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The Ideology of Internet Users as a Problem for Digital Political Representation: The Spanish Case

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Abstract: Ideology is one of the classical concepts used in the analysis of the political behaviour of citizens. This paper considers this political concept applied specifically to the case of Internet users. The authors' general aim is to look at the political behaviour of Internet users and improve their understanding of the evolution, possibilities and limitations of digital democracy. All have taken as their case study the ideology of Spanish Internet users. At first glance, the figures show a high representation of left-wing citizens among the general population of Internet users. The authors look into the reasons behind this and into its effect on representative digital political practices. Through an empirical study they that the ideological position of Spanish Internet users is, ultimately, the result of the Digital Divide that affects Internet usage in this country. In other words, the stronger presence of left-wing Internet users is the result of technological inequalities and constraints that affect a significant section of Spanish citizenry. To conclude the paper, they reflect on how this circumstance might affect political participation initiatives, especially representative participation initiatives.

Keywords: Political participation, digital democracy, political behaviour, ideology.

1. Introduction

The term impact is frequently used in the study of the evolution of ICTs (information and communication technologies) as a descriptive metaphor. Thus, there is talk of the impact of the Internet on work and it is said that technological development has a significant impact on the world economy. In the study of digital participation–the subject of this paper–, this way of conceiving of the relationship between technological and political development is also widespread [1]. According to this image, as Levy [2] puts it, the Internet would be a lance or bullet and society, its individuals and groups, a mobile target.

In this paper the authors aim to study the relationship between technological and political development, moving away from this image of impact. We analyze this relationship from the point of view of the ability to act of the actors involved, taking into consideration their political characteristics. The aim of this paper is to analyze how the ideology of Internet users may affect the concept of political representation in digital democracy initiatives. More specifically, they want to know whether one of the basic elements of the political behaviour of citizens–their ideological self-positioning–, is neutral or whether it has any particular effect in the digital (online) political sphere. In sum, this paper analyzes the ideology of Internet users to study its effects on representative digital practices. To do so, the authors take Spanish Internet users as our case study although they introduce several reflections, examples and data that allow all to transcend the limits of a single case study.

To meet these general and specific aims, they proceed as follows. Firstly, they offer a brief overview of the current debate on digital participation, digital

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democracy and its consequences. The authors speak of the idea of digital normalization, at the centre of one of the most active debates in this field. This debate, as they shall see, stems from the idea of technological impact. Our aim here is twofold. On the one hand, they provide the reader with an overview of the state of the most significant controversies, debates and concepts in this field. On the other hand, it allows us to position ourselves in their specific angle of study which proposes to analyze digital democracy based on the observation of the actors involved in said political process.

In the second section, the authors present a set of empirical results that help us describe the ideological behaviour of Spanish Internet users and compare it with that of non-users and that of the general population. According to all empirical results, the ideology of Internet users in Spain shows a clear leftwards trend that does not correspond with the average position of Spanish citizenry. They argue that this trend is the result of a leftward shift of the Internet which, according to all data, started in 1997 and reached its peak ten years after. In the third section we look into the causes behind this shift, applying several statistical methods that allow us to conclude that the cause behind this ideological bias of Spanish Internet users is related with their social and demographic characteristics. That is, all conclude that the leftward shift of the Internet is the result of digital inequalities or the Digital Divide existing in Spain1. In the fourth section the authors look at the implications of the descriptive and analytical sections with a view to studying the effects that the results observed may have on digital democracy practices. To this aim, they examine a series of studies which, leaving to one side the debate regarding normalization, analyze the evolution of the idea of representative digital democracy from the political action of the actors involved. This chapter is speculative in nature, proposing a set of generalizations based on the conclusions from the empirical and theoretical sections. The paper ends with a series of basic conclusions.

2. Digital Participation and Digital Representation: The State of the Issue

In the current academic debate there are two main categories that include the different political uses of the Internet [3]: electronic government and digital democracy. According to van Dijk [4], e-Government refers to the provision of online services by governmental bodies and the communication between these bodies and citizens. Digital democracy, on its part, consists of the union of the democratic structure of a political community and the exercise of its government functions through the Internet [5].

In the field of digital democracy, many authors [4, 6, 7] favour a "strong" digital democratic model. That is, a model of digital democracy that combines representative and deliberative elements. It is a democratically innovative model that is built on the basis of representative participation practices. Along these lines, [8], propose three ways in which ICTs could exercise an innovative effect on representative political processes. One of these three ways is what the authors call "reinvigoration" and which coincides with the "strong" democratic model referred to above. Thus, we see that there is a wide consensus among experts on the subject with regard to the representatively innovative nature of this type of practice.

