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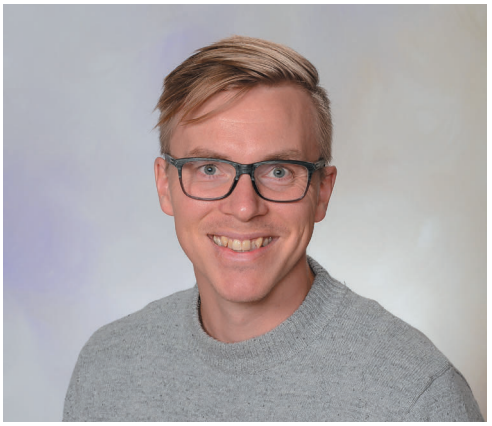
Janne Berg

Digital democracy

Studies of online political participation



Janne Berg

Born 1983 in Solf, Finland

Studies, exams and present occupation

- Master's degree in political science and mass communication at Åbo Akademi University 2010
- Bachelor's degree in media and communication science at Luleå University of Technology 2009

Janne Berg is currently working at the Department of Political Science and Mass Communication within the Faculty of Social Sciences, Business and Economics at Åbo Akademi University in Vaasa, Finland. His research and teaching concern online political participation, democratic innovations and political communication. He is a member of the independent research unit Samforsk, the Social Science Research Institute, which is located both in Vaasa and Turku.

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Janne Berg

The Department of Political Science and Mass Communication
Faculty of Social Sciences, Business and Economics
Åbo Akademi University
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Förord

Det känns smått overkligt att denna avhandling faktiskt verkar bli slutförd efter många år i ett rum i Academill, stället som jag svor att aldrig återvända till efter magisterexamen. I tidernas begynnelse tänkte jag naivt att det aldrig kan ta längre än fyra år att doktorera, speciellt inte om det ges möjlighet att göra detta på heltid. Nu tog det lite längre än fyra år i alla fall och hypotesen om att jag är en obotlig tidsoptimist blev än en gång bekräftad.

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Vasa den 3 november 2017

Janne Berg

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Article 4:

1. Introduction

1.1 The research field

A democracy requires the involvement of citizens. In a representative democracy, the power of the decision-makers is delegated to them by the people, an arrangement implying that rulers should listen to citizens. For this to be possible, there must be ways for citizens to express their will and make their voices heard. The most common and basic way to participate is by voting in elections, but engagement can take many other forms than this. Advocates of participatory democracy argue strongly that political participation in the form of citizens voting every four years is not enough (e.g., Barber, 1984; Pateman, 2012). Therefore, there are reasons to develop and increase opportunities for citizens to influence politics between elections. Dalton (2008, p. 76) maintains that the general level of political participation can be seen as a measure of the functioning of a democracy and without the participation of citizens in political processes, democracy lacks legitimacy and driving force.

Scholars are divided about the state of contemporary democracy. Democracies face challenges including weakening social ties, declining numbers of formal political participation, increasing intolerance, and skepticism towards political institutions, politicians, and parties (Ekman & Amnå, 2009; Dalton, 2014). Some see this development as a potential threat to the legitimacy of representative democracy (Putnam, 2000) while others are not convinced that political engagement is reduced in general, arguing that it is merely taking new forms (Dalton, 2008). Globally, there are more and more people appreciating democracy as an ideal political system, yet many are dissatisfied with how representative democracy and its institutions operate in practice (Norris, 1999, p. 269; Norris, 2011). A possible interpretation of the recent development, set forward by Brants and Voltmer (2011), is that people do not avoid politics altogether; instead, citizens seek out new forums for debate and

engage in specific issues and political consumption. Dalton (2014, p. 271) also maintains that the support for democracy as a system is high among post-materialists, even though they are not especially confident in their governments. There is no dearth of worrying about the state of affairs: "anxiety about the health of democracy is a regular feature of political science and political punditry" (Dalton 2014, p. 256).

Norris (2011) has presented empirical evidence of there being no general decline of trust in democratic institutions in a long-term perspective, only trendless fluctuations of system support. In her words, public support for democracy as a political system "has not eroded consistently in established democracies" (Norris 2011, p. 241). Norris argues that talks about a crisis of democracy are exaggerated and overestimate the extent of political disaffection among citizens. However, a democratic deficit, an imbalance between the public's demand for democracy and the perceived supply of democracy, exists in many states. The concept of a democratic deficit is related to the phenomenon of "critical citizens" who view democracy as their ideal form of government, yet remain skeptical towards the functioning of democracy in their own country (Norris, 2011, p. 5). Dalton (2014, p. 262) shows that people are frustrated with government and that the dissatisfaction deepened by the 2008 economic recession and its consequences. Hence, trust in government and elected officials is decreasing in contemporary democracies, despite the fact that there are positive signals such as an apparent decrease in political corruption and increased access to politics for citizens. Dalton (2014, p. 267) concludes by arguing that this is not a critique of democracy per se since expressions of distrust and disaffection "exist among citizens who remain committed to the democratic ideal."

Hence, the general picture seems to encompass a paradox; people are increasingly cynical about democratic institutions, but simultaneously express support for the democratic creed. Although a debated topic, these people seem to be a characteristic of the new style of citizen politics.

These trends are interpreted in two different ways by political scientists (Dalton 2014, p. 269).

> "The cures offered by elitist theorists are worse than the problem they address; democracy's very goals are ignored in its defence. The critics of citizen politics forget that the democracy means popular control of elites, not elite control over the populace" (Dalton 2014, p. 270).

Dissatisfied democrats may imply that a step in democracy's progress towards its ideal and previous dissatisfaction might even have strengthened this process, in other words, the Western world might be in a new period of democratic reform (Dalton 2014, p. 271). People are more conscious, more well-informed, more skilled, and therefore place greater demands on how the democratic process should function. They are more demanding in their individualism. Dalton (2014, p. 6) argues that people and politics have changed over time, and this has changed the democratic process. The socio-economic transformation of Western democracies has driven the changes in citizens' political behavior that can be seen in the advanced industrial or postindustrial society (Dalton 2014, pp. 6–7).

An important explanation of citizens' rising expectations on democracy is, as both Norris and Dalton have noted, connected to the ever-rising level of education (Norris, 2011, p. 140; Dalton, 2014, p. 271). The higher democratic aspirations among citizens in Western democracies are, according to Norris, predicted by educational level, self-expression values, social trust, and associational activism. As a result of this development, Dahlgren maintains that scholars and citizens are witnessing a growth in "alternative politics," where political engagement bypasses the electoral system. In alternative politics, the modes of engagement are evolving and new issues become politicized. The political is more "closely linked to personal meaning, identity processes, and issues that often have to do with cultural matters" (Dahlgren, 2015, p. 19).

Leadbeater shares this general view, stating that citizens of Western democracies seem increasingly uninterested in formal forms of politics (2007, p. 5). It seems as if citizens increasingly prefer direct engagement as the way of bringing about societal change. Politics has changed from focusing on collective forms of (offline) engagement through traditional means of influence (e.g., party membership) to meet the demands of citizens who engage in new types of political participation (e.g., political consumerism). Dahlgren (2003) asks us to redefine the political to be able to examine these new forms of engagement and participation. This revised focus has created a society that is characterized by the emergence of networks, single-issue movements (Bennett, 1998, p. 745), post-materialist values (Inglehart, 1997; Inglehart & Welzel, 2005), sub-politics (Beck, 1997), individualization (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) as well as lifestyle politics (Giddens, 1991).

Although citizens have become more skeptical of state institutions and authority and are now more willing to assert their own views, Dalton and Welzel (2014) do not view this development as worrisome to democracy. On the contrary, they argue that accountable and effective governance thrives in an assertive culture (Dalton & Welzel, 2014, p. 305). Nevertheless, a more assertive public presents new challenges for democracies and places new demands on the political process. Increasingly assertive citizens open up for more conflicts and contention in politics, which may require reforms of existing democratic institutions to meet modern-day needs (Dalton & Welzel, 2014, p. 306).

Changes in citizens' political participation patterns have resulted in a paradoxical situation, where support for democracy as a form of government remains high, while critique against the functioning of representative democracy is increasing—especially in the aftermath of the economic recession starting in 2007–2008 (Armingeon & Guthmann, 2014). Citizens in postindustrial societies seem increasingly dissatisfied with their options to influence democratic decision-making processes between elections. Thus, an imbalance between the supply and demand

for democracy is created. Scholars tend to interpret the signs of decreasing traditional political participation differently; pessimists view the development as a threat and describe it in terms of crisis, whereas optimists are less worried about the apparent passivity of citizens, arguing that political participation is developing into previously unseen forms.

Even though contemporary democracy is not necessarily in a "crisis," it is certainly facing challenges in the form of declining levels of traditional political participation (Dalton & Klingemann, 2007), increased political skepticism (Norris, 2011), a dealigning electorate (Dalton, 2014), and a demand for increased citizen input in political processes on specific policy issues between elections (Christensen, 2013, p. 1). Since it seems that the traditional forms of political participation are not completely satisfying the needs of modern citizens, reforms have been initiated both within and outside the formal political system. Some of these come in the form of democratic innovations with an institutional attachment, favoring direct citizen engagement in decision-making processes (e.g., participatory budgeting, petitions, and popular referenda). These innovations can be characterized as "top-down" arrangements. Conversely, there are non-institutional bottom-up solutions to the democratic deficit in the form of social movements (e.g., Occupy Wall Street), protesting, political consumerism, and engagement in non-governmental organizations (e.g., Greenpeace) to mention some examples. However, new forms of political participation outside the formal political system might either complement traditional forms of participation or threaten and disrupt the traditional political order (Dalton, 2014, p. 12). Likewise, forms of political participation initiated by the government hold a potential to increase the legitimacy of the political system or fail completely in doing so (see Christensen, 2015).

Other solutions to the challenges presented above have been inspired by theories of participatory and deliberative democracy. These ideas of a more participatory and deliberative democracy do not necessarily

advocate a replacement of representative democracy. Rather, they seek to complement it by enhancing the existing representative political system by increasing citizen participation (Dalton, 2014) and by focusing on improving the communicative processes of public opinion formation preceding voting (Chambers, 2003, p. 308). Suggestions regarding more frequent use of direct democracy instruments (e.g., referenda and petitions) are examples of solutions inspired by participatory democracy (Smith, 2009), while the impact of deliberative democratic theory is seen in the emergence of participation forms as citizens' juries, deliberative polls, and deliberation days where ordinary citizens discuss solutions to policy issues (Bengtsson, 2008; Smith, 2009). These solutions, despite their different origins, all have in common that they are ways of increasing citizens' influence in times between elections and protect the idea of democracy as an ideal form of government in line with public opinion. Moreover, the internet has been regarded as a possible solution to the problems that democracies are facing as it constitutes a new arena for political participation by citizens. The democratic potential of the internet is related to its ability to increase the spectrum of political activities, partly by offering entirely new channels for political participation and partly by modifying aspects of existing forms of political participation (Anduiza et al., 2009, p. 2). Scientific work about the internet and political participation has found inspiration from both participatory and deliberative democrats and gained in popularity due to developments such as the emergence of social media and the spread of worldwide internet access. The implications of the internet on political participation are often analyzed from a deliberative or participatory perspective. The reason for this is that the features of the internet seem ideal for the type of communication in the "public sphere" that deliberative democrats envision, leading to research about whether the ideals of deliberative democracy can be fulfilled online (Witschge, 2007, p. 21; Gustafsson, 2013, p. 30). Likewise, participatory democrats see the features of the internet as promising for enabling visions of direct

democracy on a larger scale, by coordinating voting, legislation drafting, and other types of decision-making online (Gustafsson, 2013, p. 30). The nature of the internet seems promising in increasing the quantity and heterogeneity of participation, even though it does not bring about a more inclusive public sphere in itself (Witschge, 2007, p. 22).

However, the role of the evolution of digital communication in providing solutions for increased political participation is still contested. Theories of normalization, reinforcement, and mobilization have been suggested to explain the impact of the internet on political participation, resulting in findings supporting each theory (Casteltrione, 2015; Jensen, 2013). However, scholars need to keep in mind that the internet is still evolving. Instead of predicting which dream or nightmare society the future of digital communication will bring, based on anecdotal evidence and ill-understood developments, scholars should concentrate on studying current phenomena using the traditional instruments of scholarly research (Castells, Fernandez-Ardevol, Qiu & Sey, 2004, p. 1). This becomes increasingly important as politics generally takes a larger presence online (Dahlgren, 2015, p. 17).

Although politics still represents a relatively minor area of internet usage, it can be argued that the internet has redefined the practices and character of political engagement (Dahlgren, 2015, p. 29). I agree with Dahlgren (2015, p. 29) that anything else would be odd, in the sense that the internet has transformed all levels of society for about two decades. The internet—by fostering decentralization and diversity, providing limitless communicative space, facilitating interactivity and individual communication, making immense amounts of information available, and doing all this at instantaneous speed—alters the premises for political life, making it easier for the political to emerge in online communication.

1.2 Purpose and aim of the thesis

So far, I have described general trends in contemporary democracies, pointing towards a change in the political behavior of citizens. Innovations with the purpose of reconnecting citizens to decision-makers have emerged both inside and outside the political system and contain elements from both participatory and deliberative democracy. This research is focused on forms of online political participation between elections which might help decrease the democratic deficit described in the introduction. Citizens are using these forms to express themselves politically online, yet there is a lack knowledge about how they use them. To evaluate the possible effects of a changing area of political participation, scholars first need to describe these forms of online political participation. Empirical research on political participation is usually motivated by three main agendas. The first agenda focuses on which types of citizens participate and why they participate. The second agenda aims to understand the effects of participation on the political system. The third agenda concentrates on the effects of participation on the individual (Uhlaner, 2014, p. 3). This thesis, instead, focuses on online political participation and empirically analyzes how citizens participate. Consequently, the purpose of this compilation thesis is to increase knowledge about citizens' online political participation in contemporary democracies.

Even though the study is primarily interested in empirical investigation of current phenomena, such an analysis needs to be preceded by a discussion of the concept of political participation. Therefore, the following chapter elaborates on theories relating to political participation. After this discussion, I focus on online political participation. The internet has long been regarded as a possible solution to the challenges facing democracy because it expands the political participation repertoire for citizens. Then, as a theoretical contribution, online anonymity—a specific characteristic of digital communication—

is problematized and elaborated upon. This all amounts to the empirical research questions of this thesis, combined with a typology presenting the four articles and their common denominators. This section explains how the first four chapters relate to each other and provides a framework for the thesis. This is followed by a discussion of the context of the studies, where I state the rationales for concentrating my empirical research to Finland. Four articles, then, represent the empirical part of the compilation thesis. Finally, in a concluding chapter, I summarize and discuss the main findings in light of the purpose and the overarching research query lined out in the introduction.

2. Political participation

In this chapter, I review the literature on a key concept in this study: political participation. I explore the development of the concept of political participation and different dimensions of political participation. The aim of the chapter is to provide the reader with an overview and definition of the multidimensional concept of political participation.

2.1 Views on political participation—a concept in flux

Political participation is at the core of democracy (Barber, 1984) and is central to understanding contemporary representative democracy (Teorell, Torcal & Montero, 2007). Consequently, "empirical research into political participation[…]results in an assessment of the state of democracy as well" (Hooghe, Hosch-Dayican & van Deth, 2014, p. 1). For example, van Deth (2014, p. 350) calls political participation "the elixir of life for democracy." By analyzing political participation—how people engage in politics—scholars gain an understanding of modern-day representative democracy. Participation gives citizens a chance to: voice their grievances, make demands to a larger public, hold governments accountable, and keep politicians responsive (Teorell et al., 2007, p. 334). Scientific literature exhibits a consensus on the view that participating citizens are a central element of a healthy democracy, even though scholars still debate how often and in which forms citizens should participate in public decision-making processes (Casteltrione, 2015, p. 2; Christensen, 2011, p. 1). However, political participation is not always a democratic activity, as participation in non-democratic events or activities also counts as political participation (Pausch, 2012, p. 3). Pausch (2011) highlights two positive functions of political participation. First, political participation seems to favor stability because it can strengthen and legitimize democratic political systems. Second, political participation seems to add to the well-being of citizens by promoting

political freedom or at least the impression of having a say on political matters.

Political participation enables citizens to communicate their will to decision-makers and other powerful actors within a democratic society. When elected representatives make decisions, they are supposed to act on behalf of the citizens. Democratic legitimacy depends on whether the outcome of these decisions corresponds to the will of the people. In the words of van Deth (2001, p. 3): "Democracy is not worth its name if it does not refer to government by the people; hence democracy cannot function without some minimum level of political involvement." Hence, apathy, or lack of political participation, can be destructive for democracy since it undermines the power of the people. In essence, the debate on political participation focuses on the degree of involvement, not the necessity of participation since "virtually every study of political participation starts with the allegation that political participation and democracy are inseparable" (van Deth, 2001, p. 1). The increased academic interest in political participation seems to be a result of concerns about lowered confidence in democratic institutions, low electoral turnout, and declining levels of civic engagement. In addition, scholars worry about skepticism, cynicism, and decreasing trust in politicians and political parties (Ekman & Amnå, 2009, p. 2).

There seems to be a broad consensus among democratic theorists that political participation is at the heart of politics, promoting a democratic society. Thus, political participation is mostly a positively connoted concept thought to benefit both citizens and democratic institutions. However, there is no unified stance on which acts are necessary and desirable, nor on how often citizens should participate in a well-functioning society. No consensus has been reached on the definition of political participation (Gustafsson, 2013, p. 27). This is due to the multidimensionality of the concept, which makes the boundaries between what constitutes participation and what does not unclear (Anduiza et al., 2009, p. 4).

There is no dearth of research dealing with the definition and conceptualization of political participation (e.g., Fox, 2013; Theocharis & van Deth, 2015; Teorell, 2006; van Deth, 2014; Brady, 1999). The expansion of the concept has led to warnings about political participation becoming a subject to conceptual stretching, resulting in vague conceptualizations, making the study of political participation the "study of everything" (van Deth, 2001, p. 2014). Theocharis and van Deth (2015) and Fox (2013) criticize previous political participation research for paradoxically using wide definitions combined with narrow operationalizations. The divergent definitions of the concept and its evolution (see Fox, 2013; Wajzer, 2015 for an overview) illustrates the problem of finding a balance between a definition that is narrow enough to set limitations for acts to be counted as political participation (van Deth, 2001), while at the same time broad enough to include modern forms of participation in the "umbrella-concept" of political participation (Casteltrione, 2015). However, the impact of the internet, modernization, and globalization has made it clear that an update on the pre-internet era definitions of political participation is needed (Fox, 2013; van Deth, 2014). Moreover, the different definitions of political participation are related to diverse normative theories of democracy (Teorell, 2006). Representative, deliberative and participatory democrats have differing viewpoints on political participation, each emphasizing aspects as voting, political discussion, and direct involvement, which leads to definitions ranging from minimalist to maximalist (Bengtsson & Christensen, 2016; Teorell, 2006). Overall, the concept of political participation has become less straightforward now than ever before, compared to the days when political participation simply meant voting in elections (Christensen, 2011).

Political participation can be loosely defined as civic activities with the objective of influencing political decisions (van Deth, 2001, p. 4). However, this definition has been criticized by democracy theorists who emphasize the self-fulfillment and the self-development side of political

participation and believe that participation does not have to be directly linked to political decision-making. In this view, political participation can be seen as expressive acts, not necessarily aimed at reaching policy change (Marien & Hooghe, 2012, p. 3), but still a form of micro-activism (Marichal, 2013). Van Deth (2001, p. 5) argues the different definitions of political participation have four, undisputed, characteristics in common. Political participation concerns people in their role as citizens (not in the role of politicians or civil servants) and is understood as an activity, for example, mere television viewing is not counted. Political participation must be voluntary and not imposed by law. According to van Deth (2001), political participation affects law and politics (in other words the political system in the broad sense), regardless of in what stage, on what level or in which area it occurs.

Van Deth (2001, p. 13) describes the need for a useful concept: "... avoiding the correct, but useless conclusion that participation can be everything – seems to be one of the most crucial challenges for the further development of democratic decision-making procedures in modern societies." Van Deth (2014) argues that it is difficult to avoid purely subjective definitions of political participation due to the spread of expressive modes of participation.

In line with Graham, Jackson, and Wright (2015), I argue that scholars need to adopt more inclusive typologies of political participation to capture and understand the width of modern political participation. Therefore, in an attempt to provide an adequate definition for this research project, I use the definition provided by Vissers and Stolle (2014, p. 937): "political participation refers to all forms of involvement in which citizens express their political opinion and/or convey that opinion to political decision-makers." Although this definition can be criticized for being too wide, it relates to a view on the political as being something broad and thus does not restrict participation to the formal political sphere, nor as targeting only actors with governmental connections. I agree with Uhlaner (2014, p. 2) and van Deth (2014) who argue that a

single definition of political participation does not suffice for all since the study of the concept is motivated by multiple objectives or research agendas. As my research agenda is to study how citizens participate politically online, a wide definition seems appropriate to capture a broader spectrum of activities.

2.2 Dimensions of political participation

In the literature, democratic theories present different views on political participation; how much of it is needed, how often, and in what form. Elitist democrats (e.g., Schumpeter, 1946) might settle for a minimalist definition of the concept and consider voting as the appropriate method of political participation. On the other hand, pluralist democrats (e.g., Dahl, 1998) turn to a maximalist definition of the concept, accepting a wide range of actions as political participation (Bengtsson, 2008, p. 46; Gustafsson, 2013, p. 28). Thus, these two perspectives differ in their view on citizens' role in a democracy; the former focuses on political leaders and instrumental participation (e.g., voting), while the latter focuses on citizens and view more expressive forms of participation as desirable besides voting. Likewise, models of responsive, participatory, and deliberative democracy each emphasize different normative views and rate political acts accordingly. According to these three theories, political participation can be seen as, respectively, influencing attempts, direct decision-making, or political discussion (Teorell, 2006). Hence, the preferred form of political participation varies between the models (Teorell, 2006, p. 806).

In the responsive model, the delegation of power from citizens to the political elite, the decision-makers, is in a central position, making participation in free elections the basic form of political participation (Bengtsson, 2008, p. 70). Citizen passivity is accepted, if not endorsed, in-between elections according to the minimalist model of democracy

(Amnå & Ekman, 2014, p. 263). Participatory democrats (e.g., Pateman, 1970; Barber, 1984; see Hilmer, 2010) argue that passivity constitutes a threat to democracy and that the delegation of decision-making has gone too far. Conversely, participatory democrats think as many people as possible should take part in politics in a variety of ways, in order to facilitate good decision-making and foster responsible citizens (Amnå & Ekman, 2014, p. 263). Here, the emphasis is put on direct involvement by citizens in decision-making (Teorell, 2006, p. 790). However, a broader political participation repertoire, including direct democratic forms, is not seen as a replacement for representative democracy, rather as a complement to representative democracy (Bengtsson, 2008, p. 70). The point is to get citizens more politically involved by widening the opportunities for participation within the larger framework of representative democracy (Teorell, 2006, p. 790).

Deliberative democrats (e.g., Habermas 2006), in turn, are interested in the process of opinion formation among citizens (Teorell et al., 2007, p. 337). Through rational discussion, participants with competing views present arguments, listen to the "other side", and strive to reach consensus on the policy issue in question, thus finding a solution acceptable to all stakeholders (Bengtsson, 2008, p. 70). The basic logic behind deliberative democracy is that people will become better informed, tolerant, and reflective if they discuss politics with others, preferably citizens with dissimilar political views, and thereby gain insight and higher quality opinions (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009, p. 49). Put simply, proponents of the responsive model prefer policy issues to be indirectly decided by citizens through electoral procedures like voting, participatory democrats prefer direct involvement in decision-making via referenda for example, while deliberative democrats prefer thorough discussions among ordinary citizens to be the base for political decisions.

However, there are also scholars criticizing the assumption that there is a demand for increased influence on politics, arguing that citizens do not long for increased participation and instead settle for "stealth

democracy" (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002). According to Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002), "stealth democrats" want less interaction with the government, are politically disinterested, and do not call for new forms of political decision-making. In this respect, "stealth democrats" express a different kind of disaffection than "dissatisfied democrats" (Dalton, 2014), who want more input in the democratic process (Webb, 2013). Instead, they call for politicians to better listen to citizens and become more responsive, thus, they are more concerned about political output than input (Thomassen, 2015, p. 47). Dalton (2014, p. 207), however, criticize the stealth democracy argument that people want to be less involved in government since public opinion seems to favor an expansion of democracy, at least in an American context. Moreover, while dissatisfied democrats welcome all forms of political participation, regardless if it is labeled as representative, direct, or deliberative, stealth democrats mainly seem to support direct democracy in the form of referenda, possibly as a result of the populist nature of stealth democratic attitudes (Webb, 2013).

Political participation can be categorized in diverse ways. Usually, some kind of dichotomous typology is used as a starting point. Different notions have been used in the literature, reflecting the problem of reaching agreement about the definition of political participation. Scholars have divided political participation into dichotomies as: individual/collective (Whiteley, 2011), manifest/latent (Ekman & Amnå, 2012), formal/extra-parliamentary (Ekman & Amnå, 2012), online/offline (Vissers & Stolle, 2014; Sheppard, 2015; Monnoyer-Smith & Wojcik, 2012; Oser, Hooghe & Marien, 2013), formal/informal (Jensen, 2013), expressive/instrumental (Hosch-Dayican, 2010), low threshold/high threshold (Marsch, 1977), low effort/high effort (Klandermans, 1997), moderate/militant intensity (Barnes & Kaase, 1979), persuasive/confrontational (Postmes & Brunsting, 2002), internet-supported/internet-based (van Laer & van Aelst, 2009), institutionalized/non-institutionalized (Marien et al., 2010; Dalton, 2008),

representational/extra-representational (Teorell et al., 2007), exit-based/voice-based (Hirschman, 1970), instrumental/symbolic (Whiteley, 2011, see Fox, 2013), conventional/creative (Micheletti, 2015), mobilization/communication (Casteltrione, 2015). The various dichotomizations are basically different ways of expressing similar divisions. One of the most common distinctions is between activities inside and outside the formal political system (Christensen, 2011, p. 57). Some of these conceptualizations have received criticism for being blurred since the dimensions are not easily mutually exclusive, as in the case with the division between individual and collective participation (Hosch-Dayican, 2010, p. 54). For example, scholars have defined petition signing as both an individual (e.g., Ekman & Amnå, 2009; Sloam, 2013) and a collective (e.g., Postmes & Brunsting, 2002; Hale, Margetts & Yesseri, 2013) form of participation.

Scholars interested in analyzing political participation are presented with a veritable smorgasbord when choosing which specific activities to study. The purpose of this thesis is not to study all forms of political participation, nor to provide a deep analysis of the definition of the concept because such an endeavor is outside the scope of this project.

In the past 60 years, the forms of political participation have been expanding continually (van Deth in Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 2008, p. 531). This trend mirrors a development in society and has been affected by increased influence of the state and politics, a weakening limit between the public and private sphere (i.e., the political and the non-political) plus citizens' increased knowledge and resources (ibid.). As a result of this development, political participation has evolved from mainly including voting in the 1940s, to include almost every imaginable form of non-private activity. A review of the literature on political participation shows that about 70 different activities are now categorized as political participation, which means a huge stretching of the concept (van Deth, 2001). However, if the boundary between the political and non-political is erased, and no clear distinction between political

participation and other activities is agreed upon, every citizen activity can be labeled as political participation. Research on political participation may become "the study of everything" (van Deth, 2001, p. 11).

> "The concept of political participation has lost its clear meaning due to social and political developments in many Western countries in the last decades. The repertoire of actions consists of a virtually endless list of modes of participation and the domain of government activities is difficult to distinguish from other activities" (van Deth, 2001, p. 11).

In an attempt to bring order to the conceptual chaos surrounding the concept, Ekman and Amnå (2009; 2012) set up a typology for capturing the many dimensions of political participation. This typology makes a distinction between manifest political participation and latent—less direct—forms of participation covered by the notions "social involvement" and "civic engagement." Ekman and Amnå use civic participation as a synonym for latent political participation. Examples of latent forms of political participation are: having a personal interest in politics, perceiving politics as important, writing a letter to an editor, giving money to charity, veganism, volunteering in social work, and discussing politics. Some of these forms are categorized as attention or social involvement; others are categorized as action or civic engagement, which explains the wide spectrum of latent political participation. These actions are, of course, observable behavior and not latent per se, but they are latent in "relation to specific political parliamentary and extra-parliamentary actions" (Ekman & Amnå, 2009, p. 15). The authors emphasize that latent forms of political participation should be included if scholars want to understand new types of political behavior. Ekman and Amnå (2009, p. 9) note that "a lot of citizen engagement in the contemporary democracies seems to be formally non-political or semi-political on the surface, that is, activities not directly aimed at influencing the people in power, but nevertheless activities that entail involvement in society and current affairs." In Ekman and Amnå's view, a more

nuanced picture of political participation, capturing forms of engagement that may be "pre-political" or "potentially political," rather than directly political as voting and party membership, is needed because these activities can have great relevance for future manifest political participation. This view, the authors argue, can make scholars better equipped for analyzing a supposed crisis of participation. From this viewpoint, it becomes relevant for scholars to study phenomena that at first sight do not seem to resemble manifest political participation but fill a role as latent political participation.

***Table 1**. Ekman and Amnå's typology of latent and manifest political participation (based on Ekman & Amnå, 2009, p. 16; Ekman & Amnå, 2012, p. 292)*

	Non-participation (disengagement)		**Civic participation (latent-political)**		**Political participation (manifest)**		
	Active forms (antipolitical)	Passive forms (apolitical)	Social involvement (attention)	Civic engagement (action)	Formal political participation	Activism (extra-parliamentary political participation	
						Legal/extra parliamentary protests or actions	Illegal protests or actions
Individual forms	Non-voting Actively avoiding reading newspapers or watching TV when it comes to political issues Avoid talking about politics Perceiving politics as disgusting Political disaffection	Non-voting Perceiving politics as uninteresting and unimportant Political passivity	Taking interest in politics and society Perceiving politics as important	Writing to an editor Giving money to charity Discussing politics and societal issues, with friends or on the internet Reading newspapers and watching TV when it comes to political issues Recycling	Voting in elections and referenda Deliberate acts of non-voting or blank voting Contacting political representatives or civil servants Running for or holding public office Donating money to political parties or organizations	Buycotting, boycotting and political consumption Signing petitions Handing out political leaflets	Civil obedience Politically motivated attacks on property
Collective forms	Deliberate non-political lifestyles, e.g. hedonism, consumerism In extreme cases: random acts of non-political violence (riots), reflecting frustration, alienation or social exclusion	"Non-reflected" non-political lifestyles	Belonging to a group with societal focus Identifying with a certain ideology and/or party Life-style related involvement: music, group identity, clothes etc. For example: veganism, right-wing skinhead scene, or left-wing anarcho-punk scene	Volunteering in social work, e.g. to support women's shelter or to help homeless people Charity work or faith-based community work Activity within community based organizations	Being a member of a political party, an organization or a trade union Activity within a political party, an organization or a trade union (voluntary work or attend meetings)	Involvement in new social movements or forums Demonstrating, participating in strikes, protests and other actions (e.g. street festivals with a distinct political agenda)	Civil obedience actions Sabotaging or obstructing roads and railways Squatting buildings Participating in violent demonstrations or animal rights actions Violence confrontations with political opponents or the police

The advantage of Ekman and Amnå's typology is that it strives to capture several forms of political participation and that it distinguishes between the concepts civic engagement and political participation, which are often used synonymously. According to the authors, a theoretical framework lacking latent forms of participation is not sufficient, because scholars then miss aspects of political behavior taking place outside the framework of the parliamentary sphere. If research does not take the latent forms into account, scholars disregard citizens' potential will to act. These forms of "stand-by" commitment could possibly say something about citizens' readiness to channel their commitment in conventional manifest political participation if something triggers them. Ekman and Amnå (2009) suggest that people engage in different ways, outside the formal political sphere, but in ways that could have political consequences. "Some people write to editors in local papers, debating local community affairs. Others express their opinions online ...trivial as such things may seem, these are still statements about issues of concern for more than just the own family and the circle of close friends. This entails social involvement or engagement" (Ekman & Amnå, 2009, p. 9).

Moreover, the typology includes a distinction between individual and collective forms of political participation. Behind this distinction lies the debate on changes in the values of citizens in a post-modern society (Inglehart & Wenzel, 2005). The basic idea is that collective identities are slowly being replaced by different individual identities, a phenomenon often thought to contribute to various forms of political behavior. Citizens choose when and how they want to become involved politically and become increasingly alienated from traditional forms of political participation. This means that citizens of Western democracies feel, to a greater extent than before, that parties and other institutions are blunt tools to make citizens' voices heard. In other words, the individual forms of political participation challenge more traditional forms, which were often based on collective identity (e.g., social class, nationality, and party

affiliation). This development justifies a distinction between individual and collective forms in a typology related to political behavior. It is worth noting that Ekman and Amnå (2009, pp. 11–12) avoid using the term "unconventional" political participation because such participation (e.g., demonstrations, petitions, and strikes) are no longer regarded as unconventional. Instead, the authors use the term "extra-parliamentary forms of political participation" to describe these types of political participation.

Van Deth (2014) distinguishes between three definitions of political participation: minimalist, targeted, and motivational. These result in four basic forms of political participation, which have been described with different labels as conventional, institutional, expressive etc. (see above) participation. These four forms are observable in modes, exemplified by voting, petition signing, volunteering, and political consumption. Van Deth illustrates a range of activities, representing different conceptualizations of political participation, from voting to public suicide.

