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Civil Society and the Platform Society in the Age of Post-Representative Politics

STUDIA I ANALIZY

Abstract: *The article explores the concept of civil society in connection with Web 2.0 and its transformative impact on society and politics, contrasting it with the earlier era of Web 1.0. Web 2.0, characterized by enhanced user interaction and content production, has given rise to a new media ecosystem that has reshaped the way people communicate, obtain information, and participate in the polity. The article highlights the emergence of popular social media platforms and how they have become integral to the platform society. These platforms have not only revolutionized online interactions but have also intersected with offline realms, including politics, commerce, and social relations. The article further explores the implications of Web 2.0 for civil society, contentious politics, and citizen engagement, examining the rise of protests, transnational movements, and the impact of digital resources*

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on democracy and (digital) citizenship. Finally, the work discusses the potential of digital counter-democracy in the platform society and the need for democratic control in the digital age.

Introduction

Globalization, generational shifts, changes in political culture, and the emergence of new digital and social media platforms have led to significant political changes. These changes encompass the rise of digital political parties, new interest groups, and novel models of democratic citizenship, all indicating a distinct new postmodern political landscape.

The digital revolution has profoundly impacted representative democracy, public opinion, and the public sphere, which were already substantially transformed by modernization processes. This has caused citizens to adopt new views on political mediation, potentially giving rise to new forms of plebiscitarianism 2.0.

The decline of party democracy and the diminishing role of political parties as intermediaries between civil society and the government have prompted suggestions that liberal democratic systems are entering a new "post-representational" phase.

Civil society, the space that bridges the private sphere and the public sphere/state, has undergone direct transformations due to these changes. It is an essential element of democracy, but it is also constantly evolving, influenced by the rise of the post-nation state, global governance, and transnational activism. These shifts are reflective of the political changes stemming from neo-populism, resistance to it, the emergence of new social and political divisions between winners and losers of globalization, growing economic disparities, and the so-called "cultural backlash." Throughout all these developments, the digital revolution has played a central role[1].

As it is widely recognized, civil society plays a critical role in shaping the politics of Western democracies in the early 21st century. Serving as a dynamic space where citizens can freely organize, express their opinions, and advocate for change, civil society acts as a crucial counterbalance to state power and political elites.

This article aims to explore the importance of civil society in Western democracies, with a focus on its contributions to democratic participation, social cohesion, addressing societal issues, and holding governments accountable. By examining the multifaceted roles of civil society, we can gain a deeper understanding of its

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[1]   G. Balbi, *L'ultima ideologia. Breve storia della rivoluzione digitale*, Laterza, Bari–Roma2022.

significance and potential in influencing democratic processes and outcomes. In the subsequent sections, we delve into the profound impact of social media and internet technologies on the relationship between civil society and politics.

To be more specific, the first section introduces the role of Web 2.0. The second section provides insights into the significance of civil society in Western democracies within the context of the digital age. The third section discusses the relevance of contentious politics and anti-political sentiment in connection with civil society. The following section, the fourth, focuses on digital communication: social media and internet technologies. The fifth section explores digital resources as assets for civil society. The concept of digital counter-democracy is addressed in the sixth section, and the relationship between civil society and post-representative politics is discussed in the seventh. The work concludes with final reflections.

Web 2.0, politics and society

The term 'Web 2.0' emerged as a result of the recent evolution of the World Wide Web. Coined in 2005, it represents not just new tools, but more importantly, a new approach that has revolutionized how the Internet is used compared to the previous 'Web 1.0' era. It's worth noting that the term 'Web 3.0' is now being used more frequently to describe a new phase in the digital realm, although this frontier is still evolving and primarily associated with generative artificial intelligence (GenAI).

As many are aware, Web 2.0 has introduced platforms, applications, and usage methods that facilitate higher levels of interaction among users, as well as between users and the various organizations and institutions present on the Web. This redefined media landscape enables a more horizontal exchange of information and allows for personal content creation rather than just passive consumption of digital resources.