According to this perspective, ICTs offer new opportunities for the political participation of citizens, which help to renew their commitment and interest in the public sphere, and strengthen their belief in the possibility of having an influence on the decisions of their political representatives. Although this can involve direct democracy techniques such as political deliberation, this model places more emphasis on the relationship between citizens and representatives, as

[1] The basis for both the descriptive and the analytic sections is a set of studies and barometers of the Centro de Investigaciones Sociologicas (Spanish Government) which asked Spanish citizens about their use of Internet and their political behavior, among other issues.

well as on the role of this mediation in the shaping of the political agenda. Coleman [9] suggests the possibility that ICTs, at the service of the mediation between politicians and citizens, may help make representation a stronger and more direct political mechanism.

On a normative level, Oates [10] proposes a digital mediation model that combines informative, deliberative and representative elements. According to the author, ICTs contribute to the democratic process by facilitating to Internet users access to information and favouring participation both in deliberative practices and in decision-making. These three elements, according to the author, are ordered according to a specific hierarchy: free access to information regarding political issues is the basis for deliberation about those issues. Lastly, deliberation is an essential prerequisite for decision-making by representatives. Also on a normative level, Janssen & Kies [11] propose, based mainly on a taxonomy put forward by Dahlberg [5], a set of basic democratic criteria to operationalize the process of digital democracy. These criteria are: justification and reciprocity, reflexivity and ideal role taking.

In brief, the current debate regarding the Internet's representative possibilities emphasizes Internet's capacity to strengthen the political relations between representatives and represented. That is, the Internet is portrayed as a mediating channel with a greater capacity than traditional channels to bring together the different spheres of political action. However, to test this hypothesis, we must review the main empirical contributions of recent literature.

Empirical studies on the effects of ICTs on the representative democratic process have focused on the analysis of political party websites and blogs or discussion forums. In the first case, most research has been designed to study the politically innovative nature of this type of digital practice. In other words, their aim has been to examine whether the political relations of political parties through the Net are a new type of political relationship[2] or if, on the contrary, they are an extension of traditional representation practices. Margolis & Resnick [1] call this latter hypothesis "normalization". According to this thesis, given the way the Internet is evolving, the characteristics of online social, economic and political relationships are similar to those relationships in the "real" world. For political parties, this hypothesis implies, among other things, the maintenance in cyberspace of the privileges that majority parties enjoy offline. As to political communication strategies, normalization implies that the Internet will only influence the immediacy of political relations and the reduction of political communication costs [12]. Research such as that of Margolis & Resnick [1], Strandberg [13] and Schweitzer [14] seems to provide empirical evidence in favour of this hypothesis.

However, other authors, such as for example, Coleman [9], Norris [15] and Jackson [12], attempt to show that, albeit slowly, the Internet is acquiring a specific and unique role within political practices. From this point of view, the Internet, with its characteristics and specificities, is exercising an impact on the ways of "doing politics". Thus, for example, the creation of representative digital political spaces such as political party websites, would be changing the ways in which citizens and representatives relate to each other. We could say, following Tarrow [16], that technologies are opening up a structure of political opportunity for new ways of participation and new claims.

In what follows, the authors shall make use of many of the concepts outlined above. We shall focus mainly on the idea of digital democracy to try to advance along the lines proposed by authors such as van Dijk [4], Hague & Loador [6], Subirats [7], Coleman [9] and Lusoli & Ward [8], for whom one of the possible effects of "strong" digital democracy is the reinvigoration of the links between representatives and

[2] This concern is closely related with the idea expressed further above regarding the central role of the study of the "strong" digital democratic model.

represented. However, to analyze this relationship, we move away from the debate on normalization. All aim is to analyze the digital relationship between politicians and citizens based on the latter's political behaviour. To this aim, they focus, as explained above, on a specific political characteristic of Internet users: their ideology. The authors analyze the potential effects of this aspect of political behaviour on representative digital democracy political practices.

Thus, in the following sections they describe the ideology of Spanish Internet users and analyze their specific distribution, and then go on to reflect on the effects of the ideology of Internet users in Spain on the representative digital democracy initiatives set up in this country.

3. Descriptive Section: The Ideology of Spanish internet Users

In this section the authors offer descriptive information regarding ideological self-positioning for citizens who are Internet users[3], non-users and the general population of Spain. For this descriptive section we use data gathered by Spain's CIS (centro de investigaciones sociológicas) in several studies and barometers spanning from 1997 to 2007[4]. They analyze ideology according to the classical formulation of the concept. That is, organized according to a left-right scale.

