

e-democracy in the eu:  
the opportunities for digital  
politics to re-engage voters  
and the risks of  
disappointment

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## Introduction

The internet is driving three major trends in politics that is creating disconnection and disruption to the way politics and governance is conducted. These are:

- **New expectations:** voters have a growing sense that political parties and law-making are out of touch, but not that politics is irrelevant. This is understandable given the changes in the way we interact with other parts of our lives. Online life is instant, transparent, easy and connected – while politics is often slow, laborious and secretive. How can politics meet people’s new expectations about decision-making?
- **New affiliations and locations:** The model of mass membership political parties is losing support, at least in its current form. Across Europe, formal party membership is dwindling in most countries. But people are interested in new forms of affiliation, especially through social media and alternative networks. Digital technology allows people to find myriad new ways to express their political views publicly, outside of formal political spaces. Every day there are millions of conversations about political issues in new digital spaces: on Twitter timelines, Facebook newsfeeds, comment threads, blogs and videos. This new “digital commons” reflects the hopes, views and beliefs of citizens – but it is not easy to connect these new debates to formal political engagement at the moment. Political institutions still expect voters to come to them, but their websites are not where the action is. How to take political issues to the places where there is hot debate nowadays?
- **New sources and types of information:** The internet has made vast amounts of data, and a huge range of information sources across an enormous spectrum of issues, available to every human with an internet connection. How is this information overload affecting engagement with politics? Web sources are also dramatically changing the nature of political reporting and journalism, making it far more dynamic and pluralistic. At the same time, competition from web-based sources and social media is forcing traditional mainstream media outlets to change their business models. How to keep political reporting accurate and pluralistic so that voters get reliable information on which to make their political choices? How to ensure voters, representatives and institutions are not overwhelmed with data and switch off?

Each of these is both an opportunity and a challenge. This short paper does not claim to have answers to how to best navigate this changing environment; more modestly, it aims to sketch out the broad contours of the opportunities and

challenges the internet creates for democracy, and to draw out recommendations for improving the experience of democracy for citizens at EU level. The research presented is predominantly from the UK, with data from other European countries where available.<sup>1</sup>

The paper is divided into four sections. First, we examine each of these three trends, based on a review of existing literature and material. Second, we present new research about how Twitter is being used by European citizens to communicate with MEPs. Third we review examples and short case-studies of initiatives that use technology to bring more people into politics. Fourth, we review some of the risks and challenges of introducing digital reforms into democratic systems – which are too often overlooked. We conclude with a small number of modest recommendations for how political institutions – and particularly the European Parliament – can adapt more quickly to the challenges of digital democracy in order to use it to re-engage with voters.

## 1. New challenges for democracy in the digital age

Below we set out three key trends currently affecting politics. Although not a comprehensive list – and not solely about technology – we think they are important trends that together illustrate some of the challenges presented to traditional politics by digital life.

### Trend 1: New expectations

Across Europe, there is a very broad and sustained trend of citizens losing trust and confidence in the way politics is being done. According to a 2014 Ipsos MORI poll, just 16 per cent of Britons trust politicians to tell the truth – a lower number than trust estate agents or bankers.<sup>2</sup> In Germany, 68 per cent distrust politicians, while 86 per cent of French people do. Despite a small upturn in the most recent poll, the latest Eurobarometer survey shows that just 32 per cent of British adults trust parliament, while 28 per cent of French citizens, 40 per cent of Germans and only 24 per cent of Italians trust their government.<sup>3</sup>

Voting is the most visible and personal experience of engagement in politics. But there is a generational divide between voters. In the 2010 UK election, 74 per cent of people over the age of 55 voted, compared to just 44 per cent of 18-24 year olds. This is a reflection of attitudes: 70 per cent of people in their 70s think it is a duty to vote, whereas just 50 per cent of people in their 20s agree. (This could be a cohort effect rather than just age-related: in the 1950s, when today's 70 year olds were in their 20s, voter turnout was an all-time high).

Outside the UK, similar patterns are evident. Voter turnout in the 2009 Bundestag elections was the lowest ever, at 70.8 per cent – but 80 per cent of 60-69 year olds voted, whereas only 59 per cent of 21-24 year olds did.<sup>4</sup> In France's 2014 European elections, 42 per cent of the total population turned out, but only 28 per cent of 18-24 year olds did so, against 51 per cent of the over-55s.<sup>5</sup> Across the whole of the EU, voter turnout in the May 2014 European Parliament election was 51 per cent of over-55s, but only 28 per cent of 18-24 year olds.<sup>6</sup>

Exactly what is behind these trends are not entirely clear. Causation is hard to establish given all the other trends that are affecting trust, from revelations of corruption to the economic crisis. But one way that people's digital experience could be changing their attitudes towards politics is that they interpret the slowness of responses and inaccessibility of processes in that realm as a sign of aloofness, rather the result of the old technology used in politics.

The digital revolution has enabled people to speak their minds far more easily, get more involved in creating information, and interacting with each other. Take online commerce. Not only do consumers feel better for getting complaints off their chests, but user-generated feedback online keeps e-commerce ticking over. When we purchase a product online, not only do we have easy access to the views of other people, but we can leave feedback too, and it will be viewed and acted upon by others. This gives the manufacturer or service provider a major incentive to pay attention to what we see.

We can also get involved in the production of the material. When we visit Wikipedia, we get an incredibly good encyclopaedia for free: but we also see how it was created, the debates behind its entries, and we can write or edit entries ourselves. When it comes to news content, social media has made us into active producers of information – ‘citizen journalists’ – rather than passive consumers of other people’s views. We make the news these days, as well as watch it.

The typical experience of a European citizen in much of daily life involves digital technology – and that technology is changing many aspects of it. For example, the average European citizens spend around four hours a day online – and a growing proportion of it via smartphones.<sup>7</sup> The UK telecoms regulator Ofcom has found that British adults spend an average of eight hours and 41 minutes a day on media devices, against an average night’s sleep of eight hours and 21 minutes.<sup>8</sup> From shopping to socialising, to watching television, to booking holidays, to communicating with friends, to accessing news, the internet has transformed many aspects of Europeans’ lives.

The overwhelming majority of this sort of online activity is ignored by political processes. Researchers and academics have long noted this disconnection with the technology of politics, which remains offline and clunky by comparison: voting once every few years, responding to consultation documents from time to time, writing to elected officials. For a while, speed looked like the way to bridge the digital chasm, to make politics more like an e-commerce experience – quick, seamless and easy. Technophiles have also written about the possibilities of returning to direct democracy where, thanks to digital technology and processing power, every citizen can vote directly on every single issue and policy.

Others are more sceptical. Political scientist Gerry Stoker points out that most citizens do not care to engage in politics on a regular basis – so the last reform that would interest them is more participation.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Hansard research found that only 29 per cent of British voters think that having more of a say (e.g. more referendums and more consultation) would bring about a significant improvement in the political system.<sup>10</sup>

The bigger change required is not about speed and choice-based convenience: most voters recognise that politics is a more complicated business than choosing a pair of jeans. Direct democracy is not itself an answer to many of society's challenges.

We believe that the answer lies in the quality of engagement, not just speed, ease or quantity of opportunities. Quality is about how citizens are involved in political processes. It requires transparency not just in the amount of information put on websites, but that the data is searchable, shareable, discussed, and acted upon. If voters feel that the systems and procedures that govern how decisions are taken are aloof, closed, incomprehensible and unaccountable, then they won't value the democratic processes where their participation is vital. When we experience a better quality of engagement, where we can get involved personally, then we are more likely to trust the interlocutor.

To improve the quality of engagement in politics is particularly important at EU level, where decision-making is obscure, hard to understand and often sclerotic. Many of the negotiations are between governments and institutions far removed from the average voters, on highly technical issues. What's more, the pressure to increase efficiency and speed in EU-level decision-making has led the institutions to do more of their negotiations behind closed doors, creating an even more unsatisfactory and opaque experience for citizens.<sup>11</sup>

## **Trend 2: Changing affiliations and locations of politics**

The disengagement of the younger generation from the formal process of politics extends beyond voting and attitudes. Young people are less likely to have a party allegiance than in previous years. Three million people were members of the British Conservative Party in the 1950s, and another million of the Labour Party. Now, membership is at a historic low: Labour has 270,000 members while the Conservatives reportedly have under 150,000 (the Labour figure has likely increased with the introduction of a new membership tier, which helped lead to the selection of the current leader, Jeremy Corbyn).<sup>12</sup> Only two per cent of voters in Germany and France are members of a mainstream political party.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, non-party mass membership organisations are not shrinking: for example, the UK charity The National Trust has over 4 million paid-up members, which is far more than all the British political parties combined.<sup>14</sup>

Yet young people have not stopped wanting to improve their lives and communities. According to the latest UK Community Life Survey, they are more likely to take part in formal volunteering than any other age bracket. Many also have strongly held views about issues ranging from living costs, affordable housing and unemployment to the National Health Service and online privacy. Indeed,

Eurobarometer data from 2012 suggests that while young people vote less than other age groups, they are over-represented in alternative political actions such as strikes, NGO membership and participation in demonstrations.<sup>15</sup> They are also more likely than older voters to think that voting in the European elections is an effective way of influencing decision-making (63 per cent of 15-24 year olds against 51 per cent of over-55s).<sup>16</sup>

These findings present a paradox: young people think that voting in the European elections can influence decision making; and they are still the group in the population that votes the least.

