

## **Liberal Individualist, Communitarian, or Deliberative? Analyzing Political Discussion on Facebook Based on Three Notions of Democracy**

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This study explores the democratic value of political discussion on Facebook using theory triangulation and operationalizing three models of democracy. It aims to determine which democratic model offers the best account of the benefits of Facebook discussions and to explore whether this varies according to the ideology and history of the political party hosting them. An analysis of 2,800 comments published on the Facebook websites of four Spanish political parties reveals that the discussions generally serve communitarian and deliberative purposes and, to a much smaller extent, liberal individualist goals. Results highlight significant differences related to the parties' ideology and history. Discussions on right-wing websites lean more liberal individualist, whereas those on left-wing parties' sites favor a more communitarian dynamic. Moreover, conversations hosted by new political parties are more communitarian and civil in tone than those hosted by traditional parties.

*Keywords: Facebook, public discussion, democracy, public sphere, content analysis*

Research into online political discussions has been dominated by deliberative theory; most studies have operationalized normative notions of deliberation and then measured the extent to which online conversations resemble the ideal (see, e.g., Camaj & Santana, 2015; Ruiz, Masip, Micó, Díaz-Noci, & Domingo, 2010). In doing so, they have overlooked other democratic benefits associated with online political discussion stemming from alternative political theories. This study seeks to overcome this shortcoming by using metrics derived from three democratic philosophies (liberal individualism, communitarianism, and deliberative democracy). I draw on previous theoretical work and attempts to operationalize different aspects of democratic philosophy (Freelon, 2010, 2013) to explore the democratic potential of online political discussion.

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This study concentrates on political conversations hosted by four Spanish political parties on Facebook—one of the most popular social networks worldwide and used by the vast majority of the population. In contrast, most recent research on digital politics has focused on Twitter. This study contributes to scholarship by: (a) applying a theory triangulation approach and operationalizing three democratic philosophies; (b) exploring which aspects of liberalism, communitarianism, and deliberative theory become manifest in Facebook political discussions; and (c) determining whether the dynamics and democratic value of discussions vary according to the ideology and history of the political party hosting them.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***The Internet and Politics***

Academic interest in the political implications of the Internet has produced enduring controversy about the merits of the claims of the “revolution school” and the “normalization school” (Wright, 2011). Research into online political discussion blossomed amid debates about the potential of the Internet to revitalize the public sphere (see, e.g., Dahlgren, 2005; Graham, 2009; Wilhelm, 1998; Wright, 2005).

Through political talk—meaning informal political conversation and more formalized types of discussion that take place in various settings—citizens can express their opinions publicly, and such discussion shapes their opinions about public issues and exposes them to other worldviews (Dahlberg, 2001; Shah, 2016; Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2011; Sunstein, 2001).<sup>2</sup> A growing body of literature indicates that political conversation leads to several desirable outcomes, such as increased mutual understanding, increased political knowledge and civic engagement, and greater tolerance toward other ideological groups (Mutz & Mondak, 2006; Price & Cappella, 2002; Shah, 2016). “It is through political conversations that members of society come to clarify their own views, learn about the opinions of others, and discover what major problems face the collective” (Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2011, p. 169).

Political research has explored a huge variety of online forums, including Usenet newsgroups (Papacharissi, 2004; Wilhelm, 1998), the comment sections of news media (Graham, 2010; Ruiz et al., 2010; Zhou, Chan, & Peng, 2008), blogs (Kaye, Jonson, & Muhlberger, 2012), platforms sponsored by political parties and government institutions (Desquinabo, 2008; Graham & Witschge, 2003; Jensen, 2003), social networks such as Facebook (Camaj, Hong, Lanosga, & Luo, 2009; Sørensen, 2016a, 2016b; Valera-Ordaz, 2017) and Twitter (Balcells & Padró-Solanet, 2015), and even “third spaces” (Graham, 2010; Graham, Jackson & Wright, 2015)—nonpolitical platforms that give rise to political discussion.

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<sup>2</sup> I use the terms *discussion* and *conversation* to describe political talk in a broad sense, as a wide-ranging and often informal social process that takes place in various settings and is not aimed at decision making. I reserve the term *deliberation* to describe a decision-oriented process of “rational exchange of views resulting in enlightened understanding” (Gastil, 2008, p. 19).

### ***A Field Dominated by Deliberative Theory***

Wright (2011) argues that deliberative theory has dominated research into digital political communication to such an extent that it has harmed the empirical examination of online political discussion. First, it has deeply influenced the theoretical perspective adopted by researchers, who have generally adopted revolutionary and pessimistic rhetoric in analyses of online political discussion. Second, most empirical research has drawn on ideal notions of deliberation to analyze discussions— notions that are generally rooted in the Habermasian theory of the public sphere (Graham, 2015).

