

Digital Participation and the Covid-19 Pandemic. Evidence from Italy

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This study examined the impact of digital technologies on political participation in Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic. A demoscopic survey conducted in October 2020 analysed the digital divide, Internet access as a right, e-voting, and civic and party platforms for political engagement. Four research questions were addressed. The first question asked about the relevance of the right to access for Italians. The second question explored Italians' Internet usage for economic and political purposes, assessing the importance of political activities compared to other online activities. The third question investigated Italians' inclination towards the use of ICT for remote voting at the national and local party levels, examining their preferences for expressing electoral choices through technology. The fourth question focused on civic and party platforms, investigating Italians' interest in using digital tools for participating in local and party-level political activities. The article thus elaborates on the impact of digital technologies on political engagement in Italy amidst the accelerated spread of ICTs due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Digital technologies; Political participation; Italy; COVID-19 pandemic; Internet access; Civic and party platforms

Introduction

The spread of ICTs in recent decades has led to significant social transformations. This article examines the impact of ICTs on political participation in Italy, particularly regarding the consequences of the COVID-19 containment measures on the attitudes of Italian citizens. This research aimed to investigate this issue through a demoscopic survey of a sample of 600 Italians selected by means of proportional design sampling and interviewed using CATI and CAWI methods.

The surveys were conducted in October 2020, during Italy's pandemic shock reaction phase known as the “second lockdown,” characterised by limited physical movement and a consequent increase in digital communications for many daily activities (Gabbadini et al. 2020; DeFilippis et al. 2022; McGloin et al. 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic also caused a rapid reorganisation of public services, requiring them to be provided via the Internet (Gabryelczyk 2020; Agostino et al. 2021; Shen et al. 2023). Since the survey was carried out eight months after the outbreak in Italy (the first cases were identified in February 2020, in Lombardy and Veneto), it is reasonable to assume that the issues addressed in the demoscopic survey were influenced by the spread of the virus and the containment strategies, suggesting an updated picture of citizens' attitudes towards political participation through ICTs.

During a period when many rights of citizenship, information, and participation were rapidly shifting to digital channels due to lockdowns and restricted physical

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movement (Nguyen et al. 2020), the right of access to the Internet and the digital divide emerged as fundamental issues (Esteban-Navarro et al. 2020; Litchfield et al. 2021; Lai & Widmar 2021). Consequently, the survey highlighted the effects of the digital divide and the perception of these issues, especially in segments of the population that are already fragile due to age, income, or other factors. Furthermore, reference was made to critical elements for digital participation, such as the right of citizens to access the Internet and the role of the state in ensuring this right. Finally, with the aim of analysing changes in political participation because of the increasing spread of ICTs accelerated by the pandemic, this article focuses on forms of political participation through digital technologies, such as e-voting procedures and civic and party platforms (digital democracy).

After a brief review of the scientific literature on Internet access and political participation through ICTs in Italy, the research questions on which the questionnaire to survey the sample's opinions was based are presented. Finally, the research methodology is specified and the results are presented, both through descriptive statistics and multivariate analyses. Concluding remarks follow.

Internet Access and Political Participation through ICTs

Access to the Web in Italy

Concerning the right of access to the Internet, in 2014 the “Commissione per i diritti e i doveri relativi ad Internet” chaired by the jurist Stefano Rodotà was established within the Italian Parliament, which drafted the “Dichiarazione dei diritti in Internet” (Masera & Scorza 2016) and identified the right to Internet access as a priority. The right to access is associated with freedom of expression and intellectual liberty, which is why the Italian Commission understood it as a fundamental right.

Nevertheless, there are large differences in individuals' access opportunities (digital divide). The inability to navigate the Internet can stem from two primary factors: lack of means and lack of skills. In the past, it was commonly believed that the market would regulate itself regarding access: the idea was that hardware, networks, computers, and mobile phones would become increasingly widespread, and tariffs would become more inclusive, progressively guaranteeing access for all. Although this trend has occurred, it has been insufficient to ensure egalitarian and universal access (Van Dijk 2020; Lythreitis et al. 2022).