As in many studies of this kind, CIS uses a scale of ten to measure citizens' ideological self-positioning, where 1 is "far left" and 10 is "far right". In this section the authors use this classification and study the cumulative results, as is customary, taking 1 and 2 as "far left", 3 and 4 as "moderate left", 5 and 6 as "centre", 7 and 8 as "moderate right" and 9 and 10 as "far right". The first result they highlight is the significant presence of citizens who self-position themselves as "left-wing" among Spanish Internet users. The median Spanish position being five and the average being 4.68, it is worth noting that in 2007, the average position of Spanish Internet users was just 4.46[5]. The average ideological position of Spanish citizens who are not Internet users, on the other hand, is 4.88.

They also find this trend when analyzing the distribution of the different ideological groups among Internet users. Of all Spanish Internet users in 2007, 41.5% describe themselves as "left-wing". That is, more than four out of every ten Internet users self-position themselves ideologically between 1 and 4 on an ideological scale of 10. On their part, citizens who use the Internet and describe themselves as "centre" represent practically 30% of all Internet users. The presence of "right-wing" or "far-right" citizens among Internet users is relatively scarce. Slightly over one out of every ten citizens who use the Internet self-positions themselves between 7 and 10. However, this distribution is not "as left-wing" in the general population; the percentage of Spanish citizens who describe themselves as left-wing is 31.4%. In other words, this proportion is practically 10 points lower than that corresponding to Internet users. On another note, as shown in Fig. 1, there are no significant differences between Spanish citizens who describe themselves as centre or right-wing and Spanish Internet users who self-position themselves ideologically in those groups.

The prevalence of left-wing ideology among

[3] For the purposes of this study, "Internet user" is defined as any citizen who has used the Internet in the last three months. For future research it is our aim to specify further the profile of Internet users with a view to perfecting our analysis of the political characteristics of this type of citizen. However, we consider that for this first approach, it is apt to take the largest number of citizens possible.

[4] CIS Barometer, April 2007 (Study no. 2700). All the advanced statistical analyzes (segmentation, regression, ANOVA) carried out for this paper used this survey as the basis. The scope of research is national and includes 2455 interviews (of the 2500 proposed) within a universe comprised of the Spanish population, of both genders and of legal age. The sampling points were 55 provinces and 232 municipalities. The type of sampling chosen was multi-stage, stratified by conglomerates, with selection of the primary sampling units (municipalities) and the secondary units (sections) in a proportional random manner, and of the ultimate units (individuals) by random routes and gender and age quotas.

[5] This difference is statistically significant.

Spanish Internet users has not always been the case. The first data available show that in 1997 there were hardly any differences between Spanish Internet users who described themselves as centre and left-wing. That year, left-wing Internet users accounted for 37.0 of the total and centre Internet users were 36.4 of the total. It is true that Internet users describing themselves as "right-wing" represented a substantially lower percentage (15.6%). As shown in Fig. 2, the presence of left-wing citizens has not ceased to increase since 1997. By 2004, this ideological group represented over four percentage points more than centre Internet users. Lastly, all see that in 2007 this leftward trend continues and the difference between these two groups rises to 11.8 points. Right-wing citizens, on their part, have lost representation among Internet users since 1997 and, therefore, the differences between these citizens and citizens describing themselves as centre and left-wing have polarized. In 1997 right-wing Internet users represented 15.6% of the Internet user population. In 2007, this proportion dropped to 11.8%, that is, a drop of 3.8 percentage points.

The authors can thus say that there are more Internet users in Spain that describe themselves as left-wing and that this proportion is higher than that found among the general population. Similarly, they can say that this trend is the result of the positive evolution of citizens who describe themselves as forming part of this ideology and of the negative evolution of the percentage of centre and right-wing citizens. In brief, we may hypothesize with the idea that citizens who are Internet users and, as a result, the Internet itself, is, in Spain, more left-wing than centre or right-wing and that this circumstance is the result of a leftward shift of the Internet. This empirical fact leads us to the research question that interests us in this paper: what are the causes behind this shift?

4. Typological Study of Internet users According to their Ideology

The aim of this section is to offer some insight into the roots behind the phenomenon described above. The aim is thus to understand why such a high percentage of Internet users describe themselves as left-wing. The statistical method chosen[6] to try to answer this question was segmentation. We segmented the Internet user population using traditional social, demographic and geographic variables (age, level of education, gender, employment status, size of habitat and Autonomous Community). This analysis gave us a total of 12 segments. We ordered these segments on the basis of the percentage of Internet penetration in each of them and calculated their average ideological self-positioning. Table 1 shows the result of this analysis.

If the authors analyze the above table based on the average ideological self-positioning of each segment, we can identify a first group comprised of segments whose average self-positioning is to the left of the Spanish average (4.68). Thus, they can say that segments one (4.38), two (4.24), three (4.34) and four (4.47) are made up of left-wing citizens. Then all find a segment, number five, made up of right-wing citizens (5.13). Thirdly, all find a group of segments whose average self-positioning is near the average for the general population. These are segments six to ten. Lastly, all can identify two new segments, eleven and twelve, whose ideological positioning is right-wing.