In other words, most research has operationalized constructs based on deliberative democracy and then measured the extent to which real online political conversations approximate these ideals (Graham, 2015; Wright, 2011). "It is the degree of deliberation on different platforms that has attracted most scholarly attention" (Friess & Eiders, 2015, p. 333). However, real online political discussions are spontaneous, dispersed, fragmented, and obviously not part of a decision-making process (Graham, 2015; Martí, 2006), so they can hardly be expected to be of high deliberative quality. Only good planning can produce high-quality deliberation (Birchall & Coleman, 2015), conceived as a "rational exchange of views resulting in enlightened understanding" (Gastil, 2008, p. 19).

The lack of clear criteria for deliberative quality in spontaneous environments has forced researchers to interpret results in a subjective way, and sometimes their interpretations have revealed a pessimistic bias (Wright, 2011). I agree with Wright that most researchers initially concluded that online political talk could make no real contribution to the public sphere unless all or most deliberative standards were met (see, e.g., Davis, 2005; Ruiz et al., 2010; Wilhelm, 1998) and thus interpreted their findings "through the utopian, cyber-optimist argument" (Wright, 2011, p. 250).

The existence of conflicting evidence is not surprising given the diversity in conceptual definitions of deliberation, the various communication platforms that have been investigated, and the diverse operationalization of concepts—all of which make it difficult to compare results and draw firm conclusions (Jonsson & Aström, 2014; Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2011). It is therefore common to find that online political discussion corresponds strongly with some deliberative norms but completely fails to abide by others. For example, research has found that users on Facebook generally behave civilly (Woolley, Limperos & Oliver, 2010); however, conversations are superficial (Camaj et al., 2009), users show scant willingness to engage in rational argument (Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008), and discussions are dominated by like-minded people (Fernandes, Giurcanu, Bowers, & Neely, 2010; Valera-Ordaz, 2017).

Other researchers have enriched the picture by offering more balanced interpretations that emphasize the democratic potential of various communication platforms (see, e.g., Camaj et al., 2009; Graham, 2009; Graham & Wright, 2015). Indeed, several scholars have moved beyond the cyber-optimist-versus-cyber-pessimist controversy and address the influence of specific factors on online political discussion. This strand of research has considered the influence of, among other variables, Web design (Wright & Street, 2007), discourse architecture (Freelon, 2013), the presence of a moderator (Camaj & Santana, 2015), and ideology (Camaj & Santana, 2015; Freelon, 2013).

This line of research parallels studies that explore the influence of party characteristics, such as party size or ideology, on political actors' use of various digital technologies (see, e.g., Cardenal, 2011; Sudulich, 2013; Vesnic-Alejuvic, 2016). For example, Cardenal (2011) argues that party size matters when it comes to using digital technologies for political mobilization, since big parties have greater incentives to do so due to their higher expectations of winning elections. For their part, Larsson and Kalsnes (2014) find that representatives with lower vote percentages are more likely to use social media and that it is the politicians' individual characteristics that mostly determine social media use.

The evidence on ideology is conflicting: Some studies suggest that left-wing parties are more oriented toward interaction through social media (Sudulich, 2013), while others point out a greater use of digital technologies by right-wing political organizations (Lilleker & Jackson, 2010). In any case, both ideology and party characteristics are relevant factors that might influence online political talk as well, especially in explicitly partisan forums, where conversations emerge from messages that have been selectively published by political actors. As such, they deserve consideration in studies exploring online political talk hosted by political organizations.

### ***From Deliberation to Theory Triangulation***

Several researchers have argued that studying online political talk through the narrow lens of deliberative theory might result in its real democratic benefits being overlooked (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Graham, 2015; Jonsson & Aström, 2014; Wright, 2011). They contend that deliberation is not the only democratically valuable type of political discussion and that deliberative theory should not be the sole theoretical framework for determining the democratic value of online political talk. "The predominance of deliberation as an analytical framework has thus led to the relative neglect of online discussion characteristics not classified under its domain" (Freelon, 2010, p. 1174).

Still, acknowledging the shortcomings of the application of deliberative theory to the study of online political talk by empirical researchers does not imply criticizing deliberative theory or neglecting its value as a critical standard for judging the quality of actual talk.<sup>3</sup> Rather, it means acknowledging that the exclusive use of deliberative theory as a conceptual framework in empirical research might not expand our understanding of how online political talk effectively contributes to democracy.

Focusing exclusively on deliberative ideals, along with the above-mentioned pessimistic bias in interpreting results, might cause researchers to fail to identify other useful and interesting characteristics of online political talk with democratic benefits (Birchall & Coleman, 2015). For instance, homophily in online groups (see, e.g., Camaj et al., 2009) is generally seen as leading to discourse homogeneity and lack of exposure to diversity through the deliberative lens (Ancu & Cozma, 2009; Sunstein, 2001; Wilhelm, 2000). Through a communitarian approach, however, it can be interpreted as a tool to reinforce social cohesion and build group identity among like-minded people, thus helping consolidate political and social organizations and preserve pluralism.

