

## **E-Democracy and Collaborative Lawmaking: The Discussion of the Political Reform in Brazil**

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Democratic governments are increasingly adopting the Internet to foster political participation. With a varied array of e-consultation, e-deliberation, and e-participation initiatives, the Internet provides opportunities for citizens to engage with political institutions in several ways. This article contributes to this literature by analyzing a Brazilian case, the House of Representatives' Portal E-Democracia—an initiative that promotes citizen participation in lawmaking issues. We analyze how citizens engaged in the discussions around the political reform agenda, an important issue and a response to social movements and protests in June 2013. We specifically look into the dynamics of interaction and the heterogeneity and civility of these discussions. We also investigate whether participants were interested in providing solutions to the issues at stake.

*Keywords:* political participation, e-democracy, online citizenship, political communication, Brazilian politics

The growing presence of organized civil society's actors and stakeholders and the participation of governmental and nongovernmental institutions in the Internet motivate a debate about possible effects of such phenomena in various political instances, such as participation, democratic governance, and citizenship. Within this framework, the Internet's democratic potential is constantly discussed and questioned (Chadwick, 2009; Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Coleman & Moss, 2012; Dahlberg; 2011; Rossini & Maia, 2014). Prior research reminds us that there is a gap between the opportunities through participatory initiatives and the strengthening of relations between elected representatives and those they represent. This emphasizes that political participation is a two-way process that depends not only on citizens' willingness to participate, but also on politicians' and governments' openness to citizens' input.

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Date submitted: 2015–05–27

<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank Jennifer Stromer-Galley for her valuable feedback, and two anonymous reviewers for their careful comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this article. We are responsible for any remaining issues.

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Brazil is among the top countries investing in democratic innovations (Avritzer, 2009; Goodin, 2008): institutions designed to foster citizens' participation in political decision making. In this sense, Portal E-Democracia is an innovative landmark project created in 2007 by the Brazilian House of Representatives to widen and deepen engagement on issues debated by their elected representatives. The goal is to assess citizens' inputs and promote engagement with the parliament through discussion forums, polls, and synchronous chat.

To contextualize, we refer to the political reform agenda as a set of bills of law addressing issues such as the political system, partisan fidelity, electoral system, and campaign financing that were being discussed to "correct" discrepancies in Brazil's political system, such as campaign spending, the role of private donors, time in office, and corruption. These were sensitive topics renewed by nationwide popular uprisings in June 2013. The political sphere responded to protesters' claims by bringing political reform to the center of the discussion. Citizens were invited to join the discussion around the political reform agenda online using Portal E-Democracia. After public discussion—both online and in public hearings—representatives drafted a report to summarize the debate and present the guidelines for further deliberation in the political sphere.

In this article, we focus on the online discussions around the political reform agenda that took place at Portal E-Democracia. Following most studies of online engagement, we adopted deliberation theory as an analytical framework (Dahlberg, 2004; 2011; Papacharissi, 2004). Deliberation is conceptualized in its broadest sense as a process in which participants "must find reasons that are compelling to others, acknowledging those others as equals, aware that they have alternative reasonable commitments that they are likely to have" (Cohen, 1997, p. 414).

We used a microanalytic approach to focus on the social aspects of deliberation, such as reflexivity, respect, interactivity, and purposeful participation (Gastil & Black, 2008). Instead of focusing on the quality of justification and inclusion, we analyzed the dynamics of interaction among participants in the discussion.

The article is organized as follows: We begin with a literature review on political participation online, focusing on identifying the characteristics of digital democratic innovations and critical assessment of the limitations of these platforms. Then we present the Portal E-Democracia and contextualize our case study. Our methods are discussed in the following section. Finally, we present results, conclusions, and limitations of this study. Our findings reveal that citizens' debates were civil and purposeful, suggesting that the platform was an outlet for users interested in contributing to a broader decision-making process conducted by the House of Representatives.

### **The Internet, Democratic Innovations, and Political Participation**

The growing body of research about Internet-related phenomena is driven by the ubiquitous presence of digital technologies in our daily life. In Brazil, there are nearly 81 million Internet users, which represents 49% of the population, with 69% of those connecting on a daily basis and 74% accessing it

from their own homes (Barbosa, 2014). Even though Brazil still faces a digital divide, with higher levels of access directly related to income and education, Internet use is rapidly growing all across the country.

Political actors and institutions increasingly have been adopting digital technologies in several democratic countries, with goals that range from improving administrative processes to connecting and communicating with citizens. The political effects of daily Internet use are part of a wide-ranging research agenda (Chadwick, 2009; Chadwick & May, 2003; Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Dahlberg, 2004, 2011; Dahlgren, 2005; Papacharissi, 2004; Rossini & Maia, 2014; Wright, 2012). This debate has oscillated between technological determinism—a view that the Internet would change habits and revolutionize politics—and social determinism—a perspective that holds that technologies could not fulfill democratic deficits because their effects are limited insofar as the public is not interested in politics (Wright, 2012). We side with the argument that technologies are socially shaped. Political engagement in online settings has lower costs in terms of time and effort, and people can use the Internet for several activities, such as interacting with others, accessing diverse information, running campaigns and organizing public acts online and offline, supporting causes by signing virtual petitions, and engaging with political agents through websites and e-mails. However, technology cannot force humans to behave in particular ways that are beneficial to democracy. We side with Wright's (2012) argument that "the revolutionary *potential* lies, instead, in how technologies are designed, exploited and adopted (or not) by humans in particular social and political contexts" (p. 246). Ultimately, the political benefits of Internet use are a combination of the set of affordances that technology provides and the various unexpected ways that people can make use of them (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Coleman & Moss, 2012; Dahlgren, 2005; Wright, 2012).