To guarantee this right, various public plans and programmes have been developed by the EU. Among the objectives set out by the European Commission (2015, 2022) in its “Digital Strategy” are universal coverage with a minimum speed of 100 Mbps by 2025 and Gigabit connectivity for all by 2030, outlining a path for the evolution of connectivity and an expansion of access. This plan was implemented by the Italian Government (2015) through the “Strategia Italiana per la Banda Ultralarga,” with the Ministry of Economic Development and the in-house company Infratel Italia Spa responsible for its execution. A significant step was the identification of “white areas,” i.e., market failure areas throughout the country. In these areas, the Italian Government opted to support a “direct intervention” model through national,

EU, and regional funds. Public intervention in these areas was deemed necessary (and authorised by the European Commission under state aid rules) precisely to guarantee the right to Internet access, correcting social and geographic inequalities. Additionally, the “Piazza WiFi Italia” project aimed to allow citizens to connect to a WiFi network free of charge in public places throughout the country (Italian Government 2019).

Models of Political Participation through ICTs

Through ICTs, citizens can engage in public debate, express specific social and political demands, and participate in decision-making processes. Furthermore, groups of people with common interests, behaviours, and values, who share particular demands, can share resources and information using the Internet. They can organise and mobilise themselves to achieve a goal, even independently of political parties (Dahlgren 2009; Castells 2013).

When voting is carried out through ICTs, it is called e-voting (Gibson et al. 2016). At first glance, the advantages seem obvious: speeding up the process, saving public money on the provision of physical premises, and enabling social distancing, which is particularly useful in situations such as the pandemic. However, it is not without disadvantages, particularly related to IT security issues (the risk of fraud or interference by hackers, possibly on behalf of foreign powers) (Lauer 2004). Furthermore, digital inequality is a point of concern; there is a risk of excluding some citizens from exercising their right to vote due to a lack of computer skills.

A second way of using ICTs is through information, participation, and collaboration platforms. According to Reddick (2011), there are three models of political participation that rely on digital media. The first is called the “managerial” model; in this case, the Internet and ICTs are used by institutions to inform citizens and provide access to specific services and functions. The second is the “consultative” model, in which governments and administrations also use communication technologies to gather information on public policies and improve them. The third model is the “participatory” one, which most closely approaches e-democracy. Communication technologies can ensure more widespread and less intermittent interactivity, for example, through platforms for deliberative democracy. The participatory approach aims to form active citizen communities (Blondiaux 2008) and can address both local and global issues (Della Porta & Rucht 2013).

Regarding Italy, De Blasio (2018) identified two macro-types of participatory platforms: those related to the publication of open data aimed at increasing the transparency of public institutions, and those that aim to offer tools for participation and collaboration. According to De Blasio, in Italy, the focus has mainly been on digital public services and transparency measures, enabling citizens to monitor public institutions better. Participation has so far been promoted mainly through consultation practices with closed-ended answers and open comments, both online and offline, sometimes associated with public meetings. The topics have also been concentrated in a few specific areas: education, food, and public administration. These initiatives often refer to the need to promote equality and inclusion of citizens, with a focus on the idea of restoring trust in institutions.

A third way in which digital participation can be realised is through party platforms. Some movements have tried to renew the party form by drawing inspiration from hacker culture, especially in terms of communication and management organisation. Externally, they have utilised the communication potential of social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, or channels on YouTube, to broadcast their proposals and build a supporter base. Internally, they have developed a series of online decision-making platforms to call on members to discuss and vote on policies, internal offices, and candidates (Deseriis 2020). Gerbaudo initially called these new political organisations “platform parties”, later referring to them as “digital parties” (2020). Among these formations in Italy, the Movimento 5 Stelle is one of the best-known and most successful examples. In fact, the Internet is a central channel for coordination and organisation, with a precise division of functions between the founder Grillo’s blog, the Movement’s blog, and the participation platform, formerly called “Rousseau” and now “SkyVote”, where it is possible to put forward proposals and select political directions and personnel (Bordignon & Ceccarini 2015, Giacomini 2022).

