do not want to lose control of the message, the parties only *appear* to be open to interaction; in reality, they do not join online conversations. Dialogue, when it takes place, is not between the party and citizens (commenters), but

among the citizens (commenters) themselves. Therefore, in spite of participatory internet tools being present on political parties' websites, few dialogic features are really implemented.

RQ2. What is the opinion of the leaders of Portuguese political parties and the communication managers about the citizens' participation on their websites? Does this participation involve any change to the political party agenda (themes, actions)?

As mentioned previously, it was not possible to interview the leaders of the parties, but only the communication managers; all five interviews were done face-to-face and were more or less exhaustive (we must publicly thank the political parties for their openness and cooperation with our research project).

Communication managers tend to see websites more as instruments of disintermediation, a channel to disseminate their messages directly to citizens without the filters of the mass media. This allows the parties not only to tell their own story, but also to provide the media and journalists with the information they need to tell their stories about the parties, their leaders and actions. As had been proven by several other studies in other countries, the function of providing information takes priority over promoting interaction on political parties' websites. This also happens because, as the communication managers acknowledge, dealing with citizens' participation on the parties' websites is seen to be an almost impossible task, given the time and human resources it would need ("an army behind the machine", as one of them says); the parties are unable to manage it. However, citizens' participation on the websites is seen to be very important, because it allows parties to observe and monitor what people think about several political issues and the respective proposals put forward by the parties.

The difficulty in dealing with citizens' participation on their websites is, surely, one of the main things preventing parties from using the contributions brought by that participation to introduce changes to their political agendas (themes, actions) – with the notable exception of the CDS/PP, whose communication manager explicitly says that his party has integrated some of citizens' proposals in the past.

RQ3. What are citizens' opinions about the possibility of entering into interaction with parties via their websites? How do they evaluate their own participation on the websites?

As our survey showed, most of the respondents (79.91%) say they do not visit – and so do not interact with – the political parties' websites; only an average of 26.53% of the visitors visit the parties' websites at least one day a week – which means 5.32% of our sample, i.e. 12 people in 229. Besides that, we should keep in mind that these numbers do not represent all Portuguese citizens, but only those who have and use the internet, as was the case with our respondents. In fact, as we saw in a previous point of this report, at the end of 2014, only 65% of Portuguese citizens aged between 16 and 74 accessed the internet – which means that 35% did not use it.

Therefore, in spite of all the interactive tools that parties' websites provide them with, citizens do not seem very interested in interacting. Those who do not visit – or interact with – the political parties' websites mainly do not do so because they have no interest in politics, distrust the information provided by the websites, or distrust politics in general.

And, as we have seen, parties also do not seem very interested in interacting with citizens – a result that is confirmed by the interaction experiment, the interviews and the survey. Both citizens and the political parties seem more interested in the issue of getting or providing information, not interaction. However, both citizens and political parties think that parties' websites are important as a means of communication between parties and citizens: for the citizens, to access direct political information about the parties; for the parties, to monitor citizens' opinions about them and the political issues at stake.

Hypotheses

We set the general hypothesis that there is a lack of correspondence between the participation on the Portuguese political parties' websites and citizens' expectations about it. Regarding our more specific research questions, we defined three hypotheses, the validation of which we discuss next. We shall return to our general hypothesis afterwards.

H1. Citizens' participation tends to favour image-based forms of expression (videos, photos), is predominantly supportive (not critical) of the political party, and tends not to depend on the political-ideological orientation of the party.

Our research only partially validated this hypothesis.

Regarding forms of expression, our content analysis of Facebook showed that citizens cannot make posts, only comments using the written word; in our survey, citizens say that the forms of participation they use the most are e-mailing the party, participating on social media (liking, sharing, etc.), and making comments – sending pictures and uploading videos are minority activities (4.04% and 1.01% of respondents respectively). This result is surely also explained by the fact that parties tend to monitor the use of photos and videos both on their websites and on their social networks – since, as our content analysis of Facebook showed, an amount of 84.09% political party posts included a type of image, while 15.91% had only text. Image-based forms of expression existed, therefore, but were used by parties, not citizens.

As regards the statement that citizens' participation tends to be predominantly supportive (not critical) of the political party, the results of our content analysis of Facebook shows that, with the exception of the PSD (the leading government party), the comments are more favourable than unfavourable or neutral, which may lead us to conclude that the participants are mostly members or supporters of the political parties.