This grouping of the segments is also consistent based on the social and demographic information. Thus, the authors observe that segments one to four

[6] Prior to the use of segmentation, other statistical methods were used to see what variable or variables could explain the ideology of Spanish Internet users. Thus, logistic regression techniques and ANOVA techniques were applied, where we took as the dependent variable the ideology of the Internet users and as independent variables several indicators which we considered, based on the existing literature, to be possible causes of the ideology. Thus, we analyzed the ideology from political variables (vote reporting) from cognitive variables (use of the Internet) and social and demographic variables. Only the latter offered explanatory results, albeit not conclusive. However, the results from applying social and demographic variables as independent variables, served as inspiration to apply the segmentation method.

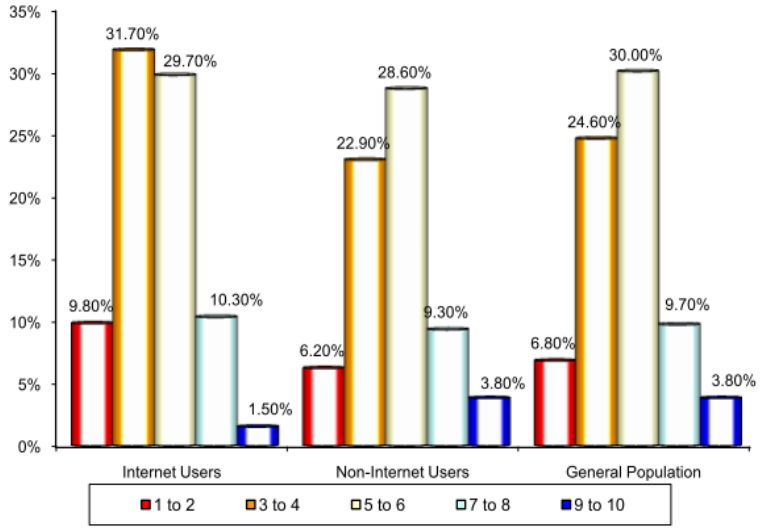

Fig. 1 Ideology of Internet Users (2007). Source: CIS.

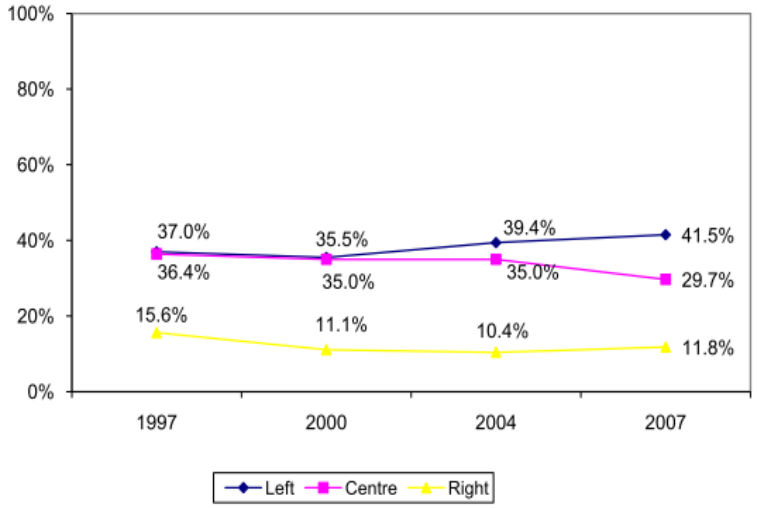

Fig. 2 Evolution of Internet users by ideology 1997-2007. Source: CIS.

Table 1 Social and demographic segments of Spanish Internet users based on ideology and level of Internet penetration.

SEGMENTS BASED ON INTERNET USAGE	Internet Users	Ideological self-positioning
Men with university education, employed or students	95.7%	4.38
Students with secondary education completed	94.5%	4.24
Women with university education, employed or students	89.9%	4.34
Employed with secondary education living in municipalities with ≥ 10.000 inhab.	74.0%	4.47
With university studies, retired, unemployed or homemakers	63.2%	5.13
People of ages 18-29 with no education or only primary education	53.0%	4.69
Employed with secondary education living in municipalities with ≤ 10.000 inhab.	48.0%	4.73
With secondary education, retired or homemakers	41.8%	4.49
People of ages 30-44 with no education or only primary education	34.9%	4.60
People of ages 45-50 with no education or only primary education	14.1%	4.66
Men over 60 with no education or only primary education	5.0%	4.99
Women over 60 with no education or only primary education	1.0%	5.32

Source: own elaboration from CIS data.