Research Questions

Some research questions can be formulated and answered through the empirical analysis provided by the survey conducted at the end of 2020, involving a sample representative of the Italian population. The answers to the research questions can provide an overview of Italians’ attitudes towards digital participation following the lockdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Access to the Internet is necessary for political participation using new technological tools. The first research question focused on the importance attributed by Italians to the right to Internet access.

RQ1) Do Italians consider the right to access the web important?

The second question examined the purposes for which Italians use the Internet in their daily practice, whether for economic or political purposes. In other words, the question tried to find out how important political purposes are compared to other online activities.

RQ2) For what purposes is the Internet used, and what relevance do political purposes have?

The third question focused on the use of ICTs for remote voting at the national, local, and party levels. This question sought to establish whether Italians are inclined to use these technologies to express their electoral preferences and whether they are interested in using platforms to participate in political life.

RQ3) Are Italians inclined to use ICTs for voting and to engaged with participation platforms at the national, local, and party levels?

The fourth question aimed to explore socio-demographic differences in digital participation in Italy.

RQ4) Which groups of Italians are most likely to use the Internet for information and political participation?

Methodology

The demoscopic survey, carried out by the University of Udine and the Ixè Institute of Trieste, involved a sample of 600 respondents, representative of the Italian population aged over 18 (50,243,518 as of 1/1/2019). The sampling followed a proportional design, with a priori definition of sample quotas, aligned with the most recent ISTAT data, with respect to the following parameters: gender, age class, geographical area, and size class of the municipality of residence. Considering the correlation with the phenomena investigated, based on official data, an a posteriori weighting was also carried out to guarantee correct distribution with respect to education level and voting behaviour at the last political elections. The sample size used ensured a fair degree of precision of the estimates, with a maximum margin of error of plus or minus 4.01%.

The interviews were carried out based on a structured questionnaire. Prior to the administration of the interviews to the sample, a pre-test was carried out between 01/10/2020 and 02/10/2020, by means of around 20 pilot interviews, which allowed for the validation of the questionnaire design and the wording of the various questions. Between 6/10/2020 and 10/10/2020, a total of 600 complete interviews were carried out, distributed as follows according to the survey technique: 500 online interviews (CAWI system - Computer Assisted Web Interviewing) and 100 telephone interviews (CATI system - Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing).

This distribution of interview techniques made it possible to oversample the segment of Internet users during the survey phase, consistent with the topics addressed. On the other hand, it is important to note that online surveys primarily represent the online population, which might be different from the non-online population in Italy. This represents a limitation of this study as it may not fully capture the perspectives of those less engaged with or having limited access to digital technologies. Nonetheless, 100 telephone interviews were also conducted, and the a posteriori weighting procedure in any case ensured sampling representativeness with respect to the overall distribution of the Italian adult population. The inclusion of telephone interviews and the rigorous sampling methodology employed contribute to the robustness of the findings, providing valuable insights into the impact of digital technologies on political participation in Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Results

Considering access to the Internet a fundamental right is a widely shared opinion among most Italians (RQ1). In fact, the percentage of those who totally and largely agreed with the idea that the right to Internet access is necessary was 89.2% (totally agree 56%, largely agree 33.2%). Those who do not agree with the statement that “Internet access should be regarded as a fundamental right of every citizen” make up 6.6% of the population (largely disagree 3.9%, totally disagree 2.7%). Those who are excluded for some reason (for reasons of old age, insufficient skills, or poverty) claim more access as a fundamental right, expressing a clear desire to be included in the digital world. For example, on the right of access, different percentages were observed across age groups, with 35.5% of 25–34-year-olds and 72.3% of those over 65 years of age saying that they “totally agree”. Even those who use the Internet less frequently (75%) and those who are politically left-wing-aligned (78%) declared themselves in complete agreement with the idea of considering access to the Internet as a fundamental right.