These opportunities were inconceivable in the early 2000s, but this quiet yet monumental change rapidly transformed the formerly 'static' Web into a dynamic space with greater potential for interaction and user-generated content. This era saw the birth of popular social media platforms: in 2004, Mark Zuckerberg launched Facebook, followed by Jack Dorsey's creation of Twitter a couple of years later, and in 2010, Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger introduced Instagram. More recently, in 2016, TikTok emerged on the global stage, particularly appealing to younger audiences. However, politicians and candidates have already recognized the platform's potential for political and electoral communication.

This ongoing 'platformization' of the Web is driving a profound societal transformation, impacting how citizens communicate, access information[2], participate in organized political communities[3], and intersect with offline life. The social media platforms mentioned above have become integral elements of this platform society[4]. Examples like Amazon, Uber, and Airbnb represent just a fraction of the broader Internet landscape. Platforms have permeated various aspects of offline life, including politics, commerce, services, social interactions, and leisure. Together with other cultural, demographic, and historical changes, platforms are altering the relationship between society and politics. Connective and networked logics have become the foundation of the digital world, often referred to as the "new social operating system"[5].

This gradual development of a new media ecosystem has redefined the context in which politics, both traditional and digital, occur. It has also reshaped how digital communication and interaction take place on the Web. This shift has significant implications for fundamental aspects of our interest in democracy and (digital) citizenship in the Internet age[6]. Specifically, it has given rise to the concept of the "monitoring citizen," where, in this unique digital environment, there is an additional opportunity to exert ‚indirect counter-power' through actions that go beyond traditional mediation processes, as discussed by John Keane[7] and Pierre Rosanvallon[8].

Shaping Democracy: The Significance of Civil Society in Western Democracies in the Digital Age

Civil society plays a vital role in boosting democratic participation by offering citizens avenues to engage in political processes beyond just periodic elections. It provides platforms for public discussions, allowing individuals

[2] R.K. Nielsen, S.A. Ganter, *The Power of Platforms. Shaping Media and Society*, Oxford University Press, New York 2022.

[3] C. Vaccari, A. Valeriani, *Outside the Bubble: Social Media and Political Participation in Western Democracies*, Oxford University Press, New York 2021.

[4] J. van Dijck, T. Poell, M. de Waal, *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World*, Oxford University Press, New York 2018.

[5] L. Rainie, B. Wellman, *Networked: The New Social Operating System*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 2012.

[6] E. Isin, E. Ruppert, *Being Digital Citizens,* London, Rowman & Littlefield 2015; L. Ceccarini, *The Digital Citizen(ship): Politics and Democracy in the Networked Society*, Elgar Edward Publishing, Cheltenham 2021.

[7] J. Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York 2009.

[8] P. Rosanvallon, *Counter-Democracy: Politics in an Age of Distrust*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2005.

to express their concerns, opinions, and hopes. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), grassroots movements, and advocacy groups enable citizens to organize, mobilize, and have an impact on policy decisions. Through initiatives like community forums, public debates, and citizen consultations, civil society encourages active citizenship and bolsters the democratic structure of Western societies. As a result, civil society becomes a key player in processes of democratic innovation within this framework[9].

Civil society acts as a bridge between diverse social groups, promoting social cohesion in Western democracies. It offers spaces for dialogue, cooperation, and the pursuit of common objectives, thereby advancing understanding, tolerance, and social integration. Civil society organizations often address social divisions and promote inclusivity by advocating for marginalized communities, safeguarding human rights, and combating discrimination. By fostering collaboration and building networks across different sectors of society, civil society helps strengthen the social bonds necessary for democratic stability. Civil society is, therefore, a multifaceted and complex reality, as effectively illustrated by Edwards[10].

In the early twenty-first century, Western democracies are grappling with a range of intricate challenges, including environmental degradation, economic inequality, migration, and social polarization. Civil society plays a critical role in addressing these issues by generating innovative ideas, proposing policy solutions, and implementing grassroots initiatives. Environmental organizations advocate for sustainable practices, while social justice groups work towards reducing inequality and promoting equal opportunities. Civil society actors often step in to fill gaps left by the state, providing essential services, and acting as watchdogs to ensure the accountability of governments and corporations.

