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Latin America & Europe
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VNiVERSiDAD Đ SALAMANCA
CAMPUS DE EXCELENCIA INTERNACIONAL

Sorbonne Nouvelle
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Stockholm University

INSTITUTO DE IBEROAMÉRICA
ERASMUS MUNDUS JOINT MASTER'S DEGREE
« LATIN AMERICA AND EUROPE IN A GLOBAL WORLD » (LAGLOBE)
TRABAJO DE FIN DE MÁSTER

A democratic paradox? Effects of online media use on political participation and extremism in Latin America and Europe

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SALAMANCA, JUNIO 2021

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AKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As part of the development of any substantial piece of work, there is a community of mentors and loved ones who, along the way, provide vital support, and to whom one wishes to express heartfelt appreciation.

Upon the completion of this project, I feel tremendous gratitude towards Dr. Tim Malacarne at Nevada State College, for guiding me through my statistical doubts and queries with kindness and patience. I am thankful for the additional, but no less essential, software and methodological advice from Dr. José Ignacio Antón and Dr. Homero Gil de Zúñiga at the Universidad de Salamanca.

I am, most importantly, indebted to my Master's dissertation supervisor, Professor Iván Llamazares. His mentorship and attention paid to my research ideas and piecemeal drafts provided me with much needed confidence in the value of my research interests and ability to pursue them.

My cherished friends, thank you for bringing me motivation and comic relief throughout the progress and challenges faced during this project. Jenny Hughes, Isabelle Huang and Mary Jane Dempsey, you inspire me, and I look forward to our eventual reunions. Gonzalo, Yoseph, Bram and Rafael, thank you for your companionship in all things 'team library'. And to my flatmates Inês, Sháuna, and Sophia, you are splendid.

Finally, and most crucially, I would like to thank my dear family, Margaret, Guy, and Paul, for providing me with continuous encouragement in my research and beyond. Uncontainable esteem is held for my mother, who had the invaluable tenacity to read through some of my rough drafts, and picked out the apples from the pears.

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Abstract

Online media have emerged as instrumental tools for citizen political behaviour worldwide. Research has shown that their usage has generated important democratic implications, particularly in relation to two specific behaviours: political participation and ideological extremism. However, the evidence showing a positive influence of online media use on participation, and its positive influence on extremism, seems somewhat contradictory. To date, these trends have only been studied separately.

To evaluate the co-occurrence of these behavioural effects, the present study examines the influence of online media on political participation and extremism. The extent of these relations are explored by studying online media use as consumptive (reading, watching) and expressive (sharing, posting) activities. In order to explore the conditions that influence these behaviours, the analysis is applied cross-regionally. Using logistic and multiple regression models on cross-sectional survey data from 47 Latin American and European countries in 2019, this study compares the effects of online media on seven political participation activities, and on left- and right-wing ideological extremism.

The main findings reveal that online media use in Latin America and Europe predicts all seven political participation activities, and correlates with citizens' self-reported placement at the ideological extremes. The correlations are stronger and more significant for online media expression than consumption. Cross-country contextual differences linked to internet penetration and democratic maturity show more variability across Latin American countries than across Europe. Overall, the co-occurrence of effects across regions suggests that online media use affects different political behaviours in similar ways. Wider democratic implications on citizen engagement and political preferences are discussed.

Keywords

Online media, political participation, ideology, extremism, political behaviour, Latin America, Europe, cross-regional comparison

Resumen

Los medios de comunicación en línea (medios online) han surgido como una herramienta instrumental para entender el comportamiento político ciudadano a nivel global. Estudios empíricos han mostrado que su uso suscita implicaciones democráticas importantes, especialmente en relación con dos comportamientos específicos: la participación política y el extremismo ideológico. Sin embargo, los hallazgos que demuestran la influencia positiva del uso de medios online en la participación, así como su influencia positiva en el extremismo, parecen algo contradictorios. Hasta la fecha, estas tendencias sólo han sido estudiadas por separado.

Para evaluar la concurrencia de dichos comportamientos políticos, el presente estudio examina la influencia simultánea de medios online en la participación política y en el extremismo. El alcance de estas influencias se analiza a través de actividades de consumo (leer, ver) y de expresión (compartir, publicar) en línea. Para explorar las condiciones que influyen en estos comportamientos, el análisis se aplica de forma interregional. Utilizando modelos de regresión logística y múltiple sobre datos de encuestas transversales de 47 países latinoamericanos y europeos en 2019, este estudio compara los efectos de medios online en siete actividades de participación política, y en el extremismo ideológico de izquierda y de derecha.

Los principales hallazgos del presente estudio revelan que el uso de medios online en América Latina y Europa predice las siete actividades de participación política estudiadas, y se correlaciona con el auto-posicionamiento ideológico extremista. Las correlaciones son más fuertes y significativas para la expresión en medios online que para el consumo de información. Las diferencias contextuales entre países muestran más variabilidad en América Latina que en Europa, debido a disparidades en acceso al internet y madurez democrática. En general, esta concurrencia de efectos positivos entre regiones sugiere que el uso de medios online afecta comportamientos políticos diferentes de manera similar. Se discute sobre las implicaciones democráticas de la participación y el posicionamiento político ciudadano.

Palabras clave

Medios de comunicación en línea, participación política, ideología, extremismo, comportamiento político, América Latina, Europa, comparación interregional

"We have become accustomed to greeting the new, including new technology, via the discursive polarities of utopia and dystopia" (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 7)

Introduction

Background and Research Questions

Online media have emerged as instrumental tools for acquiring information and communicating worldwide. From the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa, Occupy Wall Street in the U.S., the Indignados 15-M movement in Spain, Passelivre in Brazil, Yosoy132 in Mexico, to Lastesis in Chile, organised collective action has become synonymous with the use of online media in the twenty first century. This increasing reliance on online media for political action has become the dominant feature of a body of political research investigating the influence of technology on citizen behaviour. Online media is defined in this study as internet connected platforms that facilitate information and communication between individual profile accounts, on the world wide web and via social media.

The use of online media by electoral candidates, particularly from populist and extremist leanings, has also garnered attention in academia. Supporters of these parties have fuelled fears of rising political intolerance and violence, as online media have increasingly hosted hate speech and misinformation. As a result, online tools have been linked to the two distinct socio-political phenomena that have been affecting democracies across the globe: citizen collective action and opposition intolerance (Miller, 2020). Disagreements over the extent of the influence of online media on citizen behaviours has generated a divide in academia (Tucker et al., 2018). On the one hand, cyber-optimists have commented on the informative and mobilising potential of these tools, as gateways to more direct systems of democracy. On the other hand, cyber-pessimists have warned against the violence, division and deception that they foster among increasingly polarised users (Hindman, 2008). We define political 'polarisation' as the deepening of ideological conflicts in a society, marked by divisions in political opinion within electorates or party-systems. A third approach pursued by some scholars has been more nuanced, seeking to better understand the complex interplay between citizen behaviour, online media use and political institutions. This last area of research has arguably produced the most enriching findings (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2019;

Postill, 2018; Valenzuela et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2016). This paper aspires to contribute to this last body of understanding.

Below, we briefly situate the present paper within the body of research that examines the effects of online media on political behaviour. The idea that media channels shape consumers' political engagement and actions is not new, and the effects of newspapers, radio, and television on political behaviour are well documented in the literature (Liang & Nordin, 2012; Putnam, 2000). Yet, the novel feature of online media compared to previous technological advances is its interactive nature. Indeed, recent scholarship has emphasised the importance of the duality of learning and discussion that take place in online media (Hoewe & Peacock, 2020). Theoretical perspectives on political knowledge acquisition and interactive communication networks have brought further insight. According to cognitive theoretical frameworks, learning about politics drives individuals into political action. However, the strength of the relation between learning and taking action is determined by the placement of political knowledge into conversation within social networks. This is the communicative element that online media contribute to subsequent political behaviour. Inspired by the communication mediation model (McLeod et al., 2001), Shah and colleagues (2005) theorise that online users' learning (consumption of political information) and discussion (self-expression within social networks) are driven by the gratification they expect from their online interactions. Empirical evidence has provided support for the complementary theory that online media use can act as key precursors of offline political participation (Boulianne, 2015; Diehl et al., 2016; Shah, 2016). 'Political participation' is the sum of actions taken by citizens to influence politically binding decisions (this includes voting, campaigning, protesting, and petitioning, among other activities). Based on extensive studies, it can be confidently said, that online media have become important tools for citizen political participation (Boulianne, 2017). It is worth noting however, that aside from a limited selection of cross-national studies, a large proportion of this work has been carried out in the U.S.

The two fundamental features of using online media, consumption and expression, have also brought scholar's attention to their potentially polarising effects. Online media differ from traditional mass media in the way that they offer political information to consumers because of their high-choice environments. Online spaces are filled with varied political perspectives, which encourage individuals to select sources and interlocutors that align with their opinions. Based on the theory of cognitive dissonance, scholars have suggested that online media reduce the range of viewpoints individuals are exposed to, both in the information they consume and in the conversations in which they express themselves, due to a cognitive tendency towards selective

exposure (Nie et al., 2010). In addition to the cognitive argument, research has also shown that the structure of online media platforms shapes political behaviour (Dutton et al., 2017; Sunstein, 2018). Online media algorithms reduce the variety of individuals' information consumption and self-expression through the production of personalised, tailor-made content. Both cognitive and platform structure theories perceive online media as enclosing individuals into groups of like-minded opinions. This characteristic has been linked to reduced tolerance for opposing ideologies (Quattrociocchi et al., 2016), and increased ideological extremism in users (Bright, 2017). 'Extremism' is conceived here as the appropriation of ideological beliefs and association to political groups that identify on the extremes of the ideology spectrum. Contradictory findings have refuted the cognitive and structural theories, arguing that individuals are predominantly exposed to mixed political views in online media, and that consumption and expression online lead to political centrism instead (Barberá, 2015). To date, the debate in the literature has not produced an explanation for these conflicting results. This may be because the number of studies that have investigated the relation between online media use and citizens' ideological extremism is limited. The global rise in extremism makes studying the factors influencing its presence important and relevant. We therefore raise the following research questions to be answered in our study: does online media use directly relate to ideological extremism? If so, is there a difference between consumption and expression of political content online? Can the relation between online media use and political participation co-occur with ideological extremism? And can these relationships be generalised to different world regions?

Aims and Hypotheses

This paper will investigate the use of online media through two distinct activities: consumption and expression. In the first part of the study, it aims to replicate previous findings on the influence of online media on citizen political participation. In the second part, it explores the relationship between online media use and ideological extremism. The study develops a framework of co-occurring behaviour effects, by examining survey data from two different regions of the world, Latin America and Europe.

In line with the above stated research questions, four hypotheses are presented. The study's quantitative analyses are hypothesised to show that: online political *consumption* is weakly related to offline political participation, and weakly related to ideological extremism; online political *expression* is strongly associated to offline political participation and strongly associated to ideological

extremism; these relationships are believed to exist in both Latin American and European regions, taking into account some context-specific variance.

Research Overview and Structure

Scholars that study the role of online media use on political behaviour have generally evaluated its effects on political participation separately from its effects on extremism. Our study's innovative approach will investigate the behavioural influence of online media using a quantitative method, which analyses the influence of online media on participation and extremism using the same datasets, in order to connect the academic subfields of the two political behaviours. The purpose of this method is to contribute to the nuanced approach to understanding online media as a tool that can shape citizen behaviour in different ways at the same time.

The choice of Latin America and Europe for the present analysis is justified through these regions' political contexts. Both Latin America and Europe have shown recent peaks in political participation, notably in the form of protest, as well as a rise in ideological extremism, observed through the varying levels of electoral success of extremist parties and candidates (Sullet-Nylander et al., 2019). Latin America democratised more recently than Western Europe, and has shown a similarly volatile structuration of party-system ideologies to Central and Eastern Europe (Kitschelt et al., 2010). Access to online media in Latin America is more recent than in Europe, but the use of these tools for political behaviour has already been shown to be instrumental (Valenzuela et al., 2016, p. 705). Aside from the comparable contexts these regions provide to the research project, the choice is also influenced by the author's academic interests. This study was conceived as part of the completion of the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's Degree 'Latin America and Europe in a Global World' (LAGLOBE), and its focus is the result of analyses developed throughout the degree at the Universidad de Salamanca, Stockholm Universitet, and Sorbonne-Nouvelle Paris 3.

This present research is designed using a quantitative and comparative method. Data are drawn from two main open source databases, the Latin American Public Opinion Project 'AmericasBarometer' survey and the European Social Survey. The methodology employed is modelled on previous political participation studies that have used surveys in the U.S. (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012), Western Europe (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2018) and Latin America (Valenzuela, 2013). Regression analyses are run to estimate the relations between online media use and political participation, as well as online media use and ideological extremism. Variables of political

participation, extremism and online media use are designed based on the two regions' survey questions, in a way that facilitates comparison.

To address the stated research questions, this paper is divided into six chapters. The first chapter defines and analyses key concepts, which provide a theoretical basis for our investigation on citizen political behaviour. Important concepts that are reviewed include citizen participation, ideological self-placement and mass media. The chapter also provides a brief introduction to the contemporary democratic contexts of Latin America and Europe, and justifies the present study's chosen method of survey analysis.

The second chapter lays out theoretical frameworks of political participation, drawing on models of social capital, civic culture, and cognitive communication to explain the motives behind citizen engagement towards participation. Studies that examine the effects of online media on political participation as informational tools and as communicative tools are examined, in order to gauge potential implications for democracy.

The third chapter looks at methodological and theoretical approaches to studying political ideology and extremism in individuals. A distinction is made on the terminology of extremism and populism, as well as fragmentation and polarisation. This facilitates the subsequent examination of the recent evidence of the influence of online media use on citizens' ideology. The reviewed studies interpret the influence of online media on ideology as a result of cognitive predisposition of users, and online platform structure. A model to represent two conflicting accounts in the literature on the relationship between online media and extremism is designed and presented. At the end of chapters two and three, historical contexts of citizen political participation and extremism in Latin America and Europe are provided, to develop the cross-regional comparison.

Chapter four is concerned with the methodology applied for the paper's study. The datasets are described, and set up to fit the research questions. In chapter five, the results of the descriptive statistics and regressions are presented. Analyses demonstrate that both consumption and expression of political content online positively relate to participation and extremism, in Latin America and Europe. The extent of each relation is detailed.

Finally, chapter six discusses the study's findings, key contributions and wider implications, in line with the previously reviewed literature. Differences between regions and between countries are identified and evaluated. Limitations in the research design are pinpointed and recommendations for future analysis are suggested, in the hopes of better understanding the influence of information and communication technology on citizen political behaviour.

1. Key concepts, context and research design

1.1. Political behaviour: the participation of the individual in politics

Democracy, a concept derived from the Greek *dimos* (public) and *kratos* (rule), is often interpreted as a system of government that maximises the inclusion of citizen political behaviour in political decisions (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 11).

> *Democratic or not, all polities expect some public involvement in the political process, if only to obey political orders [...]. Democracy, however, expects more active involvement [...] because democracy is designed to aggregate public preferences into binding collective decisions* (Dalton & Klingemann, 2007, p. 14).

The study of political behaviour strives to quantify and understand the factors that influence citizens' political opinions and choices. Factors that influence citizen behaviour can be systemic, as the above citation suggests, or contextual. Context is defined by the environmental and demographic forces that push individuals towards their political preferences. For example, environmental factors can include the ideas and information transmitted through family, friends, teachers and news media; demographic factors can include sex, age, income, ethnicity and religion. Together, these factors form an individual's social identity. Social identity theory posits that the outcome of forming an identity leads individuals to associate or dissociate to different political groups and parties (Greene, 2004). In theory, democratic political systems benefit from the identity differences between groups and parties, because it facilitates the alignment of citizen concerns with party representation in government (Dahl, 1978). The ability for governments and parties to gauge citizen preferences depends on the motivation and engagement of populations to voice their demands and participate in civic activities that interest them. Thus, the participation of the public in political activities connects the individual to the general political system (Almond & Verba, 1963). The literature separates citizen participative behaviour into civic and political participation: *civic* participation refers to community actions that are not directly related to governance (e.g. communal and parochial activities), whereas *political* participation is composed of community actions that aim to directly affect governing policy (e.g. electoral and party activities) (Skoric et al., 2016). We define political participation for this study as: the actions voluntarily taken by an individual or group, to influence politically binding decisions, through conventional or unconventional activities (Carreras & Bowler, 2019; Linssen et al., 2014; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2018).

The term *unconventional* political participation was coined to include contentious forms of participation, such as attending a political protest, boycotting products or taking part in strikes, that increased in the 1960s (Verba & Nie, 1972).

The formation of social identities and engagement into political participation are facilitated through communication. Philosophers have highlighted the importance of communicative exchange for the development of democracy. In Hannah Arendt's interpretation of political action in ancient Greece, *speech* was the most critical participative action citizens could make (Martin, 2015). According to Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action, democracy relies on the public sphere, in which rational argumentation can take place in equal, fair and free exchanges between individuals (Love, 1989). Within this framework, three of the four habermasian spheres relate to citizen political participation: i. conversation within communities that share values (civic participation), ii. discussion in groups of concerned individuals (conventional political participation), and iii. empowerment of marginalised groups through protests (unconventional political participation) (Wessler, 2019). Communication is also important for identity and idea formation. Michel Foucault asserts that discourse and discussion use ideology to incite illusions of truth and power (Love, 1989). Ideas and ideology determine citizens' concerns about society, and stimulate the means and motivation to participate. We briefly define this concept below.

1.2. Ideology and cleavage theory

Ideology is an abstract term that denominates the means by which individuals of diverse backgrounds think about politics (Freeden, 2013). According to Michel Foucault, discourse forms the basis of how ideas are conceptualised, hierarchised and processed "as the terrain in which people become conscious [of politics]" (Purvis & Hunt, 1993, p. 489). Communication theories conceptualise ideology as the product of perceived hierarchies in social relations, and as a political weapon to frame one-sided perspectives on divisive topics such as abortion, or even to draw distinctions between political groups (e.g. 'us vs. them').

Political theory investigates ideology either in terms of modern political economy or in terms of models of political choice (Hinich & Munger, 1996). Political choice theory complements communication theories in that it examines the contents and wider implications of ideologies on political policies and political groups. Here, ideology is interpreted as a set of values that define and constrict political parties and citizens, and holds them accountable for their behaviour (Martin,

2015). To understand how ideology influences the political process, it is best evaluated in terms of citizen-party relations. For citizens, ideology serves as a map to take a stand on an issue or policy (Bauer et al., 2017; Martin, 2015), ultimately helping them to define their political preference and make participative decisions (namely, during elections) (Kitschelt et al., 2010). When citizens make a political choice, the consequence affects more than party elections, it is also the placement of a temporary mandate of affairs, the setting of an agenda for foreseeable debates (Hinich & Munger, 1996, p. x).

For parties, ideology is a reflection of the relation between the perception of political 'demands' voiced by the electorate, and the subsequent attempts to 'supply' representation of these sentiments. Cleavage theory suggests that parties define their ideology along socio-cultural divides (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). Echoing social identity theory, parties reflect the separation for other groups into friends and enemies, symbolising the contours of the in-group and out-groups (Martin, 2015). Geddes (2003) extends cleavage theory to Latin America (a concept originally fashioned for Western Europe), explaining that the presence of cleavages between parties is also applicable in other democratic regions. The concept of ideological dimensions, further discussed in chapter 3, typically places ideologies and parties on a continuum (Sartori, 2005). Although the duality of party-systems is not a necessary outcome, the opposition of ideologies facilitates the choice of political options. According to Downsian theory, uncertain and uninformed citizens can count on this duality as a means to make an electoral choice (Hinich & Munger, 1996). The extent and positioning of individuals within party contour lines depends on individual-level demographic characteristics, wealth and social identity, as well as the conditions of the wider socio-economic context in which they reside (Kitschelt & Rehm, 2004).

We define political ideology in this study as three fundamental components that are in concert: i. the discussion that informs and forms beliefs, ideals and principles, ii. the appropriation of beliefs and their attribution to political groups, iii. the actions taken in accordance with these beliefs by individuals and parties (Hinich & Munger, 1996; Mouffe, 1979). The processes that drive citizens to politically participate and build political ideology rely on citizens obtaining information to form social identity and to associate with political parties. The assimilation of political information is discussed in the next section.

