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REVIEW ESSAYS

The Fourth Arena. Rethinking Political Participation in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT: The digital revolution and the rise of e-participation have led scholars to reconsider established definitions of political participation: their dimensions, modes, and arenas. Drawing on the theoretical framework proposed by Francesco Raniolo in his book 'La partecipazione politica. Fare, pensare, essere', this article examines the academic debate surrounding the various definitions of online participation and its intersections with long-standing disputes over the nature of political participation. Treating the media (and the Internet) as an arena for observing citizens' engagement and participatory acts enables to address the hybrid and expanding repertoire of what will be called Participation at Distance (PaD), which also sees the re-invention of traditional forms of participation. More than other arenas, the media arena constitutes a 'place' capable of hosting old and new, conventional and unconventional, institutional and non-institutional, instrumental and expressive, legal, a-legal, and illegal forms of political participation.

KEYWORDS: Digitalisation of Politics; E-Democracy; Mediatisation of Politics; Modes of Participation; Participation at Distance.

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More than twenty years after *La partecipazione politica* (2002)[1], Francesco Raniolo has released a new book on political participation for Il Mulino: *La Partecipazione politica. Fare, pensare, essere*[2] (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2024. 272 p. ISBN: 9788815388155). This is not just a new edition or updated version, but an entirely new book that offers students of political participation a priceless tool for understanding this multifaceted and ever-evolving phenomenon.

The years of multiple crises (or super-crisis) made the author's effort timely and necessary, as it gathers and refines the most recent contributions from the literature on this topic, integrating them within an original theoretical framework. The other major challenge that Raniolo addresses is the impact of the digital revolution, which, since the publication of his previous work, has deepened its intersections with political dynamics and the evolution of democracy worldwide. This has not only made it necessary to 'define' online, digital, or e-participation. It has pushed scholars to question established definitions of political participation themselves: their dimensions, modes, and arenas – hence, their empirical translation.

This is the specific object of this review essay, which will present Raniolo's book, focusing on the role assigned to the media, particularly the web, in its theoretical framework. The author, in fact, treats media as an arena – the fourth arena through which he analyses participation, the other three being the *institutional arena*, the *protest arena*, and the *community arena*. These four arenas intersect with the three key dimensions of participation identified in this work: *being part of*, *feeling part of*, and *taking part in*.

This theoretical scheme will be briefly presented in the next section. The second section will then focus on online participation, exploring the academic debate on its various definitions and its intersections with existing disputes about the nature of political participation and its different dimensions. Specifically, it will discuss the value of Raniolo's choice to treat the media (and the Internet) as an arena in which to observe citizens' engagement and participatory acts. The third and final session will focus precisely on the hybrid nature of what will be called *Participation at Distance* (PaD). The central argument put forward in this review is that, while a given arena may be primarily characterised by certain modes of participation, it does not fully overlap with existing modes suggested by the literature on political participation – and the modes that may be identified by empirical research in the future. This is particularly true for the forms of political behaviour that emerge in the digital arena.

Mapping political participation: dimensions X arenas (X modes?)

A three-by-four table forms the backbone of Raniolo's book. The three rows represent the key dimensions of political participation, while the four columns correspond to the arenas in which participation takes place. This table is introduced and discussed in its "empty" form in the first part of the book, which specifically addresses the different dimensions of participation. It is then gradually filled in throughout the central chapters, where different dimensions and arenas intersect, populating the various cells of the table. The third and concluding part of the book then presents and analyses the table in its complete form.

[1] The first edition of the book was published in 2002, the second in 2007.
[2] 'Doing, thinking, being' is the new subtitle in Italian.

Raniolo follows the path set by other scholars (Teorell & Torcal 2007; van Deth 2014; 2016), choosing to analyse participation by drawing a conceptual map of it. In particular, Van Deth (2014; 2016) identifies various definitions of political participation through a flowchart that unfolds along a series of eight interconnected questions or rules. His approach identifies five variants of participation deriving from the locus in which these voluntary, non-professional actions or activities take place, their target (the government area or community issues), and their circumstances (considering whether their context and motivations are political or non-political). Raniolo chooses to elaborate on the first dimension – the one related to the *loci* of participation – and refers to them as participatory arenas, which are represented in the four columns of his table. The first three arenas closely mirror van Deth's conceptual map: the institutional arena, the protest arena, and the civil society or community arena. The fourth arena represents one of the most interesting innovations of Raniolo's theoretical framework: the media or web arena. As mentioned earlier, the following sections will precisely focus on this arena and the strengths of this approach. But to provide a comprehensive overview of the framework proposed in the book, the main dimensions of political participation need to be introduced.