In terms of ideology, since all the posts were authored by the political parties, we can only consider Likes, Comments and Shares. The order of the parties is as follows (from the first to third place): Likes – PS – BE – PSD; Comments – PS – PSD – BE; Shares – PS – BE – PSD. We can therefore conclude that there tends to be more participation on the websites of the parties of the left, especially the PS, than on those of the centre-right parties. The PS' first position is also verified by our survey, in which the most respondents that say they are members or supporters of a political party and visit its website belong to the PS (10 in 46 and 20 in 46 respectively).

H2. The leaders of the parties and the people responsible for the management of their websites tend to see citizen participation more as an instrument of delivering their own message than as a way of listening to citizens' messages.

This hypothesis undoubtedly highlights one of the most important results of the interviews with the political parties' communication managers. In fact, the political parties see their websites mostly as a tool of "disintermediation", i.e. a means of reaching citizens directly, bypassing the traditional media gatekeepers. In this process, citizens are not heard but are monitored: parties are interested not in answering citizens' questions, comments and suggestions but in observing what citizens think and say about their initiatives and proposals – perhaps in order to adapt them to citizens' perspectives. Therefore, citizens' "participation" on the parties' websites is seen by parties as merely instrumental; it is not real participation, but participation that can add to (and change) something.

This result of the interviews is fully corroborated by the results of the Facebook content analysis, the interaction experiment, and the survey. As we said before, the content analysis showed that citizens can comment on the posts made by the parties and on other citizens' comments, but cannot post themselves; the interaction experiment showed that citizens hardly get answers from the political parties; the survey showed that citizens say parties mostly never or only sometimes answer them (45.65% and 36.96% respectively, i.e. in 82.61% of cases).

H3. The citizens expect the websites of the political parties to be more open (with fewer constraints) to their participation, and to have more of an impact on the agenda and plans of the political parties.

Apparently, our survey did not validate this hypothesis. In fact, as we have already said, when we asked citizens about their reasons for visiting the political parties' websites, they did not mention the lack of openness of those means of communication, but rather their own disinterest in politics, their preference for receiving political information through the traditional media (also because they consider websites to be propagandistic and biased), and even their distrust in politics. Besides that, most citizens in our sample that visit the parties' websites consider them to be a useful or very useful (45.65% and 23.91% respectively, i.e. a total of 69.56%) means of communication with citizens.

However, when asked about the usefulness of the websites, citizens mention citizens' political participation/the exercise of citizenship in last place (5.13% of the sample), while obtaining infor-

mation or getting more in-depth information about the political parties, and encouraging closer contact and more direct communication with the parties are mentioned as the two first reasons.

It therefore seems that citizens are not really worried about the websites' possible lack of openness to their participation, for the simple reason that they are not interested in participating more than they already do. This is where there seems to be an example of what, inverting the famous expression by Pippa Norris (2000), we could call the "vicious circle" of participation: citizens do not participate because political parties do not allow them to do so; but when political parties do allow them to participate, citizens do not. One of the possible explanations of this circle could be the fact that citizens do not participate because they do not see any real effects from their participation, that is, the participation political parties' websites allow them is not real participation, in the sense that they can exert some influence on the political parties' agenda.

Research problem

Let us return, now, to our project's research problem: What is the degree of correspondence between the participation that the websites of the Portuguese political parties allow citizens and citizens' expectations about their participation – in non-electoral periods?

To summarize, and if we bear in mind what has been said up to now, the obvious answer to the problem/question would be a short, affirmative one: there is a degree of total correspondence. However, this short, affirmative answer hides a doubly negative one: i) the political parties' websites *do not* provide citizens with real participation, but only a simulation of participation, with persuasive and propagandistic objectives; ii) citizens *do not* expect the political parties' websites to allow them more participation than they already do, since what citizens mainly want from the websites is information about the parties. The problem therefore lies elsewhere.

Web 2.0 has created tools that can potentially foster dialogue between citizens and democratic institutions, namely political parties. However, once again, technology does not have the final word, since political dialogue is mainly a question of civic and political culture, both for citizens and political parties.

This culture implies that, on their side, political parties really want to listen to citizens, to their proposals and suggestions, and try to incorporate those proposals and suggestions into their plans, thereby transcending the idea of "just talking" about the need for citizen participation. This requires, of course, greater investment in financial, technological and human resources to avoid a situation in which, to use a metaphor, political parties have a Formula 1 car that they drive like a cart, i.e. that they do not use effectively. This can only lead to a discrediting of politics and the political parties themselves.