1.3. Mass media: shaping participation and ideology

The principal precursor of citizen political behaviour is the process of forming opinions and identity in politics. Opinions are formed around political knowledge, which is acquired formally through education and informally through the media. News media expose citizens to conflicting viewpoints, and promote reflection across political cleavages (D. C. Mutz & Martin, 2001). A politically informed public depends on accessible and engaging communication, made available through diverse and competing media channels (Delli Carpini, 2005). Almond and Verba (1963, p. 79) classify individuals' awareness and knowledge of the political system as "political cognition". Technological advances have generated debate on the evolving effects of mass media on citizen political cognition and behaviour. Mass media include the printed press, radio, television, and for the past 25 years, the internet. Before the internet and online news, scholars were already debating the effects of new technology on citizens. Putnam (1995) associated the decline in political knowledge and participation in the U.S. during the 1950s to the 1990s to the rise in television usage and decrease in morality and trust. He asserted that this was due to the predominantly commercialised and leisurely content found on television. Other scholars saw this trend of disaffection and cynicism, or 'videomalaise', to be caused by growing negativism in television journalism (Norris, 2000). With the rise in internet use, Putnam (2000) foresaw the same predicament as commercial television, categorising it as a tool oriented mostly for entertainment, and deeming it to be distracting from political engagement. But an increased internet use is not quite comparable to television use, as online platforms allow for political socialisation through virtual interactional activities. This is the crucial element that makes the internet an important tool to study. The multifaceted uses of the internet mean one can seek information or participate in social exchanges, manage personal affairs, and be entertained, simultaneously. To understand this interactional element, we briefly examine the literature on the influence of the internet and social media on citizen political cognition and behaviour.

The influence of the internet

Early research on the internet and news media showed that the web did not initially replace the consumption of political information from traditional media (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000). But the growth in internet use for news, particularly in younger adults, inspired interest in its mobilising potential. Studies mostly carried out in the U.S., positively linked internet use to political knowledge (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 2002; Shah et al., 2005), and political participation (Boulianne,

2009; Wang, 2007). The relation was seen as the democratising effect of the internet, as internet access provided a reduced cost for information seeking, and the horizontality of information available on search engines expanded news attention. But concerns for differences in political knowledge arose, across individuals with less access or use of the internet (Anduiza et al., 2012; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 2002). In a large-scale 108-country study, Ahmed and colleagues (2020) demonstrated that though access to the internet generally increased political engagement worldwide, it also deepened the socioeconomic gap between digitally connected individuals.

The influence of social media

Social media are defined as online services that allow individuals to create a profile, define the number of other profiles with whom to connect, and freely interact with these networks (Xenos et al., 2014, p. 152). Unlike the fixed content found on the previous web generation, social media are characterised by the contribution of the receiver as well as the emitter (Anduiza et al., 2012). Although most of the exchanges that takes place on social media are not related to politics (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012), the platforms provide regular opportunities to engage with news-related content, and promote political cognition (Lu et al., 2016, p. 76). Most importantly, the element of interaction resonates with the idea of the public sphere, or *online* public sphere (Papacharissi, 2010). Communicative exchanges within networks can redefine citizens' understanding on civil, political and social ideas. However, the online communication environment is unstable and contributions are unbalanced. Where some citizens are compelled to seek political information actively and contact political figures through their profile accounts, others passively come across information and contribute to collective action through minimal effort (dubbed 'clicktivism'). This brings us to distinguish between two online communicative behaviours: political consumption and expression.

Political *consumption* is the act of informing oneself on political news through reading, listening, or watching media content; whereas political *expression* is the process of using online platforms to interact with other individuals or groups to discuss, reflect on and debate political ideas (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2013). Online political behaviour research has shown that consumption and expression have different effects on political knowledge and participation. Where an uninterested individual can incidentally come across and learn about political information online (Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018; Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009), another politically interested individual can easily create or participate in discussions and activities (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). Unlike

traditional media, the simple habit of spending time online can lead to involvement in offline political activities (Jung et al., 2011).

We expand on the findings linking online media to political participation in chapter 2. When looking at the link between online media and ideology however, results have been conflicting. This conflict, reviewed in chapter 3, provides the basis for the paradox that will be investigated in this study. In both chapters, we find that the majority of studies have been carried out in the U.S. and Western Europe, and no research has been developed on cross-regional comparison. Therefore, in order to contribute to the gap in the literature, we reproduce methods used to detect online media influence on political participation and apply them to Latin America and Western and Eastern Europe. The same method is then used to examine the link between online media use and ideological extremism. This methodological approach of comparative political analysis using regional political behaviour surveys will now be discussed.

1.4. Comparing political behaviour across regions

According to the Oxford Handbook of Political Behaviour "the study of mass political behaviour has a deceptively simple objective – to establish the causes and consequences of the political values and behaviours of the general population" (Curtice, 2007, p. 1). To explain differences between social and government systems' influence on citizen political behaviour, researchers often resort to cross-country survey comparison. Cross-country political research is beneficial in that it enables generalisability and broadens understanding of contextual factors.

The objective of the comparative method is to observe political circumstances in more than one social system and to measure effects of structural and environmental factors (Przeworski, 2009). To improve the reliability of results, maximising the number of cases is recommended. However, this may lead to the limited control for unobservable variables, and in the case of comparative survey research, the variation in the implementation of survey interviews can introduce skews in the results. Yet, studying cross-country data remains advantageous, as large-N cross-cultural data permits a distancing from researcher bias (Lijphart, 1975, p. 170). Regional comparative research is considered more reliable than global comparison, because it reduces cultural misinterpretations in survey questions (Curtice, 2007).

Almond and Verba's (1963) seminal cross-country study on citizen political behaviour on 'The Civic Culture' is lauded for its methodological design (Dalton, 2008, p. 14), which subsequently inspired a plethora of studies on civic and political participation using survey data

(Dalton & Klingemann, 2007). The present study contributes to this legacy, where it compares the relations of two types of citizen political behaviours with two forms of online political activity (consumption and expression) across 47 countries. An original aspect of our research is that it compares multiple citizen behaviours across two geographical regions, Latin America (including the Caribbean) and Europe. Although the two regions host very different settings (political trajectories, economic production models, public welfare systems, etc.), they also share political lexicon (left-right nomenclature, approach to international trade, religion), and importantly, recent political tensions (rising civil unrest and populism). Our approach aims to deliver a large-scale comparative perspective.

We explore regional contextual similarities and differences throughout the paper, starting here with a brief examination of contemporary commonalities and differences in Latin American and European democratic context. Hereafter, we provide a summary of the current state of democratic liberties (relating to political participation), extremist tensions, and internet access in our two regions of interest. The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) Democracy Index report labels the year 2019 as a year of democratic stagnation or decline, due to a decrease in participatory democracy, widening of ideological gaps between political elites and electorates, and a reduction in civil liberties (EIU, 2020). A rise in popular protests in Latin America and Eastern Europe is noted, along with a drop in civil liberties in Latin America (freedom of speech, press and assembly). Demonstrations in Latin America were driven by clashes over electoral fraud, corruption and austerity measures. In Western Europe, there is a rise in support for extremist parties, and in some countries, strenuous efforts to form coalition governments (e.g. Belgium, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Spain). Despite concerns for deterioration of democracy in the EIU report, no drastic changes in the indices in Latin America and Europe were seen over previous years. Northern and Western European countries were generally classified as 'full democracies'[1], with only five that classified as 'flawed democracies'. In Eastern Europe, no full democracies are registered, and the report ranks the regions as having twelve flawed democracies and nine hybrid regimes (mostly in the Caucasus). In Latin America, Uruguay, Costa Rica and Chile were classified as 'full democracies', whereas Honduras, Guatemala, Bolivia and Haiti ranked as 'hybrid regimes', Nicaragua, Venezuela and Cuba as 'authoritarian', and the remaining 14 countries were categorised as 'flawed democracies'. Latin America remained the most democratic emerging-market region worldwide, after North America and Western Europe.

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[1] Ranking from most to least democratic: full democracy, flawed democracy, hybrid regime, authoritarian (EIU, 2020)

In the 2019 Freedom House report on civil liberties, press was considered generally freer in Europe than in Latin America (Freedom House, 2019). But it warns against the increasing grip of populist leaders on press freedom, particularly in right-wing populist governments in Hungary and Serbia. Waves of protests in Latin America in 2019 were seen as a sign of growing civil liberty.

According to the 2020 Reuters Institute Digital News Report, access to internet and social media is unevenly distributed in Latin America, with between 66% (Mexico) and 93% (Argentina) internet penetration (but only four countries are surveyed), as well as in Europe with internet connectivity between 67% (Bulgaria) to 98% (Denmark and Norway) (Newman et al., 2020). Access to technology is also unequal within Latin American countries, with affluent citizens and men being more likely to use internet and social media (Mitchelstein et al., 2020). The Reuters Institute reports the risk of misinformation spread through online platforms is more pronounced in Latin America than Europe (Newman et al., 2020, p. 20).

The above summary of democratic indicators leads us to expect similarly high levels of political participation in both regions, but different average positions and polarisation of ideological orientations in citizens, with regards to the rise of right-wing extremism in Europe and left and right-wing populism in Latin America. The usage of internet and social media are unequally spread in both regions, although Europe has a higher overall connectivity among its populations. With this context, the link between political participation, ideological extremism and online media will now be explored further, in order to formulate our hypotheses.

2. Political participation

In this chapter, we first explore the theoretical frameworks of citizens' political participation, and review evidence which supports different debates on political participation in a digital age. Secondly, we look at the literature on citizen participation in the Latin American and European regions, and provide a contextual overview of their transitions to democratic political behaviour, first offline and then online.

2.1. Theory

2.1.1.   Theoretical frameworks of political participation

Political scientists have long viewed political participation as an essential aspect of the quality of the democratic process, as it is the ultimate 'check and balance' that holds authorities accountable for their actions (Linssen et al., 2014; Lu et al., 2016).

> *Pateman has argued, drawing upon central notions in Rousseau and J. S. Mill, that participatory democracy fosters human development, enhances a sense of political efficacy, reduces a sense of estrangement from power centres, nurtures a concern for collective problems and contributes to the formation of an active and knowledgeable citizenry capable of taking a more acute interest in government affairs.* (Held, 2006, p. 468).

But the importance assigned to citizen participation by Pateman clashed with 1970s theories of representative democracy. Representative democracy theory assumes that any democratic system that implements universal suffrage results in citizen participation. A growing number of scholars however, argued that free and fair elections were not the only key feature of democracy, and contended that certain individuals in society were systematically restricted from participating in political and civic life (Held, 2006, p. 463). Citizen participation research then showed that a disengaged and uninterested population increased unequal representation, which systematically biased the system in favour of wealthier and more educated citizens (Lijphart, 1997). Democracy scholars also worried about indifferent citizens because of their reduced political cognition and vulnerability to manipulation by news media (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 82). Scholarship on political participation thus re-oriented towards better understanding the motives and factors that caused these differences in citizen participation.

One fundamental factor is the notion of social capital. A term popularised in the 1990s, by authors such as James Coleman, Robert Putnam and Pierre Bourdieu, it refers to the sum of relations of an individual, composed of weak and strong ties, nurtured through regular interactions, which builds a sense of societal belonging (Norris, 2000; Plascencia, 2005; Verba et al., 1995). These networks are a resource that individuals can access for collective action and problem-solving (Shah et al., 2005, p. 533; Skoric et al., 2016, p. 1820). The accessibility and strength of the ties is moderated by interpersonal trust within a community. Putnam (2000) explained that social capital leads citizens to pursue common political interests and concerns, which expands political cognition. Empirical studies have positively linked social capital to conventional forms of participation, such as voting and contacting elected representatives (Carreras & Bowler, 2019), and have suggested that political participation and social capital are mutually conducive (Skoric et al., 2016).

Social capital and interpersonal trust rely on a belief that citizens' networks can exert sufficient pressure to influence politics, also known as political efficacy (Almond & Verba, 1963). The requirement for political efficacy is that citizens believe they understand government and can influence policy issues (Karp & Banducci, 2008). "If people know opportunities exist for effective participation in decision-making, they are likely to believe participation is worthwhile, likely to participate actively and likely, in addition, to hold that collective decisions should be binding" (Held, 2006, p. 469). Over the past decades, social surveys have included measures of social capital and political efficacy as gauges of political opinion, through self-reported scales of interpersonal social trust and political trust.

For a long time, the measurement of political participation in political science was limited to voting: 'voter turnout' to represent political interest, and 'voter choice', to represent ideological preference. Literature emphasised questions on the mechanisms that could increase voter turnout. Findings included proportional election systems, infrequent elections and compulsory voting (Lijphart, 1997). However, voting is an incomplete measure of political participation. In hybrid regimes, voting measures do not account for the repression of other basic civil liberties, and in the case of a disenchanted population, falling voter turnout might be compensated by unconventional forms of participation. Measurement of unconventional modes of participation include boycotting, petitioning, contacting local or national representatives, wearing or holding political messages, funding or donating to a party or political association and joining or working in political and community meetings, parties, and organisations (Chadwick & Howard, 2010; Linssen et al., 2014; Norris, 2011). The range of actions individuals can take outside the electoral cycles offers them opportunities to increase their political efficacy and in theory, restore political trust (Dalton, 2008).

Cognitive theoretical frameworks emphasise the importance of communication networks in motivating individuals into political participation. According to the cognitive mobilisation model, citizens' understanding of politics is determined by communication networks, established through structures of education and mass media (Inglehart, 1970). In the civic voluntarism model, individuals use cognitive resources, in addition to socioeconomic resources, to engage psychologically with politics and community networks (Verba et al., 1995). The cognitive mediation model predicts that the extent of political learning from news media is mediated by cognitive variables (Eveland, 2001). But none of these models explain how individuals go from learning about politics to engaging with politics (the link is only assumed). Douglas McLeod and colleagues' (2001) communication mediation model, complements these cognitive frameworks by arguing that news media consumption leads to political participation when placed in conversation within social networks (political expression). Empirical evidence demonstrates that political conversation among individuals is fundamental for citizen engagement, and mediates the effects of news consumption (Shah et al., 2007, 2017). The introduction of new media on populations has shown an increase in political participation. For example, Gentzkow and colleagues (2011) found a positive relation between voter turnout and the introduction of a new newspaper in the U.S. longitudinal study. Radio use has been found to positively correlate with political participation in the U.S. (Strömberg, 2004), and with voter turnout in 60 developing countries (Vergne, 2011). Conversely, the introduction of television has been associated with a decline in voter turnout (Gentzkow, 2006) as Putnam (2000) had forewarned, however, the opposite effect has also been shown (Prat & Strömberg, 2005). Thus, it is important to review evidence on the influence of the latest media to influence political participation: the internet and social media.

2.1.2.   Political participation in a digital age

At the turn of the millennium, digital technology was seen as a promising tool for communication and networking, providing opportunities for activities that fostered political knowledge and participation. The optimism of the early 2000 turned into 'cyberpessimism' over the real effects of the internet and social media (hereafter referred to as online media) on political participation (Hindman, 2008). We group these debates into three areas: online media effects on information, effects on discussion, and effects on inequality.

Participation effect of online media as informational tools

Similarly to the 1960s, the 1990s experienced a drop in conventional political engagement, and particularly in the global North. Around the same time, the internet became increasingly accessible, and offered citizens a new way to interact with information (Dalton & Klingemann, 2007). Political news and opinion online gained interest from the media and academia, as a result of the exponential rise in citizen attention paid to webpages and online networks. This new form of information exposure was considered more influential on citizen participation than any previous medium before it, because it allowed for asynchronous encounters and unfiltered content to be shared by trusted networks of friends and family, which encouraged offline political discussion and reflection (Diehl et al., 2016; Shah, 2016, p. 14). But, some scholars warned against the reification of citizens' use of online news and media, asserting that online tools were both empowering and restricting political behaviours in users (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 104). We briefly mention some of these effects.

Participation effect of online media as communicative discourse tools

Over the last twenty years, numerous survey and panel studies have established a link between online media use and political participation (Boulianne, 2009; Jost et al., 2018; Shah et al., 2005; Valenzuela, 2013; Xenos et al., 2014, to cite a few). For example, experimental evidence has established a causal link between internet use and voting (Jones et al., 2017), and between social media use and petition signing (Coppock et al., 2016). In a U.S. survey study that finds that social media use is positively related to protest, Boulianne and colleagues (2020b) argue that it is the multi-functionality of online media that allows citizens to learn about specific events, discuss political issues of interest, and reach out to or be invited by networks to participate in political events, all within the same online spaces. To illustrate this dynamic process, Shah and colleagues (2005) designed a model of communication and citizen participation, to theorise on the directional influence of online media political activities on civic participation (see Figure 1). The model predicts that the choice and motivation behind individuals' media consumption (seeking online information, watching television, reading newspapers) are driven by the gratification they expect from online interactions (through messaging and discussion) (Shah et al., 2005, pp. 534–535). Findings from a recent 133 study meta-analysis has provided additional evidence to understand the dynamics between learning and interacting online and political participation offline. In it, Boulianne (2017) shows that depending on the activity, whether obtaining information online

(consumption) or discussing politics within online networks (expression), the effect of media platform use on political participation offline varies. Both online activities are significant, but Boulianne (2017) demonstrates that online political expression is more strongly related to offline participation, than online political consumption. Suggesting that "it is not the media per se that can affect individuals' social capital and engagement, but the specific ways in which individuals use media" (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012, p. 321).
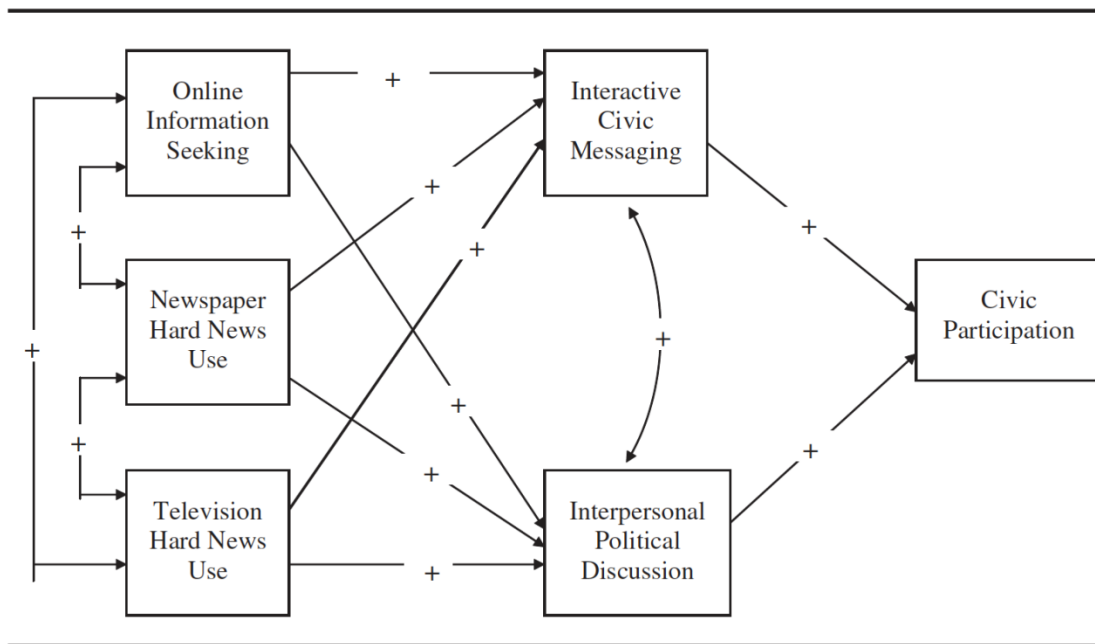
Figure 1. Theorised Model of Communication and Civic Participation (Shah et al., 2005, p.538).

While the above mentioned studies have shown that those connected to online media have increased political participation rates, some authors are more reticent to link the two. Rather than a mobilising force, some scholars have argued online media simply extend motivations in citizens who are already predisposed to participative behaviour (Mitchelstein et al., 2020; Norris, 2001). Further counter-evidence to the online media participation theory has shown that discussion online is not always conductive to participation, as unpleasant or unresponsive encounters can discourage and isolate individuals (Anduiza et al., 2012; Lu et al., 2016; McClain, 2021; D. Mutz, 2006). But disagreement in online discussions can also increase exposure to diverse political views, which enhance political cognition (Song & Eveland, 2015). Although these differences in observation exist, there is a broad consensus in the literature that online media use (consumption and expression) is positively associated to political participation (Lu et al., 2016). This is backed by additional meta-analyses that aggregate online media and participation results and overwhelmingly find a positive link (Boulianne, 2015; Skoric et al., 2016).

Participation effect of online media as an (un)equalising force

The third debate identified in the literature is on the effects of online media as a democratising, or equalising force in citizen political participation. The affordability and accessibility of the internet (in the global North) fostered the belief that online media would help subvert socio-economic inequalities in political participation. This perspective became known as the mobilisation hypothesis (Boulianne, 2015; Valenzuela et al., 2016). In contrast, the reinforcement hypothesis viewed that online media maintains the same socio-economic inequalities as the ones found offline, where low-income individuals are less likely to have access to the internet or knowledge on its uses (Gustafsson, 2014). Recent evidence supports the reinforcement hypothesis, showing that online media can exacerbate socio-political inequalities (education and income) in political engagement (Ahmed et al., 2020). It has long been known that education and income are strong predictors of political participation (Almond & Verba, 1963; Brady et al., 1995). These results therefore suggest the benefits of online media towards political participation are limited. Demographic characteristics such as age, sex, ethnicity and urbanisation also influence political knowledge and participation (Ahmed & Cho, 2019), and interestingly, online media have been found to bridge the gaps in protest participation in age and sex differences, but deepen gaps between political left-right ideologies (more on this in chapter 3) (Oser et al., 2013; Valenzuela et al., 2016). Therefore, the effects of online media on citizen participation vary depending on environmental differences; in some aspects reducing inequalities, and increasing them in others.