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<sup>3</sup> A brilliant discussion on how deliberative theory has been selectively applied by empirical researchers can be found in Thompson (2008).

In the same vein, researchers recently have argued that conceiving the outcomes of deliberation in terms of a reception effects paradigm has led to the neglect of other potential benefits of online political discussions, such as those derived from the simple act of expression (Pingree, 2007; Shah, 2016). More specifically, Pingree (2007) refers to the effects of the expectation of expression, the effects of message composition, and the effects of a message being released to others.

Moreover, some studies have combined content analysis with other research techniques to explore the potential of social media for political action. For instance, based on an analysis of focus groups with Norwegian teenagers, Storsul (2014) concludes that social media provide platforms for participating in, coordinating, and organizing political activities, but that Norwegian teenagers are hesitant about using social media for deliberation because they do not want to be perceived as highly political. Sørensen (2016a) used semistructured interviews with Danish members of parliament to explore how they use Facebook to discuss politics with citizens and how these online conversations differ from face-to-face interactions. He concludes that Danish MPs have embraced Facebook as a tool for political conversation and that they spend several hours a week using it. Moreover, the MPs perceive these online discussions to be of higher quality than face-to-face meetings, because they allow for lengthy arguments (Sørensen, 2016a).

These approaches reflect a will to understand how online discussions contribute to political action beyond deliberation (Graham, 2015). They constitute exceptions to the claim that, "for most online deliberation researchers it seems as if the political process ends when civic talk stops" (Coleman & Moss, 2012, p. 11), as recently noted by Graham, Jackson, and Wright (2015). I completely share their concern, and the aim here is to extend the empirical examination of online political discussion beyond the boundaries of deliberative theory, addressing how spontaneous and informal discussions, which are obviously not aimed at decision making, might contribute to democracy.

One way of doing this, first suggested by Freelon (2010, 2013), is to use metrics derived from multiple models of democracy to analyze online political discussion: "Deliberation is not the only democratic norm available, and alternatives should be incorporated into research designs to fully assess the potential of online political discussion" (Freelon, 2013, p. 2). Freelon's comparative theoretical framework, grounded in three well-established political philosophies (liberal individualism, communitarianism, and deliberative democracy), includes three democratic logics that online political forums may manifest (Freelon, 2010). He draws on Dahlberg's (2001) original classification of rhetorics of Internet and democracy to produce a multinorm framework that includes a set of variables that can be used in research into online political talk.

I, therefore, contend that triangulating three democratic philosophies makes it possible to carry out a broader, more flexible examination of how online forums contribute to democracy. To the best of my knowledge, Freelon's (2013) study is the only previous analysis to have applied a multinorm framework to the analysis of online political discussion. The results find that the discourse architecture tends to reflect differences in democratic norms: Twitter conversations generally exhibit a communitarian logic, whereas discussion on newspapers' sites present more liberal individualist and deliberative features.

Despite Freelon's examination of both Twitter and the comments sections of newspapers, there is still a significant dearth of research using multiple theoretical frameworks. To address this research

gap, this study applies a comparative, triangulation-based approach to online political discussions taking place on the dominant online social medium worldwide (among the general population): Facebook. A multinorm framework is used to emancipate the empirical examination of online political discussion from the almost exclusive reliance on Habermasian-influenced deliberative theory (Jonsson & Aström, 2014). Its aims are to identify the political theory that offers the best account of the democratic value of online political discussions taking place on the Facebook pages of Spanish political parties and to investigate whether the dynamics of the discussion vary according to the ideology and history of the party hosting the discussion.

### **Research Questions**

In view of the paucity of research applying a multinorm framework to online political talk, this study is guided by one exploratory research question.

*RQ1: Which democratic logic (communitarianism, liberal individualism, or deliberative theory) is more manifest in online political discussions hosted on Facebook by Spanish political parties?*

Given that social media use by political actors seems to be influenced by party characteristics, two additional research questions explore the role of ideology and party history. Party history is relevant to the case study here, because Spain has recently witnessed the emergence of two new political organizations (see the Method section).

*RQ2: Do the dynamics of the discussion vary according to the ideology of the party hosting it?*

*RQ3: Do the dynamics of discussions hosted by new political parties differ significantly from those of discussions hosted by older parties?*

### **Method**

#### **Data Source**

The data for this study were extracted from online political discussions on the Facebook pages of four Spanish political parties—the People’s Party, the Socialist Party, the Citizens’ Party, and Podemos—during the 2015 parliamentary election campaign. Spain was chosen because the Spanish political system recently has transformed from a two-party to a multiparty system (with the emergence of Podemos and the transformation of the Citizens’ Party from being a regional Catalan party into a national organization). Spain provides an example of a vibrant civil society that has channeled social discontent (such as the Indignados movement) into new political organizations. Additionally, the new parties’ use of social media has been decisive in boosting engagement in recent elections (Casero-Ripollés, Feenstra, & Tormey, 2016). Analyzing online political discussion in the Spanish context is particularly interesting in view of the recent transformations in the public sphere and the role of digital technologies.