Coleman and Blumler (2009, pp. 12–13) argued that the Internet is a constructed space and may contribute to democracy by enabling (1) the construction of a public constituted by predominantly active users; (2) the discursive engagement in civic dialogue; (3) hosting endless data and information, accessible to users according to their interests; and (4) the possibility of point-to-point or many-to-many horizontal communication, ensuring greater symmetry of communication power.

Several studies about the political benefits of Internet use are based on the concept of deliberative democracy, primarily concerning the way people engage with political discussions and how political decisions are made (Dahlberg, 2004, 2011; Dahlgren, 2005; Papacharissi, 2004; Smith, 2009). Despite particular differences, this literature sheds light on a particular type of communication: deliberation. This is a key concern in Habermas' (1996) work that explained how various institutions of the society play the role of intermediating relations between the public and political spheres. In Habermas' perspective, deliberation is a communicative process that requires participants to mutually recognize each other as equals in interaction, who respect one another's views and exchange reasonable and justified arguments to reach a provisional consensus for a common public issue. The normative criteria for deliberation include freedom from political and economic coercion; inclusivity, in the sense that those affected by the decision should have means to participate; and reflexivity, which can be understood as the consideration of others' arguments and willingness to cooperate in the decision-making process (Dahlberg, 2004). Deliberation is regarded as a process that legitimizes political decisions insofar as it is inclusive to various perspectives and focuses on reaching decisions that benefit the common good instead of particular interests (Cohen, 1997).

These precise and demanding criteria of deliberation are difficult to find in real-world decision-making processes, especially when they take place online. Several scholars address the controversies embedded in Habermas' deliberative ideal, a debate that goes beyond the scope of this article (e.g., Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Maia, 2012; Steiner, 2012). Nevertheless, the normative criteria of deliberation can be observed as ideal conditions that intend to criticize and challenge reality (Bächtiger, Shikano, Pedrini, & Ryser, 2009; Coleman & Moss, 2012; Dahlberg, 2004; Dahlgren, 2005; Janssen & Kies, 2005; Maia, 2012; Steiner, 2012). In its broadest sense, deliberation can be understood as the activity of listening and giving reasons (not limited to rational justification) to build a collective consensus about a controversial issue.

We understand that the use of the Internet for political purposes is minor among users' activities online (Dahlgren, 2005). In this sense, we support Dahlgren's (2005) argument that, for those with access and political motivation who live in open and democratic societies, the Internet offers feasible opportunities for civic interaction, even if it clearly cannot promise a quick fix for democracy's problems, such as the lack of civic participation, political knowledge, representation, and public deliberation (Dahlgren, 2005, p. 151).

If democratic participation is not an intrinsic characteristic of citizens, but rather the outcome of a citizenship built through socialization processes that happen throughout a person's life cycle (Coleman & Moss 2012), it becomes important to understand which social and technological practices facilitate political participation. In this sense, a growing stream of research on online deliberation has sought to identify the influence of technical and organizational affordance of digital environments on particular forms of deliberative citizenship (Coleman & Moss, 2012; Janssen & Kies, 2005; Wright & Street, 2007). In the following section, we review previous studies on online democracy and the impact of different models of participation to understand how digital democratic innovations have evolved and how they may foster citizen engagement.

### **The Citizen's Role in Digital Democratic Innovations**

Digital platforms specifically created to support political participation and civic engagement are becoming major communication channels between citizens and elected representatives. Governments and legislative houses in several countries are increasingly adopting technology to promote transparency, provide information, and consult public opinion on public matters (Kies, 2010; Wright, 2006). As Internet use becomes ubiquitous, it is no longer a matter of whether governments are online, but rather how these technologies are used and whether they contribute to making the political sphere more open to society's interests (Chadwick & May, 2003). As argued by Coleman and Blumler (2009), "for democratic participation to significantly impact political results, institutions that are inclusive and responsible must offer effective interaction between citizens and their elected representatives" (p. 3).

Digital democratic innovations have evolved in the past decades from linear, top-down, and unidirectional models to participatory designs inspired by the social platforms that characterize Web 2.0. Chadwick and May (2003) identified three interaction models to describe institutional efforts using Internet-based technologies. The first is the managerial model, in which the Internet is seen as an

improvement of previous technologies aimed at bringing efficacy to established government, resulting in "greater speed combined with cost reduction" (p. 276). The goal is reducing bureaucracy while providing relevant information to citizens and businesses (pp. 276–278).