Civil society acts as a vital check on power, holding governments accountable for their actions and decisions. By monitoring policies, exposing corruption, and advocating for transparency, civil society organizations play a crucial role in safeguarding the integrity of democratic governance. Through initiatives like advocacy campaigns, independent media, and whistleblower protection, civil society sheds light on issues that might otherwise remain hidden. By amplifying the voices of marginalized individuals and advocating for the

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[9] G. Smith, *Democratic Innovations: Designing Institutions for Citizen Participation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2009; M. Sorice, *Democratic Innovation*, [in:] P. Harris, A. Bitonti, C.S. Fleisher, A. Skorkjær Binderkrantz (eds.), *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Interest Groups, Lobbying and Public Affairs*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2020.

[10] M. Edwards, *Civil Society*, Polity Press, Malden, MA 2014.

rights of citizens, civil society acts as a watchdog, demanding transparency and accountability from those in power.

Civil society organizations frequently pioneer innovative governance practices that challenge traditional top-down approaches. Examples include participatory budgeting, collaborative decision-making, and citizen-led initiatives, all of which illustrate how civil society enhances democratic governance. By involving citizens directly in decision-making processes, civil society nurtures a sense of ownership, legitimacy, and trust in political institutions. These innovative practices can bridge the gap between citizens and the state, empowering individuals and communities actively to contribute to shaping public policies.

Civil society in Western democracies also exerts influence beyond national borders, contributing to global debates, advocating for human rights, and promoting democratic values worldwide. NGOs, grassroots movements, and advocacy groups collaborate transnationally to address global challenges such as climate change, poverty, and conflict. They serve as a voice for marginalized communities worldwide, influencing international institutions, policies, and norms. Civil society's transnational networks and activism strengthen the global civil society movement, promoting democratic principles and human rights on a global scale.

Contentious politics, anti-politics, and civil society

Political organizations, particularly those focused on grassroots activism, have undergone significant changes. The weakening of party loyalties and the declining public trust in established political figures have not only affected political parties but also intermediate groups representing social and economic interests, primarily trade unions. This shift has been further influenced by globalization and its impacts, including the blurring of borders and the interplay of global and local politics. These changes have created opportunities for public protest initiatives known as contentious politics[11].

This transformation results from several elements converging: conflict, collective action, and politics. Even expressions of so-called anti-politics can be part of this dynamic, as they relate to changes that have encouraged new forms of citizen engagement and enriched the array of collective actions in the postmodern era with innovative forms of activism, as suggested by Micheletti and McFarland[12]. In other words, political participation can no longer be

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[11] C. Tilly, S.G. Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, II ed., Oxford University Press, New York 2015.
[12] M. Micheletti, A. McFarland (eds.), *Creative Participation: Responsibility-Taking in the Political World*, Paradigm, Boulder, CO 2011.

purely defined in terms of high-effort, offline acts. Political participation now covers an array of forms, which includes traditional forms, such as voting, petitioning governments, contacting elected representatives, and taking part in demonstrations, as well as non-conventional acts performed using digital technologies, which appear geared more toward expressing a view, supportive or otherwise, than influencing decision makers. (…) Most conventional acts can be performed using digital platforms; however, social media also allows users to create or join communities which transcend state boundaries, starting or contributing to discussions, advertising support for causes, and promoting the work of a range of national and global political organisations and campaigns. Digital technologies thus provide a range of new means for engaging in civically oriented forms of behavior[13].

The arena for contestation extends beyond street protests. It has evolved into a style of critical, ethical consumption known as political consumerism (boycotting and buycotting)[14], e-participation, and an amalgamation of old and new, online and offline, individual and collective forms. This shift calls for a reevaluation of what civil society and participation mean today[15]. It has become a personalized form of taking responsibility, extending into sub-political spaces or in the creation of daily arenas that impact personal life, termed life-politics[16] or lifestyle politics[17].

The proliferation of digital communication complicates the concept of 'collective action' by fragmenting and individualizing it. It blurs the line between public and personal elements, distancing itself from institutionalized structures, at least in the traditional sense. This participation model refers to an individualized form of collective action[18], or a '2.0 form of participation,' as later coined by Micheletti[19]. Here, she emphasizes the idea of reticular flexibility, which overcomes the hierarchical rigidity of the 1.0 model, where political parties and institutionalized civil-society expressions were central to politics.

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[13] D.G. Lilleker, K. Koc-Michalska, *What Drives Political Participation? Motivations and Mobilization in a Digital Age*, «Political Communication» 2017, no 34(1), pp. 21–22.