But political activity is still happening, just in different venues and in different ways from previous eras. Very often it is taking place entirely outside traditional political structures. There are many aspects to this change, but many polls and surveys attest to the increasing significance of the internet as a political channel across Europe, independent of parties and parliaments. According to Eurobarometer data:

- 15-24 years olds are the most likely to use the internet as a channel for political debate, and to think that it is an effective type of political action.<sup>17</sup>
- 42 per cent of 15-24 year olds have expressed their views on public issues on the internet or through social media, compared to an average of 28 per cent.<sup>18</sup>
- Younger people are also more likely to think that the internet represents progress for democracy, because it allows everyone to take part in public debate.<sup>19</sup>

The way that social media is changing political engagement and activism is a relatively new area of research, but recent studies – particularly in the UK – indicate that the internet has become a vital new avenue of political activity. According to Demos research, social media is now vital to political activism. A representative poll of 1000 British social media users revealed that over half of them either sent or received political material on social media over the last three months, totalling around 11 million people overall. This is greater than the number of social media users who reported participating in politics or activism offline. What's more, this activity is proactive, not passive. In the three months to May 2015, as many people (40 per cent) contributed political content on social media as received it (38 per cent).<sup>20</sup>

This activism seems to encourage people to get more involved in politics. The majority of Brits surveyed felt that social media improved the democratic process

by encouraging more open discussion and greater access to debate. They better understand the issues and what the parties stood for; they feel more engaged in the political debate; and they are more likely to vote. If extrapolated to all 23 million social media users in the UK, it would mean that over 4 million people felt they understood the general election campaign better, and were more likely to vote as a result of political activity on social media.

Online platforms also provide new methods of accessing politics for upstart movements that previously had few means of reaching a broad public. This creates a different kind of challenge to established politics: new possibilities for creating and sharing information – as well as cheap new methods of organising and mobilising – are making it easier than ever for new movements to emerge and grow quickly.

For example, the Five Star Movement in Italy went from polling under five per cent to winning 25 per cent of the national vote in just a year thanks in large part to its online organising and despite refusing to engage with mainstream media. Before the digital age, such a new movement would have taken years to build a voter base because it would have had to create local and national infrastructure. Its politicians would have had to rely on broadcasters and large newspapers to take them seriously to get press coverage and make themselves known to voters. Five Star demonstrated that now a grassroots, internet enabled movement is possible – and can be an effective way of controlling the message and public image.<sup>21</sup>

What effect is the rapid rise of new web-based movements having on democracy? Certainly the new parties and movements are channelling much more energy into politics as voters become ‘netizens’ through online political activity. Similar examples are Podemos in Spain and the Pirate Party in various countries. They are also posing a major challenge to established parties, whose infrastructure of offices, local constituency organisations and membership is no longer a decisive advantage. The political market in most countries used to be an oligopoly of a few large parties, but now the barriers to new entrants have dropped very low, increasing the competition for attention and votes. Networks are becoming more powerful vis-à-vis established institutions, as in many other domains affected by the internet.

Some of the mainstream parties may find it difficult to adapt, but others could be dynamised by the new competition into adopting new methods that connect better with voters. Barack Obama in the US and Jeremy Corbyn in the UK both used internet mobilisation to attract younger voters to support their campaigns.

The implications for the democratic functioning of the political system as currently constituted depend less on whether old parties succeed in keeping their share of the vote than on the issues and style of debate that the new movements bring into politics. If new movements created and largely run on the internet feed broad

public debates and stimulate new thinking, they can bring new dynamism. But if they become “small tent” parties that appeal to nativism to marginalise minorities and exclude some parts of society, they could do harm to democratic processes.

### **Trend 3: Changing information creation, access and use**

In addition to changes to explicitly political activity, there are also major changes in the way that people find, access, consume, create and share information about politics.

Most obviously, the internet is changing where and how people get their political information. Interestingly, it seems to vary by ethnicity. Research conducted in 2015 UK found that people belonging to an ethnic minority are more likely to get news from the internet and less likely to get news from newspapers than white British adults. Around 14 per cent of white British adults now principally receive their news from the internet – compared to 32 per cent of British Pakistanis.<sup>22</sup> The role of social media platforms also varies by age. According to the Eurobarometer, young people are the most likely to trust the internet as a source of information,<sup>23</sup> and the most likely to use social networks (29 per cent of 15-24 year olds against 20 per cent average) as a source of political information.<sup>24</sup>

The connection between social media platforms and political and electoral decisions needs more research. A representative poll of British adults by Ipsos MORI and King’s College London just before the May 2015 UK general election found that 13 per cent of people expected social media to influence their vote; it was the fourth most influential factor after the leadership debates (40 per cent), newspapers (20 per cent), and election broadcasts (16 per cent). This was a significant increase from 2% of people who said it would influence their vote in 2010. Furthermore, its influence was highly subject to the age of the respondent; 34% of 18-24 year olds said it would influence their vote.

This transformation in the way people access, consume and create information creates several opportunities and challenges. Democracies are facing a novel situation in respect of information: we’ve moved from an age of scarcity to deluge. In addition to the growing volume of data generated by citizens themselves, there is now far more data available about politics and political institutions to the general public.

A growing proportion of internet activity is ‘user generated’, meaning that content produced by users, which enters public life directly, without the intervention or mediation of any kind of expert or professional gatekeeper, whether a newspaper editor, publisher, academic peer reviewer or anthologist. This has made more

information readily available to more people, and democratises the production of information, but it results in more misleading information being available too.

This has increased the ideological range of opinion and discussion that is visible, and also the quantity of both very good and very poor facts claiming to be true. The 2011 Demos report *Truth, Lies and the Internet* argued that the range of mistakes, half-truths, propaganda and patent falsehoods now present online is challenging people's capacity, especially that of young people, to tell good and bad information apart.<sup>25</sup> The presence of socially problematic forms of speech on social media has become an acute social problem, from trolling, hate speech and misogyny online, to the prevalence of terrorist propaganda and recruitment.

The rise of social media has also undermined the capacity of any central authority – including governmental bodies and law enforcement agencies – to remove socially problematic or illegal content from the public domain. It is difficult for citizens to manage the information deluge, to discriminate between different information, to tell truth from fiction, and to determine the extent to which certain claims should be accepted or acted upon.

The same holds true for European politicians. They also receive vast volumes of user generated data, as our research will demonstrate below. Traditional methods of understanding public opinion, such as representative polls or direct interaction with constituents, have been supplemented – although certainly not entirely replaced – by new online expressions of public opinion such as online lobbying groups, e-petitions, Facebook pages and Twitter campaigns. This has potentially important political implications. For example, no social media trend is nakedly a proxy for public opinion. Only certain parts of society use social media platforms, and usually a small number of 'power users' dominate even this conversation. What's more, online trends and virals can be engineered. A new breed of 'guerilla' marketing agency has sprung up with promised expertise in 'seeding' virals on the Internet. It's a difficult art, but a small number of skilful viral marketers can make a carefully engineered campaign look like an organic and spontaneous outburst of public sentiment.

The new ways – and speed – that information is created and shared is also changing how and what subjects become politically salient. In 2014, the #BringBackOurGirls Twitter campaign started by Nigerian lawyer Ibrahim Abdullahi gained international attention. The issue of civilian security and terrorism in northern Nigeria subsequently became a major part of the national Nigerian election campaign that year. In Europe, the image of Alan Kurdi, the three year-old who died on a Greek beach after the boat carrying him across the Mediterranean from Syria capsized, became the icon of the worst refugee crisis since the Second World War. Many European newspapers were very slow to print

the images, and when they did, it was because social media users had already posted it online.

The ultimate effects of this change in news and media consumption on broader attitudes about politics are still unknown. Some researchers consider that the growth of user-generated content online may result in a more polemical and polarised political debate. Certainly, online hate speech is growing quickly, and it includes sustained, targeted attacks on individuals and groups. But by democratising the creation of information, the internet makes a far wider diversity of opinion available to people – often for free – which brings more people into the political process. This is a very positive development because it brings greater engagement and pluralism, countering the trend of polarisation.