The sample cited multiple purposes for surfing the Internet (RQ2). The results are (multiple answers possible): sending or receiving emails 83.9%, shopping 78.2%, using social networks 75.3%, using bank services 60.3%, entertainment 60.2%, information on social and political issues 48.4%, planning trips 48.4%, seeking health information 45.4%, using public administration services 41.7%, reading newspapers and magazines 39.7%, job search 28.4%, participation in virtual communities 25%, participation in institutional online platforms 23.9%, expressing opinions on social and political issues 23.8%, subscribing online petitions 18.7%, participation in online party platforms 6.4%.

The most common purposes cited were “sending and receiving emails” (84%, which rose to 90.3% for the 55–64 years age group), “shopping” (80%, which rose to 92.5% for 18–24-year-olds), “using social networks” (75%, which rose to 89% among 18–24-year-olds and the unemployed), “using banking services” (60%), and “entertainment, music and games” (60%). Less than half the times, information on social and political issues was cited as the reason for use (48%, with a minimum of 31% among individuals with low education); in 42% of the cases, the motivation was the use of digital services of the public administration (the share fell below 30% for Forza Italia voters, politically unaffiliated individuals, and non-users of social networks). About 40% of the sample also declared that they use the Internet to download or read newspapers or magazines online; for people with a high level of education, the percentage was 58%, and for those who are centre-left voters, it was 59%. Therefore, the most popular digital activities involve communication (email and social) and the commercial–economic sphere (shopping, using banking services). At the bottom of the ranking were the activities typical of the public sphere and those related to political participation. Only 25% of Italians studied admitted that they participate in institutional platforms and 6.4% in party platforms. The pandemic has necessarily increased Italians’ recourse to online services, but it can be deduced that Italians use the Internet mainly for communication and commercial purposes and that political purposes are relatively less relevant.

It is possible to explore the political use of the Internet by considering technologies as tools for preference gathering and participation at the national, local, and party levels (RQ3). First, we considered preference gathering. In theory, using digital technologies, one could elect one's political representatives online (and more conveniently). This method of selection (e-voting) for the formation of parliament, regional councils, etc., may have both advantages and disadvantages. According to 44.7% of the sample, disadvantages prevail for this type of instrument, identified as the possibility of fraud or interception by hackers or foreign political forces. Only 23.3% claimed that the advantages of digital political participation would prevail ("advantages and disadvantages are balanced" 29.2%). It may be deduced that the majority of Italians, despite the travel restriction issues caused by the pandemic, remain cautious about e-voting and prefer to stick to the traditional method (with paper ballots and ballot boxes), mainly due to security issues and fear of external interference.

Secondly, consideration is given to civic platforms for information, participation, and collaboration, through which it is possible to take part in local community decisions. The ways of involvement can be many (open data, online participatory budgets, participatory planning). When asked about participation in territorial policy initiatives through institutional online platforms, 63% of respondents were quite or very much in favour (18.5% very much in favour, 44.5% quite in favour). Among those most in favour were certainly young people between the ages of 18 and 24 (79%), those between the ages of 25 and 34 (78%), the unemployed (77%), M5S voters (84%), and the most frequent users of social networks and the Internet (84%). In municipalities with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants, on the other hand, 24% did not favour this form of participation, perhaps because the community is so small that they do not feel the need for new places of "aggregation," as seen in the case of pensioners and those over 65. Even for non-Internet and non-social users, there were high shares of people who are completely against this idea (about 45% and about 40%, respectively). These categories of citizens probably fear being excluded from the online participatory processes of their community.