[14] M. Micheletti, *Political Virtue and Shopping: Individuals, Consumerism, and Collective Action*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2003.

[15] J.W. van Deth, *What is Political Participation?*, [in:] W.R. Thompson (ed.), *The Oxford Research Encyclopedia, Politics*, Oxford University Press, New York 2016.

[16] A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, Calif. 1994.

[17] W.L. Bennett, *The UnCivic Culture: Communication, Identity, and the Rise of Lifestyle Politics*, «PS: Political Science» 1998, vol. 31, no. 4.

[18] M. Micheletti, *Political Virtue and Shopping: Individuals, Consumerism, and Collective Action*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2003.

[19] M. Micheletti, *Does Participation Always Have a Democratic Spirit?*, [in:] N. Manning (ed.), *Political (Dis)Engagement: The Changing Nature of the «Political»*, Policy, Bristol 2017.

In addition to local and national activism, new transnational communities have arisen. These communities target multinational corporations, international bodies, and states led by non-democratic regimes through their protest actions. Notable examples include Anonymous' hacktivism, which has been active since the outbreak of conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Underlying such mobilizations is criticism of neoliberal policies, globalization, and their societal consequences[20], as well as criticism of political conduct that disregards human rights and democratic principles.

Some of the most significant political events in recent years include the wave of protests in 2010 and 2011, exemplified by movements like Occupy Wall Street. These movements started in Zuccotti Park near Wall Street in New York and spread to Europe, the Middle East, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Australia, and several Latin American cities. They also encompassed the actions of the Indignados in Spain and the Arab Spring.

Subsequently, a global movement emerged around the figure of young Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, known as "Fridays for Future." It began with a solo protest outside the Swedish parliament in Stockholm, known as "School Climate Strike," and soon expanded worldwide.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine prompted a transformation of 'Fridays for Future' into 'Fridays for Peace,' with the hashtag #PeopleNotProfit, advocating for ecological transition and reduced dependence on fossil fuels. This adaptation of protest slogans to new issues underscores the flexibility and fluidity of this type of mobilization in the postmodern era.

Many of these protests are interpreted in the literature as transnational civil society's reactions against politics. They reflect the intertwined relationship between the national and international dimensions in a world order different from the past, characterized as post-Western. These protests often oppose neoliberal and austerity-driven policies that followed the 2007–2008 global economic and financial crisis, aiming to address global economic and social inequality.

The global landscape was further complicated by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and the Russian Federation's aggression against Ukraine. These emergency situations had geopolitical and economic repercussions, leading national and EU governing bodies to implement emergency policies and measures, offering new opportunities for public debate and citizen mobilization.

It's worth noting that Manfred B. Steger, in the context of globalization ideologies, also identifies a third perspective: religious globalisms, exemplified by phenomena like jihadism, with Al-Qaida as the most extreme case.

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[20] M.B. Steger., *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2013.

The Significance of social media and internet technologies

The rise of social media and internet technologies has significantly impacted the relationship between civil society and politics in several ways. For instance, these digital tools have provided individuals and organizations within civil society unprecedented platforms to express their opinions, mobilize support, and raise awareness about social and political issues. This has democratized the flow of information and made it easier to share ideas on a global scale.

The internet has allowed civil society actors to connect and collaborate across geographical boundaries, fostering transnational networks and movements. This connectivity has increased the potential for collective action and the sharing of knowledge and resources.

Social media platforms have created new channels for citizens to engage directly with political processes. Individuals can voice their concerns, provide feedback, and participate in online campaigns, petitions, and surveys[21]. This has the potential to enhance democratic participation and hold governments accountable.

The accessibility and speed of information dissemination through social media have transformed how people receive and react to political events and developments. Real-time updates, viral content, and citizen journalism have influenced public discourse and shaped public opinion[22].

However, the proliferation of information on social media has also brought challenges, such as the spread of misinformation, fake news, and manipulation. These issues can erode trust in institutions, distort public debates, and influence political outcomes[23].

While social media have given voice to diverse perspectives, they have also contributed to the fragmentation of the public sphere. Concepts like filter bubbles[24], echo chambers[25], and algorithmic bias[26] can reinforce existing beliefs and limit exposure to alternative viewpoints, hindering constructive dialogue and consensus-building.