Aside from occasional meta-analyses and cross-national comparisons, most research studying the effects of online media on political participation have been carried out in the U.S. To contribute to the existing body of research, this study compares online media effects on political participation in two regions. To this end, we now review the recent history of political participation in Latin America and Europe, and examine the most recent findings of online media effects in their respective populations.

2.2. Context

2.2.1. Latin America

The late twentieth century in Latin America was characterised by transitions from authoritarianism to electoral democracy, and an increase in citizen participation in most countries (first through voting, then protests). In this subsection, we examine the socio-cultural implications of the governmental changes to understand the political climate that preceded the twenty first century. The introduction of democratic elections in Latin America started in Argentina in 1973 (subsequently revoked and re-established in 1983), and spread to most of the region throughout the 1970s up to the 1990s. This shift was somewhat unexpected, amid a high level of political uncertainty and a somewhat weak civic culture. Although this period is often framed within the 'third wave' of global democratisation (Huntington, 1991), the factors influencing its transition do not align with other developing regions (Mainwaring & Pérez-Liñán, 2013). Few Latin American countries saw a decline in political legitimacy or in the economy, many authoritarian governments were supported by religious entities, and the influential and financial role of international pressures for regime change was ambiguous. Instead, democratisation in the region was principally marked by administrative change, rather than a societal or structural change, where elites who had previously pursued non-democratic governance, continued to do so within a democratic context (Avritzer, 2002, p. 78).

The 'lost decade' of the 1980s witnessed the implementation of financially unsustainable policies that devastated many Latin American countries, throughout the global economic shift towards free trade. In this period, civil society and human rights mobilisations, including indigenous, women's and trade union movements, grew as a result of citizen engagement, through international communities and activist networks (Bianchi et al., 2016). Although these groups had not been an essential part of the democratic transitions, their growth was representative of a shared sentiment for the need for social and political participation of the general population. At the time, political networks and participation of indigenous people, people of African descent, women and students, gained more attention than opposition parties or trade unions, because the latter had been banned during the dictatorships (Espinal & Zhao, 2015). In terms of conventional participation, the context of the late twentieth century favoured the voices of the elite, white, male and wealthy. In an attempt to redistribute political efficacy, a counter-measure that many Latin American countries introduced was compulsory voting.

The permeation of the events from this period into modern democratic times is recognised in the election results of the following decades; specifically, the election of leaders of indigenous descent (Victor Hugo Cárdenas, vice-president of Bolivia in 1994, and Evo Morales first elected Bolivian president in 2005) and the election of women presidents (Violeta Chamorro in Nicaragua, 1990, Mireya Moscoso in Panama, 1999, Michelle Bachelet in Chile, 2006, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in Argentina, 2007, Dilma Rousseff in Brazil 2010, and Laura Chinchilla in Costa Rica, 2010). A notable structural impact of the implementation of compulsory voting, has been the minimal gender differences in turnout in many Latin American countries in the twenty first century.

The 2000s were marked by rapid and intense urbanisation, particularly during the commodities boom between 2005 and 2015. The growth of cities promoted greater proportions of education and wealth, but also increased feelings of political inefficacy and social distrust (Carreras & Bowler, 2019), resulting in a mixed effect on the socio-economic factors in individuals' lives that both promoted and discouraged political participation. This is one of many factors that influenced a dip in political interest and participation in Latin America in the 2010s, along with frustration with the quality of political institutions, and opposition to economic policies (Carreras & Bowler, 2019, p.725). Rising socio-political tensions, and the inability of public institutions to attend citizen demands in many countries resulted in a representation crisis. Voter turnout lowered in spite of fines in compulsory voting, and citizens no longer identified with party ideologies (Valenzuela et al., 2016). The systemic degradation in party system representativeness was accompanied by a steady decline in public support for democracy (Latinobarómetro, 2019).

Most recently, in 2019, several Latin American countries witnessed a surge in protests (Chile, Colombia, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Guatemala among others), in most cases ignited by new policies or legislation (on fuel or transport prices). Although lower than the U.S. and Western Europe, internet penetration in Latin America has increased within the last few years, particularly in South America, reaching an average regional level of 72% in 2019 (Chevalier, 2020; Navarro, 2020). As a result, an increased use of online media use to coordinate these protests was noted. Valenzuela and colleagues (2016) found that in 17 Latin American countries, social media increased chances of protest participation. Masías and colleagues (2018) demonstrated strong evidence for a link between online media use and protest patterns in most of the region's countries, particularly Chile, Honduras and Panama, with the weakest link in Nicaragua.

2.2.2.   Europe

Much of Western Europe democratised towards the end of the nineteenth century. The era, marked by uncertainty, brought about universal male suffrage, accountability mechanisms for the executive and legislative powers, and the institutionalisation of civil rights (Ziblatt, 2006). Within the framework of waves of democratisation, this is considered the first (Huntington, 1991). The transition towards new political orders still generally restricted citizen participation, and the cementing of democratic systems and the normalisation of participation of citizens in politics became more established in the twentieth century.

In post-war Western Europe, participation remained broadly conventional, with citizens expressing political interest through voting, membership in political organisations and parties, and communication with political representatives. In the 1960s, the range of political activities expanded to violent and non-violent mass gatherings organised by civil society (e.g. trade unions, students, women's groups) (Linssen et al., 2014). The May 1968 protests, sparked in Paris, then spreading to other cities in the region, defined a new generation of adult voters, whose political interests no longer prioritised economic and physical safety, but idealised individual freedom of choice (including topics such as sexual and reproductive rights, and immigration and racial rights) (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Soon after, Portugal (1974), Greece (1974) and Spain (1976) were the last countries to democratise in Western Europe, and according to Diamond and Linz (1989, p. ix) "the toppling of Western Europe's last three dictatorships, then moved on through Latin America".

Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) experienced democratisation after the fall of the Soviet Union. Like certain Latin American states, the construction of social, economic and technocratic ties with the U.S. and Western Europe at the end of the Cold War resulted in incumbents ceding power rather than cracking down on citizens' unconventional participation. At the turn of the decade, many CEE countries held democratic elections for the first time since the late 1930s. Munck and Leff (1997) find similarities in the democratic transitions of CEE and Latin America, where some countries experienced a political rupture, via popular demonstrations (Czechoslovakia), military defeat (Argentina), or extrication (Hungary), while others underwent a slow transition due to a disintegrating party system with a strong elite that either negotiated their retreat (Brazil, Poland) or conceded through a plebiscite (Chile). Another similarity between CEE and Latin America was high election turnout right after the establishment of democracy. Yet, in CEE, citizen disenchantment followed much faster than in Latin America, as the political elite struggled to form representative and coherent narratives for the mass public, and political 'outsiders' struggled to form a popular opposition. Towards the end of the 1990s, voter turnout

declined in both regions (Dalton & Klingemann, 2007, p. 13). Citizen withdrawal from conventional and unconventional channels of political participation affected much of the European region until the early 2000s (Linssen et al., 2014).

In line with grievances theory, the shock of the 2008 financial crisis on rising precarity and unemployment throughout Europe was followed by a rise in unconventional participation, namely protests (Kern et al., 2015). At the same time, Western Europe saw an increasing presence of parties and political groups online, attempting to appear more approachable, particularly during electoral campaigns (Barboni & Treille, 2010, p. 1138; Cantijoch, 2012). Scholarship on the effects of online media on political participation in Western Europe has mostly been inspired by studies developed in North America (Cantijoch, 2012; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Holt et al., 2013; Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2017; Lu et al., 2016; Shah et al., 2005; Vissers & Stolle, 2014). In a comparative survey study, Vaccari and Valeriani (2018) show that citizens from both 'established' and 'third wave' Western European democracies exchange political information and discussion online, activities which are positively associated to political participation (showing a higher link in 'established' democracies). Research on the effects of online media on participation in CEE is limited (for exceptions, see Placek, 2017; Surowiec & Štětka, 2017). Access and use of online media platforms is less prevalent in the subregion, where socio-economic differences in internet use are more pronounced (Petrjánošová, 2014; van Dijk, 2008) and its political usage by citizens less investigated. Only about 50% of the region are regular internet users (Surowiec & Štětka, 2017). Existing studies have focused on examining politicians' use of online networks to diffuse messages rather than looking at citizens' political information seeking or discussions online. Limited freedom of press continues to affect the organisation of unconventional participation (Knott, 2018), although there have been some signs of online coordination of protests such as the 2014 EuroMaidan protests in Kyiv, Ukraine (Onuch, 2015).

The evolution and maturity of democracy and citizen participation in Latin America and Europe are at different stages of maturity, but even within Europe there is a clear distinction between the Western European and CEE experiences of the effects of online media on participation. Latin America and Europe share democratic values that promote the engagement and participative behaviours of citizens, yet the challenges populations face are somewhat distinct. While in Latin America and CEE, the reach of internet access has not made the political participation benefits accessible to the general public, Western Europe faces the challenge of socio-economic stratification effects on political information and interaction online, which handicap the less educated and lower-income groups. These technological and socio-political differences

between the regions suggest that the relational use of online media for political purposes might be more stable in Western Europe than Latin America and CEE. Nonetheless, the drop in political participation in both regions during the 2010s, and its resurgence with the spread of online media usage in both regions, implies how the new technology may be similarly enabling the re-engagement of citizenry in countries at different stages of democracy.

Considering these cross-regional reflections and the review of the literature on political participation, we put forward our research hypotheses on the effects of citizens' online media use on political participation.

2.2.3.   Hypotheses

The first two hypotheses will be guided by the reported differences in effects of online media information consumption and political expression, on citizen political participation. This distinction is most clearly identified by Boulianne's (2017) meta-analysis that detects that empirical studies with higher coefficients are those related to political expression on social media and political participation, over those of information consumption. Therefore, our hypotheses are:

H1. Online political consumption and participation hypothesis: online political consumption is weakly related to offline political participation.
H2. Online political expression and participation hypothesis: online political expression is strongly associated to offline political participation.

In the same meta-analysis, Boulianne (2017) finds that online political consumption effects on participation are more likely to be significant in systems with limited civil liberties. Other contextual differences such as level of democratic maturity are expected to influence cross-country and cross-regional results. Our cross-regional hypothesis is:

H3a. Cross-regional comparison hypothesis: the effects of online political behaviours on participation are detected in both regions, with a stronger link in Europe than Latin America due to its higher levels of democratic maturity and internet connectivity (with the exception of more recently democratic CEE states).

The second part of the cross-regional comparison hypothesis (H3b) is addressed in the next chapter.

3. Ideological extremism

3.1. Theory

3.1.1.   Ideological self-placement, fragmentation and polarisation

The measurement of an individual's political ideology and preferences has been subject of debate, the main issue being, placing them in relation to one another to derive coherent conclusions (Jost et al., 2009). One method of measurement is surveying self-placement on a spectrum. This measure functions as a categorical ruler that places individuals (or parties) in one or several axes. The most common unidimensional spectrum of ideologies is spread from 'left' to 'right'. The terminology stems from the seating arrangements of the French parliament after the revolution (commoners on the left, aristocrats on the right) (Heywood, 2017). Today, the left is broadly associated with socialist ideology and policies, and the right with conservatism. A middle stance that moderately promotes ideologies from both sides is labelled 'centrist' or moderate. The measurement and analysis of ideological self-placement on unidimensional scales has been criticised as reductionist (Feldman & Johnston, 2014). Evidence for this critique is highlighted by studies that show variation in self-categorisation depending on education (Carroll & Kubo, 2018; Zechmeister & Corral, 2013) and cultural background (Bauer et al., 2017). This occurs because of individual differences in understanding the ideologies posited in the spectrum and in self-awareness of one's own political identity. Although the notions of ideological left and right do not translate seamlessly across countries, let alone regions, cross-cultural research continues to use similar reference points. For example, the widely recognised World Values Survey maps socio-political attitudes using a two-factor ideology system of secularism and traditionalism. This is because political behaviour research employs ideological positioning scales to identify trends in beliefs, not specific ideologies. Simplifying political preferences along one dimension not only facilitates comparative analysis for research, but also decomplexifies ideological identities for citizens, who use these dimensions to guide their political affiliations (Kitschelt et al., 2010; Wojcieszak & Rojas, 2011).

Ideological self-positioning on a unidimensional spectrum is typically normally distributed, with a majority of populations identifying at the centre-left and centre-right (Rodon, 2015). However, the distribution of self-placement can evolve and change, depending on the number of parties that represent different positions along the spectrum and dividing policy issues of the

moment. These changes can be understood in terms of fragmentation and polarisation. Here, we define fragmentation as the process by which audiences become more dotted along the political spectrum, divided into smaller factions, facilitated by party-system structure and new media content specialisation. And we define polarisation as a solidification of ideological conflicts in a society, which stress and widen divisions in opinion (Hinich & Munger, 1996; Tewksbury & Rittenberg, 2012). Both terms are used to understand citizen ideological self-placement, as they represent trends in political knowledge and identification within a population. In the next subsection, we focus our attention on individuals who place themselves on the opposite ends of the political spectrum, the extremes.

3.1.2.   Extremism and populism

The end of the 2010s saw a global rise in extremist and populist electoral successes, including in Europe and Latin America (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). This trend gained considerable academic attention (among them: Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2020; Postill, 2018; Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2017; Sullet-Nylander et al., 2019). Before reviewing this research, a distinction between extremism and populism must be made.

Extremism denotes ideological placement at the poles of the spectrum. It is often associated with anti-democratic tendencies even though parties typically follow electoral rules (Akkerman & Rooduijn, 2015). A rise in support for extremist parties reflects a population's reaction to a critical juncture in the socio-political system, in the absence of a moderate party representing citizen demands (Akkerman & Rooduijn, 2015; Kitschelt, 1994). Citizen ideological extremism in these studies is either measured through support of extremist parties (de Lange & Mudde, 2005; Marcos-Marne et al., 2021; Schkade et al., 2010), or using ideological self-placement, where individuals identifying with the extremes of the scale are categorised as such (J. K. Lee et al., 2014; Stroud, 2010; Wojcieszak & Rojas, 2011).

In comparison to extremism, the definition of populism is more disputed, and has been described as ranging from types of ideology, strategy and communication style (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017). Cas Mudde (2004) defines populist ideology as a loose set of ideas with three core features. The first is an anti-establishment antagonistic position, between the 'good' people versus the 'bad' elite. The second is an authoritarian and charismatic leadership. And the third, is a nativist penchant for homogeneous culturalism, nationalistic protectionism, and nostalgia for past glories. But this definition does not link populist parties by ideological positioning in any way. An alternative interpretation is that populism is a communicative style, understood using framing

theory, where it is the antagonistic, charismatic and nativist campaign discourse that has led to a rise in populist candidates (Aslanidis, 2016). This perspective explains how parties from different ideological stances can be grouped together under an umbrella term.

Therefore, extremism and populism are distinct, one is assigned to ideologies at the extremes of the spectrum, the other uses discourse to garner popular support. They are also similar, where extremist candidates often use populist rhetoric (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017), and populist candidates and parties often place themselves on the ideological extreme left or right (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Individuals who identify with either the extreme left or right also generally display stronger populist attitudes (Marcos-Marne et al., 2021). Another noticeable overlap between extremism and populism, discussed in the next subsection, is the observation that candidates of both affinities have taken advantage of online media to bolster their communication strategies (Almeida & Pismel, 2019; Boulianne et al., 2020a; Postill, 2018). Before reviewing this, we look at scholarly evidence for the influence of media on political ideology.

3.1.3. Ideology and extremism in a digital age

The study of mass media influences on citizens' political ideology is based on the theory that media outlets have 'agenda setting' power. According to agenda setting theory, selection and framing of news stories gives news media companies the power to disseminate information with a political bias, thus facilitating the creation of political affiliations between news suppliers and political parties (Hoewe & Peacock, 2020). However, rising news dissemination on online media has distorted agenda setting theory, as it promotes a high-choice environment tailored for consumer interest (López-López et al., 2020, p. 1876). By using online media, individuals have gained increased levels of discretion over the type of news they consume, while also obtaining the opportunity to react to news content and interact with other news consumers (Liang & Nordin, 2012).

Prior to the 2000s, the traditional media environment consisted in competition over increasing viewership of the median consumer, thus encouraging more moderate opinions to be broadcast, and creating a relatively homogenous news media system (Hoewe & Peacock, 2020). Online media increased the supply of ideologically diverse information, which increased competition for consumers' attention between news suppliers. This shift in the market pushed traditional media to create online channels of diffusion and also to increase coverage of ideologies (Aalberg & de Vreese, 2016). As a result, the increase in contact with ideologically alternative

currents online has been connected to the rise in extremism (Dalton & Klingemann, 2007, p. 12). We review findings in the literature on the effects of online media on ideological extremism in three parts, by looking at online media effects: as information tools, as communicative tools, and on polarisation.

Ideological effect of online media as informational tools

Research on the effects of citizens' information seeking use on online media supports the premise that online news incites a more fragmented and polarised political environment than offline news consumption (Fletcher et al., 2020; Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011). But the widening of the gap in political ideologies and increasing dissimilarities in perceived attributes between groups within the mass public does not automatically mean an accumulation of public opinion at the poles of the spectrum (Enders & Armaly, 2019; Esteban & Ray, 1994).

Approaches in literature on the effects of online media on citizen ideology are dual: either they focus on individual behaviour patterns, or they concentrate on the structural environment of online platforms. The 'selective exposure' argument, based on Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance (Nie et al., 2010), posits that people tend to avoid information that conflicts with their own opinions in favour of self-reinforcing messages. Thus, the behaviour of seeking "attitude-consistent information" (Valenzuela et al., 2019, p. 806) reduces individuals' range of viewpoints and unwittingly polarises them along ideological lines (Warner, 2010), a process also known as 'confirmation bias' (Knobloch-Westerwick & Kleinman, 2012). Selective exposure behaviour has been shown to increase in individuals with extremist attitudes (Stroud, 2010). The 'personalised content' (Sunstein, 2018) or 'filter bubbles' (Dutton et al., 2017) argument suspects the structure of online media to automatically provide users with related attitude-consistent information, to increase further readership.

Information online is not only produced by the press, but personal and political contributions, notably by politicians and populist candidates, are also widely available (Gerbaudo, 2018). The algorithmic mechanism of virality, the exponential probability that a post or website will gain attention as the number of followers or shares increases, has been linked to extremist content. This is due to the direct, outrageous and emotional messages, employed by its partisans (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2020). Hyperpartisan news, a press that favours populist candidates (Rae, 2021), benefits from virality to spread ideologies, because its untraditional journalistic style and emotion-provoking content generates more views and reactions than investigative or moderate news (Hoewe & Peacock, 2020; Knobloch-Westerwick & Johnson, 2014).

Previous findings on the effects of communicating through online media on citizens' ideology are mixed. The main disagreement in the literature being on whether discussion with homogenous or heterogenous networks increases ideological extremism. The first theory, we call it the selective discussion hypothesis, argues that online hubs attract like-minded people (Valenzuela et al., 2016), and facilitate the formation of 'deliberative enclaves', where discussion between individuals with homogenous opinions develops (Sunstein, 2007). These hubs have earned the label 'echo chambers'. According to Mutz (2006), the best environment to cultivate political activism is one where people are surrounded by those who agree with them, share their enthusiasm and share plans for political action. Simultaneously, "when those of like mind come together, the feared outcome is polarisation" (D. Mutz, 2006, p. 13). Findings in the literature have generally found a link between echo chambers, polarisation and extremism. Quattrociocchi and colleagues (2016) show empirical evidence from Italy and the U.S. using platform data extraction, that the use of social media promotes selective exposure and echo chambers in individuals, which leads to polarisation between groups. In a 23 cross-country study, Bright (2017) demonstrates that individuals join online groups according to their ideological preferences, and that the 'echo chamber' effect of homogenous networking is strongest in ideological extremist groups. Wojcieszak (2010) found that not only did extremism increase with online discussion, but also that homogenous networks online and heterogenous networks offline most exacerbated extremist tendencies. In a panel study measuring political views of individuals over four years, C. Lee and colleagues (2018) show that the positive and significant effect of online media on ideological extremism is mediated through increased offline political participation. In contrast to these results, other scholars have found a weak or inexistent relation between online media use and extremism. Based on Swedish survey data from 2002 to 2007, Liang and Nordin (2012) show that internet access increases ideological polarisation, but only slightly increases right-wing extremism. In a comparative survey study of France, the U.K. and the U.S., Boulianne and colleagues (2020a) do not find evidence that online media relates to right-wing populism support (although they measure populism, the candidates and parties they refer to are right-wing extremists). Therefore, according to the selective exposure hypothesis, there is potentially a relation between online media discussion in homogenous networks and ideological extremism, but the above-mentioned mixed results strongly invite further investigation.