Thirdly, we considered participation in their party's political initiatives through online platforms. This third modality found more limited acceptance, that is, 52.9% (18.7% very much in favour, 34.2% quite in favour). Good propensity was more evident among the electorate of the M5S, which already makes extensive use of this form of participation by members of the movement (73%); whereas for Forza Italia and Fratelli d'Italia voters, the consensus did not reach 40%. PD voters showed agreement in 62% of cases, and League voters in 58%. In short, even the group of retired people, homemakers, the over-65s, and those who are not Internet and social users showed a tendency to disagree with this type of ICT use.

For RQ4, a multivariate analysis, including descriptive, inferential, and correlation techniques, was conducted using mainly ordinal variables. These variables were recoded by assigning them numerical scores consistent with the range of variation of each question and then indexed on a uniform scale from 0 to 100. The recoding made it possible to standardise the range of the response scale, assigning the highest score (100) to the response that indicated greater propensity and/or agreement. This methodology made it possible to effectively compare the summary indicators of all

items, including those with a dichotomous response. Question 2 on the purpose of Internet use, with 16 possible answers, generated as many dichotomous variables (scored 0 for the absence of the behaviour, 100 for presence). Since some answers could be traced back to the same application sphere, five summary variables were generated from the 16 variables:

1. Q.2- “Information” (4 var.);
2. Q.2- “Participation” (4 var.);
3. Q.2- “Services” (5 var.);
4. Q.2- “Entertainment” (2 var.);
5. Q.2- “Job search” (1 var.).

For the elaboration of multivariate analyses, in addition to the five summary variables just described, reference was also made to other questions that were considered essential for the analysis:

6. Q.1- measuring responses regarding “Internet access is a fundamental right: agreement”;
7. Q.3- measuring “Interest in participating in institutional platforms”;
8. Q.3- measuring “Favour for Internet elections”;
9. Q.4- measuring “Interest in participating in institutional platforms”;
10. Q.5- measuring “Interest in participating in party platforms”.

The multivariate analysis of the data revealed some significant conclusions. An initial descriptive analysis revealed that the Internet is more widely used in the areas of Entertainment (average $I=67.75$; $SD=37.8$) and Services (average $I=62.7$; $SD=31.7$), rather than Information (average $I=39.33$; $SD=33.5$), Civic and Social Participation, and Job Search; moreover, the average index remained below 30 (figure 1).

Figure 1. Overall Index Averages for each Variable

Q2- Entertainment	67,7
Q2 -Services	62,7
Q2 -Information	39,3
Q2- Participation	29,9
Q2 - Job search	28,4
Q1- Internet access is a fundamental right: agreement	82,9
Q3 - Interest in participating in institutional platforms	56,1
Q3 - Favour for Internet elections	49,8
Q4 - Interest in participating in party platforms	49,6
Q5 - Elections via the Internet: favour prevails	39,0

Support for Internet elections received an intermediate score. Some groups, such as the self-employed and voters of the Movimento 5 Stelle, favoured this way of voting more. In contrast, the over-65s and voters of Fratelli d'Italia scored lower. In particular, the sample's favour towards elections via the Internet showed an average index score of 49.79 ($SD=43.32$), with a positive deviation of 16–18 points

for the self-employed, M5S voters, and those who position themselves politically on the right, and a negative jump of about 20 points for the over-65s and Fratelli d'Italia voters. Again, with regard to Internet elections, the total number of subjects showed an average score that is not very high for the assertion that advantage prevails (average $I=38.97$; $SD=40.37$), an average that falls by about 13 points for people aged over 65, and rises by almost the same amount for subjects in the 45-54 age bracket, for the self-employed, and for the M5S and Forza Italia electorate.

