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Lobera, J., & Portos, M. (2020). Decentralizing electoral campaigns? New-old parties, grassroots and digital activism. *Information, Communication & Society*, 24 (10), pp. 1419–1440.

DOI: [10.1080/1369118x.2020.1749697](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118x.2020.1749697)

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# Decentralizing electoral campaigns? New-old parties, grassroots and digital activism

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## Abstract

*Recent studies suggest that new parties display new patterns of digital mobilization. We shed light on this debate: do new party supporters engage in online political activities to a greater extent during electoral campaigns? Do they share political images or quotes on social media, participate in political forums, or exchange political messages with their friends more often than supporters of traditional parties? No. Drawing on a post-electoral survey dataset in Spain, we find that offline extra-institutional political activities are key predictors of the level of online political engagement. Even in the context of a polarized electoral campaign and the emergence of new electoral forces such as Podemos, extra-institutional political participation drives digital activism to the detriment of institutional variables, such as turnout or partisan preferences. Thus, all parties depend on extra-institutional activists to boost their online campaigns. Since grassroots activists increasingly influence the communicative strategy of all political parties, we interpret this process within a long-term digital-based post-material transformation of the political culture, with major implications for partisan organization, mobilization, and polarization in many democracies. We contend that the overrepresentation of grassroots activists in producing and disseminating political content in social media may have favored an increase of the visibility and public support of political outsiders in several countries.*

Keywords: political polarization; activism; post-material political culture; election campaign; digital public sphere.

## Introduction

The increasing use of digital media worldwide has generated a more fragmented and diverse media environment in the last decade, resulting in a flow of information that is more fluid and harder to control. A broad range of political actors can bypass the mainstream media using digital platforms, reducing the influence of the traditional gatekeepers (Schulz, 2014), as they are able to produce and disseminate political content (Castells, 2015). These changes in the digital public sphere become particularly significant during electoral campaign periods, where political exchanges intensify.

Following the 2008 financial and economic crisis, protests spread worldwide to voice political discontent and strong opposition to rising inequality and welfare retrenchment. Activists' use of digital media played an instrumental role in the recruitment and rapid diffusion of mobilizations (Micó and Casero-Ripollés, 2014)—e.g., Facebook pages were used to mobilize, gain feedback from members (Kavada, 2015), and moderate the influence of repression on the diffusion of the movement (Suh et al., 2017). Also, tech and media activists set up alternative media publications, established autonomous technological infrastructures, and ran 24-hour livestreams (Costanza-Chock, 2014).

In contrast to the costly and complex organizational infrastructures that institutional organizations offer, Internet contributed to the decrease of such costs while increasing the power of entrepreneurial activists (della Porta and Mosca, 2005). In a way, it favored 'organizing without organizations' (Shirky, 2008; Klandermans et al., 2014). Some scholars argue that these transformations challenge established views of what it means to be a 'member' (Chadwick, 2013), leading to a new type of 'connective action' characterized by the lack of clear leadership, weak organizational structure, predominantly personal action frames, and the centrality of network technologies (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012).

To what extent do these changes affect partisan activism? Several authors have pointed out that the new parties display new patterns of digital mobilization, since many of them rely on innovative forms of digital participation (e.g. Casero-Ripollés et al., 2016; della Porta et al., 2017). According to this perspective, supporters of these parties would have a higher level of digital activism (e.g., sharing partisan content on social media more often) compared to traditional parties.

On the other hand, one could argue that all parties would be affected by an increase in autonomous activist participation, regardless of the macro strategy of the political party. Following this approach, partisan digital activism would have similar conditions in all parties, reflecting profound changes in the organization and mobilization of the parties. Certain cultural changes and the extension of the political use of digital tools would favor an increase in autonomous logic in partisan participation, similar to what has occurred in recent decades in the organization of social movements.

The first general election in which Podemos ran in December 2015 presents a phenomenal setting to explore the association between electoral activism in practice and the evolution of political culture on the Net. In the context of new political competitors, what is the association between electoral behavior and digital political activism? To what extent is there an association between institutional participation (i.e., voting preferences) and digital political activism during an electoral campaign? Would digital activism be higher among new movement-related political parties? Does the emergence of a post-material political culture have an impact on digital political activism during an electoral campaign?

Digital media might mobilize citizens far from traditional channels of political representation (Mosca and Quaranta, 2017). Several scholars have noted that new information and communication technologies are important resources for new parties—and more generally for organisations that lack access to mainstream media (Ward and

Gibson, 2009). Indeed, empirical evidence shows that people with more expertise and who are more active on Internet and on social networks are more likely to vote for new parties such as Podemos (e.g., Mosca and Quaranta, 2017; Casero-Ripollés et al., 2016).

We contend that this line of reasoning cannot be inverted: our results suggest that it is not whether they vote for one party or another that determines citizens' degree of political engagement in the digital sphere. Even in the context of a polarized electoral campaign and the emergence of new electoral forces, it is participation in offline extra-institutional political activities which ultimately determines the level of online political engagement. Our findings are in line with contributions that stress post-material political cultures, where political participation would gradually move away from the control of party elites (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley, 2016; Bang and Sørensen, 1999; Bennett, 1998; Beck, 1997), and have important implications for understanding the relationship of social media with the changing structure of political opportunities and political polarization. Digital activism of extra-institutional activists would be often outside the control of political elites, giving rise to new intermediation processes in the digital sphere and more opportunities for political challengers.

Our empirical analyses draw on original survey data collected right after the December 2015 election. In the next sections we survey relevant contributions to address our research questions, and place our contribution in relation to extant literature. We then introduce the Spanish case and its importance for the broader readership. After that, we introduce our data, lay out the empirical design, and discuss our results. Finally, in the concluding section we elaborate on the implications of our findings and signal some avenues for further inquiry.