The second theory of online communication effects on citizen ideology relates to the effects of heterogenous networks, we call it the disagreement exposure hypothesis. Disagreement exposure scholars have suggested that online media do not enclose individuals into echo chambers, but rather enable users to encounter a diversity of opinions, and thus are more likely to moderate their political positions (Papacharissi, 2002). This counter-argument posits that, on the whole, most individuals who use online media have heterogeneous networks of social connections and are likely, on average, to also come across attitude *inconsistent* content (Papacharissi, 2010). Using a national U.S. survey, J. K. Lee and colleagues (2014) found that online media use increases individuals' social networks and reduces the echo chamber effect, particularly in individuals who seek political information. In a data-mining study of ideological positioning of Twitter users from Germany, Spain and the U.S., Barberá (2015) estimates that the ideologically diverse personal networks of individuals increase ideology centrism. Drawing on a national U.S. study, Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009) demonstrate that discussion between individuals with opposing ideologies occurs in online groups by incident, where political discussion is not the group's central purpose. The authors argue that even though individuals tend to seek out online experiences consistent with their own opinions (in line with the selective discussion hypothesis), they are still likely to encounter political differences. However, a number of studies dispute the moderating effects of the disagreement exposure hypothesis, finding that heterogenous networks have also been linked to increased polarisation and extremism. In a study of self-reported ideological views in the U.S., Schkade and colleagues (2010) found that left-wing and right-wing partisans both showed more extremist positioning after deliberating offline with individuals of opposing views. Similarly, in J. K. Lee and colleagues' (2014) previously mentioned survey that showed reduced online echo chamber effects in heterogenous networks, the authors also found a relation between network heterogeneity and increased polarisation, mediated through the frequency of discussing politics with opposition-minded individuals.

There is a general lack of consensus on the overall state of ideological patterns in the online public sphere. This is probably because of the high variability in political behaviour depending on the network (homogenous or heterogenous) and tools available. Indeed, Conover and colleagues (2011) find that depending on the mode of interaction of Twitter, individuals are either very polarised (in the retweet function) or very opposition-tolerant (user-to-user mentions). Similarly, Wojcieszak and Rojas (2011) demonstrate that general internet use is negatively linked to extremism but that seeking entertainment online is positively linked to extremism. Cultural factors also seem to influence effects of online media on ideology. In a cross-countries comparison, Fletcher and colleagues (2020) find varying levels of polarisation online, with highest proportions

in the U.S. and Western Europe, compared to newer democracies (Fletcher et al., 2020). Thus, the relation between online media and citizen ideology depends on the predispositions of the individual, the online tool being used, and country-level factors (C. Lee et al., 2018). In Figure 2 below, we schematise the detected patterns of citizen ideology and online media political consumption and expression according to the literature.
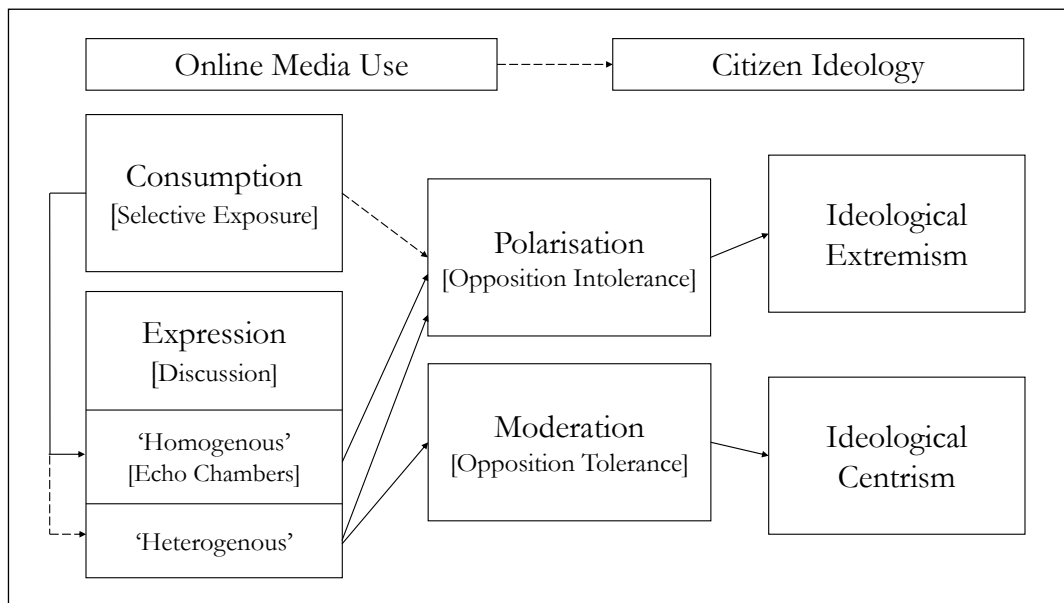
Figure 2. Diagram of Online Media Use and Citizen Ideology, via Political Consumption and Expression (author's elaboration, multiple sources).

Country-level differences between online media use and extremism are moderated by macro-social, political and economic factors. Limited civil liberties also make the relationship more difficult to study, where an increased censorship makes citizens less likely to express political views (Vergne, 2011). Differences may also arise given individuals' or parties' perceived utility of online media. The effects of selective exposure, and expression in homogenous or heterogenous networks will therefore vary depending on context. As can be observed from the literature review, most research on the influence of online media on extremism has been carried out in the U.S. or Western Europe, further justifying the regional comparative analysis our research proposes. Given the complex relations between online spheres and ideological inclination, we replicate the design approach from political participation studies to examine trends in citizen ideological extremism in relation to online political consumption and expression. In the following section, we examine and compare the contextual backgrounds of extremism in Latin America and Europe.

3.2. Context

Mirroring the contextualisation in chapter 2, we review recent histories of ideological placement, extremism and the rise of online media use in our regions of interest, in order to propose informed hypotheses.

3.2.1. Latin America

The political cleavage between the ideologies of liberals and conservatives after the wars of independence in Latin America in the nineteenth century created dividing lines in the region's political societies. In many countries, ideological violence between the governing elite was temporarily pacified through mass suffrage. In the twentieth century, military dictatorships took over from the bureaucratic and authoritarian developmentalist regimes of the 1930s to the 1950s, in the midst of an escalating Cold War. Radical politics seemed to reappear during the democratic transitions in the 1980s and 1990s, after a string of populist candidates who campaigned for social change won presidential elections (e.g. Alberto Fujimori in Peru and Carlos Menem in Argentina). But these executives soon switched to align with the internationally-vetted ideologically mainstream neoliberal models, against their constituents expectations (Kitschelt et al., 2010, p. 229). As a result, a dealignment between Latin American electorate ideologies and government representation grew. Towards the end of the twentieth century, left-wing civil society and political parties began to successfully organise, and gain support. This shift had a polarising effect on party-systems (Bornschier, 2019, p.2), and offered citizens a wider range of ideological options to choose from. Latinoamericanist political historians Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán (2013, p. 34) explain that public opinion and engagement was an important factor in the transition out of the authoritarian regimes of the past century, principally because it emboldened the organisation of opposition actors (who participated in elections once permitted). The democratic transitions out of authoritarian regimes gave rise to a volatile and fast-changing party-system, which varied considerably from country to country, influenced citizens' general understanding of ideological placement in distinct ways, and "can be described only in imprecise terms"(Coppedge, 1998, p. 547).

The origins of ideological dimensions and political identification of individuals and parties on the left-right spectrum in Latin America are, as a result, complex to analyse. In their seminal book on Latin American party-systems, Kitschelt and colleagues (2010) systematically review and compare the historical context and structuration of parties across 12 countries. Although their

findings indicate that the level of repression from past authoritarianism and the economic policies of the 1990s did not have long-term effects on ideological placement in the region, the wave of democratic transitions did lead to short-term ideology placement volatility. As a result, the ideological meaning assigned to parties across the left-right spectrum has led to differences in political distribution in Latin American countries, in some cases veering more towards the right (Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Peru) and other cases leaning more towards the left (Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil). Besides this distinction, Kitschelt and colleagues (2010) find that party cleavages across the region follow a similar pattern around three issue areas: economic distribution, political regime, and religion. Alternate party cleavages in each country are short-lived, and still tend to evolve around these three issues. Similar to CEE, party volatility in many Latin American countries has meant that electorates are less likely to have long-term party attachments, and thus have more difficulty in ideological self-placement (Dalton & Klingemann, 2007, p. 13).

During the twenty first century, moderate and extreme left-wing parties were elected in several Latin American countries (Venezuela, Chile, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Ecuador). This period was named the pink tide, and coincided with considerable economic growth due to the boom of the commodities which became briefly associated to the success of the left-wing (Cachanosky & Padilla, 2020). The rise of the left to executive mandates was facilitated by increased party polarisation and stabilisation (Béjar et al., 2020; Handlin, 2018). Left-wing electoral candidates represented voters' discontent with past neoliberal economic policies, and opposed the right-wing who had mostly been in power during the 1990s. More recently, the economic-distribution has issue again has divided the electorate, due to a crisis of representation on the left, resulting from the dissatisfactory management of anti-cyclical policies during the late 2010s (Bianchi et al., 2016). Tenuous election campaigns swept the region, mired by corruption scandals and political distrust. In some cases, citizens elected populist non-mainstream candidates (Brazil, Mexico, El Salvador), and in other cases voters returned to supporting right-wing parties after disenchantment with the left-wing (Chile, Uruguay). The increased use, particularly by populist candidates, of online media during these campaigns, mainly Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp, and particularly in populist candidates, was noted by political communication scholars (Waisbord & Amado, 2017). The link to online media was arguably encouraged by the mono- or duopolistic traditional media structures that have strong ties with mainstream parties in most Latin American countries. In an analysis of citizens' reactions to politicians' messages on Twitter in five Latin American countries, López-López and colleagues (2020) identified strongly polarised left and right-wing currents, promoted by the use of emotional language. The spread of extremism in Latin

American online publics has also been reported, particularly in the Brazilian right-wing (Mitchelstein et al., 2020). Although ideological polarisation and rising extremism in Latin America has been identified in online spaces, scholars do not label it a technological phenomenon, but rather a result of social critical juncture and political discontent (Valenzuela et al., 2019; Zuluaga et al., 2012).

3.2.2. Europe

After the Second World War, the extreme right was largely marginalised in European society, because of its association to the Holocaust, and the extreme left ruled in Eastern Europe under the Soviet Union (Betz, 1999). On occasion, short waves of extremism occurred in Western Europe. For example, in the 1950s, France saw the rise and fall of Poujadism, an anti-corporatist and nativist trade union movement, and in the 1960s, Germany witnessed the short-lived event of the National Democratic Party. However, since the late 1980s, a more stable emergence of right-wing extremist parties and movements spread across the region; while the extreme left reinvented itself away from Marxism-Leninism, and has been exploited by other groups such as environmentalists, feminists, and libertarians (Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017). One of the key factors for this rise has been growing political disenchantment and the decline in trust, engagement, and support for democratic institutions and parties, also known as a "democratic deficit" (Bartlett, 2014, p. 102). This sentiment was arguably triggered by a spreading belief of 'winners' and 'losers' of globalisation in Western European society. This social shift instilled a transformation in party systems at the turn of the millenium, where cultural issues such as mass immigration and resistance against European integration were included into extremist party rhetoric (Kriesi et al., 2008). The level of extremism in the discourse and ideological placement of these parties has varied (Aslanidis, 2016). Yet, populist and extreme right literature has tended to group these parties together into the 'new populist right' category, and has largely been comparatively studied as a Western European phenomenon (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the UK) (see Kriesi et al., 2008). Following the 2008 Great Recession, the winner versus losers of globalisation argument gained further attention, as rising unemployment accelerated the decline in positive political attitudes and voter turnout (Kriesi & Pappas, 2015). The economic crisis was linked to the increase in support for anti-establishment parties (such as the Front National in France, the British National Party and UKIP in the UK, Syriza in Greece, Moviemento 5 Stelle in Italy, and the Freedom party in the Netherlands, among others) and a fall in trust of European political institutions (Algan et al., 2017). The 2014 immigration crisis further fuelled the rise in

Western European right-wing extremism, strengthened a pan-European alliance, and gained considerable political weight in national parliaments of Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, Latvia, as well as the European Parliament in the 2010s (Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

In CEE, extremism in its democratic regimes has been generally understudied, and research has largely focused on communist successor parties (with the exception of Poland and Romania with stronger currents of right-wing extremism) (de Lange & Mudde, 2005). This is perhaps due to a less clearly defined stratification of parties along the ideological spectrum following democratisation, where "the legacy of the hegemonic communist party system hindered the development and institutionalisation of ideologically differentiated and electorally distinctive political parties" (Stanley, 2017, p. 189), similarly to Latin America (Kitschelt et al., 2010). The stigma of radicalism was also more closely linked to a fear of the return of demagoguery. Reduced to small gatherings in the 1990s (Mudde, 2005), right-wing extremist groups increasingly began to organise in the 2000s, in response to the liberal reforms of the post-communist transition and inspired by the Western European new populist right. This trend additionally revived 'unresolved' ethnic racist and historic rivalries (Stanley, 2017). The electoral success of extremist fringe parties has varied across CEE, from limited success (Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) to obtaining seats in parliament (Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) and even establishing themselves as important political actors (Romania).

The link between the populist extreme right and utility given to online media is more extensively studied in Western Europe than in Latin America (Boulianne et al., 2020a; Stanley, 2017). Indeed, right-wing extremist politicians have frequently articulated their ideologies and criticism of political institutions on Facebook and Twitter to gain electoral support (Engesser et al., 2017). Research in the previous subsection has pointed towards polarising and extremist-reinforcing effects of online media on Western European citizens, and has encouraged the debate that online media have facilitated the growth of ideologically extreme political behaviour in the region (An et al., 2014).

What is clear from the contextualisation in our two regions of interest, is that a decline in political engagement and trust provoked by economic and cultural transformation at the turn of the twenty first century has given rise to a readjustment in political party-system competition, in which a rise in the success of populist and extremist electoral candidates has occurred in both regions. At the same time, increased use of online media has led to the digitisation of political

behaviour of parties and citizens, and facilitated the spread of ideas as well as the polarisation of groups. Our related hypotheses are elaborated below.

3.2.3. Hypotheses

Using the same approach as with political participation, we theorise on the potential relation between online media use and ideological extremism in Latin America and Europe. In accordance with our review of previous findings on the effects of online information seeking and selective exposure, and online exchanges within homogeneous and heterogenous networks, on citizens' propensity towards ideological extremism, we hypothesise the following:

H4. Online political consumption and extremism hypothesis: individuals who see political content online identify somewhat more towards the left and right political extremes.

H5. Online political expression and extremism hypothesis: individuals who post or share political content online position themselves much further along the left and right political extremes.

Country and regional-level differences are expected due to context-specific historical and political variation. Specifically, the link between right-wing extremism in Western Europe with citizens' online media use has been more reported than in Latin America or Eastern Europe. Therefore, we expect that:

H3b. Cross-regional comparison hypothesis: the effects of online political behaviours on ideological extremism appear in both regions, with a stronger link in Europe than Latin America due to higher right-wing extremist electoral support in recent years.

4. Methods

First, the dataset on which our study is drawn will be presented, followed by a description of the key variables and controls. The descriptive statistics of these variables will provide an outline on the nature of the data, which will guide the choice of statistical method for the study's analyses.

4.1. Datasets

The data used for this study are sourced from the AmericasBarometer survey from 2018/19 and the European Social Survey (ESS9) from approximately the same time period (2018/20). The AmericasBarometer survey is carried out biennially by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) at Vanderbilt University. It is the only survey that has thirty years of experience in rigorous social comparison between 34 nations of North, Central and South America. The ESS is a cross-national academically-driven survey with 20 years of experience of collecting socio-political data in Europe. Both provide openly accessible datasets online as well as numerous manuals and complementary materials for analysis[2]. Aside from being the largest social surveys in each region, both surveys are regularly cited in the literature and used for policy assessment and development[3]. This widespread recognition increases their reliability.

Both the AmericasBarometer and ESS are carried out by local institutions in each country, and use a multistage probability sampling design. In our 2018/19 datasets, face-to-face surveys were conducted at respondents' homes, and included adults above the age of 15 in Europe and 16 or 18 in Latin America depending on the country's voting age. The questionnaires used a set standard selection of questions, and were conducted either in Spanish or English in Latin America, and in the each country's language in Europe. Further information on the surveys' methodologies can be found on their corresponding websites (https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/; http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/)[4].

The surveys provide rich data on respondents' socioeconomic situation and political opinion, but more importantly, these regional surveys were selected because they introduced questions on

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[2] LAPOP dataset: https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/raw-data.php
ESS dataset: https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data/
[3] LAPOP list of publications: https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/references.php
ESS list of publications: https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/findings/bibliography.html
[4] LAPOP and ESS both provide technical information to apply the appropriate weighting to the samples analysed, which allows nationally representative estimates.

politically motivated online activity in recent rounds (in 2012[5] and 2016 respectively). Similarities in question and answer structures of our variables of interest in AmericasBarometer and ESS, notably those that relate to political participation, ideological positioning, and online political activity, additionally provide us with the opportunity to develop region-wide analyses and to subsequently compare the two regions.

4.2. Variables

The data contain in their raw forms N = 28,042 observations for 18 Latin American countries in the AmericasBarometer survey (Central and South America, and the Caribbean; Mean Responses per Country = 1,558), and N = 49,519 observations for 29 European countries in the ESS (Mean Responses per Country = 1,708). The countries that are included in the analyses, along with the year they were surveyed are detailed in Table 1. The sum of countries is believed to be sufficient to represent observable trends in the two regions and to explore relevant cross-regional differences.

Table 1. Latin American and European surveyed countries (N = 47)

Survey	Countries surveyed	Year Surveyed
LAPOP 2018/19	Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Panama	2018
	Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay	2019
ESS9 2018 ed.3.1	Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Montenegro, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom	2018-19
	Croatia, Hungary, Iceland, Latvia, Slovakia, Spain	2019-20

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[5] The LAPOP survey included a question on social media usage in 2012 for the first time, with the question "And in the last twelve months, have you read or shared political information through any social network website such as Twitter or Facebook or Orkut?". Social media was not mentioned in the 2014 or 2016/17 rounds. The questions that refer to social media in the 2018 survey are distinct and defined in more detail below.

The measures used for the analysis of online political activity and its relation with political behaviours offline are based on a set of dependent and independent variables.

4.2.1. Dependent variables

Our analysis is divided into two parts, using two key dependent variables. The first dependent variable is a set of measures of offline political participation, the second is a scale measuring ideological extremism. The two aforementioned surveys include a number of questions on respondents' participation in several political activities, these are considered for the first variable. The examined survey questions are listed in Table 2. The correlation between the political participation variables is not particularly high (Cronbach α = 0.62 for AmericasBarometer, Cronbach α = 0.45 for ESS). Therefore, we look at each activity as individual binary variables (following Espinal & Zhao, 2015), where participating in the activity is coded as (1) and not participating as (0). Due to the exploratory nature of this study and the fact that it is a common approach in the literature, we also aggregate the responses to create an index of participative action for each survey, and examine whether potential relations identified in the individual dependent variables still hold when combined.

Table 2. Political participation dependent variables.

Variable	AmericasBarometer	European Social Survey
1. Voted	Did you vote in the last presidential elections of (year of last presidential elections)?	Did you vote in the last [country] national election in [month/year]?
2. Protested	In the last 12 months, have you participated in a demonstration or protest march?	During the last 12 months, have you taken part in a lawful public demonstration?
3. Municipality / Politician	Have you attended a town meeting, city council meeting or other meeting in the past 12 months?	During the last 12 months, have you contacted a politician, government or local government official?
4. Political institution	[Do] you attend meetings of a political organisation?	During the last 12 months, have you worked in a political party or action group?

5. Community association	[Do] you attend meetings of a community improvement committee or association?	During the last 12 months, have you worked in another organisation or association?[6]
6. Badge	N/A	During the last 12 months, have you worn or displayed a campaign badge/sticker?
7. Petition	N/A	During the last 12 months, have you signed a petition?

The participation variable of attending or working in an association for community problem-solving or improvement invokes civic rather than political participation, but is included in the list of activities because it is considered a civic skill directly applicable to politics (Espinal & Zhao, 2015, p. 126).

The second dependent variable is a measure of ideological extremism on the left-right spectrum. Used to gauge political trends, respondents are asked where they position themselves on a numeric scale from small numbers on the left, to higher numbers on the right, to represent the ideological left and right on the political spectrum (in AmericasBarometer from 1-10 and ESS from 0-10). The choice of selecting ideological preference on the one-dimensional left-right spectrum as a measure is limiting (Bauer et al., 2017), and a better alternative may have been to analyse respondent's party-affiliation (Boulianne et al., 2020a). However, it would be difficult to compare across 47 countries, and arguably, would end up being equally reductive. The left-right scale has been reported as a reliable representation of broad ideological trends (Carroll & Kubo, 2018), which is what we seek to measure.

Following a similar method to Lee and colleagues (2014) and Wojcieszak and Rojas (2011), we recode the ideological extremism measure into a scale of absolute distance from the centre-most position (which is coded as 0). For AmericasBarometer, the centre-most values from the original scale are (5) and (6), and for ESS the centre-most value is (5). This means that the values (4) and (7) from AmericasBarometer are recoded as (1), and the values (3) and (8) are recoded as (2), and so on. The scale for AmericasBarometer ranges from (0) to represent moderate ideology to (4) for extremist ideology, and the ESS scale ranges from (0) to (5).