While there has been an expansion of the actions labeled as political participation from meaning mainly electoral activities (voting, running for office, party membership) to including petitioning, campaign work, contacting officials, protesting, political discussion, political consumerism, and volunteering in political organizations etc. There have also been changes in the popularity of the various forms of political participation. In many Western European countries, there has been a decline in traditional participation, usually exemplified by voting and party membership. However, this decline has been partly compensated by an increase in petition signing. As Christensen (2011, p. 43) shows, the popularity of different forms of political participation varies over time. Since a uniform decline in political participation cannot be found, the trends point toward a transformation in political participation (ibid., pp. 43–44). Over time, citizens have become less eager to engage in activities most directly associated with representative democracy and instead try

to find alternative channels of influence, exemplified by petition signing, protesting, and political consumption (ibid.).

Not only has the political participation repertoire for citizens expanded greatly in the last 60 years (van Deth, 2012; van Laer & van Aelst, 2010), the number of targets for participation has also increased. Actions targeted at other actors than governments can be considered political participation since politics is a wide concept not merely restricted to the formal political arena any longer (Fox, 2013). Political consumerism in the form of boycotting is an example of political participation that takes place outside the formal political sphere and targets private companies, usually urging these to take social responsibility (Micheletti, 2003; Norris, 2003).

In sum, there seems to be a dominant view among scholars that more forms of citizen participation and deliberation are needed to rejuvenate representative democracy. This section has shown that the concept of political participation has widened and new forms have surfaced. One of the most used categorizations of political participation is the offline/online distinction. Not only has political participation taken diverse forms and expanded offline, the introduction of the internet has resulted in the catch-all term "online political participation" being used for "a very heterogeneous set of practices" (Gustafsson, 2013, p. 30; Oser et al., 2013). Thus, the internet has further increased the spectrum of political participation by offering entirely new channels of participation and modified aspects of existing forms of participation (Anduiza et al., 2009, p. 2). Some actions citizens can take online are roughly equal to the ones they can perform offline, other actions are entirely internet-based (Anduiza et al., 2009). To set the framework for the empirical analyses, I will now turn the attention to what happens when political participation goes online.

3. Online political participation

In this chapter, I discuss the importance of online political participation and the definition of the concept. Furthermore, I elaborate more specifically on two forms of online political participation especially relevant for this thesis: e-petitioning and online political discussion. I review key findings and identify several research gaps in the literature concerning e-petitions and online political discussion, which build the basis for this thesis. The aim of this chapter is to provide the reader with a theoretical and empirical overview of online political participation in general, and e-petitioning and political discussion in particular. To give the reader a balanced view of previous findings, I discuss these in terms of possibilities and challenges based on their implications for democracy.

3.1 The importance of studying online political participation

It would be difficult to imagine the internet not having an effect on the ways that politics is expressed, depicted, conducted, communicated, and reflected upon. Digital communication certainly affects politics, yet it does not necessarily change politics fundamentally. To investigate the impact of the internet on politics, more empirical investigation is needed instead of theoretical speculation. History has shown that technology is not always used in the ways that the inventors planned, and the internet perhaps makes this lesson clearer than ever as people experience both positive and negative effects of the medium (Coleman & Freelon, 2015, pp. 1–2). Dahlgren (2015, p. 29) argues that the internet has changed and redefined the character and practices of political engagement. He suggests that anything else would be odd since the internet has contributed to transformations on all levels of contemporary society. Certain characteristics of the internet have contributed to this change: information access, diversity and decentralization, interactivity,

individual communication possibilities, and unlimited communicative space. Furthermore, all of the aforementioned communication can occur at instantaneous speed. Nevertheless, while politics only covers a tiny area of internet usage, the invention and adaption of various internet tools "make it easier for the political to emerge in online communication" (Dahlgren, 2015, p. 29).

Many different forms of political participation are now practiced online. A collection of creative forms of political participation appears to surpass the traditional distinction between private and public life (van Deth, 2001, p. 12; Micheletti & McFarland, 2011). The possibility of political participation online can encourage new groups of people to engage in new forms of expression and open up the political process for more types of political behavior (Gil de Zuñiga et al., 2010, p. 39). Citizens have the option to visit political blogs, search for political information, follow news online, participate in discussion forums, or organize e-petitions (Bakker & De Vreese, 2011, pp. 453–454).

Although the debate surrounding the definition of political participation has been going on for decades, current research cannot ignore the forms of participation taking place online (Bakker & De Vreese, 2011, p. 452). Changes in political participation patterns in connection with increased internet access—83 percent of households in the EU 28 countries in 2016 (Eurostat, 2017)—highlight the importance of studying online political participation in Western democracies. The different communication channels online facilitate communication where individuals can express their views more openly and freely, as a verbal political commitment (Gil de Zuñiga et al., 2010, p. 38). Social networks like Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube have given citizens tools to disseminate information and express political preferences using methods not previously possible (Christensen, 2011, p. 2). Nevertheless, the effectiveness in achieving policy objectives using these methods is still debated (ibid). Dalton (2008, p. 94) argues that research is not only observing changes in the levels of political participation but also in the

manner in which citizens become politically active. A new kind of citizenship aims to give citizens more control over the forms of political participation and exert more pressure on the political elite. Dalton sees this as an opportunity to expand and develop democratic participation. However, if scholars continue to mainly concentrate on voting and other traditional offline forms of participation, they might miss what political participation is shaping into, perhaps neglecting a new conception of citizenship (Theocharis, 2015, p. 14).

Starting from the introduction of the mass-circulated printed press in the nineteenth century, the media has been interlaced with power structures, both promoting and limiting civic participation, for a long period of time (Dahlgren, 2015, p. 22). Radio, television, the personal computer, and the internet have all been thought to have democratic benefits. However, even though some of the claims are true, the vision of a quick technical fix for democracy's problems implicitly suggests these ills are related to insufficient technology. This technological determinism is a basic fallacy and discredits the impact of socio-cultural settings. When internet research began to emerge in the 1990s, theorists either predicted an astonishing positive development for democracy or saw doom and gloom in their crystal balls, anticipating the end of democracy (Dahlgren, 2015, p. 22). The debate surrounding the possible effects of the internet on political participation is represented by three schools of thought: optimists, pessimists, and normalizers (Casteltrione, 2015, pp. 2–3). On the one hand, optimists (e.g., Benkler, 2006; Shirky, 2008) argue that the internet mobilizes citizens and promotes political participation by offering new pathways to participation and engaging people otherwise characterized as passive. Pessimists (e.g., Hindman, 2010; Morozov, 2011), on the other hand, view the internet as a distracting medium, luring people away from more meaningful forms of participation, thus reducing social capital and generating passive citizens. Normalizers represent a third viewpoint indicating that the internet is merely reinforcing participatory trends by mainly involving

those already interested in politics. In this view, online political participation is for the already converted, politically active citizens, and therefore fortifies existing power structures and widens the gap between the active and inactive without transforming the way of doing politics (Casteltrione, 2015, p. 3). According to Casteltrione (2015, p. 9), these diverging views result from an older dichotomy between technological determinism (i.e., optimists and pessimists) and social determinism (i.e., normalizers). This debate on the impact of the internet on political participation has also been described as two competing hypotheses: the mobilization hypothesis and the reinforcement hypothesis (Norris, 2000; Oser et al., 2013, p. 91). Empirical research has not established a consensus regarding the merits of these two hypotheses (Oser et al., 2013, p. 93; Boulianne, 2009; Casteltrione, 2015), illustrating that the relationship between the internet and political participation is complex and not easily generalizable. This has led to some scholars viewing online and offline political participation as separate constructs (Yang & DeHart, 2016; Oser et al., 2013). Similarly, Gibson and Cantijoch (2013, p. 701) suggest a new, social-media-based, type of expressive political behavior is emerging online.

3.2 Conceptualizing online political participation

In the same manner as its offline predecessor, online political participation is a debated and thoroughly discussed concept in the literature (e.g., Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Vissers & Stolle, 2014; Oser et al., 2013). Wojcik (2013) has called online political participation "one of the most difficult concepts in political science." This is partly because the classic definitions of political participation were formulated in the pre-internet era (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013, p. 701). It is not easy to clearly, on theoretical grounds, distinguish newer forms of online political participation from older traditional forms offline. Participative acts in the form of consumer boycotts and petitions have existed for several

hundred years (Marien et al., 2010, p. 2). Online political participation may be represented by electronic versions of traditional forms of engagement (e.g., e-petitions or e-voting) or by internet-dependent forms as hacktivism (Samuel 2004) or Facebook participation (Vissers & Stolle, 2014, p. 950). In other words, some forms of online political participation are simply renewed offline classics (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013, p. 714) while others are unique for the digital realm.

The internet has helped to broaden the field of political participation further, giving citizens more tools to perform political acts. This does not necessarily make the task of defining political participation any easier. On the contrary, it complicates matters further (Theocharis, 2015, p. 1). Van Deth (2001, p. 13) describes the need for a useful concept: "... avoiding the correct, but useless conclusion that participation can be everything – seems to be one of the most crucial challenges for the further development of democratic decision-making procedures in modern societies." Van Deth (2014) argues that it is difficult to avoid purely subjective definitions of political participation due to the spread of expressive modes of participation. Forms of political participation as starting a political Facebook group or contacting politicians via Facebook are examples of acts previously not possible to perform (Vissers & Stolle, 2014). It would be possible to define online political participation primarily as an extension of traditional activities taking place offline; voting becomes e-voting, petitioning becomes e-petitioning etc. However, this would imply that the more expressive forms of online behavior fall outside the scope of political participation research. Therefore, the definition mentioned previously by Vissers and Stolle (2014, p. 937), "political participation refers to all forms of involvement in which citizens express their political opinion and/or convey that opinion to political decision-makers," seems to fit well into the online realm as well because it does not specifically mention whether these activities take place online or offline. Furthermore, it is broad enough to include acts of political opinion expression not necessarily directed

towards policy-makers or politicians only, that is, the formal political system (see Vissers & Stolle, 2014, p. 943; Micheletti & McFarland, 2011).

More recently, scholars have started to argue that offline and online political participation are separate concepts and need to be treated as such to make research more rigorous, both theoretically and empirically, than before (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; Jensen, 2013). Survey research has adapted to this by including items measuring political participation both online and offline (e.g., Bengtsson & Christensen, 2009; Grönlund & Wass, 2016). Furthermore, it is necessary to distinguish between different forms of online political participation in order to aim for specification rather than over-generalization since online political participation is a very heterogeneous catch-all term in the literature (Casteltrione, 2015; Oser et al., 2013). Casteltrione (2015) argues that the different operationalizations of participation and measurements of internet usage are some of the reasons behind the mixed findings about online political participation, and therefore asks for a more differential approach.

Hoffman (2012, p. 220) criticizes previous research for not adequately distinguishing between the related concepts political participation and political communication in the online political realm. Hoffman defines online political participation as "an information-rich activity that utilizes new media technology and is intended to affect, either directly or indirectly, policy-makers, candidates, or public officials." However, this definition neglects forms of political participation seeking to influence private corporations, non-state actors, into changing policy. Hoffman (2012, p. 222) concludes that the difference between participation and communication is that the latter does not need to send an explicit message to the government. Accordingly, she defines political communication as "a relational process using new media to communicate synchronously or asynchronously, across one, two, or three dimensions." Hoffman argues that research needs to comprehensively define these concepts to accurately describe patterns of

citizens' online behavior. Moreover, traditional models of political participation have to be adapted to the online realm because scholars cannot automatically assume the same mechanisms of participation take place online. Based on the distinction that Hoffman describes, signing e-petitions would count as political participation, while discussing politics online would be classified as three-dimensional political communication. Empirical studies by Hoffman et al. (2013) show that citizens perceive differences in the effectiveness of various online behavior. Online engagement is seen as a means of communicating information to others "rather than influencing governments" (Hoffman et al., 2013, p. 2256). What Hoffman is defining as political communication can be seen as a synonym for the latent forms of political participation described by Ekman and Amnå (2012) exemplified by online political discussion.

The array of new forms of participation can be seen as a diversification of how citizens become politically engaged (Dalton, 2008; Christensen, 2011, p. 2). Examples of online political participation include: signing an e-petition, e-voting, joining a political Facebook group, discussing politics, donating money, writing political blogs or contacting public officials (Jensen, 2013). As previously mentioned, the operationalizations of the concept in the literature are diverse, and usually include both internet-supported and internet-based activities. The ease of performing these activities has given rise to a substantial amount of critique, labeling some forms of online political participation as "clicktivism" or the more negatively connoted, even derogatory, term "slacktivism" (i.e., slacker plus activism) because they are viewed as less time-consuming and less demanding than traditional offline activities (see Morozov, 2009). From this perspective, actions like sharing content online or signing online petitions are lazy, easy, and overly convenient forms of participation without any effects other than inducing positive feelings of well-being among those who perform them (Morozov, 2009; Halupka, 2014, p. 116). The critique is that these forms are too simple to engage in and may

induce the idea that people performing these actions are changing the world when they do not (Vissers & Stolle, 2014, p. 939). Moreover, critique considers clicktivism to deliver a sense of justification without the need to actually engage in something (Lee & Hsieh, 2013). However, Gustafsson (2013, p. 48) argues this view is perhaps too negative since low time-consuming activities labeled as slacktivism should be compared to not doing anything at all. Halupka (2014, p. 117) also takes a more positive view on clicktivism and argues that even though it requires limited effort, is should be acknowledged as a legitimate political act having relevance for the individual. All in all, although the status of these activities is contended, they, at the very least, can be considered as expressions of political preferences, not necessarily taking place within the formal political sphere nor aiming to influence the state. As Christensen (2011, p. 2) argues, these activities thus fit a wider definition of political participation and therefore need to be taken into account in research regarding online political participation. One may also note that low effort engagement labeled as slacktivism can be a small part of a larger repertoire of actions aiming to influence politics, reducing concern for limited effects in isolation (Karpf, 2010).

To summarize, scholarship about online political participation has not reached a consensus regarding the definition of the concept. The types of activities regarded as online political participation seem to be constantly expanding, resulting in a broader palette for citizens wanting the make their voices heard. The internet has revitalized classic forms of participation and given rise to entirely new forms. Optimists have hoped that the internet can help fulfill the ideals posited by deliberative democracy and participatory democracy, since some of its features seem promising from these perspectives. However, empirical findings regarding the effects of the internet on political participation are mixed. Critics argue that many forms of online participation are ineffective and might even be detrimental to democracy by reducing levels of, more effective, traditional offline ways of political participation. Regardless

the effectiveness of online political participation, it can be seen as expressions of opinion worthy of further study within political science.

In order to limit the scope of this compilation thesis, I concentrate on two particular forms of online political participation: e-petitioning and online political discussion. This is partly because previous research has urged scholars to specify the varying kinds of participation being analyzed to make a clearer distinction between actions rather than summing several activities under the catchall term online political participation. Moreover, it seems impossible to study all forms of online political participation within the framework of one thesis. In the next section, I discuss the rationale for analyzing e-petitions and online political discussion in particular as a part of online political participation research.

3.3 Reasons to study e-petitioning and online political discussion

The acts of creating or signing an e-petition are generally defined and recognized as acts of political participation in the literature (Vissers & Stolle, 2014; Jensen, 2013; Lutz, Hoffmann & Meckel, 2014). Electronic petitioning is simply an online variant of an older form, with the main difference that signature gathering is done digitally online instead of offline using pen and paper. Ekman and Amnå (2012) classify petition signing as a manifest form of political participation, in line with voting or donating money to political parties. However, political discussion, in turn, is not necessarily defined as a form of political participation; Hoffman (2012), for example, urges scholars to differentiate between political participation and political communication and argues that political discussion is a form of political communication, not political participation. In Brady's opinion (1999), political discussion is not to be regarded as political participation, since such participation should be deliberate attempts to influence others and their decisions. Similarly,

Valenzuela et al. (2012) view political discussion as a predictor of online political participation. Other scholars (e.g., Jensen, 2013; Whiteley, 2011; Lutz et al., 2014) define political discussion as a less formal form of political participation than petitioning but still categorize it as political participation. According to Ekman and Amnå's (2012) typology of political participation, political discussion is to be regarded as an action and a form of latent political participation and can be described in terms of civic engagement, closer to more manifest forms of political participation and more manifest than pure attention to politics. Thus, the act of discussing politics—regardless whether it is done offline or online—represents a good example of the problematic task of defining political participation and distinguishing between participation and communication (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013, p. 702). Political discussion offline has traditionally been operationalized in surveys as talking politics with family or colleagues (e.g., Parry et al., 1992; Jensen, 2013, p. 9; Bimber et al., 2015, p. 35), whereas online political discussion is operationalized as discussing with "other people" (e.g., Jensen, 2013, p. 11). The threshold for discussing politics with strangers or other people is higher offline, compared to the online situation, where discussions between people who do not know each other happen frequently. Thus, the view on political discussion as a form of political participation might be changing since the internet potentially expands citizens' political discussion networks. Moreover, online discussions leave traces in form of transcripts of discussions, making data collection of citizen discussion easier online than offline. While I agree with Hoffman (2012) that online political discussion is more of a communicative than participatory act, I still argue it can be categorized as a form of political participation in light of the Visser and Stolle's (2014) broad definition of the concept, which is used in this thesis. In a sense, all forms of political participation represent political communication since participation is basically about communicating a political message between actors.

E-petitions and online political discussion have some common characteristics as forms of political participation; they both exist *within* and *outside* the formal political system. E-petition systems, for example, can be controlled by national governments or commercial entities relying on advertising (Wright, 2015, pp. 25–26). Online discussion about policy issues takes place on governmental sites and on an endless amount of informal forums. Other forms, Facebook-based activism and politically motivated hacktivism for example, mainly exist outside the formal political system. Contrary to internet-based hacktivism, e-petitioning and online political discussions no longer require advanced technical skills to perform (Vissers & Stolle, 2014, p. 938). Furthermore, they are both internet-supported forms of political participation that have been made easier due to the characteristics of the internet (in terms of mobilization costs and potentially large discussion networks for example). Signing online petitions is one of the most popular forms of online political participation (Christensen, 2012, p. 10; Christensen & Bengtsson, 2011, p. 11), and although political discussion online is not quite as common it is growing in popularity (Christensen, 2012; Christensen & Bengtsson, 2011, p. 11). E-petition signing and online political discussion can both be performed from the convenience of one's own home, and are not as demanding as protesting and voting. Thus, the two forms represent types of modern political behavior often being portrayed as slacktivism (Morozov, 2009; Christensen, 2012; Halupka, 2014). As concentrating on studying traditional forms of offline participation is no longer enough due to the development of the concept, scholars need to pay more attention to e-petitioning and online political discussion—representing "alternative politics" (Dalton, 2014)—to gain knowledge of citizens' political participation in modern democracies. By not treating online political participation as an aggregated concept (see Bimber et al., 2015, p. 26), a more accurate analysis of two specific forms of political participation is possible.

3.4 E-petitions

Petitioning is an old form of political participation, with its roots tracing back to the thirteenth century (van Voss 2001 in Karlsson & Åström, 2015, p. 563). No consensus exists on the exact historical origin of petitioning, but some scholars connect the first petition to the Magna Charta of 1215 in England. Long before universal suffrage and elections, the right to petition arose from the need to maintain a relationship between the political power and the community. The right to petition is found in both the French Constitution (1791) and the US Constitution (1789) and is probably the oldest political right of citizens (Tiburcio, 2015, p. 8). Petitions have played an important role in slavery-opposition in the USA and in the quest for universal suffrage in Sweden to mention a few examples (Karlsson & Åström, 2015, p. 563). Over time, petitioning was continuously adapted to changing political and social circumstances and needs (Lindner & Riehm, 2008, p. 1), and after a considerable period of decline, petitions have arguably once again started to assume some real significance, illustrated by the introduction of formal petition systems (Bochel & Bochel, 2015, p. 5). The most recent developments in the right to petition are closely related to the rise of the internet as a communication medium connecting the public and political institutions (Lindner & Riehm, 2008, p. 1; Bochel & Bochel, 2015, p. 5; Tiburcio, 2015, p. 8). The first e-petition system established by a parliament was the Scottish "e-petitioner" in the year 2000 (Lindner & Riehm, 2008).

3.4.1 Importance of e-petitioning

E-petitions represent a form of democratic innovation, a technologically mediated avenue for political participation (Wright, 2015, p. 1). For citizens, petitions have three main functions; they give them a chance to protect rights and interests, they provide influence in politics in general, and help mobilize people for a given cause (Lindner & Riehm, 2011; Escher & Riehm, 2016). E-petitions have the potential to achieve policy

change, and, if successful, they can strengthen civic-mindedness and political efficacy among citizens (Yasseri et al., 2013). I identify three main reasons behind the rising scholarly interest for e-petitioning. First, e-petitions are growing in popularity as a form of political participation (Jungherr & Jurgens, 2010). Second, several countries have introduced formal e-petition systems linked to parliaments in recent years, thus institutionalizing e-petitioning on a governmental level (see Riehm, Böhle & Lindner, 2014; Karlsson & Åström, 2015, 562). Third, as petitioning is transforming from offline to online, a data-driven approach to study petitioning behavior is now possible (Briassoulis, 2010; Jungherr & Jurgens, 2010).

Within the research field of digital politics, the effectiveness of e-petitions and their impact on democracy are debated (Wright, 2015, p. 136). On the one hand, critics like Shulman (2009) and Morozov (2011) write off e-petitions as slacktivism with little or no impact on politics. In this view, e-petitions might represent an example of "sham democracy," where they are claimed to have policy influence when in reality they do not. Others dislike e-petitions because they actually might have an influence on policy and therefore interfere or stop governmental policies from being realized (Wright, 2015, p. 136). On the other hand, some scholars have more optimistic views on e-petitions, describing them as one of the most successful e-democracy tools ever, at least in terms of mobilizing large quantities of citizens (Chadwick, 2012, p. 61). Bochel (2013, p. 798) argues that e-petition systems "may help underpin the legitimacy and functioning of representative institutions" by enabling citizens to express their views to decision-makers. This debate over the merits and perils of e-petitioning illustrates disagreement about what the actual impact of e-petitions ought to be in a democratic political system (Wright, 2015, p. 136).

In general, governmental e-petitioning platforms mainly have an agenda-setting function, and in contrast to other democratic processes (e.g., online voting), do not have any binding political consequences. In

this line of thought, e-petitioning platforms are intended to complement, rather than replace, representative democratic institutions. Thus, e-petitioning is an easy and low-cost instrument for tapping the political opinions and interests of citizens (Puschmann et al., 2016, p. 2). Moreover, e-petitioning represents a safe "playing field" from the perspective of representative democracy, since decision-making power remains in the hands of elected politicians (Lindner & Riehm, 2010).

Regardless of signatures are gathered on paper or electronically, petitions have seldom been subjected to academic analysis (Corbett, 2011, p. 1). As petitioning is making a transformation from offline to online spaces, Riehm, Böhle, and Lindner (2011) argue that there is scarce research on contemporary trends of petitioning. In a way, the literature on e-petitioning is still in its infancy (Glencross, 2009; Wright, 2015, p. 146). Wright (2012, p. 453) finds this surprising, and to some extent even worrying, given that the perceived success of e-petition systems has led to a wider adoption of these in several nations and levels of government. This makes e-petitions one of the most prominent and used e-democratic tools (Lindner et al., 2014; Wright, 2012, p. 453). Because e-petitioning is a mechanism legislatures in liberal democracies are hoping to help to tackle citizen disengagement from formal politics, scholars need to examine how the e-petition systems operate in practice (Hough, 2012, p. 479).

Lindner and Riehm (2010, pp. 3–4) offer three rationales for studying e-petition systems. First, they are at the forefront of official, formal, and operational e-participation opportunities (democratic innovations) in liberal democracies. Second, they are less experimental than other democratic innovations and seem to suit changing participation patterns of citizens. Third, e-petitions systems, in comparison with offline petition systems, provide petitioners with enhanced transparency and publicness and might, therefore, have an impact on political legitimacy and responsiveness.

Compared to other forms of political participation, like voting, for example, e-petitioning provides individuals an opportunity to express their political opinions on specific policy issues, rather than supporting a more general, pre-packaged party program. Thus, e-petitioning is a channel for citizens to directly express their policy preferences (Hagen et al., 2015, p. 10). Scholars argue that e-petitioning plays an important role in contemporary political processes (e.g., Fox, 2009, p. 683 in Corbett, 2011, p. 6). In some countries, e-petition signing is one of the most popular online political activities (Dutton & Blank, 2011; Bengtsson & Christensen, 2009). This popularity, combined with the introduction of several national e-petition systems in the latest ten years, has produced an upsurge in research on *parliamentary* petition systems (Corbett, 2011, p. 6).

3.4.2 Petitioning as a democratic instrument

The term petition is not generally well-defined and its meaning varies between countries, institutions, and levels of government (Escher & Riehm, 2016, p. 2; Karlsson & Åström, 2015, pp. 564–565). A petition has been defined as a formal request to a higher authority (e.g., parliament or other authority) signed by one or a number of citizens (Macintosh et al., 2002). Escher and Riehm (2016), inspired by Lindner and Riehm (2011, p. 3) define petitions as requests to a public authority with which citizens try to "change public policy, call for an official statement, or evoke a certain act by a public institution." Lindner and Riehm's earlier definition (2009, p. 3) is quite similar and defines petitions as formal requests to an authority, usually a governmental institution" (Lindner & Riehm, 2009, p. 3). While Escher and Riehm's (2016) definition emphasizes "public authority", which indicates that petitions, in their view, are connected to formal, public, or official authorities, the definitions provided by Macintosh et al. (2002) and Lindner and Riehm (2009) are wider. In this thesis, the wider definition by Lindner and

Riehm (2009) is used to incorporate petitions outside the formal political system, usually, but not necessarily, aimed at a public institution like parliaments. By using a wider definition, petitions targeting private corporations or actors are not excluded (cf. Riehm et al., 2014, p. 34). Hence, petitions targeting political actors or institutions are a form of political participation (Böhle & Riehm, 2013, p. 2). Petitions can be understood as a form of asymmetric communication between an individual or a group on one side and an institution on the other. A petitioner forwards a matter of concern to an addressee who may react (Böhle & Riehm, 2013, p. 2). Petitions can be distinguished from mere expressions of opinion since they have the purpose of changing policy, evoking a certain act, or calling for an official statement (Lindner & Riehm, 2010, p. 5).

Scholars generally position petitioning between representative democracy and direct democracy in the category of advocacy democracy, where acts of participation are aimed at influencing the decisions of elected representatives (Cruickshank & Smith, 2009; Carman, 2007). Petitioning is, in this view, a possibility for citizens to participate in policy formation, even though final decisions are still made by elites (Bochel, 2013, p. 805). Therefore, petitioning mitigates the risks of weakening existing democratic institutions (Cruickshank & Smith, 2009, p. 3). In petitioning, citizens' concerns are legitimized by a "strength of numbers" strategy, where the number of signatures determines the petition's weight or representativeness of public opinion (Kirwin, 2011, p. 4; Karlsson & Åström, 2015, p. 563).

The terms agenda initiative and citizens' initiative are sometimes used to signify specific kinds of petitions (Beramendi et al., 2008, p. 84). Agenda initiatives and the citizens' initiatives are petitions in the form of direct democracy instruments. The former is a procedure which enables citizens to submit a proposal which must be considered by the legislature, without necessarily leading to a referendum. The latter is a stronger instrument and a procedure that allows citizens to initiate a vote

of the electorate on a proposal (Beramendi et al., 2008, pp. 83–84). The term full-scale initiative is also used for initiatives followed by a ballot vote (Setälä & Schiller, 2012, p. 1). Full-scale initiative institutions exist in countries like Switzerland and Hungary, while agenda initiative institutions are in use in Austria, Spain, and the European Union, for example. Moreover, some countries (e.g., Slovakia and Italy) have both full-scale and agenda initiatives (Setälä & Schiller, 2012, p. 5). The distinction between the terms petition and initiative is not always clear-cut as they are sometimes used synonymously. Sometimes the term petition is used to indicate that it addresses parliaments, and the term initiative used when executive powers are addressed, like the European Commission in the case of the European Citizen Initiative. However, this is not a perfect rule of thumb, as the e-petitions launched in Finland are called Citizens' Initiatives, while the equivalent e-petitions in the UK are named e-petitions (Karlsson & Åström, 2015, p. 564–565). Petitions can be classified in several ways depending on impact factor (full-scale initiative, agenda initiative), level (international, national, regional, local), form (online, offline) or institutional attachment (formal, informal) (see Setälä & Schiller, 2012). Therefore, in this thesis, the term petitions will be used as an umbrella term for different kinds of signature gathering procedures with varying institutional attachment and treatment.

3.4.3 Difference between offline and online petitioning

E-petitions, or electronic petitions[1], are the digital version of the traditional form of offline pen and paper petitions. E-petitions involve information and communication technology and differ from traditional paper petitions as they are created, disseminated, circulated, signed, and

[1] The terms e-petitions and online petitions are regarded as synonymous in this thesis.

presented online (Hale et al., 2013, p. 2; Karlsson & Åström, 2015, p. 561). E-petitioning is thought to facilitate and add transparency to the petitioning process, which can be rather resource-demanding and practically complex offline. E-petitions often address the agenda-setting phase of policy-making and may be accompanied by other online tools, discussion forums for example, of citizen participation (Panagiotopoulos et al., 2011, p. 3). E-petitioning is one of the most prominent democratic innovations and most widely used e-participation tools (Wright, 2012, pp. 453–454). Dumas (2015, p. 335) argues e-petitioning sites offer insight on what the public is thinking about and represent avenues for citizens' political expression, without the mediation of political parties, the media or interest groups. Furthermore, e-petitioning systems can make participation in policy discussion more easily accessible (Dumas, 2015, p. 335) and user-friendly in addition to making the petition process public (Böhle & Riehm, 2013, p. 3).

E-petitions offer several advantages over paper-based petitions, for which collecting and processing signatures takes a great amount of time and effort. Online petitions can be signed anywhere at any time and thus possibly reaches a larger portion of society. Additionally, the automatic processing of signatures is faster and less error-prone. However, electronic petition systems also introduce problems regarding privacy preservation or misuse in the form of multiple signing (Verslype et al., 2008, p. 1). E-petitions give people more time to consider the issue at hand in comparison to pen and paper petitions, thus e-petitions can produce more informed choices of petition support. Additionally, e-petitions allow people to acquire background information, make comments and receive feedback about the progress of petitions (Macintosh, Malina & Farrell, 2002, p. 8).

Concerning e-petitioning, Mosca and Santucci (2009, p. 122) stress the distinction between formal and informal petition systems. Another way to describe this distinction is to view formal e-petition systems as "top-down" arrangements set up by public institutions to enhance citizen

participation and informal e-petition systems as "bottom-up" attempts to intervene in the political system (Mosca & Santucci, 2009, p. 122; Bochel & Bochel, 2015, p. 6). Lindner and Riehm (2008, p. 3) demonstrate the dual nature of e-petitions: "Formal e-petitions refer to institutionalized and at least to some extent legally codified e-petition systems operated by public institutions. Informal e-petitions, on the other hand, are systems established and managed by non-governmental, private organizations." Thus, formal e-petition systems have an obvious relationship with formal decision-making in public institutions, while informal e-petition systems do not. Although informal e-petition systems are not connected to public law, nor have to follow the same procedural requirements as formal e-petition systems, e-petitions launched at informal e-petition sites usually seek to address public institutions (Lindner & Riehm, 2008, p. 3). E-petition system established and administered by parliamentary institutions are examples of formal e-petition systems (e.g., We the People in the USA). Online sites, like change.org or avaaz.org, represent informal e-petitions systems where citizens can create, distribute, and sign e-petitions (Reid, 2014). As Wright (2015, pp. 136–137) points out, this categorization can be refined into greater detail. Formal e-petition system can be divided into systems targeting: government and executive branches, parliaments, hybrid models fitting in between government and parliament, and systems at local government/parliament level. Similarly, informal e-petition systems can be funded by charity or rely on advertising.

3.4.4 Findings about e-petition systems

As a democratic innovation, formalized e-petition systems can use the dynamics of internet technology to mobilize citizens, while simultaneously dealing with opinions and suggestions within the scope of representative democracy (Karlsson & Åström, 2015, pp. 561–562). Hence, formalized e-petition systems represent a safe playing field from the perspective of political institutions. Lindner and Riehm (2010) argue

that e-petitions are compatible with principles of representative democracy and have a very moderate transformative potential. Christensen, Karjalainen, and Nurminen (2014) observe a potential for crowdsourcing legislation in the form of agenda-setting formal e-petition systems to affect political efficacy in a positive manner, even if it has not done so yet in Finland. It seems that clear and just policy procedures for e-petitions are more important to citizens than mere policy influence (Carman, 2010; Karlsson & Åström, 2015, p. 594; Christensen, 2015). Moreover, previous attitudes towards the function of democracy also matter for changes in political efficacy; "content" citizens exhibit positive changes in political trust, and vice versa for "critical" citizens. However, the local e-petition system in Malmö, Sweden showed some tendencies to increase political trust in critical citizens who participated (Åström et al., 2014 in Karlsson & Åström, 2015, pp. 594–595).