## **Electoral turnout and digital activism**

When it comes to the nexus offline-online political involvement, we can distinguish three main approaches in the literature on digital participation. Early contributions underscored the possibilities Internet could offer in terms of enhancing citizens' offline relationships and political involvement (Wellman et al., 2001). Internet would help restore community by overcoming limitations of space and time (Sproull and Kiesler, 1991), creating room for democratic deliberation, identity building, and organizational involvement (Wellman et al., 2001).

Indeed, Internet eases the dissemination of political content, facilitating the connection with like-minded users and the coordination of the different interest groups (Hoffmann and Lutz, 2017). Importantly, most relationships formed in cyberspace have a continuity in physical space (Rheingold, 2000). The opposite approach, often referred to as thesis of replacement, would posit that development of new technologies weakens offline engagement as people spend more time in front of the screens (Putnam, 1995), embracing 'clicktivism' activism and other forms of low intensity activism such as online petitioning and participation in social media and Internet fora. Moreover, Internet may cause depression, alienating people from face-to-face interaction (Kraut et al., 1998).

After subjecting the two preceding approaches to close empirical scrutiny, a third 'normalization' perspective developed, suggesting Internet does not substantially change the patterns of political involvement but reinforces pre-existing structures and inequalities (Dahlgren, 2005; Bimber, 2000). This way, Internet is incorporated into routine practices of everyday life, and thus "a largely null finding of participation effects (...), [which] emerges from attempts to discover a stimulus effect from new technology on political engagement or learning at the individual level. It does not appear (...) that new technology leads to higher aggregate levels of political engagement" (Bimber, 2002: 4-5).

While we know a great deal about the determinants of offline political engagement (including the non-effect of Internet), we know comparatively less about the determinants of online political participation (Feezell, 2016). Evidence on the importance of resource mobilization to understand changing levels and/or forms of digital political participation abounds (Anduiza et al. 2010; Best and Krueger 2005; Gibson et al. 2005); in contrast, the association between offline and online political behavior is often assumed but seldom tested (see, e.g., Feezell 2016; Hoffmann and Lutz, 2015; Anduiza et al., 2009). In countries like Spain where opportunities for participation are manifold, costs and restrictions on the circulation of information are relatively low, people who are keen to get involved in politics would have been able to do so through traditional channels in the first place (Bimber, 2000, 2002). Hence, in line with the normalization approach,

H.1 (Hypothesis 1): we would expect electoral turnout to be positively associated with higher levels of digital political activism.

### **New movements parties and digital activism**

In May 2011 thousands of *indignados* (“outraged”) activists demonstrated and occupied squares to protest against austerity policies and demand real democracy in Spain (e.g. Lobera, 2019). These protest events are part of a broader cycle of contention, which contributed to the birth of Podemos, a new party launched from scratch some months before the 2014 European elections that gathers one million votes and gets five MEPs on the basis of some indignados movement’s core claims (Portos, 2019). With regards to organizational settings, research emphasized the continuities between square movements and Podemos, oftentimes referring to the latter as a ‘movement party’ (della Porta et al., 2017).

Kitschelt (2006: 280) defined movement parties as ‘coalitions of political activists who emanate from social movements and try or apply the organizational and strategic

practices of social movements in the arena of party competition.’ Relative to traditional parties, Podemos is less institutionalized in terms of formal party structures and internal decision-making processes, relying to a greater extent on grassroots mobilization— at least, that was the case in its first general election campaign in 2015.

The rapid growth of Podemos flowed from thousands of volunteer groups, the so-called *círculos* (‘circles’), which debated party positions and took direct action. Borrowed from the *indignados* movement, this organizational feature was conceived to promote grassroots participation within Podemos (Rodríguez-Teruel et al., 2016). The *círculos*’ use of social networking services led to organizational hybridity, as parties adopted and adapted digital network repertoires typical of social movements (Chadwick 2007; Casero-Ripollés et al., 2016; Lisi, 2018). By privileging communication as the central feature in its political action (Kioupkiolis, 2019), the party combined presence on broadcast television through the use of intense digital media to boost citizens’ engagement and self-mediation, promoting connective action (Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Casero-Ripollés et al. 2016).

In this vein, Paolo Gerbaudo (2018) finds that new political formations such as Podemos use social media to gain momentum and online participatory platforms to mobilize the rank-and-file. Specifically, the party followed a ‘multi-layered technopolitical strategy’, where both ‘the front end’ (elites) and ‘the back end’ (grassroots) played an important role (Toret, 2015; Lobera & Parejo, 2019).

A number of contributions have stressed the populist character of left-wing formation Podemos (e.g. Font et al., 2019; Lobera, 2020). Broader scholarship on populism has stressed the central role that social media play in maintaining voters’ support for populist candidates (Kriesi, 2014). In this vein, Groshek & Koc-Michalska (2017: 1402) found that US voters more active in social media (creating and sharing political content) showed higher levels of “support for populist candidates than those

that are more passive receivers of political online content” during the 2016 US election campaign.

Overall, there is solid evidence that people who are younger, more educated, more politically sophisticated, and with Internet skills tend to be more supportive of Podemos (Mosca and Quaranta, 2017; Fernández-Albertos, 2015; Ramiro and Gómez, 2017). Specifically, the frequent use of Internet and digital social media increase the probabilities of voting for Podemos (Mosca and Quaranta, 2017; Fernández-Albertos, 2015). This argument has important endogenous implications. Not only that being a more active and sophisticated Internet user makes you keener to vote for Podemos, but also,

H.2 (Hypothesis 2): we would expect Podemos’s constituency to be more politically active in the Web during an electoral campaign than voters of other parties.