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[21] C. Vaccari, A. Valeriani, *Outside the Bubble: Social Media and Political Participation in Western Democracies*, Oxford University Press, New York 2021.

[22] Z. Papacharissi, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*, Oxford University Press, New York 2014.

[23] M. Thompson, *Enough Said: What's Gone Wrong With the Language of Politics?*, St. Martin's Press, New York 2016.

[24] E. Pariser, *The filter bubble: What the Internet is hiding from you*, Penguin, New York 2011.

[25] C.R. Sunstein, *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J. 2017.

[26] T. Bucher, *If… Then: Algorithmic Power and Politics*, Oxford University Press, New York 2018.

Social media platforms have become instrumental in organizing and coordinating grassroots movements and campaigns[27]. Hashtags, viral challenges, and online petitions have facilitated collective action and generated public pressure on political leaders.

The widespread use of the internet has raised concerns about government surveillance, data privacy, and restrictions on online freedoms. Civil society organizations are at the forefront of advocating for digital rights and protecting privacy in the face of increasing state control and corporate interests.

Online platforms have revolutionized fundraising for civil society organizations, enabling them to reach a broader donor base and collect donations more efficiently. Crowdfunding and digital payment systems have facilitated resource mobilization for various causes.

To harness effectively the power of social media and internet technologies, civil society organizations have had to adapt their strategies. They employ digital advocacy, social media campaigns, online storytelling, and data-driven approaches to engage audiences and drive social and political change.

Digital resources as (possible) resources for civil society

The key driving force behind the scenario discussed in the previous sections is the digital revolution. This term is often used in public discourse but needs clarification before we delve into the combined impacts of digitization and platformization, their political implications, and the changing political culture of citizens.

The digital revolution has affected everyone, regardless of whether they use the internet or are affected by the so-called 'digital divide.' This new ecosystem has been created due to the rise and prevalence of digital technology in the everyday lives of citizens.

In essence, a genuine revolution has taken place, on a par with other momentous revolutions in history, such as the discovery and use of fire, the American and French revolutions, the Enlightenment, and the industrial revolution. Digitalization has transformed the lives of individuals and collectives in various spheres, including communication, commerce, information, education, leisure, and politics. These transformations have had a profound impact, and more changes are expected in the future, reshaping human development. The

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[27] J. Cable, *Protest Campaigns, Media and Political Opportunities*, Rowman & Littlefield, London 2016.

mere possession of a networked smartphone enables various forms of engagement with this digital world.

The stories surrounding this revolution have taken on an ideological character, framing digitalization as a revolutionary and radical change for humanity. It has led to a clear distinction between the pre-digital and post-digital eras, shaping common sense and social practices.

However, the network and digital development contain inherent ambiguity, giving rise to different political scenarios and interpretations, which remain uncertain. The role of civil society can influence these scenarios.

On one hand, participatory practices can have a significant political impact and empower the modern digital citizen. These practices place the sovereign people and civil society at the heart of the political landscape. This is especially true considering that, thanks to the digital revolution, their organizations can be more or less organized, as highlighted by Shirky's concept of the 'Power of Organizing without Organizations.'

On the other hand, these positive outcomes are not guaranteed. Initial expectations and promises of disintermediation and direct democracy, with citizens at the centre of the digital public space, have given way to concerns about growing democratic disillusionment. Disintermediation may lead to a concentration of power and political control, potentially resulting in a form of 'plebiscitarianism 2.0,' as seen in various digital parties[28]. These experiences challenge mediation and representation principles, pushing the concept of democracy beyond post-democracy[29]. They combine old and new elements, fundamentally altering the dynamics of politics in the relationship between new technologies and democracy. As has been pointed out during the reflection on hyper-democracy, it is a development that should not be understood in a reductive way, or as if the technology offered only those means that render voting ever easier and more rapid and frequent. In such circumstances, a narrow vision of democracy would be recognised, seen not as a process of participation of the citizens, but only as a procedure of ratification, as a perpetual game of yes and no, played by citizens who nevertheless are extraneous to the preparatory phase of the decision, to the formulation of the questions they must answer. The conceptual and political change is evident. Direct democracy becomes solely a democracy of referendums, and on the horizon there appears, rather, a plebiscitarian form of democracy[30].