Research on the informal e-petition platform change.org indicates that social media promotion on Twitter impacts the success of e-petitions; as the number of tweets about an e-petition increases, so does the number of signatures (Proskurnia et al., 2016). E-petition success is usually defined as a high number of signatures, where e-petitions reaching a threshold triggering action (e.g., parliamentary debate) are seen as "successful" without necessarily causing policy change. Another position is to only regard e-petitions resulting in actual policy change as successful. However, citizens have a broad definition of e-petitioning success, which has helped to rationalize action (Wright, 2015, p. 2). According to Wright (2015), more nuanced definitions of e-petitioning success are needed. This conclusion is supported by his findings that the tone and response of government are crucial for citizens' perception of the effectiveness of democratic innovations like e-petitions. Östling (2011, p. 69) concludes that institutional design matters for the quality and success of e-petition systems by comparing the Bristol e-Petitioner system with *Malmöinitiativet*, the e-petition system in Malmö. Mandatory consideration by policy-makers, as in the Bristol e-Petitioner case, has led

to implemented e-petitions, in contrast to Malmöinitiativet, where the only e-petition debated in the city council was rejected. The design of the e-petition system also matters for the willingness to sign e-petitions. In a study by Margetts, John, and Escher (2009), provision of social information (about how many signatures an e-petition has received) affected how many citizens were willing to sign the e-petitions.

In an analysis for the German formal e-petitions system, Schmidt and Johnsen (2014) found an uneven distribution of signatures across petitions, a spill-over effect from popular petitions to less popular petitions, and a higher activity of male users. Furthermore, they did not discover any statistically significant change in the amount of signature after pseudonymous signatures were made possible in the system. Wright (2012) analyzed the British e-petition system where participation was highly unequal due to "super-posters." He also found that traditional media coverage was crucial to success for e-petitions, e-petitions represented a low level of considered judgment, and that the vast majority of e-petitions did not influence policy. He concluded that the UK e-petitions system was a less successful program than assumed (Wright, 2012, p. 466). To improve the system, Wright called for a need to: clarify the legislative position, moderate the system, restrict petition creation per citizen, add a deliberative space, offer citizens counter-petition ability, and introduce a trigger number for consultations (Wright, 2012).

3.4.5 Possibilities of e-petitioning

According to Karlsson and Åström (2015), e-petitioning has three potential consequences; agenda-setting, policy effects, and effects on individuals' political efficacy. Agenda-setting can happen on several arenas as e-petitions have the potential to cause a parliamentary debate or evoke media interest, and thus visibility for the issue at hand. Effects on policy might be unusual, as Karlsson and Åström note (2015, p. 592), yet there are cases where e-petitions have reached their policy goals (see

Cotton, 2011). Regarding effects on political efficacy, some studies indicate that just and organized treatment of e-petitions might be more important to citizens than actual policy implementation (Carman, 2010). Christensen (2015) found that both outcome satisfaction and process satisfaction predicted changes in political trust among citizens using e-petition systems. However, process satisfaction was a more important predictor. Therefore, a fair, unbiased, and well-functioning e-petition system can have positive effects on citizens' political trust. Moreover, a properly designed e-petition system can function within existing representative democratic institution, connecting ideas of participatory and representative democracy by allowing a different means for the public to access institutions (Bochel, 2013, p. 799).

In general, e-petitioning is well received by citizens and has shown signs of mobilizing younger cohorts into political participation (Böhle & Riehm, 2013). Although several findings imply that e-petitioning has not been able to close the digital divide, nor activate underrepresented groups (Böhle & Riehm, 2013), other findings have shown that e-petitioning activates both satisfied and dissatisfied democrats on the local level (Åström et al., 2014, p. 2). Furthermore, Sheppard (2015) found that women in Australia are significantly more likely to sign e-petitions than men, and concluded that language, gender, and income do not constitute barriers to e-petition signing. E-petitions might have secondary effects besides their main goal, policy change, like educating citizens about the political system (Bochel & Bochel, 2015, p. 16). By giving individual citizens a say in political decision-making processes and reducing costs for mobilization, e-petitioning diminishes the importance of having a resource-rich organization to achieve policy change. Therefore, a potential benefit of e-petitioning is empowerment of the individual as opposed to reinforcement of the power of established organizations (Karlsson & Åström, 2015, pp. 578–581).

3.4.6 Challenges for e-petitioning

Despite the potential of combining modern technique with one of the oldest forms of political activity, e-petitions have received criticism and present challenges on both a theoretical and practical level. The force or potential impact factor of an e-petition is usually determined by the number of signatures. However, it remains difficult to determine how representative public opinion expressed via e-petitions is (Bengtsson, 2008, p. 208). E-petitions do not necessarily represent the general will of the people (Karlsson & Åström, 2015, p. 597). Navarria (2010) describes e-petitions as snapshots of opinion, creating a political environment that does not allow informed and reflective decisions. Instead, "populist charismatic leaders thrive while democracy dies" (Navarria, 2010, p. 19). Coleman and Blumler (2009, p. 152) fear that e-petitioning "uses technology to facilitate the kind of unreflective populism that we have argued is at the root of the problems of contemporary democracy." They worry about the lack of deliberative features in formal e-petition systems and suggest that political parties supporting e-petition systems demonstrate a symbolic willingness to listen to citizens. Wright (2015, p. 1) states that e-petitions might be part of democracy's problems instead of being a solution by reinforcing already negative attitudes about politics and politicians. Wright's worries are echoed by McNutt (2015, p. 4) who highlights the need for well-designed e-petition systems: "the greatest threat of a poorly designed system is a further loss of trust in democratic institutions and processes." Bochel (2013, pp. 799–800) finds it important to recognize that e-petition systems risk undermining representative democracy by reducing the legitimacy of decisions made by elected politicians, skewing input towards more powerful groups in society, or undermining public support for democracy. These are all possible negative scenarios for democracy as a whole if e-petition systems fail in the eyes of citizens.

In an analysis of e-petition systems targeting legislative bodies, Hough (2012) found a considerable variation regarding how e-petition systems affect policy change. He concluded that few e-petition systems help citizens to influence the outcome of parliamentary debate or affect policy. In his view, it is unrealistic to expect "even the most modern, accessible and influential petitions system to reverse such a profound and complex problem as citizen disengagement" (Hough, 2012, p. 491). Nevertheless, Hough argues that effectiveness should not only be evaluated based whether individual e-petitions achieve policy change, since e-petition system can be effective in enhancing the relationship between parliament and citizen. Other scholars also emphasize the difficulty in evaluating e-petition success and argue for a broader definition of success incorporating other measures than simply evaluating whether e-petitions achieve policy change or not (Wright, 2015; Bochel, 2012). Östling (2011, p. 64) reached a similar conclusion as Hough (2012) when comparing e-petition systems in Malmö and Bristol; she considered the e-petitioning panorama to be rather disappointing in terms of political results. Yasseri et al. (2013) discovered that 99 percent of the e-petitions launched via the formal UK e-petition system failed to reach the 10,000 signatures required for an official response. Likewise, only 0.1 percent of the e-petitions reached 100,000 signatures, which was the requirement for triggering a parliamentary debate. Moreover, the fate of an e-petition could be practically set during the first 24 hours from its launch, indicating that a critical mass of signatures needs to be gathered during this time frame if the threshold is ever to be reached.

Several studies have found an unequal representation of citizens signing e-petitions, indicating that traditional under-representation found in other forms of political participation is reproduced in e-petitioning (Östling, 2011; Lindner & Riehm, 2010; Schoultzman et al., 2012). Hence, traditional participation predictors, socio-economic background, for example, seem to have an effect on e-petition participation, albeit the effect might be indirect as digital skills have been

found to be more important (Anduiza et al., 2010 in Karlsson & Åström, 2015, p. 585).

A common critique of e-petitions is that they represent a too light-weight form of political participation. Since signing an e-petition does not require much effort, some scholars have labeled the activity as slacktivism or clicktivism (Karpf 2010; Morozov, 2009). Critics like Morozov (2009) and Shulman (2009) argue that e-petitions have, at most, a limited impact on politics. According to this view, signing e-petitions is more about making citizens feel good about themselves than to address important political matters and achieve policy change. Performing these low-threshold acts might distract citizens from making more meaningful contributions to politics (Skoric & Poor, 2013, p. 343). The effects of e-petitioning are not yet fully understood, and scholars have suggested that engaging in e-petitioning might even deter citizens from engaging in other forms of political participation (Schumann & Klein, 2015 in Puschmann et al., 2016).

E-petition systems might be seen as disappointing from a direct-democracy enthusiast's point of view because they are primarily agenda setting instruments as opposed to real direct-democratic power in the hands of citizens (Carman, 2010). E-petition systems might create a democratic bubble that suffers the risk of bursting if the outcome and treatment of e-petitions fail to live up to citizens' expectations (Bryer, 2010 in Karlsson & Åström, 2015). As a democratic innovation, e-petitioning is widely adopted but not fully developed. This gives e-petitioning a "vulnerable potential" to develop representative democracy and studying it can help to increase knowledge about online political participation (Karlsson & Åström, 2015, p. 562).

3.4.7 Research gap

In sum, e-petitioning is a promising form of online political participation, although it is facing several challenges if it is to successfully deal with democracy's ills. However, there are still relatively few *systematic*,

comparative studies on e-petition systems (for an excellent exception, see Lindner, Böhle & Riehm, 2014). Most of the research so far has concentrated on formal e-petition platforms introduced by authorities, resulting in a scarcity of research analyzing informal e-petition platforms. Scholars stress the importance of more research on platforms other than parliamentary petition bodies (Riehm, Böhle & Lindner, 2011; Wright, 2015, p. 147). More specifically, there are no studies, to the best of my knowledge, comparing formal and informal e-petition platforms and the e-petitions created on these platforms. When analyzing various aspects of e-petitioning, I argue that scholars need to acknowledge different kinds of e-petition system before writing e-petitioning off as either slacktivism or a successful development of representative democracy. Moreover, citizens might want to mobilize others regarding an issue that cannot be dealt with within the framework of the formal political system, but nevertheless constitutes a political cause, which can be pursued using an informal e-petition platform. An example could be citizens using an e-petition for protesting against a law proposal that is yet to be passed by the legislature, and therefore might not be a subject for a formal e-petition system. This illustrates the need for informal e-petition platforms unconnected to formal law-making, still filling a role for channeling the political will of the people by complementing the formal, institutionalized, e-petition platforms. Studying the vices and virtues of both formal and informal e-petition platforms suits the purpose of this thesis as it increases knowledge about e-petitioning as a form of online political participation, and adds to the debate on the merits and perils of e-petitioning. This is the theme for one of the articles in this compilation thesis.

Although previous research has analyzed predictors of e-petition signing (e.g., Böhle & Riehm, 2013; Östling, 2011), the effect of e-petition systems on political efficacy (Christensen et al., 2014), and the impact of e-petitions on policy change (e.g., Hough, 2012), less is known about how citizens use e-petitions for political participation. Furthermore, there is a

dearth of research regarding the role of anonymous signatures in e-petition signing (cf. Schmidt & Johnsen, 2014; Verslype et al., 2008). On e-petition platforms, the publishing of signatures becomes an aspect relating to the issue of anonymity in political participation, which will be discussed in chapter three in this thesis. Technically, it is easy to publish the names of the undersigned on petitions on e-petitions platforms. Consequently, designers of e-petition platforms must decide on whether anonymous signatures are to be allowed. When allowed, citizens are given the option to hide their signatures from public disclosure. This has the potential to affect the behavior of citizens as it may influence the decision to sign an e-petition. By analyzing patterns behind anonymous e-petition signing, I seek to increase knowledge about how citizens participate politically online.

3.5 Online political discussion

This subchapter assesses the literature on online political discussion. The aim is to highlight a central area of interest in this thesis—the quality of online discussion—and identify a need for further empirical research. I discuss the importance of political discussion in a democratic society and how online discussion differs from offline discussion. Moreover, I point out possibilities and challenges related to online political discussion to provide the reader with a backdrop for the empirical studies relating to the quality of online discussion.

3.5.1 Political discussion—a cornerstone of democratic politics

Most democratic theorists would agree that engaged discussion about public matters and a talkative electorate are essential in a healthy democracy (Freelon, 2010, pp. 1172–1173; Jackson et al., 2013; Rowe, 2013, p. 2). Some scholars even call political discussion "the soul of democracy" (Kim et al., 1999; Valenzuela et al., 2012) since it has been resonated with democratic theories for centuries (de Tocqueville, 1839).

Discussion among citizens can contribute to better-informed opinions and foster civic engagement (Zhou et al., 2008), and frequent political discussion in cross-cutting networks has the potential to increase interest in politics and social tolerance (Mutz, 2002). Political discussion is a key element in democratic societies where citizens are supposed to make informed decisions on issues of civic importance. Political discussion has been found to increase political knowledge (Eveland, 2004; Thomson, 2007, p. 3), and it is believed that a democratic system where citizens engage in discussions could increase both the performance and the legitimacy of that system (Barber, 1984; Dahl, 1989). On the contrary, a lack of meaningful and regular political deliberation results in poor public policy and political alienation (Moy & Gastil, 2006, p. 443). Scholars have argued that providing citizens with opportunities to deliberate about policy issues is an effective response to high levels of disillusionment and disenchantment with the political process (see John, 2011, p. 2; Smith et al., 2013, p. 1). Dewey (1946) and Habermas (1962; 1989) argue that the notion of rational and critical debate taking place in a public sphere is one of the cornerstones of a democratic society. Barber (1984) wants the public sphere not only to include educated elites but all members of society. According to this thinking, critical discussion grounded in information and reasoning should create enhanced public opinion, which, in turn, influences actions of elected officials. The internet seems promising to deliberative democrats in particular, since their view of democracy emphasizes the need for citizen discussion about policy issues, rather than mere aggregation of opinions (Wright & Street, 2007, p. 851; Mansbridge, 1991). Moreover, Scheufele (2001) argues that talking about political issues is a condition for understanding them, thus relating them to other issues and knowledge, and consequently making meaningful participation in political life possible. The importance of political discussion in a democracy is summarized well by Stromer-Galley and Wichowski:

> "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. Through such conversations, political participation is made possible, enabling citizens to affect the practices and policies of their elected leaders and ultimately ensuring a democratic process of governance" (Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2011, p. 169).

According to Wolf and Morales (2010, p. 1), political discussion has a central role in democracies. It occurs more frequently than other forms of political participation (e.g., voting) and enables unmediated political expression for citizens. Political discussion provides information short-cuts to voters and can activate latent political attitudes. Moreover, persuasive political discussion might also alter citizens' attitudes and presumptions. Another important role for political discussion is to construct trust across social divisions, hence contributing to participation in mutual political activity and reciprocity among discussants, producing a more vibrant society. Nevertheless, political discussion does not always produce positive results for democracy. It may result in unintended consequences, biases and further fragmentation of already polarized societies. Discussion can either build consensus among participants or cement political predispositions. Conflicting findings call for further exploration of the characteristics of political discussion.

3.5.2 Political discussion moves online

Political discussion is one of the political participation forms that optimists (e.g., Rheingold, 2000) hoped would be promoted by the internet by extending it beyond social networks and making information instantly available (Muhlberger, 2003, p. 5). As democratic theory took a "deliberative turn" (Dryzek, 2000), the internet became especially interesting to scholars due to its potential to fulfill some of the characteristics of an ideal public sphere envisioned by deliberative democrats (Strandberg, 2015, pp. 451–452; Zhou et al., 2008, p. 761). The

internet has features which might be favorable to democratic discussion between citizens because it: enables many-to-many communication, bridges time and place, enables easy transmission of large quantities of information, gives citizens easier access to the public sphere, is of horizontal nature, and lowers the (social and economic) costs of publication (Witschge, 2008, p. 76). In other words, it erodes physical, psychological, and social barriers which can have a restrictive impact on offline political discussion (Gastil, 2000; Dahlberg, 2001; Price, Cappella & Nir, 2002; Strandberg, 2008). Online, citizens can engage with authorities and participate in their own pace (Smith et al., 2013, p. 1; John, 2011, p. 1). Moreover, large numbers of people can be involved in political discussion online; participation can be scaled up without producing costs of physically bringing people together (Smith et al., 2013, p. 1; Wales et al., 2010, p. 32).

> "The unique characteristics of the Internet enable citizens to produce, comment on, edit, remove, and recommend portions of a global dialogue. This has set it apart as a medium with the potential to transform the democratic landscape at large and expand the public sphere" (Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2010, p. 170).

Even though the internet is potentially expanding the public sphere and increasingly functioning as an arena for political discussion (Himelboim et al., 2009, p. 772), online discussions have been criticized for causing polarization (Sunstein, 2009) and lacking in deliberative quality (e.g., Jankowski & van Os, 2004; Strandberg, 2008). Findings show that forum design matters because it has effects on the deliberative quality of the online discussion (Wright & Street, 2007; Wales et al., 2010). One of the characteristics of the internet, anonymity, seems to be challenging for the quality of online discussion (Wales et al., 2010, p. 2). This has fielded interest from scholars since democratic discussion traditionally does not occur between anonymous participants, yet many online discussions characterized by anonymity (Eisinger, 2011, p. 4).

The rise of the internet as a space for political discussion has triggered research on the diverse forms online discussion can take (e.g., chat, forums, blogs, social network sites, video chat, and article comments). This research field is constantly growing as political discussion increasingly takes place online (Himelboim et al., 2009, p. 772). In the early stages of internet research, an optimist/pessimist discussion among scholars was present due to the fallacy of technological determinism. Since then, this approach has given way for more nuanced and sophisticated research, addressing specific platforms and uses since there is no such thing as "the" internet (Freelon, 2015, p. 772). Online political discussion has been studied for over 20 years, making research overviews challenging. However, the subsequent section will provide an overview of some of the possibilities and challenges concerning online political discussion.

3.5.3 Possibilities

The internet has introduced new forms of communication ranging from e-mail to high definition video conferences. Text-based online forums are only one of many forms of online communication, yet it has received extensive attention from scholars from various disciplines. The earliest studies focused on discussions in Usenet newsgroups (Lewiski, 2010, p. 1). These studies tended to paint a gloomy picture; online discussion did not live up to highly placed standards regarding reciprocity, rationality, respect, and mutual understanding (e.g., Schneider, 1997; Wilhelm, 1998; Davis, 1999; Hill & Hughes, 1998; Hagemann, 2002; Jankowski & van Os, 2004). Nevertheless, scholars like Dahlberg (2001) saw characteristics of the internet possibly contributing to democratic discourse (Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2011, p. 178). Among these characteristics are the ability to criticize claims made by others, freedom of opinion expression, and the possibility of reflective, interactive discussion between citizens. Moreover, asynchronous online forums can facilitate large-scale discussions, and thus enable broader based policy-making (Wright, 2009,

p. 233). The asynchronicity of online communication may enhance rational reason-giving in political discussions; participants are given time to think through their statements before posting them at any given time, in contrast to offline political discussion which usually happens in real-time (Janssen & Kies, 2005; John, 2011, p. 24). Offline, political discussion of this kind of many-to-many deliberation is impractical and costly to implement (Wright & Street, 2007, p. 850). Furthermore, online discussions have reduced the cost of dissent (Postmes et al., 1998; Min, 2007; Ho & McLeod, 2008). Moreover, problematic physical constraints (e.g., time, access, and geographical distance) found in offline political discussion are removed online (Strandberg, 2015, p. 454). Compared to the limited space available for political discussion in traditional print and broadcast media, the internet offers unlimited space for unmediated debate among citizens (Dahlgren, 2015, p. 29).

Findings show that text-based, digital communication promotes exposure to diverse viewpoints and provides citizens with access to a larger number of discussion partners (Min, 2007, Ho and McLeod, 2008). Online political discussion has also been found to contribute to the heterogeneity of citizens' political discussion networks, although partisans were more prone to sort themselves into ideological enclaves than non-partisans (Brundidge, 2010, p. 695). Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009) argue that political discussion groups are not the best place to look for cross-cutting political online deliberation since they found that political discussion in non-political groups more frequently involved participants who disagree with each other. They found evidence of promising political discussions in groups where participants are not self-selecting their group membership based on political opinions and therefore become part of politically more heterogeneous communities. The type of online discussion one takes part in has an effect on other forms of online participation; discussing with individuals outside the circle of friends and family resulted in a higher degree of political participation online (Valenzuela et al. 2012, pp. 176–177). However,

exposure to disagreement was negatively related to the degree of online participation, whereas agreement motivated participants to engage in online political participation (ibid.). Although exposure to disagreement may elicit a greater understanding of politics and the arguments of the "other side", it might simultaneously deter citizens from participation in other online activities (Valenzuela et al. 2012, p. 177; Mutz, 2006). Nevertheless, Valenzuela et al. (2012) discovered that the size of online discussion networks was positively associated with greater online political participation.

Experimental research by Strandberg (2015) suggested that online discussion forums designed according to deliberative principles produced better outcomes than unregulated forums. Participants in the regulated forums increased their internal political efficacy (i.e., the feeling of being politically competent) and their external political efficacy (i.e., the view on the functioning and responsiveness of the current political system) as a result of the discussions. In a similar manner, Darabi and Jin's study (2013) indicated that online discussion quality can be significantly enhanced using example-posting strategy and limited-number-of-postings strategy.

Some people are reluctant to discuss politics because they view it as an exposure of their identity (Conover et al., 2002). However, the threshold for online discussion can be lower than for face-to-face interactions, helping shy people to make their voices heard and broadening opinion diversity (Stromer-Galley, 2002; Min, 2007). Especially for introvert persons, the possibility of anonymous participation increases the likelihood of participating in online discussions (Amichai-Hamburger, Gazit, Bar-Ilian, Perez, Aharony, Bronstein & Dyne, 2016, p. 274).

3.5.4 Challenges

While there are many possibilities for political discussion online, the internet also provides some challenges for democratic discourse. To start

off with, uneven distribution of internet access and technical ability for internet use still produces a digital divide (Norris, 2001) leaving non-internet users excluded from online political discussion, thus reinforcing the power of socially, politically and economically privileged groups (Lee et al., 2014, p. 42). Scholars have found that the online environment can lead to "balkanization" as like-minded individuals are drawn to each other and create "echo chambers" in which homogeneity of opinions is high (Sunstein, 2001; 2007). Consequently, a reinforcement of initial opinions—due to lack of conflicting viewpoints—might lead to the phenomenon of group polarization, which means that people's attitudes become more extreme after group discussion with like-minded others (Sunstein, 2007; Lee, 2007, p. 385). Group polarization can breed prejudicial discussion in separate online communities, not taking the views of others nor society as a whole into account (Brants & Voltmer, 2011, 10). On the contrary, another possible scenario is that online political discussion is too confrontational or oppositional, rather than too like-minded, opening up for very heated debates (Kelly et al., 2005, p. 3).

Some scholars argue that the internet has not improved the conditions for political discussion. Hindman (2010, p. 142) points out that it is easy for citizens to speak online, but it remains difficult to be heard amid an overload of information and countless distractions of non-political content. Similarly, Noam (2005) warns about the negative consequences of misinformation and that an increase in the quantity of information enabled by the internet does not automatically increase the quality of information. Moreover, the publishing of political opinions and face recognition tools online opens gates to opinion registration and electronic surveillance (Morozov, 2011). Furthermore, only a small part of citizens' internet use is devoted to political discussion, in fact discussing politics is quite uncommon in comparison with other types of internet use (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009, p. 41; Hindman, 2010).

Research on online political discussion has revealed troublesome signs of behavior with detrimental consequences. Aggressive,

uninhibited language known as flaming in online political discussion spaces indicates that, in reality, online political discussion is not necessarily conducted in the manner deliberative democrats wish (Kayany, 1998; Hutchens et al., 2015). Definitions of flaming have generally been vague and abstract (Cho & Kwon, 2015, p. 366). Usually, flaming is regarded as language use defined as hostile comments (Aiken & Waller, 2000), uninhibited expression of ridicule, hostility, and insults (Kayany, 1998), or name-calling and swearing (Cho & Kwon, 2015). In essence, flaming is an indicator for incivility in online discussions which might discourage participation in such discussions (Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2011).

Incivility has generated both public and scholarly interest since the early days of online political discussion research. According to Papacharissi (2004), heated debate filled with disagreement becomes problematic when it disrespects democratic values. Accordingly, Papacharissi makes an important distinction between mere impoliteness and incivility, which can be defined as "a set of behaviours that threaten democracy, deny people their personal freedoms, and stereotype social groups" (Papacharissi, 2004, p. 267). Papacharissi (2004, p. 277) found discussions on Usenet to mostly maintain a calm and mild tone, although anonymity "may make some less mindful of their manners." Findings regarding the level of incivility in online political discourse have been mixed. Benson (1996, p. 375) studied Usenet newsgroups and found political topics to be particularly vitriolic as "debates are often characterized by aggressiveness, certainty, angry assertion, insult, ideological abstraction, and the attempt to humiliate opponents." Santana (2012) identified incivility in online political discussion about immigration and minority groups. Eisinger (2011) examined article comments and found numerous examples of incivility, but nevertheless concluded that the preponderance of dialogue was civil. Rowe (2015) found a lower level of incivility in article comments than in the findings of Benson (1996) and Santana (2012), concluding that a majority of

comments were neither uncivil nor impolite. This standpoint finds further empirical support in research by Ruiz et al. (2011) and Canter (2013). Another form of uncivil behavior, trolling—"the practice of deliberately trying to aggress electronically or to distress participants online through frequently inflammatory and abusive behaviour; usually just to disrupt without direction" (Virkar, 2014, p. 51)—is a threat because it can discourage participation and lead to discussion forums being shut down (Turner, 2010).

In light of ideals posited by deliberative democracy theory, scholars have attempted to measure the deliberative quality, or more simply put discussion quality, of online discussion (e.g., Graham, 2009; Steiner et al., 2004; Stromer-Galley, 2007; Monnoyer-Smith & Wojcik, 2012). Despite some studies suggest the high-quality discussion fulfilling deliberative criteria can be found online (e.g., Jensen, 2003a; Stromer-Galley, 2002; Dahlberg, 2001; Talpin & Monnoyer-Smith, 2010; Monnoyer-Smith & Wojcik, 2012), other scholars describe discussions which fail to reach the standards of deliberation (Schneider, 1997; Hill & Hughes, 1998; Davis, 1999; Wilhelm, 1999; Jankowski & van Os, 2004; Loveland & Popescu, 2011; Santana, 2014). Thus, unrestricted online discussion might not always work in favor of a healthy and strong democracy, since its quantity and quality "is far removed from the ideals set out in the early to mid-1990s" (Chadwick, 2009, p. 12). It might be possible that online discussion is excluding people and promoting inequality, instead of strengthening democracy (Witschge, 2007). One of the critiques against deliberative democracy is that it fails because deliberation favors citizens who are able to articulate their views in rational, reasonable terms and convince others. This can lead to an online public sphere an aristocracy of intellectuals dominate over those less skilled in deliberation, basically meaning traditionally disadvantaged, lowly educated citizens (see Hindman, 2010, pp. 138–139). However, scholars have begun to examine how discussion venues can be designed to better achieve the ideal of deliberative discussion (Hamlett & Cobb, 2006; Wright & Street, 2007;

Kies, 2010; Coleman & Moss, 2012). This strand of research argues that design matters for discussion quality and thus can help bring about discussions that are more beneficial for democracy (Strandberg, 2015, p. 455). These studies show there are several factors influencing the characteristics and quality of online discussions. To mention a few examples, scholars have investigated the impact of moderation (Stromer-Galley, 2007), political sophistication (Nagar, 2011), gender (Price, 2009), and publicity (Meade & Stasavage, 2006). In particular, anonymity has been a common explanation for uncivil discourse online (Witschge, 2007; Eisinger, 2011, p. 5; Mungeam, 2011; Nagar, 2011; Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012; Santana, 2012; 2014; Erjavec & Kovacic, 2013). Some scholars even suggest that "perhaps no aspect of online communications poses as great a challenge to our aspirations for meaningful democratic discourse as the ready availability of anonymous speech" (Samuel, 2004, p. 214). This position has been questioned by earlier findings (Papacharissi, 2004) and by more recent research, indicating no major negative impact of anonymity (e.g., Ruesch & Märker, 2012b; Hutchens, Cicchirillo & Hmielowski, 2015; Fredheim & Moore & Naughton, 2015). Other scholars emphasize the need to take other factors into account when analyzing online political discussion; the impact of the discussion topic for example (Stromer-Galley, 2007; Lindell, 2015, p. 97; Rowe, 2015). For political online discussion to be perceived as beneficial, normal, and useful, "more work needs to be done to design forums to promote good discussion" (Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2011, p. 182).

3.5.5 Research gap

Overall, an ongoing debate regarding online political discussion and deliberation concerns the quality of online discussion. Promoting high-quality discussion online seems to be challenging. Optimistic, theoretical visions of the internet as a virtual public sphere have generally encountered setbacks in empirical research analyzing online discussion. Nonetheless, scholars have identified high-quality discourse online. The

mixed findings regarding the quality of discussion inspired scholarship to measure the quality of discussion in different online settings. Online political discussion has been studied in both formal settings resembling deliberation (e.g., Talpin & Wojcik, 2009) and in more informal settings, exemplified by Usenet forums (e.g., Papacharissi, 2004) and online article comments (e.g., Santana, 2014). Some scholars (e.g., Graham, 2009; Graham, Jackson & Wright, 2015) stress the idea of analyzing political discussion in more informal, even non-political, forums because of their potential for cross-cutting political discussions. Thus, the literature has identified a need for systematic research on the quality of political participation in the form of political discussion online (Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2011). Moreover, in the same manner as there are many forms and venues for political discussion offline, there is a need for distinguishing between different settings for online political discussion instead of treating online political discussion as a unitary concept. Coffee room discussion differs from parliamentary deliberation, and likewise, article commenting is a different context compared to formal online deliberation events.

Furthermore, scholars are interested in the factors influencing the quality of discussion, as knowledge of these factors can help improve online discussion in a direction beneficial for democracy (e.g., Wright & Street, 2007; Kies, 2010). In the literature, it is suggested that anonymity is one of the most prominent factors influencing the quality of online political discussion. However, the empirical results regarding the effects of anonymity have been mixed. This calls for more investigation of anonymous online discussions and empirical research analyzing other possible determinants of the quality of online discussion. These issues will be elaborated on in this thesis.

This chapter has discussed the importance of analyzing online political participation and provided a definition of this key concept in this thesis. It has established two forms of online political participation, e-petitioning and political discussion, as the main phenomena of interest

for my research query. These two forms are connected to two strands of democratic theory, participatory and deliberative democracy, respectively, and exist both within and outside the formal political system as formalized (e.g., national e-petition systems) or informal processes (e.g., political discussion in article comment sections) for political participation. Although neither petitioning nor political discussion is a new phenomenon, they have been introduced to an online world, creating a context different from the offline ditto. To fulfill the purpose of increasing knowledge about citizens´ *online* participation, I argue there is a need to discuss one of the most prominent issues relating to the internet: anonymity. Therefore, next chapter will elaborate on anonymity and its relation to political participation.

4. Anonymity in participation and communication

Given that political participation is moving online, it becomes intertwined with a central characteristic of digital communication: online anonymity. This characteristic is perhaps the most prominent of several important psychological components distinguishing the internet from the offline world (Amichai-Hamburger, 2013; Gardner, 2011). The subsequent chapter discusses the concept of anonymity, starting from its definition to its potential effects on communication and, consequently, political participation. Here, I identify merits and perils of anonymity from the literature. The aim of this chapter is to review previous research on anonymity and to argue for a need to take anonymity into account in online political participation research. An understanding of anonymity becomes relevant for my research query as the internet arguably has made it easier to perform acts of political participation anonymously. In line with Pottle (2013), I believe that the use and implications of anonymity have been under-scrutinized in debates about the political potential of the internet because scholars cannot assume that online communication is equivalent to offline communication. Given the dearth of research on anonymity in political participation, I take a wider approach to the concept of anonymity in this chapter, by referring to findings from disciplines such as social psychology and communication studies.

4.1 Anonymity—the noncoordinability of traits

Why is it interesting to analyze anonymity? According to Pavlicek (2005, p. 6), the internet's ever-increasing importance in society combined with the ease of anonymous communication, are factors that help to make the subject interesting. Historically, anonymity played a relatively minor role in a world where the potential audience for anonymous

communication was limited. The internet has made anonymous communication more common and enlarged its reach to an audience consisting, at least theoretically, of an infinite number of people. In pre-internet eras, anonymous communication was more expensive and time-consuming than today (du Pont, 2001). At the same time, digital technology facilitating anonymous communication coexists with technology promoting identification using tracks that citizens leave behind when browsing the web. Anonymity can be seen as something that is built into the properties of the internet and therefore worthy of study for scholars seeking a deeper understanding of the internet's democratic potential.

Thus, the concept of anonymity is central in discussions concerning the internet. Analyses of the political, economic, psychological, and legal aspects of the internet are often associated with the medium's ability to offer anonymity to its users (Kling et al., 1999). Of particular research interest is the increasing importance of anonymity in computer-mediated communication (Christopherson, 2007). In the early adoption of the internet, anonymity was the default setting in online communication, making it troublesome to change the default setting from anonymity to accountability. It is simply unrealistic to make *all* online communication identifiable because no recognition or identification system is without weaknesses (Weinberger, 2005). The internet is ambiguous because it both provides citizens with an opportunity to act anonymously and simultaneously make their actions more traceable than ever before, as identification technology (e.g., face recognition software) is constantly evolving (Marx, 2004). The question is how to balance anonymity as an instrument for civil rights and privacy, with identification as an instrument for law enforcement, marketing, and social control (Nicoll & Prins, 2003, p. 291). Anonymity can provide resistance against governments or private interests using information technology to collect information about citizens (Samoriski, 2002; Saco, 2002).