### **Extra-institutional political behavior and digital activism**

Although sometimes forgotten in the literature, movement actors are linked to routine political actors in electoral campaigns (McAdam and Tarrow, 2010). Movements often engage in proactive and reactive electoral mobilization and may “introduce new forms of collective action that influence election campaigns” (Ibid: 533). Moreover, digital tools offer growing opportunities for social movements and entrepreneurial activists to exert influence on the electoral field.

On the other hand, researchers have noted a ‘growing disconnection between formal bureaucratic modes of organizational maintenance and looser, more flexible, and less “dutiful” engagement repertoires’ (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley, 2016: 4; Tormey, 2015; Wells, 2015). This happens in a broad context of decreasing levels of membership and trust, declining partisan identification and support among the wider electorate,

which put under question the parties' ability to sustain themselves (Norris, 2011; Gibson and Ward, 2009; Mair and van Biezen, 2001).

While some observers seem to have discarded all expectations that political parties can be 'resuscitated' (Wilson, 2006), others have issued calls for reform and renewal. Following political parties' cartelization over the last few decades (Katz and Mair, 2009) and the exceptional use of experts and professionals for creating campaigns, strategies, and marketing to strengthen its electoral appeal (Panebianco, 1988), political parties seem to be experiencing a long-term period of adjustment toward post-material political culture and attitudes toward political engagement (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley, 2016). These shifts in political values and participation would affect all constituencies and imply a move away from traditional forms of loyalty-based party engagement and toward issue-oriented campaigns, including participation through alternative forms of action, such as protesting, political consumerism, community involvement, and so on (Tormey, 2015; Wells, 2015; Dalton, 2007).

There is an ongoing, vivid debate in the literature about how alternative digital media may be fostering self-organization and open participation (Atton, 2004; Couldry and Curran, 2003), challenging traditional membership (Chadwick, 2013), and favoring the surge of political outsiders (Jungherr et al., 2019). Similar to the changes observed in the social movements by Bennett and Segerberg (2012), we would also expect a weakening of the organizational structure of political parties, predominantly personal action frames, and a declining of party elite control, with a greater importance of network technologies. Digital tools promote cultures of organizational experimentation and a party-as-movement mentality that cause many to reject norms of hierarchical discipline and usual partisan adherence. Moreover, the effect of Internet use on institutional forms of political involvement, such as electoral turnout and contacting politicians, would be more moderate than on alternative forms of participation such as

social movement activism (Dahlgren, 2011; Hoffmann and Lutz, 2015).

Earl and Kimport (2011) argue that Internet offers two key affordances relevant to activism: e-activists do not need to be physically present to act together, and the web sharply reduces costs for organizing and engaging in coordinated action. These authors find a positive effect between affordances' leverage and the transformative changes of organization and participation in contentious activities (*ibid.*). More generally, the elective affinity between digital tools and post-material engagement is observed with different intensities in what Ulrich Beck called *sub-politics* (1997), Lance Bennett's *lifestyle politics* (1998), Henrik Bang and Eva Sørensen's *everyday makers* (1999), and Russell Dalton's *engaged citizenship* (2007). Accordingly,

H.3 (Hypothesis 3): we would expect extra-institutional forms of participation to increase digital political activism, concealing the effect of electoral preferences on digital participation.

### **Digital Political Participation in Spain: the Context**

The wide use of digital tools in US presidential campaigns has dominated scholarly literature on digital political campaigning since 2000 (Hara, 2008). Developing empirically informed research that incorporates other cases can advance our knowledge and the undertheorized association between political engagement and digital activism (Postill, 2012). The Spanish case provides an analytically useful case to shed light on the interplay between these two factors for a number of reasons.

First, a deep transformation in the political landscape goes together with increasing relevance of the digital public sphere. Exchanges of information and political organization through Internet and social media were key to understand the level of anti-austerity mobilization in the country since 2011 and the subsequent transformation of the traditional bipartisan system (Micó and Casero-Ripollés, 2014).

Second, political practices in the digital environment developed early and in an intense way. Traditionally, Spain has been among the Western countries with lower levels of political and citizen participation (Morales, 2005). After a period of intense citizen mobilization around the Transition to democracy, Spaniards' political mobilization decreased during the following decades (Torcal, 1995). "Tactical demobilization" has been identified as one of the necessary keys enabling the elites to negotiate and establish "consensus politics" (Gunther, 2010: 24). Since the 1980's formal political participation decreased –e.g., party and union membership–, protracting a public sphere with no criticism towards the so-called "Transition Culture" (Martínez, 2012).

In this context, the appearance of the Net led to the development of a digital public sphere in Spain with a marked "dissident" nature and new social intermediations in the electoral information flows. Although traditional political actors still play an important role as a source of electoral information, they are increasingly sharing space with new social actors (Lobera and Sampedro, 2018). The general election held on 20<sup>th</sup> December, 2015 took place in a climate of increasing polarization, with an expectation to restructure the bipartisan system in the face of the emergence of new electoral competitors with greater mobilization capacity such as left-wing Podemos and center-right liberal Ciudadanos (Rodríguez-Teruel et al., 2016). The preceding campaign and ensuing election were marked by different issues, including corruption, citizens' distrust towards traditional parties and the consequences of the economic recession and austerity policies.

The vote resulted in the most fragmented parliament in the country's recent democratic history. While the conservative PP remained as the main force, total electoral support for the party went from 45% in the 2011 election to 28.7% in 2015 (which represents a loss of 64 seats). The main opposition party's performance, social-

democratic PSOE got its worst electoral result to date since the Transition to democracy (22% support, 90 seats). Newcomer Podemos closely followed, winning some 20% of the vote share (69 seats). Centre-right challenger, Ciudadanos, ranked fourth (with 13.9% of electoral support and 40 seats).