A great deal of research on online political talk focuses on Twitter, but Facebook is examined here because it is the dominant online social medium worldwide. In Spain, Facebook is clearly more popular than Twitter. According to a recent panel study, 69% of the Spanish population reported using the Internet during the period coinciding with the data collection for the current analysis. Indeed, 70% of Spanish Internet users had a Facebook account, whereas only 25% of them were on Twitter (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2015). Other online surveys confirm this gap between the use of Facebook and Twitter among Spanish Internet users (Asociación para la Investigación de Medios de Comunicación, 2015).

Collecting data from sites hosted by Spain's political parties ensured that I would encounter online discussion of public issues. Additionally, the obvious relevance of political parties to the structure of contemporary politics reinforced this decision (Birchall & Coleman, 2015).

The first two political parties selected (the People's Party and the Socialist Party) are the main forces in Spanish politics and have dominated Spanish politics since the transition to democracy, alternating in power since 1982. The other two parties (Podemos and the Citizens' Party) were founded more recently, and in 2015 both ran in a general election for the first time.<sup>4</sup> Together the four parties garnered more than the 85% of the popular vote (when votes for coalitions between Podemos and regional parties are included). In terms of ideology, the People's Party and the Citizens' Party are viewed as right-wing parties by Spanish citizens, whereas the Socialist Party and Podemos are viewed as left-wing (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2016).

### ***Data Collection***

Data collection took place during the two-week period before the December 2015 election, when Spanish political parties officially were allowed to campaign. Because the election took place on December 20, this period extended from December 4 to December 18.

The sample consists of 2,800 comments made in response to 60 posts published by the four political parties on their Facebook pages (15 posts per party). Table 1 provides information about the composition of the sample. The sample was selected as follows. First, Facepager software was used to collect all the posts published by the parties during the election campaign and all the comments they attracted.<sup>5</sup> Second, one post per day for each political party was randomly selected; this allowed covering every campaign day and avoiding bias due to a focus on discussions taking place on days when specific events occurred. For

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<sup>4</sup> Podemos was founded by a group of Spanish political scientists in 2014, and its first electoral outing was in the European parliamentary election of May 2014, when it achieved an outstanding result, winning five seats despite being completely unknown to most electors. The Citizens' Party was founded in 2007 by a group of intellectuals, as a regional Catalan party publicly opposed to the hegemony of Catalan nationalism. It became a national party in 2015, after the emergence of Podemos, when its leader, Albert Rivera, decided to take advantage of the favorable political landscape by making this change.

<sup>5</sup> Facepager retrieves publicly available data from Facebook and Twitter, such as the content generated in the Facebook public webs of political parties. All collected data are automatically stored in a database and may be exported to a comma-separated values file.

practical reasons, only the first 50 comments published in response to each post were analyzed, in line with previous research practice (Camaj & Santana, 2015; Graham & Wright, 2015). Some posts attracted fewer than 50 comments, resulting in slight differences in the number of comments analyzed for each party (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Sample Composition.**

Political party	No. of comments
Citizens' Party	724
People's Party	632
Podemos	750
Socialist Party	694
Total	2,800

Table 2 includes descriptive data about the four political parties' general use of Facebook, including the total number of posts published during the campaign by each party, the total number of comments attracted by their posts, and the mean number of comments that each post received. The sample of 2,800 comments was selected from a universe of 145,886 comments made in response to 555 posts published during a two-week period.

**Table 2. Partisan Use of Facebook During Spain's 2015 Parliamentary Election Campaign.**

Political party	No. of posts	No. of comments	Mean no. of comments per post
Citizens' Party	52	9,600	185
People's Party	257	42,867	167
Podemos	133	27,997	211
Socialist Party	113	65,422	579
Total	555	145,886	263

### **Measures**

To generate a body of textual criteria, I used metrics derived from three democratic traditions—liberal individualism, communitarianism, and deliberative democracy—drawing on Freelon's (2010, 2013) previous efforts to produce operational definitions of various democratic traditions.<sup>6</sup> The variables were designed to capture the democratic functions of Facebook political conversations. The aim was to establish the extent to which the characteristics of the discussions correspond with the three democratic philosophies.