According to Boyd and Field (2016, p. 332) “anonymity is one of the great enigmas in Western philosophy.” It is not difficult to find worrisome uses of anonymity: cyber-bullying, machinations of corporate actors, hacktivism performed by terrorists, masked looting, and terrorists committing atrocities in online videos with their faces covered to prevent accountability. Anonymity is also central to other well-contested phenomena like the secret-sharing website Wikileaks and the hacktivist collective Anonymous, famous for targeting groups and actors as ISIS or the Church of Scientology. Nevertheless, anonymity has its merits and some kinds of anonymous actions are supported by both ends of the political left-right spectrum (Boyd & Field, 2016, p. 333). In demonstrations, participants can be protected from oppression by authorities because of the anonymity of the mass or the masks they wear. The “Guy Fawkes” masks often seen at contemporary demonstrations, in addition to thwarting easy identification, have a symbolic value, helping to signify the egalitarian core of the protests. Moreover, anonymity is a privacy tool, which can be used to deal with citizens’ justified concerns about government intrusions into the private sphere in light of recent revelations about the monitoring powers of the National Security Agency (NSA) surveillance program. Anonymity is connected to the freedom of speech by protecting citizens from retaliation and their ideas from suppression in intolerant societies. Taken together, modern anonymity “is fraught with ambiguity” (Boyd & Field, 2016, p. 334) and offers competing concerns without easy answers.

4.1.1 Definition and related concepts

In everyday use, the word anonymity means being nameless, or to perform acts without revealing one’s name. The actual word anonymity comes from the Greek language and means "untitled" or "no name" (Baggili, 2009, p. 15). Citizens usually have some sort of idea of what anonymity is because it is part of their existence and everyday experience. However, a more distinct definition of the term is necessary

to prevent confusion with other related concepts such as pseudonymity (Scott, 1998). A text is anonymous when no specific person can be linked to its creation, a donation is anonymous when the name of the donator is not published, and people can be anonymous in locations where no one knows who they are (Nissenbaum, 1999). Anonymity is used to describe a range of related concepts: namelessness, privacy, lack of recognition, loss of sense of identity, or self-esteem (Wallace, 2008, p. 165). However, the everyday definition of anonymity, namelessness, is not sufficient enough to describe the concept, since a name is only one of many identifying traits. A name is not automatically an important identifier since names are rarely unique. Social security number is, for example, a better identifier. The point here is that anonymity should be understood as a broader concept, non-identifiability, rather than being limited to signify namelessness, which is only one form of anonymity (Wallace, 1999, p. 23).

An increased understanding of internet surveillance shifts the focus on anonymity as a name-driven phenomenon towards anonymity as an issue of access to personal information. This information includes: date of birth, marital status, personal identity number, passport information, property ownership, vehicle registration, driver's license number, facial characteristics, height, e-mail address, workplace, phone number, credit card transactions, iris shape, fingerprints, retinal imaging, blood type, road use, gait, consumer behavior, Google search history, IP-address, and so on (Kerr, 2007). According to Marx (1999), an actor is completely anonymous when it cannot be identified, that is, there are no traces leading to identification of the person performing the action (Nicoll & Prins, 2003). Anonymity means to be non-traceable by any of the identification dimensions listed by Marx (1999): legal name, address, numeric symbols (e.g., social security number), pseudonyms in the form of symbols or names unlinkable with other identification data (e.g., anonymous AIDS-tests with number identification), behavior (e.g., graffiti tags, anonymous commenters recognized by language style and

rhetoric), social categorization (e.g., gender, ethnicity, age, religion, leisure activities), symbols of eligibility in the form of: knowledge (e.g., passwords), abilities (e.g., swimming ability) and possession of objects (e.g., tickets, uniforms). Online, identifiers may be e-mail addresses, user names, usage history, IP-address, and writing style (Weis, 2008, p. 3).

Simply put, anonymity represents a situation where the source of a message is missing or unknown to the receiver of the message (Scott, 2004). Wallace (1999, p. 24) defines anonymity as "noncoordinatiability of traits in a given respect." Put differently, a person is anonymous when others are unable to link a given characteristic of the person to other characteristics. For example, the Norwegian terrorist Anders Behring Breivik was anonymous as long as he was only known as the man who shot people on an island in Norway. Only when this characteristic could be linked with other characteristics such as name, address and social security number, he could be identified. This reasoning leads scholars to view anonymity as a polar value on a scale ranging from identifiability and non-identifiability (Marx, 1999; Nicoll & Prins, 2003). Hence, anonymity is not a dichotomous concept (Scott, 1998; Nissenbaum, 1999; Marx, 1999; Nicoll & Prins, 2003; Scott, 2004; Rains & Scott, 2007; Qian & Scott, 2007; Wallace, 2008). This definition is important since it conceptualizes anonymity as a continuous variable. Communicators, in other words, are not completely anonymous or identifiable. They can also be partly anonymous (Rains & Scott, 2007, p. 64). Anonymity is perhaps best understood as a condition when an actor is disconnected from information necessary for identification, a condition in which available data cannot be linked to a specific individual (Kerr, 2007).

Anonymity requires a social or communicative relationship (Wallace, 1999; 2008), in other words, an audience of at least one person (Marx, 1999, p. 100). Wallace (2008, p. 168) argues that anonymity is related to the social context in which a person can act, influence, or be influenced by others. Moreover, anonymity is related to the extent of which knowledge (or lack of knowledge) of a person's identity is relevant to

how the person acts, affects or is affected by other actors. Isolation from others can be a means to achieve anonymity, but isolation in itself is not necessarily the same thing as anonymity. Or as Marx (1999, p. 100) puts it: ”One cannot be anonymous on top of a mountain if there is no form of interaction with others and if no one is aware of the person.”

To achieve a better understanding of the concept of anonymity, one needs to describe how it differs from related concepts like privacy, confidentiality, and pseudonymity. The concepts of anonymity and privacy are related, yet not the same. For example, it is entirely possible for a person to act in front of a large audience—without privacy—and still remain anonymous, that is, unknown to the spectators (Gardner, 2011, p. 940). Nicoll and Prince (2003) define privacy as the degree of anonymity citizens choose to use in their interaction with the state and other people. The right to privacy is based on the expectation that individuals should be able to control information about themselves (Marx 1999). In this sense, privacy refers to not having information about oneself revealed to others (Tunick, 2011, p. 1355 in Kurian, 2011). Hence, privacy is about hiding the content of communication, and anonymity concerns hiding who is communicating (Bradbury, 2014). People who can break the link between their identity and their actions are better able to decide when, how and to what extent information about them is communicated to others (Kerr, 2007). Confidentiality, in turn, is a condition in which messages can be connected to a source by some (e.g., researchers, journalists) who have agreed not to reveal the identity of the source (Scott, 1998; 2004). Confidentiality means the source of a message is known by a few but not for the recipients of the communicated message. Confidentiality is thus based on a trust relationship between two or more people (Marx, 1999, p. 100). Pseudonymity, like anonymity, is derived from the Greek language and means ”false name” (Voorhof, 2010, p. 2). Pseudonymity denotes that the real, offline identity is kept apart from the online identity (Farrell, 2012, p. 2). The biggest difference between anonymity and pseudonymity is that the latter allows the

creation and maintenance of an alternate identity (Froomkin 1999, 114). In other words, pseudonymity enables individuals to use a name other than their own (Stein, 2003, p. 164).

Online, the use of a pseudonym is common (Baggili, 2009, p. 15), perhaps because pseudonymity provides communicators with a sense of anonymity (Scott, 1998, p. 384). Pseudonymity does not give online communicators complete anonymity since it is possible to link—with varying degrees of difficulty—a fictitious name with other identity markers, consequently identifying the person behind a pseudonym (Nissenbaum, 1999, p. 142; Stein, 2003, p. 164). Pseudonymity exists in two forms: sources perceived as fabricated (fictitious sources) and sources perceived as real (factual sources). The latter type stands out because the message recipient does not necessarily have any reason to suspect identity deception (Scott, 2004, p. 129).

It is also worth making a distinction between offline anonymity (e.g., in phone calls or traditional media) and online anonymity (Scott, 2004). According to Johnson (1997, p. 62), offline anonymity requires an effort while online anonymity is more often assumed. Internet users must make an effort to prove their identity online. There are some aspects of online anonymity potentially making it more powerful than the offline equivalent: anonymous communication online is cheaper and more easily achieved, it can reach a large part of the population and is easier to spread due to its digital form (Scott, 2004). In addition, statements made on the internet exist potentially forever, escape editorial review and have a greater likelihood of reaching a receptive audience (O'Brien, 2002, in Scott, 2004). However, the mindset that anonymity is something presumed and easier to achieve online compared to offline, can be questioned. The anonymity of a temporary e-mail account, for example, is not absolute anonymity since users can be tracked with identification technologies (Wallace, 2008).

Online anonymity used to be a default feature on the internet. In the early days, it was the norm for online communication (Black, 2011, p. 10).

However, the arrival of social media and the concept of web 2.0 have challenged social norms regarding online anonymity, resulting in an increase of online services based on identification of users. Personalization is now a growing trend in online communication; interactions are connected to identity and people leave digital footprints. Hence, a great deal of information about individuals' personal and professional lives is available by a Google search (Black, 2011, p. 11; Lugaresi, 2013, p. 111). This creates a paradox, although anonymity is more easily achieved online than offline, digital footprints makes citizens less anonymous than ever before even if they do not use their real names while browsing the internet. Therefore, true online anonymity requires technical know-how to achieve (Froomkin, 2011, p. 2). Nevertheless, scholars highlight that it is the *feeling* of anonymity, not whether people are actually anonymous or not, that drives human behavior (Burkell, 2006; West & Burkell, n.d.; Consalvo & Ess, 2010, p. 462). Online anonymity is related to a broader conflict, where governmental actors and private businesses strive for control and seek to identify citizens and consumers, who might prefer anonymity to preserve their freedom and privacy when acting online (Lugaresi, 2013, pp. 111–112).

There are additional ways of categorizing anonymity. In the literature, several concepts are found: visual and discursive anonymity, technological and social anonymity, as well as self-anonymity and other-anonymity (Scott, Rains & Haseki, 2011). Visual anonymity exists in situations where it is not possible to identify sources based on physical properties. Visual anonymity reduces the exchange of interpersonal information normally (in face-to-face situations) conveyed by non-verbal communication. In computer-mediated communication, visual anonymity usually involves a person lacking visual representation such as photos or videos (Qian & Scott, 2007, p. 1430). Discursive anonymity means not being able to identify the name of a source or not being able to connect verbal communication to a specific source (ibid.; Scott, 2004). People often feel anonymous online when personal information (gender,

name, email address, etc.) is concealed even if what they write might reveal who writes it. Discursive anonymity is slightly more complex than visual anonymity (Qian & Scott, 2007, p. 1430). Technical anonymity is used to denote the degree of anonymity technology permits by removing meaningful identification information in an interaction (Christopherson, 2007, p. 3040; Scott, Rains & Haseki, 2011), while social anonymity is the degree of anonymity users perceive technology actually offers (Scott, Rains & Haseki, 2011). Self-anonymity is the sender's perception of whether he or she is anonymous to others. Other-anonymity is about the recipient's perception of the sender's anonymity (ibid.; Scott, 2004, p. 129). Moreover, one can make a distinction between source anonymity, a situation where the group composition is known but not the identity of the communicator, and participant anonymity, representing situations when neither the group composition nor the identity of the communicator is known.

Froomkin (1995) divides online anonymous communication into four categories describing the degree of anonymity (see also Baggili, 2009; Kling et al., 1999):

1. Traceable anonymity; the message source can use an intermediary to transmit the message to the recipient. Only the intermediary knows the sources' identity. The transmitter (source) remains anonymous to the recipient but identifiable by the intermediary.

2. Untraceable anonymity; exists in situations where neither the receiver nor the intermediary can identify the source of a message. According to Kling et al. (1999), this kind of anonymity is not complete, but the message source can be difficult to track.

3. Traceable pseudonymity; when pseudonyms can be traced because a third party can connect them with the real, offline identity based on the context of communication.

4. Untraceable pseudonymity; represents cases where the sender uses a pseudonym that cannot be traced to him or her. Unlike anonymity, the

same pseudonym can be used consistently to build a reputation online, instead of using a pseudonym only once.

Online communication platforms offer a wide range of forms of disclosing user identities. According to Moore (2016), anonymity can be disaggregated into three dimensions: traceability, durability, and connectedness. Traceability represents the extent to which communication can be traced to real identities; for example, if an online identity is verified or unverified. Traceability by governmental and private actors has the potential to constrain online communication by creating a risk of exposure and retaliation for speech offending powerful actors. As Froomkin (1995) demonstrates, traceability concerns both anonymity and pseudonymity. Durability concerns how difficult or easy online identities can be acquired and changed. If new pseudonyms are easy to create, online communicators can create new identities and start over again after a period of abusive behavior. However, when users stick to a particular pseudonym, they open up for reputational consequences of their behavior. Thus, communicative accountability does not require a real-world identity, but the use of pseudonymity enables a durability or persistence of identity within a particular platform (Moore, 2016, p. 8). Connectedness refers to the extent users are identifiable across different platforms and contexts. Internet user might prefer that their contributions are to be like islands, separate from each other to keep their different domains of interest unconnected. For example, someone commenting on sports events online might prefer to keep these comments unconnected with their professional networks. Connectedness involves global, rather than local, reputation as it allows statements to be attributed to particular individuals across different social contexts. The use of real name policies enables connectedness in contrast to the use of true anonymity or pseudonymity. Moore's (2016) disaggregation of anonymity results in three modes: true anonymity (not durable, not connected), pseudonymity (durable, not connected), and real-name (durable, connected).

This subchapter has acknowledged the multifaceted concept of anonymity and defined it as the noncoordinability of traits in a given respect. It has shown that anonymity is more complex than simply not being identified by name and is to be regarded as a continuous, rather than a dichotomous, variable. Moreover, true online anonymity is difficult to achieve without technical expertise. I have distinguished anonymity from other, related, concepts to position the notion in relation to concepts such as privacy, which are sometimes used interchangeably in everyday writing. The subchapter has mentioned the paradoxical relationship between the internet and anonymity: although anonymity is more easily achieved online than offline, it is simultaneously technically feasible to track and monitor citizens' online actions. However, regardless of how, technically, anonymous citizens are online, it has been stressed that it is the feeling of anonymity that seems to have a bearing on human behavior. This will serve as a point of departure for the use of anonymity in the empirical research in this thesis. Thus, although I acknowledge the complex nature and various categorization of anonymity in the literature, I will not go into great detail and theoretical discussions about in the individual research articles relating to anonymity. Instead, I choose a simpler path and focus on whether or not citizens are anonymous to other citizens when performing acts of online political participation.

4.1.2 Theories relating to anonymity

Studying online political participation is essentially about studying human behavior, and as anonymity is a social construction, theories from social psychology have discussed anonymity at least since Le Bon's (1896) early studies of human behavior in groups. Three theories in the literature seem relevant to online anonymity: deindividuation theory, the social identity model of deindividuation effects, and the theory of the online disinhibition effect. Because of the lack of attention to anonymity

in democratic theory[2], these theories can provide a background and contribute the discussion on the connection between anonymity and political participation, which will be the theme for the next subchapter.

According to deindividuation theories, deindividuation is a psychological state of decreased self-evaluation and decreased evaluation apprehension causing antinormative and disinhibited behavior (Postmes & Spears, 1998, p. 238). Thus, deindividuation describes a state where self-awareness and individual identity is lost (Myers, 2009, p. 279). The foundation of deindividuation theory traces back to Le Bon's (1896) studies of crowd behavior, where he found that people lost their sense of identity in crowds and acted in manners differing from the way they acted in a state of isolation. The term deindividuation was introduced to describe the loss of the sense of self in a crowd (Festinger, Pepitone & Newcomb, 1952; Huang & Li, 2016, p. 400). Deindividuation is one of the most cited effects of social groups, and deindividuation theory aims to explain expressions of antinormative behavior in the form of lynch mobs, hooligans, and violent crowds (Postmes & Spears, 1998). Deindividuation theory asserts that group size has an effect on anonymity; in larger groups members experience a stronger sense of anonymity which results in more antisocial behavior (Chang, 2008, p. 2). Zimbardo (1969) proposed that anonymity, physical involvement, arousal, sensory overload, and unstructured situations induced deindividuation which led to inappropriate and antinormative behavior. Deindividuation theory focused on the negative effects of deindividuation and posited that the state led to acts of aggression and other deviant behaviors (Huang & Li, 2016, p. 400). It has also been used to explain antinormative behavior in anonymous computer-mediated communication although this context can seem to be far from the

[2] The exception might be the heated debate concerning the arguments for and against the secret ballot in the 20th century (Mill, 1861; Townes, n.d.).

maddening crowd (e.g., Kiesler et al., 1984; Spears & Postmes, 2015, pp. 24–26) and some scholars argue that deindividuation theory cannot fully explain disinhibition in computer-mediated communication (Bae, 2016, p. 301). However, empirical testing of the deindividuation theory has produced inconsistent results. In several studies, deindividuation was not enough to induce aggressive behavior; rather behavior was dependent on normative cues associated with groups and the situational context of a specific situation (Huang & Li, 2016, p. 400). A meta-study of deindividuation studies provided an inconsistent picture regarding the link between anonymity, deindividuation, and antinormative behavior (Postmes & Spears, 1998; Finn, 2016, p. 1). In sum, deindividuation theories did not sufficiently explain the effect of anonymity on behavior as situational factors seemed to have a significant impact on the behavior of deindividuated persons (Christie & Dill 2016, p. 293).

The varying effects of anonymity in the literature surrounding both classic (e.g., Festinger et al., 1952; Zimbardo, 1969) and "contemporary" deindividuation theories (Prentice-Dunn & Rogers, 1989) paved way for researchers who have tried to provide alternative explanations for deindividuation phenomena by taking salient context norms into account (Postmes & Spears, 1998, p. 241). Inspired by social identity theory and social categorization theory, social psychologists started seeking alternative explanations for the effects of deindividuation (Huang & Li, 2016, p. 400; Bae, 2016, p. 301; Christie & Dill, 2016, p. 293). As a result, the social identity of deindividuation effects (SIDE) model was introduced as a critique of deindividuation theories (Reicher, Spears & Postmes, 1995; Spears & Postmes, 2015, p. 30). In contrast to deindividuation theories, the SIDE-model posits that anonymity can reinforce group salience and conformity to group norms (Postmes & Spears, 1998, p. 241). Thus, when people are placed in groups and interact anonymously, they are more likely to identify themselves as part of the group, rather than as unique individuals, and will consequently

conform to group norms (Huang & Li, 2016, p. 400). A meta-analysis by Huang and Li (2016) discovered a positive relationship between anonymity and conformity to group norms. Moreover, the type of anonymity mattered; visual anonymity was found to have effects, whereas physical and personal information anonymity did not. In other words, anonymity can foster group identification and conformity to social group norms. In environments where people are more anonymous (e.g., in crowds and online), antinormative behavior can be guided by norms that emerge in specific contexts. Hence, anonymity can produce both prosocial and antisocial behavior, depending on contextual factors (Chang, 2008).

According to SIDE-theory, anonymity enhances the salience of social identity rather than personal identity when people feel they are part of a group (Bae, 2016, p. 301; Christie & Dill, 2016, p. 293). Anonymous persons with salient ties to the group will perform according to what their social identity dictates due to the heightened sense of social identity. "Rather than lose themselves in a crowd, deindividuated persons will look more to the social aspect of their identities to guide their behaviors" (Christie & Dill, 2016, p. 293). Thus, the SIDE-model predicts conformity to specific social identities rather than conformity to any general norms (Postmes & Spears, 1998, p. 241). In essence, the SIDE-model deviates from deindividuation theories in that it proposes that deindividuation causes human behavior to become more, not less, socially regulated (Spears & Postmes, 2015, p. 26). The SIDE-model makes a distinction between two aspects of anonymity when defining the cognitive and strategic sides of the SIDE-model. The cognitive dimension of the SIDE-model refers to how anonymity of or within the in-group can promote the salience of a group identity. This means the sense of who we are is affected by the online representation of ourselves and others. The strategic dimension of the SIDE-model argues that reduced accountability to outgroups due to anonymity to these can allow

behavior that could be sanctioned by the outgroup (Spears & Postmes, 2015, p. 26–27).

The anonymity of computer-mediated communication offers people strategic advantages, especially in situations when there are reasons not to be identified by a powerful authority or outgroup with conflicting goals. Less powerful groups may take advantage of this and conceal their group identities if they think it will benefit them. To exemplify, women concealing their gender online might do so because it is a strategy that does not result in a power disadvantage compared with men. The strategic side of the SIDE-model is associated with anonymity to others and the reduced accountability this brings, rather than the anonymity of others (as in the cognitive dimension). However, the SIDE-model develops classic deindividuation theory because it does not assume that people will always act in line with individual self-interest when anonymous (Spears & Postmes, 2015, pp. 32–33).

Spears and Postmes (2015, p. 30) acknowledge that true anonymity is rare online, as online communicators are usually characterized by a pseudonymity, where they might be traceable but not recognizable in situ. The SIDE-model concentrates on how people are visually represented online. Technology makes it possible for web designers to provide either visible or disguised cues to personal and social identity. Depending on which cues are made visible, the design can, therefore, accentuate or de-accentuate different aspects of social identity. Spears and Postmes (2015, p. 34) show that a consistent finding is that visual anonymity in computer-mediated communication causes other available social category cues to become relatively more salient, due to the lack of individuating information. Hereby, norms and stereotypes related to these other social categories also grow in salience. However, when there is no visual anonymity, for example in communication using webcams, the visibility provides cues to individuating characteristics as well as to which social category a person belongs. Nevertheless, all social categories do not have visual markers. Some categories (e.g., gender, age

or race), tend to have more or less clear visual markers whereas social categories like nationality, ideology or sexuality are not easily determined by visual cues (Spears & Postmes, 2015, p. 35). Hence, "the SIDE model is able to explain when and why visual anonymity but also visibility can lead to greater group salience and social influence effects. This is important for understanding the (variable) effect of communication media depending on whether communicators are visible or not" (Spears & Postmes, 2015, p. 36).

The SIDE-model has been tested in many studies in the context of computer-mediated communication. The model has been a useful framework for studies of online communication since many forms of online communication is more or less anonymous (Christie & Dill, 2016, p. 293). While classic deindividuation theory assumed that anonymity promoted negative antisocial behaviors, later research revealed that this was not always the case. Researchers found that anonymity also could produce prosocial and positive effects (Spears & Postmes, 2015, p. 37). Deindividuation theory and the SIDE-model argue that anonymity induces deindividuation and depersonalization respectively. Although these two notions seem similar, they are not. Whereas deindividuation theory associates deindividuation with a loss of self and rationality in the group, resulting in negative consequences (e.g., antisocial behavior), the SIDE-model prefers the term depersonalization which refers to the emergence of the group in the self: the tendency to see others and oneself in group terms (Spears & Postmes, 2015, p. 27; Huang & Li, 2016, p. 401). Moreover, classic deindividuation theory and the SIDE-model differ in their views on identities. Whereas deindividuation theory assumed that individuals have a unitary self-concept, the SIDE-model suggests that individuals have multiple self-concepts and that one's sense of self is a combination of personal identity and multiple social identities, shaping one's personality (Bae, 2016, p. 302).

Classic deindividuation theory suggests that when individuals submerge in the group and become anonymous, they lose self-awareness

and their individual identity. The SIDE-model, on the contrary, posits that anonymity facilitates depersonalization, which involves a switch from individual identity towards group identity, without the loss of individuality (Wang, 2007, pp. 21–22). Hence, according to the SIDE-model, the salience of the group as a whole can help explain group behavior besides the depersonalization induced by anonymity (Chang, 2008, p. 6). However, as Spears and Postmes (2015, p. 30) highlight, people communicating anonymously online will not always share a group identity, and when group identity is not salient, anonymity will not lead to more group influence. Christie and Dill (2016) found that when no in-group is salient, the impact of anonymity on the evaluation of peers is moderated by individual factors, suggesting that models aiming to understand anonymous online communication need to consider interpersonal and intrapersonal characteristics. Thus, this suggests that there are no simple global explanations to how people respond to anonymity.

The online disinhibition effect refers to the tendency of some people to self-disclose or act out more frequently or intensively online than they would do in person (Suler, 2004, p. 321). The term is used for online situations when people say and do things they would not normally do face-to-face; they feel less restrained and express themselves more openly. Disinhibition is difficult to define (Suler, 2004, for example, does not provide an exact definition) but has been vaguely described as "any behavior…characterized by an apparent reduction in concerns for self-presentation and the judgement of others" (Joinson, 2007, p. 63). Joinson (2007, p. 77) notes that "Disinhibition is one of the few widely reported and noted media effects of online interaction."

Suler (2004) distinguishes between benign disinhibition and toxic disinhibition and admits that this distinction is complex or ambiguous in some cases; what is considered asocial behavior in one context might be appropriate behavior in another. Benign disinhibition refers to acts as sharing personal emotion, unusual acts of kindness or generosity, and

revealing hidden emotions, fears, and wishes. Toxic disinhibition, on the contrary, refers to acts as threats, hate speech, harsh criticism, rude language, and exploration of the dark sides of the internet: hate-groups, pornography, crime, and violence. Suler (2004, p. 321) argues that some forms of benign disinhibition indicate attempts to develop one's self and explore dimensions of one's identity, whereas toxic inhibition might be a blind catharsis, acting out needs without any ambition of personal growth.

Suler (2004, p. 322) posits that there are at least seven factors behind the online disinhibition effect: dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, minimization of status and authority, and individual preferences and predispositions. The existence of one or two of these factors can produce the online disinhibition effect for some people. However, for most people, these factors interact and combine to produce an amplified and more complex effect. Conversely, Joinson (2007) argues that one factor (e.g., anonymity or asynchronicity) alone cannot fully explain disinhibited behavior online, since internet users can make strategic choices to suit their particular needs when communicating. Therefore, a wider context in which the behavior is taking place needs to be considered when researchers conceptualize online behavior.

Several of the seven factors that contribute to the online disinhibition effect as described by Suler (2004) relate to anonymity in online interactions. Dissociative anonymity describes a process when people are able to separate their online actions from their in-person identity, by for example using no name or a pseudonym when communicating, and thus feel less vulnerable about acting out and self-disclosing. A process of dissociation between offline-self and online-self reduces accountability for online behaviors. This makes it possible for people to create a compartmentalized online-self or even argue that their online actions "aren't me at all" (Suler, 2004, p. 322). Moreover, Suler's (2004) factor named invisibility (or visual anonymity as described by the SIDE-

model), refers to the fact that people cannot see each other in many online environments although they might know a great deal about each other. Suler argues that the lack of visual feedback from fellow communicators (e.g., body language or subtle signs of disapproval as frowning) amplifies the online disinhibition effect even in situations where communicators know each other. Invisibility means people do not have to worry about how they look or sound nor how others look or sound in response. Suler (2004, p. 322) likens the situation to a psychotherapist setting where the therapist sits behind the client to encourage disclosure without the client feeling inhibited by seeing the physical reactions of the therapist. Furthermore, the minimization of status and authority Suler (2004, p. 324) mentions refers to a reduction in the impact of status cues in text-based online communications. The lack of authority cues online makes people less reluctant to express what they really think because the fear of disapproval and punishment from authority figures decreases. According to Suler (2004, p. 324), the influence of status, wealth, race or gender diminishes in the online world where participants communicate on a level playing field. However, he acknowledges that other factors besides identity (e.g., communication skills, writing skills, persistence, quality of ideas, and technical know-how) increase in importance when it comes to influencing others online.

In an experimental study of the fundamental factors behind toxic online disinhibition in the form of flaming behaviors, Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2012) found that lack of eye-contact was the main contributor. The other two independent variables studied, anonymity and visibility, did not produce equally strong effects although they did produce statistically significant main effects on some measures of toxic online disinhibition. The three independent variables interacted in producing toxic online disinhibition, however, the comparison of the contribution of each factor found the lack of eye contact to have the greatest relative effect. Of the interaction effects, four were statistically significant and all of these involved lack of eye contact. Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2012, p.

440) concluded that the online disinhibition effect is a complex phenomenon induced by many variables and that it is the interaction of these that increases the complexity and intensity of the disinhibition effect.

Contrary to expectations based on the online disinhibition effect, Finn (2016) found that visible online communicators were more negatively disinhibited than visually anonymous participants. Hollenbaugh and Everett (2013) only found partial support for Suler's (2004) theory of the online disinhibition effect in blogs. In line with the expectations, discursive anonymity (not using one's real name) lead to more self-disclosure among bloggers. However, the authors discovered that, contrary to the expectations, visual anonymity resulted in less self-disclosure. Moreover, age and gender were found to have on impact on the amount and breadth of self-disclosure; women and younger people tended to disclose more information. A subsequent experimental study by Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2015) investigating determinants of benign online disinhibition found that neither anonymity, invisibility nor eye contact had any statistically significant effects on different measures of self-disclosure and prosocial behavior. This finding contradicts the claim that anonymity is a main determinant of the online disinhibition effect. Interestingly, all multivariate analyses in the study had statistically non-significant results. Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2015, p. 10) see this as an indication of a possibility that the process behind benign online disinhibition is more complex than the process leading to toxic online disinhibition. Furthermore, the factors inducing benign online disinhibition might be different from those inducing toxic online disinhibition. A possible explanation for the mixed findings regarding anonymity might be the definition and operationalization of online anonymity used in different studies. Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2012; 2015) provide a sophisticated view on anonymity (lack of personal identifiers, e.g., name, gender, and address) where the term is

distinguished from invisibility (lack vision of upper body) and lack of eye contact (lack of camera capturing the eyes of communicators).

4.1.3 Summary

This subchapter has shown that the effects of anonymity on human behavior are context-dependent and therefore not easily predicted. It has illustrated that research on the effects of anonymity has become more sophisticated than the deterministic predictions of older studies of offline communication. Early deindividuation theory mainly predicted negative effects of anonymity and were refined into the more detailed SIDE-model, which also could explain positive effects of anonymity. Furthermore, the online disinhibition theory was developed to explain divergent, pro-social and anti-social, online behavior. Each of these theories have found support and been contradicted by empirical research, again suggesting evasive effects of anonymity on how people behave. Studies based on these three theories suggest that anonymity in online interactions usually influences behavior. However, other factors (e.g., asynchronicity) relating to the online setting also influence behavior. Therefore, it might be too one-dimensional to only study the effects of anonymity in online communication without taking other contextual factors into account. Since this subchapter has focused on anonymity in a broad sense, connecting research from different disciplines to provide the reader with a background on a substantial characteristic of online communication, the following subchapter will focus on research discussing anonymity in relation to political participation.

4.2 Political participation and anonymity

The aim of this subchapter is to provide the reader with a nuanced picture of anonymity in politics and to identify gaps in the literature relating to anonymity and political participation. It assesses the

relationship between political participation and anonymity, considers the perils and merits of anonymity in communication, and discusses the value of anonymity in a democratic society. Furthermore, it elaborates on the role of anonymity in the two forms of political participation of interest in this thesis: e-petitioning and online discussion.

4.2.1 The importance of the relationship between anonymity and political participation

If anonymity is considered to alter human behavior in general, there is no reason to believe it should not have an impact on citizens' political behavior. As Gardner (2011) highlights, the political participation repertoire of citizens in modern democratic societies is expanding and most of the forms of political participation can in principle be performed either publicly or anonymously. Scott, Rains and Haseki (2012, pp. 299–300) write: "Indeed, one of the key reasons anonymous communication is especially relevant today is due to the rise of new information and communication technologies (ICTs)—especially the internet—which is distinctive in part of the anonymity it affords to many of its users." The anonymous political participation made possible by the internet has not received too much scholarly attention. Anonymous communication is an unavoidable part of the online reality citizen face in modern times and therefore demands interest from scholars in a wide selection of disciplines. A first step in developing a deeper understanding of anonymous political behavior of citizen is a description of the phenomena. Consequently, as a second step, a more explanatory approach to citizens' online political participation fills some of the research gaps identified in the literature. These endeavors fit the purpose of this dissertation; to increase knowledge about citizens' online political participation in contemporary democracies.

One could argue that anonymity has a poor reputation in today's public discussion in modern democracies (Carey & Burkell, 2007). Online anonymity is often seen as a contributing factor in different negative

online phenomena like cyberbullying (Rafferty, 2011; Smith, 2012), low quality political discourse (Sonderman, 2011), threats against politicians and scholars (Toivonen, Harju & Kähkönen, 2013), defamation (Griffiths, 2011), flaming (Goldsborough, 2012), trolling (Zhou, 2010), hate speech (Seth, 2010) and general anti-social or anti-normative behavior. The role of anonymity has been scientifically studied regarding some online phenomena while there is a lack of research on others, especially those relating to politics where opinions about the role of anonymity tend to rely on anecdotal evidence. Representatives from Google and Facebook have called for an end to online anonymity and stress the need for identification (Bosker, 2011; Rosenbach & Schmundt, 2011). These "nymwars" have once again sparked the debate about the appropriateness of anonymity in online communication as many people claim that people behave better and more honestly when identity information is required (see Boyd, 2012). On the other hand, anonymity has long been used to promote honesty in survey research on sensitive topics for example (see Ong & Weiss, 2000). Politicians have asked for more control over the internet and some countries have even tried to outlaw anonymous political communication online. The hacktivist collective Anonymous use anonymity as one of its main methods of achieving its goals, as a means to an end which sometimes can be considered purely political (see McLaughlin, 2012). Consequently, anonymity seems to be a double-edged sword, working as a tool for freedom of speech in journalism, whistleblowing in organizations and protecting citizens from corruption when voting, while, at the same time, helping people to threaten politicians or to spread child pornography online. In many cases, anonymity is seen as the main factor contributing to different forms of negative, or even anti-democratic, behavior. The link between online anonymity and political behavior, however, remains scientifically unexplored.