All in all, this context lets us closely examine the determinants of the levels of digital political participation, providing evidence of whether new parties display different patterns of digital mobilization. More generally, the results allow us to better understand the current dynamics in party support and public opinion— in Spain and beyond.

## **Data and methods**

To test our hypotheses about the determinants of digital political activism, we use information collected from 1,556 post-electoral structured interviews with Internet users (Lobera and Sampedro, 2018). The survey was fielded between December 21<sup>st</sup> and December 30<sup>th</sup> 2015, following the Spanish general election held on December 20<sup>th</sup>. The sample was built by a specialized polling agency (Netquest), implementing balanced quotas based on respondents' demographic information.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, online panellists were stratified by gender, age, region and size of town. The sampling has been done by randomly selecting, in each stratum, four records for each theoretical sample unit. The deviations of the sample distributions from the population characteristics have been corrected by weighting. The source used for weighting is the '2011 Survey on Equipment and Use of Information and Communication Technology in Households' from the National Statistics Institute (INE). Quality assurance and supervision systems were applied during the process (see Netquest, 2019).

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<sup>1</sup> This established polling agency counts "with more than 1,300,000 panelists in over 23 countries around the world" (see Netquest, 2019). Specifically, for Spain they have a large enough sample of 157,916 panelists, with an average response rate of 50-55% (Netquest, 2019). Panel members are recruited from a host of different sources, including standard advertising, strategic partnerships with websites, etc. When a new panel member is recruited, Netquest records a host of socio-demographic information. For nationally representative samples, it draws a sub-sample of the panel that is representative in terms of a number of socio-demographic features, inviting this sub-sample to complete the survey.

The survey questionnaire focuses on Internet uses and online political participation, but it also includes a number of questions covering biographical features, participation during the electoral campaign, and broader information on socio-political behavior and attitudes. In our empirical analyses, we understand online political participation as a ladder made up of several rungs of intensity (see Bazurli and Portos, 2019; Pirro and Portos, 2020). Precisely, in order to build the dependent variable we rely on a battery of nine items that measure the frequency in which the following activities are carried out over the last three months (all of them are measured through an ordinal scale, 1-6, which ranges from "never or almost never" to "several times a day"): 1) "upload political images or videos on social media such as Facebook, Twitter, etc.", 2) "share political phrases, texts, or quotes via social media", 3) "participate in forums, blogs, or chats about the elections or politics in general", 4) "search information about the candidates' position on topics that interest me", 5) "sign petitions, manifestos, or incriminations of a political nature", 6) "visit a candidate's or party's website", 7) "visit a civic, social or alternative information group's or organization's website", 8) "send emails to political parties or candidates", 9) "exchange emails with relatives or friends with comments on the campaign or forwarding political jokes".

Since the level of intercorrelation between the items is moderate-to-high ( $0.32 < \text{Pearson's } r < 0.76$ ), we carried out a Principal Component Analysis, which allowed us to construct a weighted additive scale that we used to measure the level of digital political activism.<sup>2</sup> The scale is reliable, and the Principal Component Analysis (PCA) offered a solution with one single component's Eigenvalue above the 1.00 threshold (Eigenvalue= 4.94; Cronbach's  $\alpha$ = 0.89), which accounts for 54.84% of the total

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<sup>2</sup> We have built three alternative indices. First, instead of a cumulative index, we calculate a weighted average of the nine indicators. Second, we have created a simple additive scale based on the individual 1-6 scales (potential range: 6-54). Third, depending on the degree of online activist participation, we have distinguished between three groups within the simple additive scale (low, medium and high, which correspond to 39.5%, 35.5% and 25% of the observations, respectively). We have reproduced our statistical models with these three alternative dependent variables, and the overall findings are robust.

variation.

We perform a number of OLS regressions with robust standard errors.<sup>3</sup> The survey questionnaire includes information on past voting spells and electoral turnout in the preceding December 2015 national election, as well as participation in a number of extra-institutional political activities during the last four months such as protesting, membership of pressure groups and boycotting/buycotting. The last three items report a low-to-moderate level of correlation (Pearson's  $r < 0.30$ ). In order to weigh our arguments against alternative explanations, we include a number of controls. The control variables measure grievances (whether the respondent is unemployed, household income), biographical availability (sex, age, education, municipality size), as well as political attitudes and values (ideology, trust, attention during the electoral campaign). Importantly, we also control for the effect the individual's expertise as an Internet user can have on the level of digital activism— in Table 1, we report the summary statistics; for the exact wording of the questionnaire, see Appendix II.

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<sup>3</sup> The histogram in the Appendix I shows the dependent variable is not normally distributed (Figure A1). The data are strongly skewed to the right. Further evidence confirms overdispersion. The latter happens provided the conditional variance exceeds the conditional mean. We run a test of the overdispersion parameter alpha. As alpha is significantly different from zero, we conclude that the Poisson distribution is not the most suitable modelling strategy. Although our measures are not discrete, the structure of our dependent variable is similar to event counts, hence we replicate all models with negative binomial specifications in the Appendix I (Table A1).