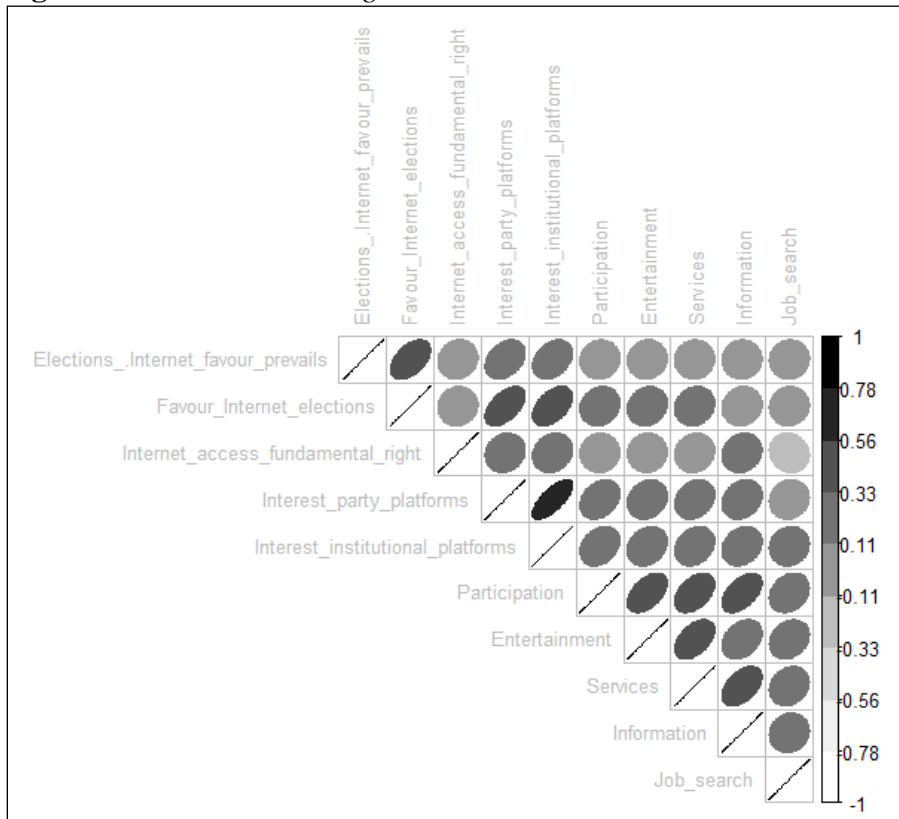
Regarding participation in institutional platforms, interest showed an average index score of 56.1 ($SD=31.9$). However, significant differences were observed according to age, level of education, and political orientation. Young people, those with a higher education, and M5S voters showed a greater interest in these forms of political participation. The average index increased by about 10 points for individuals aged 18–34 and reached over 70 for those with a higher level of education and M5S voters. Interest in participating in party platforms showed a slightly lower average index than in the previous case (average $I=49.55$; $SD=35.14$), and the average was higher by more than 10 points for the younger class, those economically better off, the better educated, those on the political right, and M5S voters (the average index was 66.5).

There is strong evidence of differences in the various groups in terms of their schooling, political orientation, and profession. There is weak evidence of differences, on the contrary, in terms of gender, territorial origin, and size of municipality of residence. To express this in inferential terms, however, it was necessary to test the incidence of each socio-demographic factor on each response variable (Kruskal-Wallis test). The result of the inferential comparison analysis shows that significant differences by gender were nevertheless present in correspondence with the use of the Internet for services, agreement on Internet access as a fundamental right, and interest in institutional and party platforms, all points in which there is greater agreement among men. By age group, excluding the over-65 age group, which showed significantly different characteristic values for each of the areas discussed, there were no significant differences for Internet use other than entertainment and job search, and regarding the agreement on Internet access as a fundamental right. Different levels of schooling produced significant equality with respect to the agreement on the Internet as a fundamental right but also on the prevalence of the benefits of digital voting in elections. On the other hand, subjects of different professions showed a different descriptive value structure for all macro-variables at stake, as well as the expression of voting.