The consultative model encourages democratic participation, seeking citizens' opinion to guide decision-making processes. E-consultation initiatives tend to be sporadic and target specific issues, sometimes using Web surveys, with little openness for citizens to engage discursively (Kies, 2010). Critics of this approach argue that e-consultation initiatives are not inclusive because of unequal Internet access, which becomes a selection criterion as to who may participate. Inasmuch as several factors inhibit universal participation, this model allows governments to consult citizens to legitimate the interests of certain groups (Chadwick & May, 2003).

Finally, the participatory model refers to platforms that support complex, horizontal, and multidirectional interactions between citizens and politicians. The underlying idea is that discussion emerges from intercitizen communication, even if the state remains the target of organized political action. These models are increasingly being adopted in democratic countries in the form of initiatives such as e-democracy and e-participation tools (Kies, 2010).

Furthermore, strongly influenced by Web 2.0's tools and inspired by the popularity of social network sites, e-democracy platforms have incorporated semiopen access and adopted mechanisms for citizens to display their identity (such as use of personal profiles, photos, etc.), which in turn may increase levels of trust, confidence, and honesty among participants, providing richer user experiences (Chadwick, 2009).

According to Friess and Eilders (2015), studies on political discussions online fall into three different categories: input, throughput, and output. Scholars interested in understanding the impact of design choices on online deliberation focus on input: platform affordances and conditions that enable deliberation to occur (Friess & Eilders, 2015; Janssen & Kies, 2005). When incorporating digital technologies in processes of governance, governments, political parties, and other institutions define how these tools may afford or constrain interaction, a complex debate that could not be properly addressed here. Yet, it is important to note that the main aspects in which the construction of political platforms may affect discussion are identity, presence of moderation, agenda setting, and mode of conversation (synchronous/asynchronous). The role of identity/anonymity affects online deliberation in different ways. Anonymity may encourage minorities to participate by removing constraints, and identity tends to foster sincerity, civility, and rationality and therefore is preferable to foster deliberation (Friess & Eilders, 2015; Janssen & Kies, 2005). Moderation plays a dual role. Interactive moderation is seen as a positive design choice. However, when moderation is about censoring content, it constrains participation. Another relevant aspect is synchronicity. Empirical research has demonstrated that asynchronous discussion platforms foster reasoned collaborative discourse and are generally better for deliberation (Friess & Eilders, 2015; Kies, 2010; Stromer-Galley, Webb, & Muhlberger, 2012).

The throughput of online discussion focuses on modes of communication and argumentation (Friess & Eilders, 2015), such as studies measuring deliberativeness by analyzing the quality of

discussions vis-à-vis normative ideals. These criteria include rationality (use of arguments and facts to support claims), equality (among participants), interactivity, common good reference, and constructiveness (meaning that discussions aim at reaching decisions; Friess & Eilders, 2015, p. 328).

Finally, the third field of online deliberation is output, focused on examining the consequences of these processes at the individual level (e.g., enhancing political knowledge, building social trust, and enabling opinion change) and at the process level. This means that the deliberative process is assumed to increase the legitimacy and the quality of decisions (Coleman & Moss, 2013; Friess & Eilders, 2015). The following section presents empirical studies that analyze e-democracy and e-participation initiatives to contextualize the Brazilian case within a global trend and to evaluate the limitations of these platforms.

### **E-Democracy Initiatives: A Global Trend and Its Critics**

Initiatives aimed at fostering citizen deliberation and participation online have blossomed in several countries with a varied array of outcomes. Kies (2010) extensively reviewed initiatives of e-consultation and e-democracy across several countries such as the United States, Germany, Denmark, and the United Kingdom, and classified initiatives sponsored by political actors and institutions as *strong publics* because they are more likely to have external outcomes. Conversely, *weak publics* are discursive environments that are not connected to formal political structures and thus are less likely to produce external outcomes (Janssen & Kies, 2005; Kies, 2010). In his comparative approach, Kies found that strong publics are more likely to foster citizen deliberation. Prior research has demonstrated that users were interested in addressing collective problems and presenting solutions to advance the discussion when participating in online platforms hosted or sponsored by political institutions, indicating that purposeful participation in online deliberation may be connected to a perception that these debates could have political outcomes (Albrecht, 2006; Friess & Eilders, 2015; Kies, 2010).

Albrecht (2006) drew positive conclusions in his analysis of the DEMOS project, an online deliberation in Hamburg, Germany. Using quantitative and qualitative methods—surveys, content analysis, and participant observation—he found that citizens participated actively in the refinement of a new strategic vision for the development of the city. The quality of debates was high, and Albrecht emphasized that the initiative enabled those who would not have influence by traditional means to contribute to the debate by participating online (p. 74).

Moss and Coleman's (2013) evaluation of e-democracy initiatives by the UK government and Parliament suggests that, despite efforts to provide venues for citizens to participate, results are mixed at best. Initiatives that are too broad and attempt to host large-scale discussions face difficulties in engaging the public in purposeful debates, whereas forums that are structured around specific political issues tend to produce better outcomes, especially when linked to policy formation and decision making (p. 7).