TABLE 1: Descriptive statistics

	N	Mean	S.D.	Min.	Max.
Digital activism scale	1379	5.49	2.78	4	24
Sex	1502	0.50	0.50	0	1
Age groups	1502	2.17	0.77	1	3
Household Income	1418	1.84	0.80	1	3
Education	1502	2.51	0.61	1	3
Municipality size	1502	2.36	0.71	1	3
Employed	1502	0.75	0.43	0	1
Internet User	1502	2.85	0.42	1	3
Ideology	1502	2.32	1.30	1	5
Institutional trust	1502	2.79	2.29	0	10
Campaign attention	1502	2.21	0.85	1	4
Protest participation	1502	0.16	0.37	0	1
Member pressure group	1502	0.08	0.27	0	1
Boycotting/Buycotting	1502	0.45	0.50	0	1
Electoral turnout	1499	0.89	0.31	0	1
Party voted (ref. Podemos & allies)					
_PP	1291	0.14	0.35	0	1
_PSOE	1291	0.13	0.34	0	1
_Ciudadanos	1291	0.16	0.37	0	1
_Izquierda Unida	1291	0.08	0.26	0	1
_Other minority	1291	0.12	0.33	0	1

## Results

We study the determinants of the level of digital activism in election campaigns. In the first specifications we include only the predictors related to institutional participation and the sociodemographic controls (Models 1-2, Table 2). While in Model 1 we incorporate a dummy on electoral turnout, we include a multinomial variable in Model 2, taking electoral support for Podemos (and its confluences in Catalonia, Galicia and Comunitat Valenciana) as the baseline category. Turning out to vote has a positive impact on the level of online activism (Model 1, Table 2). Relative to voting for Podemos (and its allies), we observe a negative association between opting for traditional forces

(PP, PSOE) and Ciudadanos and other minority parties (Models 1-2, Table 2).<sup>4</sup> Coefficients for voting IU or other minor parties relative to Podemos and allies are not significant.

When controlling for political attitudes and values, the effects of electoral turnout and partisan preference vanish (Models 3-4, Table 2). Self-declaring as a right-wing individual decreases online activism. Greater confidence in political institutions, especially paying attention to the electoral campaign, and more frequent use of Internet are positively associated with the level of online political participation. Likewise, the effects of extra-institutional political behavior (i.e., attending to protests and rallies, belonging to a pressure group, and engaging in boycotts/buycotts) are strong and robust (Models 4-5, Table 2).

<sup>4</sup> We have excluded the ideological self-identification variable in Models 4 and 6 due to multicollinearity concerns\_\_\_\_\_

TABLE 2: OLS regressions with robust standard errors, DV: Digital Activism Scale

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.
Sex	-0.30	0.16	0.02	0.15	0.09	0.16	-0.03	0.13	0.02	0.15
Age groups	-0.12	0.10	-0.09	0.09	-0.01	0.10	-0.13	0.08	-0.08	0.09
Household Income	0.02	0.11	-0.11	0.10	-0.16	0.10	-0.15	0.09	-0.21	0.09
Education	0.14	0.13	-0.00	0.12	-0.07	0.13	-0.06	0.10	-0.09	0.12
Municipality size	0.15	0.11	-0.01	0.10	-0.04	0.11	-0.05	0.09	-0.08	0.10
Employed	-0.30	0.20	-0.10	0.18	-0.05	0.20	-0.06	0.16	-0.02	0.18
Internet User	0.62***	0.16	0.39*	0.15	0.59*	0.15	0.41*	0.14	0.63*	0.14
Ideology			-0.22***	0.06			0.00	0.05		
Institutional trust			0.09*	0.04	0.11*	0.04	0.07*	0.03	0.09*	0.04
Campaign attention			1.33***	0.09	1.33***	0.11	1.08***	0.08	1.05***	0.09
Protest participation							1.61***	0.26	1.53***	0.26
Member pressure group							2.41***	0.37	2.44***	0.39
Boycotting/Buycotting							0.64***	0.13	0.63***	0.14
Electoral turnout	1.02***	0.23	0.07	0.21			-0.07	0.19		
Party voted (ref. Podemos & allies)										
_PP					-0.84**	0.26			-0.14	0.24
_PSOE					-0.60*	0.28			-0.12	0.24
_Ciudadanos					-0.93***	0.19			-0.25	0.18
_Izquierda Unida					0.16	0.31			0.13	0.26
_Other minority					-0.03	0.31			-0.08	0.29
Constant	1.02***	0.23	8.01***	0.74	7.44***	0.72	6.71***	0.66	6.08***	0.66
N	1233		1233		1060		1233		1060	
Adj. R2	0.0351		0.2133		0.2039		0.3668		0.3596	

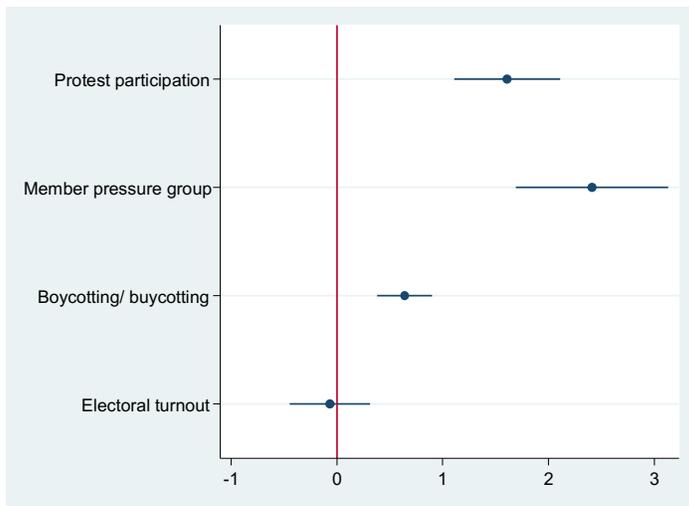
\*p<0,05 \*\*p<0,01 \*\*\*p<0,001

On the one hand, the regression analyses show a robust, statistically significant, and positive association between the degree of political involvement in the digital public sphere and non-electoral offline participation. Specifically, the value on the scale for a person who has not participated in demonstrations or protests is 5.22, keeping the rest of the constant predictors adjusted to their means. Conversely, if the respondent has participated in a demonstration or protest, the prediction on the digital activism frequency scale is 6.83 (Figure 1).