The correlations between the summary variables indicate that the series linked to Internet use are all positively and significantly connected with each other, with coefficients close to 0.5, except for use for information and entertainment, which do not appear to have a specific significant linear link (figure 2). Furthermore, these variables show no connections with the other quantities analysed. The two variables related to agreement on online elections and the two variables related to interest in institutional platforms and linked to political parties are also positively correlated. Also significant is the correlation between those interested in institutional and political platforms and those in favour of Internet elections; here too, coefficients exceeding 0.5 are found. On the other hand, the agreement on Internet access as a

fundamental right has no significant correlation with the other variables of use and institutional/political interest.

Figure 2. Correlations among Variables



Discussion and Concluding Remarks

Based on the results presented, several considerations emerge regarding the political participation of Italians following the COVID-19 pandemic. In general, it can be stated that political participation through ICT is still an evolving phenomenon.

The data highlights the importance of Internet access as a fundamental right for the majority of Italians. However, Internet use is mainly oriented towards communication and commerce, while interest in online political participation is limited. Technological developments and efforts to increase digital inclusion could influence the situation in the long run, but it is also important to consider security concerns and individual preferences regarding the methods of political participation, as a significant part of Italians seem to be attached to traditional methods. Despite technological advancements, the lockdown experience has not led to the advent of widespread online political participation, indicating that traditional habits and concerns about new methods still persist.

The majority of Italians (89%) believe that access to the Internet should be considered a fundamental right. Notably, digital literacy is seen as crucial mainly for the elderly and those who use the Internet less frequently, rather than for citizens

of all ages. Those excluded from Internet access due to age, insufficient skills, or poverty are the ones who most yearn for inclusion in the digital world. This is believed to be due to the awareness of the rapid evolution of technologies and the realisation that it is difficult to keep up without having the appropriate foundation. Despite public efforts to bridge the digital divide, it should be considered that, as technologies innovate, so do forms of exclusion. This should be taken into account by those who wish to promote greater political participation through ICTs; the difficulty of guaranteeing the right to access increases the risk of good intentions turning into exclusionary practices. Before encouraging people to participate politically online, one should first consider whether they are truly capable of doing so, without assuming they can easily adapt.

Regarding Internet use, the main purposes include sending and receiving emails, online shopping, using social networks, availing of banking services, and playing music and games. Activities related to communication and the commercial-economic sphere are the most widespread, while those related to the public sphere and political participation are relatively less relevant. Only a limited percentage of Italians use the Internet to inform themselves about social and political issues or to participate in institutional or party platforms. The Internet was intended as a means of information, but it has become primarily a place of entertainment. The Internet offers a wide range of content and activities that can divert attention from important political issues. Engaging politically is a tiring, difficult, and sometimes even frustrating activity, and the fact that it is online does not automatically make it more comfortable. Moreover, mistrust of traditional political institutions may also extend to digital political participation.

This orientation is confirmed regarding e-voting and participation platforms. The majority of respondents are cautious about the use of e-voting and still prefer the traditional method of paper voting due to security issues and fear of external interference. This mistrust might have well-founded reasons, in light of the issues related to IT security and the management of anonymous and uninfluenced voting procedures; to date, multiple pieces of evidence show that it is difficult to guarantee both of these aspects online (Abba et al., 2017). However, there is a large propensity (63%) to participate in local political initiatives through institutional online platforms, especially among young people and those who frequently use the Internet and social networks. Political participation via online platforms regulated by one's own party receives lower approval (53%) and shows significant differences between supporters of different political parties. Put another way, respondents appeared to be polarised on certain issues related to political participation via digital platforms according to their gender and political affiliation. Based on these considerations, it is possible to state that for most Italians, participation is analogue to the public space of pre-eminence, while only rare exceptions (such as the Movimento 5 Stelle and its supporters) practice online forms of participation.

For future research, we envisage the administration of an online questionnaire similar to the one used in this study, in order to record changes in the population's opinions on these dynamics. In addition, it is essential to investigate the issues of digital literacy and devise suitable strategies to address the digital divide; indeed, the resilience of democratic systems in the face of the complex challenges posed by

constantly evolving ICTs and the associated risks will depend on the effectiveness of such strategies.

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