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[6] The full question begins with: "There are different ways of trying to improve things in [country] or help prevent things from going wrong". This activity has been classified as 'civic participation' and as 'social capital' rather than 'political participation' in previous literature (Carreras & Bowler, 2019; Espinal & Zhao, 2015).

4.2.2. Independent variables

Having established the degree that people participate politically and their self-reported political ideology, we can now test our hypotheses on the extent of effects on these behaviours. To complete the analysis, we create our key independent variable: online political activity. Differences in the syntax of questions in our two regional surveys entail an important distinction. In Latin America, the question enquires on the individual's viewing of political content on social media, and in Europe, the question asks whether the individual has shared political content online. While the first is related to consumption of political content, which can be either intentional or accidental, the second is an act of political expression and is intentionally sought. Responses to both questions provide additional complexity to our analysis and will inform our hypotheses on online political consumption and expression.

In the AmericasBarometer questionnaire, respondents are asked how often they see political content on three social media platforms: Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. Responses are recoded into a binary variable, where seeing political content on any platform was coded as (1), and never seeing political content on social media was coded (0) ("Don't know", "No answer" and "Inapplicable" were treated as missing values). Multiple imputation was applied to the missing values for the social media binary variable (9,001 values imputed), to simulate the values generated for individuals who do not own a social media account, and for individuals who did not report their ideological positions on the extremism scale[7] (4,161 values imputed). We computed 10 sets of imputed values using ordered logistic regression on these two variables. The variables used to build the imputation model were: age, gender, internet connectivity, number of individuals in the household, urbanisation and country. Multiple imputation assumes that data is missing at random (Lodder, 2014). Although the AmericasBarometer survey sample design promotes randomised and representative selection of respondents, it is likely that there are unobserved biases explaining the differences between those with a social media account and those without one. To minimise this bias, imputation was only applied to the online political activity and ideological extremism scale variables, and thus does not eliminate all missing observations from the entire dataset. The remaining data were analysed using listwise deletion.

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[7] Following Stata and UCLA instructions and recommendations, for full instructions see the following manuals:
https://www.stata.com/manuals13/mimiimputeologit.pdf;
https://www.stata.com/manuals13/mimipredict.pdf#mimipredict;
https://stats.idre.ucla.edu/stata/seminars/mi_in_stata_pt1_new/

The ESS questionnaire asked if respondents had posted or shared anything about politics online in the last 12 months (such as on blogs, by email or on social media such as Facebook or Twitter). The dichotomous answers are coded "Yes" (1) and "No" (0). Unlike the Latin American dataset, the missing variables ("Refusal"; "Don't know") make up less than one percent, so they are not imputed.

4.2.3. Control variables

The relationships between the measures and online political activity in Latin America and Europe will be modelled using a series of logistic regression models. The first model estimates the relation between the key independent variable, online political consumption (for AmericasBarometer), online political expression (for ESS), and the key dependent variables, political participation, and ideological extremism. The second model controls for other individual-level variables associated with political participation and ideological extremism. These are described in depth below. Country-level fixed effects are added in the third model, to control for variance between countries and ensure the results are not driven by these unobservable differences.

A range of individual-level variables are included to control for factors influencing our dependent variables. Demographic (or extrinsic) variables include age, education, sex, internet, income and level of urbanisation. *Age*, measured in years, can either have a positive or negative effect on political participation depending on the politically participative activity, for example older citizens are more likely to vote but younger citizens are more likely to protest (Espinal & Zhao, 2015; Melo & Stockemer, 2014). Age has also been found to be a predictor of ideological positioning and extremism (Boxell et al., 2017) and is closely related to internet use (Ahmed et al., 2020; Holt et al., 2013), thus making it likely to interact with our key independent variable, online political activity. *Education*, categorised into three groups of qualifications (primary, secondary and post-secondary in AmericasBarometer, and lower, middle and higher in ESS) is both a predictor of socialisation that leads to political participation (Mayer, 2011; Persson, 2015) and is a mediator of citizens' ability to understand different ideological positions in their country's party system (Carroll & Kubo, 2018). The dichotomous variable *sex*, ("Female" coded (2)), predicts differences in types of political participation and activism, but is not a predictor of participation (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010; Espinal & Zhao, 2015). Sex is thought to be a predictor of ideological self-placement (Norrander & Wilcox, 2008), which is our second dependent variable. Access to the *internet* (binary variable of accessing internet from one's home) increases the likelihood of interest

in politics (Liang & Nordin, 2012) and influences political participation inequality, and deepens socioeconomic differences in offline participation (Ahmed et al., 2020).

Other demographic control variables include *income*, which is measured as a proxy of socioeconomic status (for AmericasBarometer we use the 17 point scale of total monthly household income, for ESS we use the 10 point scale from low to high household income), and level of *urbanisation* (in AmericasBarometer, categorised into a four point scale and in ESS a five point scale, ranging from a "Big city" (1) to the "Countryside" (5)) as observable characteristics that co-vary and influence the reported measures from our dependent and independent variables (Carreras & Bowler, 2019).

We also control for behavioural factors (also known as intrinsic factors) that predict political participation and ideological extremism. *News exposure* is associated with higher political participation, particularly in individuals with higher education (Ahmed & Cho, 2019; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Hoewe & Peacock, 2020; Norris, 2000; Shah et al., 2005). The variable is measured on a five point scale. AmericasBarometer records it as the frequency of paying attention to the news in print, radio, television or online (so that "Never" (0), "A few times a year" (1), "A few times a month" (2), "A few times a week" (3), "Daily" (4)). The ESS registers it as time spent paying attention to the news (we categorise time exposure into "None" (0), "1-30 minutes" (1), "31-90 minutes" (2), "91-150 minutes" (3), "151+ minutes" (4)). *Interest in politics* is a self-reported measure that has previously been reported in the literature as a predictor of political participation (Brady et al., 1995; Knobloch-Westerwick & Johnson, 2014), and has also been identified as a predictor of more accurate ideological positioning (Zechmeister & Corral, 2013), and is controlled using a four point scale in both surveys, from "Not interested" (0) to "Very interested" (4).

Studies have shown that governing institutions have a socialisation effect on the behavioural and participative attitudes of their citizens (Pop-Eleches & Tucker, 2011; Shorrocks & Geus, 2019; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2018), where social and political trust are the result of a complex interrelation between societies and authorities (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Thus, *social trust*, or trust in local community, is controlled on a four point scale of trustworthiness in the community in AmericasBarometer (from "Untrustworthy" to "Very trustworthy") and as an eleven point scale in ESS (from "You can't be too careful" to "Most people can be trusted"). The measure of *political trust* is interpreted as the level of respect individuals have for political institutions, and is included as a seven point scale variable from "Not at all" to "A lot" of respect in the AmericasBarometer, and as an eleven point scale from "Extremely dissatisfied" to "Extremely satisfied" in ESS.

These variables are included in the second regression model to control for within country variation. Following the analytical strategy developed by Pop-Eleches and Tucker (2011). Between-country variation is added in the third model of our regressions to account for cross-national differences in political participation and ideological extremism.

4.3. Descriptive Statistics

In order to appropriately select the types of regression to be applied to our dependent and independent variables, we examine the descriptive statistics below. The data are processed using the Software for Statistics and Data Science (Stata/SE 14.0) package. Summarised in Table 3, the descriptive statistics show differences in the two regions, markedly in the dependent variable – online political activity–, which, as explained in the variables section, is because each survey measures distinct online behaviours: consuming (AmericasBarometer, 73% positive responses, see Table 3) versus expressing (ESS, 15% positive responses) political content online. The descriptive statistics for the variable 'voting' are similar, despite obligatory voting in six of the eighteen Latin American countries (IDEA, 2021), and so is the political participation variable for protesting. There is a contrast between the remaining matched political participation variables (contact with politician, attendance or work with political and community institutions), and it is suspected to be due to the differences in question syntax (AmericasBarometer is more focused on passive political contact, i.e. attending meetings; whereas ESS asks respondents about their active political contact, i.e. sending an individual message to a politician or having worked in a politically-associated institutions). Ideological extremism levels are slightly more elevated in Latin America than in Europe.

Regional differences in the demographic control variables reflect differences in socioeconomic development between middle-high and middle-low income countries. Education attainment and access to internet are lower in the Latin American region, while level of urbanisation is more elevated and mean age is eleven years younger than in Europe. Income levels appear similar with the regions' means at the scales' centres. Latin America's platykurtic distribution shows higher frequencies at the 1 and 2 measures (earning more than 0 but well below average) compared to Europe's similar distribution but with a higher concentration of responses at values between 2 and 5. It must be noted that these categories reflect different income ranges adapted to each country, which makes this cross-national comparison one of economic distribution rather than one of net income.

Behavioural control variables somewhat differ as well. News exposure is difficult to compare due to the difference in syntax, where (5) in AmericasBarometer is being exposed to the news daily, and (4) in ESS is being exposed to the news more than two and a half hours a day. Both are the maximal value in their respective categorical scales, but an individual could read the news daily for ten minutes and classify as the lowest exposure in ESS but as the highest exposure category in AmericasBarometer. For this reason the measure has value in controlling variance as an individual characteristic, but not in the cross-regional comparison. The remaining behavioural variables show lower levels of interest in politics and higher levels in social trust in Latin America, and perhaps surprisingly, marginally higher levels of political trust.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics.

Variables	AmericasBarometer			European Social Survey		
	M	SD	N	M	SD	N
Online Political activity (0-1)	0.73	0.44	(18,954)[8]	0.15	0.36	(49,236)
Political participation (0-5 and 0-7)	1.28	0.97	(28,042)	1.48	1.31	(49,519)
Voted (0-1)	0.72	0.45	(27,944)	0.78	0.41	(45,233)
Protested (0-1)	0.10	0.30	(27,989)	0.08	0.26	(49,298)
Municipality / Politician (0-1)	0.12	0.32	(13,900)[9]	0.15	0.36	(49,303)
Political institution (0-1)	0.20	0.40	(15,277)[10]	0.04	0.20	(49,321)
Community association (0-1)	0.30	0.46	(27,786)	0.16	0.36	(49,302)
Badge (0-1)	-	-	-	0.08	0.28	(49,294)

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[8] The limited number of data is in most part due to the fact that this is a follow up question to answering positive to owning a social media account. The ESS question has more data because it is more open ended (asking whether the respondent has shared political content online, including but not limited to blogs, social media and email).
[9] Another reason to look at the political participation variables individually is because two of our variables of interest were questions that were only asked in 9 and 10 countries in Latin America, as these were questions only asked in USAID countries.
[10] *Idem.*

Variable						
Petition	-	-	-	0.25	0.43	(49,200)
(0-1)						
Ideological extremism	1.77	1.59	(23,841)	1.64	1.56	(42,269)
(0-4 and 0-5)						
Age	39.99	16.68	(28,026)	51.07	18.65	(49,297)
(15-99)						
Education	1.99	0.69	(27,570)	2.12	0.77	(49,245)
(1-3)						
Sex	1.50	0.50	(28,027)	1.54	0.50	(49,519)
(Female =2)						
Internet	0.48	0.50	(27,945)	0.82	0.39	(49,472)
(0-1)						
Income	7.55	4.81	(24,970)	5.24	2.78	(39,865)
(0-16) and (1-10)						
Urbanisation	3.02	1.53	(28,042)	2.91	1.20	(49,480)
(Big city =1, Countryside =5)						
News exposure	4.34	1.06	(27,907)	1.86	1.08	(48,947)
(1-5) and (0-4)						
Interest in politics	2.11	1.04	(27,890)	2.66	0.92	(49,421)
(1-4)						
Social trust	3.55	0.66	(26,293)	5.06	2.50	(49,374)
(1-4) and (0-10)						
Political trust	4.55	1.94	(27,473)	5.26	2.58	(47,689)
(1-7) and (0-10)						

Note: variable scales specified in parentheses

Figures 3 and 4 below show the relation of political participation and ideological extremism with online political activity. As can be noted from the left hand figures, both Latin America and Europe show a higher political participation mean (calculated from the aggregate index) in individuals that report positively to online political activity. Mean ideological extremism does not seem to be related to online political activity in Latin America, but extremism co-occurs with online political activity in Europe.
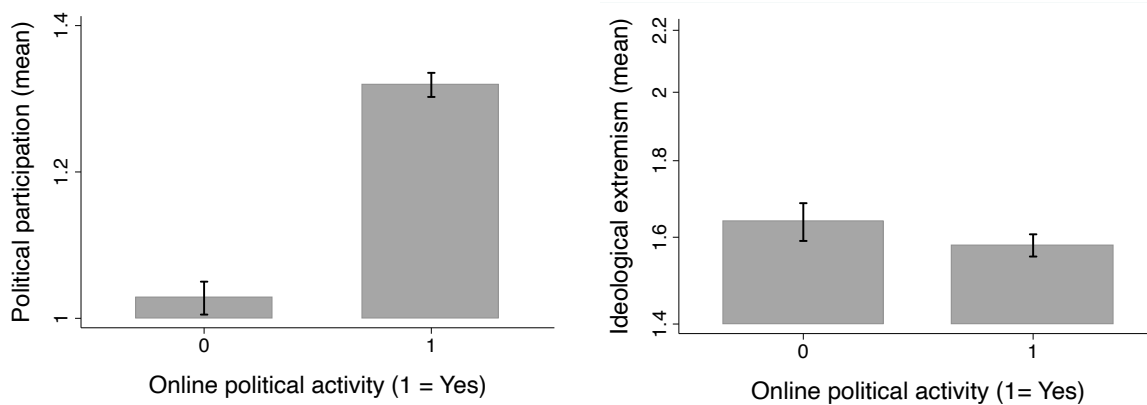
Figure 3. Relation between political participation, ideological extremism and online political activity in Latin America. Source: AmericasBarometer 2018. N = 28,042 (political participation); N = 23,841 (ideological extremism).
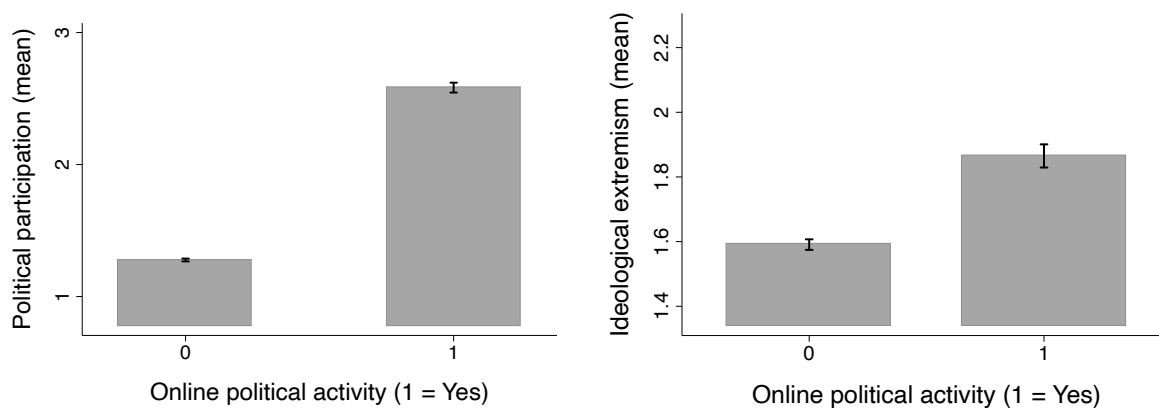
Figure 4. Relation between political participation, ideological extremism and online political activity in Europe. Source: ESS9. N = 49,519 (political participation); N = 42,269 (ideological extremism).

Below, Table 4 provides information on the levels of interactions between our key independent variable (online political activity) and our control independent variables. It shows a similarly negative relation between advanced age and online political activity in both regions, and a positive association with education, income and internet access. Latin America shows a more apparent relation between news exposure and online political activity compared to Europe. Again, a cross-regional divergence arises in interest in politics, where it is positively associated with online political activity in Latin America, and negatively associated in Europe. Overall, we can discard the issue of multicollinearity, as the key independent variable does not highly correlate with any of the control variables. The associations indicate the individual-level characteristics that relate to political behaviour and technological tool use.

Table 4. Descriptive associations between control variables and the key independent variable: online political activity.

	Online political activity	
	AmericasBarometer	European Social Survey
Point-biserial correlation		
Age	-0.18***	-0.17***
Education	0.16***	0.16***
Income	0.10***	0.12***
Urbanisation	0.01*	-0.06***
News exposure	0.12***	0.02***
Interest in politics	0.22***	-0.23***
Social trust	0.06***	0.08***
Political trust	0.04***	0.01
Phi coefficient		
Sex	0.06***	0.03***
Internet	0.09***	0.19***

* $p \leq 0.05$; *** $p \leq 0.001$

4.3.1. Models for statistical analyses

How can the relationship between online political behaviour with political participation and ideological extremism in the same individuals be empirically examined? We propose to measure recognised and cross-nationally comparable characteristics of political participation and ideological positioning, to establish whether there is a significant difference in these features between those who are political online with those who are not. Additional demographic and behavioural factors are added to the analysis given that they are known to influence individuals' political behaviour. National cultures of political behaviour, such as protesting or levels of trust in political institutions, vary according to historical legacies peculiar to each country. The extent to which these factors influence online and offline political behaviour is secondary to this study, but they are showcased in the analysis in order to deepen our understanding of their effects.

To test our hypotheses, a series of regression models are estimated. For H1 and H2, each dichotomous political participation variable is run using a binary logistic regression (five activities in AmericasBarometer and seven in ESS). To analyse the aggregated political participation index,

we use ordinary least squares (OLS), for its accommodating properties when dealing with complex data, which allows for easier interpretation of coefficients. OLS is also the most common type of regression applied in research on the relation between technology and political participation (Boulianne, 2017, p.49). Ordered logistic analyses are run as robustness tests (see Appendix). Similarly, for H4 and H5, we run OLS and ordered logits on our ideological positioning and predictor variables. To ensure comparability between the two regions (H3a and H3b), we restrict our variable analysis to the most similar and relevant survey questions from the two datasets, in order to apply analogous analytical models. It is worth highlighting that we do not make any claims of causality of the statistical associations, given that our hypotheses are tested on cross-sectional, observational data.

5. Results

5.1. Online political activity and political participation

The first two hypotheses (H1 and H2) predict a positive relationship between online political activity and political participation. We begin by testing the prediction on distinct political participation activities (five in Latin America, seven in Europe). Holding other individual-level and country-level variables constant, the binomial logistic regression models in Table 5 show a positive significant relationship between consuming political content online and all five activities in Latin America. Models 2 and 4 indicate that people who consumed online political content have 45% better odds of having *protested* and 43% better odds of having *attended a political meeting*. In the remaining models, those who had seen political content online had over 20% higher odds of *voting*, *attending a municipal meeting*, and *attending a community improvement association*, all else being equal. This result is in line with H1.

The five models also indicate that the demographic effects of individuals vary depending on the political activity, which highlights the importance of having examined the logistic regression of each variable (particularly *age, sex* and *urbanisation*). Unsurprisingly, the behavioural control variable with most predictive probability is self-reported *interest in politics*, with the highest prediction effects on the participation activities of having *protested* and *attended a political meeting*.

Table 5. Predicting political participation activities in Latin America (imputed).

	Model 1 Voted	Model 2 Protested	Model 3 Attended municipal meeting	Model 4 Attended political meeting	Model 5 Attended community assoc.
Online political activity (consumption)	1.21*** (0.06)	1.45*** (0.09)	1.21* (0.10)	1.43*** (0.12)	1.28*** (0.06)
Individual-level demographics					
Age	1.06*** (0.00)	1.00 (0.00)	1.01*** (0.00)	1.01*** (0.00)	1.01*** (0.00)

Education	1.64***	1.40***	1.17**	0.96	1.10***
	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.04)	(0.03)
Sex (=female)	1.26***	0.92	0.88*	0.78***	0.87***
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.03)	(0.02)
Internet	1.09*	1.18**	0.92	0.96	0.70***
	(0.04)	(0.06)	(0.07)	(0.05)	(0.03)
Income	1.01*	1.00	1.00	0.98***	1.00
	(0.00)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.00)
Urbanisation	1.09***	1.01	1.24***	1.16***	1.19***
	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Individual-level behaviour					
News exposure	1.34	1.59	0.75	0.89	1.39
	(0.25)	(0.60)	(0.22)	(0.23)	(0.26)
Interest in politics	1.27***	1.68***	1.46***	1.76***	1.23***
	(0.02)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.02)
Social trust	0.86	0.71	1.34	1.17	0.75
	(0.17)	(0.28)	(0.42)	(0.32)	(0.15)
Political trust	1.00	0.91***	1.01	1.07***	1.00
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Country-level fixed effects	0.99**	0.99**	0.98***	1.02***	0.99***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.01)	(0.00)	(0.00)
F	151.50	68.56	26.76	67.24	55.64
Prob > *F*	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Observations	22,725	22,777	10,877	12,143	22,663

Note: cell entries are binary logistic regression odds ratios, with standard errors in parentheses. Source: AmericasBarometer 2018. In Model 3, the question was only asked in 9 countries, and in Model 4 the question was asked in 10 countries (as part of a USAID extended questionnaire).