On the other hand, citizens need to think that online participation is only one form of political participation, and that it does not substitute other, direct forms of participation. Sending an email to a party representative or signing an online petition are important things, but their effect is limited. Voting, participating in a meeting, protesting, attending a demonstration or rally, boycotting a product, to give only a few examples, are also important forms of political participation, which the forms of online participation should be seen to complement.

What is the critical word? The critical word, we believe, is not technology but *education*. In fact, of all human actions, education is surely the most political one. It is just for this reason that the first important philosophical work on politics was, at the same time, the first important philosophical work on education – we mean, of course, Plato's *Republic* (*Politeia*). In this work, dedicated to defining justice, Plato describes not only the ideal community, but also the education of men (namely the "Guardians") that is necessary to build that community. Even if we do not agree with most of Plato's theses, what we want to stress here is his intuition about the link between politics and education – a link that was also stressed by contemporary philosophers such as John Dewey and Hannah Arendt, to cite only two (whose theses we also do not fully agree with).

The education we talk about is education for a democratic, pluralistic society. It cannot be confused with ideological indoctrination or with training for any kind of "horse race". It should be based on the universal values of freedom and respect for the human person, and proceduralist and deliberative in the sense proposed by Habermas (1994).

Appendix 1

Interview questions

1. What are the main objectives behind the creation and development of your party's website?
2. Do you consider the party website to be a favoured means of achieving interaction and fostering citizen participation? Why?
3. In your opinion, do citizens often interact with the political party through the participatory tools provided by the website (e.g. e-mail, chat, forum, etc.)?
4. How do you evaluate the party's response to comments and other forms of citizen participation on the website? Why?
5. How is citizen participation managed on the party's website? Who manages it? How often? Using what means?
6. What are the main difficulties encountered in managing citizens' participation on the party's website? Why?
7. There is a link to social networks, e.g. Facebook, available on the party's website. Is there a specific strategy for managing and monitoring comments made on social networks?
8. Does the party's agenda include citizens' participation on the website? If so, in what ways?

Appendix 2

Questionnaire

A. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RESPONDENT

1. Sex:
 - 1.1. Male
 - 1.2. Female
 - 1.3. Other
 - 1.4. No answer
2. Age (on 31 December 2014):
 - 2.1. Under 18
 - 2.2. 18 to 35
 - 2.3. 36 to 50
 - 2.4. 51 to 65
 - 2.5. Over 66
 - 2.6. No answer
3. Education level:
 - 3.1. None
 - 3.2. Year 4
 - 3.3. Year 6
 - 3.4. Year 9
 - 3.5. Year 12
 - 3.6. Bachelor's degree
 - 3.7. Master's degree
 - 3.8. PhD
 - 3.9. No answer
4. Marital status:
 - 4.1. Single
 - 4.2. Married
 - 4.3. Non-marital partnership
 - 4.4. Widow(er)
 - 4.5. Separated/divorced
 - 4.6. No answer
5. Number of members of the household (including the respondent):
 - 5.1. 1 member
 - 5.2. 2 members
 - 5.3. 3 members

- 5.4. 4 members
- 5.5. 5 or more members
- 5.6. No answer
- 6. Region of residence (Portugal):
 - 6.1. North
 - 6.2. Centre
 - 6.3. Lisbon
 - 6.4. Alentejo
 - 6.5. Algarve
 - 6.6. Madeira
 - 6.7. Azores
 - 6.8. Abroad
 - 6.9. No answer
- 7. City and county of residence: _____
- 8. Employment status:
 - 8.1. Employee in the private sector
 - 8.2. Employee in the public sector
 - 8.3. Self-employed/entrepreneur
 - 8.4. Student
 - 8.5. Unemployed
 - 8.6. Retired
 - 8.7. Other
 - 8.8. No answer
- 9. Professional area (if retired or unemployed, refer to your last profession):
 - 9.1. Senior manager in public or private sector
 - 9.2. Specialist in an intellectual or scientific profession
 - 9.3. Mid-level technical or professional staff
 - 9.4. Administrative staff or similar
 - 9.5. Service staff or salesperson
 - 9.6. Farmer or skilled worker in agriculture or fisheries
 - 9.7. Worker, craftsman or similar worker
 - 9.8. Facilities or equipment operator or assembly worker
 - 9.9. Unqualified worker
 - 9.10. No answer
- 10. Indicate your personal net income (average per month in euros):
 - 10.1. Up to €500