#### *Liberal Individualism*

From a liberal individualist perspective, democracy allows for the articulation and aggregation of interests. In this view, the democratic potential of online political talk is dependent on the extent to which it

<sup>6</sup> For a further explanation of the theoretical foundations of the three political philosophies and how they can be applied to Internet practices and online political discussion, I strongly recommend the work of Freelon (2010) and Dalhberg (2001).

satisfies individual purposes—for example, by offering a forum for self-expression or means of obtaining information. Three nominal variables are used to measure the presence of a liberal individualist dynamic in Facebook comments: expression of support, personal showcasing, and information seeking. Expression of support refers to an individual's desire to help and/or benefit the political party during the campaign. I contend that this variable reflects a liberal individualist dynamic because it channels individual efforts to publicly support a political party. Consequently, expressions of support are defined as personal statements of willingness to take concrete action to benefit a political party and reports of having done so. Comments reporting political actions such as casting a vote, participating in a rally, or contributing economically to a party's campaign were coded as expressions of support. Personal showcasing is defined as use of the party's Facebook page to advertise content generated elsewhere (Freelon, 2010) and thus reflects a desire to share content with other visitors to the page. This variable is operationalized as use of explicit links to external content. Finally, information seeking is defined as posing a direct question to the political party or asking for specific information in the expectation of receiving a response. I contend that using online communication platforms to interact directly with political parties constitutes a liberal individualist dynamic, because it allows individuals to bypass the news media and seek information directly from political actors. Doing so allows individual citizens to autonomously gather relevant information to articulate their political preferences.

#### *Communitarianism*

Communitarianism holds that democracy is sustained by the existence of multiple communities bound by a shared identity, shared values, and a common conception of what is good. From this perspective, online political discussion can benefit democracy by promoting and developing communities. For example, it may reinforce members' group identity or enable a community to mobilize. Three metrics are used to assess communitarian features of partisan Facebook discussions: communitarian identification, mobilization, and homophily. Communitarian identification is defined as a sense of group identity—that is, a feeling of belonging to a broader ideological community—and it is operationalized as the use of first-person plural pronouns (*we*, *our*) and the use of verbs in the first-person plural.<sup>7</sup> Mobilization is defined as the taking of collective action and is operationalized as the presence of calls to action. Inviting other visitors to the page to engage in collective action is a particularly good example of behavior that follows the communitarian logic, because it amounts to a call for party activists and sympathizers to gather, strengthen their ties, and act collectively. Finally, homophily refers to an ideological correspondence between the content published by the political party hosting the discussion and the comments made in response; all comments were coded as contrary, favorable, or neutral.

#### *Deliberation*

Finally, deliberative theorists propose an ideal notion of political discussion based on open, rational discourse in which the participants present reasoned arguments and are willing to listen and be persuaded by others. Three variables measure deliberation: discursive freedom, argument, and reciprocity. Discursive freedom is operationalized as the absence of insults and intimidating or harsh language. Comments are coded as neutral language, harsh language, and harsh language directed at an individual or individuals, as in earlier

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<sup>7</sup> In Spanish, each personal pronoun is associated with a different verb form. Both indicators (pronouns and verb forms) are needed because Spanish sentences do not necessarily include the subject explicitly.

research (Camaj et al., 2009; Valera-Ordaz, 2017). Argument refers to the presence of reasoned claims and is operationalized as the use of causal conjunctions (*because, since*) or the explicit inclusion of evidence (linking to data, surveys, other resources). Finally, reciprocity is defined as communicative interaction among contributors. Reciprocity is important for deliberation because it enables the mutual discovery and exploration of arguments. Reciprocity is assessed using two indicators: formal responses and argumentative incorporation. The first is an indicator of "soft reciprocity" because it indicates a desire to respond to another contributor, and it is operationalized as use of vocatives. The second indicator is a stronger indicator of reciprocity because it captures willingness to engage in deliberation.

The presence of these variables was determined through content analysis. The unit of analysis is the individual comment, and comments were analyzed in the broader context of the Facebook thread associated with the original post (Black, Burkhalter, Gastil, & Stromer-Galley, 2011). All variables were coded by a team of six coders who were trained over several weeks until intercoder reliability reached suitable levels. Intercoder reliability was assessed with 10% of the sample (280 comments). For all variables, intercoder agreement exceeded 85%, and Krippendorff's alpha values, which account for intercoder agreement by chance, ranged between .65 and .80. Given the inevitable trade-off between validity and reliability and the complexity of the indicators—which operationalize three normative conceptions of democracy—these are acceptable values.

## Results

Descriptive analysis of all nine variables is presented in Table 3, which shows both the general percentages of each variable (right-hand column) and the percentages for each political party. Several issues must be taken into consideration in determining which model of democracy offers the best account of the democratic potential of partisan Facebook discussions (RQ1).

First, the results indicate that these online political discussions only sporadically serve the democratic functions associated with the liberal individualist perspective. Contributors rarely use online communication platforms to pose direct questions to political parties (3.3%), highlight content generated outside Facebook (5.9%), or declare that they have taken specific action to support a political party (4.9%). Hence, the democratic value of these spaces cannot be conceived of in liberal individualist terms despite their capacity to satisfy individuals' needs for self-expression and information seeking. Other communication platforms, such as newspapers' comment sections, seem to have a more liberal individualist dynamic (Freelon, 2013).