In sum, investing in digital technologies to foster participation and deliberation is a global trend. Governments, legislators, stakeholders, and nongovernmental organizations have been experimenting with new ways to narrow the relationship between elected representatives and those they represent. Our case study of Portal E-Democracia is an example of this trend. One aspect that makes Portal E-

Democracia an interesting case study is that it has been available for almost 10 years and is constantly creating new affordances for users to engage with policy discussions. The endurance of the project helps build credibility and suggests that citizens have permanent opportunities to engage with public policy debates.

With discussions structured around topics of public interest such as the Internet Bill of Rights, the minimum age of criminal responsibility, and the National Education Plan, the platform engages citizens in debates that are happening simultaneously at the House of Representatives. Because it is permanent, Portal E-Democracia fosters a participative culture and incentivizes civic engagement with policy discussions. This is a distinguishing factor given that several e-democracy initiatives are created to discuss specific projects and tend to be shut down after an established period of time for citizen participation (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Kies, 2010). As Coleman and Blumler (2009) argued, "There is a need for a well-publicized, enduring democratic space to which citizens can turn in the same way that they can go to a library if they want to borrow a book" (p. 137).

However, the use of technologies to enhance democratic participation and deliberation faces some criticism. Hartz-Karp and Sullivan (2014) argued that "it is unrealistic to assume that online users in a self-managed environment will sufficiently understand and appreciate the inherent value of deliberation to sustain their involvement in resolving tough issues through respectful discourse" (p. 2). They do not believe that the free and open environment of online discussions is ideal for fostering reciprocity among users and may undermine the normative ideal of respect. They further criticized that the inherent nature of online deliberation—which often occurs in asynchronous environments—is not ideal for collaborative discourse. Rather, they argued, "it is conducive to direct democracy that merely aggregates the unreflective opinions of self-selected voters" (p. 3). For Hartz-Karp and Sullivan, online deliberation has a "self-selection" bias that prevents it from being representative, as well as a lack of interest, skills, and motivation for citizens to participate.

Self-selection might be an issue for online deliberation because digital democratic innovations cannot change or fix democratic deficits such as lack of interest and participation (Dahlgren, 2005). However, we disagree that it prevents deliberation from being effective or legitimate. It seems natural that those platforms of online deliberation will appeal to citizens who are more interested in politics and not to the population in general, which does not necessarily mean that the outcomes of this type of engagement are irrelevant.

We side with Johnston's (2010) argument that participatory and deliberative initiatives online are limited insofar as political decision making entails a series of processes that are obscured or unknown by the public. Governments and legislators are informed by stakeholders, the media, nongovernmental organizations, unions, experts, and so on. As the influence of these actors is not transparent, citizens tend to feel remote from decision making. Johnston believes that it is necessary to improve the transparency of decision-making processes to increase citizens' influence. Because citizens' inputs are generally gathered at initial stages of a policy debate, their influence on the outcomes are not clear. In other words, according to Johnston, the lack of accountability in available participatory initiatives obscures the real influence of citizen engagement in these platforms. The solution would be to have transparent decision-

making processes and to design tools that enable citizens to participate as the debate unfolds (Johnston, 2010, pp. 165–167).

In our view, a major problem faced by online participatory initiatives is scaling up deliberation: enabling citizens to actually influence political decision making. We emphasize, however, that this is not particularly related to online deliberation, but is inherent in several deliberative efforts including minipublics and deliberative polls (Bächtiger & Wegmann, 2014). Moreover, it is difficult to measure the extent to which online initiatives enable citizens to influence the political sphere given that political decision making encompasses a variety of procedures that frequently occur far from public scrutiny in which prior decisions might be modified (Johnston, 2010). Therefore, it was not our goal to evaluate whether the participation in Portal E-Democracia influenced political decisions. Rather, following a growing literature on online deliberation, we focused on the characteristics of these debates and evaluated the extent to which those who engage in digital platforms for political discussion are interested in debating and advancing policy discussions.

Whereas a few authors are concerned that the Internet may promote homophily by enabling people to selectively expose themselves to like-minded users, there is sufficient evidence that the Internet facilitates heterogeneous debates (Brundidge, 2010; Garrett, 2009, 2013). Disagreement is a central aspect of deliberative democracy (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Mutz, 2006; Wojcieszak, 2011; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009). Gutmann and Thompson (1996) stressed that deliberation requires that citizens “try to find mutually acceptable ways of resolving moral disagreement” (p. 6). In online settings, researchers tend to find intolerance when looking into like-minded communities and more respect for diverse views when looking into environments that are more heterogeneous. In situations in which people believe their opinions are shared by others, their positions are reinforced and tend to become more extreme (Wojcieszak, 2011; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009), whereas discussions that take place on heterogeneous platforms are generally open—or, at least, tolerant—to contrasting views. Theorists agree that deliberation can only happen in settings in which decisions are informed by a variety of perspectives (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Mutz, 2006). Challenging reasons must be carefully considered to enable participants to make better decisions after evaluating all available arguments. Therefore, heterogeneity is not just desirable, but also necessary when people engage in debates about matters of public concern.