- 10.2. Between €501 and €1000
- 10.3. Between €1001 and €1500
- 10.4. Between €1501 and €2000
- 10.5. Over €2000
- 10.6. No answer
- 11. Do you have a computer at home:
 - 11.1. Yes
 - 11.2. No
 - 11.3. No answer
 - 11.1. If you answered yes, please give the type of computer (you can indicate several types):
 - 11.1.1. Desktop
 - 11.1.2. Laptop
 - 11.1.3. Tablet/Palmtop
 - 11.1.4. Other
 - 11.1.5. No answer
- 12. What kind of internet connection do you have at home:
 - 12.1. Broadband (cable, ADSL, wireless, 4G, etc.)
 - 12.2. Narrowband (analogue line, ISDN, 3G, etc.)
 - 12.3. Don't know
 - 12.4. None
 - 12.5. No answer
- 13. How often do you use the internet?:
 - 13.1. Don't use it
 - 13.2. One day a week
 - 13.3. Several days a week
 - 13.4. Every day
 - 13.5. No answer
- 14. Place where you usually use the internet (you can indicate more than one location):
 - 14.1. Home
 - 14.1. Work/study
 - 14.1. Public places
 - 14.1. Other
 - 14.1. No answer
- 15. Membership of a political party:
 - 15.1. None
 - 15.2. BE

- 15.3. PCP
- 15.4. PS
- 15.5. PSD
- 15.6. CDS/PP
- 15.7. Other
- 15.8. No answer

16. Support for a political party:

- 16.1. None
- 16.2. BE
- 16.3. PCP
- 16.4. PS
- 16.5. PSD
- 16.6. CDS/PP
- 16.7. Other
- 16.8. No answer

17. Do you usually use the internet to visit / browse websites of political parties':

- 17.1. Yes
- 17.2. No
- 17.3. No answer

17.4. Please give the reason for your answer: _____

If you answered No, your questionnaire ENDS HERE.

If yes, please answer the questions in Part B, below.

B. PARTICIPATION ON POLITICAL PARTIES' WEBSITES

18. Frequency of visits to the political parties' websites (you may indicate more than one):

	1. Never	2. Rarely	3. One day a week	4. Several days a week	5. Every day	6. No answer
18.1. BE						
18.2. PCP						
18.3. PS						
18.4. PSD						
18.5. CDS/PP						
18.6. Other						

19. Have you visited a political party's website in order to do one of the following actions (you may indicate more than one):

- 19.1. Send an email
- 19.2. Send photos
- 19.3. Send videos
- 19.4. Make suggestions
- 19.5. Make comments
- 19.6. Participate on social networks (Facebook, etc.)
- 19.7. Participate in chats
- 19.8. Participate in forums
- 19.9. Volunteer for party actions (meetings, rallies, etc.)
- 19.10. Make donations
- 19.11. Join the party
- 19.12. Other

20. Did the parties respond to your participation on their websites?

- 20.1. Never
- 20.2. Sometimes
- 20.3. Often
- 20.4. Always
- 20.5. No answer

21. If the parties responded to your participation on their websites, indicate the medium used (you may indicate more than one):

- 21.1. E-mail
- 21.2. Answer to your comment on a news story

21.3. Answer to your comment on a post

21.4. Answer to your suggestion

21.5. Other

22. Which political parties' Facebook pages have you already visited? (You may indicate more than one)

22.1. BE

22.2. PCP

22.3. PS

22.4. PSD

22.5. CDS / PP

22.6. Other

23. Do you usually share or comment on news you read on the parties' websites through social networks (e.g. Facebook)?

23.1. Yes

23.2. No

24. Please rate the usefulness of the political parties' websites as a means of communication with citizens according to the following scale:

24.1. Not very useful

24.2. Somewhat useful

24.3. Useful

24.4. Very useful

25. Please justify your answer:

Appendix 3

Socio-demography of the respondents of the survey

Gender	Number	Per cent
Male	111	48.47%
Female	118	51.53%
Other	0	0%
No answer	0	0%
Total	229	100%

Table 7.10: Gender

	Number	Per cent
Under 18	0	0%
18 to 35	76	33.19%
36 to 50	120	52.40%
51 to 65	29	12.66%
Over 66	4	1.75%
No answer	0	0%
Total	229	100%