The vital challenge now is to see how democracies and citizens can best navigate and make use of big data and unmediated information in ways that support open and free societies. One key aspect of this challenge is how the clever use of technology could allow political institutions to provide more information to the public in forms that allay their suspicions about elite-driven political decisions, to demonstrate the trade-offs involved in policy decisions, and to allow greater participation. Equally, it is vital to find out how technology can help citizens hold their elected officials to account, and encourage greater transparency and accountability. Digital technology can undoubtedly help in this endeavour, but cannot realise it alone.

## **2. NEW RESEARCH ON THE PRACTICE OF DIGITAL POLITICS: how parliamentarians use twitter**

Despite these significant changes in political activity, there has been little research to date that examines the exactly how they are being felt. In particular, little is known about the specific ways in which users and elected officials are using social media for political purposes.

To help address this gap, we have conducted new primary research on how EU parliamentarians and voters are using Twitter in order to share information and communicate with each other online. While Twitter is not the only social media platform used for this purpose, and nor is direct interaction between elected officials and citizens the only way it is used for political purposes, this research illustrates one dimension of how political discussion and debate are moving online at both national and EU levels.

### **Method**

Using Twitter's Application Programming Interface, we collected all tweets in all languages sent either to or from MEPs for one month between 12 March and 12 April 2015 (tweets are the way users communicate with each other on the platform). This includes every tweet sent by one of the 504 MEPs whose Twitter accounts we were able to identify and verify when collection commenced, and every mention of an MEP's username in a tweet posted by any user of the platform during the month. We collected only tweets from public accounts.<sup>26</sup> (The number of MEPs on Twitter since we conducted this research as increased slightly). We then subjected the data to a series of analyses turning on the metadata contained in each tweet.

When a tweet is sent, data about that tweet is attached to the tweet itself, such as the time, place, language and who the tweet was sent to. By aggregating this metadata and combining it with offline data (such as the nation or European Parliamentary Group the sender/receiver belongs to), we can perform large-scale analyses on the EU parliament as a whole.

In total, the 504 MEPs sent 39,556 tweets over the period – an average of 78 each, though some sent just a single tweet during the period and others sent almost a thousand. When we included all tweets that mention an MEP's user name (posted by any user of the platform), we found 1,074,910 tweets from 238,974 users. That means that, of those MEPs included in this dataset, each received an average of 2,132 tweets each over this one month, and many of them got significantly more. Three MEPs received over 100,000 mentions during the period. In fact, we

anticipate that millions more are expressing their political views on the platform without using the MEP username that we used to identify relevant tweets. Nevertheless, this volume of interactions suggests that Twitter has become a significant site of democratic activism in Europe.

The most prolific tweeters in our dataset were a mix.

*Table 1: Top MEP Twitter users by country and party group*

Rank	Name	Country	Group	Tweets Sent
1	Margot PARKER	UK	Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy Group	990
2	David COBURN	UK	Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy Group	984
3	Inés AYALA SENDER	Spain	Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament	927
4	Michel REIMON	Austria	Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance	758
5	Julie WARD	UK	Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament	687
6	Lara COMI	Italy	Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats)	686
7	Ian DUNCAN	UK	European Conservatives and Reformists Group	613
8	Nathan GILL	UK	Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy Group	607
9	Elena VALENCIANO	Spain	Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament	526
10	Juan Carlos GIRAUTA VIDAL	Spain	Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe	509

Of the top ten tweeters, five are from the UK and three are from Spain. UK MEPs were the most active, accounting for around one third of all tweets sent, followed by Spanish MEPs (16 per cent), Italian (12 per cent) and French (8 per cent). There are clear discrepancies by nationality in the data. The UK is overrepresented on Twitter. Their 63 MEPs are also, on average, the most active during the period, averaging over 166 tweets each. Nations with smaller representations such as Ireland and Austria produced over a hundred tweets per MEP during the period. Despite both having 10 representatives in our sample, Irish MEPs sent five times as many tweets as Danish MEPs over the period.

There are also striking differences in Twitter usage by party group.

Table 2: Tweets sent broken down by Parliamentary Group

European Parliamentary Group	Tweets Sent	# MEPs on Twitter	Average # Tweets Sent
Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy Group	4963	30	165.4
Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance	4495	42	107.0
Confederal Group of the European United Left - Nordic Green Left	3077	36	85.5
European Conservatives and Reformists Group	3913	49	79.9
Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament	9863	127	77.7
Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe	3271	47	69.6
Non-attached Members	2162	32	67.6
Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats)	7179	132	54.4

Although the Socialists and Democrats grouping and the Christian Democrats grouping sent the most tweets during the month we collected, this is mostly a result of the fact they have significantly more MEPs than other groups. Indeed, it is the smaller groupings that are the most active. For example, the Freedom and Direct Democracy Group was three times more active than the Christian Democrats, sending on average 165 tweets per MEP during the period. Proportionate to their size, Eurosceptic MEPs use Twitter much more than parliamentarians from the main parties who outnumber them among the 751 total members. Two of the MEPs in the top five listed above belong to another Eurosceptic party group, 'Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy'.

We also measured which MEPs received the most tweets from other user (measured as number of interactions).

Those MEPs that received the most number of tweets can be broadly broken down into two groups. Those on the right-wing, and those in the public eye. Seven of the ten most mentioned MEPs were right-wing. Nigel Farage, the most mentioned MEP during the month we collected data, was at the time leading the euro-sceptic UKIP party in the UK, and was therefore at the centre of a lot of media attention the UK. The breakdown is below.

Table 3: MEPs receiving the most tweets from other users

Rank	Name	Country	European Parliamentary Group	Tweets Received
1	Nigel FARAGE	UK	Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy Group	131110
2	Teresa RODRIGUEZ-RUBIO	Spain	Confederal Group of the European United Left - Nordic Green Left	120189
3	Matteo SALVINI	Italy	Non-attached Members	119747
4	Marine LE PEN	France	Non-attached Members	87174
5	Pablo IGLESIAS	Spain	Confederal Group of the European United Left - Nordic Green Left	80109
6	Florian PHILIPPOT	France	Non-attached Members	41891
7	Jean-Marie LE PEN	France	Non-attached Members	28671
8	Pablo ECHENIQUE	Spain	Confederal Group of the European United Left - Nordic Green Left	24437
9	Andrzej DUDA	Poland	European Conservatives and Reformists Group	22924
10	Daniel HANNAN	UK	European Conservatives and Reformists Group	17016

(Note - four of the top ten (highlighted in blue) were at the time non-attached members representing far-right parties from Italy and France respectively)

When broken down by country, on average, Spanish MEPs received the most number of tweets per representative during the period. This analysis shows that Twitter users are more likely to turn to Twitter to contact Spanish, French and British MEPs than Czech, Romanian and Slovakian MEPs. This may be due to the respective interest in the platform in the different member states.

Table 4: Tweets received by MEPs broken down by nationality

Country	Tweets Received	# MEPs on Twitter	Average # Tweets Received
Spain	258922	35	2876.9
France	204706	69	1861.0
UK	224093	65	1474.3
Italy	169029	67	1432.4
Poland	32472	31	705.9
Sweden	13038	15	383.5
Greece	5713	12	285.7
Ireland	5349	10	214.0
Netherlands	14251	23	182.7
Germany	22046	63	153.1
Austria	5563	14	139.1
Slovenia	1631	7	108.7
Finland	3309	13	103.4
Belgium	5958	22	78.4
Denmark	1095	12	73.0
Lithuania	542	6	67.8
Hungary	508	7	63.5
Latvia	1054	8	58.6
Czech	2279	18	57.0
Portugal	1020	10	46.4
Malta	448	5	44.8
Croatia	604	9	37.8
Luxembourg	413	4	29.5
Romania	848	19	24.9
Bulgaria	713	9	23.0
Estonia	815	6	22.0
Slovakia	166	7	20.8
Cyprus	142	3	20.3

When broken down by Parliamentary group, it is a similar set of results to those above relating to which MEPs send tweets. On average, the smaller groupings were more likely to receive tweets than the larger parties (we have not established any causal pattern here).

Table 5: Tweets received by MEPs, broken down by Parliamentary Group

European Parliamentary Group	Tweets Received	# MEPs on Twitter	Average # Tweets Received
Non-attached Members	295806	36	5916.1
Confederal Group of the European United Left - Nordic Green Left	240959	37	3300.8
Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy Group	176464	33	3095.9
European Conservatives and Reformists Group	51381	53	577.3
Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats)	71351	162	344.7
Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance	39634	47	333.1
Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe	34488	51	263.3
Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament	56258	139	252.3

### Styles of communication: how MEPs use Twitter

Twitter can be used by parliamentarians in a variety of ways. There is no right or wrong way to use the platform, but differences in style can affect the quality of the interaction. For example, MEPs can use Twitter to reply to other users' tweets directed at them, or simply to post a message. The former is more conversational in style, while the latter is broadcasting.