In a similar way, the predicted value of the scale fluctuates between 5.28 and 7.69, depending on whether the person belongs to a political pressure group, *ceteris paribus* (Figure 1). The difference of value on the digital activism frequency scale changed from 5.19 to 5.84 if they have bought or have stopped buying products for

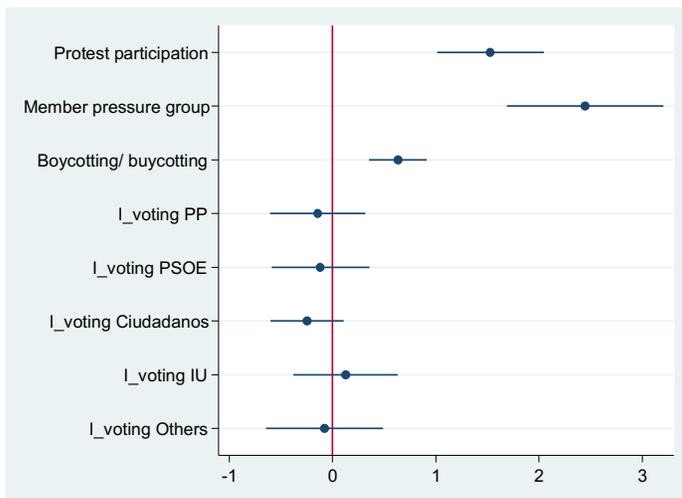
ethical or political reasons. On the other hand, the predicted value of the digital activism scale remains constant regardless of whether or not the respondent turned out to vote and regardless of his or her electoral preferences (Figures 1 and 2).<sup>5</sup>

FIGURE 1: Marginal effects of offline political participation (protest participation, member of pressure group, boycotting/ boycotting, and electoral turnout) on digital political activism scale (Model 4, Table 2)



95% C.I.

FIGURE 2: Marginal effects of offline political participation (protest participation, member of pressure group, boycotting/ boycotting, and voting spells) on digital political activism scale (Model 5, Table 2).



Multinomial voting spells: baseline category is Podemos (and its confluences). 95% C.I.

<sup>5</sup> If using negative binomial regressions instead of OLS specifications with robust standard errors, these results remain unchanged (see Appendix I, Table A1; Figures A1 and A2).

## Discussion

We compared the extent to which levels of digital political participation could be predicted by people's offline participation. The results were clear: *online* political participation functions as a complement not dissociable from *offline* participation, and electoral mobilization as an extension as the individual's extra-institutional participation. Although our results are not counter-intuitive nor do they contradict this line of thought, they do allow us to qualify previous findings, as not every form of offline political participation works as a determinant of online activism. Amid high levels of polarization and electoral mobilization, especially following the electoral emergence of new left-wing and movement-related parties such as Podemos that increased fragmentation, one could expect that electoral turnout in general (and voting for Podemos and allies in particular) would be associated with increased levels of online activism.

Contending with this approach, our results show that only the least formal and least conventional forms of offline political participation account for the frequency of digital political activism. Neither electoral turnout nor partisan preferences are relevant predictors of the general level of online activism, as their effect is concealed by extra-institutional political engagement such as protesting, pressure group membership and having boycotted/buycotted. In fact, these three explanatory variables are, along with political interest, the most relevant predictors in the models, strengthening the hypothesis that online political participation is connected to offline participation and can be interpreted as an extension of it.

Our results support Hypothesis 3 (to the detriment of H.1/H.2). Participation in offline extra-institutional political activities determines level of online political engagement more strongly than party preferences, in line with the observations of Dahlgren (2011) and Hoffmann and Lutz (2015). The individual's digital learning processes accumulated over the months and years (as a form of cultural capital) are

transferred to his/her partisan activism during the electoral campaign. It is true that activists are increasingly aware and conscious of the mediation opportunity structure, being able to adapt to, appropriate, and develop media and communication practices (Cammaerts, 2012). Moreover, the changes produced in the field of social movements in the last decade seem to be transferring in new patterns in the digital participation during the electoral campaigns.

Notwithstanding limitations emerging from single-case studies, our results lead to important implications for other scenarios. Extra-institutional activists may be contributing to the surge of political challengers (Jungherr et al., 2019) and populist candidates (Groshek and Koc-Michalska, 2017), as empirical evidence from several countries testifies. Specifically, extra-institutional activists' over-representation in the generation and diffusion of political content within their parties may be increasing the visibility of more polarized messages in social media than those designed by the party elites, leading to a more polarized debate discussion among the party members themselves. This, in turn, may have contributed to the success of political challengers in several countries, including the United States, Germany, and China (see Jungherr et al., 2019).

The results add to the current state of the reflection on how digital technology can act as a driver of political change. As Jungherr, Schroeder and Stier (2019) point out, while some have described digital media as an instrument that deterministically disrupts existing structures of political power (Gerbaudo, 2018; Margetts et al., 2015), others have referred to the role of technology in enlarging control by incumbents in the form of political elites (Gohdes, 2020; Robles & Córdoba, 2019; Howard, 2005). As Tucker et al. (2017) suggest, this division may emerge as a sort of historical stage model of technology that starts by serving outsiders to defy the political elites,

followed by a time in which the status quo readjusts and the same technologies are used to avert this defiance.