Marx (2004, pp. 149–150) argues that value conflicts regarding anonymity and identity are connected to broader informational and

societal value conflicts: "We value freedom of expression and a free press but do not wish to see individuals defamed or harassed. We desire honesty in communication and also civility and diplomacy. We value the right to know, but also the right to control personal information." This leads to discussions about its value and role in a democratic society (Kerr, 2007). As Kerr (2007) writes, there are few who would disagree that anonymous criminal activity is undesirable and anonymous voting is desirable, but in between these two "lies a sea of uncertainty."

According to Witschge (2002, p. 12) people tend to avoid politics because of fear of the consequences. One role of anonymity in a democracy is to allow people to express opinions without fearing acts of reprisal (Sundström, 2002). Thus, anonymity can lower the threshold for political participation and opinion expression (Rose & Saebo, 2010) while at the same time work against freedom of expression by making political actors less likely to enter the public sphere due to fear of anonymous hate speech and threats (Fagerström, 2013). According to Scott (2004), there would be no need for anonymous communication in an ideal world, where citizens could share their opinions and ideas without fears. However, as communication technologies facilitate both appropriate and inappropriate use of anonymity, the role of anonymity remains complicated.

Anonymity is of course not a concept introduced by the internet. Kerr (2007) points out that anonymity historically had a political purpose; one of the most central political acts in a democracy, anonymous voting, was introduced in order to shield the citizens from the "tyranny of the majority" and ensure that every voter is a free actor, immune to undue pressure from powerful groups seeking to influence elections or even buy votes. According to Scott, Rains, and Haseki (2012), history contains many examples of anonymous communication ranging from Puritan attacks against the Anglican Church in the 1500s, anonymous writers and painters, and the pseudonymous Federalist papers to the unlimited amount of anonymous messages exchanged on the internet every day.

Anonymity has been studied at least since the 1900s when Mill (1861) discussed the question of the secret ballot (Townes, n.d.). Nevertheless, Rains (2007) describes research on anonymity as "largely fragmented" because it has been divided between many different fields of research. Early studies on anonymity focused on anonymous editorials (Hopkins, 1889; 1890) and anti-normative crowd behavior (Le Bon, 1895). The literature on anonymity is widespread and spans over several research disciplines due to the complex nature of the phenomenon. Anonymity has been analyzed within social psychology (Postmes & Spears, 2002; Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012), journalism (Hopkins, 1889; Hlavach & Freivogel, 2011; Boeyink, 1990), economics (Barmettler, Fehr & Zehnder, 2012) , organization studies (Scott & Rains, 2005), computer-mediated communication (Haines, Hough, Cao & Haines, 2012), education (Ainsworth et al., 2011), law studies (Froomkin, 1999; 2003; 2009; 2011), literature (Mullan, 2007), research methodology (Wiles, Crow, Heath & Charles, 2008), sociology (Form & Stone, 1957; Freidson, 1953), and communication (Pizzarra & Jesuino, 2005).

Thus, research in anonymous communication has a history extending over several decades and across numerous academic disciplines: journalism, organizational theory, psychology, information systems, social psychology, computer-mediated communication, and education (Scott, Rains & Haseki, 2011). The importance of anonymity in relation to political action lies in its ability (or inability?) to influence actors' behavior in a democratic political system (Gardner, 2011, p. 929). The lack of attention to anonymity in democratic theory is a strong reason to study the concept within the discipline of political science (Gardner, 2011). Moreover, an interesting paradox between authentication and anonymity exists. Generally, states want to authenticate the identities of citizens, who might want to preserve their privacy by acting anonymously. Anonymity can benefit society by reducing corruption and discrimination or by increasing transparency in government. Likewise, especially in authoritarian regimes, anonymity brings benefits

in terms of freedom of speech (Polat & Pratchett, 2014, p. 76). Here, anonymity can provide a safe haven for citizens and promote honest opinion expression, thus reducing the power of a repressive state (Douai & Nofal, 2012).

When should citizens be allowed to perform acts of political participation anonymously? This question has spurred debate for a long time, although the secret ballot is a widely accepted voting routine. In other cases, as when citizens cover their faces in street demonstrations or perform acts of online hacktivism, opinions are more divided and these acts of anonymous political participation are often regarded as detrimental to democracy. Moreover, there is a strong consensus for disclosure of campaign donations, yet some scholars (e.g., Ayres, 2001) argue strongly in favor of anonymous political donations, using the same arguments as proponents of the secret ballot; anonymous donations prevent corruption. Thus, why should some acts of political participation be allowed to be done anonymously and others not? The two forms of political participation in focus in this thesis, e-petitioning and online discussion, can be done anonymously. Especially for online discussion, the effect of anonymity is a contested issue. What happens when political discussion becomes anonymous? In e-petitioning, both initiators and signers of online petitions can, on some platforms, choose to remain anonymous. How do citizens use these options? The larger theoretical question, looming in the background, is whether anonymous political participation is contributing to or undermining democracy? The more practical questions concern how and to what extent citizens are using the option of anonymous political participation.

Anonymity is interesting from a political science perspective for several reasons. According to Kerr (2007) "anonymity has always been a crucial thread in the fabric of democracy." Anonymous voting—the secret ballot—protects citizens from "the tyranny of the majority" and acts of reprisal based on political opinions. Moreover, anonymity can protect citizens' privacy from state surveillance. Kerr (2007) mentions

the Federalist Papers as an example of an important political document in American history, written by anonymous (or rather pseudonymous) authors with a decisive influence in the creation of the US Constitution. Moreover, anonymity helped 19th-century female writers to prevent gender discrimination from influencing the reception of their work. In journalism, anonymity has had significance for a long period of time, which can be exemplified by the role of the anonymous source Deep Throat in the Watergate scandal or the legal protection for anonymous sources in many democracies. The possibility of anonymous communication has sometimes been considered a central element of freedom of expression (Scott, 2004) and its role in a modern, digitalized democratic society raises normative questions about whether anonymity is worth protecting (Nissenbaum, 1999). The advent of new communications technologies problematizes the discussion on anonymity (Lipinski, 2002). Samuel (in McShane, 2004, p. 135) writes that no other aspect poses a larger challenge for meaningful democratic dialogue than anonymous discussion. Offline, anonymous opinions are a rarity, in contrast, they are easily found online. Democratic conversations do not traditionally occur under anonymous conditions, nonetheless, many online conversations feature unnamed participants who neither see, know, nor hear each other (Eisinger 2011, p. 4).

According to Rothstein (1994, pp. 149–150), the logic of human action varies according to the institutional context in which the action takes place. He argues that one's actions are different if they can be performed anonymously, as on a market or in a voting booth, compared to a situation where they are performed publicly as in a parliamentary institution. Rothstein argues that the political sphere differs from the market because anonymous acts are possible in the latter. For example, the moral status of a business deal is usually only a matter for the involved parties since these do not have to defend their action in public. Contrary to this, in politics, political actors are generally obliged to defend decisions and actions publicly in order to legitimize them. As

anonymous communication has become more easily available due to the internet, anonymous political communication and engagement have also become more common in a way that Rothstein might not have foreseen back in 1994.

Much of the research on anonymity is related to specific contexts and empirical investigations, although a few noteworthy articles on anonymous communication have been published (Marx, 1999; Anonymous, 1998; Scott, 2004; Froomkin, 2011; Gardner, 2011). From a political science perspective, research on anonymous communication has been limited, from a theoretical (see Gardner, 2011) and empirical standpoint. However, there are examples of studies where anonymity is given a central role in the form of: perceptions of the secret ballot (Gerber, Huber, Doherty, Dowling & Hill, 2013), the idea behind the secret ballot (Townes, n.d.), presidential anonymity (Erickson & Fleuriet, 1991), anonymity networks to prevent government censorship (Rady, 2013), disclosure of campaign donations (Ayres & Bulow, 1998; Kang, 2013), freedom of expression (Akdeniz, 2002), political discussion (Ruesch & Märker, 2012) and anonymity as a promoter of democratic citizenship (Gardner, 2011). However, given the dearth of research on the role of anonymity in political behavior and participation, the subsequent sections discuss the perils and merits of anonymous communication in light of research from several disciplines.

4.2.2 Perils of anonymity

The widely accepted principle of the secret ballot is not as controversial as it once was; nevertheless, there are arguments against anonymous voting procedures. To exemplify, Barber (1984, pp. 187–188) argued that the individualistic and anonymous character of the secret vote may discourage public-regarding motivations among voters (Setälä, 2006). A study by Berg and Dahlén (2012) showed that anonymous decisions were significantly less utilitaristic than public decisions, pointing to a tendency of people acting according to self-interest rather than public

good when acting anonymously. The literature on donations has shown that people tend to donate more money when the donation is public compared to anonymous (Baumeister, 1982; Satow, 1975 in Berg & Dahlén, 2012, p. 12). In general, experiments in the lab and in the field conclude that anonymity reduces donations to the public good (Peacey & Sanders, 2014, p. 6). However, Peacey and Sanders (2014) found that anonymous donations to charity were likely to be larger than public ones. Additionally, anonymous donations were followed by approximately four percent higher donations than those following public donations. Raihani (2014) found a similar mechanism; donors on an online fundraising website were more likely to donate anonymously when donations were extremely high or extremely low. Fang et al. (2015) tested Ackerman and Ayres's proposal to anonymize campaign finance and concluded that "A fully anonymous campaign finance system seems to have the potential to reduce the influence of money in politics more effectively…" This finding is reproduced in another study, which suggests that full anonymity should lead to the greatest social welfare, and that contribution limits have limited or no effect on welfare level (Fang et al., 2014). Experimental research suggests that information about candidate funding sources might influence voters' evaluations of candidates (Downing & Miller, 2016, p. 19).

It can be argued that online anonymity suffers from an "image problem" due to hate speech, spam, viruses and identity theft made by criminal actors. Trytko (2015) found that quality newspapers often paint a negative and simplified picture of online anonymity. However, anonymous communication can be vital in sustaining political freedom worldwide (Crews, 2007; Carey & Burkell, 2007). The concept of anonymity is becoming increasingly involved in debates about the information society. Tension exists between anonymity as a catalyst for freedom of expression and anonymity as a protection of "socially undesirable speech" in the form of defamation for example (Nicoll & Prins, 2003, 292). Anonymity stimulates interest when political

communication to a greater degree becomes digital and public discussion increasingly occurs online. With a growing number of online newspapers inviting readers to comment on articles anonymously or under a pseudonym, questions arise about the quality of these comments, and to what extent they contribute to a democratic debate (Eisinger, 2011). Several voices have recently wanted (see Yle, 2011; Bosker, 2011a; 2011b; Connor, 2011) to limit online anonymity, and major daily and evening newspapers are reviewing the design of their comment sections. The debate can be roughly divided into two camps: those who think everyone should present opinions using their real name, and those who believe anonymity guarantees freedom of expression. This debate is by no means new; nevertheless, it has gained momentum along with the development of the internet and an increasing emphasis on participative online culture originating from the concept of Web 2.0. This discussion forms the backdrop for two of the empirical studies in this thesis.

The main drawback of anonymity is the lack of accountability it produces (Wallace, 1999b). Consider cases when street demonstrators engage in illegal behavior while covering their faces, and cannot be identified nor held accountable. Moreover, accountability has a central role in representative democracies, where citizens select decision-makers and are supposed to be able to reward or punish these based on the policies adopted. If the government would remain anonymous to voters, accountability for its actions would be impossible. The loss of accountability makes anonymity attractive for criminal activity because it makes the punishment of wrongdoing harder. In a similar vein, anonymity can be appealing to extremist speech online (Gerstenfeld et al., 2003). The lack of accountability induced by anonymity has been linked with distorted and deceptive self-representation, an increased likelihood of cyber aggression and hostility (Christie & Dill, 2016, p. 293). Likewise, the lack of accountability decreases the likelihood of punishment or retaliation for cyberbullying (Wright, 2013) although

studies show that victims of cyberbullying often know their attackers (Rafferty, 2011, p. 46). When accountability is lost in online anonymous interactions, participants in political discussion are discouraged from staying committed to their views and sincerity (Albrecht, 2006; Friess & Eilders, 2015, p. 326). Nevertheless, anonymity opens up a possibility for opinion change without being labeled as an indecisive person and can reduce other social-psychological factors which otherwise might obstruct people from changing their views during political discussions (Ho & McLeod, 2008; Gelmini Hornsby et al., 2008). From a deliberative point of view, being able to change opinion when confronted by better arguments is a virtue (Winsvold, 2013).

Research on anti-normative behavior online has studied the impact of anonymity in different environments. Anonymity has been found to increase the propensity for flaming—hostile online verbal aggression—in computer-mediated communication (Mungeam, 2011; Alonzo & Aiken, 2004). However, these findings are disputed by other research (Hutchens, Cicchirillo & Hmielowski, 2015; Reinig & Mejias, 2004). Trolling, the "practice of deliberately trying to aggress electronically or to distress participants online through frequently inflammatory and abusive behaviour; usually just to disrupt without direction" (Virkar, 2014, p. 51), is usually done anonymously. Online anonymity is generally considered a factor behind trolling, protecting trolls from being identified and held accountable (Hardaker, 2010, p. 238; Cho & Acquisti, 2013, p. 5). Similarly, people use online anonymity to shield themselves from trolling and other forms of offline and online harassment (Kang et al., 2013, p. 5).

The online disinhibition effect refers to when people say and do things online they would not normally do in face-to-face situations offline (Suler, 2004). When this takes the form of toxic disinhibition (e.g., hatred, threats, violence, and crime), anonymity is considered a major determinant of disinhibited behavior (Suler, 2004; Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012, p. 435). Anonymity can make internet users feel

unaccountable and not responsible for their negative actions, increasing the risk of toxic disinhibition and producing situations where moral cognitive processes seem to be "temporarily suspended from the online psyche" (Suler, 2004, p. 322). However, the findings linking anonymity and toxic disinhibition are not indisputable since individual attributes may cause disinhibited behavior as well (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012, p. 435).

Anonymity might benefit electronic discussions by minimizing status differences, making participants feel more comfortable to contribute, and liberating them from fears of retribution (Rains, 2007, p. 101). Nevertheless, Rains' research suggested that anonymity in electronic meeting systems undermines source credibility and influence in small group communication. Rains' conclusion was to recommend anonymity for brainstorming ideas among team members, followed by discussions where participants are identified and accountable. Anonymous sources may be seen as less credible and influential because source characteristics, such as trustworthiness and expertise, have been regarded as essential in the process of persuasion (see Wallsten & Tarsi, 2016, p. 14; Haines et al., 2012, p. 2). However, in the context of online health information, experimental research suggests that anonymous sources are at least as credible and influential as identified sources (Rains, 2007b, p. 208).

In the literature, anonymity is regarded as a major determinant of the quality of online discussion. Several studies have found a negative effect of anonymity on the quality of discussion (Omernick & Sood, 2013; Nagar, 2011; Aharony, 2012; Santana, 2012; Kilner & Hoadley, 2005; Towne & Herbsleb, 2012, p. 108; Fredheim & Moore & Naugthon, 2015; Santana, 2014; Polat & Pratchett, 2009; Janssen & Kies, 2005, p. 321; Davis, 2005; Joinson et al., 2009 in Cho & Acquisti, 2013, p. 9). More specifically, anonymity can decrease the level of rationality (Friess & Eilders, 2015, p. 326), cause incivility in online discussion (Smith & Bressler, 2013; Friess & Eilders, 2015, p. 326) and in article comments on newspapers' websites

(Santana, 2014; Rowe, 2015; Hlavach & Freivogel, 2011). Moreover, the tendency of anonymity to decrease civility and respect was noted in early studies on online discussion on Usenet (Barber, 1997; Hill & Hughes, 1998; Davis, 2005) and has been documented in subsequent findings (Rowe, 2013; Coleman & Moss, 2012, p. 8; Kies, 2009, p. 22; Kies, 2010, p. 159). Similarly, Cho and Acquisti (2013) observed that anonymous postings contained more offensive words, swearing, anti-social behavior and aggressive expressions than identified postings. Anonymity is thought to decrease politeness in online discussions (Omernick & Sood, 2013; Smith & Bressler, 2013; Levmore et al., 2010; Halpern & Gibbs, 2012, p. 8), although there are studies contradicting these findings (Paskuda & Lewkowicz, 2016, p. 3; Papacharissi, 2004). Thus, the literature does not provide a unanimous picture of the effects of anonymity on online discussion quality. Several scholars find no correlation between the level of anonymity and the quality of online discussion (Short, 2012; Reader, 2012; Kaigo & Watanabe, 2007; Jensen, 2002; 2014; Tereszkiewicz, 2012; Papacharissi, 2004). Others have found that anti-social behavior can be caused by other factors, such as personal wishes to stand out (Tereszkiewicz, 2012). Nevertheless, the more general view is that anonymous online discussion does not seem to foster mutual trust and respect, both virtues of a democratic discussion climate (De Cindio & Peraboni, 2010, p. 46, in De Cindio et al., 2010).

The effect of anonymity on the quantity of online discussion is less disputed than its effects on discussion quality. Anonymity increases the number of postings and produces more engagement than identifiable discussion (Kilner & Hoadley, 2005; Rhee & Kim, 2009; Towne & Herbsleb, 2012, p. 108). Hence, the possibility of anonymity seems to lower the threshold for taking part in discussions.

In some contexts, anonymity has been found to induce self-interested unethical behavior (e.g., cheating to obtain a monetary reward) by individuals (Nogami, 2009). However, self-awareness seems to be a factor influencing the effects of anonymity on unethical behavior; when

people are objectively more self-aware (e.g., by watching themselves in a mirror), they will try to change their behavior to meet their ethical standards (Nogami, 2009, pp. 269–270). Moreover, Nogami's (2009, p. 270) findings suggested that men might be more prone to self-interested unethical behavior than women while being anonymous. Besides unethical behavior, anonymity might cause antisocial behavior in the physical world (Zimbardo, 1969; Mathes & Guest, 1976; Diener, 1980 in Finn, 2016; Silke, 2003; Ellison et al., 1995 in Silke, 2003). Subsequently, anonymity is hypothesized to contribute to antisocial or antinormative behavior online as well (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013) and has been found to do so in online gaming (Chen et al., 2009; Zimmerman & Ybarra, 2016, p. 19), online political debate (Fuchs, 2006), brainstorming (Guerin, 1999), and online suicide discussion (Leonard & Toller, 2012) for example. However, antisocial behavior in the form of verbal online aggression is sometimes only partly explained by anonymity, since contextual factors, such as social rules, also have effects (Laineste, 2012). Evidence contradicting deindividuation theory, and indicating no negative effect of anonymity, has been presented by Finn (2016) who found that visible participants in online communication were more negatively disinhibited than anonymous participants. In light of mixed findings in the literature, Chui (2014) argues that anonymity in itself is not sufficient to explain antisocial behavior online. According to Chui, several other components of online interaction might affect antisocial behavior: sex, age, aggression, characteristics of the self, group norms, personal motivations, and the media channel.

Within online media, journalists usually view anonymity as the cause of offensive online speech found in discussion forums and comment sections (Singer & Ashman, 2009; Erjavec & Kovacic, 2013; Santana, 2011; Nielsen, 2014). Wallsten and Tarsi (2016, p. 2) argue that anonymous comment sections influence users' perceptions of news media negatively. Therefore, they argue, anonymous comments sections constitute a poor investment for news organizations wanting to enhance

their reputations. In Öhrvall's (2002, p. 14) study of online discussion, anonymous comments exhibited more dissatisfaction and less argumentation than identifiable comments. An evaluation of online groups showed that anonymity increased the efficiency of decision-making, although at the cost of a less satisfying experience for participants (Li, 2007; Davies & Chandler, 2011, p. 22). The effects of anonymity are also present in individuals' behavior within groups. Anonymity can heighten group polarization (Sia et al., 2002; Lee, 2007 in Baggili, 2009, p. 29; Sunstein, 2007), a social psychological term to describe situations when the initial opinions of group members tend to become more extreme in the direction favored by the group following group discussion (Christopherson, 2007, p. 3013; Baggili, 2009, p. 29; Muhlberger, 2008, p. 5; Lee, 2007, p. 385). Additionally, anonymity tends to increase social loafing, which refers to individuals working less hard when immersed in groups compared to working alone (Short et al., 1976 in Baggili, 2009, p. 29). Sunstein (2007) speculates that group polarization is more likely to occur when people have a high degree of anonymity, as in political discussions online, and will lead to detrimental consequences for the democratic society, where like-minded individuals increasingly only discuss among themselves and become more extreme in their attitudes and opinions (Muhlberger, 2008). Muhlberger (2008, p. 8) argues that Sunstein's generalizations about polarization in online discussions are not supported by empirical research of the "real internet", possibly because people are less deindividuated online than in the laboratory experiments Sunstein refers to. Contrary to the findings of Sia et al. (2002) and Lee (2007), in a comparison of online and offline political discussion, Muhlberger (2005) did not find evidence of polarization in online discussions due to the heightened anonymity in computer-mediated communication. Likewise, Wu and Huberman (2008) found an anti-polarizing effect of opinions in online reviews. Moreover, Tolkin (2013) concluded that anonymity did not have an effect on polarization in his analysis of article comments; instead, article topic

had a statistically significant effect on levels of polarization. Thus, anonymity alone might not be sufficient to explain group polarization in online discussions. Anonymity might also help undermine group polarization since anonymous communication alleviates the fear of social isolation which drives the spiral of silence (Kim, 2006, p. 38; Noelle-Neumann, 1993).

Anonymity plays a role in petition signing. Boudin (2010) argues that petition signing is not a form of political speech; instead it should be regarded as lawmaking, and should therefore be subject to disclosure of signatures. Hence, if petitions are a part of actual direct democracy lawmaking processes, anonymity does not ensure transparency in lawmaking. Riley (2009, p. ix) believes that anonymous petition signing threatens the legitimacy of online petitions "because it cannot adequately represent or organize the personal identities of the petitioners." In the US, the names of the signers of a petition supporting a referendum to overturn support for gay rights were disclosed because the court found that petition signing did not qualify as anonymous political speech (Oman, 2011, pp. 4–5). However, Green (2013) argues for the protection of anonymous petition signing to avoid a dramatic decrease in participation following forced disclosure of signatures. Green argues that anonymous petition signing is related to the concept of political obscurity—the individual control over the scope of public knowledge about one's political preferences (Green, 2013, p. 371). She emphasizes that the real threat of signature disclosure is not noticeable harassment but indelible internet scrutiny and political preference cataloguing. La Raja's (2011) findings support the idea that decreased anonymity has a chilling effect on political participation. Although democracy requires a social cost of publicity and civic courage—a willingness to take a position publicly with responsibility and accountability attached—from citizens, the internet changes the social context for exhibiting civic courage in form of taking political positions. The internet makes it more difficult for citizens to separate politics from other spheres of life, such as work and

social ties with neighbors, at a given point in time. Citizens might want more control over when and how to exhibit their political opinions, otherwise political participation might be dominated by those "for whom politics is a highly salient feature of their personal lives" (La Raja, 2011, p. 22). In a study of electronic petition systems in Europe, Riehm et al. (2012, p. 18) did not find disclosure of signatures to be necessary, and recommended the option of anonymizing signatures. When the option of pseudonymous petition signing was introduced in the petition system of the German Bundestag it did not result in any significant change in the amount of signatures (Schmidt & Johnsen, 2014). Similar to the ballot vote, petition signatures might have to be anonymous to protect the privacy of citizens in e-petition systems. E-petition systems are designed to make duplicate signatures detectable while preserving the anonymity of petition signers (Verslype et al., 2008; Diaz et al., 2008). Whether anonymous signing is possible or not is a design issue in e-petition systems, and research about such decisions can help find ways to maximize citizen input in political processes (Hale et al., 2013, p. 17).

4.2.3 Merits of anonymity

Conover, Searing and Crewe (2002, p. 60) argue that public discussions valued by deliberative theorists face an obstacle in citizens' reluctance to take part in such discussions. According to the Conover et al. (2002, p. 60) "political discussion is simply too revealing, for it can inadvertently expose our basic identities and character. And for that reason, many citizens have absolutely no desire to engage in public discussions." In other words, some view that their political preferences are fundamentally private, and are reluctant to reveal these to strangers, as argumentation and persuasion can be regarded as privacy invasion. Offline political discourse tends to be synchronous, oral, and full of both visual social cues, whereas online discourse is usually asynchronous, written, and in many cases under conditions of anonymity. On the one hand, an effect of anonymity is that it reduces the cost of political

opinions, which can help to contribute to more political participation. On the other hand, if anonymity contributes to uncivil discussion, it might put people off from participating and be less effective than face-to-face discussion in promoting political participation (Valenzuela et al., 2012, p. 166). Political disagreement is troublesome to people since it can have relational implications; for example, interpersonal political persuasion can be considered impolite. Concerns over one's face[3] and the face of others affect people's communicative behavior. Thus, anonymity provides a possibility for political discussion without any cost for social relationships (Eveland et al., 2011, p. 1093). Similarly, the lowered sense of social presence induced by anonymity promotes dissenting views and reduces social risks and other potential negative effects of disagreement (Stromer-Galley, 2003; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009, p. 42). Disagreement is valued within deliberative democracy. By exposing oneself to dissimilar political views, citizens become more informed, tolerant, and reflective, taking other people's views into account, reevaluating their own opinions, and consequently resulting in higher quality opinions (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009, p. 49; Price, Capella & Nir, 2002). Hence, anonymous online discussion can be beneficial to democratic discussion by fueling more disagreement and bolder statements than the face-to-face equivalent (Davis, 1999; Hill & Hughes, 1998; Scott, 1998). Nevertheless, this theory was challenged in an experimental study by Stromer-Galley et al. (2015) who found that online chat groups exhibited less expressions of disagreement than face-to-face discussion groups.

The role of anonymity in democratic conversations is that it has a potential to provide an equal starting point for discussion participants because social traits are lacking, thus reducing the possibility of bias due to prejudice. In anonymous discussions, attention is on the

[3] Face is ''a claimed sense of favorable social self-worth that a person wants others to have of her or him'' (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998, p. 187, in Eveland et al., 2011, 1093).

argumentation instead of the person presenting it. In other words, the focus is, at least theoretically, on what is being said rather than on who is saying it. However, this assumption is questionable. Sundström (2002) wonders if it is indeed desirable because it is difficult to isolate the argument from the person. Herein lays a paradox according to Sundström (2002, p. 215): "If the argument cannot be isolated from the individual, then one cannot prevent that irrelevant facts about the person, such as sex, may obscure the analysis of the argument." In a democracy, citizens should be able to present views opposing the majority opinion without risk of reprisal. According to Sundström (2002), the ability to remain anonymous is the only way to ensure citizens are free from this type of pressure. Moreover, anonymity can help disadvantaged individuals to participate in discussions and reduce stereotyping based on status cues, such as appearance, gender, and style of dressing (Baek et al., 2012, pp. 4–5; Min, 2007). Yet, as these factors lose importance, others, for example, educational competence and linguistic skills, become more important. In a way, people just use different criteria to rate or judge others in anonymous communication (Schmitz, 1997 in Kennedy, 2006). Rains (2007, p. 106) highlights that people are seldom completely unidentified; writing style, jargon, contribution length, and repeated position stating all provide information about identity.

One of the key effects of anonymity is that it enables citizens to produce political speech without fear of retribution or repercussions. It enables people to express their beliefs by reducing barriers to action, such as fear of embarrassment or shame (Froomkin, 1995; Wallace, 1999). In essence, anonymity provides a shield against the tyranny of the majority by allowing dissenters to express critical, minority views (Froomkin, 2011, p. 41). Herein lays a contradiction, as anonymity can be misused and become destructive precisely due to the lack of fear of repercussions. The choice between anonymity and identifiability might become a trade-off. On the one hand, identifiability can result in self-censorship, conflict avoidance, subjection to conformity and social

pressure, and people being bound by expectancies related to offline identities. On the other hand, the communicative freedom enabled by anonymity can be used in cruel and abusive ways (Moore, 2016, p. 2).

Several studies have shown that anonymity increases the quantity of communication online, and thus lowers the barriers to political participation (Leshed, 2009; Rhee & Kim, 2009; Towne & Herbsleb, 2012; Fredheim & Moore & Naugthon, 2015; Towne & Herbsleb, 2012; Friess & Eilders, 2015, p. 326; Kies, 2010, p. 159). Some authors argue that the choice between identifiability and anonymity in online communication equals a choice between quality and quantity (Towne & Herbsleb, 2012; Friess & Eilders, 2015, p. 326). However, there are studies pointing to anonymity not increasing the quantity of online communication as well (Omernick & Sood, 2013). Moreover, Fredheim et al. (2015) found that the effect of anonymity on the quantity of online comments is dependent on the discussion issue. Anonymity has been found to have a positive impact on idea-generation by contributing to a more open exchange of ideas (Rains, 2005 in Price, 2009). In brainstorming contexts, anonymity can be useful in promoting unconventional ideas (Cooper et al., 1998), although some studies show no effect of anonymity on idea-generation (see Kraut, 2003, p. 344 for an overview). However, a study by Min (2007) indicated that visual anonymity resulted in more heated debate and candid opinions. Anonymity has the potential to promote greater attitude differentiation, or in other words, opinion diversity (Postmes et al., 2001; Christopherson, 2007), and therefore be beneficial to the ideals of deliberation (Stromer-Galley, 2003; Gastil, 2008).

The secret ballot is a way of protecting the voter from bribery, eliminating the possibility of vote buying, and threats (Moore, 2016; Wallace, 1999a). Furthermore, anonymity lessens group pressure (Witschge, 2002), which can serve an important function in a conservative society (Rigby, 1995). According to Rowland (2003, p. 2) "it is without doubt that anonymity safeguards privacy" and is an

important method of protecting online privacy, for example in the context of commercial services.

One of the reasons anonymity is seen promising to democracy is its potential to reduce inequality in debates. Anonymous communication can liberate people from social hierarchies and power relations that are present offline, and thus reduce the influence of status on communication. This is regarded by some as a powerful advantage of online deliberation in comparison with face-to-face deliberation (Witschge, 2007, p. 23). The anonymity of online interactions can result in more egalitarian communication, where patterns individual dominance are reduced and low-status participants contribute more (Price, 2009, p. 7). In interaction offline, physical appearance provides important social cues, such as race, gender, age, physical disability, or attractiveness, which potentially contributes to the way people treat each other. When these cues are lacking, individuals cannot project stereotypes on others and judge others based on prejudice. This can potentially result in more participation and influence for traditionally low-status participants and free them from behaving in ways associated with their group membership (Christopherson, 2007, p. 3045; Witschge, 2007, p. 23). Furthermore, traditionally less powerful individuals (e.g., women, members of minorities) should have increased power in anonymous online environments (Christopherson, 2007, pp. 23–24). The idea that anonymous communication levels the playing field and reduces inequalities, due to the lack of social cues connected with judgment and constraints, has been called the equalization hypothesis (Dubrovsky et al., 1991; Postmes & Spears, 2002). However, empirical research on the equalization hypothesis has produced mixed findings, which imply that the assumption of anonymity causing equalization might be too optimistic (Witschge, 2007, p. 24–25; Christopherson, 2007, pp. 3046–3047; Postman & Spears, 2002, p. 1074). For example, Postman and Spears (2002) did not find support for the equalization hypothesis concerning gender in online discussions. Nevertheless, others have

found that female students prefer discussing in anonymous environments (Clark, Bordwell & Avery, 2015). According to an earlier study, women prefer anonymity because it minimizes the risk of being judged solely on gender (Gopal et al., 1997 in Flanagin et al., 2002).

In relation to the theory of the spiral of silence, anonymity undermines the fear of isolation which participants holding minority views might experience in discussions. Hence, anonymity allows for a greater expression of opinions, in turn creating an environment conducive to public deliberation (Malaspina, 2014; Heney, 2011, p. 12; Kim, 2006, p. 38; Ho & McLeod, 2008; Haines et al., 2012). Haines et al. (2012) found that anonymity produced more comments that were against the majority position of the group in a group-decision context. Moreover, anonymity also led to more socially undesirable arguments. This highlights another effect of anonymity, the ability to bring "hidden" arguments and viewpoints into the open (Kuran, 1993, p. 75). Furthermore, anonymity can lower the threshold for citizens to take part in discussions with decision-makers and politicians since it eliminates the risk of being labeled as ill-informed (Strömblad, 2009, p. 21). Likewise, participants in anonymous online discussions do not need to feel intimidated about having their writing skills view in a bad light. This might help those with a low literacy level to participate in discussions (Coleman & Gotze, 2002, p. 43).