Of those who sent at least 31 tweets (an average of one tweet per day during our collection period), we identified the top ten MEPs by percentage of tweets that were replies to other users' tweets. Note: the average Twitter user on the platform as a whole sends replies 35 per cent of the time. Only a small number of MEPs exceeded the average reply rate.

Table 6: MEPs tweets broken down by proportion of replies

Rank	Name	Country	EPG	Replies	Tweets Sent	% Replies
1	Bill ETHERIDGE	UK	Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy Group	62	102	60.8%
2	Christofer FJELLNER	Sweden	Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats)	68	114	59.6%
3	Lara COMI	Italy	Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats)	407	686	59.3%
4	György SCHÖPFLIN	Hungary	Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats)	69	131	52.7%
5	Rebecca HARMS	Germany	Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance	66	128	51.6%
6	Tomáš ZDECHOVSKÝ	Czech	Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats)	105	226	46.5%
7	Bas EICKHOUT	Netherlands	Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance	70	152	46.1%
8	Rina Ronja KARI	Denmark	Confederal Group of the European United Left - Nordic Green Left	15	34	44.1%
9	Jonathan ARNOTT	UK	Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy Group	36	82	43.9%
10	Luke Ming FLANAGAN	Ireland	Confederal Group of the European United Left - Nordic Green Left	155	364	42.6%

Bill Etheridge of the UK was the MEP most likely to use Twitter as a means of responding directly to messages. 21 MEPs in the dataset who had sent tweets had not sent a single reply. Bas Belder, of the Netherlands, was the MEP using Twitter to broadcast the most: he sent 298 tweets during the period, but none of them were replies.

When broken down by country, some countries' MEPs were far more likely to use Twitter in this more interactive way. Hungarian MEPs were the most frequent repliers, with 28% of their tweets being replies. Eight of the countries represented were below 10%, including France. French MEPs sent just 320 replies from the 3,866 tweets sent overall. The full breakdown is below.

When broken down by party group, two of the smaller groups - Freedom and Direct Democracy and the Green/European Alliance – tend to use Twitter to interact and engage with other users, whereas the bigger mainstream groups more often use the platform to broadcast their messages. This supports other research work by Demos that suggests more radical movements tend to be better users of social media than mainstream parties.<sup>27</sup> Twitter helps them to extend their support and allows their more extreme views to bypass the editorial checks used by mainstream media.

Table 7: MEPs replies on Twitter, broken down by Parliamentary Group

European Parliamentary Group	Replies	Tweets Sent	% Reply Rate
Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance	998	4495	22.20%
Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy Group	1071	4963	21.60%
Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats)	1422	7179	19.80%
Confederal Group of the European United Left - Nordic Green Left	525	3077	17.10%
European Conservatives and Reformists Group	655	3913	16.70%
Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe	492	3271	15.00%
Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament	1310	9863	13.30%
Non-attached Members	85	2162	3.90%

Despite receiving the most tweets, non-attached members appeared unwilling to reply to tweets, with less than one in 20 tweets constituting a reply.

### **Tweets from voters and other users**

The majority of the tweets we collected were directed at MEPs by users around Europe. Unsurprisingly, English is the most commonly used language. Spanish, French and Italian users also used the platform in large numbers, and constitute the majority (89%) of the tweets sent. Some tweets could not be classified, such as those containing just a link or a string of emojis. These are labelled as 'Unknown'. The breakdown is below.

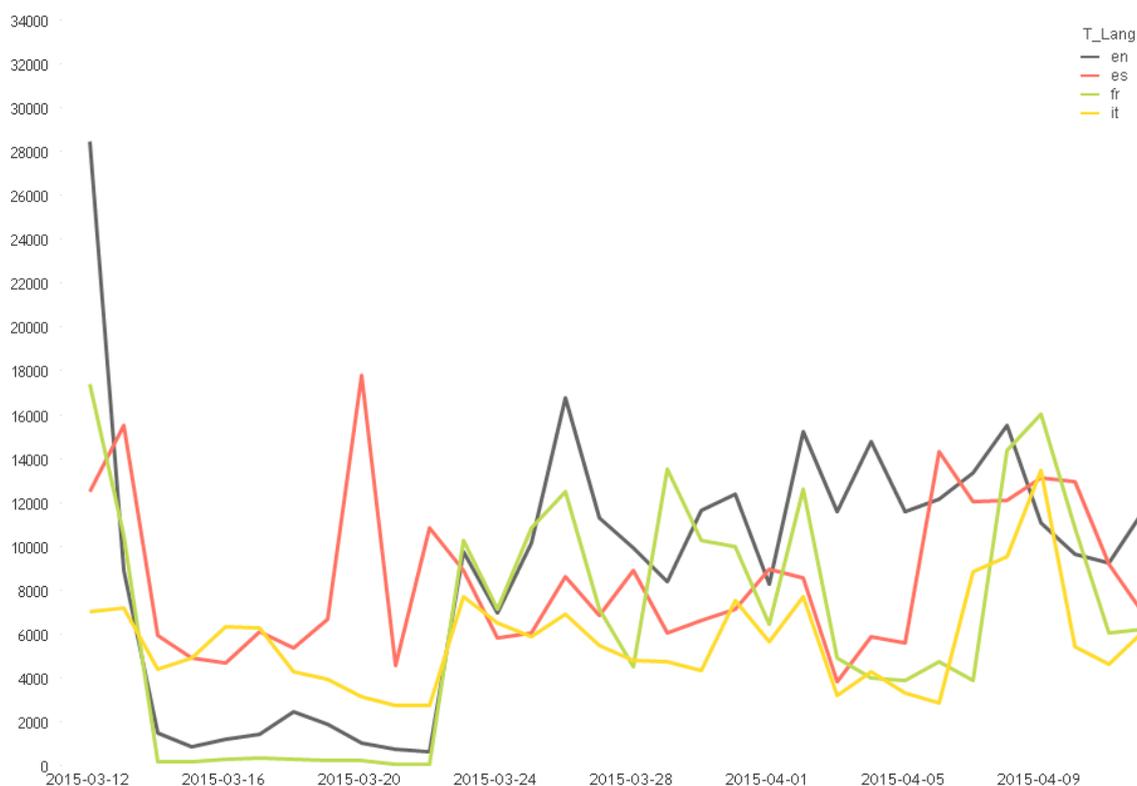
Table 8: Language of tweets

Language	# Tweets	% of Total Tweets	# Unique Users
English	290319	27.0%	74241
Spanish	273256	25.4%	64616
French	209664	19.5%	47811
Italian	181777	16.9%	33334
Polish	33301	3.1%	4864
Unknown	24940	2.3%	15999
German	15751	1.5%	5876
Dutch	14738	1.4%	5973
Greek	6527	0.6%	2125

## Patterns of use

We analysed the different ways in which individual users are using platform when communicating with MEPs. Although some incidents are talked about across several languages, events often generate language-specific ‘Twitter storms’, as the graph below shows. However, the graph shows some overlap in spikes of tweets, which suggests that conversations about the EU often cross languages. There is an interesting correlation between French and Italian tweets, but further work would need to be performed to understand the probable cause.

Figure 1: Tweets over time, plotted by language



In order to provide some content to the sort of tweets that users send their MEPs, we conducted a qualitative review of a random sample of 500 English language tweets that were sent by users to MEPs (selected in proportion to party group size as a proportion of all MEPs on Twitter). A researcher at Demos manually sorted tweets according to whether they were about domestic or EU issues; the subject matter; and the tone of the tweet. The categories chosen were selected by the researcher, based on a method called grounded theory.<sup>28</sup>

In the tables below, we set out the results in full, with illustrative examples from each category type. Interestingly, the data revealed that almost two-thirds of Twitter users preferred to talk to their MEPs about domestic issues, rather than EU-related ones.

*Table 9: tweets categorised by domestic and EU issues*

<b>Tweet Category</b>	<b>% of Tweets</b>	<b>Sample tweet</b>
Domestic issues	63.6%	@chrisrumfitt @DanHannanMEP @FraserNelson Has Ed said whether he would not form a coalition with the SNP yet? Nope. Thought not.
EU issues	32.8%	.@SebDance please vote wisely on Tue on #TTIP, to exclude healthcare from any trade deal (amendment on Section 1, point b, point vii)
Other	3.6%	@A_Mierce_Maecga @Coeurdelion87 @DanHannanMEP Absolutely correct.

Of these issues, discussions about individual politicians and parties (and their public activities) were by far the most common subject matter, followed closely by concerns about the economy or social issues. This probably reflects the timing of the data collection period, which coincided with the May 2015 UK general election. But it is also a result of the disproportionate attention received by controversial personalities among the MEPs, such as Nigel Farage, who are the subject of considerable criticism and sometimes overt personal attacks. Around 15 per cent of users chose to lobby their MEPs outright to vote on particular issues – particularly the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), which was

a major decision going through the European Parliament at the time the data were collected.