Our argument emphasizes the importance of extra-institutional grassroots activists both in the emergence of challengers as well as in the efforts of political elites to counter these challenges. In the latter case, the status quo will tend to develop co-optation (e.g. Gunitsky, 2015) or surveillance/repression mechanisms (e.g. Gohdes, 2020), due to the key importance of these actors in the political debate in the digital sphere. In the first stage, outsider candidates will try to persuade grassroots activists to support them, as a central strategy for their digital campaigns. This is the case of the UK Labour Party leader, Jeremy Corbyn (Dennis, 2019), and the three outsider candidates who challenged their parties in pursuit of the US Presidential nomination in the last years, Barack Obama (Katz et al., 2013), Bernie Sanders (Penney, 2017) and Donald Trump (Gervais & Morris, 2018).

In this vein, the remarkable higher digital political activity of extra-institutional activists *in all* parties observed in our results may help to explain observations in other contexts. These activists may be favoring messages of more radical candidates, polarizing the discourse of their own parties, away from the traditional discourse of the party elites. Groshek & Koc-Michalska (2017) noted that voters more active in social media showed higher levels of support for populist candidates in the 2016 US election campaign, but they found no support that ideologically constrained flows of information (*filter bubbles*) were related to increasing the likelihood of higher support for populist candidates; conversely, they found that greater heterogeneity actually increased the probability of endorsing specific (populist) candidates, both in the Republican and the Democratic side.

How could social media favor polarization in an environment of greater heterogeneity of political opinions? A grassroots-driven increasing polarization *within* each party may induce reactive polarization *outside* them. Experimental evidence

shows that exposure to opposite messages on social networks increases the political polarization of individuals, particularly among conservatives (Bail, et al. 2018), adding to the effects of the selective exposure and the principle of homophily in social media. Therefore, an increase of political polarization within a party due to the action of extra-institutional grassroots activists would induce an increase of political polarization in rival parties, particularly on those voters exposed to a higher level of information heterogeneity in social media.

Finally, our cross-sectional correlational study cannot demonstrate causality. It will require some other type of approaches and empirical evidence (e.g., experimental). Even though the endogeneity hypothesis cannot be fully ruled out, it does not preclude the fact that our rationale holds— and the findings in our article are robust and relevant.<sup>6</sup> Incorporating controls in multivariate designs also helps us to weigh our argument against alternative explanations. Further examination of the effect of digital activists in political polarization will be an important avenue of inquiry, particularly given the increasing polarization that emerge for most political parties across countries.

## **Conclusions**

The current study is useful in sharpening our understanding of digital political activism during electoral processes. Participation in extra-institutional forms of political involvement (e.g. protest participation, boycotting/ boycotting, and being a member of a pressure group) will increase digital political activism, concealing

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<sup>6</sup> In addition to the analyses reported here, we ran preliminary statistical analyses inverting the relationship of dependency between the key variables. While digital activism seems to be positively associated with electoral turnout, it vanishes when controlling for institutional trust and campaign attention. Similarly, while the effect of activism seems to be positively associated with voting for Podemos and allies— relative to voting for any other party—, it vanishes when controlling for extra-institutional participation. Consistent with the normalization approach, the effects from online political activism on offline political participation are far from robust, thus going against the reverse causality hypothesis.

the effect of electoral preferences on digital participation. Our results connect with the theory of normalization and the emergence of a post-material culture in political parties.

Digital technologies do not substantially change the patterns of political involvement but reinforce pre-existing structures and inequalities (Dahlgren, 2005; Bimber, 2000), blurring the separation between offline and online participation. The expansion of social media has weakened the power of political elites. However, this shift in the opportunity structure has not been seized equally by all individuals but mainly by those with greater participation in extra-institutional forms of political engagement. Importantly, this pattern is observed irrespective of electoral turnout and within *all* political parties.

Our findings might help understand the surge of populist candidates (Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017) and political outsiders (Jungherr et al. 2019). In short, rather than being determined by homophily, political polarization in social media might be determined by grassroots driven-polarization within each party. This mechanism can help explain the increase in polarization in contexts where social media induces an environment of greater heterogeneity of political opinions (Bail, et al. 2018). Our results confirm that extra-institutional grassroots activists have become central actors of new political intermediations in the digital public sphere (Howard, 2005; Lobera and Sampedro, 2018), affecting all parties during the electoral campaigns. Decentralized activist participation and their influence through new information and communication technologies could under certain conditions 'hack' the official campaign, potentially forcing the campaign leaders to hybridize or adapt their initiatives to the activists' proposals.

Are political parties therefore being forced into a process of uncartelization? Not necessarily. The decentralization processes of electoral communication that we

observe in our analysis is currently compensated for by the political parties for several re-centralizing strategies. These aim to recover the central influence of the political party on the new logic of decentralized digital activism. The changes in the digital sphere lead to an increasing tension between the centripetal tools of the political parties and the decentralizing dynamics of digital activists.

This tension is particularly salient during election campaigns. In societies with acute political conflict, the activity of extra-institutional activists will be greater (both in relative and absolute terms) and the effect of the preference falsification –suggested by Mutz (2006) as a fundamental intermediating factor between levels of online polarization and readiness to engage in political action– will diminish.

