



THE INNOVATIVE FORMS OF PARTICIPATION: CASE OF SLOVAK PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

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One of the long-term interests of political scientists is researching the scope of civic and political participation in public affairs. The current decrease in civic activism is related to the crisis of representative democracy which reflects a growing distrust of politicians and political institutions. Innovative forms of participation serve as tools to mitigate this crisis and support civic engagement. The result of a comparative analysis reveals that the online activism of politicians significantly impacted political awareness during the Slovak parliamentary election in 2020 and 2023. In addition to traditional media, online campaigns had a substantial mobilizing influence on voter turnout, particularly in 2023. However, a negative aspect of citizens' online participation is slacktivism which refers to participation that lacks a real impact on social change.

Key words: participation; civil society; crisis of representative democracy; slacktivism.

1 INTRODUCTION

The challenge for the most modern democracies in the 21st century is the research of civic and political participation. The current state of low activism results from the continuing existence of the crisis of representative democracy which manifests in an increasing degree of distrust and apathy towards politics, politicians, and political institutions. This includes criticism of the institutional representative form of politics (Reiners 2023). Concrete manifestations of disinterest in public affairs are evident in the decreasing participation in elections and membership in political parties (Watts 2008). Furthermore, the last decade has shown that political parties struggle to attract new members, particularly among the youth, who are underrepresented in political decision-making positions and whose involvement in political parties is declining. At the same time, voter turnout among the youth is significantly low (Župová 2022). It

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is essential to note that the downward trend of civic participation within liberal democracies is increasingly noticeable across many countries (Bláha 2023).

The development of recent years, coupled with the massive influence of information and communication technologies, impacts all areas of an individual's life, including civic and political activities. Consequently, a notable outcome of these circumstances is the transformation of activism into the online space. A segment of the expert community believes in innovative technologies and new types of participation associated with Internet use. (Davis 2010; Jakubowicz 2013).

Information and communication technologies have transformative potential for both politicians and citizens. Politicians strive to enhance their popularity by utilizing social networks, which have become rapid channels for addressing information to voters and expanding their voter base. The campaign of B. Obama in 2008 serves as an inspiring example of mobilizing voters through Facebook (Lilleker and Jackson 2010). In Slovakia, the parliamentary election to the National Council in 2020 exemplified a successful activation of the voter base due to political party activities conducted through online campaigns (Klingová et al. 2020). The voter turnout for this election was 65,8 %, the highest number since 2002. Additionally, in an early parliamentary election in 2023, voter turnout reached 68,1%, surpassing that of 2020. (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic 2023). Both elections were characterized by politicians adopting innovative communication methods and motivating citizens via social networks.

For citizens, certain social groups find that using innovations represents a more effective and quicker means to enhance their civic participation or influence decision-makers. It is crucial to emphasize that successful activism requires genuine participation through active engagement in decision-making processes such as elections or referendums. It remains clear that in democratic political systems, politicians and political parties aim to gain power through elections, thus, civic activity in the electoral process is a high priority for them.

In the online space, we may observe the phenomenon of slacktivism, a form of false participation where citizens engage electronically by sharing or expressing agreement with a politician's or party's post without contributing additional value through actual participation in elections or referendums.

Two research questions are formulated based on the outlined considerations:

RQ1: What is the scope of transforming traditional forms into innovative forms of participation during election campaigns before parliamentary elections?

RQ2: How does the intensity of social media use and the variety of political content online influence voter turnout in parliamentary elections?

In this context, the first hypothesis posits an increasing diversity of online activism significantly influences electoral mobilization. The second hypothesis suggests that slacktivism without real participation does not affect societal changes.

2 TRADITIONAL AND INNOVATIVE FORMS OF PARTICIPATION

Participation in civic and political forms is a long-standing focus object within the political science community, particularly regarding its potential to influence the actors of the decision-making process. In this case, it acts as a vital link between citizens and the state, addressing the challenge modern democracies face in engaging citizens in governance. The ability of citizens to express their interests and demands is recognized as a crucial aspect of a democratic establishment.