(left-wing) are comprised of citizens with a medium-high level of education. These are citizens of both genders, who are in employment or completing their higher education (whether university or advanced professional qualifications). It is interesting to note that the age variable does not appear in these segments. This allows us to verify, following Robles, Torres & Molina [17], that education is an essential variable for the study of Internet usage. The second group (segment five) is different from the first four as regards the employment status of the citizens that make it up. These are citizens with higher education but who, unlike the first segments, are retired, unemployed or are homemakers. In other words, these citizens are inactive. The third group is comprised of citizens with a medium/low level of education or who are inactive. Lastly, segments eleven and twelve are comprised of elderly citizens with a low level of education.

These groups also hold if the authors look at them from the point of view of Internet penetration. The first four segments are comprised of citizens among whom the level of Internet use penetration is very high. In the first segments this percentage is practically 96% of the population. The second group, comprised by segment five, has a level of Internet usage which, although high, is barely above the Spanish average for the year (52.0%). In the third group, age becomes an essential factor. The older the citizen, the lower the Internet penetration rate. Lastly, group four (segments eleven and twelve) is characterized by a marginal use of the Internet.

Fig. 3 shows all these typologies. This figure is organized as follows. The vertical axis measures the average ideological self-positioning of each segment. The horizontal axis shows the segments according to Internet penetration level. Thus, the leftmost segment of the figure represents the segment with the highest level of Internet penetration (segment one). As the figure shows, the first segments (high Internet penetration) are those that are located furthest to the left on the ideological scale. On their part, the central and end segments (segments five and eleven and twelve) are above five on the scale. That is, these segments represent citizens who describe themselves as more "right-wing".

This segmentation study allows us to organize a set of social groups based on their social, demographic and geographic characteristics, their level of Internet usage and their ideological self-positioning. In turn, this typology allows us to know more accurately the social and technological characteristics of left-wing and right-wing Internet users in Spain. However, it does not provide an answer as to why left-wing citizens are over-represented among Internet users. Table 2 will help us make some progress towards answering this question.

This table shows us the relative weight of each of the segment groups with regard to the total population of Internet users. That is, it offers us information regarding what percentage of Spanish Internet users belongs to each of the types we have defined. Thus, we find that more than six out of every ten citizens who use the Internet belong to one of the first four segments. In other words, 63.5% of Internet users belong to group one, as defined above. This means that more than half of Spanish Internet users position themselves further to the left than the general population. However, the two segments comprised by citizens who describe themselves as right-wing represent, jointly, 6.8% of the total Internet user population. Lastly, the segments whose average self-positioning is close to the Spanish average represent a third of the total Internet user population.

It is interesting to note that the majority segments among Internet users –those we have identified as group one–, are not majority in the general population. In Spain, practically four out of every ten citizens belong to segments six to ten. Likewise, citizens belonging to group four, who position themselves further to the right than the national average, are

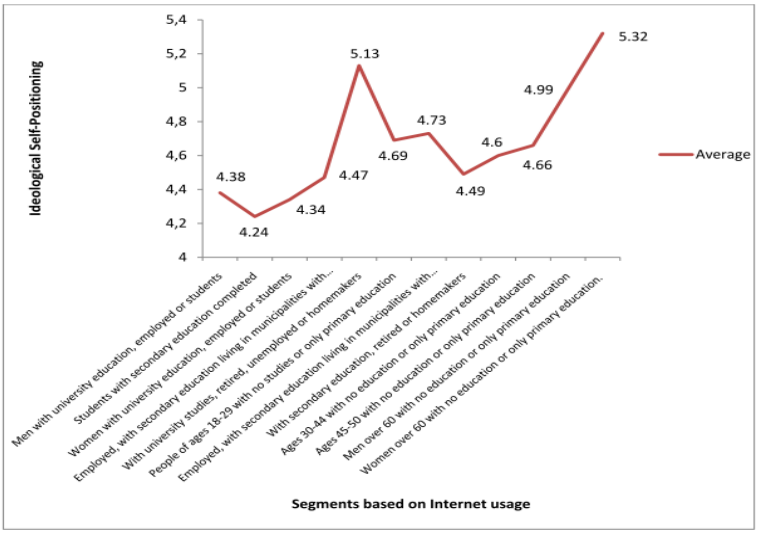

Fig. 3 Social and demographic segments of Spanish Internet users according to ideology and Internet penetration level. Source: own elaboration from CIS data.

Table 2 Relative weight of each social and demographic segment with regard to the general population.