In light of this literature, we now turn to the case study of Portal E-Democracia, a platform that follows a global trend of digital democratic innovations aimed at fostering citizen participation in policy discussions.

### **Portal E-Democracia and the Political Reform Debate**

To enable readers to understand the case under study, we present a brief overview of the discussions around the political reform agenda in Brazil. In 2013, nationwide demonstrations revealed an overall dissatisfaction with political parties, electoral procedures (such as re-election for a second term), and corruption, as well as overall lack of trust in the political system. In response to citizens’ demands, President Dilma Rousseff proposed a plebiscite and a Constituent Assembly to discuss the political reform agenda. However, the proposal was rejected by the Congress. A new attempt to debate these issues was



presented by Deputy Cândido Vaccarezza, from the Workers' Party, in November 2013. Vaccarezza drafted a proposal addressing the main topics of the political reform agenda: party fidelity, re-election, campaign financing, mechanisms for civic participation, and the electoral system. The parliamentary committee in charge of these discussions held public hearings with members of civil society, electoral prosecutors, lawyers, political scientists, and party leaders. At the same time, citizens could participate through comments and suggestions on Portal E-Democracia.

During the public hearings in Congress, representatives brought questions and comments from the online debates to discussion. In May 2015, the House of Representatives presented the final report of the political reform. The proposal included 154 constitutional amendments. In the following years, each topic that was reported on the political reform proposal would undergo a vote in Congress and then be sanctioned or vetoed by the president.

We focus on the discussions in Portal E-Democracia (see Figure 1), a platform created by the Brazilian House of Representatives in 2007 aimed at providing citizens with opportunities to follow and engage in policy debates. It is a resourceful platform that incorporates aspects of social network sites, such as the use of personal profiles, communities, and the need to be registered to participate (although it is possible to view the debates without logging in). The website has several features: (a) "legislative communities" that revolve around specific policies that are under debate in Congress; (b) interactive events such as public hearings and legislative seminars, in which citizens can participate through chat rooms in real time; and (c) open-themed communities in which users can create forums to debate public issues. The features for user engagement vary among policy topics, but they are mainly asynchronous forums for debate, surveys where people can vote on predefined topics, and comments on public posts.

Portal E-Democracia hosted a legislative community dedicated to the political reform debate. The community was structured in seven thematic forums: (1) campaign financing; (2) mechanisms of civic participation; (3) political parties; (4) re-election, term of office length, and coincidence of elections; (5) electoral system; (6) responses of an interactive parliamentary audience hosted at the E-Democracia; and (7) open themes. These forums accumulated 244 topics and 3,043 messages when data were scraped (between June 11 and 27, 2014, a year after online discussions began).

We focus on the discussion stage of the political reform community. In what follows, we analyze the discussions held in the online forums to observe how citizens engaged with others and debated solutions for the issues at hand. The role of Portal E-Democracia in this debate is of special interest for two main reasons. First, the political reform agenda was one of the most visible topics after the 2013 uprisings and received significant amounts of coverage in the media. Because of that, it is reasonable to assume that the public was paying attention to what the House of Representatives was discussing. Although there were several other issues under discussion on the digital platform at the same period, the political reform agenda was arguably the most popular because of its visibility in the public sphere. Second, Portal E-Democracia was the only viable option for many Brazilians who would not be able to take part in public hearings to participate in this debate. To understand the nature of citizen engagement in this topic, we aimed to answer three questions:

RQ1: *With whom are participants talking when they participate in the discussion forums? Are they engaging with each other's comments and proposals?*

RQ2: *Do the threads of the political reform community exhibit heterogeneous opinions? If so, how do participants react to the expression of diverging views?*

RQ3: *Are participants interested in proposing solutions for the topics under discussion?*

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**Figure 1. The political reform community. Source: edemocracia.camara.gov.br**

### Methods

This study employed systematic content analysis as a research method, a technique that enables inferences and insights over data in relation to their context (Krippendorff, 1980; Neuendorf, 2002). We analyzed 451 messages collected across the six main topics addressed in the political reform legislative community. Although the legislative community had an open-themed forum where citizens could discuss other issues, we focused on the forums structured around topics formally under discussion within the political reform legislative agenda. We selected the longest thread in each thematic forum, including the four subdivisions of the topic “political parties.” Although this method cannot be considered representative, we believe that it enabled the observation of conversation dynamics and discussion within topics that drew greater attention and participation. Table 1 shows the sample distribution.

**Table 1. Sample Distribution.**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Number of messages</b>
Campaign financing	107
Mechanisms for popular participation	52
The electoral system	101
Re-election	54
Parties: partisan fidelity	68
Parties: ideal percentage for the barrier clause	33
Parties: end of partisan coalitions	20
Parties: loyalty for the party or for the people? (about the term of office)	15

Our coding scheme built on well-known criteria broadly used to examine deliberation (Bächtiger et al., 2009; Black, Burkhalter, Gastil, & Stromer-Galley, 2011; Coleman & Moss, 2012; Dahlberg, 2004; Steiner 2012; Stromer-Galley, 2007) and incorporated original categories developed for this project. We focused on social aspects of political conversation (Gastil & Black, 2008), such as the negotiation of agreement and disagreement in public discussions of political issues, respect, and reflexivity. These aspects are here understood as the communication dynamics that can be apprehended in interpersonal communication. The analytical sphere of political discussion (Gastil & Black, 2008)—whether participants

provide arguments to support their views or the types of justification they use and how they elaborate and negotiate different views of the world—is beyond the scope of this article.