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[28] P. Gerbaudo, *The Digital Party: Political Organisation and Online Democracy*, Pluto, London 2019.

[29] C. Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, Polity Press, Malden, MA 2004; C. Crouch, *The Globalization Backlash*, Polity Press, Malden, MA 2018.

[30] S. Rodotà, *Iperdemocrazia: Come Cambia la Sovranità Democratica con il Web*, Laterza, Rome 2013.

In order to escape this reductionist formulation between technology and democracy, it is necessary to go beyond the identification of electronic democracy with the logic os referenda, and to analyse the manifold dimensions of the problem. These concern the effects of information technologies on individual and collective liberties; the relationships between the public administration and those who are administered; the forms of collective organisation of the citizens; the modalities of participation of citizens in the various procedures of public decision-making; the types of consultation of the citizens; the characteristics and the structure of voting. These, however, are not separate matters but facets of a single theme (…)[31].

In simpler terms, technology and its relationship with democracy directly influence the topics of political citizenship, civil society, and its expression. The concept of 'presidentialization'[32] could be amplified in the digital age, allowing for 'hyper-leadership.' It also grants the (unaccountable) owners of major platforms the ability to make decisions unilaterally, as exemplified by the permanent suspension of the Twitter account of US President Donald Trump after the events in Washington D.C. on 6 January 2021. This demonstrates a direct and immediate exercise of power by the leaders of these organizations. Consequently, it highlights an issue that goes beyond the debate on the decline of public discourse, echo chambers, and filter bubbles, criticized for the lack of transparency in the algorithms used by platforms to manage information targeted at individual network users. In simpler terms, it is a case of power having been placed directly in the hands of those who control the 'server keys.'

In today's democracies, citizens and the political actors who represent them are grappling with a profound sense of disillusionment. Civic monitoring can be viewed as the flip side of this widespread distrust. Distrust typically underlies disenchantment and political disengagement, contributing to the decline of civic involvement within a political community. However, it can also be seen from a different perspective, as a fundamental motivator and a fundamental component of democratic oversight, as in Pierre Rosanvallon's vision.

(Digital) counter-democracy in the platform (civil) society

Pierre Rosanvallon's concept of counter-democracy considers the internet as a vital tool available to civil society for addressing the issue of democratic distrust. In this perspective, the internet is regarded as a political medium.

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[31] Ibidem, p. 6.
[32] T. Poguntke, P. Webb, *The Presidentialization of Politics: A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005.

Within the landscape of power structures, the internet can play a significant role in enhancing the quality of representative democracy in an era marked by mistrust.

Compared to the past, there is now intermittent and somewhat transient participation, as well as organized post-bureaucratic forms[33], civil-society monitoring structures, and mobilization facilitated by digital capabilities. Together, they have created a realm of democratic engagement that complements traditional elections, which are the cornerstone of representative democracy. This fits into the broader discussion about the theoretical concept and practical application of representation. Monitorial citizens, as defined by Michael Shudson, and their direct actions, both online and offline, can be viewed as a response to the decline in the effectiveness of representation. They have started to adopt methods of action that go beyond conventional forms of political participation, hinting at the emergence of a post-representational model for the political dynamics of democratic systems.

The digital revolution has expanded the spatial scope, which has, to some extent, become less defined. Digital citizens use specialized websites for online petitions, not only for local issues but sometimes for causes that extend beyond their immediate locality, such as www.change.org. They are active on popular social media platforms, where they can organize various civic or explicitly political campaigns. Platforms like Meetup and FixMyStreet are essential tools for these purposes. Others, like MoveOn.org, represent both an experience and a valuable model for studying the evolution of new-generation political advocacy groups and lobbying in the digital age.

In essence, these platforms connect various dispersed realities and experiences, with the central theme being "connection." The true impact of the new media environment does not necessarily come from organizing without organizations, as previously argued by Shirky in 2008, but rather from organising with different organizations, as later posited by Karpf[34]. This leads to various forms of engagement, including the use of tools provided by advocacy groups like analytic activism. Analytic activism represents a novel approach to citizen-led politics, leveraging digital technologies to introduce innovative strategic interventions into the political arena. This shift has brought about changes in organizational structures, processes, and working methods.