The traditional concept of participation defines it as essential for the functioning of a modern and democratic political system. It is viewed as a fundamental aspect of an effective civil society, characterized by diverse forms of activism. Traditional political participation can be evaluated through various factors, including involvement in elections, campaigns, referendums, or even personal interactions with politicians (Ekman and Amna 2012). Democracy seeks to establish a relationship between those who govern and those who are governed (Reiners 2023).

Based on the above, we are inclined to a broader understanding that participation encompasses more than just electoral involvement. In other words, this perspective focuses attention on the complex forms of engagement where citizens actively influence public policy. In that context, political participation includes both direct involvement in the decision-making process and efforts to sway decision-makers, particularly through electing representatives. Participation serves as a means for citizens to communicate their opinions and needs, thereby influencing decisions that affect them (Nie and Verba 1972). Dahl (1995) describes this engagement as active volunteering aimed at enhancing cooperation in public affairs. Subsequently, it can be argued that civil society represents an imaginary mirror for the degree of political participation in society while it has an informative value regarding the division of citizens into politically active and passive ones.

The traditional understanding of citizen participation has evolved, tracing back to philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, who differentiated between rulers and the ruled. Thinkers such as Locke and Hobbes emphasized individual roles within civil society (Störig 2007). In this context, despite not delving into the detailed perspectives of individual theorists from antiquity to the present, it is essential to emphasize that the entire historical development of the understanding of civil society and its associated participation has been accompanied by changes driven both by political transformations and by the evolution of democracy. Consequently, we can identify distinct periods within this historical framework that exhibit noticeable elements of the growth of democratic principles, leading to the creation of an active and effective civil society and increased participation. Conversely, the absence of fundamental democratic features, resulting from centralized governance with significant control over various socio-political domains, has led to the non-existence of civil society and minimization of manifestations.

The traditional view of participation since the early 20th century, during what is often referred to as the renaissance of civil society, is characterized by efforts to regulate it through active intervention in the political system. For clarification, we define civil society as a collection of non-governmental institutions that are strong enough to act as a counterbalance to the state (Gellner 1997). This definition is further supported by other authors who emphasize local-level

participation. A specific feature of local self-government is its indication of community interest in self-governance, self-regulation, or self-decision-making (Žofčinová, Čajková and Král 2022, 10).

The validity and importance of civil society draw attention to several prominent tasks performed by a functioning civil society (Ghaus-Pasha 2004): political analysis and advocacy, monitoring public officials' activities, building social capital, providing a space for citizens to express their values and attitudes, developing public welfare. We support the view that there is a parallel between increased participation and higher levels of democracy. Furthermore, we endorse a positive perspective on participation based on opinion Warren's (1992) arguments regarding its benefits in public life: increased opportunities for citizen self-awareness, greater participation leads to an expansion of democracy, citizen participation in public events reduces conflict, civil activism enhances the acceptability and co-responsibility for decisions.

Recent decades in the development of civil society underscore its significance through additional critical tasks such as agenda-setting and generating new ideas, which it accomplishes alongside participation in decision-making and oversight. The responsibilities of civil society, coupled with the adherence to transparency, openness, and accountability, contribute to creating an effective counterbalance to the state.

The current impact of innovative forms of participation is particularly striking due to the rapid advancement of information and communication technologies and unforeseen events like global pandemics that have accelerated online engagement. We observe that the Internet and social media significantly influence political activity at all levels from local to national primarily because they enable outreach to a broad segment of the population. It is important to note that innovative forms of participation are viewed as essential tools for addressing initial deficits in civic engagement while simultaneously bringing citizens closer to political decisions in ways they find most effective and easy to implement. We reference Dahl's (1995) assertion that every citizen should have opportunities for meaningful cooperation without encountering barriers from authorities, no interested citizen should be denied access. Equality of opportunity is crucial when seeking involvement in public life.