The online disinhibition effect does not need to be negative and produce toxic disinhibition as mentioned earlier. Suler (2004) acknowledges an effect in the opposite direction and labels it benign disinhibition. This notion describes situations online when people show generosity, unusual acts of kindness, share personal things, and reveal secret emotions, fears, and wishes (Suler, 2004, p. 321). Suler (2004) admits that the distinction between toxic and benign disinhibition is complex and blurred. What is considered toxic or benign is related to the context of communication. Sometimes expressing hostile words online can have therapeutic effects on the communicator. Just as in the case with

toxic disinhibition, anonymity is regarded as one of the main factors inducing benign disinhibition online by making people feel less vulnerable about self-disclosing and acting out. Increased self-disclosure as an effect of anonymity is a positive benefit in social support like Alcoholics Anonymous (Wallace, 1999), and can be beneficial for bloggers who feel embarrassed by their illness (Rains, 2014). Research by Hollenbaugh and Everett (2013) has revealed that the effect of anonymity on self-disclosure in blogs is partly dependent on the type of anonymity. Discursive anonymity led to more self-disclosure, whereas visual anonymity, in contrast to the theory of the online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004) and prior empirical findings (Joinson, 2001), led to less self-disclosure. Findings from a cross-national study of information sharing in knowledge management systems in companies showed that the workers' intention to share failures increased when they could share their experiences anonymously (Huerta et al., 2012). Thus, anonymity is a mechanism for companies to encourage employees to share failures as this helps other employees to learn from unsuccessful experiences.

Anonymity is thought to reduce anxiety related to expressing honest opinions, particularly when these are perceived as unpopular (Davies & Gangadharan, 2009, p. 43). In social science survey research, anonymity is used to promote honesty and creates more accurate responses (Rains, 2005, p. 13). When researchers want to estimate the frequency of a negative or socially undesirable behavior, they are usually reliant on self-reported data. In the case of cheating, anonymity was found to result in more sincere answers and was labeled as "clearly powerful" (Ong & Weiss, 2000, p. 1704). Anonymity is seen as a tool to obtain honest views and recommendation of online services (Kang et al., 2013, p. 8). Users of mobile apps enabling anonymous communication regarded anonymity as a promoter of honesty, openness, and diversity of opinion in a study by Kang et al. (2016). Lelkes, Krosnick, Marx, Judd, and Park (2012) highlight that although anonymity may decrease motivation to distort reports of behavior in socially desirable directions; it also decreases

accountability, and therefore decreases motivation for thoughtful and accurate responses. Their study illustrates that complete anonymity in survey responses actually might compromise reporting accuracy rather than increase it. The authors suggest that this phenomenon is prone to exist among college students who receive course credits for completing questionnaires. Furthermore, contrary to the idea that anonymity promotes honesty in communication, van Zant and Kray (2014) found that participants in a deception game were more honest in the face-to-face condition than in the anonymous condition. The authors suggested that this was because face-to-face interaction promoted the activation of individuals' moral-interest. However, in mental health screening tools, anonymity might be essential in discovering mental health problems among soldiers who are uncomfortable reporting their answers honestly non-anonymously (Warner et al., 2011).

In interviews with internet users, Kang et al. (2013, p. 8) identified several advantages of staying anonymous online for individuals. Anonymity helped users to avoid being disliked by others, enabled honest feedback, gave them control over their personal image, aided them to feel relaxed and comfortable, supported freedom of expression, gave them more control over personal information disclosure, protected their personal safety, and promoted ease of use by saving login efforts. Cho and Acquisti (2013) found that anonymous commenting compared to using social media accounts for identification resulted in a larger share of offensive words. However, they also discovered that a majority of users preferred using pseudonyms in online discussions. Moreover, anecdotal evidence from the online comment management company Disqus proposes that pseudonymous comments elicit both the highest quantity and quality of discussion compared to completely anonymous comments or real name comments (Disqus, 2012; Cho & Acquisti, 2013, p. 2). The correlation between the degree of anonymity and the quality of online discussion has spurred a debate on whether internet communities, social media sites, and unmoderated online forums should

employ a "real-name policy" to counteract negative implications of anonymity. This debate is essential as old as the internet itself, but returns in waves, as in the example when Google+ was introduced and implemented a real name policy, which caused protests (Ruesch & Märker, 2012, p. 301). Ruesch and Märker (2012, p. 301) investigated participatory budget processes in a German municipality and identified five objections against real name policy: "distraction from issue-related dialogue, violation of privacy rights, administrative problems causing high expenditure of time and costs, negative media and public attention, and usability problems that may result in a low rate of participation." They found that, in the context of e-participation, the negative outcomes of a real name policy outweigh the positive ones. The conclusion was that moderation and the use of pseudonymity can account for some of the problems associated with anonymity. Ainsworth et al. (2011) studied classroom discussions among 16–17 year-olds and found that participants were less likely to converge to group norms, and more likely to change opinion after the debate if voting anonymously. Although the anonymous debate was accompanied by some off-task behavior, the authors concluded that anonymity, in general, brought benefits to classroom argumentation. Ainsworth et al. (2010, p. 20) highlight that educational research has suggested more positive benefits of anonymity than the literature in computer-mediated communication and social psychology.

A study of the question-and-answer online platform *quora.com* found no significant difference between anonymous and non-anonymous answers on health issues (Paskuda & Lewkowicz, 2016). No differences in politeness, length, or social appreciation led to the researchers concluding that anonymity was harmless in this particular context. However, users rated anonymous answers significantly lower than average and as impolite, although they rated their own anonymous answers as polite. Research on a Japanese online forum has suggested that anonymity does not necessarily lead to antisocial behavior even in

uncontrolled settings (Kaigo & Watanabe, 2007). The study indicated that anonymous user communities can successfully induce self-regulating mechanisms promoting prosocial behavior.

Some scholars argue that anonymity could be beneficial for certain types of political participation. Ayres (2001) argues against the consensus regarding transparency in political campaign donations. In his view, anonymity would make it more difficult for politicians to reward their contributors, would substantially reduce the number of large donors, and would increase the number of small donors. Thus, the central argument for mandatory anonymity in donations is that it would decrease the possibility for donors to buy loyalty from politicians and parties (Ackerman & Ayres, 2002). This theory has received support from experimental research by Fang, Shapiro, and Zillante (2015) who conclude that "A fully anonymous campaign finance system seems to have the potential to reduce the influence of money in politics more effectively than the current PA system or the NA system."[4] Karvonen (2004, p. 213) notes that a general tendency of campaign finance regulation is that countries where individual candidates have a more salient role also have a more extensive legal regulation. La Raja (2011) discovered that disclosure (non-anonymity) of political participation had a negative effect on citizens' willingness to donate money to a political cause or to sign petitions. The study concluded that disclosure had a chilling effect on participation and suggested that women are more sensitive to disclosure than men. Moreover, moderates were more sensitive to disclosure than "extreme ideologues" (La Raja, 2011, p. 11). La Raja (2011, p. 4) considers that the internet changes the social context of political activity, and compels citizens "to wear their politics on their sleeve" more than ever before. La Raja highlights that some citizens want to avoid the social discomfort of making their political opinions public

[4] NA = no anonymity, PA = partial anonymity.

and at least wish for greater control over when they choose to do so online.

Wallace (1999) argues that anonymity is a treasured commodity in the political arena because governments have more power than individuals. He states that the loss of online anonymity can be particularly troublesome, or even life-threatening, for citizens in repressive regimes. Here, online anonymity can be used as a tool against state surveillance of dissidents (Morozov, 2011). Jardine's study (2016) demonstrates that the level of political repression in a country drives usage of anonymity-granting technologies. The relationship is U-shaped, with political repression driving usage of the anonymous web browser Tor in both highly liberal and highly repressive regimes. Jardine (2016, p. 17) suggests that the interaction of the opportunity to use anonymization technology and the need for people to use it accounts for the U-shaped pattern: "Political need increases as political repression worsens because people need to take additional steps to protect their identities online or risk severe repercussions. The opportunity to use anonymity-granting technologies, in contrast, is highest in liberal democratic states and lowest in countries with high levels of political repression." Thus, anonymity-granting technology can be useful for political dissidents, whereas the use of the same technology might be more prone to abuse in liberal countries where opportunity, in contrast to political need in repressive regimes, is the underlying driver of Tor use (Jardine, 2016, p. 17).

4.2.4 Conclusion: anonymity—a double-edged sword

In sum, online anonymity is associated with several different perspectives: as a shield against state oppression or surveillance, as a guarantee for free speech, as prevention against corporate data collection, and as a bothersome feature in online communities (Chui, 2014, p. 7). Despite several decades of research in computer-mediated-communication, empirical findings concerning the effects of anonymity

are "notoriously heterogeneous and evasive" (Tanis & Postmes, 2007, p. 958). Considering the democratic potential of online discussion, conflicting results call for a clarification of under which empirical circumstances online discussions constitute the high-quality deliberative discussion envisioned by theorists. Herein, anonymity has been viewed as both a vice and a virtue, producing mixed findings. In the words of Rhee and Kim (2009, p. 225): "anonymity in online discussion seems to be a double-edged sword." The picture of anonymity's effects remains muddled, possibly due to the neglection of other factors influencing online behavior, and to scholars using different definitions and operationalization of anonymity (Kahai, 2009, pp. 451–452, p. 472). For example, there are empirical inconsistencies regarding whether anonymity contributes to equalization in online communication (Postmes & Spears, 2002), or if anonymity promotes honesty in discussions (van Zant & Kray, 2014). These kinds of contradictions prevent scholars from providing a clear picture of the effects of anonymity (Paskuda & Lewkowicz, 2016, p. 3). Anonymity can be harmful under certain circumstances, useful or completely necessary in others, or a matter of personal choice in others (Reader, 2012, p. 3).

The discussion of online anonymity is a reminder about why issues pertaining to information technology and society are so complex and that scholars should resist the temptation to fall into the trap of technological determinism, viewing technology either as the solution to or reason behind societal problems (Marx, 2004). Early on, scholars found that behavior in computer-mediated-communication was highly context-dependent (Bordia, 1997, p. 114). Several scholars highlight that the effects of anonymity on behavior are highly context-dependent and anonymity policies should reflect a balance of interests (O'Sullivan & Flanagin, 2003, p. 73; Nicoll & Prins, 2003, p. 288; Gardner, 2011, p. 945; Teich et al., 1999). Anonymity is socially mediated, and due to the influence of context on human behavior, effects of anonymity on political virtues as sincerity and public-mindedness cannot be predicted with

confidence (Gardner, 2011, p. 950). Thus, personal characteristics, norms, motivations, and the media channel, that is to say, contextual factors, need to be taken into consideration when studying the effects of anonymity on behavior (Chui, 2014; Christie & Dill, 2016).

4.2.5 Research gap

Usually, technology stabilizes after an initial period of mutual competition between different configurations. The social and political importance of a technology becomes apparent only after stabilization. However, this does not yet apply to the internet. Despite several decades of development, the internet is still in flux and innovative new uses are emerging (Feenberg, 2009, p. 77; van Dijk, 2013). The best evidence for this is the ongoing controversy over the positive and negative impacts of the medium on democracy.

In the large amount of research regarding the internet and its democratic qualities, a specific area has been overlooked: the ability to communicate about political issues anonymously online. Anonymity is one of the premises "embedded" into the internet, but this aspect has, so far, generated little interest within *political science* research. Unlike pre-internet days, citizens can now with greater ease than ever communicate anonymously online. Moreover, this ability potentially has consequences for political participation. Most acts of political participation can now more easily be performed anonymously online than offline. This has revived a debate about the role of anonymity in democratic politics. Gardner (2011) calls for more research on the impact of anonymity on citizens' behavior in a political context. He notes that the effects of anonymity on human behavior are highly context- and condition-dependent, making generalization risky and difficult. Anonymity is an old concept being introduced to new contexts as communication technology continues to develop. By examining anonymity in the digital world, its advantages and disadvantages, scholars can better understand its importance in a modern democratic society. Weis (2008, p. 4) describes

the importance of studying anonymity: "We are in a pivotal moment in the history of privacy and anonymity, where understanding the role of anonymity in society will be essential in making suitable judgements regarding the future of digital anonymity, decisions being made every day in legislatures, companies and courtrooms."

Of all the types of political participation, voting is one of the cornerstones of democratic politics. When the role of anonymity in a democracy is discussed, it is common to think of the secret ballot, holding a key and fundamental role in politics. In a modern democratic state, political participation can take many different forms: political debate, campaign contributions to candidates, interest groups or parties, petitioning, lobbying and communication with decision-makers for instance. In principle, citizens can perform these acts a) openly, b) anonymously with no or an inexplicit connection between the act and the actor, or alternatively c) in a gray area between openness and anonymity, in which actors can be linked to their political documents only by observers in certain domains (Gardner, 2011, p. 928). Gardner (2011, pp. 928–929) observes that the right of political actors to be anonymous is questioned (e.g., anonymous campaign donations) and is subject to an ongoing legal debate. Gardner notes the discussion on the function of anonymity in democratic societies seems to be characterized by a doubt regarding the appropriateness and value of anonymous political discussion, especially in light of the amount of anonymous communication and the potentially large online audience for this type of communication.

> "The significance of anonymity as a political practice, if indeed it has any, lies in its capacity to affect the behavior of those who participate in democratic politics: anonymity has been both praised for freeing citizens to vote and speak their true beliefs, and condemned for providing convenient cover to harmful and democratically undesirable behavior" (Gardner, 2011, p. 929).

This chapter has elaborated on the relationship between anonymity and political participation, which becomes increasingly important when political participation enters the online sphere. Specifically, it has shown that the participation acts of interest in this thesis, e-petitioning and online political discussion, both can be performed anonymously with greater ease than their offline equivalents. This raises questions and concerns about the democratic value of these relatively new forms of participation. This has been illustrated by scholars debating the quality of (anonymous) online discussion and critics labeling e-petitioning as meaningless slacktivism. The literature has demonstrated a need for a) descriptive research on online political participation, and b) explanatory studies of both predictors and effects of anonymous political participation. In light of the discussion in the previous chapter, the rise of internet politics seems to call for descriptive empirical research on both informal/formal as well as participatory/deliberative forms of online political participation. I have identified a lack of knowledge regarding the quality of online discussion and the determinants of quality of discussion. If scholars argue that the quality of online discussion is too low and needs to be raised to improve the quality of public opinion (and, in the long run, democracy itself), it is essential to evaluate online discussions and identify determinants of quality. Additionally, I have identified research gaps about how citizens use e-petitions and the determinants behind anonymous political participation. Before labeling e-petitioning as a useful/useless addition to representative democracy, empirical research must analyze how it is being used by citizens. Moreover, knowledge about the patterns behind of anonymous political participation adds to the literature about the behavior of those who participate in democratic politics, a central task in political science. Given this, in next chapter, I present the four articles that seek to address these gaps in the empirical part of the thesis.

5. Research query and analytical framework

In this chapter, I present the research questions addressed in this thesis and provide a framework for how the empirical articles are interconnected. Reflecting on dimensions of online political participation, the framework discusses e-petitioning and online political discussion in terms of participatory/deliberative and formal/informal participation. This is followed by brief presentations of the four articles and their connections to the research questions. The aim of this chapter is to show the reader how the articles relate to the themes presented in the previous chapters. Furthermore, the chapter demonstrates how the articles connect to the concepts online political participation and anonymity.

5.1 Research questions

As previously stated in the introduction chapter, the purpose of this compilation thesis is to increase knowledge about citizens' online political participation in contemporary democracies. There are several rationales for studying what happens when political participation moves online. Generally speaking, the internet possesses several properties that might help fulfill the visions of democratic theorists because it increases the number of channels citizens can use to participate. Moreover, it can help make deliberation and political discussion easier, less costly, and perhaps even of better quality than its offline equivalent (Witschge, 2007). Likewise, digital technology has played an important part in the renaissance petitioning has enjoyed during the last decade as both formal and informal e-petition systems make petitioning more accessible to ordinary citizens (Hough, 2012). However, if scholars are to understand the changes in political participation taking place, they need to analyze how citizens use these new forms of political participation. Furthermore, research has to widen its perspective and include anonymous forms of

political participation to increase knowledge about the impact of the internet on political behavior. If it is considered important to incorporate the internet into the development of democratic processes, anonymous online communication is inevitably a part of internet structure and therefore a central part of the analysis.

In light of the discussion in the previous chapters, this compilation thesis seeks to address the following overarching research questions:

- RQ1: How do citizens participate politically online?
- RQ2: How do citizens use the possibility of anonymous online political participation?

Online political participation is a central concept in this thesis. As discussed in the literature review, the concept can be categorized in several ways. In an effort to encompass the width of online political participation, I have chosen to study phenomena related to two dimensions of political participation. The first dimension relates to the origin of political participation; whether the form of participation is initiated by a formal institution or an informal institution. This dimension is roughly the equivalent of Ekman and Amnå's (2012) formal/extra-parliamentary division. The second dimension regards whether the form of participation resembles participatory or deliberative democracy, in other words, if the emphasis is more on aggregating opinions or on discussing policy issues (see the introduction for discussion). This dimension is close to the labels manifest/latent used by Ekman and Amnå (2012). E-petitioning would be labeled as manifest political participation, whereas online political discussion is a form of latent political participation. Together, these two dimensions illustrate how the four articles in the thesis relate to each other and serve as a roadmap for the reader. When analyzing online political participation, these dimensions are demonstrated in a typology (see Figure 1 below) of the different innovations that have been introduced to counter some of the problems representative democracy is facing in modern times. The thesis contains four articles, which focus on two forms of online political

participation: e-petitioning and online discussion. These acts of participation can take place in both formal and informal online arenas and represent different solutions to the problem of fading traditional forms of political participation. Moreover, they can be connected with theories of participatory and deliberative democracy, respectively, which both present ideas to make up for the drawbacks of representative democracy. Moreover, these two theories are often used in research about online politics (Chadwick, 2009, p. 14; Friess & Eilders, 2014, p. 3).

Online political participation	System-initiated (formal)	Non-system-initiated (informal)
Participatory	Article 1	Article 2
Deliberative	Article 4	Article 3

Figure 1. Typology of innovations.

Political participation inspired by participatory democracy

The internet has been rapidly adopted as a tool for political participation in both unstable democracies and stable democracies (Oser et al., 2013, p. 91). Rice and Fuller (2013) found that the number of scientific articles addressing online participation increased dramatically in the previous decade. In a systematic literature review, the topic of online political participation experienced the strongest growth in interest among the six identified themes (Lutz et al., 2014, p. 1). Despite this development, there are few *systematic* studies regarding how the internet is used for political purposes (Vissers & Stolle, 2014, p. 937). The importance of studying online political participation is highlighted by the facts that an increasing number of people engage in political participation online (Vicente & Novo, 2014, p. 1). Furthermore, the internet makes traditional forms of political participation easier to perform and offers entirely new innovations for engaging in politics (Hoffman et al., 2013, p. 2248). This, in turn, calls for a redefinition of the concept of political participation (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013, p. 701). According to Jensen (2013, p. 2), more

recent developments, where internet culture has transformed from being mostly information-based to an age of interactivity, combined with an upsurge in user-generated content, has resulted in the internet having a larger potential to contribute to political participation and civic engagement than ever before. Thus, more (online) political participation might result in more politically astute, empowered, and efficacious citizens or even a more equitable and humane society (Hilmer. 2010, p. 62). Scholars, therefore, need to substantiate some of the key claims made by participatory democratic theorists by addressing the relationship between technology and practices of participatory democracy. Pateman (2012, p. 8) argues that participatory democracy differs from deliberative democracy. In her view, deliberation, discussion, and debate "are central to any form of democracy, including participatory democracy, but if deliberation is necessary for democracy it is not sufficient."

Online deliberation and discussion

Deliberative democracy theory is arguably one of the most influential theories in the research field of internet and democracy. The internet has been seen to hold a potential of becoming a public sphere, and thus an arena for deliberation. Some scholars even argue that it provides ideal conditions for deliberative democracy (see Freiss & Eilders, 2015). Deliberation might be an answer for the public demand for democratic innovation and increase citizens' influence in democratic decision-making processes (Freiss & Eilders, 2015, p. 320). Birchall and Coleman (2015, p. 264) mention that deliberation can help people who can't make up their minds, and people who have already made up their minds to rethink their stance on policy issues. This would be essential because these people are not representative of citizens in a healthy democracy.

Political discussion holds an important role in a democratic society (de Tocqueville, 1839), and due to a lack of censorship, the internet has a potential to host discussions that are open and free. De Tocqueville (1839) regarded meeting halls and newspapers as communication

forums in civil society, now, online forums and online newspapers can be considered as modern versions of these; creating venues for idea-sharing, debate and discussions among citizens (Himelboim, 2010, p. 641). However, unrestricted online discussion might not always work in favor of a strong and healthy democracy due to overrepresentation of voices from "privileged segments of the population" (Himelboim, 2010, p. 641). In theory, the internet has features enabling many-to-many communication, which opens up for discussions between both heterogeneous and like-minded people (Witschge, 2007, p. 22).

Furthermore, anonymity in online interaction is an interesting phenomenon in the light of deliberative democracy because "those that do not feel free to speak offline might do so online", thereby contributing to a more diverse public sphere, where disagreement is more easily expressed than in offline environments (Witschge, 2007, p. 23). Anonymity might also decrease stereotyping and prejudice, and provide means of overcoming inequality among discussion participants due to status-related judgment (Witschge, 2007, p. 23). However, empirical findings have shown that online discussion might not mobilize marginalized groups, nor lead to diverse and equal discussions. Likewise, anonymity, by reducing civility and contributing to flaming, does not necessarily produce discussions beneficial for democracy (see Witschge, 2007, pp. 24–25).

In a democracy, citizens need access to a "marketplace of ideas" and a variety of viewpoints to make informed decisions about their future. The idea of the internet resembling a public sphere reflects the ideals of deliberative democracy, a democratic utopia in which citizens can discuss politics and make decisions with the common good in mind. Letters to the editor sections provide offline venues for these kinds of public discussions. Yet, the unrestricted online space combined with freedom from traditional media gate-keeping offers possibilities for a wider range of views to be heard, thus producing a situation more close to the ideal public sphere (McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012, pp. 1–2).

Institutionalized forms of online political participation

Governments have reacted to a decline in traditional participation by developing democratic innovations, institutionalized forms of political participation, to strengthen democracy (Wright, 2012, p. 453). In other words, a shift from government to governance has led to more participatory planning being implemented to increase and deepen citizen participation in democratic processes (Mattijssen et al., 2015, p. 1). However, poorly designed institutional mechanisms come with a risk of reinforcing citizens' negative attitudes towards politics and politicians; making democratic innovations part of the problem rather than of the solution (Wright, 2015, p. 1). Rightly designed, democratic innovations can help regain trust in political authorities (Christensen, Karjalainen & Lundell, 2016, p. 1). By studying democratic innovations, scholars can gain insight about how the ideals of deliberative democracy and participatory democracy might be realized (Smith, 2009, p. 2).

According to Newton (2012, p. 6), democratic innovations have a growing practical importance in contemporary politics, which calls for research about their major features as a first step when developing a research agenda. Newton (2012, p. 10–11) suggests abandoning the assumption that participatory and deliberative forms of political participation are rendering representative democracy obsolete, since the new forms are developed within and influenced by existing institutions. Previous research has dealt with: evaluation of democratic innovations (Geissel, 2009; Smith, 2009; Newton, 2012), the impact of democratic innovations on political trust (Christensen, 2015; Christensen, Karjalainen & Lundell, 2015), the perceived success of democratic innovations (Wright, 2015). Fewer studies have been conducted from a descriptive perspective (e.g., Böhle & Riehm, 2012), which calls for analyses of how these democratic innovations are being used by citizens. Furthermore, few studies have taken an explanatory approach to

investigate the predictors and effects of anonymous political participation.

Non-institutionalized forms of online political participation

Besides democratic innovations, non-institutionalized forms of political participation have emerged outside the formal political system. The growth of social networking sites has provided citizens with more tools for political participation, and created unique arenas for online discourse, creation and sharing of political content. Participation in political Facebook groups, for example, is a type of expressive political performance, which can be considered a form of micro-activism (Marichal, 2013). Even though Facebook group involvement has been found to foster offline political participation (Conroy et al., 2012), there is a controversy regarding the effects of the internet on political participation (Breuer & Farooq, 2012).

The more expressive forms of non-institutionalized political participation exemplified by Facebook groups or online petitions have received criticism for being ineffective, too convenient and egoistic, and therefore labeled as slacktivism (e.g., Morozov, 2009). Nevertheless, these non-institutionalized forms of political participation have extended the political participation repertoire for citizens wishing to convey detailed information to decision-makers. Even if the effectiveness of non-institutionalized forms like online political discussion is debated (Marien & Hooghe, 2012, p. 16), people still use these forms to express political opinions. Since most research on political participation has been conducted within the formal area of representative politics, a wider focus involving alternative ways of participating seems warranted (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013, p. 3).

5.2 Summary of research articles

This section summarizes the articles representing the empirical part of the compilation thesis. It presents the purpose and research question investigated by each article. The aim of this section is to provide the reader with an overview of the articles and the areas these address in light of the discussion in the previous section.

Article 1: Political participation in the form of online petitions—a comparison of formal and informal petitioning

The first article (Berg, 2017a) concerns e-petitions in Finland and seeks to increase knowledge about the similarities and differences between formal and informal petitioning. The purpose of the article is to contribute to the understanding of 1) the features on formal and informal e-petition platforms as well as 2) the characteristics of the e-petitions on these platforms. Using quantitative content analysis of online petition platforms and e-petitions, the article describes how citizens use e-petitioning platforms both inside and outside the formal political system. It systematically compares two e-petition platforms and analyzes how the formality of the platform affects the characteristics of the e-petitions. Thus, the focus is on a comparative analysis of the use of e-petitions, moving beyond the focus on formal e-petitioning to fill a research gap regarding informal online political participation. In this sense, the article relates to both formal and informal political participation. It adds to the literature of online political participation by analyzing how citizens use democratic innovations in a representative democracy. Moreover, it shows how formal and informal e-petition platforms differ in design. Taken together, it mostly connects with the first overarching research question without further touching upon the concept of anonymity.

Article 2: The dark side of e-petitions? Exploring anonymous signatures

In the second article (Berg, 2017b), I further explore the informal aspects of e-petitioning. The possibility of withholding one's signature from online publication on an informal e-petition platform serves as the starting point for this study as it represents a unique possibility to study the mechanism behind anonymous political participation. In this case, patterns behind citizens' choices to remain anonymous when signing an e-petition are in focus. I evaluate the impact of several e-petition characteristics on the share of anonymous signatures. Methodologically, quantitative content analysis of e-petition texts is combined with regression analysis to explain the variation in the share of anonymous signatures on informal e-petitions. Therefore, the study relates to the second overarching research question because it deals with anonymous political participation. The purpose of the article is explanatory as it aims to increase knowledge about patterns behind anonymous political participation in the case of e-petition signing. It addresses the research question: Which e-petitions characteristics have an effect on the share of anonymous signatures? The data originates from a popular Finnish informal e-petition platform, *adressit.com*. Thus, in contrast to Article 1, the attention is turned towards a participatory act initiated outside the formal political system.

Article 3: Newspapers' readers' comments: democratic conversation platforms of virtual soapboxes?

The third article (Strandberg & Berg, 2013) analyzes online discussion on an informal arena; reader comments on a newspaper website. In the wake of the web 2.0 era, reader comments have become a popular feature on the website of almost every news outlet. These commenting forums can be regarded as a modern form of letters to the editor, and in that sense, an act of political participation. Online article commenting has

raised a great amount of both scholarly and societal debate regarding the quality of online discussion (e.g., Santana, 2014; Rowe, 2015). Concerns have been raised that the quality of online news commenting does not live up to the high standards of deliberative discussions and therefore might be more detrimental than beneficial for democracy in the long end. The purpose of the article is to assess the democratic quality of online readers' comments. Although the focus is not on deliberation per se, the study draws on deliberative criteria used in previous research examining online discussion quality. This is done to establish a normative yardstick to which the quality of the comments can be balanced against. The data originates from the website of the regional newspaper *Vasabladet* in the city of Vasa, Finland. Comments are analyzed using quantitative content analysis to answer the research question: to what extent do citizen discussions in reader comments constitute democratic conversation? The comments are evaluated based on four conditions of deliberation; rationality, relevance, reciprocity, and politeness/respect. The article mostly relates to the first overarching research question. However, because of the overwhelmingly large share of anonymous comments in the sample, 96 percent, the study also connects to the second overarching research question relating to anonymous online political participation.

Article 4: The impact of anonymity and issue controversiality on the quality of online discussion

The fourth article (Berg, 2016) builds on the findings from the previous article and further examines the factors that impact the quality of discussion in online forums. Instead of analyzing political discussion in an informal area, as in article three, it concentrates on a top-down, formal arrangement of citizen deliberation initiated by Åbo Akademi University in Finland. The main purpose of the article is to increase knowledge about how different factors affect the quality of political discussion online. More specifically, it addresses the research question: how do anonymity and discussion topic controversy affect the quality of online

discussion? The determinants of high-quality online discussion have been studied to some extent, and anonymity is often seen as the culprit in low-quality online discussion. When creating forums for online deliberation, designers have the possibility to allow anonymous communication, and while deliberation traditionally is not supposed to take place among anonymous participations, there is a need for studying the effects of anonymity. In this manner, designers can weigh the benefits and drawbacks of anonymity. Moreover, there are other potential factors influencing the quality of online discussion, the issue being discussed is one of these. Controversial issues (e.g., gay adoption), can seem more likely to degenerate into low-quality discussion than less controversial issues (e.g., child allowance). This study uses a 2x2 factorial experimental design to analyze the effects of anonymity and issue controversiality on the quality of discussion in an online lab-on-the-field experiment. 58 citizens took part in the experiment and were randomized into four discussion settings in the Virtual Polity 2.0 online deliberation environment at the Department of Political Science at Åbo Akademi University. Thus, this study relates the second overarching research question of anonymous political participation in a formal environment and adds to the literature on online deliberation.

Typology for the compilation thesis revisited

In essence, the thesis concerns both participatory and discursive forms of political participation represented by e-petitioning (articles 1 & 2) and online discussion (articles 3 & 4) respectively. Furthermore, it incorporates two different types of political participation; formal (articles 1 & 4) and informal (articles 2 & 3). Article 1 encompasses both formal and informal political participation since it compares e-petition platforms both inside and outside the formal political system. Two of the articles are of a more general descriptive nature (articles 1 & 3) and the other two (articles 2 & 4) have an explanatory ambition, analyzing more

specific parts of online political participation relating to anonymity. Hence, online anonymity is an essential concept in the study although it is not given equal attention in each of the four articles. Article 3 concerns anonymous political participation because 96 percent of the reader comments analyzed are anonymous. Therefore, Article 3 can be viewed as a descriptive study of anonymous online communication. In Article 2, more focus is put on anonymity as it seeks to find determinants of anonymous behavior in e-petition signing. Likewise, anonymity has a central role in Article 4, where the effects of anonymity on discussion quality are studied in an experimental setting. Article 1, however, does not explicitly deal with anonymity. In light of this, all the four articles touch upon the first overarching research question and three out of four relate to the second overarching research question.

Online political participation	System-initiated (formal)	Non-system-initiated (informal)
Participatory	Article 1: Political participation in the form of online petitions – a comparison of formal and informal petitioning	Article 2: The dark side of e-petitions? Exploring anonymous signatures
Deliberative	Article 4: The impact of anonymity and issue controversiality on the quality of online discussion	Article 3: Newspapers' readers' comments – democratic conversation platforms or virtual soapboxes?

***Figure 2**. Typology of online political participation.*

5.3 The case of Finland

This empirical part of this compilation thesis relies exclusively on data from Finland. It can be argued that, of Western democracies, Finland is

at the forefront of online technical developments and internet use (Global Innovation Index, 2016), which makes it an interesting and relevant country for studying online political participation. Moreover, Finland has one of the highest internet penetration rates in the world at 92.5 percent (Finland internet users, 2016). About 53 percent of Finnish households have access to a fast broadband connection of 100 Mbps (Viestintävirasto, 2016). In 2010, Finland became the world's first country to make broadband access a legal right (Embassy of Finland, 2009). There are several reasons to study online political participation in Finland. The developments in the country reflect the challenges other Western democracies are facing; traditional forms of political participation are in decline, while new forms of online political participation are rising in popularity (Bengtsson & Grönlund, 2005; Bengtsson & Christensen, 2009). Thus, lessons about developments in online political participation may be learned from the Finnish case (Christensen et al., 2016a, p. 4).

Finland is characterized by a Nordic welfare tradition and has traditionally been a strong representative democracy (Christensen et al., 2016a, p. 4). Additionally, the country has a well-educated population (Christensen & Bengtsson, 2011, p. 901). These elements, combined with Finland being in the technological frontier internationally as described in the previous paragraph, the country seems suitable for detecting new trends in online political participation. Moreover, Finland is the only Nordic country to have introduced a democratic innovation on a national level, when the petitioning system in form of the Citizens' Initiative, was launched in 2012. Moreover, Finland and Latvia are the only countries allowing electric signatures in national citizens' initiatives (Christensen et al., 2016, p. 5; Auers, 2015; Bukovskis and Spruds, 2015).

In line with the other Nordic populaces, Finnish citizens tend to be among the most politically active in Europe (Bengtsson & Christensen, 2011; Bengtsson & Christensen, 2016, p. 9). Similar to most European democracies, Finland represents a tradition of representative decision-making, although there have been two consultative referenda held

during the history of the nation. The first national referendum was held in 1931 regarding the prohibition of alcohol, whereas the other took place in 1994 concerning membership in the European Union. Referenda on the municipal level, which became possible in 1995, have been held more frequently (Christensen & von Schoultz, 2016, p. 6). Besides being on the forefront of democratic innovations, Finland has many citizens with a participatory conception of democracy, illustrating a demand for more opportunities for political participation (Bengtsson & Christensen, 2016, p. 18).