		Internet Users		Total
		No	Yes	% col.
		% col.	% col.	% col.
Segment groups	Segments 1 to 4	10.4%	63.5%	34.3%
	Segment 5	2.6%	5.4%	3.9%
	Segments 6 to 10	47.7%	29.7%	39.6%
	Segments 11 and 12	39.4%	1.4%	22.3%
Total		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: own elaboration from CIS data.

more represented in the general population than among Spanish Internet users. However, the most interesting information for the purpose of our research regards the over-representation of profiles one to four among Internet users. In the general population, citizens belonging to these segments represent slightly over one third of the population. Whereas, as they have said, among Internet users, this proportion is double.

These results are consistent with descriptive studies regarding Internet usage in Spain. These studies show the irregular distribution of Internet usage in Spain [18-20]. According to the data from Spain's National Statistics Institute[7], despite the positive progress of Internet usage in Spain over the last four years, there are still very significant differences among citizens depending on social and demographic characteristics such as age, level of education and employment status. Thus, 90.3% of Spaniards under the age of 24 were Internet users in 2008. Among people above the age of 55, the percentage was below 25%. Citizens who use the Internet and have some form of higher education exceed 90% whereas citizens with only basic education do not reach 15% of the total Internet user population. Lastly, the percentage of people in employment who use the Internet is 68.8%. Among pensioners or homemakers this percentage is significantly lower (13.8% and 19.0% respectively).

Spain's socio-political environment shares similar

[7] These data have been taken from the series of studies carried out by the INE (National Statistics Institute) from 2002 to 2010 regarding equipment and usage of information and communication technologies in Spain.

problems to those described above. Internet usage has not ceased to increase in Europe in recent years. However, there are still countries for which the universalization of Internet usage is still a long way away. According to the United Nations, European Mediterranean countries–France, Spain, Greece, Italy and Portugal–have levels of Internet usage penetration of under 50% of the population. Along the same lines, as shown by several EUROSTAT studies, despite the reduction of the Digital Divide in all European countries, having a well-paid job, being under the age of 45 and having a medium-high level of education remain essential factors for being an Internet user [21]. Thus, for instance, the increase of Internet users with higher education in the European Union was, from 2002 to 2006, 16 percentage points. This growth was 7 percentage points among people with a low level of education. By age, we find that the relative growth of the number of European Internet users under the age of 24 was 18 percentage points. Whereas for people over the age of 45, the increase was of 12 percentage points. Lastly, the percentage of students who use the Internet in Europe increased 22 percentage points over this period. However, among self-employed people and homemakers the increase was barely 9 percentage points [21]. In brief, the authors can say that despite the increase of the number of Internet users in Europe, there are still differences in Internet usage that are determined by social and demographic variables such as age, level of education or type of employment [21].

In summary, as they have seen, the over-representation of citizens from group 1 and, therefore, the over-representation of the ideology of the members of this group (left-wing ideology) among Internet users are closely related to the irregular distribution of Internet usage in Spain. This is a problem that also affects many European countries.

5. Conclusions of the Empirical Study

all empirical analysis allows them to put forward a set of conclusions that are relevant for the study of the political behaviour of Internet users. In descriptive terms, we show that the ideology of Spanish Internet users is very dynamic. In other words, this aspect of the political behaviour of Internet users has undergone a very significant evolution process. This evolution, as described above, has caused a leftward shift of the Internet in Spain. In other words, it has resulted in the proportion of left-wing Internet users significantly exceeding the proportion of centre and right-wing citizens. It is important to note that the ideological distribution of Spanish Internet users is very different to the ideological proportion of Spanish citizens. In the latter case, the percentages of right-wing, centre and left-wing citizens are not as biased towards the left.

In the typological section of their paper the authors have attempted to understand the reasons behind this particular ideological distribution of Spanish Internet users. They have seen the important relationship between the social and demographic characteristics of Internet users in Spain and the ideological characteristics of this population. Above, they have shown that, behind the over-representation of left-wing Internet users in Spain, there is a bias in the social and demographic make-up of the Spanish citizens who use the Internet. Thus, they have seen that citizens with higher education, who are young and/or are in employment (group 1)–citizens with a profile significantly closer to the political left–, are over-represented among Internet users. This over-representation is, as the authors have seen, practically double (63.5% of Internet users compared to 34.3% of citizens). In brief, the most interesting result of our analytical study allows us to put forward the following thesis: the ideology of Internet users in Spain is a result of the Digital Divide that affects Internet usage in this country.

In the last section of this paper the authors analyze the possible effects of the ideological make-up of Internet users in Spain on digital political practices. In other words, all look into the political effects of a

digital democratic demos ideologically biased due to a specific form of inequality, the Digital Divide, on forms of representative digital democracy.