We advocate for the incorporation of innovative forms of participation as vital components of modernization processes across various aspects of individuals' lives, including public policy. According to Mital' (2020), innovative communication methods provide a unique platform for two-way communication, with information value serving as the starting point for this process. Free access to truthful information is necessary condition to free decision-making and the conduct of citizens (Jesenko 2013). The promotion of modern methods also stems from ongoing Europeanization and globalization processes that underscore the importance of supporting and enhancing the number of decision-making actors to improve openness and transparency in policy-making processes. Moreover, the complexity of contemporary issues such as geopolitical climate, disinformation, pandemics, military conflicts, and various political tensions highlights the necessity for awareness regarding political topics (Moravec, Hynek, Gavurová and Kubák 2024).

Based on these observations, we find it necessary to analyse how political activities are transforming within online spaces. We consider political science research on participation that examines political behaviour, such as electoral participation or protest activities, or interactions with politicians. All these forms

can be effectively implemented through the Internet and social networks. Specifically, we refer to transferring election campaigns into social media platforms through status updates or video sharing, contacting politicians via their official websites, or using social networks to mobilize citizens for electoral participation.

3 ONLINE PARTICIPATION AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE POLITICAL SYSTEM AND SOCIAL NETWORKS AS A SOURCE OF SLACKTIVISM

The opportunities for online participation have become integral to daily life, reflecting the significant extent and development of contemporary digital forms. Among their most notable benefits is the capacity for rapid and effective dissemination and sharing of information in formats that are accessible to citizens. However, alongside these advantages, it is crucial to consider the negative aspects, such as the widespread dissemination of disinformation, hateful content, and conspiracy theories, which may adversely affect certain forms of political participation, particularly voter turnout in elections (Haček 2024; Douglas, Sutton and Cichocka 2017). Nonetheless, this negative dimension is not the primary focus of the analysis presented in this paper.

From a political science perspective, online participation remains a relatively new and unexplored field. This raises questions about the extent to which such participation can be classified as political engagement. Online participation allows multidisciplinary research that encompasses not only political and social sciences but also communication and media studies. A political science standpoint examines behaviours on social networks, particularly in terms of agreement with shared content, commenting on posts, or creating original content. Consequently, online activities characterized as slacktivism cannot be classified as traditional forms of participation due to their lack of tangible outcomes, specifically the absence of genuine citizen involvement in decision-making processes. It is important to note that while expressing support through sharing a politician's or political party's post is prevalent, it does not necessarily reflect a true representation of societal engagement. The most significant drawback of slacktivism is that it does not encompass the entire society, however it should not be disregarded entirely.

To maintain a balanced viewpoint, it is essential to highlight the potential positive impact of slacktivism, provided it serves as a preliminary step toward genuine offline participation. We argue that any form of participation necessitates time and effort, this requirement is often unmet in cases of slacktivism. In other words, online participation on social networks can be viewed as an initial stage leading to offline engagement if it demonstrates mobilization potential. This mobilization ability is linked to access to online platforms and their impact on public discourse coherence, which is a fundamental variable for analysing the relationship between social media influence and the democratization of political systems.

For a deeper understanding of this issue, we must consider Dahlberg's (2011) analysis concerning the interplay between democratic forms and social network usage, focusing on participatory potential.

TABLE 1: FOUR MODELS OF DIGITAL DEMOCRACY

Type of Model	Meaning in Online Space
Liberal-Individualist	Online referendums or online public opinion polls
Deliberative-Digital	An arena for expressing diverse ideas and discussing social issues
Digital Democracy	The uniqueness of online media among others
Autonomist-Marxist	Democratic subjects creating alternative structures to state and corporations

Source: Jungherr (2012), Gerbaudo (2012).

The basic analysis devoted to participation in the online space focuses on two main objects of interest: the definition of the term itself and its real effects. Regarding the first object, we discuss defining the boundary between real participation and participation in the online space. In the words of Carpentier (2011), this refers to the difference between interaction perceived as simple online activity facilitated by information and communication technologies, and full participation, which represents an activity centered on the decision-making process requiring more intense involvement. Within this context, we can identify false participation or slacktivism, where individuals believe they are engaged, whereas, in reality, they are not (Vaccari, Valeriani, Barberá, Bonneau, Jost, Nagler and Tucker 2015).