Data were coded in three analytical sets, each with its own categories: users, interactions, and utterances. At the users' level, participants were coded by gender when such information could be identified by their usernames. This measurement built on previous research that identified a gender gap in online political discussion, suggesting that men are more likely to participate in political activities (Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2011).

### ***Coding Categories***

At the interaction level, we focused on identifying the target of interaction (i.e., with whom users are talking, if at all) and the presence of disrespect, agreement, and disagreement. Figure 2 presents brief descriptions of each code.

<b>Interaction</b>	
<b>Target of interaction</b>	Identifies whether participants are engaging with others or simply interested in expressing their opinions. Engagement is operationalized as responses to other participants or arguments. This code demonstrates to what extent the aforementioned forum is characterized by dialogical interaction.
<b>Disrespect</b>	Measures the use of foul language or personal attacks toward other persons or arguments.
<b>Agreement</b>	Agreement is important for users to form a sense of "community" and reinforcement, which is regarded as an incentive for those who share similar opinions to speak their minds. This variable sought to reveal the reflexive potential of the forum and assess the homogeneity of the discussion.
<b>Disagreement</b>	This variable measures the heterogeneity of the debate. Of special interest here is an investigation of how people react in controversial situations and negotiate interaction in these settings.

***Figure 2. Codes at the interaction level.***

The third level of analysis—utterances—identified the characteristics of the messages exchanged between participants. We elaborated five variables: topic, opinion expression, sourcing, question, and proposal. These categories are briefly explained in Figure 3.

**Figure 3. Codes at the utterance level.**

<b>Utterances</b>	
<b>Topic</b>	This category identifies whether participants are talking about the topic of the thread or are expressing unrelated opinions.
<b>Opinion expression</b>	This measurement intends to reveal whether utterances contain expressions of opinion — users' judgments on a person, an event, a social problem, a state of affairs, a crisis, values.
<b>Sourcing</b>	Identifies whether participants make use of external sources as resources to support or elaborate their arguments.
<b>Question</b>	Identifies whether participants are directing questions to others or use rhetoric as an argumentative strategy to advance their own arguments.
<b>Proposal</b>	This variable reveals whether participants are actively contributing to advance the debate by presenting ideas and solutions for the political reform.

**Coding Procedure and Reliability Test**

After a careful discussion of the codebook, coders conducted a blind test with a small sample to compare interpretations. Once a desirable level of pairwise agreement was reached, coders analyzed 10% of the sample for reliability using Krippendorff's coefficient alpha (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). The results were generally above 0.800, which represents a high level of agreement between coders, and indicates that our analysis tended to be reliable. The categories that went through the calculation of reliability and the results were gender, 1.0; target of interaction, 1.0; disrespect, 1.0; agreement, 0.882; disagreement, 0.818; topic, 0.791; opinion, 0.848, sourcing; 0.740; question, 0.819; and proposal, 0.808.

**Results**

Users who participated in the discussions about the political reform were predominantly men, representing 95.3% ( $n = 429$ ) of the sample, and 0.7% ( $n = 3$ ) were women. Nicknames and aliases prevented the disclosure of gender for 4.0% ( $n = 18$ ).

At the social level, debates were characterized by interpersonal interaction, with users perceiving others as the target in 84.7% of all messages. The discussion was also characterized by low levels of disrespect, both in the form of personal offense and irony (3.1%) and use of foul language to disqualify others and arguments (2.9%).

Even though these results suggest a civil discussion, we observed a substantial level of disagreement. Soft disagreement—that is, when people demonstrate willingness to negotiate and

understand diverging views—was perceived in 23.6% of the messages, and bold disagreement appeared in another 26.2%. The former indicates a polite expression of diverging views and willingness to negotiate disagreement, whereas the latter suggests a stronger position toward an issue. We observed agreement to previous ideas or arguments in 43.1% of utterances, and only 7.1% of the messages were neutral.

On the analytical level, 82.7% of the utterances were on topic. Another 14.4% were classified as presenting related but off-topic contributions. Only 2.9% were completely off-topic. In addition, 88.2% of the utterances presented the expression of an opinion regarding the issue under discussion and/or previous arguments.

Regarding argumentative strategies, we observed that the majority of utterances did not present external sources to support or clarify arguments. This was the case for 66.4% of the sample. When speakers mobilized external sources to justify their claims, they used political actors or institutions (12.2%), such as members of Congress who were engaged in the political reform debate, political personalities, and parties. Speakers combined political actors/institutions with personal stories to support their arguments in 9.0% of the utterances and with legislation in another 9.0%. Rhetorical questions were used in 15.6% ( $n = 70$ ) of the cases, a strategy that contributes to the elaboration of arguments and may foster further reflection.