6. The Ideology of Internet users and Political Participation. A Reflection on the Implications for Representative Digital Democracy

Not all studies on the political use of the Internet have analyzed this phenomenon from one of the two angles of the "normalization" debate. Over the last 5 years, a series of studies and papers have been published analyzing digital democracy from a different point of view: the role of the political actors in the definition of the characteristics and processes related with digital democracy [22]. These authors suggest that the effects of applying ICTs to politics depend to a great extent on issues of design, as well as on the political values and goals that define said design. In brief, the innovative nature of digital practices is the result, according to Wright & Street [22], of the way and the intention with which these digital resources have been created.

Research analyzing the blogs of political representatives seems to support this perspective. Although most political parties have a website (for example, [23]), the decision to use a blog implies the intention of establishing a different type of relationship and of communication between representative and represented. For example, according to the results obtained by Jackson [24], members of parliament do not use a weblog to support functions carried out off line, such as their constituency role. Rather, a weblog seems to have a very specific role: to promote debate. In his analysis of the British Read My Day [25] experience, Wright concludes that, whereas it is true that political communication is increasingly negative, attack-oriented, dominated by political leaders and lacking substance, blogs, in some way, give rise to new political practices that do not always mirror those patterns and dynamics. Coleman [9] has shown that online consultation favours inclusive public deliberation, in addition to creating and connecting networks of interest. Along these same lines, Gil de Zúñiga, Puig-i-Abril & Rojas [26], through an analysis of secondary data gathered by Pew Internet & American Life Project, suggest that the use of blogs is an important predictor to explain the political engagement of Internet users.

Together with the design of digital political tools, another of the most noteworthy perspectives in the study of digital democracy that steers clear form the debate on normalization, analyzes the active role of citizens in the construction of the political possibilities of the Internet. Norris & Curtice [27] have carried out a study along these lines based on the "political market model". This study describes the interaction between the "supply" of information and communication provided through the Internet by civil institutions and the "demand" of information and communication by citizens. This model suggests that the "demand" and therefore the very makeup of digital political relationships depend to a great extent on the social characteristics of the population of Internet users. This population is defined, according to the authors, by a majority of young and educated citizens, as well as by the political leanings and interests of those citizens.

If the authors apply this research to the case at hand, we may understand the relevance, in political terms, of the results presented in this paper. Over recent years, a great number of representative digital political initiatives have been set up in Spain. Two are of special relevance. The first was ciudadanos2005.net, an initiative to foster the relations of citizens with political candidates for the regional elections of 2005. The second was España política 2.0., an initiative to provide tools and inform citizens for voting at the 2008 European elections. However, these initiatives, despite being important, did not reach the relevance of the blog phenomenon in Spain. In 2008 a long list of

Spanish mayors, senators, members of parliament and members of European parliament had opened a blog to discuss, dialogue and exchange information with citizens regarding issues of political relevance. It is true that these initiatives are still in an experimental stage. However it is reasonable to assume that the interaction between citizens and representatives through this or other similar initiatives may lead to the development of political behaviour or participative habits that go beyond current representative practices. This is due to, among other things, the importance of the political ideas and values of the actors involved in this process [22].

However, looking at this process from the perspective of the political market model [27], one can foresee the risk that could lie in the evolution of political services offered through the Internet in a social environment marked by the Digital Divide and its political consequence studied in this paper: ideological bias. If all consider the digital mechanisms of representation as a process of interaction between the political supply and the demand of Internet users, the over-representation of Internet users of any ideology implies a potential risk for political equality. The authors are, in brief, before a problem for the classical principle of isegoria.

Isegoria is the Greek name for one of the basic and thus most important requisites of democracy: equality in representation of the opinions and preferences of the citizens of a political community [28]. One of the basic principles of democracy is the irrevocability of the principle of universal representation of individual or collective preferences of all citizens or of, at least, all those involved in the problem open to discussion. If they accept the theoretical premises set out above regarding the political innovations offered by the Internet [9,11,27], as well as the results of our empirical analysis, all have to accept the fact that representative digital political practices are marked by a form of inequality that can negatively affect the very concept of isegoria. The possibility of gaining a closer contact with the representatives through their blogs or websites, the deliberative nature of some of these contacts or the attention which, in terms of political market, is given to the opinion of Internet users, are key elements in this argument. This technological-political development is not balanced in as much as the Digital Divide can favour the representation of wills, opinions and preferences of a specific ideology. In other words, the development of political services through the Internet, together with digital inequality, involves a serious risk for the idea of isegoria in that the Digital Divide makes it difficult to guarantee equal representation of all ideologies. This would mean that left-wing citizens could be in a better competitive position than citizens from other ideologies to transmit their preferences and opinions to their representatives and this way, they would have a greater influence on the design of public policies. This is, from our point of view, potentially harmful for the development of a fair democratic system. In brief, if ICTs provide users with more possibilities of having multilateral communications with public representatives than non-users have, the latter risk staying out of the polycentric power structures that seem to form part of knowledge societies [24, 25].