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[33] B. Bimber, *Information and American Democracy: Technology in the Evolution of Political Power*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003.

[34] D. Karpf, *The MoveOn Effect: The Unexpected Transformation of American Political Advocacy*, Oxford University Press, New York 2012; D. Karpf, *Analytic Activism, Digital Listening and the New Political Strategy*, Oxford University Press, New York 2017.

It is important to clarify that not all digital activism falls under the category of analytic activism. Individual citizens and various social movements, both active and less active online, also benefit from the opportunities offered by the internet. Analytic activism, based on data analysis, involves reflection, decision-making, and the development of new strategic approaches within activist groups and specifically in advocacy organizations. Strategy revolves around making choices, and strategists base their decisions on information that they collectively deem relevant to the desired outcomes. What sets analytic activism apart from other forms of digital activism is its focus on transforming new modes of digital listening into strategic inputs that, in turn, contribute to fresh forms of digital discourse related to activism.

The digital platforms mentioned above are examples of tools for Internet-mediated participation that can be used as civil society monitors to address the fundamental question of control of the elected and the governed, since elections, Bernard Manin points out, recalling Carl Schmitt's reflection, can be a democratic method if those elected are regarded as 'agents, proxies, or servants,' that is, if they are treated as 'dependent delegates.' This, however, implies that elections are aristocratic if representatives are independent in the sense that constitutional theory gives to the term – that is to say, if they are not bound by instructions or imperative mandates[35].

The Internet alone, of course, guarantees neither a better compromise between representatives and the represented nor the affirmation of an engaged civis nobilis 2.0 in postmodern civil society. Moreover, this digital citizen does not prefigure a genuinely new type of citizenship. Rather, s/he reflects a kind of digital empowerment of an ideal typical citizen, namely the civis nobilis, already discussed in the political science literature[36].

Civil society in the era of post-representative politics?

Examination of the postmodern reality reveals significant transformations, some of which have already occurred, while others are still ongoing. In modern representative democracies, developments like micro-partisanship, pop-up parties, and the rise of anti-party political actors are combined with a growing disillusionment toward traditional political mediators. These mediators are no

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[35] N. Manning, *Feeling politics: the importance of emotions for understanding electoral (dis)engagement*, [in:] N. Manning (ed.), *Political (Dis)Engagement: The Changing Nature of the «Political»*, Policy, Bristol 2017.

[36] G. Sani, *«Civis italicus». Il mosaico della cultura politica italiana,* [in:] M. Maraffi (a cura di), *Gli Italiani e la politica*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2007.

longer legitimized by society and the citizens they aim to represent, as pointed out by Tormey in 2015[37].

Widespread anti-political sentiments, specifically "anti-establishment" attitudes, promote a direct and personalized mode of communication between representatives and their constituents. In essence, citizens now have a more immediate conception of democratic practice. The decline of party democracy, which previously relied on these representatives and political mediators, has led observers to consider new foundations for politics, exploring the concept of the post-representative.

One way to address the challenges posed by these times is to combine different democratic concepts. Key ideas like "participation" and "deliberation," including practices of participatory and deliberative democracy at both local and broader levels, can merge to enhance representative democracy. This approach aims to bolster the resilience of the democratic model, allowing it to adapt to changing conditions brought about by generational shifts and socio-cultural influences affecting the political landscape. However, geopolitical changes are also underway, impacting international politics with inevitable repercussions for national politics.

Democracy, as highlighted by Philip Kotler in 2016, is currently in decline, and it should be seen as a product that needs to be revitalized. Disenchanted citizens, who have become disaffected consumers of politics, look with disappointment at this "product" and its weaknesses. To make democracy appealing from the citizen's perspective, these issues must be addressed.

In this ever-evolving context, new digital technologies offer essential tools for implementing projects of democratic innovation and strengthening the active role of civil society. However, the opportunities presented by the digital world come with inherent limitations and risks. It is crucial to understand that it is not politics in general that is rejected by critical citizens but, rather, the traditional actors of representative politics in their current forms and practices.