Table 7.11: Age

	Number	Per cent
None	0	0%
Year 5	0	0%
Year 6	1	0.44%
Year 9	2	0.87%
Year 12	16	6.99%
Bachelor's degree	63	27.51%
Master's	62	27.07%
PhD	85	37.12%
No answer	0	0%
Total	229	100%

Table 7.12: Education (highest education level completed)

Marital Status	Number	Per cent
Single	76	33.19%
Married	103	44.98%
Non-marital partnership	24	10.48%
Widow(er)	0	0%
Separated/divorced	26	11.35%
No answer	0	0%
Total	229	100%

Table 7.13: Marital status

	Number	Per cent
1 member	46	20.09%
2 members	54	23.58%
3 members	55	24.02%
4 members	63	27.51%
5 or more members	11	4.80%
No answer	0	0%
Total	247	100%

Table 7.14: Number of members of the household (including the respondent)

	Number	Per cent
North	73	31.88%
Centre	89	38.86%
Lisbon	38	16.59%
Alentejo	13	5.68%
Algarve	52	2.18%
Madeira	1	0.44%
Azores	2	0.87%
Abroad	8	3.49%
No answer	0	0%
Total	229	100%

Table 7.15: Region of residence (Portugal)

	Number	Per cent
Employee in the private sector	34	14.85%
Employee in the public sector	131	57.21%
Self-employed/entrepreneur	11	4.80%
Student	25	10.92%
Unemployed	10	4.37%
Retired	4	1.75%
Other	14	6.11%
No answer	0	0%
Total	229	100%

Table 7.16: Employment status

	Number	Per cent
Senior manager in public or private sector	44	19.21%
Specialist in an intellectual or scientific profession	126	55.02%
Mid-level technical or professional staff	26	11.35%
Administrative staff or similar	13	5.68%
Service staff or salesperson	6	2.62%
Farmer or skilled worker in agriculture or fisheries	2	0.87%
Worker, craftsman or similar worker	0	0%
Facilities or equipment operator or assembly worker	1	0.44%
Unqualified worker	11	4.80%
No answer	0	0%
Total	229	100%

Table 7.17: Professional Area

	Number	Per cent
Up to €500	37	16.16%
Between € 501 and €1000	42	18.34%
Between €1001 and €1500	57	24.89%
Between €1501 and € 2000	67	29.26%
Over €2000	26	11.35%
No answer	0	0%
Total	229	100%

Table 7.18: Personal net income (average per month in euros)

	Number	Per cent
Yes	229	100%
No	0	0%
No answer	0	0%
Total	229	100%

Table 7.19: Computer at home

	Number	Per cent
Desktop	67	29.26%
Laptop	210	91.70%
Tablet/palmtop	83	36.24%
Other type	8	3.49%
No answer	0	0%

Table 7.20: Type of computer at home (multiple answers)

	Number	Per cent
Broadband (cable, ADSL, wireless, 4G, etc.)	217	94.76%
Narrowband (analogue line, ISDN, 3G, etc.)	7	3.06%
Don't know	5	2.18%
None	0	0%
No answer	0	0%
Total	229	100%

Table 7.21: Internet connection type at home

	Number	Per cent
Don't use it	0	0%
One day a week	5	2.18%
Several days a week	12	5.24%
Every day	212	92.58%
No answer	0	0%
Total	229	100%

Table 7.22: Internet usage frequency

	Number	Per cent
Home	223	97.38%
Work/study	200	87.34%
Public places	119	51.97%
Other	19	8.30%
No answer	0	0%

Table 7.23: Place where internet usually used (multiple answer)

	Number	Per cent
None	205	89.52%
BE	4	1.75%
PCP	0	0%
PS	14	6.11%
PSD	1	0.44%
CDS/PP	2	0.87%
Other	3	1.31%
No answer	0	0%
Total	229	100%

Table 7.24: Membership of a political party

	Number	Per cent
None	112	48.91%
BE	17	7.42%
PCP	12	5.24%
PS	53	23.14%
PSD	17	7.42%
CDS/PP	6	2.62%
Other	12	5.24%
No answer	0	0%
Total	229	100%

Table 7.25: Support for a political party

	Number	Per cent
Yes	46	20.09%
No	183	79.91%
No answer	0	0%
Total	229	100%

Table 7.26: Internet usage for visiting/surfing political parties' websites

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