Twitter proved to be a significant as a platform for feedback and discussion should not be underestimated. Cumulatively, close to a third of users expressed support for MEPs' viewpoints or defended their ideas in online debate, or shared news and updates with MEPs to solicit their opinions.

Table 10: Tweets categorised by subject matter

Subject Matter	% of Tweets	Sample
Party / Politician	30.6%	#BattleForNumber10 'Hell Yes', a tough #Miliband certainly scares the life out of me! @Nigel_Farage and @MayorofLondon will dictate future.
Economy	15.4%	@ClareMoodyMEP Hi Clare, EU taking UK 2court over tax breaks for small cider makers. Do you agree cider industry is important to SW & UK?
Brexit / EU membership	12.6%	.@DanHannanMEP: "EU leaders keep telling us the alternative to our EU membership is a free-trade-only relationship." Perfect! #WorksForMe
Social	12.2%	.@AdamRamsay @GreenKeithMEP State shd buy property for social rent to replace all sold- off council housing. Fund with QE sitting in banks.
Immigration / Multiculturalism	9.4%	#bbcdebates @Nigel_Farage immigrants pay taxes create jobs are net contributors to the economy. We'd be poorer with your immigration cuts
Other	8.6%	@DanHannanMEP @Bruciebabe @DouglasCarswell It's because of the Twitter's 140 characters limit per tweet.
Personal Attacks	5.8%	[Not included]
Foreign Policy	5.4%	.@richardhowitt Will you vote for the strongest means of stopping the

		flow of #ConflictMinerals into Europe on Weds? <a href="http://t.co/3gJsZgmBmG">http://t.co/3gJsZgmBmG</a>
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To get a better sense of how users send messages to their MEPs, we categorised tweets by the tone taken. This revealed a high proportion that was critical, but a significant number (around one in five) was supportive.

Table 11: Tweets categorised by tone

Tweet Category	% of Tweets	Sample
Critical	37.8%	@Daily_Express @Nigel_Farage you seen the iPsos poll?? You have got no chance of an out vote #stopwastingeveryonetime
Supportive	21%	.@Nigel_Farage thank u nige,, 4 Standing up 4 this country when no1 else will :)
Neutral / News	16.8%	@CharlesTannock what do you think about this article on a carbon price on imports to the EU? - <a href="http://t.co/TWhphAllmP">http://t.co/TWhphAllmP</a> @EDimantchev
Lobbying	15.2%	.@TimKirkhopeMEP @AmjadBashirMEP @RCorbettMEP Please stop #TTIP! Vote against it when you have the chance.
Other / Unclear	5%	@camstaquinn @Nigel_Farage
Angry / abusive	4.2%	[Not included]

## Where tweets come from

Twitter's Application Programming Interface allows the meta-data associated with each tweet to be collected, including location data when available. Typically 1-3 per cent of tweets include a latitude and longitude within the meta-data, which is the exact location from which a tweet is posted (a 'geo-tag' that needs to be switched on by the person posting the tweet).

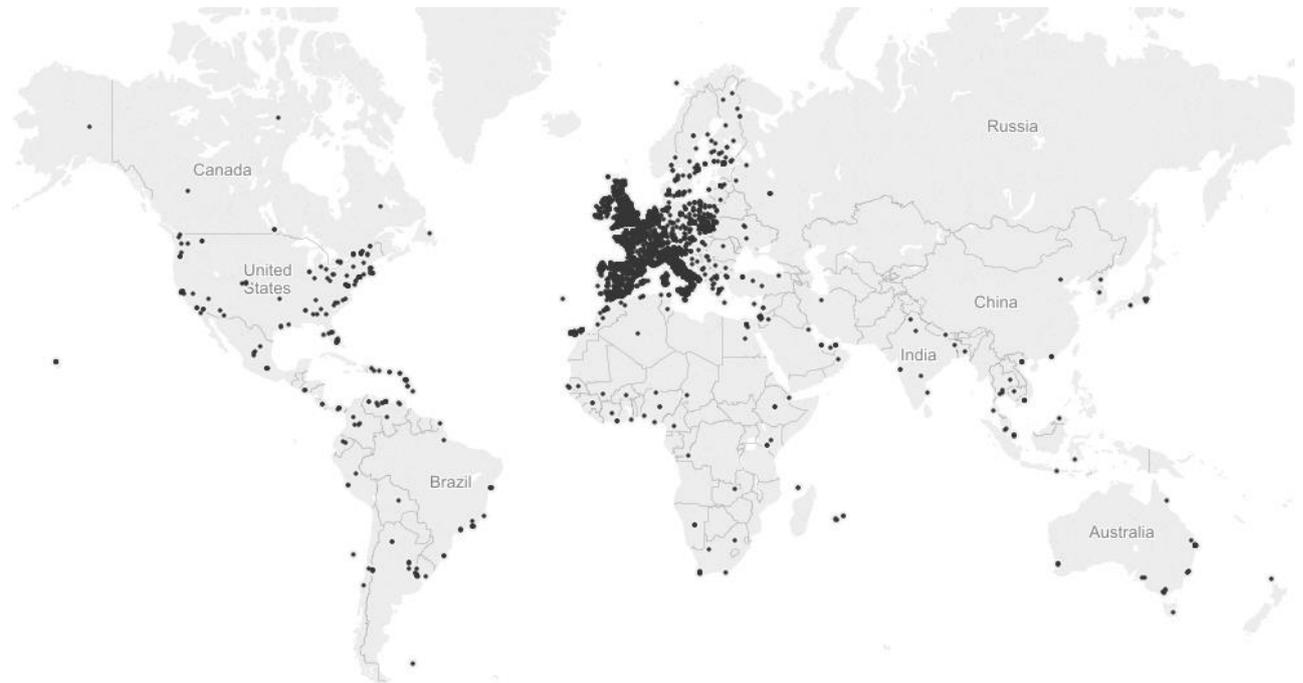
In our dataset, there were 12,445 tweets with geo-located data of this type. Of those, 29 per cent were in English, 25 per cent Italian, 18 per cent Spanish and 12 per cent French. The total numbers are laid out below, as well as the proportion of all tweets in that language. Every European language is represented in the dataset, but the four top languages made up 85% of the total dataset.

*Table 12: Location of geo-located tweets*

Language	# of Geolocated Tweets	% of Total
English	3657	1.3%
Italian	3167	1.7%
Spanish	2268	0.8%
French	1503	0.7%
Unknown	585	2.3%
Polish	383	1.2%
Dutch	263	1.8%
German	149	0.9%

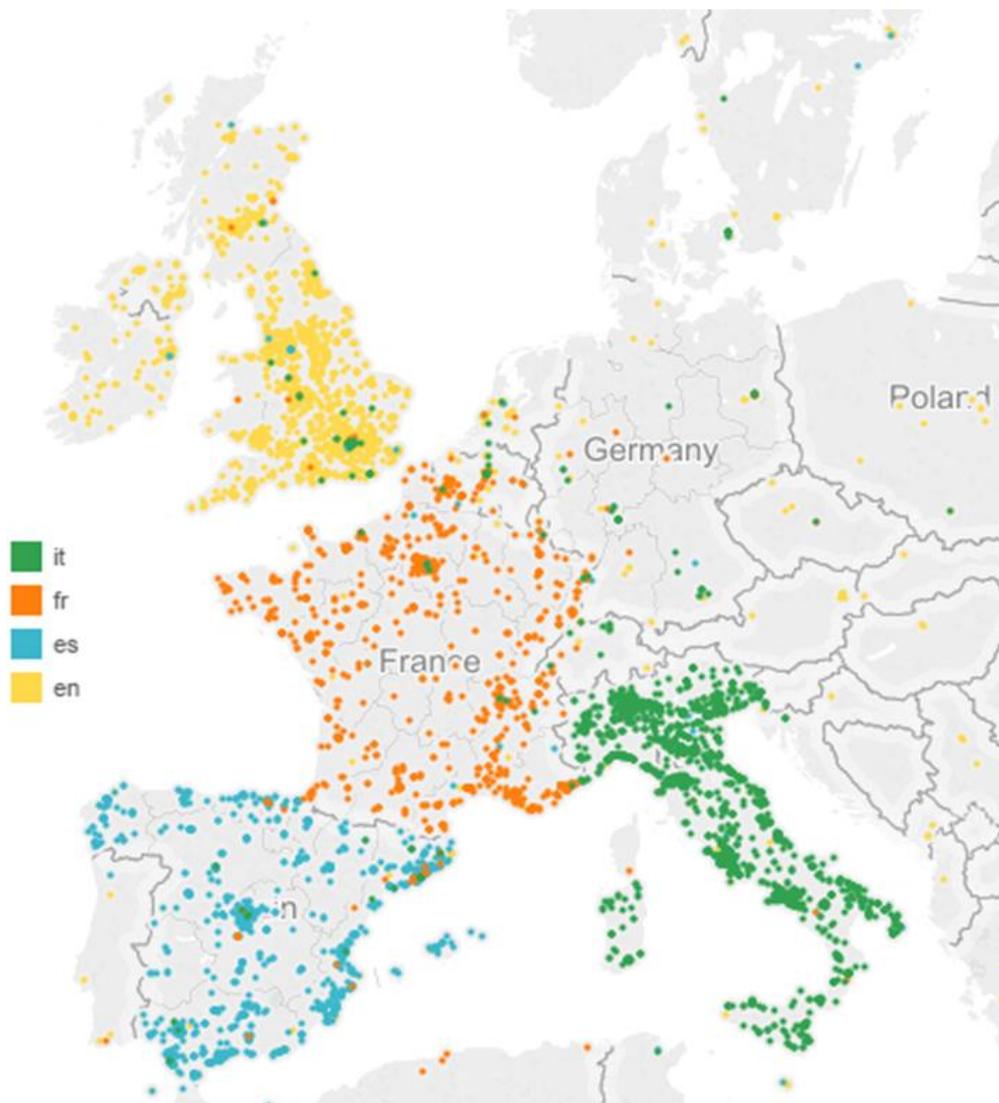
While only representing a small fraction of the data, this is nevertheless a sufficient volume from which to draw some broad conclusions about where tweets are being posted from. Below is a world map which shows from where all geo-located tweets were posted. As expected, they were overwhelmingly posted from within Europe, but there were clusters of activity in other continents.