* $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$

Table 6 shows the predicted probability of a European citizen responding positively to participating in a political activity, when also having shared political content online. Supporting H2, six of the political participation measures are two-to-three times more likely to take place (between 84%-245% higher odds) in individuals who have expressed political content online compared to those who have not. *Vote* is the least affected political act, but still shows an 18%

increase in odds of participation when having posted or shared something about politics in the last year. Being connected to the *internet* at home is also a strong predictor of political participation activities, in all but having *worked in a political institution* (party or action group).

This pattern contrasts with the results from Latin America, where an internet connection at home positively predicts *voting* and *protesting*, but negatively predicts attendance to a *community improvement association*. Similarly, the behavioural predictors of *news exposure*, *social trust* and *political trust* produce different results in the two regions. In Europe, they increase the odds of participation in most activities, but in Latin America barely have any effect (except *political trust* which positively predicts *attending political meetings* and negatively predicts participation in *protest*). Latin America and Europe do coincide in the individual-level behaviour predictor of *interest in politics*, where it positively and significantly increases the odds of participation in every single activity.

Table 6. Predicting political participation activities in Europe.

	Model 1 Vote	Model 2 Protest	Model 3 Contact politician	Model 4 Work political insti.	Model 5 Work com. assoc.	Model 6 Badge	Model 7 Petition
Online political activity (expression)	1.18* (0.09)	3.01*** (0.20)	2.13*** (0.13)	3.35*** (0.31)	1.84*** (0.10)	3.45*** (0.23)	3.19*** (0.16)
Individual-level demographics							
Age	1.03*** (0.00)	0.99*** (0.00)	1.01*** (0.00)	1.01 (0.00)	1.01*** (0.00)	0.99** (0.00)	1.00** (0.00)
Education	1.31*** (0.05)	1.04 (0.05)	1.30*** (0.05)	1.05 (0.08)	1.23*** (0.04)	0.96 (0.05)	1.43*** (0.05)
Sex (=female)	1.16** (0.06)	0.97 (0.06)	0.87** (0.04)	0.93 (0.09)	0.94 (0.05)	1.31*** (0.08)	1.37*** (0.06)
Internet	1.57*** (0.12)	1.57** (0.24)	1.95*** (0.18)	1.42 (0.36)	1.96*** (0.20)	1.69** (0.28)	2.30*** (0.23)
Income	1.09*** (0.01)	0.99 (0.01)	1.03*** (0.01)	1.01 (0.02)	1.04*** (0.01)	0.99 (0.01)	1.02** (0.01)
Urbanisation	1.13*** (0.02)	0.87*** (0.02)	1.21*** (0.03)	1.10* (0.04)	1.16*** (0.03)	0.98 (0.03)	0.97 (0.02)
Individual-level behaviour							

News exposure	1.11***	1.11***	1.06*	1.11*	0.98	1.15***	0.98
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.05)	(0.02)	(0.04)	(0.02)
Interest in politics	1.87***	1.59***	1.64***	2.37***	1.63***	1.46***	1.59***
	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.05)	(0.17)	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.04)
Social trust	1.05***	1.09***	1.01	1.09***	1.09***	1.09***	1.08***
	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.01)
Political trust	1.05***	0.89***	0.99	0.97	1.03*	0.95***	0.95***
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Country-level fixed effects	1.00	0.99*	1.00	1.00	0.99***	1.02***	0.99***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.01)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
F	118.45	72.23	73.99	44.01	94.69	69.76	154.17
Prob > F	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Observations	35,308	37,889	37,889	37,896	37,884	37,880	37,821

Note: cell entries are binary logistic regression odds ratios, with standard errors in parentheses. Source: ESS9.

* $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$

To address H3a on the differences and similarities between the Latin American and European regions, we turn to the aggregate index analyses of political participation. Bearing in mind the associations identified in the above binary regression models, we expect that the OLS estimations of the political participation indices will also demonstrate a positive significant effect of online political activity in both regions. Table 7 shows that this is the case, confirming that political content consumption online is positively related to overall participation in Latin America. Europe shows a positive coefficient that is strong in magnitude in Model 1, suggesting that online political expression positively correlates with political participation. Introducing individual-level controls in Model 2 reduces the coefficient of *online political activity* in Europe, but not in Latin America. Model 3 introduces country fixed effects, to account for cross-national variation and provide a more accurate estimate. In both regions, *online political activity* remains positive and statistically significant across the three models.

According to the individual-level control variables, those who are older, more educated, and from less urbanised areas are also more engaged in political activities. A higher interest in politics and a lower level of trust in political institutions also significantly correlates with an increased participative index. In Europe, the models estimate a positive relation between being a woman and higher political participation, as well as if the respondent used the internet at home. In contrast, in Latin America, being a man predicts participation (the significance is lost when country effects are

considered) and so does a lack of internet access at home. We suspect the role of the internet connection on political participation in Latin America to be related to the covariance between owning an internet connection and living in a city. A Kendall tau-b correlation was run, and showed a negative significant correlation (τ_b = -0.23, p < .000), suggesting that living in a more urbanised agglomeration is indeed related to accessing internet, but the relation is not as strong as might be expected, and thus remains an important independent control variable.

Table 7. Multiple OLS regression analyses predicting political participation indices in Latin America (imputed) and Europe.

	AmericasBarometer			ESS		
	Model 1	Model 2 (indiv.)	Model 3 (country)	Model 1	Model 2 (indiv.)	Model 3 (country)
Online political activity	0.15***	0.15***	0.15***	1.16***	0.86***	0.86***
	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Individual-level demographics						
Age		0.01***	0.01***		0.01***	0.01***
		(0.00)	(0.00)		(0.00)	(0.00)
Education		0.09***	0.10***		0.20***	0.20***
		(0.01)	(0.01)		(0.02)	(0.02)
Sex		-0.02*	-0.02		0.07***	0.07***
		(0.01)	(0.01)		(0.02)	(0.02)
Internet		-0.11***	-0.08***		0.29***	0.29***
		(0.01)	(0.01)		(0.03)	(0.03)
Income		0.00*	0.00		0.03***	0.03***
		(0.00)	(0.00)		(0.00)	(0.00)
Urbanisation		0.07***	0.08***		0.05***	0.05***
		(0.01)	(0.01)		(0.01)	(0.01)
Individual-level behaviour						
News exposure		0.13	0.12		0.04***	0.04***
		(0.08)	(0.08)		(0.01)	(0.01)
Interest in politics		0.20***	0.20***		0.37***	0.37***
		(0.01)	(0.01)		(0.01)	(0.01)
Social trust		-0.09	-0.08		0.05***	0.05***
		(0.08)	(0.08)		(0.00)	(0.00)

Political trust	-0.01**	-0.01***			-0.02***	-0.02***
	(0.00)	(0.00)			(0.00)	(0.00)
Country-level fixed effects			-0.01***			0.00
			(0.00)			(0.00)
F	131.10	192.26	183.26	1197.75	404.02	370.85
Prob > F	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Observations	27,856	22,806	22,806	49,236	37,930	37,930

Note: coefficients represent regression estimates from OLS models, with standard errors in parentheses. Source: AmericasBarometer 2018 and ESS9.

* $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$

An intra-regional look at cross-country differences on the relation between online political activity and political participation are laid out in Figure 5. OLS regressions of the two variables were run for each country, controlling for individual-level characteristics, coefficients are included in parentheses. Online political activity is categorised as *high* when above 65% of a country's population responds positively to seeing political content online, as *medium* when the percentage is between 60 and 65%, and *low* when the percentage is below 60%. Given that in most countries citizens participate in at least one political participation activity, the threshold of two activities was used to gauge differences on a binary scale. Countries that reached more than 25% of the population participating in two of five activities were considered *high* in participation, and those below were considered *low*.

		Political participation index	
		High	Low
Online political activity	High	Bolivia (0.02), Honduras (0.11)	Nicaragua (0.18*)
	Medium	Guatemala (0.12), Ecuador (0.07), Paraguay (0.18*), Peru (0.19*)	Brazil (0.21***), Colombia (0.15), Costa Rica (0.16**), El Salvador (0.05), Mexico (0.01), Panama (0.06)
	Low	Dominican Republic (0.06)	Argentina (0.08), Chile (0.10*), Jamaica (0.17), Uruguay (0.03)

Figure 5. Online political activity and political participation across Latin American countries. Source: AmericasBarometer 2018. * $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$

The bulk of Latin American countries are classed as having a medium online politically active population, and most populations do not participate in more than two political participation

activities. The low-low nexus at the bottom right of Figure 5 displays three Southern Cone countries, Argentina, Chile and Uruguay. This positioning goes against the cognitive mobilisation theories that claim higher rates of education and communication promote political behaviour (Inglehart, 1970). However, only a third of the countries have a significant relation between online political activity (viewing content) and the political participation index.

The same analysis with different thresholds of high-low categorisations is repeated for Europe, and reported in Figure 6. Online political activity is categorised as *high* when the percentage of population sharing or posting political content online is above 20%, as *medium* when the percentage is between 10 and 20%, and *low* when the percentage is below 10%. As with Figure 5, the threshold of two activities was used to gauge political participation differences on a binary scale. Countries that reached more that 20% of the population participating in two of five activities were considered *high* (levels are overall lower than Latin America), and those below were considered *low* in participation. OLS regression coefficients are included in parentheses.

		Political participation index	
		High	Low
Online political activity	High	Denmark (0.86***), Iceland (0.91***), Norway (0.92***), Portugal (0.50***), Sweden (0.70***), UK (0.81***)	France (0.83***), Spain (1.09***)
	Medium	Austria (0.93***), Belgium (0.71***), Croatia (1.04***), Finland (0.95***), Germany (0.62***), Netherlands (0.37***)	Czechia (1.06***), Estonia (0.89***), Ireland (1.29***), Italy (1.05***), Lithuania (0.84***), Serbia (1.51***), Slovenia (0.90***), Switzerland (0.81***)
	Low		Bulgaria (1.35***), Cyprus (1.33***), Hungary (0.73***), Latvia (0.80***), Montenegro (1.19***), Poland (1.44***), Slovakia (0.94***)

Figure 6. Online political activity and political participation across European countries. Source: ESS9. *$* p \leq 0.05; ** p \leq 0.01; *** p \leq 0.001$*

The high-high box in Figure 6 includes most Scandinavian countries and the UK. Portugal's classification into high political participation index is the result of rounding up the percentage of population participating in two activities. The low-low corner pools together CEE countries, but still show strong significant positive relations between online political activity and political participation index. None of the highly participative countries have low levels of online political activity. The contrast between the stronger correlations in the European individual country regressions compared to the Latin American countries is evident, but it is important to recall that the European data examines online political expression rather than the Latin American data which measures online political consumption.

Using the political participation index, OLS results confirm the binary logistic regression findings for each political activity. Given the uneven distribution of the *online political activity* variable for both of our datasets, running OLS also functions as a test of robustness. We conducted further robustness checks on the findings. An ordered logistic analysis was run on both datasets using the political participation index and remaining independent variables. Using ordered logistic regression could be deemed more appropriate than linear regression due to the ordinal nature of our participatory behaviour scale (ordered 0-5 for Latin America and 0-7 for Europe). However, the coefficients are less straightforward to interpret, and the anormal distribution of our variables would violate the less forgiving assumptions of ordered regression. Generalised ordered logit modelling is a more recent method that is less restrictive than proportional odds models (Williams, 2016), but it has not yet been adapted to imputed or sample survey datasets, and thus is not yet accessible for this analysis. The result from the ordered regression indicates similar findings to those reported above, where online political activity predicts 35% higher odds of politically participating offline in Latin America, and resulted in 241% higher odds for Europeans that are politically expressive online to be politically participative offline (see Appendix 1, Table 9).

5.2. Online political activity and ideological extremism

In order to mirror the analysis of online political behaviour on political participation, OLS analysis is applied to our second dependent variable: ideological self-placement at the political extremes. Using ordinary least squares is fitting, as it is known to minimise type I errors (false positives) when using count dependent variables (Dylko, 2010). Our H4 and H5 stated that online political activity is foreseen to predict ideological identification on the political extremes of the left-right spectrum.

Results presented in Table 8 show the coefficient estimates for Latin America and Europe. In Latin America, Model 1 demonstrates that consuming political content on social media is significantly negatively correlated with ideological extremism, which suggests that it reduces with extremism. This is inconsistent with H4. However, as individual-level controls are added in Model 2, the relation becomes positive and the significance disappears. This indicates that the demographic and behavioural characteristics of respondents are significantly more responsible for individuals' identification with the political extremes. Key correlating characteristics in Latin America include being older and less educated, being a woman, not having an internet connection, earning a lower income, living in a less urbanised area, being less exposed to the news, and a higher interest in politics and a higher level of social trust. The importance of individual-level traits is maintained when country fixed effects are included in Model 3, but the positive relation of online political activity and ideological extremism becomes significant. This result suggests that between-country differences significantly account for variance in ideological positioning when measured in relation to online political consumption.

In Europe, the correlation of online political activity and ideological extremism demonstrates a larger coefficient that holds in all three models. The inclusion of individual-level effects minimally reduces the correlation coefficient (by 0.05 points), and the statistical significance remains after the incorporation of country fixed effects ($p < .000$). The only individual-level characteristics that significantly affect ideological extremism in Europe are: having a lower education, not being connected to the internet, being more exposed to the news, more interested in politics, and having lower political trust in the current government.

Table 8. Multiple OLS regression analyses for ideological extremism in Latin America (imputed) and Europe.

	AmericasBarometer			ESS		
	Model 1	Model 2 (indiv.)	Model 3 (country)	Model 1	Model 2 (indiv.)	Model 3 (country)
Online political activity	-0.15*** (0.03)	0.06 (0.01)	0.06* (0.03)	0.30*** (0.03)	0.25*** (0.04)	0.25*** (0.04)
Individual-level demographics						
Age		0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)		0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Education		-0.28*** (0.02)	-0.30*** (0.02)		-0.05* (0.02)	-0.04* (0.02)

Sex		0.05*	0.05*		-0.03	-0.03
		(0.02)	(0.02)		(0.03)	(0.03)
Internet		-0.23***	-0.27***		-0.31***	-0.30***
		(0.03)	(0.03)		(0.05)	(0.05)
Income		-0.01**	-0.01**		0.00	0.01
		(0.00)	(0.00)		(0.01)	(0.01)
Urbanisation		0.04***	0.04***		-0.02	-0.02
		(0.01)	(0.01)		(0.01)	(0.01)
Individual-level behaviour						
News exposure		-0.53***	-0.52***		0.05**	0.03*
		(0.13)	(0.13)		(0.01)	(0.01)
Interest in politics		0.06***	0.06***		0.16***	0.17***
		(0.01)	(0.01)		(0.02)	(0.02)
Social trust		0.57***	0.55***		0.00	0.00
		(0.14)	(0.14)		(0.01)	(0.01)
Political trust		-0.01	-0.01		-0.02**	-0.02**
		(0.01)	(0.01)		(0.01)	(0.01)
Country-level fixed effects			0.02***			0.02***
			(0.00)			(0.00)
F	29.67	91.12	92.42	86.18	23.08	33.83
Prob > *F*	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
Observations	27,856	22,806	22,806	42,121	34,108	34,108

Note: coefficients represent regression estimates from OLS models, with standard errors in parentheses. Source: AmericasBarometer 2018 and ESS9.

* $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$

Aside from differences in the influence of individual-level characteristics on the relation between online political activity and ideological extremism, other regional comparisons are worth highlighting. First, we identify two similarities. Results show that in both regions, being able to connect to the internet at home is negatively related to ideological extremism (with a similar approximate coefficient of $\beta = 0.30$), while pronouncing a higher interest in politics is positively related to extremist positioning. Second, we find three behavioural differences. In Latin America, news exposure is strongly negatively correlated with ideological extremism, whereas in Europe it shows a weak positive correlation. This pattern suggests a regional distinction in news

consumption behaviour, where it increases with extremism in Europe, and decreases with extremism in Latin America. Another divergence in behavioural relations is the estimated relationship between social and political trust and ideological positioning at the extremes. Though the relation between ideological extremism and social trust in the community is seemingly inexistent in Europe, Model 3 indicates a significant positive relation in Latin America. Conversely, political trust has little relation with extremism in Latin America, but it is negatively correlated with ideological extremism in Europe. This result suggests that, while higher social trust is an indicator of ideological extremism in Latin America, political distrust is a better indicator in Europe (to a lesser magnitude).

The intra-regional OLS cross-country analysis of online political activity and ideological extremism are arranged into Figure 7. Online political activity is categorised in the same way as Figure 5 for political participation in Latin America. Countries were classified as *high* in ideological extremism if more than 30% of the population positioned themselves on either political extreme of the left-right spectrum. OLS regressions were run for each country, controlling for individual-level characteristics, coefficients are included in parentheses. Again, in the low-low bottom right corner, the Southern Cone countries appear, this time indicating a low level of ideological extremism. The only significant correlation is in Uruguay, showing a considerably limited country-specific relation between online political consumption and ideological extremism.

		Ideological extremism	
		High	Low
Online political activity	High	Nicaragua (0.14)	Bolivia (-0.04), Honduras (-0.03)
	Medium	Brazil (0.11), Colombia (0.09), Guatemala (0.08), El Salvador (0.08), Panama (-0.09), Paraguay (-0.07)	Costa Rica (-0.06), Ecuador (-0.07), Mexico (0.14), Peru (-0.08)
	Low	Jamaica (0.10), Dominican Republic (-0.06)	Argentina (0.19), Chile (0.01), Uruguay (0.25**)

Figure 7. Online political activity and ideological extremism across Latin American countries. Source: AmericasBarometer 2018. $*p \leq 0.05$; $**p \leq 0.01$; $***p \leq 0.001$

The same analysis with different thresholds of high-low categorisations is repeated for Europe, and reported in Figure 8. Online political activity is categorised the same way as Figure 6

for political participation in Europe. Similarly to the Latin American cross-country comparison in Figure 7, the threshold of two activities was used to gauge ideological extremism differences on a binary scale. Countries were classified as high in ideological extremism if more than 15% of the population positioned themselves on either political extreme of the left-right spectrum (again, levels are overall lower than Latin America). OLS regressions of the two variables were run for each country, controlling for individual-level characteristics, coefficients are included in parentheses.

		Ideological extremism	
		High	Low
Online political activity	High	Spain (0.51***)	Denmark (0.12), France (0.28*), Iceland (0.29*), Norway (0.16), Portugal (0.43**), Sweden (0.10), UK (0.24*)
	Medium	Croatia (0.19), Lithuania (0.48*), Serbia (0.47*), Slovenia (0.20)	Austria (0.60***), Belgium (0.10), Czechia (0.00), Estonia (0.06), Finland (0.32***), Germany (0.16), Ireland (0.15), Italy (0.24), Netherlands (0.25*), Switzerland (0.45***)
	Low	Bulgaria (0.39), Cyprus (0.31), Hungary (-0.11), Latvia (-0.13), Montenegro (0.50), Poland (0.01), Slovakia (0.08)	

Figure 8. Online political activity and political participation across European countries. Source: ESS9. * $p \le 0.05$; ** $p \le 0.01$; *** $p \le 0.001$

The countries in the lower two left hand boxes, classified as high ideological extremism, are CEE democracies. The only exception is Spain in the high-high corner, which has a high level of ideological extremism and corresponding high level of online political expression. The remaining European countries are low in ideological extremism, and none of these of low levels of online political activity.

Similarly to section 5.1 of our findings, we apply a robustness check with ordered logistic regressions (see Appendix 2). These were run on imputed and unimputed data for the

AmericasBarometer dataset. Although the multiple imputation is carried out to strengthen our analysis, the mechanism assumes that missing data are missing at random. Given that the missingness of our dependent variable (online political activity) is driven by the lack of owning a social media account, the randomness of this occurring is likely to be influenced by a number of exogenous and endogenous factors. This might lead to the introduction of unwanted bias in our models. Nonetheless, the ordered logit on both imputed and unimputed datasets (Appendix 2, Table 10 and Table 11) align with the above-mentioned findings, and show increased odds of ideological extremism in Latin America when having viewed political content online (9% and 15% respectively). Results also hold when running the ordered logistic regression on the European dataset (except that social trust significantly predicts ideological extremism, Odds Ratio = 2.26, p = .024, and political trust becomes insignificant, Odds Ratio = 0.99, p = .260).

To summarise, the above findings validate the significant role of online political activity in explaining ideological extremism. The relation is stronger when individuals share political content online, than when they simply view it. We therefore conclude that we find evidence to support H4 and H5. In the discussion, the results are analysed in relation to previous literature, and the regional comparison is elaborated. The implication of these findings are evaluated.

6. Discussion

6.1. Key findings

6.1.1. Descriptive statistics

In this subsection we make brief observations on the descriptive statistics of our key independent variable (online political activity), dependent variables (political participation and extremism), and key control variables (education, internet access, urbanisation and interest in politics).