A great deal of political participation research in Finland has mainly focused on traditional forms taking place offline (e.g., Bengtsson & Christensen, 2009, p. 78; Grönlund & Wass, 2016). Moreover, several experimental studies on face-to-face deliberation have been conducted during the last ten years, testing various claims relating to the theory of deliberative democracy (e.g., Himmelroos, 2012; Lindell, 2015; Grönlund, Herne & Setälä, 2015). However, research on online political participation in the form of online discussion and e-petitioning remains a scarcity, although some studies have explicitly dealt with online participation (e.g., Christensen, 2012; Strandberg & Grönlund, 2012; Grönlund, Strandberg & Himmelroos, 2009). As Finland is arguably at the forefront of technological developments relating to online political participation and Finnish citizens are early adopters of technology, studying online political participation in Finland might offer a preview into the future of other countries.

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6. The articles

I. Berg, J. (2017a). Political participation in the form of online petitions: a comparison of formal and informal petitioning. *International Journal of E-Politics (IJEP), 8*(1), 14–29. doi:10.4018/IJEP.2017010102

II. Berg, J. (2017b). The dark side of e-petitions? Exploring anonymous signatures. *First Monday, 22*(2). doi://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v22i12.6001

III. Strandberg, K., & Berg, J. (2013). Online newspapers' readers' comments – democratic conversation platforms or virtual soapboxes? *Comunicação E Sociedade, 23*, 132–152. doi://dx.doi.org/10.17231/comsoc.23(2013).1618

IV. Berg, J. (2016). The impact of anonymity and issue controversiality on the quality of online discussion. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics, 13*(1), 37–51. doi://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2015.1131654

7. Summary & conclusions

The previous chapter presented the four empirical research articles examining e-petitioning and political discussion online. The aim of this chapter is to summarize the main findings from the research articles in the previous chapter and relate these to the theoretical discussion in the introductory chapters. This is crucial for showing the reader how the themes in the articles link together. I will begin by revisiting the overarching research questions and purpose of the thesis, as previously presented in chapter 5. Furthermore, I will draw conclusions of the findings from the articles and discuss their theoretical and practical implications. At the end of the chapter, I will discuss some of the limitations of my research and provide recommendations for further research.

7.1 Research problem and purpose of the thesis

In the introduction of this thesis, I identified some of the problems modern democracies are facing: declining turnout, increasing political disaffection, and political skepticism. It appears as if the ways citizens participate politically are changing. Traditional forms of participation give room to new forms of engagement. The internet has for over two decades seemed like a promising solution to the supposed "crisis" of democracy as it expands the citizen toolbox containing forms of political participation. This research is concentrated on two forms of online political participation: e-petitioning and political discussion, for reasons discussed in chapters 3–4. Furthermore, a specific aspect of online politics, anonymity, is elaborated upon in the introductory chapters.

This research project started from a broad statement of purpose. The purpose of this compilation thesis is to increase knowledge about citizens' online political participation in contemporary democracies. After a discussion on the central concepts of online political

participation, e-petitioning, online political discussion, and online anonymity, the introductory chapters resulted in a typology. This typology illustrated the link between the studies and two theoretical models of democracy in the form of participatory and deliberative democracy, thus relating the forms of participation to two theories especially relevant to online political participation. The typology also demonstrated the division between formal and informal forms of political participation, a common theme in the literature (Christensen, 2011, p. 57; Mosca & Santucci, 2009). As a whole, this thesis sought to address the following research questions:

- RQ1: How do citizens participate politically online?
- RQ2: How do citizens use the possibility of anonymous online political participation?

These two research questions are mainly descriptive and can be answered in a multitude of ways. However, I have mainly used quantitative content analysis and statistical methods in this thesis to describe how citizens use different forms of political participation. These overarching research questions were refined into more specific questions in the introductory chapters, questions the four articles sought to address. Before launching into this endeavor, and to create a narrower scope for the thesis, I focused two specific forms of online political participation; e-petitioning and political discussion. Thus, the opportunity to generalize the findings becomes restricted to these two areas of online political participation.

Online political participation	System-initiated (formal)	Non-system-initiated (informal)
Participatory	Article 1: Political participation in the form of online petitions – a comparison of formal and informal petitioning	Article 2: The dark side of e-petitions? Exploring anonymous signatures
Deliberative	Article 4: The impact of anonymity and issue controversiality on the quality of online discussion	Article 3: Newspapers' readers' comments – democratic conversation platforms or virtual soapboxes?

***Figure 3**. The types of political participation the articles concern*

Reconsider the typology presented in Figure 3 above. The four articles in the thesis are connected in several ways. Firstly, besides all dealing with "old" forms of participation taking place online, petitioning and political discussion are not internet-based phenomena (cf. hacktivism), they are internet-supported, yet take place offline as well (van Laer & van Aelst, 2009). Secondly, articles 1 and 2 analyze e-petitioning, a form of political participation emphasizing participation, and a form that fits within participatory democracy. In e-petitioning, numbers and quantities are important as they represent the tool for influence. The strength of petitions is measured in numbers, and the idea is to mobilize as many citizens as possible. Thirdly, articles 3 and 4 concern online political participation in the form of political discussion. The focus here is on the quality of online discussions in light of criteria derived from deliberative democracy theory, and on the determinants of this quality. Hence, these two articles emphasize expressive acts of online political participation, rather than mobilizing acts as in the case of e-petitioning.

Simply put, articles 3 and 4 concern the quality of acts of political participation, while articles 1 and 2 concern the quantity of acts of political participation. This is illustrated by the division between participatory and deliberative acts of political participation in the typology.

The other dimension connecting the articles is based on a dichotomy separating system-initiated (formal) and non-system initiated (informal) forms of political participation. Another way of describing this distinction is using the terms top-down and bottom-up participation. Articles 1 and 4 examine formal political participation; a governmental e-petition system and a formal online deliberation forum set up in an elite actor, in this case, a university. These forms of political participation can be referred to as democratic innovations (Smith 2009), set up from above with the aim of improving the input side of democratic politics. Conversely, articles 2 and 3 concern informal forms of online political participation, represented by an ad-funded e-petition warehouse site (*adressit.com*) and online article comments on a regional level newspaper (*vasabladet.fi*). These arenas for political participation have been initiated outside the formal political system by private actors and, thus, stand in stark contrast to formal, institutionalized forms of participation. They are financed by private actors with an interest in making profits. Nevertheless, they provide citizens with opportunities to "do politics" albeit no governmental actors are involved by default.

Anonymity, an important aspect of the internet, was thoroughly discussed in the introductory chapters as a central dimension of online politics due to its relationship to political participation. In the articles, anonymity is analyzed both as an independent variable (article 4) and as a dependent variable (article 2). Moreover, anonymity is a central concept in the descriptive study of online article comments (article 3) since 96 percent of the comments were anonymous. The only article wherein anonymity is not given any greater attention is article 1, which compares e-petition systems. However, although anonymity is not

central to article 1, the e-petition platforms analyzed provide different levels of anonymity for users. Thus, whereas the answer to the first research question is to be found in all four articles, the answer to research question number two is primarily in the articles 2 to 4 and touched upon in articles 1 and 3.

7.2 Citizens' use of e-petitioning and online political discussion: central findings

In this subchapter, I compile the findings from the four articles and address the first research question: how do citizens participate politically online? The findings in the articles have shed light on how citizens use e-petitioning and discuss politics online in different contexts. As a common denominator, however, the analyzed acts have taken place in Finland, for reasons given in chapter 5.3.

Starting with the form of political participation pertaining to participatory democracy, e-petitioning, the articles 1 (Berg, 2017a) and 2 (Berg, 2017b) assessed Finnish e-petitions from different perspectives. The first article compared formal and informal e-petition platforms and the second article analyzed determinants of the share of anonymous e-petition signing on an informal site. The focus of these studies was how citizens use the options provided by e-petition platforms for political participation. The findings will now be summarized.

The first article (Berg, 2017a) compared formal and informal e-petitioning and found several differences between these two types. First, the e-petition systems differed in security and design, as the formal system put greater emphasis on signature verification, whereas the informal site could easily be susceptible to false or duplicate signatures. Moreover, the formal site lacked a discussion forum, leaving no room for deliberation on issues, in contrast to the informal site. Second, the e-petitions on the sites differed in several aspects. E-petitions on the formal site contained more rational reasoning, were better prepared, had a

higher average number of signatures, and had longer texts. E-petitions on the informal site were characterized by having more women and registered organizations as initiators, containing more emotional texts, and bringing up "softer" issues relating to media and entertainment more often than e-petitions on the formal site. Furthermore, e-petitions on the informal site targeted several private actors, outside the institutions of representative democracy. Third, the formal e-petition system guarantees an agenda-setting process due to its connection to governmental institutions, whereas the informal platform cannot guarantee that e-petitions actually will be dealt with by any addressee.

As the first article provided an overview of e-petitioning in Finland, the next step in article 2 was to examine a particular feature of the internet, the possibility of anonymous political participation (see chapter 4). The informal e-petition platform *adressit.com* provides users with an option to sign e-petitions anonymously, and this option became the focus of article 2 (Berg, 2017b). Here, I analyzed patterns behind anonymous e-petition signing by examining which e-petition characteristics affected the share of anonymous signatures.

The results showed that anonymous e-petition signing was rather common; on average, one-third of the e-petition signers chose not to reveal their name. The commenting function, making deliberation on e-petition issues possible among visitors of the site, was moderately used; e-petitions received 27 comments on average. However, the discussions were unevenly distributed between e-petitions, and only four out of one hundred signers chose to take part in the discussions. Most of the e-petitions in the randomized sample had been online for more than four years on average, most likely because initiators seldom remove e-petitions although they have actively stopped collecting signatures. The e-petition system did not remove petitions automatically.

The dependent variable in article 2 was the share of anonymous signatures on e-petitions. In the analysis, 15 independent variables were examined. Out of these, four variables were able to explain some of the

variation in the share of anonymous signatures: demand type, preparation quality, creation year, and initiator anonymity. The demand type described how specific or general the demands put forward in the e-petition text were. More specific demands resulted in a lower share of anonymous signatures than more general and less serious demands. Less prepared e-petition text received a higher share of anonymous signatures, indicating that the quality of the text was a key predictor. Over time, starting from 2009, anonymous signatures became less frequent. This suggests the introduction of social media (and an internet culture more inclined towards real name policies) might have had a bearing the development. Moreover, e-petitions that were initiated anonymously tended to receive a larger share of anonymous signatures as well. A surprising finding was that controversial e-petition topics (e.g., issues pertaining to sexuality, religion, or alcohol) did not increase the share of anonymous signatures (cf. La Raja, 2011; Peddinti et al., 2014).

The second form of online political participation of interest in this thesis has been political discussion, a form of participation whose importance has been emphasized within deliberative democracy theory. Online political discussion has been the focus of two articles. In the third article (Strandberg & Berg, 2013), a popular venue for online discussion was examined; article comments to online newspaper stories. Following this descriptive study of the quality of citizens' article commenting, the focus was turned towards the determinants of online discussion quality in the fourth article (Berg, 2016). The main findings from these two studies will now be summarized.

In the third article (Strandberg & Berg, 2013), we asked to what extent citizen discussions in online reader comments constitute democratic conversations. Taking an explorative and descriptive approach, we used quantitative content analysis to evaluate the quality of discussion using criteria derived from deliberative democracy theory. In essence, we measured the rationality, relevance, reciprocity, and the degree of

politeness and respect in the commenting section. Regarding the quality of discussion, both encouraging and discouraging results were found. Starting from the positive side, the article comments showed signs of rationality, relevance, and politeness and respect. However, the comment sections had less-than-ideal results for some indicators of rationality and reciprocity. Thus, the quality of discussion in the comment section, judged by criteria for ideal democratic discussions, did not always seem to live up to the (high) standards of deliberation. Nevertheless, the article comments analyzed did not generally deviate from findings regarding deliberative quality in other communicative contexts. The study revealed methodological challenges related to the task of measuring quality of discussion, as there is no consensus on how to operationalize the ideal criteria derived from deliberative democracy theory. Moreover, deciding when a discussion fulfills the conditions for deliberation, that is when a discussion reaches a level of quality high enough to be labeled as deliberation, is a troublesome task since there are no natural cut-off points distinguishing ordinary discussion from deliberation. As most of the article comments (96 %) in the sample were written by anonymous citizens, the study highlighted a question about the determinants of online discussion quality. This led us to further examine anonymity as a possible culprit for some of the less-than-ideal findings regarding quality of online discussion.

Hence, building on the findings from article 3, article 4 focused on quality of discussion in a formal discussion forum. However, this time the determinants of discussion quality were the object of analysis. Two independent variables, anonymity and issue controversiality, were selected to assess their effect on the dependent variable, the quality of online discussion. The study used quantitative content analysis and a factorial 2x2 experimental design to evaluate the causal relationship between anonymity, issue controversiality, and the quality of discussion in an asynchronous online forum set up by Åbo Akademi University.

Here, the same criteria for discussion quality were used as in the previous study (Strandberg & Berg, 2013).

The analysis resulted in several surprising findings. Firstly, anonymity did not have a main effect on discussion quality, only two simple main effects which could be interpreted as positive effects on the quality of discussion. Secondly, the controversial issue resulted in comments with a factual and respectful tone, although the majority of the main effects of a controversial topic were negative. The findings indicated that the effects of the discussion topic are larger than the effects of anonymity. The analysis suggested that the effects of anonymity and issue controversiality on discussion quality are complex and can vary according to which criteria of discussion quality are measured. For example, issue controversiality had positive effects on some indicators of discussion quality and negative effects on others. This suggests that it is relevant to divide the concept of discussion quality into different criteria measuring several aspects of the notion. These findings stress the importance of examining other variables than anonymity when searching for possible determinants of discussion quality.

I now return to the first overarching research question presented earlier: how do citizens participate politically online? As there are many forms of online political participation, the scope of this thesis was narrowed down in the introductory chapters to formal/informal and participatory/deliberative forms of participation, represented by e-petitioning and online political discussion.

Finnish citizens seem to be eager to use both formal and informal e-petition platforms for agenda-setting. The platforms are used for different policy issues and complement each other in the sense that they offer a channel for the expression of political will. The use of the platforms does not seem to be fading, although it is too early to assess the implications of the Citizen's Initiative, given that it was introduced in 2012. Bearing gender equality in mind, a majority of petition initiators are males on the formal platform *kansalaisaloite.fi*. Conversely, female

initiators dominate the informal platform *adressit.com*. Furthermore, individuals, not organizations, submit the majority of the petitions on the e-petition platforms, indicating that these empower individuals instead of resource-rich organizations. Citizens might be put off by the fact that most e-petitions, at least on the formal platform, never neither reach the quorum of 50,000 signatures nor achieve policy change. E-petitions on the formal site gather more signatures on average, but the difference compared to the e-petition on the informal site was not statistically significant. Yet, citizens put more effort into e-petitions on the formal site; e-petition texts are longer, better prepared, more rational, and less affective.

Regarding political online discussions, the commenting function linked to newspaper articles is an arena where Finnish citizens have the chance to express their opinions and experience disagreement. Although the quality of these discussions leaves room for improvement, it is noteworthy that most of the comments were civil and hate speech was absent. Citizens favored anonymous opinion expression in the comment sections analyzed. However, they could develop their argumentative skills by providing more justifications for their opinions and improving their listening skills by concentrating on establishing dialogue rather than monologue. Although it is tempting to remove anonymity as a quick fix to improve the quality of discussion, my research suggests such a solution is not necessarily enough to guarantee an improvement in discussion quality.

7.3 Anonymous political participation

Of all the four articles, three explicitly touched upon anonymous political participation. What, then, can be learned about anonymous political participation based on this thesis?

When citizens use informal channels for political participation, anonymity is a choice for them. Citizens had the choice to discuss politics

anonymously in the newspaper comments section (article 3) and could choose to sign e-petitions anonymously at *adressit.com* (article 2). However, the formal forms of online political participation put more emphasis on identification, as in the example of *kansalaisaloite.fi* demanding strong signature verification using personal online bank codes. Paradoxically, users of *kansalaisaloite.fi* will remain anonymous if the e-petition they signed online fails to reach the quorum of 50 000 signatures. Thus, if the petition a citizen signs fails to gather enough signatures, the action of signing it still remains anonymous to other citizens.

Article 2 (Berg, 2017b) demonstrated a trend in Finnish informal e-petition signing: users have become less inclined over time to stay anonymous when signing e-petitions. I do not know the reason for this phenomenon; however, I speculate it has something to do with the increasing popularity of real-name social media represented by Facebook, Google+, and Twitter, making citizens more accustomed to using their real names instead of aliases in their online interactions. Nevertheless, anonymity is still quite popular since about 32 percent of the online signatures were anonymous on the informal platform. The findings in article 2 suggested that e-petition characteristics affect the choice to remain anonymous when signing online petitions. Although this choice might also be connected to other variables as personality type or individual preferences, the four determinants found in article 2 can at the very least explain part of the variation in the share of anonymous signatures. Here, it was also found that anonymity seems to be "contagious," in the sense that anonymously initiated e-petitions resulted in a larger share of anonymous signatures. My data does not reveal if this is the case for online discussions as well, yet it could be plausible that anonymous comments spur more anonymous comments, as anonymity becomes part of the expectation when entering an online commenting forum featuring mostly anonymous discussants.

Similarly to the informal e-petitions platform *adressit.com*, anonymity was popular in the informal online discussions on *vasabladet.fi*. Almost every comment (96 percent) was written by an anonymous user. This might be different today as the commenting forums have evolved since 2010 when the data for article 3 was gathered. Even though the discussion quality in the commenting section did not always live up to the ideal democratic conversations described by deliberative theorists, the study showed that even an almost completely anonymous setting can produce discussions that are free from hate speech and uncivil behavior. At the same time, it needs to be acknowledged that none of the unpublished, neglected comments were analyzed in the study.

Article 4 showed that other factors than anonymity might account for the variation in online discussion quality. The controversiality of the discussion topic was the other determinant analyzed in the study, and I found that this factor had a larger impact than anonymity. Moreover, anonymity had positive effects, even promoting some indicators of discussion quality. The lack of negative effects of anonymity might have been due to the experimental setting of the study. Participant knew they were being monitored and therefore behaved better than in the "real-world." However, they remained anonymous to *each other* and the experimental setting eliminated potential impact on discussion quality from other factors. At least, the study showed it seems to be a fallacy to adhere to technological determinism by always expecting negative effects of anonymity on online discussion quality. It might be the case that people behave differently under the influence of anonymity. In this context, there are several other factors with an impact on online discussion quality worth exploring: participant personality, example posting-strategies, active moderation, and online discussion experience, to mention a few.

Summary of 7.2 and 7.3

E-petitioning and online political discussion are not necessarily signs of participatory and deliberative democracy replacing representative democracy. Instead, these forms of engagement seek to improve the representative political system by increasing the quantity of political participation (by involving more citizens in politics) and by refining the communication processes of public opinion formation (Chambers, 2003; Dalton, 2014). Thus, the internet seems promising from both of these perspectives. Ideas connecting the internet with participatory democracy identify a positive development due to the potential to involve more people in decision-making processes and giving citizens more chances of having their say. Deliberative democracy connects the internet to the quality of participation, as the wealth of information and the possibilities for reasoned discussion with people holding opposite views produces better decisions with the common good in mind (ideally). The literature on online anonymity suggests that the theories of participatory and deliberative democracy might have diverging views on anonymity. On the one hand, participatory democrats might view anonymity in a positive light since it lowers the threshold for participation. On the other hand, deliberative democrats might dislike anonymity since it tends to lower the quality of discussion among citizens. Furthermore, the theory of deliberative democracy probably focused on face-to-face, rather than online, discussions. The assumption that anonymity lowers the threshold for participation was not directly tested in this thesis, although the findings point in that direction, given the large share of anonymous signatures on the informal e-petition platform (article 2). Nevertheless, anonymity did not have an impact on the quantity of postings in the formal online discussion analyzed (article 4). The findings also showed that the online discussion analyzed did not always match the ideal discussion envisioned by deliberative democrats (article 3), neither did anonymity produce the expected negative effects (article 4). There might

be a trade-off between representativeness of large-scale presentation and the quality of discussion achieved by small-scale discussion. Improving the quality of discussion might come at the cost of decreasing the quantity of public participation (Cohen & Fung, 2004, p. 27). "Participationists" stress inclusiveness and representation, while "deliberationists" emphasize the quality of discussion (Burchardt, 2012).

Formal and informal forms of political participation differ in their institutional connection. Citizens seem to use these for slightly different purposes; the formal forms have a higher potential of actually having an impact and producing policy change, the informal ones can be used as venues for opinion expression that perhaps are less instrumental in character and includes a lower potential for policy impact. Nevertheless, informal forms of political participation provide citizens with opportunities to demonstrate their political will and vent frustration with the way democracy works. As a result of the less strict moderation and unclear implications of participating (in terms of impact) in informal venues, these acts of participation seem to represent a wide array of seriousness. Perhaps self-expression, rather than policy change, is the primary motivation for informal participation.

The tone of the types of informal political participation analyzed in this thesis tended to be more negative than the formal forms. Article comments had a more negative tone compared to the postings in the experimental study of online deliberation. Likewise, the e-petitions on the informal site were more often coded as negative than the e-petitions on the formal site. This suggests that informal political participation is more confrontational to its character, or is used by citizens for protesting to a larger extent than the formal forms of participation. As negative emotions can work as catalysts for political participation (see Soroka, 2014; Valentino et al., 2011), the informal acts of online participation provide citizens with opportunities to blow off steam whenever they want. Of course, formal political participation can also be used to relieve pressure and self-expression needs related to one's political opinion.

However, the threshold for participating tends to be lower for informal forms of political participation; it is easier to sign informal e-petitions and the opportunities to take part in informal political discussion online are endless.

7.4 Implications of the findings

7.4.1 Theoretical implications

This thesis sought to expand the literature on online political participation. Some studies in this thesis had an explorative approach, possibly being more theory generating than theory consuming. The scarcity of related literature about the phenomena of interest was a reason for this approach. Nonetheless, this section will contrast my findings in light of existing research and discuss possible implications for current theories.

Dealing with innovations inspired by participatory democracy and deliberative democracy, the thesis had a focus on both phenomena within and outside the formal political system. E-petitioning and online political discussion may be regarded as possible solutions to some of democracy's problems, related to changes in how citizens participate politically: declining numbers of traditional political participation being one of the most prominent dilemmas (Dalton, 2014). Although online political discussion and e-petitioning only represent two forms of several new channels for political participation, they might increase the understanding of political participation in modern representative democracies. It is worth remembering that these two forms are internet-supported modifications of old forms of political participation rather than internet-based phenomena. Moreover, when assessing their possible impact on democracy, it has to be acknowledged that these forms of participation are considered low-cost since they require less effort than other forms of political participation (e.g., demonstrations, hacktivism) (van Laern & van Aelst, 2009).

This thesis has illustrated that e-petition systems come in many shapes and sizes (Wright, 2015, p. 137; Karlsson & Åström, 2015, p. 567). Citizens' use of both formal and informal e-petitioning platforms in Finland points towards a demand for increased participation opportunities as argued by participatory democracy theorists (Barber, 1984; Pateman, 2012). Thus, citizens are given more opportunities for input on specific policy issues between elections (Christensen, 2013, p. 1). Dissatisfied democrats (Dalton, 2014) can use e-petitioning to channel their dissatisfaction with the way representative institutions operate in practice. E-petitioning seems to fit the demands of modern citizens; it gives them opportunities to bypass the representative system to express support for specific policies individually, it enables new issues to reach the political agenda, and addresses political actors both within and outside the formal political system. In this sense, e-petitioning mainly complements traditional forms of political participation in representative democracies, although the introduction of the Citizens' Initiative might have disrupted the traditional political order (Dalton, 2014, p. 12) by giving citizens' more influence on the agenda of the Finnish Parliament. The potential for disruption is much smaller for the informal e-petition platform as there are no legal obligations for any addressee to deal with e-petitions put forward using these platforms.

While the introduction of different e-petitioning platforms very well might increase the quantity of citizen participation and increase legitimacy in line with participatory democracy ideas, due to the small amount of petitions that actually result in policy change using the formal system, there is still a risk that e-petition systems fail to increase legitimacy for the political system (see Christensen, 2015) if citizens do not witness any results of their efforts. Therefore, instead of solving problems of negative attitudes towards politics and politicians, e-petition systems, if poorly designed, might create new ones (Wright, 2015, p. 1; McNutt, 2015, p. 4). Therefore, it is valuable for future studies to evaluate if e-petitions live up to citizens' expectations. Otherwise, e-

petition platforms might be blowing a democratic bubble with the risk of bursting and further causing distrust and dissatisfaction with the political system among citizens (Bryer, 2010; Karlsson & Åström, 2015). Therefore, I agree with the thoughts of Karlsson and Åström (2015, p. 597), who state that e-petitioning has a "vulnerable potential." Yet, e-petitioning might help develop representative democracy due to its agenda-setting ability and the possibility to develop better e-petition platforms.

Despite the questionable impact on policy by the e-petitions analyzed in this thesis, the mere quantity of signers seems promising for e-petition systems to become a recurring political participation tool for Finnish citizens. This thesis did not specifically focus on the success of e-petitions, partly due to the difficulties with defining success (Bochel, 2012; Hough, 2012; Wright, 2015), and partly because of the practical problem of evaluating the policy effects of e-petitions on informal platforms. Simply put, it would be very demanding for researchers to evaluate the individual impact of several hundred e-petitions to prove the causal link between the e-petition and policy change convincingly. In the case of Citizens Initiatives, the situation is different. Here, only one petition[5], out of almost 600 petitions launched in total, has actually directly caused policy change since the introduction of the system in 2012. Thus, these findings are in line with Östling (2011), Wright (2012) and Yasseri et al. (2013) who found that the political results of e-petitioning are rather disappointing regarding formal e-petition systems. Why, then, do citizens keep signing e-petitions despite the low chance of policy impact? It seems plausible that citizens have broader definitions of successful e-petitioning than scholars, which aids them in

[5] This was the initiative for same-sex marriage, which became legal in Finland on March 1, 2017. The law ending the distinction between same-sex unions and heterosexual marriages was passed in 2014. This gave same-sex couples equal rights to adopt children and share a surname.

rationalizing action (Wright, 2015, p. 2). A possible explanation could be that just and straight-forward processes surrounding e-petitioning is more important to citizens than policy influence (Carman, 2010; Karlsson & Åström 2015, p. 594). Moreover, as Wright (2015, p. 12) argues, it might be too harsh to simply evaluate e-petitioning as a political participation tool in terms of policy impact. E-petitions can be parts of larger campaigns, and success can also be defined as raising awareness about an issue using an e-petition. Thus, e-petitions can create secondary effects besides policy change, effects on individuals' political efficacy, for example (Karlsson & Åström, 2015).

My research supports the view that e-petitioning seems to empower individuals, as opposed to established organizations (see Karlsson & Åström, 2015, p. 578, p. 581). A large majority of the e-petitions analyzed were initiated by individuals. This suggests that e-petitioning has the possibility to increase influence for less resourceful political actors, possibly because of the low cost of initiating e-petitions. Furthermore, my findings confirm those of Schmidt and Johnsen (2014), which reveal that men dominate formal e-petitioning in terms of petition initiation. Likewise, the assumption that women are more prominent in informal political participation (Marien, Hooghe & Quintelier, 2010; Sheppard, 2015) also seem to be true, at least when it comes to initiating e-petitions. Thus, the findings considering the role of gender in e-petitioning supports previous research on gender gaps in political participation in general (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010; Norris, 2002), in other words, some types of political participation are preferred by women and others by men (Electoral Commission, 2004; Hooghe & Stolle, 2004; Marien et al., 2008). I do not have any explanations for why there are gender differences based on whether the e-petition initiation takes place in a formal or informal setting. Based on the findings of Coffé and Bolzendahl (2010), it can be speculated that women might be pressurized into a gender role specializing in the private sphere and therefore find it easier to participate in ways that can be incorporated into daily life without

demanding too much in form of resources (e.g., time, information, civic skills). In industrialized societies, women spend more time on household responsibilities than their male partners even when both partners work full time (see Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010, 321), reducing women's opportunities for political participation (Electoral Commission, 2004, p. 102; Verba et al., 1997). Arguably, initiating an e-petition on an informal platform is slightly less resource-demanding than doing so on a formal platform. On the informal platform, the only thing needed to start an e-petition is a functioning e-mail address, whereas e-petition initiation on the formal platform requires login using personal bank codes. However, the difference is perhaps not large enough—e-petition initiation, regardless of platform, is not an especially demanding task—to be solely attributed to resources required.

Regarding the gender gap between formal and informal e-petition initiation, other speculative explanations can be discussed. First, informal forms of engagement may correspond better to women's own definitions of good citizenship (Harrison & Munn, 2007) and be perceived as more effective by women than by men (Marien & Hooghe, 2012, p. 13). Second, the e-petitions on the informal platform can address actors on both local, regional, national, and international level, whereas the formal platform only deals with national, legislative issues. Studies have shown that women are socialized to be more involved and interested in local, rather than national, politics (Coffé, 2013; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; 2000; Electoral Commission, 2004). Furthermore, another explanation might be that women engage in different types of issues than men, as shown by van Aelst and Walgrave (2001) concerning demonstrations. Nevertheless, discovering the reasons for women being more attracted towards informal political participation is an area for further research (Marien et al., 2010, p. 10).

The sum of the findings in articles 2 and 3 suggests that Finnish citizens use the option of anonymity when participating online, indicating that Green (2013) is right in arguing that citizens are

concerned over their political obscurity—the individual control over the scope of public knowledge about one's political preferences. The formal website did not publish names of the undersigned online, which is in line with Riehm et al. (2012, p. 18, p. 20) who recommend an anonymization option for signatures. The average share of anonymous e-petition signatures on the informal e-petition site was smaller (circa 32 percent) than the share of anonymous article comments (96 percent) on the informal newspaper comment section. This gives support to La Raja's (2011) ideas that some citizens prefer to avoid the social discomfort of making their political opinions public or wish for greater control of when to do so online. Based on my data, however, it is problematic to confirm that e-petition signature disclosure, revealing one's real name, online has a chilling effect on participation (cf. La Raja, 2011). Nevertheless, this assumption seems plausible as anonymity was an active choice for every third citizen. The large share of anonymous comments in the commenting sections suggests that the threshold for participating in online discussion is lower when anonymity is allowed (Min, 2007; Rains, 2005; Stromer-Galley, 2003) or that people adapt their behavior according to the social context; if anonymity is the norm, people will turn to it due to phenomena as social learning and social modeling (see Rösner, Winter & Krämer, 2016; Zimmerman & Ybarra, 2016). Thus, citizens might be reluctant to discuss politics non-anonymously because they view political discussion as an exposure of their basic identity (Conover et al., 2002). Yet, the comparison of anonymous and identifiable online discussion in article 4 showed no statistically significant difference between anonymous and identifiable posters (cf. Kilner & Hoadley, 2005; Rhee & Kim, 2009; Towne & Herbsleb, 2012, p. 108), indicating that disclosure did not have a chilling effect on participation. Hence, the results for the assumption that anonymity lowers the threshold for participation are mixed. I can only speculate about the reasons for this; it is possible that the self-selected sample in the experimental study (article 4) resulted in a pool of people that were

more highly educated and outspoken than the population in general. Another possible explanation is that there are contextual differences between e-petitioning and online commenting; identification might be the norm for e-petitioning given that people are used to signing disclosing their names on paper-based petitions, whereas the norm for online political discussion has been towards anonymity (at least before the widespread adoption of Facebook and other "real-name" social media).

To date, most of the research surrounding anonymity in politics has concerned the effects of anonymity (e.g., Gardner, 2011; La Raja, 2011; Ruesch & Märker, 2012b; Tolkin, 2013). Much less is known about the causes of anonymity in political participation (Reader, 2012, p. 13). Therefore, article 2 dealt with possible predictors of anonymity in the context of e-petition signing. Here, it was found that e-petition characteristics had an impact on the signing behavior of citizens; whether they chose to disclose their signature online or not. This increases the understanding of citizens' behavior online and can hopefully generate hypotheses to be tested in other contexts of political participation about when and why citizens choose anonymity. Two of the more prominent findings were that anonymity was decreasing over time, and that anonymity was "contagious." Again, it seemed like citizens adopt the behavior (cf. article 3) of the initiator of an e-petition; if the initiator was anonymous, undersigners were more likely to remain anonymous too. The somewhat surprising finding that controversial e-petition topics did not result in a higher share of anonymous signature indicates that "extreme ideologues"—people with extreme opinions—were less sensitive to disclosure of their political preferences than moderates (La Raja, 2011). Perhaps citizens with opinions on controversial issues are more accustomed to wearing "their politics on the sleeve" compared to people signing less controversial e-petitions (La Raja, 2011, p. 4). By identifying patterns behind anonymous e-petition signing, this research adds to the literature on reasons for anonymity in online interactions.

However, it does so on the basis of quantitative data of actual behavior rather than qualitative data of reported behavior (cf. Kang et al., 2013). Future studies should combine these methods to achieve a better understanding of the reasons for anonymity in online politics. Although my findings contribute to the question *when* citizens choose anonymity, the data does not reveal *why* citizens choose it. Moreover, it is necessary to acknowledge that my findings relating to predictors of anonymity in political participation are placed in the context of a modern representative democracy. I do not expect to find the same reasons for anonymous political participation in totalitarian states given the potentially disastrous consequences of revealing one's political opinions in such a context.