Raniolo starts from the etymological roots of the term itself to identify three different but interrelated types of participation. First, he distinguishes between participation as *taking part* and participation as *being part*. The former is more frequently found in established definitions of participation, as it refers to the idea of an action, activity, or decision. The latter defines participation as an «active incorporation within a socio-political solidarity at various possible levels» (Cotta 1979, 203). This semantic distinction highlights how these two «poles» (in Cotta's words) of participation are closely connected, with one dimension of participation often serving as a precondition for the other. Furthermore, in this study, Raniolo distinguishes the dimension of being part of an organization, group, or polity from that of *feeling part*. While *being part* relates to the theme of inclusion and incorporation, *feeling part* directly evokes the theme of identification and the construction of collective identities. The book also explores how these three dimensions of participation relate to the corresponding dimensions of politics: the normative dimension (being part), the expressive dimension (feeling part), and the instrumental dimension (taking part).

The other criterion employed by Raniolo in his conceptual map – represented in the columns of the table – concerns participatory arenas. The first one is the institutional arena: the corridors of power or the *palace* in Raniolo's words, where forms of participation that are 'compatible (or functional) with the operation of the system take place'. Following Raniolo's reasoning, three sub-arenas can be identified within it: the electoral arena, the party arena, and the associative or pressure arena (which may be broadly referred to as the *lobby*). Formal elements are typically a prerequisite for participatory acts within this domain. While citizenship or formal membership (i.e., *being part*) is (usually) required to have a voice in the organizational life of a party or an interest/pressure group, active participation – even in its most routine forms – necessarily entails at least some degree of identification (i.e., *feeling part*). The second arena is the protest arena – the *streets* or *squares* –, which is the typical territory of social movements, where antagonistic participation targets the political system, its authorities and their decisions, or even the regime itself. Formal membership here is rare or non-existent, as being part and feeling part tend to overlap and blend. The third arena, the community or civic arena, contains those 'generative experiences' and forms of 'social self-organisation' the aim of which is solving problems of the community and influence the life of the citizenry rather than targeting the state or what governments do or do not. In this case as well, *being part* and *feeling part* are deeply intertwined.

Different empirical types of participation can be located at the intersections between dimensions and arenas, following the long theoretical debate and research dispute on the (multi)dimensionality of political participation (Verba & Nie 1972; Milbrath 1965; Koc 2021). Could Raniolo's arenas, as such, be considered *modes* of participation? If we embrace Theocharis and Van Deth's definition of a *mode* as 'a combination of two or more forms of participation sharing some feature' (Theocharis & Van Deth's 2018, 17), all participatory

manifestations within an arena share at least the 'place' or 'locus' in which they occur. Hence, they should be considered a mode. However, the same authors, with de Moor, seem to refine their definition when they write that a mode of participation 'refers to the notion that, resulting from some shared feature like a strategic logic, targets or arenas, specific political activities can be seen as expressions of an underlying style of participation' (Theocharis, de Moor & Van Deth 2019). While including a specific reference to arenas, in this definition the idea of an underlying style of participation appears to be more 'demanding' in terms of the connections we expect to exist between the political activities comprised by a specific mode. These connections can be hypothesised theoretically and then tested empirically, e.g. via (confirmatory) factor analysis. This is what Theocharis, de Moor and Van Deth do in their article, as we will see in the following sections.

At the same time, Raniolo's arenas seem to match both the traditional typologies of political participation and their most recent refinement and updates. The *palace* is traditionally regarded as the domain of *orthodox*, *conventional* or *institutional* forms of participation. Whereas protest, by definition, refers to 'nonroutinized [*unorthodox*, *unconventional*, *non-institutional*] ways of affecting political, social, and cultural processes' (Della Porta & Diani 2020; 1997). But participation is inherently fluid and ever-evolving, with its different forms transcending different arenas, even because the actors channelling them increasingly adopt hybrid profiles.

For instance, political actors in movement parties engage in institutional politics 'without making requisite investments in overcoming challenges of collective action and social choice that party politicians encounter in electoral and legislative arenas' (Kitschelt 2006). At the same time, their rise and 'movement towards institutions' encourage traditional political actors to embrace innovative and provocative actions – typical of the protest arena – even within the core of state institutions. Parliamentary sections themselves have increasingly become a stage for colourful and noisy protests challenging established liturgies and codes of conduct (Bordignon and Ceccarini 2014). Similar pattern of cross-arena action can also be found in other institutional 'places', such as party assemblies, union meetings, etc.