Initial statistical analyses of AmericasBarometer and ESS9 survey datasets revealed that both Latin American and European populations are engaged with political content online. The online political activity variables in the two regions differ, due to a difference in question wording. In the case of Latin America, three quarters of respondents consumed (read, watched, heard) political content on social media (Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp) in the last year. Whereas in Europe, 15% of respondents expressed (posted, shared) political content online (social media, blogs, websites, email) in the last year. In both regions, the proportions are similar in a country-by-country basis. Although we were limited to the questionnaires' syntax for each region, meaning that we were not able to gauge the levels of online media expression in Latin America and online media consumption in Europe, we used the online political activity indicators as representative of online citizen activity in each region, to serve as our point of comparison.

Both regions showed similar rates of political participation, specifically in voting and protesting. It is estimated that the remaining participation variables would have been more alike, had there not been a difference in the question formulation (AmericasBarometer measures *attendance* to political organisation meetings and ESS9 measures *working* in organisations, making the proportions of participation in Europe about half those in Latin America). Extremism levels are slightly higher in Latin America than Europe, but this may be for various reasons. It could be due to the nature of party-system spread, which is generally less centripetal in Latin America, or due a mix of ideological leanings, more towards the right or left depending on the country (Kitschelt et al., 2010). We therefore infer this to be a trait of regional idiosyncrasy.

Two important individual-level control variables that predict political participation and ideological self-placement are education and access to the internet (Brady et al., 1995; Carroll & Kubo, 2018). Our results showed that Latin America has overall lower levels in both of these variables. We also identify in the descriptive statistics that Latin America has higher levels of

urbanisation than Europe, a demographic trait that influences individuals' sense of communal social trust (Carreras & Bowler, 2019). Upon looking at the individual-level control variables' relation to our independent variable, we noted a particular cross-regional difference. There was a positive association of interest in politics to online political activity in Latin America, whereas in Europe, respondents reported a negative interest in politics in relation to online political activity. In other words, Latin American citizens who are consuming political content online state that they are interested in politics more often than those who do not. And European citizens who are expressing political content online are less interested in politics than those who do not express themselves online. We elaborate on this difference in the cross-regional implications section of our discussion (subsection 6.2.4.).

6.1.2. Statistical models

Our hypotheses were set out to investigate the information and communication effects of individuals' online media use on political participation and ideological extremism. Findings suggest that online political activities, consumption of information and expression of ideas, positively relate to participation and extremism. More specifically, our empirical analysis of 47 countries in Latin America and Europe shows evidence of a stronger relation between online political expression and offline behaviours. Hereafter, we position our results in relation to each of our five hypotheses.

Online media use in relation to political participation

First, we expected a difference in the statistical relations between online political *consumption* and political participation, compared to online political *expression* and political participation, where the socialising effects of discussion with online networks were anticipated to be stronger (H2) than information seeking (H1). Our findings confirm these hypotheses (see Tables 5, 6, and 7). In our activity-by-activity statistical analysis, we found that individuals who were exposed to online political content were much more likely to protest or attend a political meeting than those who were not exposed. They were additionally more likely to vote, attend a municipal meeting and attend a community improvement association. All activities were also strongly predicted by individuals' self-reported level of interest in politics, a result that is in line with the literature (Lu et al., 2016). Individuals who *expressed* political content online were more likely to vote, but slightly less so than those who *consumed* political content online. In the remaining participation activities,

respondents who politically expressed themselves online were considerably more likely to protest, and work in political organisations (from 56 to 192 percentage points higher). These findings were sustained in the aggregated participation index analysis, as well as in robustness tests. Therefore our political participation index results align with the literature that links online political media use to offline political participation activities (see meta-analyses by Boulianne, 2015, 2017; and Skoric et al., 2016).

Second, we hypothesised that the contextual differences between the Latin American and European regions would be related to levels of democratic maturity and internet connectivity (H3a). Results showed positive correlations in both regions in our main analyses of online political activity and political participation. As with online media activity, internet connection was also found to be an important predictor of voting and protesting in Latin America and Europe. In Europe, internet connectivity was a particularly strong participation predictor for most activities (with the exceptions of working in a political institution or association). Other demographic predictors of political participation in Europe include age, sex, education, and income. In contrast to previous research (Espinal & Zhao, 2015), our Latin American survey results show that income was not closely related to political participation activities (except a positive prediction of voting and negative prediction of attending political meetings). Education and sex were stronger predictors, influencing the probability of citizens participating in four out of five of the activities. Unexpectedly, internet connection in Latin America negatively correlated with the aggregated participation index. It is difficult to deduce why this might be the case, but we suggest this finding is driven by the political participation activity 'attendance to community associations' (seen in the activity-by-activity binary regression analysis), as it is strongly negatively predicted by internet connection. We suspect this is because higher participation in community meetings is more common in rural areas (Carreras & Bowler, 2019), which are less likely to be connected to the internet.

After our cross-regional statistical results, we deepened the analysis to briefly look at country-by-country correlations, in the eventuality that some countries were biasing the results of the entire region. In both Latin America and Europe, the countries all showed positive correlations (significant and non-significant) between online political activity and political participation. Surprisingly, the relation was not significant for the majority of Latin American countries. Specifically in the cases of Argentina and Uruguay, which have socio-economic conditions and democratic stability that led the author to expect them to show significant positive correlations between online political activity and political participation. This may be due to a limitation in the statistical design of the study, perhaps in terms of the chosen control variables which might be

causing internal, even municipal-level, differences to appear. However, the aim of the study was to approach the hypotheses with a large-scale regional focus, and thus it does not provide more detailed examinations of local contexts. Nonetheless, the significant relationship in a third Southern Cone country, Chile, aligns with previous literature on the same variables (Valenzuela, 2013; Valenzuela et al., 2019). In contrast to Latin America, all the individual European country statistical results were significant. Within Europe, the magnitude of correlations in Western European countries was generally larger than in newly democratic CEE countries. No European country that categorised as 'high' in the political participation index had low levels of online political activity, which further supports the hypothesised link between political online media use and political participation.

Online media use in relation to ideological extremism

Similarly to our political participation hypotheses, we expected a difference between online political *consumption* and ideological extremism, versus online political *expression* and ideological extremism. This differentiation was based on a review of previous ideology and communication research. We anticipated that the influence of online communication on individuals' extremism would be stronger (H5) than the influence of online information (H4).

Our results confirm that online media use is positively related to citizen extremism. To the author's knowledge, this is a previously unreported finding. Results also demonstrate that online political expression shows a strong and significant correlation with ideological extremism, when holding individual-level and country-level variables constant. In comparison, the reported correlation coefficient between online political consumption and extremism is smaller and less significant (see Table 8). This suggests that information seeking behaviour online is less related to extremism than online communication, aligning with our hypotheses. Checks for robustness not only confirmed this finding, but resulted in slightly increased odds of ideological extremism in individuals who consumed political content online.

Cross-regional and cross-country analyses of Latin America and Europe were expected to reflect socio-economic differences, as well as recent trends in support for extremism. In both regions, extremism correlated significantly negatively with higher education and internet access, and positively with interest in politics. This indicates that even though political online media activity is linked with increased extremism, general internet access is, on the contrary, linked with political moderation. In other words, politically-motivated online media use is related to extremism,

but non-political online behaviour might be more conducive to political centrism. This supports the thesis that the influence of online media use on citizen ideology is a consequence of individual predispositions and intentions upon using online media tools (C. Lee et al., 2018). We discuss this further in our implications subsection 6.2.2.

Another noteworthy similarity between Latin America and Europe is the positive and significant relation between interest in politics and increased ideological extremism. This individual-level trait positively and significantly also predicts all the measured political participation activities from the previous subsection. The 'participation-deliberation' paradox may explain this somewhat contradictory finding, as it postulates that homogeneity in social network discussions increases political participation, but also ideological polarisation (D. Mutz, 2006). Again this will be discussed in more detail in subsection 6.2.3. Trust also appears to be an essential feature of extremist tendencies in both regions. In Latin America, social trust is positively linked to extremism, potentially in relation to higher homogeneity of social networks in the region (Barberá, 2015); and in Europe, political distrust correlated with extremism.

Notable cross-regional differences in individual-level cognitive correlations with extremism include news exposure, social trust and political trust. Our results show that news media exposure is positively correlated with extremism in Europe, but negatively correlated in Latin America. We suspect that this is due to different preferences of news platforms in both regions. In Europe, levels of online news readership have increased, and as a result, have somewhat crowded out offline traditional news media (Liang & Nordin, 2012). Previous research has found that online news media increases extreme political views via the selective exposure or attitude-consistent mechanisms (Winneg et al., 2017). In Latin America, online news readership has increased as well, but citizens still widely listen to the radio and watch television news (Salzman, 2015). Despite being sources which also instil a bias in news consumption, traditional media do so in a less fragmented and 'individually-tailored' way in comparison to online news (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2018). In addition to weaker correlations, our intra-regional results show more variation within Latin America concerning online media-extremism. In the same way as the country-by-country participation correlations, the majority of Latin American countries do not show a significant relationship between online political activity and ideological extremism. Almost half the countries have negative non-significant coefficients. This suggests that varying national contexts may have an effect on online political activity where in some cases (although not investigated in this study), political online media use might promote moderation rather than extremism. In contrast, the relation between online political activity and ideological extremism in all European countries is positive, except Hungary and Latvia, and is significant in a third of them. The CEE respondents

mostly classified into the 'high' category of ideological extremism, and many categorised as 'low' in our classification of online political expression levels. This aligns with the literature from our contextual analysis in chapter 3, which identified rising levels of right-wing extremism in the CEE subregion (Stanley, 2017), but lower levels of internet penetration than Western Europe (Surowiec & Štětka, 2017). The classification of Spain into 'high' extremism and 'high' online political activity can be explained by relatively recent party fragmentation, and the appearance of the populist and extremist parties Vox (far-right) and Unidas Podemos (left to far-left) in the national political arena.

In summary, the results show that online political activities (consumption and expression) correlated significantly with political participation and ideological extremism. It is worth noting that the magnitude of the correlation between online political activity and extremist self-placement was small, compared to the effect of online political activity on political participation. We infer that most individuals who come into contact with far-right or far-left content online are not swayed into following those currents, but may be intrigued or further polarised (Bright, 2017; Liang & Nordin, 2012). We also reported differences between Latin American and European respondents. Intra-regional country-specific correlations were overall less statistically significant at the national than the regional level. In the following section, we discuss the implications of our findings, and relate them to existing literature.

6.2. Implications

We highlight possible implications from our findings into four main subsections: i. political participation; ii. extremism; iii. political participation and extremism; iv. geographic context.

6.2.1. Participation

Our results corroborate previous findings on online media use and citizen political participation. We base this statement on three meta-analyses, which consistently identify a positive link between social media use and citizen participation (Boulianne, 2015, 2017; Skoric et al., 2016). In these seminal meta-analyses, authors disagree on which online media behaviour is more instrumental: consumption or discussion. On the one hand, the 22-study review by Skoric and colleagues (2016), finds that online consumption is a stronger predictor of participation than expression. On the other hand, Boulianne's (2017) global 133-study examination finds larger effects for online expression than consumption. Our study aligns with the second, more

comprehensive, cross-examination, given that we find higher odds ratios for almost every participation activity (protest, attendance to or contact with political institutions, attendance to or work in political organisation, attendance to or work with community improvement association, badge wearing, and petition signing), as well as higher correlation coefficients for the aggregate indexes. More specifically, our results replicate findings from two relevant studies that differentiate their results based on consumption and expression. Firstly, a survey of urban adults in Chile, which demonstrates a significant increase in political participation in individuals who use social media to express political opinion, compared to individuals who use them as a source of news information (Valenzuela, 2013). Secondly, a survey in the U.S. that finds expressive blog use is directly related to political participation, and informational blog use is not (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2013). A possible explanation for the greater influence of expression on participation compared to consumption might be a difference in mobilising potential of these online activities. Previous research has shown that news consumption can be beneficial to political knowledge, political interest and to a certain extent, participation (de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006). However, political expression is arguably more influential because it consists in putting political knowledge into discussion with others, and has a higher propensity to lead individuals to political action (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2013). Hence, through dialogue, individuals not only learn political information from their interlocutors (as they would from the news), but they also grow their social networks, and exercise reflection on their own political beliefs and efficacy.

Our literature review pointed to some theoretical frameworks that further help explain the difference between consumption and expression. In both the cognitive mobilisation and civic voluntarism models (see chapter 2), communication networks determine individuals' likelihood of learning and engaging with political information. This process, stimulated by education, mass media and the internet, expands on the awareness and knowledge of political systems, i.e. 'political cognition' (Inglehart, 1970; Lu et al., 2016). The transition from political thinking to political action is contingent upon many factors. Yet, two elements are believed to be fundamental for this to happen. First, social capital, which is nurtured by regular interactions with networks of family, friends, and acquaintances (Norris, 2000; Verba et al., 1995). Second, interpersonal communication, which is the precursor to action (McLeod et al., 2001). Research has shown that online media facilitate both, through webs of interconnected networks and repertoires of communicative action (Skoric et al., 2016). Theories of social capital and cognitive communication provide frameworks not only to explain the differences in consumption and expression we obtained in our results, but also to understand the directionality between the two. Shah and colleagues have extensively studied the empirical link between informational and communicative online media use (Shah, 2016; Shah

et al., 2005, 2007). They find that the most plausible direction of behaviours from thinking to action is: i. information seeking; ii. political discussion; iii. participation. This is a helpful schema to conceptualise citizen political behaviour, but we are aware that the complexities of actual cognitive and behavioural processes are far less straightforward.

The greater effects of expression on participation should not lead us to undervalue the influence of online political consumption. Learning about politics online comes at a reduced financial cost for many, making it an essential resource for political knowledge. For others, online media offer opportunities of incidental exposure to news content. Incidentally viewing news on social media is positively related to engagement and subsequent discussion, at similar levels than for individuals who actively seek political information (Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2018). Therefore, as a precursor to discussion and participation, online political consumption is an irrevocable part of the mechanism that drives citizen participation.

This study, along with a number of studies before it, has demonstrated that consuming and expressing political content online makes individuals more likely to be politically participative, albeit to differing degrees. This result continues to be important link to report, as technology increasingly facilitates the replacement of offline behaviours with online ones, and in turn influences the dynamics of the democratic process (Linssen et al., 2014; Lu et al., 2016).

6.2.2. Extremism

The previously unreported finding we present here is that online political activity correlates with citizens' ideological extremism. Our results show smaller statistical relations than the previous subsection on political participation; nevertheless, they are positive and statistically significant, even when controlling for individual-level and country-level variance. Similarly to our participation results, we found a stronger link between extremism and online political expression, than with online political consumption. The literature on online media use and ideological self-placement is more limited, and as far as we know, meta-analyses have not been published on this subject. We therefore base our reflection on specific and pertinent previous findings.

We encountered two studies on the link between news consumption online and ideology, one on polarisation and the other on extremism, and one study on the link between social media use and right-wing populism. The first two studies evaluate the effects of online news consumption on ideology in comparison with offline news consumption. In the polarisation study, authors compare news consumption trends in 12 countries, and find that individuals from left-leaning and

right-leaning ideologies display higher polarisation online than offline (they measure polarisation as the size of the overlap between news sources) (Fletcher et al., 2020). In the extremism study, authors use U.S. survey data to demonstrate that individuals who consume online news self-identify as farther from ideological centrism that those who do not (Winneg et al., 2017). The present study's methods do not measure online news consumption but political content consumption on online media. We find similar results, but the relation of online consumption with extremism is somewhat weak. In Fletcher and colleague's (2020) cross-country analysis, countries with more dispersed news suppliers online (such as Poland and Czechia) produce more moderate beliefs among online consumers. Therefore, online political information environments varying across our study's countries may explain our weak correlation. In the third study we identified, authors analyse social media use and right-wing populism, and do not find a relation with either online information seeking nor online discussion (Boulianne et al., 2020a). This differs considerably from our findings. However, a difference in measurement may explain this inconsistency. In our study, we measure both left and right-leaning ideological extremism, not populism. Conversely, Boulianne and colleagues (2020a) categorise their dependent variable as right-wing populism, and rank candidates in France and the U.S. (and parties in the U.K.), according to a cultural populism index, where they include non-extremist parties, such as 'the Conservatives' and 'Les Républicains' as populist. This highlights the importance of differentiating between extremism versus populism when conducting research on the influence of online activity.

Additional insights from the literature on online extremism may help explain our findings. In the second above-mentioned study, Winneg and colleagues (2017) put forward that the influence of online media on individuals' ideological extremism comes down to the social psychology of the user and the commercialised structure of internet platforms. We believe both components are related to patterns of consumption and expression online, and briefly discuss this in relation to our results. Firstly, individuals are cognitively predisposed to avoid information that conflicts with their opinions (Nie et al., 2010). Online media allow users to selectively expose themselves to attitude-consistent information, permitting them to conform with their psychological traits. This behaviour is further aided by the diversity of political perspectives online, which offer highly specialised content to appeal to different political currents and attract more consumers (Aalberg & de Vreese, 2016). Selective exposure theory and fragmentation theory explain the symbiosis of ideological variety online, where users seek attitude-consistent information, and online media increasingly tailor content to niche subgroups of the population (Papacharissi, 2010). Individuals' ideological communication patterns also depend on cognitive

traits. Recent polling has shown that users with more polarised views are more likely to post about political issues online, and that 70% of social media users, many of them moderates, never or rarely post about political issues (McClain, 2021). Thus, those who identify at the ideological spectrum extremes are cognitively more inclined to politically express themselves online. This may explain our results, as only 15% of survey respondents admitted to sharing or posting political content online. If individuals who are predisposed to express themselves online are also more often likely to be polarised, it may explain our finding of a strong positive relation between online media expression and extremism.

Secondly, the structure of online media platforms has also been theorised to contribute to extremist tendencies in consumption and expression. The economic priorities of commercialised online media are centred on making a profit from 'traffic'. They are designed to maximise users' time spent on them. A way in which they achieve this is by personalising 'filter bubbles' and 'clickbait' (links with enticing titles) to the user's preferences, including political preferences based on browser history (Dutton et al., 2017; Sunstein, 2018). The reduced heterogeneity in content suggested to the user also results in reduced political moderation in consumers (Hoewe & Peacock, 2020). The structural influence of network homogeneity on extremism appears to be more important for individual expression than for consumption. We link this to two additional structural features. One, is the possibility of creating private spaces for like-minded people to discuss ideologies of interest among themselves, otherwise known as 'echo chambers'. These structures have been shown to increase polarisation and extremism in their members (Bright, 2017; Quattrociocchi et al., 2016). The other, is the 'virality' mechanism in public spaces, where social media favour the sharing of polarising opinions over informed ones, because they are more likely to increase traffic (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2020; Papacharissi, 2010). The smaller effects of online media consumption on extremism that we find in our results could be due to the more heterogenous nature of public spaces on social media, despite the virality mechanism (J. K. Lee et al., 2014). This may also explain the negative significant correlation between individuals' internet access and extremism, as information on the web is more heterogenous than in echo chambers.

Beyond the immediate implications of our findings, there are also important democratic implications to consider. The literature has often treated extremist support as a threat to democracy (Aslanidis, 2016). According to party-system theories, voting for extremist parties manifests a weakness in the party system (Duverger 1954, Sartori 1976). When looking at 28 democracies between 1967 and 1976, Bingham Powell (1981) found that higher extremist party support was associated with governing instability and mass rioting. Yet, at the same time, these

trends coincide with an increase in attention to reform in mainstream party policies, in an attempt to balance citizen opinion back in their favour (Bornschier, 2019). During this period of political readjustment, political discussion is fuelled by extremist candidate campaigns and redefines societal principles and values. The imbalance towards the extremes can thus be considered an indirect balancing mechanism, which enforces parties to remain responsive to evolving voter preferences. Uncertainty, fragmentation and extremism do not guarantee a return to stability, but in most mature democracies, they do not risk authoritarianism either. This rationale is known as the corrective democracy theory, which posits that a rise in extremism reflects a discontent and disenfranchised electorate, usually followed by a readjustment of mainstream party ideologies.

In summary, our results show that online media use can be linked to ideological extremism, which at the individual level implies less tolerance for opposing views and reduced inter-group consensus (C. Lee et al., 2018). We contribute to fill the gap in the literature on this matter, and suggest that it might not have been previously investigated because of the challenges and debates over measures of citizen ideology (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2018). At the societal level, extremist support invites ideological readjustments in the party-system. In the following subsection, we discuss how a rise in extremism may also be connected to a reactivation of citizen participation.

6.2.3. Participation and extremism?

It may come as a surprise that our datasets demonstrate both a positive relation between online political activity and citizen participation, and simultaneously, between online political activity and extremism. To better understand these co-occurring results, we examine possible ties between participation and extremism.