*Box 1: World map of all geo-located tweets sent to MEPs*



Within Europe, the majority of tweets are in the languages of the country from which they are posted; the English, French and Spanish and Italian language clusters are evident on the map.

Box 2: European map of all geo-located tweets sent to MEPs; filtered by Language



## Conclusion

Overall, this new research suggests that Twitter has become an important platform for democratic engagement in European politics, although activity is not uniform across all countries. Nevertheless, over a quarter of a million people used it to communicate with their MEPs over a one month period, and on a very wide range of subjects, five-month period, including policy and political views. There are likely to be a very significant volume of policy-relevant conversations on Twitter about European politics that we have not collected, which could be extremely valuable for MEPs and others to hear.

However, the explosion of Twitter activity creates a problem for MEPs. The very large amount of tweets directed at them is likely to be too much for MEPs to

answer or even read personally. But if they fail to keep up and become unresponsive, voters will think that they are aloof and unengaged.

MEPs from the smaller parties and party groups are more active on Twitter, and use it as a means of engaging with voters as well as simply broadcasting their message. We speculate that this is partly contributing to their popularity, and it is in keeping with their self-styled position as representing a new type of politics. This, in particular, presents a challenge to traditional politics.

### **3. WAYS FORWARD: new initiatives in digital democracy**

The new research presented above shows just one way that elected representatives and citizens are adapting – in different ways and with very different degrees of success – to one aspect of technological change. Although limited in scope, this research illustrates an important way in which social media is connecting voters to political life at the EU level.

This section will outline promising initiatives to apply digital technology to other aspects of politics and government in several parts of the world, for the purpose of improving or improving citizens' experience of democracy. While each is specific to the context in which it has been applied, together they offer useful indications of possible ways digital technology can be used to enhance democratic practice.

#### **Electoral campaigning and crowdfunding**

The most publicised way of using new technology is the focus of large political parties on using social media for electoral gain. Since Barack Obama's successes in 2008 and 2012, electoral campaigns across the world have entered the digital world as a new political battleground. In 2012, Obama's campaign built an enormous digital presence of 45 million Facebook likes, 23 million Twitter followers, and 1 million downloads of the campaign's Facebook page. The success of this campaign showed politicians around the world how much this new digital space matters, and that they could convert online success into tangible, offline gains. The Democrats' social network organised more than 358,000 offline events, with 1.1 million responses. According to *Time* magazine, the Obama campaign raised \$690 million digitally in 2012, mainly in small cash donations from 4.4 million individuals. That constituted over half of the total \$1.1 billion that he raised, showing the power of this new method of fundraising.

Online campaigning is even more effective for new political movements that don't want to look like traditional parties – even if they become a party once they win seats. Perhaps the best example in Europe is Beppe Grillo's building of a network of millions of social media followers and the most popular blog in Italy in just a few months. Enraged by a series of corruption scandals, he founded a new political movement, the Five Star Movement, which became a furious, insurgent, anti-corruption groundswell. Grillo refused to talk to the mainstream media, instead using online Meetup groups to build an army of volunteers. He spoke to Italians directly through his blog, and crowd-funded his campaign largely through digital communication. In 2012, the Five Star Movement was polling at around 5 per cent in the opinion polls for the parliamentary elections. The following year, Grillo's

party won 1 in every 4 votes, making him the leader of the largest single party in Italy.

In both these cases, dynamic politicians won by gaining personal affiliation from voters through social media, rather than using traditional party membership as a way of gaining the loyalty of their followers.

## **Governance reforms**

Other new initiatives are using technology to improve the practice of democracy rather than to benefit a particular political party. The best known in the UK is the e-petition. Following its launch by the government in 2011, any citizen or UK resident can create an e-petition to support a cause or ask for a change in policy or legislation, as well as sign other people's petitions. Each petition is open for up to a year, after which it will be considered for debate in the House of Commons if it has collected 100,000 signatures. However, the Backbench Business Committee can only consider an e-petition for debate if an MP makes a case for the subject to be debated. In October 2012, the Hansard Society published a review of the first year of e-petitions which showed that 14,092 had been accepted, with three million unique signatures.

The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) is a similar initiative at EU level that was introduced by the Lisbon Treaty in 2009. If 1 million citizens from at least four EU countries sign a petition inviting the European Commission to bring forward proposals in an area where it has the power to do so, the Commission is obliged to examine it. However, only one proposal has so far reached this stage – partly because of how cumbersome it is to collect and verify signatures, and because most petitions have been on subjects outside the Commission's competence.

Implementation of such non-binding methods has proved to be a challenge in both cases. The UK e-petitions can easily be dismissed by Parliament. The ECI has faced legal, bureaucratic and technical challenges, and few European citizens have heard of it.<sup>29</sup>

Around the world, there are several online campaigning communities that try to create similar petitions, but outside the formal structure of political institutions. Perhaps the best known is 38 Degrees, whose members decide on which issues it will campaign. Typical campaign activities include signing petitions, emailing or phoning MPs, and making donations for newspaper ads about their campaigns. Change.org claims to be the world's largest petition platform, with users in 196 countries. It is a for-profit business which sells access to members' email addresses to other organisations, including political groups and non-profits.

The UK government is trying to make more information and data available to citizens through several initiatives. The Office of the Parliamentary Counsel (part of the Cabinet Office) has a Good Law Initiative which aims to make legislation more accessible online by providing simpler language and explanations. The Open Government Partnership UK National Action Plan 2013-15 states that the government will promptly publish all new primary and secondary legislation on the website [legislation.gov.uk](http://legislation.gov.uk); and make legislative data available in an open and accessible format to allow people to re-use content under the terms of the UK's Open Government Licence.

Perhaps the most interesting of all is a website called [data.gov.uk](http://data.gov.uk), which hosts around 20,000 government datasets. Just over half of them are available as open data under the Open Government Licence, making £80 billion of government expenditure accessible to the public in detail. However, not all central government departments publish their spending data in a timely manner, in a consistent format or at the same level of richness, and some local authority spending data is missing completely.

## **Community engagement**

Local politics attracts the most people to get personally involved, so new forms of digital affiliation with local civic initiatives offer great promise for revitalising democratic engagement. They can either focus on influencing political processes problems or offering citizens an independent source of information on parliamentary activities.

For example, MySociety is a UK charity which runs four websites designed to be civic 'self-help' resources to help people to engage with political processes. The first is FixMyStreet, which sends complaints from local residents (about problems like graffiti and street lighting) to councils on behalf of users. WhatDoTheyKnow facilitates freedom of information requests, while WriteToThem is a platform for contacting elected representatives, and TheyWorkForYou provides information about MPs' activities in parliament.

Likewise, NosDéputés.fr is a French platform which provides information on the activities of members of the National Assembly, as well as providing logistical information for citizens to attend parliamentary debates. OpenParlamento serves a similar function in Italy, by providing daily updates on parliamentary debates and accessible explanations of Italian parliamentary proceedings.