The community arena also encompasses a wide array of forms participation. While local, civic and lifestyle contexts of political involvement are often seen as spaces of innovation and creativity, some of them have a deep-rooted tradition that may suggest their classification as conventional. A notable example is the long-standing practice of political consumerism, which brings politics into purchasing behaviours. Longitudinal analyses on this phenomenon have shown that while boycotting has maintained its critic and militant connotations in Italy, 'buycotting' and other forms of responsible and politically engaged consumption witnessed a process of 'participative normalisation' (Bordignon, Ceccarini & Silla 2024). Raniolo includes into the civic arena what Bosi and Zamponi (2019) define as *Direct Social Action* (DSA), openly identifying it as a third, distinct mode compared to the other traditional forms of social action, which they call *conventional* and *demonstrative*. Unlike conventional political action, DSA is unmediated and does not 'require the involvement of collective actors within the political system'. Unlike demonstrative forms of political action, DSA does not target authorities or power holders; instead, it is directed toward society at large or segments of it. What about the fourth arena, the media or the web arena?

Mediated Participation

Studies on the mediatisation of politics (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999) have often emphasised how media logic can shape passive forms of political engagement, which are explicitly excluded from many definitions of political participation. However, technological evolution and the rise of the Internet have significantly increased scholarly interest in participation *through* the media. The participatory potential of the digital space,

with its two-way communication flows, has been even seen by many as a game changer, reversing long-standing trends toward *audience democracy* (Manin 1995). Nevertheless, the 'place' of online participation – or mediated participation more broadly – in the conceptualisation of political participation is still disputed. Should it be recognised as a new, distinct mode of participation? Regardless of the answer, what are its defining features?

Participation through the media has often been relegated to the domain of political information, which has frequently been considered a borderline area in terms of its participatory 'value'. The evolution of various media outlets – from the printed media to radio to television – has progressively expanded citizens' access to information. The web has ultimately brought us into an era of information abundance, where traditional information actors lose their authority alongside other epistemic authorities. This is the age of *post-truth* and *fake news*. Nevertheless, citizens continue to seek and receive political information through the media. At least when such exposure is active (and can be empirically isolated as such), its inclusion within the theoretical framework and empirical measurement of participation is a question worth considering. At the same time, it can be seen as an expression of political interest and a component of that *being/feeling part* which, at the very least, represents a predisposition toward more demanding forms of active involvement.

When we move from the realm of 'consumption' to that of 'production' of political content via the media, its inclusion within the domain of participation becomes more straightforward. While this form of active engagement has been amplified by the rise of the internet – particularly the so-called Web 2.0 – it would be reductive to consider it exclusive to the digital space. Although legacy media have often served as platforms for intra-elite discussions or direct, one-to-many communication by political leaders, they have also provided opportunities for bottom-up communication and activation. Consider, for instance, letters to newspaper, television formats that encouraged live audience participation, consultations or petitions engaging readers, listeners or viewers. The Internet has dramatically expanded the spaces and opportunities for citizens' (mediated) political engagement, unlocked democratic innovation, overcome the constraints of physical distance, and offered viable alternatives for citizens disillusioned with traditional, elite-controlled channels.

Nevertheless, opposite views persist regarding both the impact of digital tools and their effects on democracy.

Many argue that the extremely low cost of many online political actions disqualifies them as 'true' participation. From this perspective, signing an online petition lacks the symbolic and practical weight of its traditional paper-based counterpart. Similarly, according to this vision, liking or disliking the page/post of a political leader or party, sharing a meme with political content, using hashtags to support a cause, commenting on political issues on social networks are not comparable to equivalent forms of support or protest carried out in the 'real' world. Terms like *slacktivism*, *clicktivism* or *armchair activism* has been coined to label this minimal-effort forms of political engagement (Cantijoch & Gibson 2019).