The authors believe that the conclusions expressed up to this point transcend the scope of Spain and are of interest for analyzing the development of representative digital political practices in other European countries. These countries, as mentioned above, still have an unequal distribution of Internet usage. Studies such as those of EUROSTAT [21], have shown that this unequal distribution of Internet usage is closely linked to social and demographic variables such as age, level of education and employment status of the citizens of these countries. From our point of view, the effect of the Digital Divide on the ideology of Internet users is a phenomenon that affects the specific case of Spain. The fact that young, educated citizens are ideologically positioned to the left is dependent on

local and specific circumstances that need not hold for the rest of Europe. However, all believe that, in itself, generating representative political tools on the basis of a digital political demos affected by inequalities of age or education is a circumstance that may negatively affect the ideal of isegoria. As the authors say, in the specific case of Spain, they have seen how the Digital Divide affects the ideology of Spanish Internet users and how this can be a risk for equal representation of opinions in representative digital democracy experiences. It would be interesting to study in what way and what elements of political behaviour of European Internet users are affected by the Digital Divide in these countries. Could it affect voting, level of political education and political information? These issues will be the subject of future papers. What all do know, as a result of this paper, is that the combination of the Digital Divide and representative political practices is a formula that poses great risks for key political concepts such as isegoria.

7. Conclusions

In this paper the authors have attempted to make progress in the understanding of the relationship between technologies and political practices. From all point of view, the study of the political behaviour of Internet users is essential to advance in the study of digital democracy. With this aim, we have focused on a specific aspect of the political behaviour of Spanish Internet users: their ideology. Thus, they have shown that there is a higher proportion of left-wing citizens than right-wing citizens who use the Internet in Spain. Likewise, we have shown that this proportion is larger than in the general population. This circumstance is the result of a leftward shift of the Internet. In other words, it is the result of a positive evolution of the Internet presence of citizens who self-position themselves as politically left-wing. Having established this fact, we ask why. They have tried to understand what causes this difference with regard to the general population.

The application of several statistical methods has allowed us to offer a typology of Spanish Internet users based on the level of penetration of the Internet and their ideological self-positioning. They find that the group with the highest Internet usage penetration was citizens of both sexes with university studies, in employment or completing their higher education. This is a group whose average ideological position is significantly further to the left than the Spanish average. The authors also find another important group comprised of elderly citizens, with higher education, retired or homemakers. This group's ideology is predominantly right-wing. Thirdly, we find a group of citizens with a medium/low level of education, of both sexes, in employment at the time of the study. This is a group with an average or below average level of penetration, depending on the age of the citizens. Their ideological position coincides with the national average. That is, there is a slight tendency to the left. Lastly, all have offered information regarding a group comprised of elderly people who use the Internet in a very low proportion and whose ideological positioning is right-wing.

This typology has allowed us to qualify the information available regarding Spanish Internet users based on their ideological self-positioning. Similarly, by calculating the relative weight of each group within the general Internet user population, they reach the conclusion that the leftwards trend of Internet users is the result of the predominance of the first group among Internet users. In this regard, our conclusion in this descriptive study is that the leftward shift of the Internet is the result of the increase of the Internet presence of citizens in the first group. In other words, the particular social and demographic constitution of Internet users has an important effect on the political behaviour of the study population.

The authors are also interested in the potential impact of the social and demographic constitution of Internet users and, by extension, in the impact of the over-representation of left-wing Internet users, on the

tools and initiatives of political participation through the Internet and, especially on those of a representative nature. We have seen that the effects of the Digital Divide can be important for a basic idea of democracy: isegoria. In other words, the development of representative political services and tools through the Internet implies changes in issues such as citizen representation or their possibilities of interacting with and being heard by representatives. From all points of view, the Digital Divide that implies the over-representation of left-wing citizens means offering more tools and services for citizens who are left-wing. The authors consider that, given the knowledge and information available to us at this time, this is a circumstance that goes against the correct democratic development of a political community.

Lastly, the authors have offered some data and reflections that have allowed us to place their results in a wider context. They have shown that the digital divide continues to be an essential problem from the development of the Information Society in Europe. They have also seen that this Divide is closely related with the relevant variables in our study: education level, age and employment status, and that this can imply a potential problem for representative digital democracy initiatives carried out in Europe. The authors believe, in brief, that the study of the political behaviour and characteristics of citizens is an essential requirement for promoting digital democracy policies that are balanced and politically just.

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