The link between the ideological and participative effects of online news has been reported in two notable studies. In one study, An and colleagues (2014) employed a mixed observational and experimental investigation of partisan sharing of online news content (attitude-consistent information) on Facebook and Twitter. The authors show evidence for echo chamber effects in social media towards polarisation, while also finding that online expressive behaviour increased political participation. In the other study, Knobloch-Westerwick and Johnson (2014) found that political interest was linked to attitude-consistent online news consumption, which in turn positively affected political participation. They also found that exposure to more heterogenous information in online networks, previously linked to reduced extremism (Bright, 2017), also

reduced participation (D. Mutz, 2006). Based on the two aforementioned studies, we deduce that selective exposure can foster political participation at the same time as it promotes intolerance to ideological opposition.

In two additional studies, we detected that scholars investigating the influence of online media on political participation also report higher divides in left-right ideologies. In their study, Oser and colleagues (2013) explain that this is because social media are more appealing to younger citizens, who are generally less engaged with traditional mainstream parties, and more likely to join radical currents of ideology. Whereas Valenzuela and colleagues (2016) explain the increased gap in protest participation between left and right-wing individuals as a results of the link between social media and a higher tendency to protest in left-wing partisans. Although their explanations do not directly refer to extremism, they do note an interaction between online media use, participation and ideology.

To deepen our analysis of results implications, we look at the co-occurrence of participation and extremism using theoretical frameworks of communication and engagement. First, using the previously mentioned cognitive communication models, we can understand how human political behaviour is driven by mechanisms of attraction and aversion, which are stimulated through discussion. Discussion, according to both the communication mediation model and the cognitive mediation model, promotes political learning and interest, which in turn facilitate participation (McLeod et al., 2001; Wang, 2007). But it is the type of discussion that determines the applicability of these theories. Conversation with like-minded individuals encourages polarisation and extremism as individuals are attracted to ideals that align with their beliefs (Quattrociocchi et al., 2016). Contact and discussion with dissimilar-minded groups have also been found to promote polarisation, but with the adverse effect of strongly reducing political participation (Lu et al., 2016; D. Mutz, 2002). This appears paradoxical, as network diversity and exposure to opposing views is conducive to democratic consensus according to habermasian communicative action theory. Mutz (2006) argues that the deliberative and participative elements of discussion cannot co-exist in the same individuals, because moderate and tolerant citizens tend to be less confrontative, and are less likely to become combative in defence of their values. Cognitive theories justify this difference in behaviour, in connection with the psychological and social predispositions of each individual (Eveland, 2001; Jost et al., 2009). The structure of the platform is also important in the nature of communication that it hosts, where discussion in longer and frequent exchanges promote balanced exchanges, compared to short encounters, which can be polarising (again, based on communicative action theory, Love, 1989).

Second, and in line with theories of communication and ideology networking (Liang & Nordin, 2012; Wojcieszak, 2010), the facilitation of extremism and participation via online media is tied to its influence on political interest. In a panel study measuring political views of individuals over four years, C. Lee and colleagues (2018) show that online media indirectly affect polarisation through the promotion of political engagement. In a qualitative assessment of social media use in Latin America, Mitchelstein and colleagues (2020) argue that online platforms increase political learning and enable political engagement on a large-scale, while at the same time cementing political opinions away from the ideological centre and towards extremism and populism. In our study, we find that political interest strongly correlates with both participation and extremism. This behavioural trend is reflected in real-world observations, where a growing disenchantment with mainstream politics and rising support for extremist parties has frequently co-occurred with a surge in public engagement and (often unconventional) participation (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). This observation might seem contradictory, as higher political participation has typically been associated to healthy democracy (Putnam, 2000). However, "the realm of public opinion is not simply optimistic or pessimistic; rather, it depends on the complex interplay between individual characteristics and the structural nature of the social media" (J. K. Lee et al., 2014, p. 718).

Thus, digital media can spur both political participation and extremism because they offer users communicative tools that reinforce their views and organisational tools for collective action. The original contribution of our study is the provision of empirical evidence for this co-occurring effect of political online activity on citizen political behaviours. Additionally, we contribute to the generalisability of this pattern, by observing it in two different regions. We discuss the cross-regional comparison of our findings below.

6.2.4. Cross-regional implications

Our results suggest that in both regions, populations are being politically stimulated online towards political participation and ideological extremism. Demographic and cognitive individual characteristics relating to these behaviours vary between regions, but common factors include levels of: education, internet access, interest in politics, and social and political trust. The findings contest previous remarks that the effects of digital media on political behaviour are momentary and simply relate to spikes of civil discontent or electoral campaign periods (Mitchelstein et al., 2020). In this study's datasets, less than half of the countries experienced a national election in the

year of survey implementation. In this subsection, we briefly compare the similarities and differences of our cross-regional results, and situate them within respective contexts.

In the late 2010s, both Latin America and Europe witnessed a decrease in conventional participatory democracy and a widening of ideological gaps between political elites and electorates (EIU, 2020). This period was fuelled with popular disenchantment and frustration with unrepresentative institutions. The two regions also saw a rise in popular protests, with an increased use of social media in partisan efforts to coordinate and engage citizens. In Latin America, widespread unconventional political participation had previously come to fruition in the late 1990s, during a regional political turn in favour of the left. In the 2010s, many of the pink tide governments that had benefited from citizen engagement in previous decades were then criticised for corruption scandals and mismanagement during their mandates. Online media use accompanied the revitalisation of Latin American citizen participation, most visibly during the 2012-2013 protests, which used abbreviated labels (hashtags) to attract larger membership, and in the recent 2019-2020 demonstrations that spread information and communicative threads throughout the region (Valenzuela et al., 2016).

In Europe, discontent with political elite and a rise in protests have been linked to grievance and cultural backlash theories (Kriesi & Pappas, 2015; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). The political tensions can be explained by long-term and short-term factors. Globalisation, a phenomenon growing since the 1990s, propelled a perceived incrementing divide between winners and losers, particularly in Western Europe. This gradually rising sentiment was joined by the sudden 2008 economic crisis and the 2014 immigrant crisis, which accentuated citizen dissatisfaction and alienation from national and supranational governments (namely, the European Union). In Latin America and Europe, populist and extremist party support grew, as a result of dealignment between incumbents representation and citizen demands (Barboni & Treille, 2010; Waisbord & Amado, 2017). The use of social media by these candidates and protesting citizens also attracted attention to the influence of technological tools of behaviour (Chadwick, 2017; Miller, 2020). From this review, similarities between Latin America and Europe in recent citizen political sentiment and frustration are noticeable. During this period, and in both regions, scholars have incrementally investigated the growing use of online media by citizens and politicians in the transition towards new political climates (Cantijoch, 2012; Espinal & Zhao, 2015; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2019; Mitchelstein et al., 2020; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2018; Valenzuela et al., 2016).

Despite these broad similarities identified in the literature, there are several noteworthy differences between the regions that explain our results. We focus on two contextual differences that we find relevant for our comparative analysis: internet penetration and democratic maturity. First, overall internet penetration (internet connection in the average household) is more elevated in Europe than in Latin America (88% in Europe, 66% in Latin America) but Latin America has higher penetration levels of social media (41% in Europe and 51% in Latin America), suggesting that internet connection is more synonymous with social media use in Latin America than in Europe (Internet World Stats, 2019). That said, within Latin America there are several countries that have particularly low levels of internet penetration, such as Bolivia, Cuba, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Paraguay, and Venezuela. This may explain why these countries have been found to have the lowest reported levels of social media use during times of protest (Masías et al., 2018). Unexpectedly, in our results we find that Bolivia, Honduras and Nicaragua classify in the 'high' online political consumption category that we designed (compared to Southern Cone countries, which classify as 'low'). This inconsistency could be due to distinct purposes that citizens give to social media, which could include informal channels for news information in otherwise censored environments. Further research is needed to understand political online media usage in these countries. Likewise, more research is needed on understanding citizen political use of online media in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). In spite of generally having lower levels of internet penetration than Western Europe, some countries such as Belarus, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Hungary, Kosovo and Ukraine, have been officially reported to have rates of average internet connectivity above 80%, which might be an avenue for future investigations on online media and citizen political behaviour (Internet World Stats, 2020).

Second, Europe generally has better records for freedom of expression, press and assembly than Latin America, which are characteristic of mature democracy. In a comparison of 'established' versus 'third wave' Western European democracies, Vaccari and Valeriani (2018) find that institutional legacies shape the relation between online media use and participation, where 'third wave' democracies overall show significantly weaker correlations between online discussion and participation than established democracies. In line with this democratic maturity argument, Europeans in our study's cross-regional comparison showed significantly stronger correlations of participation and extremism with online media use than Latin Americans. We also perceive a connection with the Latin American context of a recent rise in political protest but drop in civil liberties (EIU, 2020). It is possible that during this time, online media have not only been a source for political socialisation, but a matter of learning and sharing information on protest and opposition organisation (Ahmed & Cho, 2019; Valenzuela, 2013). This difference is further noted

in the intra-regional country results. Many Latin American countries did not show significance in the correlation between online media use and participation, and even fewer did in the statistical analysis with extremism.

Another difference that may be related to democratic maturity is the generally higher levels of self-reported extremism in Latin America than Europe. Latin America has a historical past of volatile party-system stratification due to shifts in ideological spread of parties over the past 40 years (Coppedge, 1998; Kitschelt et al., 2010). Although changes in ideological meaning assigned to the spectrum affects citizens' ability to self-place their ideological preferences and build party attachments, the growing political cleavages that have risen from extremism aid citizens to increase in political cognition (Hinich & Munger, 1996; D. C. Mutz & Martin, 2001). This helps individuals perceive a more accurate ideological self-placement (Dalton & Klingemann, 2007). "By clarifying the political alternatives, polarization creates strong links between parties and voters, and thereby instils mechanisms of accountability" (Bornschier, 2019, p.153). This argument is based on democratic theory, the future of ideological placement of citizens and parties in the region remains uncertain. Within the regions, socio-economic and democratic contexts of Latin America and CEE are more similar than Western Europe. Yet, the benefits of polarisation and extremism for democracy in CEE are arguably different to those in Latin America. Our intra-regional results show 'low' political participation, 'high' extremism, and 'low' online political activity for most CEE countries. The instability in party-systems and democratic values are a testament to the shorter lived popular satisfaction with the transitions in the 1990s, and lingering ethnic and religious differences (Stanley, 2017; Surowiec & Štětka, 2017). This context renders CEE less adept for party-system ideology readjustment than Latin America (Kitschelt et al., 2010).

In summary, this study's cross-regional examination provides innovative and generalisable results linking citizen political behaviours, participation and ideological extremism, to online media use. We base this claim on the reliability of the comparative and cross-regional citizen behaviour research methods we used (Curtice, 2007; Lijphart, 1975). We also detect interesting contextual differences in each region. Western Europe's higher internet connectivity and democratic maturity, explain the stronger links between online media use, participation and extremism in our results. Latin American and CEE countries have a history of less stability, but provide more possibilities for future research investigating the utility of online media and their effects in varying democratic contexts.

6.3. Limitations

While the present study brings new insights, the analysis also has its limitations. We outline three methodological limitations to be noted.

First, our results depend entirely on self-reported measures. The issue with self-reported answers is that they rely on respondents' honesty and recall. Misreporting behaviour is common, particularly in routine activities such as news exposure, where individual and contextual characteristics influence self-reporting (Vraga & Tully, 2020). This has repercussions on the validity of the research. However, the advantage of using surveys is that they provide a standardised set of carefully planned out measures, allowing for the monitoring of multiple individual characteristics, beliefs and behaviours in sample populations. In other words, it facilitates generalisations of trends. Most observational studies, and particularly of large-scale analysis, continue to use self-reported measures as an accessible and expediate method. Self-reported measures are specifically insightful in the study of online behaviours, given that most online platforms have strict privacy regulations that prevent researchers from extracting data (with the exception of Twitter) (Tucker et al., 2018). Both the AmericasBarometer and ESS9 surveys were carried out face-to-face, a method which increases the likelihood that people answer the entire questionnaire (Valenzuela, 2013, p.927), but also makes them vulnerable to social desirability bias (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2018, p.5). Admittedly, every method has its limitations, and results must be treated with discretion. The datasets our study employed are observational in nature, which means that our results show correlation but not causality. Nonetheless, they are both highly recognised, and regularly cited and sourced from to conduct socio-political research.

Second, the AmericasBarometer and ESS9 questionnaires are designed for equal implementation in all countries of their respective regions, in the most unified manner possible. This is favourable to improving the quality of quantitative cross-comparison (Curtice, 2007), but it ignores country-specific, and more locality-specific differences (Ahmed et al., 2020). In our study we chose to keep the two datasets separate, as combining them would have increased the erasure of context-specific differences. This methodology still allowed us to develop a cross-regional comparison, and to complement our findings with intra-regional country comparisons. The comparative aspect of the study was arguably limited in the key independent variable, measured as online political consumption in Latin America and online political expression in Europe. Future studies would preferably obtain both measures in both regions in order to confirm our results.

Third, part of the AmericasBarometer dataset was incomplete, due to a number of missing values. Missing data typically arise when respondents refuse, or do not know the answer. But in

the case of the AmericasBarometer dataset, the missing values correspond to the people who do not have a social media account. We believe this to be an issue that can be confronted with question wording in the forthcoming survey round. The commonly used statistical procedure of multiple imputation assisted our analysis. Multiple imputation uses the distribution of data to estimate multiple values and mirror the uncertainty of true values (UCLA, 2021). By using this method, and running other statistical models to check the robustness, minimised bias and increased the reliability of our results (reported in the Appendix). Limitations notwithstanding, the approach to the research design and statistical analyses was adapted to optimise the quality of results, within the research aims of the study

6.4. Recommendations

Based on the innovative results and the cross-regional scope of our study, we suggest three possible directions for future research. First, our analysis pinpoints the need for deeper understanding of the use of online tools and radicalisation in Latin American and CEE countries that have been for the most part ignored. Special attention should be given to low-income countries that have seen growth in internet access in the last few years. Although it is likely that similar patterns of behaviour will influence these increasingly connected populations, its effects on participation and extremism are worth examining, in order to re-assess theoretical frameworks of online information and communication. Such research could also consider using qualitative methods, to offset the overwhelming majority of quantitative studies in the literature. Second, additional longitudinal work needs to be developed on the effects of information and communication technology on political behaviour. Some studies have produced results over four or five year terms (C. Lee et al., 2018; Liang & Nordin, 2013), but decade-long studies should now be within reach, and could perhaps enable the comparison of inter-generational cohorts. This would provide a better indication of the potential ways that technology will influence individuals and societies in decades to come. And third, research must continue to promote findings that differentiate the ways different platform structures affect political behaviour (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2019; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2018). This will help scholars understand why and how certain populations prefer a social medium over another for political engagement (Newman et al., 2020). A step that the present author would personally like to pursue is an experimental study to test the diagram designed in Figure 2, to further explore how different platform structures foster more homogenous or heterogenous social networks, and whether these simultaneously affect participation and extremism.

Conclusions

The general objective of this study was to identify and examine the influence of using online media tools on two patterns of citizen political behaviour: participation and ideological extremism. On the first behaviour, an extensive literature has been published, mostly stemming from research in the U.S. This literature has confirmed the importance of online media in promoting citizens' political participation (such as voting, protesting, participation in political meetings, signing petitions, among others). On the second, there is a limited amount of scientific evidence linking online media use with ideological extremism. The existing literature is conflicting, with some accounts pointing towards increased extremism, and others indicating a tendency towards moderation. The context of a global rise in extremism and populism further provided a justification for our investigation. Given that most studies in the field on both behaviours have been carried out in the U.S. and Western Europe, we chose to focus on Latin America, a region with highly reported levels citizen participation; and chose to compare it to Europe, a region on which scholarly evidence that has shown a relation between online media and political participation, and has experienced a recent rise in right-wing extremism. To analyse these two regions, we replicated methods of evaluating online media effects on citizen political participation using representative sample social surveys, and expanded the design to our comparisons of interest, online media use, political participation and ideological extremism.

In these final remarks, we summarise the main results from our study, its implications in the wider literature, and our future recommendations. Our main finding in this study of 47 countries was that online political activities positively correlates with citizen political participation and self-reported ideological extremism. Binary and multiple regression analyses demonstrated that online political expression is more strongly related to both participation and extremism, compared to online consumption of political content. The results also generally showed stronger correlations of these relationships in Western European countries than in CEE and Latin American countries. Taken together, the results confirmed our hypotheses. The principal innovative finding from our study is that the same online activities, consumption and expression, can be predictors of markedly different offline political behaviours, participation and extremism. This result might initially seem paradoxical. Using theories of cognition, communication and networking, we argue that polarisation and ideological extremism are processes that can align with individuals' predisposition to become more politically participative within more homogeneous groups.

In our cross-regional comparison, similarities in correlations support the generalisability of our findings. Yet, two contextual differences that influence region-specific variance are detected. These are internet penetration and democratic maturity. These are believed to influence the extent of online media mediation of citizens' access to political participation and ideological positioning. The empirical findings of this study make a contribution to understanding of the role of online media on citizen behaviour in two world regions. We suggest that future research avenues might explore online political activity trends in less frequently studied Latin American and CEE countries, or evaluate platforms' structural differences to explain homogenous and heterogenous network influence on behaviour. We believe our findings raise questions worth pursuing, particularly given the constantly evolving environments in technological information and communication networks.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Robustness checks of political participation analyses.

Table 9. Robustness checks for predicting political participation indices in Latin America and Europe.

	AmericasBarometer		ESS
	Imputed	Not imputed	Not imputed
Online political activity	1.35***	1.56***	3.41***
	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.17)
Individual-level demographics			
Age	1.03***	1.03***	1.02***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Education	1.26***	1.33***	1.44***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.04)
Sex	0.99	0.99	1.16***
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.04)
Internet	0.85***	0.82***	1.62***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.08)
Income	1.01	1.01*	1.05***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.01)
Urbanisation	1.17***	1.16***	1.09***
	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Individual-level behaviour			
News exposure	1.39	0.83	1.05***
	(0.25)	(0.18)	(0.02)
Interest in politics	1.46***	1.45***	1.86***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.05)
Social trust	0.80	1.37	1.07***
	(0.15)	(0.31)	(0.01)
Political trust	0.98***	0.97***	1.07***
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)

Country-level fixed effects	0.98***	0.98***	1.00
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
F	174.51	151.16	302.61
Prob $> F$	.000	.000	.000
Observations	22,806	16,252	37,930

Note: cell entries are ordered logistic regression odds ratios, with standard errors in parentheses. Source: AmericasBarometer 2018 and ESS9.

* $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$

Appendix 2: Robustness checks of ideological extremism analyses.

Table 10. Robustness checks for ideological extremism indices in Latin America.

	Imputed		Not imputed	
	OLS (reported)	Ordered logit	OLS	Ordered logit
Online political activity	0.06*	1.09*	0.10***	1.15***
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.05)
Individual-level demographics				
Age	0.01***	1.01***	0.01***	1.01***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Education	-0.30***	0.71***	-0.29***	0.71***
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Sex	0.05*	1.05	0.05*	1.06
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Internet	-0.27***	0.74***	-0.22***	0.78***
	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Income	-0.01**	0.99**	-0.01	0.99
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Urbanisation	0.04***	1.05***	0.03**	1.03**
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Individual-level behaviour				
News exposure	-0.52***	0.54***	-0.62***	0.48**
	(0.13)	(0.08)	(0.19)	(0.12)

Interest in politics	0.06***	1.08***	0.07***	1.10***
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.02)
Social trust	0.55***	1.90***	0.69***	2.26***
	(0.14)	(0.32)	(0.20)	(0.57)
Political trust	-0.01	0.99	-0.01	0.99
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Country-level fixed effects	0.02***	1.02***	0.02***	1.02***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
F	92.42	79.59	44.13	38.86
Prob > *F*	.000	.000	.000	.000
Observations	22,806	22,806	14,411	14,411

Note: cell entries are regression estimate coefficients for the OLS models and odds ratios for the ordered logistic regressions, with standard errors in parentheses. Source: AmericasBarometer 2018.

* $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$

Table 11. Robustness checks for ideological extremism indices in Europe.

	OLS (reported)	Ordered logit
Online political activity	0.25***	1.33***
	(0.04)	(0.06)
Individual-level demographics		
Age	0.00	1.00
	(0.00)	(0.00)
Education	-0.04*	0.97
	(0.02)	(0.03)
Sex	-0.03	0.95
	(0.03)	(0.03)
Internet	-0.30***	0.70***
	(0.05)	(0.04)
Income	0.01	1.00
	(0.01)	(0.01)
Urbanisation	-0.02	0.98
	(0.01)	(0.01)
Individual-level behaviour		

News exposure	0.03*	1.05**
	(0.01)	(0.02)
Interest in politics	0.17***	1.24***
	(0.02)	(0.03)
Social trust	0.00	1.02*
	(0.01)	(0.01)
Political trust	-0.02**	0.99
	(0.01)	(0.01)
Country-level fixed effects	0.02***	1.02***
	(0.00)	(0.00)
F	33.83	34.11
Prob > *F*	.000	.000
Observations	34,108	34,108

Note: cell entries are regression estimate coefficients for the OLS models and odds ratios for the ordered logistic regressions, with standard errors in parentheses. Source: ESS9.

* $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$