At the same time, research has revealed the role of digital media as a driver of political polarisation and negative emotions, which tend to translate into negative forms of political engagement. More broadly, technological development and the role of digital media have provided new platforms for the emergence of protest movements. This dynamic is favoured by the evident isomorphism between the structure of the digital space and the networked nature of social movements. Some of the internet's key attributes – openness and inclusiveness, transparency and control, horizontality and disintermediation – strongly resonate with the values and features often associated with social movements. In this way, the web greatly enhances the potential for connection between the various nodes of a movement. It increases the movement need for immediacy, as in the case of flash mobs. It further removes the spatial constraints that once limited the global expansion of protest. Moreover, Internet provides social movements with an augmented square for contestation, through

initiatives that can emerge and unfold entirely online — such in the case of mailbombing or digital petitions — while also enabling the connection between online and offline spaces. In this way, movements actively contribute to the construction of digital citizenship (Ceccarini 2021). But the internet is not merely a channel for communication or an organizational tool for social movements. As in the case of digital parties (Gerbaudo 2019), which are often *movement parties* (Kitschelt 2006), it often becomes an identity-building and even ideological factor.

On the other side, tech enthusiasts and digital collective actors often promote an ideology of the Internet that envisions the digital sphere not merely as a space to integrate or correct democracy, but to overturn it altogether. Their view suggests replacing representative democracy – viewed as inherently corrupt – with a web-based direct democracy, in which citizens do not merely monitor or pressure those in power but make political decisions themselves. This radical interpretation of e-democracy envisions the digital Agora as a space where the traditional limits that once hindered the application of 'ancient democracy' within complex, large, and geographically dispersed societies can be overcome. In rejecting any form of delegation or mediation, this view presupposes a 'total citizen' who discusses and decides on everything.

Acknowledging the persistence of practical limitations in the implementation of digital direct democracy, other tech enthusiasts see that the possible solutions could come from technology itself, especially by exploring the new avenues offered by the AI. César Hidalgo (2018) has proposed a 'bold idea to replace politicians' through an original combination of direct democracy and mediated representation. In his model, any individual could, in practice, decide on any single political issue via a software agent instructed to *choose* according to the citizens' own interests, opinions and preferences. This automation of democratic representation through algorithms would produce a digital twin (Musella 2025) designed to accurately represent the single individual and 'vote' as they would, were they directly involved – while leaving open the possibility for the citizen to intervene and take control of their decisions whenever they feel the issue warrants it.

While the latter clarification is crucial to rule out the idea of a permanent transfer of power from people to machines – a sort of *digital translatio imperii* –, it underscores how, even in models that envision an intensive use of technology, digital direct democracy would still require a high (if not unrealistic) level of individual commitment. At the same time, this utopian (or dystopian) vision of e-democracy ultimately suggests automated participation, or even participation without people.

Participation at Distance (PaD)

Reluctance to recognize online participation as genuine political participation frequently stems from at least four of its recurrent (or presumed) features. 1. Because it is, in many of its expressions, low-cost participation. 2. Because it often takes the form of expressive involvement. 3. Because it tends to be individualized, rather than collective. 4. Because it takes place – or is assumed to take place – in an artificial space, detached from the 'real' world. Raniolo's path through the book and his review of the various empirical forms of media-based participation easily allow for an effective challenge to the first three points.

Even the 'simple' act of taking a stance through the media can have significant consequences for the individual citizen in authoritarian regimes, or, even in advanced democracies, in the context of the growing spread of cancel culture (Norris 2021). More generally, the cost of digital participation increases significantly when we shift our attention from *slacktivism* to *hacktivism*, where digital technologies are used to carry out (risky) acts of civil disobedience, as in the cases of Anonymous or WikiLeaks.

There is a continuous circular relationship between participation and identity (Pizzorno 1966; Andretta & Mosca 2008), and Raniolo emphasizes how the feeling of belonging is an essential component of participation — or at least a precondition for it. As for the concerns stemming from the individual nature of online participation, they could be dismissed simply by pointing out that even the most common and institutionalized form of political participation – electoral participation – although carried out collectively, still consists of an individual act. In addition, studies on political consumerism have already introduced the concept of *individualised collective action* (Micheletti 2003). The intertwined processes of personalization and mediatization of politics are pushing these dynamics even further, increasingly blurring the boundaries between *action* and *emotion*, between the *individual* and the *collective*. The analysis of what happens within the media arena — and the innovations that develop within it — challenges theoretical (and empirical) frameworks that choose to exclude more expressive, invisible, and attitudinally-oriented forms of political involvement from the realm of participation. This is precisely the aspect that Raniolo's approach addresses on a theoretical level through the dimension of *feeling part*. Moreover, specific research strands reveal how innovative forms of involvement emerge through the actions performed in the digital space. These go beyond the individual level, shaping new political communities. In particular, studies on celebrity politics have highlighted forms of 'intimacy at distance' channelled by digital media, in which political constituencies tend to approach the dynamics that characterise fan communities in other domains of social life, such as entertainment, arts, or sports (Van Zoonen 2004; Sandvoss 2013; Dean 2017; Campus & Mazzoni 2024).