## Voter education and engagement

A very interesting new way of improving information to voters – and encouraging them to participate in elections – is the Voter Advice Applications (VAAs) in use across Europe. VAAs ask users for their opinions on a series of political issues to help them to determine how closely their policy preferences and priorities match those of political parties in the run-up to an election. There are currently around 40 national-level VAAs operating in Europe, and more were created prior to the UK general election in 2015. The main Dutch VAA, *Stemwijzer*, was used 4.9 million times in their 2012 elections. In Germany, the state-sponsored Wahl-O-Mat was used 13.3 million times in the German federal election in 2013. However, the UK's largest VAA, Vote Match, was used 1.1 million times in the 2015 UK general election, which is nowhere near the levels of engagement reached in other European countries.<sup>30</sup>

Another VAA, DemocracyOS, was set up in Buenos Aires in 2012 by a group of students and hackers. It is an attempt to create an open source, free software to facilitate public understanding of and engagement with legislation passed through parliaments across the world. In Europe, a similar approach is the Open Debating platform, which is being used by party members (for example, by members of Podemos or Guanyem Barcelona in Spain) and by members of the public as a way of discussing bills and legislation across several European political spheres at the same time.<sup>31</sup> At the time of writing, the platform is in a 'demo' phase, but it is interesting because it demonstrates a digital means of fostering more direct public involvement in the workings of European parliaments.<sup>32</sup>

## 4. PITFALLS OF TECHNOLOGY

Digital technology clearly offers the potential of bringing more citizens into democracy, and improving citizens' experience of democracy. But technology is not a panacea for the problems of democracy and can even make them worse if used ineptly. New technology allows a speed and volume of exchange that is not conducive to extensive and deep deliberation. But democratic procedures, including at the supranational level, involve thrashing out disagreements and reconciling different points of view, which takes time and careful deliberation. Internet-based political discussion creates massive mood swings, with excitement and mobilisation, but often little rational discourse.

The online scrum is not necessarily conducive to a pluralistic debate, because marginal voices can be drowned out by noisy majorities. This might not matter in many areas of online life, but democracies are supposed to reflect the views of all their citizens, so technological advances should not skew political power towards certain groups and away from others. Moreover, certain rights and responsibilities in democracies should remain beyond constant popular vote – such as constitutional law – so the same safeguards and separation of powers should apply online as offline.

We do not have answers to all of these challenges, but we set them out here because they require careful consideration when changes are made to political systems at many levels. We will be considering them in further detail in forthcoming work.

### **Can MPs effectively turn the digital noise into something approximating citizens' attitudes and views?**

For democracies to function, politicians have to avoid capture by special interests. New technology can make this more difficult when the intensity and scale of online debates make it hard for political actors to distinguish the signal from the noise. Social media data of the kind we present above is particularly high in volume and complexity, making it difficult for political actors to gauge when online data reflects broader public opinion, or even just the views of most online users. A seemingly large debate with many supporters of a particular position can instead be the result of a campaign by a PR firm, or a small number of angry people who are very active online. These effects of manipulation and amplification have always affected debates, but they are harder to discern in online activity, so political actors need better ways of telling which communications really reflect the views of many citizens.

## **Will web-based technologies entrench existing inequalities?**

There is a danger that the opening up of democracy with digital tools will create more democratic inequality, meaning that people who are already political engaged can use new technology to extend their influence within the political system, while others remain powerless. The explosion of new digital practices has occurred within a social context where many people are excluded from participating, or are just unaware of them. Not everyone uses social media, and the poorest and most vulnerable in society are least likely to have access. As political processes and debates evolve in response to new technology, it is important that digital views are not heard above others, and especially not over those of the digitally dispossessed, many of whom are already disadvantaged by lack of access to political expression and participation.

## **If technological innovations fail, do citizens feel even more let down?**

The introduction of exciting new reforms can do more harm than good if they ultimately fail to deliver a better quality of engagement for citizens. A recent study of MySociety found no evidence that use of the sites had produced any marked shifts in users' feelings towards governing authorities and their ability to influence such bodies. Moreover, the European Citizens' Initiative and the UK e-petitions do not appear to have resulted in more engagement by citizens. In practice, very few petitions have resulted in any subject being discussed by the European institutions or the British parliament.

The weight of public expectation is rarely met, even when a large number of people participate; for example, 2 million people signed the latest ECI called 'Stop TTIP', well above the 1 million threshold required for valid ECIs. Procedures remain unnecessarily complex and hard to understand to the public; for example, few of the people who signed an e-petition were aware that it required an MP to bring it to debate in the UK parliament. But more worryingly, none of the first successful ECIs ever led to concrete policy proposals – suggesting that citizens might feel even more let down if their millions of signatures do not cause tangible political change. There is even a danger that the e-petitions may give more influence over House of Commons debating time to media and campaigning organisations, as they can raise the profile of e-petitions but already have much greater lobbying resources than ordinary citizens do.

## **How to balance transparency with the need for privacy?**

There are growing concerns about data privacy and personal information on individuals being shared with third parties. Indeed, over the last few years, worries about data privacy have increased, partly a result of people sharing more information about themselves online, and partly a result of a revelations about government surveillance and private company data collection. In a typical week, for example, Facebook users upload twenty billion pieces of content. Smartphones are full of apps that collect information about your activities, every waking and sleeping moment. Some analysts estimate we each give away £5,000 worth of data annually – although no one really knows. While there is great potential for governments and public institutions to open up more of their data and information to the public, this needs to be done with strong protections for data privacy. Existing and forthcoming data protection regulations put restrictions on how personal data can be held and shared. Government institutions need to balance openness and transparency against necessary safeguards for personal information.

## **How to avoid the data deluge?**

The UK parliament recently conducted a ‘Commission on Digital Democracy’, which found that e-petitions have led to many more people engaging with their MP. However, they also make it more difficult for MPs to respond to constituents personally. Parliamentarians’ inboxes get clogged up with template emails, among which individual messages from constituents who need help are in danger of getting lost. MPs complain that it is impossible to respond to the volume of requests received.

The research on Twitter messages sent to MEPs presented above shows a similar problem. Based on our research, the MEPs received an average of 2,132 tweets each over 4 week period we collected data, and many received significantly more (three received over 100 thousand). To read and answer so many messages is a significant burden for MEPs and their assistants. Measures to help politicians to filter and manage this deluge are urgently needed, so that they can do their job of representing their constituents effectively.

## **Is it possible to manage online political discussions effectively?**

One of the key challenges with digital democracy is that large, online spaces are very good at gathering information, but not good at prioritising it or deliberating on what it means. It is still difficult to channel the incredible volume of discussion

and communication into any kind of collective decision-making process, let alone a consensual outcome.

## **CONCLUSIONS: how to seize the new opportunities of digital democracy**

If used well, digital tools might help to improve citizens' confidence and trust in both political institutions and the people who work in them. But if used ineptly, they could make citizens feel even more disillusioned with political processes that seem remote, irrelevant, old-fashioned or dominated by special interests. This is the difficult challenge facing many liberal democracies, including the European Parliament and other EU institutions.

In this conclusion, we set out an agenda for further exploration with examples of promising routes to improving voters' experience of EU-level democratic processes, especially those that would address the challenges we started with: changing expectation; changing affiliations and location; and changing information. These recommendations are especially important for the European Parliament, which is often accused of being more remote and less directly connected to the concerns of voters than national or regional parliaments are. Because the Parliament represents such a large and geographically diverse collection of people, it is the ideal candidate to adopt new technology to update its methods and engage the public directly by taking more of its business online and making more data publicly accessible.

To meet people's upgraded **expectations** of fast and effective online services, the European Parliament could adopt new methods of involving voters in its deliberations that echo their online experience in other domains. The Parliament has a Facebook following of 2 million people, to which it could add further channels:

- Use online platforms to facilitate dialogue about legislative proposals and their implications, including their deliberation in committees. Web tools exist that could enhance presentation of diverse views and considerations, so that citizens can see the trade-offs involved in the decisions, and synergies with their own individual perspectives. While the ECI has started the process, given the shortcomings of existing procedures, a platform facilitating quick yet detailed responses to initiatives could help keep voters engaged. For example, the Commission turned down the 'Stop TTIP' ECI over a technicality despite the large number of signatures, which is likely to alienate those voters.
- Make deliberation more interactive. For example, when there is a new legislative proposal, members of the public should be able to comment on it, discuss it, share it and link to it. Parliaments might add ways of linking to the debates on certain amendments, not just as a flow from MEPs to

citizens, but also horizontally across and between citizens. People in one part of Europe should be able to see easily what their counterparts are thinking about – just as they can as consumers on Amazon or Facebook.

To allow for stronger **affiliation** with what MEPs do, beyond their allegiance to political party groups, and find the new **locations** where politics now occurs, the European Parliament should engage with people in the forums they are already, using rather than expecting voters to come to them through institutional websites. Consumers these days expect to do more than receive information from above; they want to be involved in creating it, and to be able to participate directly in debates.