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## Appendix I

TABLE A1: Negative binomial regressions, DV: Digital Activism Scale

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.	Coef.	S.E.
Sex	-0.06*	0.03	0.00	0.03	0.01	0.03	-0.01	0.03	-0.01	0.03
Age groups	-0.02	0.02	-0.01	0.02	0.01	0.02	-0.02	0.02	-0.01	0.02
Household Income	0.00	0.02	-0.02	0.02	-0.03	0.02	-0.03	0.02	-0.04	0.02
Education	0.03	0.02	-0.00	0.02	-0.01	0.02	-0.01	0.02	-0.02	0.02
Municipality size	0.03	0.02	-0.00	0.02	-0.01	0.02	-0.01	0.02	-0.01	0.02
Employed	-0.05	0.03	-0.01	0.03	-0.01	0.03	-0.01	0.03	-0.00	0.03
Internet User	0.12**	0.04	0.08*	0.03	0.12**	0.04	0.08*	0.03	0.12**	0.04
Ideology			-0.04***	0.01			-0.00	0.01		
Institutional trust			0.02**	0.01	0.02**	0.01	0.01*	0.01	0.02**	0.01
Campaign attention			0.25***	0.02	0.24***	0.02	0.20***	0.02	0.19***	0.02
Protest participation							.24***	.03	.23***	.03
Member pressure group							.31***	.04	.31***	.04
Boycotting/Buycotting							.12***	.03	.12***	.03
Electoral turnout	0.21***	0.05	0.03	0.05			0.00	0.04		
Party voted (ref. Podemos & allies)										
_PP					-0.15**	0.04			-0.03	0.04
_PSOE					-0.10*	0.04			-0.02	0.04
_Ciudadanos					-0.17***	0.04			-0.05	0.04
_Izquierda Unida					0.03	0.05			0.03	0.05
_Other minority					-0.00	0.05			-0.00	0.04
Constant	1.13***	0.15	2.10***	0.14	1.99***	0.15	1.87***	0.14	1.77***	0.15
N	1233		1233		1060		1233		1060	
Adj. R2	0.0090		0.0572		0.0539		0.0948		0.0919	

FIGURE A1: Histogram dependent variable (Digital Activism Scale)

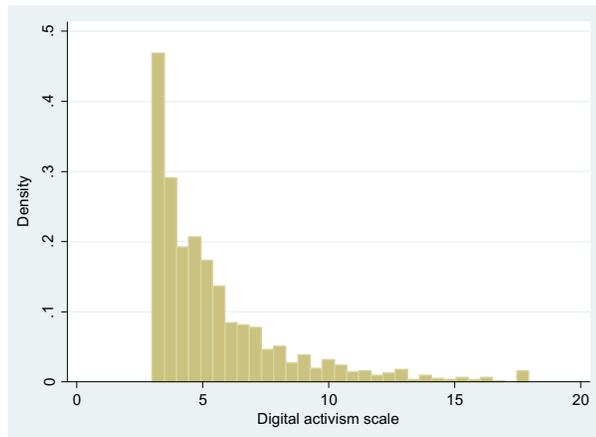
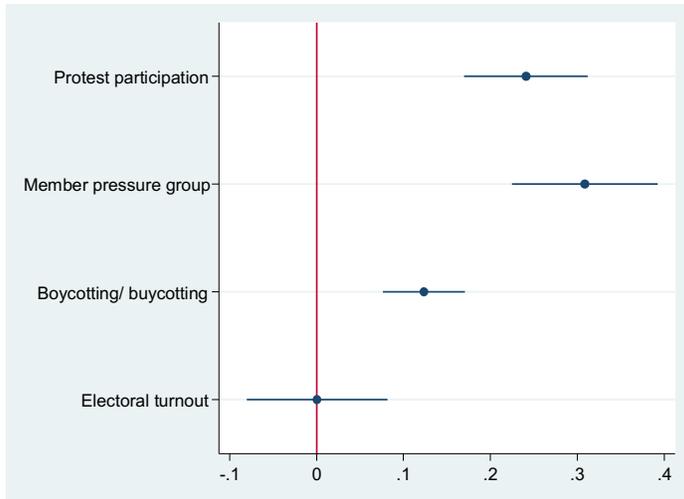
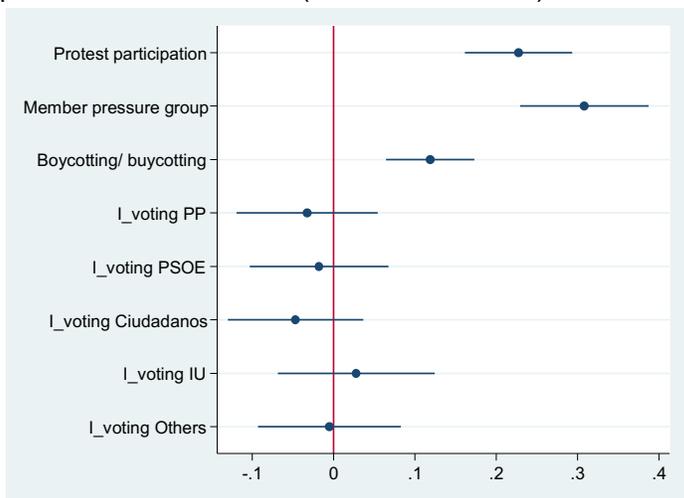


FIGURE A2: Marginal effects of offline political participation (protest participation, member of pressure group, boycotting/ boycotting, and electoral turnout) on digital political activism scale (Model 5, Table A1)



95% C.I.

FIGURE A3: Marginal effects of offline political participation (protest participation, member of pressure group, boycotting/ boycotting, and voting spells) on digital political activism scale (Model 5 Table A1)



Multinomial voting spells: baseline category is Podemos (and its confluences). 95% C.I.

## Appendix II: questionnaire and operationalization

- Age groups: 1= 30 years-old or less; 2= 30-45 years-old; 3= +45 years-old
- Household income: 1= 1,200€ per month or less; 2= 1,201-2,400€ per month; 3= +2,400€ per month
- Education: 1= Primary; 2= secondary; 3= tertiary
- Municipality size: 1= 10,000 inhabitants or less; 2= 10,001-100,000 inhabitants; 3= +100,000 inhabitants
- Internet user: 1= "Sometimes every month" or less; 2= "several times a week"; 3= "daily"
- Ideology: 0= "left", 5= "right"
- Institutional trust: 0= "fully mistrust"; 10= 0= "fully trust"
- Campaign attention: 1= "a lot"; 2= "quite"; 3= "little"; 4= "none"