To further define the extent of the impact of online participation on the democratization of the political system, attention must be focused on three basic variables. Firstly, we discuss individuals' access to social networks. According to Habermas (2000), public space serves as a sphere for sharing diverse viewpoints. However, the heterogeneity of opinions can be constrained by access to information and communication technologies, which is influenced by media literacy or social capital. In this context, social networks may become exclusive spaces where only a certain segment of society has access. Unequal access to information through modern information and communication technologies exacerbates existing socio-economic inequalities (Davis 2010; Norris 2001; Zillien and Hargittai 2009). The second object of interest examines how participation through social media affects the coherence of political communication. On one hand, there are benefits from a public sphere that supports diverse opinions, on the other hand, there is a tendency for like-minded individuals to isolate themselves (Dahlberg 2007). This isolation ultimately contradicts Habermas's theory. The final object of interest is the mobilizing nature of online participation. If online engagement serves as a precursor to offline participation, it can be viewed as mobilizing. However, Hirzall (2010) presents an opposing view that suggests online active individuals were already engaged before participating online. Similarly, Davis (2010) argues that innovative forms of communication serve as a source of deeper engagement for those already interested in politics. Conversely, inactive segments of society face even greater communication exclusion. The same results are examined in the findings of Kuba and Stejskal (2024) who indicate that e-participation, particularly e-voting, reduces citizens' voting costs, however empirical observations show that increased e-voting options do not correlate with higher voter turnout. Inactive citizens remain inactive even when given innovative voting options such as electronic voting.

Another factor influencing voter turnout is polling station location. Studies indicate that relocating polling stations closer to citizens can increase turnout by up to 4-5% (Cantoni 2020). Additionally, extending polling station hours may boost turnout by 0.5-0.9% (Potrafke and Roesel 2020). Bradfield and Johnson (2017) propose establishing a special election day to ensure all citizens have adequate time and conditions to participate in elections. Furthermore, holding multiple elections may also enhance electoral participation (Franklin 2001). It is crucial to note that none of these measures reduce potential citizens' costs as

effectively as e-voting does, however e-voting primarily benefits Internet users and more educated and affluent citizens (Oostveen and van den Besselaar 2004).

The question remains: what is the potential of online forms of participation? The professional community presents several perspectives. One viewpoint emphasizes the positive influence of online participation on offline engagement, particularly among young people, as it reduces turnout inequalities by motivating youth (Vassil, Solvak, Vinkel, Trechsel and Alvarez 2016). Social networks are believed to impact political interest comparably to television (Holt et al. 2013), with Boulian (2011) arguing for an even stronger effect from social media than television.

Conversely, Vissers et al. (2011) suggest that online media serve merely as a supplement to political communication. The most sceptical viewpoint comes from Vitak, Zube, Smock, Carr, Ellison and Lampe (2011), who regard online activity as superficial political engagement and highlight the negatives associated with slacktivism, political activity with minimal impact on social change. The ambiguity surrounding the demonstrable effect of online participation on political engagement arises from various influencing factors. Vissers et al. (2011) assert that any citizen's online activity results from prior offline engagement. Meanwhile, proponents of online participation acknowledge a small but existing effect on individuals' political involvement (Boulian 2011).

4 DATA AND ANALYSIS

Based on the aforementioned diversity of opinions regarding the transformation and the subsequent relationship between traditional i.e. offline participation and innovative i.e. online participation, there is no consensus on which form is superior. This lack of agreement stems from varying degrees of attention to the issue under investigation. As previously mentioned, participation has been a long-term focus for political and social scientists, and analysing the heterogeneity of participation today requires an understanding of new innovative media from both the recipient's and provider's perspectives. Nevertheless, we can apply partial theoretical knowledge to practical contexts, specifically within the conditions of the Slovak Republic. A pertinent example is the parliamentary elections in 2020 and 2023, which were characterized by mobilization efforts that significantly utilized online platforms for voter activation.

Referring to the data in Tables 2 and 3, we can conclude that the online activism of the most successful political parties in both elections was closely related to their interactions in online spaces, particularly on social networks. In both elections, the political party with the highest number of interactions on these platforms emerged as the winner, with their leaders subsequently becoming prime ministers. Analyses by Havlík, Lysek, Spáč and Zvada (2024) demonstrate a new trend in electoral behaviour, highlighting the significance of leadership personality in shaping political party preferences.