Second, communitarian features are clearly more prominent. This is not particularly surprising given that the focus is on comments made on partisan Facebook pages, which tend to be dominated by like-minded individuals (Fernandes et al., 2010; Valera-Ordaz, 2017). Almost half (45.5%) of the comments reflect the ideological stance of the party hosting the discussion, only 11.1% express dissent, and 43.5% are neutral. In other words, the discussion on these platforms was broadly homophilic; online party platforms are a space where like-minded people cluster and talk in a friendly, broadly consensual environment and outsiders are relatively uncommon. These findings are consistent with previous studies of political discussions on the Facebook pages of political actors (Camaj et al., 2009; Camaj & Santana, 2015; Valera-Ordaz, 2017). Moreover, 13.1% of contributors express a sense of belonging to a broader ideological

community—that is, their shared identity. Nevertheless, clear party variation exists in the extent to which communitarian feelings are expressed. Finally, the comments offer the least empirical support for the notion that online political discussions are used for mobilization, as only 2.6% of the comments contain calls to action. In other words, only a small minority of contributors use online party political communication platforms to call for collective action.

**Table 3. Descriptive Percentages for All Variables by Political Party.**

	People's Party	Citizens' Party	Socialist Party	Podemos	Total
<b>Liberal individualism</b>					
Expression of support	5.9	6.9	3.3	3.5	4.9
Personal showcasing	1.6	3.2	8.2	10.0	5.9
Information seeking	3.2	4.8	2.3	2.7	3.3
<b>Communitarianism</b>					
Communitarian identification	6.6	7.1	12.1	25.2	13.1
Calls to action	1.9	1.0	2.9	4.4	2.6
<b>Homophily</b>					
Contrary	11.5	10.6	12.6	10.1	11.1
Neutral	34.5	45.2	56.0	37.9	43.5
Favorable	54.0	44.2	40.4	52.0	45.4
<b>Deliberation</b>					
Argument	16.2	21.2	19.0	15.6	18.0
<b>Reciprocity</b>					
Formal responses	6.5	6.2	2.9	6.8	5.6
Argument incorporation	10.1	7.5	13.8	11.7	10.8
<b>Discursive freedom</b>					
Neutral language	84.7	92.7	82.6	84.0	86.0
Harsh language	4.9	3.6	7.6	6.4	5.6
Targeted harsh language	10.4	3.7	9.8	9.6	8.4

Third, the frequency of deliberative variables is moderately high, especially relative to liberal individualist features. The vast majority of contributors use neutral language and avoid uncivil behavior (86.0%); only a minority of comments contain insults or swear words (14%), although most of these are directed at specific individuals (8.4%), which obviously thwarts communicative interaction and hinders deliberation. In terms of opinion justification, 18.0% of the comments include reasoned claims. Finally, there is little reciprocity: Only 5.6% of contributors formally refer to the comments of others (a reflection of, at the least, a desire for interaction), and 10.8% incorporate arguments introduced by other participants. These results indicate that discussion on the Facebook pages of political parties is generally civil and only occasionally leads to reasoned argument among users.

In summary, the democratic value of political conversations taking place on partisan Facebook pages appears to serve communitarian and deliberative purposes more than liberal individualist purposes.

Liberal individualist use of partisan Facebook pages is rather infrequent, beyond the obvious fact that by posting comments contributors are satisfying their desire for self-expression.

Table 4 presents the adjusted standardized residuals derived from cross-tabulating each democratic metric with the ideology (RQ2) and history of the political party hosting the discussion (RQ3). The adjusted standardized residuals are used to explore whether an association exists between each democratic metric and the two proposed variables (ideology and party history). Values greater than +1.96 (+2.58) or less than -1.96 (-2.58) indicate that residuals are significant—that is, there is an association among variables at the 95% (99%) confidence level. Positive values indicate that the number of observations with those particular characteristics is greater than expected under the independence hypothesis, while negative values indicate fewer observations than expected. A discussion of the relationship between democratic metrics and ideology will be followed by a discussion of the relationship between discussion dynamics and party history.

**Table 4. Adjusted Standardized Residuals Derived from Cross-Tabulating Each Democratic Metric With Ideology (Right vs. Left) and Party History (Old vs. New).**

	Ideology		Party history	
	Right	Left	Old	New
<b>Liberal individualism</b>				
Expression of support	3.7**	-3.7**	-0.8	0.8
Information seeking	2.3*	-2.3*	-1.5	1.5
Personal showcase	-7.5**	7.5**	-1.8	1.8
<b>Communitarianism</b>				
Communitarian identification	-9.5**	9.5**	-5.3**	5.3**
Calls to action	-3.8**	3.8**	-0.5	0.5
<b>Homophily</b>				
Contrary	-0.3	0.3	1.5	-1.5
Neutral	-3.4**	3.4**	2.2*	-2.2*
Favorable	3.5**	-3.5**	-3.1**	3.1**
<b>Deliberation</b>				
Argument	1.1	-1.1	0.5	-0.5
<b>Reciprocity</b>				
Formal responses	1.6	-1.6	-2.1*	2.1*
Argument incorporation	-3.4**	3.4**	2.0*	-2.0*
<b>Discursive freedom</b>				
Neutral language	4.3**	-4.3**	-3.6**	3.6**
Harsh language	-3.2**	3.2**	1.5	-1.5
Targeted harsh language	-2.7**	2.7**	3.2**	-3.2**

\* Values > +1.96 or < -1.96 indicate association at a 95% confidence level.