- Use technology to identify issues that are important to citizens but have been overlooked in political processes, through direct engagement between citizens and parliament. For example, non-mainstream issues can be raised in the UK parliament through a “member’s bill” of just one MP. This is a valuable way of bringing voters’ non-political affiliations into political processes. One technical approach is to use keyword annotators on forums or websites like TheyWorkForYou (and their European equivalents) to track keywords and issues that pop up often but do not get put into a successful petition, and then put those issues to MEPs. This would help to get around the numbers threshold problem; an e-petition with 99,000 signatures cannot get past the 100,000 threshold, but might still raise important issues.
- It is now easier for ordinary people to lobby on an equal footing with PR firms and other paid lobbyists – for example creating campaigns and material which can be shared on public social media platforms and sent to elected representatives. To use it, the EU would need to create more formal channels for citizens to submit petitions and proposals under a unique user authentication system to ensure the process cannot be captured by a small number of vocal or influential people. ‘Block chain’ technology allows for verification of individual users using unique digital signatures that prevent users from interacting multiple times on a database. These could potentially be incorporated into existing petition systems – and provide an important democratic check on online activism.
- The European Parliament should create a data dashboard that is freely available to all MEPs to better allow them to make sense of the new ‘digital commons’. This dashboard needs to be free and easy to use, built according to MEPs’ requirements and to ensure that other users’ privacy is respected. This tool would help elected representatives to collect and analyse online conversations, distinguish genuine users from trolls and special interest groups, to identify their own constituents for priority, and sort through their

comments according to the topic and type of communication. This dashboard is a vital tool that MEPs need urgently, given the volume of communication they are now receiving.

Digital technology allows many new ways of delivering **information**, and making large amounts of data accessible to improve accountability and transparency. Improvements in processing power, free software and other tools allow parliaments to produce and share new types of data to allow citizens to interrogate and input into political debates that would improve the functioning of the European Parliament. Some examples include:

- If the EU provided a more engaging and accessible interface for viewing annual budget allocation information and quarterly financial performance reporting, citizens would have greater scrutiny of departmental expenditure and policy delivery.
- The European Parliament should offer RSS syndication (a way to publish frequently updated information from a range of sources to users who request it) on the progress of draft legislation and other business, to take the debate to where people are already discussing the issues.
- The European Parliament should use block chain technology to create decentralised, immutable digital public records. These new protocols are based on innovations used in crypto-currencies such as Bitcoin.<sup>33</sup> Application of this technology has so far been limited, but it potentially offers a new way of publishing and recording EU data – such as spending – in the form of a public record which can be verified by citizens. One example is to make publicly available all EU spending records on to a public database for scrutiny by citizens. Using block chain technology means the data cannot be tampered with by third parties, is constantly available, and can only be updated by verified users.
- The EU institutions should adopt a policy of making publicly available all data for which there is no clear overriding reason for privacy (individual information, commercial interest or national security) in a consistent, machine-readable format that can be used by researchers and journalists. Simply declaring data sets to be open does not, in itself, make it of any practical use to the public, and so further investment in ensuring they can be understood and used by the public would strengthen the value of big data.

This paper has tried to show how closing the digital chasm between people's daily lives and politics could help reconnect politics and people – and that failure to do would be dangerous for democracy. The opportunities we identify for

reconnection show that new technology offers better answers to some challenges than to others. A further analysis of costs and benefits for these types of changes is necessary, but collectively they sketch out a possible way forward.

Our overall conclusion is that new digital technology creates new opportunities to make politics and governance more democratic, transparent, accountable, inclusive and accessible. The challenge is to work out how to do this while avoiding the many pitfalls of relying too much on technocratic solutions, or imagining that social media and digital technology will offer simple, ready-made solutions to the problems faced by modern democracies. Democracies are not, and should not be, run like tech companies or e-commerce services. But without significant reform, political institutions and processes will continue to drift away from people's lives and expectations, depriving politics of the broad public participation it needs to be fully democratic.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The authors would welcome research results from other European countries.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/15/Trust-in-Professions.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> Jamie Bartlett, Jon Birdwell and Mark Littler (2011), *The New Face of Digital Populism*, London: Demos.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/en/bundestagswahlen/BTW\\_BUND\\_09/presse/77\\_Repr\\_WStat.html](http://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/en/bundestagswahlen/BTW_BUND_09/presse/77_Repr_WStat.html)

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/eurobarometre/2014/post/post\\_ee2014\\_sociodemographic\\_annex\\_en.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/eurobarometre/2014/post/post_ee2014_sociodemographic_annex_en.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/eurobarometre/2014/post/post\\_ee2014\\_sociodemographic\\_annex\\_en.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/eurobarometre/2014/post/post_ee2014_sociodemographic_annex_en.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <http://wearesocial.net/blog/2014/02/social-digital-mobile-europe-2014/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://m.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-28677674>

<sup>9</sup> Gerry Stoker (2014), 'Building a new politics' in *New Paradigms in Public Policy*, ed Peter Taylor-Gooby, London: British Academy.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Audit-of-Political-Engagement-10-2013.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Heather Grabbe and Stefan Lehne (2015), 'Emotional Intelligence for EU Democracy', Brussels: Carnegie Europe.

<sup>12</sup> <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN05125/SN05125.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Ingrid van Biezen, Peter Mair and Thomas Poguntke (2012), 'Going, going ... gone? The decline of party membership in contemporary Europe', *European Journal of Political Research*, Vol 51:1, pp 24–56.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Keen (2015), 'Membership of UK political parties', Briefing Paper SG05125, London: House of Commons Library.

<sup>15</sup> [http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/focus-on/young\\_people\\_politics\\_en.php](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/focus-on/young_people_politics_en.php)

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/resources/docs/fl373---report-final-en.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> [http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/focus-on/young\\_people\\_politics\\_en.php](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/focus-on/young_people_politics_en.php)

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/resources/docs/fl373---report-final-en.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/eurobarometre/2014/youth/eb\\_395\\_synthesis\\_youth\\_en.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/pdf/eurobarometre/2014/youth/eb_395_synthesis_youth_en.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> Miller, C (2015) 'The Rise of Digital Politics' Demos (forthcoming)

<sup>21</sup> Jamie Bartlett et al. (2015), *The New Face of Digital Populism: Beppe Grillo and the Five Star Movement*, London: Demos.

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.integrationhub.net/module/society-integration-and-everyday-life/#fn-12>

<sup>23</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/eb/eb76/eb76\\_media\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb76/eb76_media_en.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/eb/eb76/eb76\\_media\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb76/eb76_media_en.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller (2011), *Truth, Lies and the Internet: A Report into Young People's Digital Fluency*, London: Demos.

<sup>26</sup> Social media data can be collected manually by copying, screen-grabbing, note-taking and saving web-pages. However, for large volumes of data, the most appropriate method is automatic collection. We used Twitter's 'Application Programming Interface' (API), a portal that acts as a technical gatekeeper to all the data held by the platform. It allows researchers to use their external computer system to communicate with and acquire information directly from Twitter. APIs produce data in a consistent, structured format, and in large quantities. Twitter's APIs also produce 'meta-data', that is, information about the data itself, including information about the user, their followers and profile. This meta-data is valuable to researchers because it often contains information on everything from the sender's device type, to their account creation date, location and social media following.

<sup>27</sup> Jamie Bartlett et al (2011) *The New Face of Digital Populism*, London: Demos.

<sup>28</sup> For more on this methodology, see Bartlett et al. (2014), *Social Media is Transforming How to View Society: Vox Digitas*, London: Demos.

<sup>29</sup> See: <http://www.citizens-initiative.eu/12-ways-to-build-a-european-citizens-initiative-that-works/>

<sup>30</sup> <http://demos.co.uk/blog/howshouldivote>

<sup>31</sup> <http://democracyos.org/democracies>

<sup>32</sup> <http://democracyos.org/about-us>

<sup>33</sup> Jamie Bartlett (2015), 'The plot to replace the internet' in *The Spectator*, 28 March, <http://www.spectator.co.uk/spectator-life/spectator-life-life/9477812/the-utopia-algorithm/>

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The digital revolution has disrupted politics, but it could enhance democracy. The speed and ease of online business can make political processes look frustratingly slow and inaccessible to many voters. The internet has transformed our social, personal, professional and economic lives, but the processes of politics and government remain remarkably similar to those of the last century. If voters disengage as a result, democracy will lose its life-blood.

This short paper explores the implications of the growing chasm between how people live and how politics works, and how far digital technology can improve the experience of democracy for citizens. We present new, illustrative research on how MEPs and voters are using one social media platform, Twitter. We then explore the broader implications of digital technology for parties and political processes.

New technology is creating opportunities for new types of democratic engagement, but we also set out some of the challenges and difficulties of realising these opportunities. In conclusion, we identify a number of promising new initiatives for improving the quality of political engagement and how they might be implemented by the European Parliament. This paper is not designed to be comprehensive, but rather as a provocation to stimulate further research and thinking on the subject.

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