Article 3 focused on one of the most popular forms of political participation online: commenting on news articles (Weber, 2013, p. 2). The findings support the idea that readers prefer pseudonymous communication (Cho & Acquisti, 2013). In line with Eisinger (2011), Ruiz et al. (2011), Canter (2013) and Rowe (2015), contrasting the findings of Benson (1996) and Santana (2012), I found that the majority of the article comments was neither uncivil nor impolite. However, civility and politeness are only two indicators of the quality of discussion. The results were less encouraging when criteria as rationality and reciprocity were assessed. Nevertheless, I want to highlight that, in a similar manner as Ruiz et al. (2011, p. 467), I find it too much to ask for online comments to live up to the ideals of deliberative democracy. Analyzing online comments using measures of debate developed for parliamentary debate and comparing these two forums can set unrealistic goals for online discussions (Wright, 2011). Yet, the criteria derived from the literature on deliberation serve as benchmarks for evaluating online discussion.

How did my findings compare to the literature on quality of online discussion? Comparing findings is complicated, many different coding schemes and operationalizations of discussion quality have been used in the literature (e.g., Graham, 2009; Graham & Witschge, 2003; Kersting &

Zimmermann, 2014; Nagar 2011; Santana, 2012). The varieties of quality measures used, the diversity of data collection methods, and the heterogeneity of contexts analyzed contributes to the difficulty of arriving at a precise scientific synthesis about the quality of online discussion (Monnoyer-Smith & Wojcik, 2012, p. 27). Although the article comments did not always live up to the high standards to be labeled as deliberation, the discussion in the commenting section did not paint an equally grim view of online political discussion as in the findings concluding that online discussion fails to reach the standards of deliberation (Schneider, 1997; Hill & Hughes, 1999; Davis, 1999; Wilhelm, 1999; Jankowski & van Os, 2004; Loveland & Popescu, 2011; Santana, 2014). The results were not as encouraging as other, more positive findings regarding the quality of online discussion (Jensen, 2003b; Stromer-Galley, 2002; Dahlberg, 2001; Talpin & Monnoyer-Smith, 2010; Monnoyer-Smith & Wojcik, 2012). In sum, in the online commenting section studied here, in the same manner as Eisinger (2011), most of the dialogue was civil in nature. This is important, since uncivil comments can cause polarization among individuals (Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos & Ladwig, 2013). The quality of commenting was not what deliberative theorists might envision as an ideal online public sphere, yet it was not "an insult to democracy" (see Stromer-Galley & Wichowski, 2011, p. 181). Similar to previous findings (Friedman, 2011; Pieper & Pieper, 2014) the comments sometimes exhibited signs of deliberative discussion, even though they mostly contain personal opinions in the form of statements lacking explicit justification.

Given that commenting sections have the potential to influence public opinion on policy matters (von Sikorski & Hänelt, 2016, pp. 2–3), a high-quality discussion is desirable to help citizens make informed choices based on reasoning rather than on pure emotions. Thus, the commenting section would benefit from more interactive (hearing the "other" side) communication based on justified statements, arguments, rather than

pure opinion expressions. Still, one should not dwell in pessimism, as the lofty ideals of deliberative discussion are to some extent unattainable (Stromer-Gallery & Wichowski, 2011, p. 182). Nevertheless, one of the main contributions of commenting sections is a diversity of opinions, even if the rationality of these opinions is often questionable. The words of Friedman come to mind here (2011, pp. 13–14): "In a sense, the Internet has traded rationality for inclusive democracy." Before research labels online commenting sections as detrimental to democracy, it should acknowledge that scholars know very little about how citizens discuss news offline, not to mention the quality of these discussions. As a reader of online commenting, one might become discouraged by the quality of discussion, yet it is not certain that online comments differ much from coffee room discussions due to the lack of data. Hence, conclusions about the quality of online comments depend on whether online discussion is compared to writings on a bathroom wall, workplace banter or to plenary debates of elected assemblies (cf. Pedrini, 2014).

As Jonsson and Åström (2014, p. 7) note, the "principal discussion on anonymity is rather shallow" in the literature on online discussion. The practical difficulty of arranging anonymous face-to-face discussions is probably a reason for the lack of attention anonymity was given in the pre-internet era of political discussion. In contrast, anonymous online discussions take place every day, all over the world. Some argue that anonymity can be a challenge for online deliberation by increasing negative behavior (e.g., Wales et al., 2010, p. 2), others argue there is no correlation between anonymity and discussion quality (e.g., Jensen, 2003; Reader, 2012; Reinig & Meijas, 2004), and some find positive effects of anonymity (e.g., Jensen, 2014). Hence, there is a debate in the literature regarding the effects of anonymity on the quality of discussion (Jonsson & Åström, 2014, p. 7).

My findings in article 4 (Berg, 2016) contradicts some previous research showing negative effects of anonymity on the quality of discussion (Omernick & Sood, 2013; Nagar, 2011; Aharony 2012; Santana,

2012; Kilner & Hoadley, 2005; Towne & Herbsleb, 2012, p. 108; Fredheim & Moore & Naugthon, 2015; Santana, 2014; Polat & Pratchett, 2009; Janssen & Kies, 2005, p. 321; Davis, 2005; Joinson et al., 2009 in Cho & Acquisti, 2013, p. 9). Instead, the findings are more in line with the research pointing towards no negative correlation between anonymity and discussion quality (Short, 2012; Reader, 2012; Kaigo & Watanabe, 2007; Jensen, 2002; 2014; Tereszkiewicz, 2012). These results indicate that the effects of anonymity on the quality of discussion are mixed and more nuanced than previously believed (e.g., Ksiazek, 2016; 2015). Furthermore, anonymity can have contradictory effects for different criteria (e.g., rationality compared to reciprocity) of discussion quality (Friess & Eilders, 2015, p. 326). Moreover, anonymity did not have an impact on the quantity of discussion as expected (cf. Kilner & Hoadley, 2005; Rhee & Kim, 2009; Towne & Herbsleb, 2012, p. 108). Therefore, my findings go against early deindividuation theory (Finn, 2016; cf. Zimbardo, 1969) and suggest that there are no simple explanations to how people respond to anonymity (Spears & Postmes, 2015, p. 30; Christie & Dill, 2016). Similarly, I did not find support for a toxic online disinhibition effect (cf. Suler, 2004). All in all, these findings suggest that the level of anonymity is not enough to explain variation in the quality of discussion and that other contextual factors play a part as well (Laineste, 2012; Chui, 2014; Short, 2012).

One of these contextual factors studied in article 4 was the discussion topic. Several scholars have argued that the topic has an influence on the quality of discussion (e.g., Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011; Coe, Kenski & Rains, 2014; Hutchens et al., 2015; Kies, 2010, p. 165; Ksiazek, 2016; Nagar, 2011; Santana 2014; Stromer-Galley, 2003; Tolkin, 2013; Wojcieszak & Price, 2012; Wright & Street 2007, p. 864). My findings showed that controversial topics tend to elicit lower-quality postings, which confirms conclusions from previous research (Ksiazek, 2016), contradicts the findings of Freelon et al. (2008), and adds weight to hypotheses about a negative impact of controversial topics on discussion

quality, as proposed by several scholars (Janssen & Kies, 2005, p. 8; Bächtiger, 2011; Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011). Contrary to previous findings, controversial issues did not increase the quantity of discussion (cf. Ksiazek, 2016). However, the controversiality of the discussion topic had mixed effects, indicating that controversial topics do no always result in negative implications for the quality of discussion. Most importantly, when analyzing the interaction between the discussion topic and anonymity, I found that the discussion topic had a greater impact on the quality of discussion. Therefore, I agree with Talpin and Monnoyer-Smith (2010, p. 12), when analyzing factors with a potential effect on the quality of discussion, scholars should control for the discussion topic. Moreover, when comparing anonymous and non-anonymous online discussion the difference might be overrated if the nature of the discussion topic is not taken into account (Rowe, 2015; Tolkin, 2013). To summarize, the impact of the discussion topic suggests that adopting a real-name policy is perhaps not sufficient for resolving the problems of low-quality online discussion.

7.4.2 Practical implications

The findings regarding anonymity should be interpreted with caution. The online comments analyzed in article 3 were moderated, which could have a decisive impact on the quality of discussion (Kies, 2010; Ksiazek, 2015; Park et al., 2016; Rhee & Kim, 2009; Ruesch & Märker, 2012b; Seo, 2007; Stromer-Galley, 2007; Trénel, 2009; Wright, 2009; Zhang, 2007; cf. Ruiz et al., 2011). Furthermore, the participants in the online forum in article 4 were self-selected and knew their actions were being watched as they agreed to participate in the experiment. Thus, the external validity of the findings can come into question. Nevertheless, although the moderators (article 3) and the researcher (article 4) knew the identity of the participants in the discussion, they were anonymous to each other. It might be the case that anonymity can produce discussions of higher quality if these discussions are moderated or supervised. In this sense,

my findings indicate that the use of moderation and pseudonymity can counteract some of the problems related to online discussion. Thus, instead of debating whether online discussion fora should be subject to real name policies or provide total anonymity for participants, pseudonymity could be the middle-ground solution (Moore, 2016, pp. 20–21). Moore (2016) argues that use of online forums should require registration to enable durability of pseudonyms, without demanding connectedness (e.g., real name policies). Thus, moderators can punish inappropriate behavior and promote deliberation, without forcing users to connect their discussions of public affairs to their social media world. Moore's idea of pseudonymity as an alternative solution has found some support in previous research (Cho & Acquisti, 2013, p. 2; Disqus, 2012; Fredheim et al., 2015b, p. 2). Furthermore, Cho and Acquisti (2013) found that users seem to prefer pseudonymous communication. Despite the possibilities for improving the quality of discussion by design (e.g., using active moderation or pseudonymity) it has to be acknowledged that the quality of discussion is ultimately determined by the participants themselves (Bergström & Wadbring, 2015; Karlsson, 2012).

It seems plausible that banning anonymity from online discussions will, in general, help to decrease the amount of incivility, hate speech and low quality commenting online. However, this solution is not guaranteed to solve all problems since the relationship between anonymity and online behavior is not deterministic, as indicated in this thesis. Anonymity does not seem to be the one-size-fits-all solution for raising the quality of online discussion. Some rhetorical questions can be raised here; will hate speech, racism, incivility, etc. disappear if online anonymity would be banned? Are these kinds of opinion expression less "real" if they are expressed anonymously? Or does anonymity help citizens approach their "true self"? The results of this study indicate that designers of online forums need to investigate other possible determinants of online discussion quality, instead of expecting wonders from identity policies (Finn, 2016; cf. Mungeam, 2011; Fredheim et al.,

2015a). Ideological identity and levels of partisanship have been found to have an impact on the quality of discussion (Swift, 2012). Research seems to indicate that non-anonymous web platforms also suffer from verbal aggression and incivility (Rösner & Krämer, 2016, p. 1). For example, users experience anti-social and negative behavior on online spaces like Instagram, Facebook, and Youtube, where users are visually identified (Finn, 2016, p. 1). Similarly, Rowe (2015b) found a higher quality of discussion in anonymous article comments on the Washington Post website compared to the article comments on Facebook.

Further action seems to be needed to involve more women in formal e-petitioning, as men dominated the initiation of petitions on the formal e-petition platform. At the same time, women were more prominent in initiating petitions on the informal platform. Future research should investigate the relationship between gender and formal/informal political participation to understand why the representation is skewed.

Informal e-petition platforms should consider introducing stronger signature verification methods to prevent misuse of the platform and decrease the chance of false signatures or manipulation. The findings regarding the anonymous signature option on the informal e-petition platform suggest that citizens will actively use it, indicating that the option for anonymity can increase participation in terms of quantity. Hence, not publishing names of the undersigned online can be an option for e-petition platform designers wanting to maximize the quantity of participation (La Raja, 2011).

A combined implication of articles 3 and 4 is the need for better methods of measuring the quality of (online) discussion. Usually, scholars base their measurement on Habermas' ideas of the ideal speech situation via the notion of the public sphere and operationalize the criteria of this ideal public sphere. However, there are difficulties in reaching consensus about these criteria and their operationalization (although the Discussion Quality Index (Steenbergen et al., 2003) is an attempt to provide scholars with a tool for this endeavor), making a

comparison of findings difficult. As Wright (2012) argues, scholars need to carefully consider the criteria they employ for discussion quality, and how these are operationalized. He argues that findings about online discussion quality would have been interpreted much more positively if they theoretical bar had been lowered from deliberation to discussion, since the deliberative criteria are ideal. Moreover, the reliability of the coding schemes is not always assessed in research about discussion quality, which raises questions about their validity (see Janssen & Kies, 2005). As a result, reaching conclusions regarding the quality of online discussion is not an easy task. Future research would potentially benefit from automated coding of large quantities of online discussion data if only a reliable tool can be invented to analyze big data. In the best of worlds, human coding of discussion quality could be integrated with machine-learning, to reduce the time-consuming process of evaluating online discussion quality. Furthermore, more emphasis could be put on perceived discussion quality to broaden the picture from elitist view on discussion quality, even though these types of measurements can have questionable validity due to popularity bias, if users, for example, start rating offensive comments highly (Mishra & Rastogi, 2012). Nevertheless, as Da Silva (2015, p. 34) and Domingo (2015, p. 166) highlight, taking perceived discussion quality into account does not mean that every online commenter should become a moderator with the possibility to delete postings, since this could create an ideological war between different viewpoints.

7.5 Limitations and recommendations for future research

This study has offered a descriptive perspective with, to some extent, explanatory ambitions on Finnish citizens' online political participation. The choice to focus on one country only has consequences for the generalizability of the results; it is troublesome to evaluate how

indicative the results are regarding online political participation outside the Finnish context. Nevertheless, by conducting studies in the same country context, I eliminate the possibility of specific cultural factors impacting the results when summarizing the findings from the four articles. Single-country studies have the virtue of holding potentially causal variables constant (Culpepper, 2005, p. 2), which was important in article 1, where formal and informal e-petitioning platforms were compared. This has also been important for articles 2 and 4 with explanatory ambitions, dealing with the determinants and effects of anonymous political participation (articles 2 and 4). Furthermore, it has to be acknowledged that the citizens examined in the articles dealing with online discussion mostly are from the Swedish-speaking minority which represents about five percent of the total population in Finland. Concerning the e-petitions studied, there barely were any e-petitions in Swedish, indicating that the sample was more representative than in the case of online discussion. This may have had bearing on the results. It has been found elsewhere that the Swedish-speaking minority differs in several aspects from the Finnish-speaking majority. For example, the divorce rate is remarkably lower among the Swedish-speaking minority (Finnäs, 1997), as is mortality (Koskinen & Martelin, 2003), which is possibly due to a larger extent of social capital among the Swedish-speaking minority compared to the Finnish-speaking majority (Hyyppä & Mäki, 2001). Moreover, the Swedish-speaking minority is a more advantaged group in terms of health and socioeconomic status than the Finnish-speaking majority (Volanen, Suominen, Lahelma, Koskenvuo & Silventoinen, 2006). People with higher socioeconomic status are more likely to engage in all forms of political participation and to be politically interested (Schlozman, Verba & Brady, 2012; Quintelier & van Deth, 2014). Therefore, it is plausible that the findings in the thesis might have been slightly different if only online discussion by Finnish-speaking citizens had been examined.

Another limitation relates to the size of the samples in the various empirical research articles in this thesis. Due to the time-consuming process of hand-coding both online discussion posts and e-petition texts, smaller sample sizes were inevitable. As a Ph.D.-candidate, I could not afford the luxury of recruiting research assistants for coding assignments, and therefore have conducted the coding singlehandedly. However, having only one coder can be considered strength in comparative studies, as it reduces problems related to inconclusive coding decisions due to low inter-coder reliability (although there is still a risk of intra-coder errors). Nevertheless, I have tested my coding scheme by conducting both simple inter-agreement tests (e.g., percentage agreement) and more conservative inter-reliability tests (e.g., Krippendorff's alpha) on a sub-sample of the coding units. Ideally, I would have conducted tests of intra-coder reliability as well. However, I think inter-coder reliability test are even more conservative than intra-coder test, given that the former gives researchers better clues about the reliability of the coding scheme in light of reproducibility.

In the articles dealing with online discussion quality, I encountered the tedious task of objectively trying to measure the quality of discussion posts using quantitative content analysis. The problem of assessing discussion quality objectively has been acknowledged elsewhere (e.g., Coleman & Moss, 2012; Janssen & Kies, 2005; Talpin & Monnoyer-Smith, 2010; Rowe, 2015b), and I have to agree with these scholars. That said, I do not mean that assessing the quality of discussion is impossible, merely that it is a task that involves some subjective judgment. When coders encounter large variation in how citizens express their political thoughts, coding quality is not as straight-forward as it might seem in theory. However, in contrast to an alternative method, the quantitative approach to content analysis is independent of the particular scholar, whereas qualitative content analysis is not (Neuendorf, 2016, p. 9). Furthermore, the lack of consensus regarding how to measure the quality of discussion combined with the arbitrary cut-off points between non-deliberative

(low-quality) and deliberative (high-quality) discussions, makes interpretation of results difficult (see Graham, 2009, p. 54, p. 166). This calls for a development of a coding scheme in the likes of the Discussion Quality Index, DQI (Steenbergen et al., 2003), simultaneously making sure the scheme is adaptable to online discussion, which tends to differ from face-to-face interactions. In a similar vein, more theoretical clarity is needed about distinguishing non-deliberative from deliberative talk, preferably leading to a developed DQI, with high inter-coder reliability.

When measuring the quality of online discussion, I used quantitative content analysis as a form of objective measurement. To increase the validity of the assessment, I could have included perceived discussion quality (see Kies, 2010, p. 164; King, 2009). Data about the participants' perception of discussion quality in the forum they participated in was collected in article 4. However, the text length requirements for a journal article did not allow analysis of perceived discussion quality to be included. This opens up further studies on online discussion quality; to what extent does perceived discussion quality differ from objectively measured discussion quality? Such a study could increase knowledge about the measurement techniques used by several scholars investigating online discussion (e.g., Kersting & Zimmermann, 2014; Nagar, 2011) and help determine if the deliberative standards are set too high, that is, if people have a different perception of discussion quality compared to scholars and experts. What if the objective and subjective measurements of online discussion quality do not match? If citizens determine discussion quality using a different yardstick than scholars and expert, online discussion quality might have been rated undeservedly low by the latter. Yet, it has to be acknowledged that citizens' tend to rate online discussion as having low quality as well, especially if they are less frequent readers of comment sections (Diakopoulos & Naaman, 2011, p. 136). Bergström and Wadbring (2015) found a paradoxical approach towards online comments among citizens in their sample; a majority considered online comments to be of high

value, while simultaneously bemoaning the low quality of these comments.

Neither article 3 nor article 4 found any instance of hate speech or incivility in the discussions, which was rather surprising; given the bad reputation of online discussion (see Da Silva, 2015, p. 33; Reader, 2012, p. 2; Reich, 2011, p. 98). However, in the case of the online commenting forum, I did not have any data on the nature of the dismissed comments, that is, the comments that were never published or deleted. It might be plausible that the lack of incivility and hate speech in the online comments was due to successful moderation by editors, yet I could not test this hypothesis due to lack of data. Moreover, the participants in the experimental study regarding the effects of anonymity and issue controversiality could have been exposed to the Hawthorne effect, and thus behaved better than they would have outside an experimental setting. The Hawthorne effect posits that research participants alter their behavior as a consequence of being observed by researchers (McCambridge, Witton & Elbourne, 2014, p. 247). Their commenting behavior could have been affected because knew their actions were being watched by scholars and therefore made fewer uncivil responses (cf. Rösner et al., 2016, p. 469). Nevertheless, the manipulation of anonymity was successful and the participants truly were anonymous to each other, although their identities were known to the researcher. Of course, this study also suffered from the problems of self-selection, as mainly highly educated citizens and students participated in the experiment. In a more real-life setting, the participant could perhaps have been more inclined towards incivility and hate speech. The experiment probably did not attract the most demonic internet trolls. The bias in participant selection is not unique to this study (e.g., Lindell, 2015), and it simply seems difficult to attract citizens with extreme political opinions to these kinds of experimental studies. Nevertheless, recruitment for experiments using self-selection is not unusual and automatically condemned (Falk, Meier

& Zehnder, 2013), and neither is the use of students in experiments (Druckman & Kam, 2011).

A central limitation with studying phenomena on the internet is the rate of development (Schneider & Foot, 2004). My earliest data (on online comments) dates back to 2010, and arguably the internet has evolved in many ways since then. This is a challenge for any researcher studying the internet and might be problematic to cope with. The pace online is quick and findings tend to become outdated. At the same time, this development opens up for explorative studies of the kind I have presented regarding e-petitions and online comments. Researchers obtain chances to study previously unexplored forms of political participation, and, thus, are presented with the opportunity to be at the forefront of emerging research areas. This has been illustrated with the increasing amount of research on online commenting during my years as a Ph.D. student. Still, while the empirical research articles have multiplied in numbers, the debate about online discussion quality and the role of anonymity in affecting this quality has not faded. Conversely, it is perhaps more present than ever as many different online commenting policies are implemented in the most popular media outlets.

Although e-petitioning is thoroughly described in this thesis, there are still many areas of this form of online political participation to examine. In this thesis, I do not evaluate the effectiveness of e-petitions when it comes to policy change, for example. However, this has partly already been done (El Noshokaty, Deng & Kwak, 2016; Hale et al., 2013; Palmieri, 2008; Wright, 2015). In the case of the Finnish Citizens' Initiative, an interesting point of departure could be to investigate how citizens' opinions about the effectiveness of this democratic innovation change over time. Moreover, using my e-petition data, it would have been possible to search for factors influencing the success (measured as the number of signatures) of e-petitions. Yet, as this thesis has put special emphasis on anonymous political participation, other areas of interest

have been neglected but may serve as future research projects. In light of this, future studies could examine what distinguishes successful e-petition from unsuccessful ones.

Article 2 showed that the share of anonymous e-petitions signature has been decreasing over time. Likewise, anonymous commenting sections are being abandoned by several online news providers, replacing anonymity with real name policies similarly to Facebook and Google+. This begs the question if anonymity is fading away online? And if so, why is anonymity becoming less popular? Should citizens be forced to be open about their political affiliations? Is it time to abandon the secret ballot? Technically, an introduction of e-voting might result in dismissal of the secret ballot. Perhaps citizens no longer think political anonymity is a virtue, and therefore are prepared to lose their political obscurity. This thesis has studied when citizens prefer to stay anonymous when participating politically. However, it has not, to any greater extent, discussed why people choose to be anonymous in politics. Maybe this choice is a question of personality, in the sense that some citizens are more inclined towards anonymity than others. This hypothesis could be tested experimentally to evaluate the connection between personality type and anonymous political participation. In this thesis, I found that many online commentators and e-petition signers seemed to turn to anonymity. Assessing personality types and anonymity preferences could increase knowledge about why some people prefer political anonymity.

Another area of interest is the reception of anonymous online commenting. Is online commenting an effective way of changing people's minds? What kind of impact does the online commenting section have? Are anonymous and non-anonymous comments rated in the same way by readers? In contrast to news, comments are not fact-checked in the same manner, and might, therefore, be used for misinformation and false opinions. Looking beyond the quality of online

discussion, scholars need to evaluate the impact of these forums on opinion formation, attitudes, and political knowledge.

7.6 Conclusions

This thesis started from the assumption that democracy faces problems in form of declining levels of traditional political participation. To some extent, citizens seem dissatisfied with the way democracy functions, yet they still support democracy as a principle of government. To counteract declining levels of political participation, ideas originating from both participatory and deliberative democracy have been combined with the emergence of the internet, raising hopes for a revival of the connection between citizens and politics. Here, I have focused on e-petitioning and online political discussion as potential solutions to improve the relationship between citizens and democracy. Furthermore, to widen the focus, I have analyzed both formal and informal political participation, given citizens' increasing use of informal channels for participation.

The forms of political participation—e-petitioning and online discussion—studied in this thesis are popular among citizens, yet they do not change the foundations of representative democracy. The decision-making power is still in the hands of elected representatives. The use of e-petitioning and online political discussion illustrates a citizenry with an interest in politics, and perhaps also a citizenry turning to these forms to express dissatisfaction with the lack of input given in traditional political participation. Based online, these two forms of participation give citizens the choice to activate themselves politically whenever and wherever they want to rather than having the time and place for their participation determined by others. Participating in e-petitioning and online discussion can be done individually, from the comfort of one's own home, which lowers the threshold for participation. Moreover, these activities can usually be performed anonymously, further lowering the threshold for participation. Thus, these innovations

can increase the level of participation and expand the toolbox of political participation.

In contrast to previous research, this thesis has highlighted differences between formal and informal political participation, showing that citizens use formal and informal channels differently, which is demonstrated in the context of e-petitioning. Informal political participation, just like formal political participation, is a way to express political opinions and needs to be taken into account when discussing the changing nature of political participation. One's view on informal political participation is likely to affect the interpretation of the state of contemporary democracy. If one dismisses informal political participation as a waste of time, the interpretation of democracy's future is likely to be gloomy. However, it is possible that informal (i.e., latent) online political participation is neither useless slacktivism nor the ultimate cure for the democratic malaise but something in between. A citizen might consider that the cost of signing an online petition or participating in an online discussion is relatively small compared to the potential benefit from doing so, and therefore worth doing. The findings seem to show that citizens do use both formal and informal forms of online political participation, and many times do so anonymously.

Scholars are only beginning to find out why people opt for anonymity when participating politically online. This thesis has merely touched upon the subject. Consequently, the question of when citizens should be allowed to participate anonymously in politics might resurface as new democratic innovations are being implemented online. Therefore, the question not likely to lose importance. However, this thesis, in contrast to several studies, has shown that anonymity is not necessarily causing a low quality of discussion online. This highlights a need to examine other determinants of discussion quality. Removing anonymity is perhaps not the "quick fix" many forum moderators and online newspaper editors hope for when wanting to increase the quality of online discussion. Moreover, the research field of online deliberation and

discussion would benefit from a reliable instrument for measuring online discussion quality, preferably an instrument that is able to handle large amounts of data from diverse contexts. This would benefit comparative research about online discussion quality and its determining factors.

Although the quality of discussion does not always live up to the high standards of deliberation, and despite few e-petitions actually led to policy change, the opportunities to influence the political agenda has perhaps never been greater. Work is still to be done in order to enhance the quality of participation both in terms of raising the quality of public debate online and improving the e-petition processes from mere ideas for policy changes to actual implementation. However, by allowing more voices into the public sphere, these innovations have the potential to level the playing field and empower individuals on the cost of established political actors, organizations and parties.

Svensk sammanfattning

Medborgarnas politiska deltagande är en förutsättning för en fungerande demokrati. Med politiskt deltagande avses alla de former av engagemang där medborgare uttrycker sin politiska vilja eller förmedlar denna vilja till beslutsfattare. Synsätten på hur ofta och i vilka former detta deltagande ska äga rum skiljer sig däremot åt mellan olika demokratiteorier. En modernisering av medborgarnas attityder kombinerat med en kommunikationsteknologisk utveckling med internet i spetsen har skapat nya former för politiskt deltagande. En del former är initierade från myndighetshåll medan andra har skapats utanför det formella politiska systemet.

Dessa nya former av politiskt deltagande på internet utökar medborgarnas ”verktygslåda” för att uttrycka sina åsikter. Dels uppstår helt internetbaserade former för politiskt deltagande (t.ex. hacktivism) och dels återkommer gamla former (t.ex. e-petitioner) i en ny skepnad. Tidigare forskning visar att medborgarna använder sig av dessa former och att de tenderar att göra det allt oftare, till skillnad från mer traditionella former av politiskt deltagande som minskar i popularitet. Däremot finns det mindre forskning kring hur detta politiska deltagande online ser ut i praktiken.

I takt med att det politiska deltagandet flyttar över till nätet kommer det i kontakt med en av internets centrala egenskaper: möjligheten till anonymt deltagande. Det här väcker intressanta frågor om orsaker till och effekter av anonymt politiskt deltagande. I dessa frågor är den statsvetenskapliga forskningen fortfarande i sin linda.

Syftet med denna avhandling är att öka kunskapen om politiskt deltagande på internet. De övergripande frågeställningarna är: Hur utövar medborgarna politiskt deltagande på nätet? Hur använder sig medborgarna av möjligheten till anonymt politiskt deltagande? De former av politiskt deltagande som denna avhandling empiriskt granskar är nätbaserade politiska diskussioner och namninsamlingar.

Sammanläggningsavhandlingen består av tre huvuddelar. I den första delen redogör jag för bakgrunden till studien och diskuterar centrala begrepp. Den andra delen består av fyra vetenskapliga artiklar som tillsammans utgör det empiriska bidraget i avhandlingen. I den summerande avslutningsdelen redogör jag avhandlingens bidrag, sammanfattar resultaten från de fyra artiklarna och diskuterar begränsningar samt rekommendationer för framtida forskning.

Det empiriska angreppssättet i avhandlingen är en kombination av olika metoder. I samtliga artiklar använder jag kvantitativ innehållsanalys för att beskriva medborgarnas politiska deltagande. Jag drar nytta av den experimentella metodens styrkor för att utreda kausala samband mellan olika faktorer som påverkar diskussionskvalitet. I artikeln som studerar anonymitetens orsaker använder jag mig av regressionsanalys för att reda ut vad som förklarar andelen anonyma underskrifter på e-petitioner. De två artiklarna som granskar diskussionskvalitet använder sig av idealtypsanalys, där den observerade kvaliteten ställs mot teoretiska ideal. I två av artiklarna företar jag en jämförande metod för att identifiera likheter och skillnader mellan olika subtyper av politiskt deltagande. En avgränsning är att all data i denna studie härstammar från Finland.

Politiskt deltagande i form av politisk diskussion eller e-petitioner kan ske via både informella och formella vägar. Användandet av e-petitioner skiljer sig åt på flera punkter beroende på om namninsamlingen äger rum på en formell eller informell sajt. Andelen medborgare som väljer att vara anonyma beror till en del på vad e-petitionerna handlar om, ifall den som initierat e-petitionen gjort det anonymt samt hur argumentationen ser ut i texten. Utöver detta har andelen anonyma underskrifter minskat över tid, men sett till helheten var ungefär var tredje underskrift anonym.

Anonymiteten var också starkt framträdande i det artikelkommentarsforum som var föremål för undersökning i en av artiklarna. Diskussionskvaliteten i detta forum ledde inte alltid upp till

de höga idealen som härletts från den samtalsdemokratiska teoribildningen, men samtidigt var kvaliteten inte heller sämre än i liknande nätforum. Resultaten var blandade beroende på vilken aspekt av diskussionskvalitet som analyserades. Medborgardiskussionen i artikelkommentarerna nådde inte nödvändigtvis upp till kraven på rationella resonemang. Däremot visade deltagarna bättre tendenser gällande aspekter som att hålla sig till diskussionsämnet.

Hurudana faktorer påverkade då diskussionskvaliteten då medborgare diskuterade politik online? Diskussionsämnets laddning visade sig ha större påverkan på diskussionskvaliteten än anonymitet. Ett mer kontroversiellt, ”laddat”, ämne fick fler negativa konsekvenser för diskussionskvaliteten jämfört med effekten av att diskutera anonymt. Anonymiteten hade inga större effekter på diskussionskvaliteten. Däremot tenderade ett mer kontroversiellt ämne ha negativa effekter på diskussionskvaliteten.

I de former av politiskt deltagande som avhandlingen behandlar verkar det finnas en efterfrågan på möjligheten att delta anonymt, givet den andel av diskussionen och underskrifter som utfördes anonymt. Resultaten pekar på att formella och informella sajter för politiskt deltagande används i olika syften och av olika aktörer. De informella formerna ligger närmare expressivt, s.k. latent politiskt deltagande, än de formella formerna som mer liknar manifest, eller instrumentellt, deltagande. Både politisk diskussion och namninsamlingar verkar användas flitigt av finländare. E-petitioner representerar ett brett spektrum av ämnen som medborgarna vill lyfta upp på den politiska agendan, vilket antyder att det finns ett behov av denna typ av deltagande.

Resultaten visar att det finns utrymme att förbättra diskussionskvaliteten i både informella forum som kommentarsfält och formellt initierade webbforum. Men det ter inte sig säkert att ett förbud mot anonymt diskussionsdeltagande nödvändigtvis höjer diskussionskvaliteten. De former av politiskt deltagande som

avhandlingen behandlar utökar visserligen möjligheterna för medborgarna att uttrycka sig, men för att dessa uttryck ska ha effekt krävs också det att någon lyssnar.

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Janne Berg

Digital democracy

Studies of online political participation

The objective of this thesis is to gain knowledge about citizens' online political participation in contemporary democracies. Some scholars have regarded the internet as a potential remedy to decreasing levels of traditional political participation. This is partly because the internet expands the political participation repertoire for citizens.

On the one hand, entirely new forms of participation, like hacktivism, emerge online. On the other hand, the internet revitalizes older forms of political participation, such as petitioning and political discussion. This thesis concerns how citizens use these latter forms of political participation.

When political participation moves online, it becomes interwoven with a central characteristic of the internet; anonymity. Once a greatly debated topic regarding the secret ballot, online anonymity has now revived a discussion about the effects of anonymity on human behavior, or more specifically, political behavior in terms of online political participation. This thesis sheds light on how citizens use anonymity within the context of e-petitioning and political discussion.

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