In the context of widespread disillusionment, the concept of post-representative democracy is useful for comprehending the political order in postmodern society. This term may seem paradoxical, but it sheds light on the complexity of the present era's political evolution and the changing nature of civil society.

Specifically, the "post-representative" label does not merely indicate the crisis of traditional parties, declining deference toward the political class, or diminishing value placed on elections and conventional participation. Instead, it signifies the need for a paradigm shift to understand better the evolving

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[37] S. Tormey, *The End of Representative Politics*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2015.

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political reality and the changes in civil society within this transformed landscape.

In this new paradigm, traditional and emerging political logics coexist, involving citizens in their communities. The post-representative dimension has gained prominence while the representative dimension has waned. New post-bureaucratic forms that structure political mobilization, individualized engagement, and leaderless actions have become more significant in the eyes of citizens. These innovative forms of engagement exhibit networked and diffuse characteristics, and they are characterized by low levels of institutionalization, including through forms of micro-activism[38], setting them apart from traditional political actors. These characteristics have become defining elements of how citizens engage and empower themselves in postmodern civil society.

Digital-related mobilization takes on a dynamically composed and recomposed structure, creating a variable geometry of participation. It transcends national borders, encompassing global campaigns, national petitions, and local initiatives. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), bloggers, think tanks, advocacy groups, and watchdog organizations all play a part in this mode of political activism, where information and digital communication technologies represent fundamental resources. Technology and its affordances interact with and influence the changing political culture of citizens.

In this context, the ideas of monitoring and surveillance, which have a place in democratic regimes, are supported by the civic use of network tools. This reinforces the notion of a paradigm shift in the interpretation of postmodern politics. At its core is the concept of the "monitoring citizen," who goes beyond the rhetorical and improbable figure of the all-competent citizen described by Walter Lippman over a century ago in his classic work on public opinion in 1922. This insight was later taken up by Michael Schudson in his historical reconstruction of American civic life when discussing the monitorial citizen:

> Citizenship during a particular political season may be for many people much less intense than in the era of parties, but citizenship now is a year-round and day-long activity, as it was only rarely in the past[39].

All of this suggests an intermittent yet ongoing mode of civic engagement, which may seem contradictory but conveys the idea of complexity. It pertains to the citizen who remains attentive but does not engage continuously, acting only when they personally deem it necessary. In other words, they take action

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[38] J. Marichal, *Political Facebook Groups: Micro-activism and the Digital Front-stage*, «First Monday» 2013, vol. 18, no. 12.

[39] M. Schudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life*, The Free Press, New York 1998, p. 311.

when they consider it relevant, based on their personal perspective within a particular social and political context.

This behaviour is not a matter of withdrawing or defection, as traditionally understood (even though there are few reasons for expressions of loyalty). Instead, it can be viewed as a form of expression, akin to "voice" as described by Hirschman in 1970. It represents a kind of protest aimed at bringing attention to issues considered important, demanding intervention from the political class.

This behaviour signifies that a crucial resource, trust in the system, is still available (even though trust in the key actors of the system is less evident). This, in turn, nurtures a sense of effectiveness regarding the impact that actions from an active civil society can have on the organized political community.

Conclusion

In summary, civil society plays a significant role in the politics of Western democracies in the early twenty-first century. It enhances democratic participation, fosters social cohesion, addresses societal challenges, promotes accountability, and contributes to innovative governance practices. By serving as a critical check on power, civil society ensures that governments are transparent, responsive, and accountable to citizens.

As Western democracies grapple with complex and evolving challenges, including the crisis of intermediate bodies, civil society's role in shaping political processes and outcomes becomes increasingly vital. Recognizing and supporting the essential contributions of civil society can help strengthen democratic governance and promote inclusive and sustainable societies in the twenty-first century and beyond.

Simultaneously, social media and internet technologies have transformed the relationship between civil society and politics in Western democracies. While they have expanded opportunities for engagement, activism, and civic participation, they have also introduced new challenges, such as information overload[40], affective polarization (which, in some sense, has replaced ideological polarization), and threats to privacy.

Effectively navigating these dynamics requires continuous reflection, digital literacy, and proactive measures to ensure that civil society maintains its influence and relevance in shaping democratic processes.

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[40] J. Keane, *Democracy and Media Decadence*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2013.

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