Finally, the analyzed sample revealed that participants were engaged in presenting proposals and solutions to the problems at stake in each forum. Overall, 62.7% of the utterances demonstrated that speakers were interested in contributing assertively with their ideas for the political reform.

### **Discussion**

Our sample revealed a majority of male discussants and demonstrated that a substantial percentage of participants disclosed their identities by using their real names, thereby making it possible to identify gender in 96% of cases. The low presence of women in political discussion online has been highlighted by other studies (Kies, 2010). Although we did not intend to investigate why women are underrepresented, this finding corroborates previous research (Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2011).

At the social level, debates were characterized by dialogical interactions with users perceiving others as their targets in a substantial majority of posts (84.7%). Our results suggest that the debate was reflexive given that participants were predominantly engaging with others instead of simply sharing their views and talking past one another. These findings answer our first research question and reveal that participants were responsive to others' inputs and genuinely engaged in a discussion. These results also suggest that the debate was reflexive. In addition, this finding corroborates previous studies in the United States, Denmark, Germany, and the United Kingdom (Kies, 2010, pp. 102–104) that suggested that participants in political discussions on strong publics had a tendency to engage with others' opinions throughout the development of a debate.

To answer the second research question regarding heterogeneity of opinions and presence of disagreement, we analyzed whether users disagreed with others during the discussions. Our results

demonstrated a substantial indication of heterogeneity, as people explicitly disagreed with others in 48.8% of the analyzed messages, whereas agreement was observable in 43.1% of the cases. Only 7.1% of the messages were neutral. Moreover, the frequent use of soft disagreement—in 23.6% of the cases—demonstrates that almost a quarter of those who revealed disagreement were willing to negotiate with contrasting ideas.

The second question also inquired how people behaved in the presence of contrasting views. Even though there was a significant amount of disagreement, we found a high level of civility toward diverging views. In the rare occasions of disrespect, other participants reprehended those who were being disrespectful.

If we look at the normative ideals of deliberation as standards to judge these results—reciprocity, respect, reflexivity—the high level of civility can be interpreted as a demonstration that participants mostly considered others as individuals whose opinions were worthy of respect and consideration, especially in a highly heterogeneous scenario. In this sense, the debates on Portal E-Democracia can be characterized as deliberative insofar as participants engaged in a thoughtful and purposive discussion, treated each other with respect, and negotiated contrasting views in an effort to present their arguments.

Our third research question addressed citizens' willingness to collaborate with decision making by presenting solutions. Overall, 62.7% of the utterances were purposeful and demonstrated that participants were interested in contributing to the discussion with genuine ideas and suggestions, which is desirable given that the goal of the platform was to debate solutions for the political reform. Citizens effectively used the discussion space to present ideas and debate the issues at stake, providing a resource for their elected representatives to access public opinion. This result can also be considered a desirable outcome, as deliberation entails presenting a variety of arguments and ideas to decide a course of action.

Overall, our research suggests that citizens who engage in participative platforms are interested in opportunities to engage with relevant policy discussions. In the debates around the political reform, citizens demonstrated respect toward each other, discussed heterogeneous ideas, and revealed a purposeful spirit, presenting ideas to improve policy proposals. In this sense, initiatives such as Portal E-Democracia contribute to narrow the gap between citizens and their elected representatives by fostering the type of discussion that is beneficial to deliberative democracy. If the results of e-democracy initiatives are the product of the interaction between citizens and the affordances of these platforms, it seems correct to say that those who engaged in these discussions revealed genuine concerns around the issues at hand and ultimately believed that their voice would have an effect on political decision making. Even though Brazil still faces high levels of corruption that contribute to undermining public trust in political institutions, the fact that citizens carried substantial discussions in a platform sponsored by the House of Representatives seems like a positive outcome for e-democracy enthusiasts.

Our goal was not to measure the effectiveness of Portal E-Democracia in influencing political decision making or the quality of citizens' arguments. However, we examined the report produced by members of Congress to assess whether citizens' inputs online were taken into account during political decision making. The report highlighted the relevance of the platform and informed that more than

150,000 people participated in the online discussions around the topic in two years. The fact that citizens' proposals were referenced during public hearings also evince that representatives were attentive to what was discussed online. Nevertheless, as Johnston (2010) argued, it is impossible to correlate citizens' inputs with the final proposals presented in Congress, as these have been affected by a series of activities such as public hearings and the political game itself.

If we consider that creating opportunities for citizens to take part in political decision making online is costly for political agents and that giving feedback to those who participate is an issue of such initiatives, it seems plausible to say that, in this case, online discussions were successful both in terms of providing means for citizens to engage in policy debates and in producing political outcomes. Although we cannot claim that citizens effectively influenced policy decisions, participants revealed a deliberative behavior. Certainly, in addition to public hearings, Portal E-Democracia represented an opportunity for citizens to participate in the discussion of the political reform agenda, as well as to publicly scrutinize proposals that were being evaluated by political representatives. At the very least, it is possible to say that online debates were able to inform decision makers of citizens' opinions.