Empirical analysis has also highlighted the need to question the categories of 'real' and 'virtual'. This is not only because digital participation has tangible consequences in the 'physical' world, or because online engagement often spills over into offline spaces, but also because the participatory repertoire is increasingly enriched with hybrid, cross-arena forms that combine both dimensions. What instead appears to be specific to media-based participation is, of course, the medium: the act of participation is subjected to mediation through technology. This has another important implication: its interactions regard physically distant actors. In this sense, mediated participation could also be described as *Participation at Distance* (PaD).

Without necessarily drawing normative conclusions from this characteristic feature, it has undeniable implications that must be assessed in terms of the 'quality' of mediated participation. However, this alone may not be enough to designate it as a distinct mode of participation, at least if we conceive a mode as a specific 'underlying style of participation' (Theocharis, de Moor & van Deth 2019, 32) to be included in a wider typology combining multiple criteria. The fact that PaD may outline a specific mode can of course be stated as a hypothesis to be tested empirically. The research by Cantijoch e Gibson, for instance, revealed that e-participation can be differentiated into distinct clusters of 'interrelated activities' that mirrored those observed for their offline counterparts: 'offline types of political engagement are reemerging online' (2013, 714). In the case of specific forms of behaviour traditionally considered more passive, however, they found empirical evidence supporting the emergence of a potentially new, independent mode of participation. Using an innovative method and considering a wide (and open) array of participatory activities, Theocharis, de Moor and van Deth (2019) identified digitally networked participation (DNP) as a distinct mode of political participation. In particular, they examined the possible overlap with lifestyle politics, concluding that 'DNP proves to be an independent part of today's activists' participation repertoire, suggesting that technology – rather than individualization – is the main distinguishing feature at play' (Theocharis, de Moor and van Deth 2019, 33).

In this respect, Raniolo's contribution mainly regards the theoretical level. The author frames the media (and the web) as an additional arena of participation, complementing the institutional, protest, and community arenas. This approach avoids taking a stance on whether participation through the media constitutes a distinct mode of participation with specific features. Instead, it simply but importantly recognizes the media as an

additional 'locus' where participatory phenomena occur. This conceptualization is not limited to the digital sphere but effectively incorporates media in general as a participatory environment. Moreover, it provides a valuable foundation for the operationalisation of the concept, the identification of its indicators, and their empirical translation.

Another possible approach could have been to speak of (at least partially) overlapping arenas, or of the media arena as a meta-arena that intersects and cuts across all the others, albeit asymmetrically. However, this is not strictly necessary as long as arenas and modes are kept analytically distinct. This distinction, in fact, allows us to highlight how even the most institutionalized forms of political participation – including voting – can be reconfigured within the digital space. The pandemic phase, in particular, but also the growing abstention rates in many democracies, have reignited the debate on e-democracy and e-voting. Meanwhile, the inevitable rise of digital parties has forced even the most traditional parties to reconsider how the digital space might at least complement their conventional/institutional channels for member involvement and consultation. Even more evident in Raniolo's review of the wide and ever-evolving repertoire of participatory phenomena is the way in which both contentious politics and lifestyle politics find new (and perhaps ideal) channels of expression within the digital arena.

In conclusion, extant research suggests that expressions of political behaviour that have recently emerged in the hybrid media system (Chadwick 2013) may constitute a specific, independent mode of participation, with a potentially distinctive participatory style, such as DNP. However, these do not appear to encompass the entire expanding repertoire of PaD, which also sees the re-invention of established forms of participation. More than other arenas, the media arena constitutes a 'place' capable of hosting old and new, conventional and unconventional, institutional and non-institutional, instrumental and expressive, legal, a-legal, and illegal modes of political participation. While the accelerate pace of change within the digital space reproduces, at a higher speed, the long-standing difficulty of capturing the elusive and fluid nature of participation with static definitions. It will be up to theoretical reflection and empirical research to continue investigating how these different elements combine, as they take shape and reshape across different arenas. The book provides a valuable tool to perform this task – a conceptual map to help scholars find their way through the multifaceted and ever-changing world of political participation.

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