\*\* Values > +2.58 or < -2.58 indicate association at a 99% confidence level.

First, clear associations are found between ideology and most of the variables investigated; the two exceptions are argument and dissent. Interestingly, the proportion of comments that include opinion

justification and the proportion of ideologically dissenting comments are stable across ideology and history, as discussed below.

Second, no clear relationship emerges between a single democratic model and ideology. In other words, discussions on right-wing spaces (or left-wing spaces) do not score systematically higher (or lower) in all three variables associated with a specific democratic model (deliberative, communitarian, or liberal individualist). Nevertheless, some general trends are observed. Discussions hosted by right-wing political parties have a more liberal individualist dynamic, whereas discussions hosted by left-wing parties tend to have a more communitarian dynamic, as shown by two of three variables in both cases. Evidence on the relationship between deliberation and ideology is inconsistent.

Right-wing Facebook pages attract more individual statements of support for the party; that is, declarations of willingness to take action during the campaign are more frequent. Right-wing Facebook pages are also more likely to attract direct questions for political parties. In simple terms, contributors to right-wing parties' Facebook pages are more likely to post comments seeking information or as a means of self-expression. Personal showcasing is, however, more frequent in online political discussion hosted by Podemos and the Socialist Party. These differences need to be interpreted in light of the general paucity of liberal individualist features.

Discussions hosted by left-wing political parties have a more communitarian flavor than those hosted by right-wing parties. Contributors more frequently demonstrate a sense of shared identity, using communitarian language that acknowledges the existence of a collective subject. Perhaps as a result, they are more likely to call for action. Nevertheless, the level of dissent is similar across the ideological spectrum; only the proportions of comments favorable and neutral toward the hosting party's ideological stance vary with ideology.

The evidence from the deliberative metrics is inconsistent. Discussion on right-wing Facebook pages shows greater discursive freedom, whereas reciprocity is significantly more frequent in discussions hosted by left-wing parties. Moreover, the frequency of comments making an argument is similar across ideologies, and no differences are found. Deliberation cannot, therefore, be described as a feature specific to discussions hosted by either right- or left-wing parties.

The only significant differences related to party history are in the frequency of communitarian and deliberative features of discussion; the frequency of liberal individualist features is similar for old and new parties. It is worth noting that associations between the investigated variables and party history are generally weaker than those involving ideology. In other words, residuals show greater values across ideologies than between old and new parties, which indicates that ideology is more intensely associated with the investigated variables than is party history.

Nevertheless, some differences between new and old parties are observed. Contributors to political discussions hosted by new parties are more likely to express a sense of group identity, probably as a result of their recent emergence and the enthusiasm of their respective sympathizers. They are also more likely to share the host party's ideological stance. Comments that include argument are less frequent, although

formal responses to other contributors are more common. Comments on the Facebook pages of new parties are also less likely to include swear words—that is, they are significantly more civil in tone. In simple terms, discussions on the Facebook pages of new parties tend to be more communitarian and more respectful than those hosted by traditional parties. In addition, the frequency of dissent and argument does not vary according to the history of the party hosting the discussion.

### Discussion

This study extends the theoretical scope of empirical examination of online political discussion beyond the confines of deliberative theory. Drawing on previous work (Freelon, 2010, 2013), this study operationalizes three models of democracy and applies them to political discussions on Facebook, one of the dominant social networks worldwide. The article provides an empirically grounded account of the ways in which Facebook discussions hosted by formal political organizations contribute to democracy.

In response to RQ1, the findings suggest that the democratic benefits of discussion on political parties' Facebook pages are best conceived in terms of a combination of communitarian and deliberative features, at least during electoral campaigns. The communitarian and deliberative models of democracy are clearly more relevant than the liberal individualist model. Only a minority of contributors uses these platforms for liberal individualist purposes, such as posing a question to political organizations. But it should be noted that these dynamics might vary in nonelectoral periods.

