

Policy Brief 9: From clicks to civic engagement



ANDREAS NORDANG UHRE,
Senior Researcher, Division of Health &
Social Sciences, NORCE Norwegian Research
Centre

SUMMARY

The digitalisation of political discourse – commonly exemplified by the growth of social media platforms – is frequently depicted as a significant threat to democracy. Yet, it also carries the potential to engage traditionally marginalised groups and individuals, integrating them into the democratic process. My research suggests that the digitalisation of political discourse can help lower the threshold for political engagement, by mobilising groups or individual citizens who might otherwise have found the bar for joining formal politics too high. To harness this potential, decision-makers should facilitate citizens' entry into formal political arenas.

THE ISSUE

Is democracy in crisis? Participation in political activities is dropping, especially among young people. Trust in political institutions is fading, and growing inequality feeds distrust and cynicism. The brunt of the blame for these developments is laid at the door of digitalisation of political discourse, in particular the rise of social media platforms. They are accused of contributing to the deterioration of the democratic landscape through the dissemination of fake news, questionable science, computational propaganda, aggressive micro-targeting, and political advertising. This, in turn, fosters increasingly confined 'echo chambers' of personalised news and connections with like-minded individuals. This restricted exposure reinforces similar ideological viewpoints, creating a feedback loop of opinions.

However, the emergence of social media platforms has undeniably also created spaces that enable new and diverse groups of citizens, including those traditionally marginalised, to participate in political discourse (Margetts 2018). Two decades ago, engaging in politics typically required joining a political party, participating in organised interest groups, attending meetings, or canvassing door-to-door. For many individuals, the associated costs in terms of time, effort, and resources were often deemed prohibitive.

Consequently, politics became predominantly the realm of an activist elite. In contrast, contemporary dynamics have witnessed the emergence of small, manageable actions that are attracting a new demographic into politics. Notably, this trend is particularly evident among young people, whose longstanding absence from political participation has been lamented by commentators for years.

Lance Bennet and Alexandra Segerberg (2012) introduced the concept connective action. They posited that societal and cultural shifts associated with globalisation and individualisation have led to disruptions in group affiliations and institutional allegiances. Additionally, these changes have fostered individualised perspectives, prompting political engagement as a manifestation of personal aspirations, lifestyles, and grievances. Bennet and Segerberg assert that as communication increasingly takes place within digitised decentralised networks, opportunities for decentralised and self-organised collective action emerge. The defining feature of these networks is their ability to operate through social media channels without requiring strong organisational control or the establishment of symbolic communities, which distinguishes them from traditional forms of collective action that rely on formal organisational structures. This gives these networks a more fluid, short-lived, and ad-hoc character than traditional forms of collective action.

Bernard Eljoras and Ivar Eimhjellen (2019) acknowledge the widespread adoption of digital communication technology by both individuals and organisations. Yet, they contend that while the impact of these digital networks on democratisation and mobilisation is positive, they are limited to the initial phase of the political engagement cycle. Moreover, they argue that for digitally organised networks to endure in the long term, there is a need for formalisation and organisational structure.

MY RESEARCH

During the summer of 2023, I conducted interviews with the founders of Motvind, a Norwegian anti-wind power interest group founded in 2019, and the anti-road tolls political party FNB, founded in 2014. The objective was to understand the motivations that led these citizens to venture into the realm of political entrepreneurship.

KEY FINDINGS

One common thread between the two organisations was the founders' initial political apathy. Their paths into activism shared a common narrative: upon learning about plans to install wind turbines or new road tolls in localities where they lived, hiked, or grew up, they turned to Facebook as a tool for finding and sharing information.

Facebook also served as a means to connect with like-minded citizens and, eventually, organise. Motvind has achieved significant success by placing their criticisms of wind power on the political agenda, persuading elected officials to impede local developments. Similarly, the FNB caused a minor political earthquake in the 2019 Norwegian local elections, securing substantial representation in various local assemblies. Particularly noteworthy was their impressive 16.8 % of the vote in Bergen, Norway's second-largest city.

One of the informants recounted her journey from complete political apathy, via active involvement with Motvind, to ultimately running for mayor in 2023 as a "total personal transformation". This involved a comprehensive shift in her media consumption, a much-broadened personal network, and a newfound interest in civic issues. The informants from both organisations emphasized that without the presence of Facebook or similar platforms, their groups would never have come into existence. The initial connective action played a vital role in their political mobilisation.

However, to attain political influence, they recognised the need to formalise, organise, and transition into real-world activities, essentially shifting from connective to collective action. These transitions were significantly facilitated by Norway's openness to interest groups, its multiparty electoral system, and the absence of electoral thresholds at the local level of governance.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EUROPEAN POLICY MAKERS

- Improve framework conditions for NGOs.
- Advocate for multiparty electoral systems throughout the European Union.
- Eliminate electoral thresholds in local politics.

REFERENCES

Bennett, W. Lance and Alexandra Segerberg. 2012. The Logic of Connective Action. *Information, Communication & Society* 15(5): 739-768.

Enjolras, Bernard and Ivar Eimhjellen (eds.). 2019. *Fra kollektiv til konnektiv handling. Nye former for samfunnsengasjement og kollektiv handling*. Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk.

Margetts, Helen. 2018. Rethinking Democracy With Social Media. *The Political Quarterly* 90: 107-123.

CONTACT THE RESEARCHER

anuh@norceresearch.no