Considering Chadwick and May's (2003) theoretical framework, Portal E-Democracia can be described as an example of the participative model in regards to the flow of information, the opportunity for citizens to discursively engage with political issues, and the opportunities to inform and influence political decision making. The participative model is unique because of its complex discursive structure that values what citizens have to say instead of merely providing information. These are precisely the characteristics of Portal E-Democracia. The dialog is multidirectional and can be initiated by Congress members and their staff to engage citizens in topics that are currently on the legislative agenda.

However, we add the caveat that the platform remains restrained by some features that were inherited from the consultative model. Legislative communities are built according to priorities defined by Congress members and their staff. In this sense, Portal E-Democracia can be considered a participatory platform constrained by some consultative features, such as top-down agenda setting, which suggest that citizens' inputs are seen "as a resource that can be used to provide 'better' policy and administration" (Chadwick & May, 2003, p. 278). Although citizens' inputs have no clear connection with political outcomes and the agenda is primarily determined by Congress members and staff, the platform provides citizens with a variety of affordances that enable them to engage with policy decisions.

### **Conclusion**

Our goal was to analyze how Brazilian citizens engaged in the discussion of a major political controversy—the political reform—on Portal E-Democracia, a platform created by the House of Representatives to foster public participation on political decision making. Our analysis demonstrates that the debates were characterized by civility, cooperation, and reflected dialog, as well as by the interest to move the discussion forward by presenting solutions to the issues at stake. Those are some of the guiding principles of deliberative democracy (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Habermas, 1996) that were fulfilled in this online debate.



Our article has addressed three research questions: First, our results demonstrate that participants were interacting with others instead of merely expressing opinions, which suggests that discussions were characterized by reflexivity (willingness to consider others' arguments in a discussion). Second, the balance between agreement and disagreement reveals that participants had heterogeneous views, which provides citizens with a better understanding of others' perspectives and allows a refinement of their own opinions (Kies, 2010). Finally, the results also demonstrate that users were engaged with the discussion and tried to present solutions for the problems at stake, which we interpret as an attempt to guide decision making. Our findings regarding the quality of citizens' discussions suggest that participants were engaged in the type of argumentation that is considered beneficial for democracy and fulfills some normative ideals of deliberation, such as reflexivity, respect (toward speakers and opinions), justification and the ongoing negotiation of arguments, and preferences focused on discussing solutions for a collective political problem (Habermas, 1996).

With regard to the models proposed by Chadwick and May (2003), Portal E-Democracia can be considered a participatory platform constrained by some consultative features. Political actors have the power to determine the discussion agenda and ultimately are the ones with power to filter discussions on their behalf. Therefore, citizens can be seen as consultants whose inputs might be discarded during the decision-making processes as the online platform represents an instance of political discussion that is not aimed at producing binding decisions.

However, Portal E-Democracia provides users with a richer experience when compared with e-consultative initiatives given that those tend to be sporadic, aimed at particular issues, and are restrictive in terms of how citizens can participate. With a varied array of affordances for citizens to interact, Portal E-Democracia leans toward the participatory model of digital politics, which are broadly seen as relevant means to foster political participation online (Chadwick & May, 2003; Kies, 2010).

Even though there is room for criticizing the effectiveness of e-democracy tools for strengthening the relationship between citizens and their representatives, our results reinforce Dahlgren's (2005) perspective that, for those with sufficient interest, motivation, and resources, the Internet can be a powerful tool and may contribute to bringing citizens closer to the formal political sphere. Although it is not possible to guarantee that suggestions made online will influence political decisions, it must be recognized that these platforms provide citizens with an opportunity to voice opinions that otherwise would not be heard. We believe that the quality of discussion can be seen with enthusiasm for deliberative researchers and demonstrates that the Internet can be used as a tool to enhance public deliberation, as citizens are able to engage in collaborative and purposeful debate among themselves and with members of Congress. Specifically in a country in which politicians are constantly linked to corruption, the fact that users effectively engaged in purposeful debates is a suggestion that they believe their voices might influence decision making. Instead of demonstrating cynicism or mistrust in the effectiveness of the participatory process, they adopted a deliberative behavior and presented genuine contributions to the discussion at hand.

One limitation of our study is that our inferences refer to the discussion dynamics, namely, the characteristics of policy discussion. By doing so, our study did not measure the effectiveness of Portal E-

Democracia in producing binding decisions or influencing political outcomes. As political decision making happens in several dimensions and receives inputs from a variety of stakeholders, industries, members from organized civil society, and the media, as well as from citizens through public hearings and online discussion platforms, it is difficult to assess whose voice is heard in the actual process of political decision making.

In our case, the report produced by the legislative committee states that contributions made through Portal E-Democracia were considered in the production of the final draft bill and, moreover, that suggestions made online were also discussed during public hearings. In our view, this acknowledgment demonstrates that the online debate had political consequences.

As a final remark, we believe that these initiatives present citizens with genuine opportunities to discuss important political issues with others and, occasionally, with politicians and experts, thus fulfilling a desirable role for deliberative democracy. However, we must recognize that there is still a gap in what regards scaling up these deliberative opportunities, which, it should be noted, is a problem for many deliberative initiatives that ultimately prevents us from claiming that these platforms have successful outcomes from a participatory perspective.

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