In fact, the discussions analyzed here might be termed "communitarian deliberations"—that is, discussions among like-minded people in which there is some scope for argument and interaction. More specifically, a number of democratic benefits of Facebook political conversation can be inferred from the evidence produced by this study. From a communitarian perspective, discussion serves the following functions: (1) It increases social cohesion among party followers; (2) it allows activists to express their group identity and—occasionally—to call one another to action; and (3) it provides a safe context in which to express political views because of the few dissenting voices present. These communitarian features are more widespread in discussions hosted by left-wing parties (especially in the case of Podemos), probably because of left-wing parties' aspiration to coalesce group solidarities. In deliberative terms, conversation provides for: (1) intra-ideological discussions in which at least a few participants justify their points of view, listen to one another, and develop argument pools; and (2) occasional exposure to diversity, as shown by the modest but constant presence of dissenting voices in discussion hosted by all four parties.

In response to RQ2 and RQ3, discussion dynamics are significantly different across ideologies and between old and new parties. Despite no single democratic model being consistently associated with ideology or party history, differences are found in most of the investigated variables. More importantly, the democratic metrics are associated more strongly with ideology than with party history. This finding confirms that ideology is an important variable related to discussion dynamics (Freelon, 2013).

Regarding the conflicting evidence on the role of ideology in partisan social media use (Lilleker & Jackson, 2010; Sudulich, 2013), the findings indicate that ideology clearly matters in terms of influencing the democratic benefits of online political talk. Hence, ideology might not be decisive when it comes to

political parties' campaign strategies on Facebook (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2016), but it significantly influences the democratic benefits of the resulting political conversations. Interestingly, two of the deliberative metrics (dissent and argumentation) are the only two metrics not associated with ideology, which confirms that ideology does not generally affect the deliberative quality of conversations (Camaj & Santana, 2015). But ideology does influence the rest of the democratic metrics.

More specifically, discussions on right-wing Facebook pages exhibit more features of liberal individualism—more personal statements of support and information seeking—than discussions on left-wing Facebook pages. Communitarian features, however, are more frequent in discussions hosted by left-wing parties, with like-minded people expressing their collective identity and occasionally calling one another to action. In other words, the dynamics of right-wing discussions favor individual self-expression and information seeking, whereas the dynamics of discussions on left-wing parties' Facebook pages favor the building of social cohesion and mobilization of activists. This is probably the result of left-wing parties featuring a stronger participative culture (Janssen & Kies, 2005) and therefore offering democratic benefits stemming from communitarianism, while right-wing parties are more rooted in individualistic values.

Regarding party history, previous studies have found party (Cardenal, 2011) and candidate characteristics (Larsson & Kalsnes, 2014) to be relevant predictors of their respective social media use. However, party history proves in this study to be a weaker factor associated with the democratic dynamic of conversations than ideology.

Still, a few differences emerge. Discussions hosted by new parties have a higher proportion of comments with communitarian features, and they are significantly more civil than those hosted by traditional parties. The dynamics of the so-called new politics thus amount to more expressions of group identity, more homophily, and more civil behavior, probably as a result of sympathizers and activist enthusiasm for two new political projects. For their part, discussions hosted by older parties feature more exchange of arguments and, perhaps as a consequence, more swearing.

A number of limitations restricting the generalizability of the findings must be noted. First, the results shed light on the democratic value of discussions taking place only on explicitly party political Facebook pages and should not be generalized to discussion on other platforms. According to some researchers, studying online talk in explicitly partisan forums might present a distorted picture of the Internet public sphere (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Graham, 2015). Hence, future studies should apply theory triangulation to third spaces—that is, nonpartisan discussion platforms where political discussion occurs (Graham, Jackson & Wright, 2015). Second, the findings relate to the Spanish context, where political parties are powerful organizations and the political system has transformed from a two-party system into a multiparty system. In countries with fewer powerful political organizations, the dynamics of online political conversations might be different. Third, although some of the variables used in this study are based on earlier research (Freelon, 2010, 2013), most were created specifically for this analysis. As such, I anticipate future studies can refine these variables to better capture the range of normative features that Facebook discussions might manifest. It should be noted that the findings may be influenced by the concrete operationalization strategies, and alternative indicators of political theories may offer different results.

Finally, it is worth noting that analyzing a two-week period before a general election implies examining a highly focal event. This can obscure the spontaneity of regular online discussions, and even influence the probability of the occurrence of some of the outlined democratic dimensions (such as the presence of calls to action or homophily). For these reasons, the study should be replicated outside an electoral campaign.

Further research is needed to improve our understanding of how online political discussion contributes to democracy. I call for theory triangulation to be applied to the study of online political discussion across various online forums to explore how the “democratic logic” of conversations varies across platforms (Freelon, 2010, 2013). Moreover, theory triangulation should be combined with methodological diversification to advance the field. Content analysis has been the preferred method for communication scholars, but using other research techniques, such as online surveys of representative samples of social media users, focus groups, or in-depth interviews, could deepen our understanding of how online political discussion contributes to political participation and democracy. This is illustrated by recent methodologically innovative research, which has analyzed how digital media practices influence political engagement through a panel survey applied to Twitter users (Vaccari, Chadwick, & O’Loughlin, 2015).

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