TABLE 2: ONLINE CAMPAIGN OF SELECTED POLITICAL PARTIES AND ITS INFLUENCE ON ELECTION RESULTS

Political Parties with the Highest Number of Interactions on Facebook in the Monitored Sample (November 2019-February 2020)	Coalition Party in 2020	Election results 2020
OĽANO (1,22 M) (Ordinary People and Independent Personalities)	Yes	25,02%
SMER-SD (482 K) (Direction - Social Democracy)	No	18,29%
Sme rodina (467 K) (We are Family)	Yes	8,24%
SNS (278 K) (Slovak National Party)	No	3,16%
Sloboda a Solidarita (264 K) (Freedom and Solidarity)	Yes	6,22%
Vlast' (151 K) (Homeland)	No	2,93%
Dobrá voľba (90 K) (Good Choice)	No	3,06%
Za ľudí (88 K) (For the People)	Yes	5,77 %
Demokratická strana (75 K) (Democratic Party)	No	0,14%

Source: Author according to Klingová et al. (2020), Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (2020).

TABLE 3: ONLINE CAMPAIGN OF SELECTED POLITICAL PARTIES AND ITS INFLUENCE ON ELECTION RESULTS

Political Parties with the Highest Number of Posts in the Monitored Sample of the Most Popular Posts (July-September 2023)	Coalition Party in 2023	Election results 2023
SMER-SD (56%) (Direction - Social Democracy)	Yes	22,94%
Hnutie Republika (17%) (Movement Republika)	No	4,75%
SNS (10%) (Slovak National Party)	Yes	5,62%
HLAS-SD (5%) (Voice - Social Democracy)	Yes	14,70%
OĽANO (4%) (Ordinary People and Independent Personalities)	No	8,89%
ĽSNS (3%) (People's Party Our Slovakia)	No	0,84%

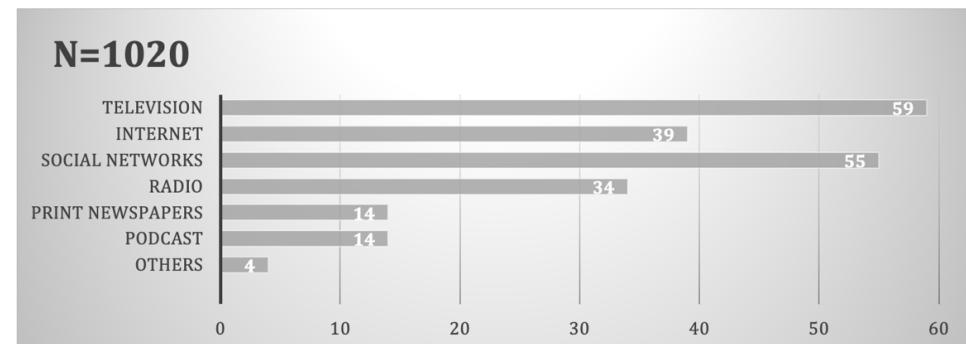
Source: Author according to Strauszová and Nemečkayová (2023), Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic (2023).

Social network Facebook had a significant influence on the information campaign before elections, and it also contributed to election dynamics (Klingová et al. 2020). Moreover, according to Kužel (2021), the activities and interactions of politicians on social networks influence a higher level of mobilization and information in parliamentary elections.

Furthermore, as a consequence of the global pandemic, we observe a notable increase in politicians' activity in online spaces even after election campaigns have concluded. While we do not consider the pandemic to be the sole reason for this rise in social media campaigns, it is certainly one contributing factor. It is also crucial for politicians to avoid being misled by slacktivism and instead encourage genuine participation.

While we seek parallels in our chosen examples, as mentioned earlier, this area warrants long-term data analysis. However, it is highly likely that due to ongoing modernization processes, online participation has the potential for sustained existence as a permanent aspect of political life in society. The elections in 2023 recorded the highest voter turnout since 2002, suggesting that political candidates' decisions to utilize social networks for campaigning may have played a significant role in increasing voter turnout (Kevický 2020). Furthermore, there is a noticeable upward trend in acquiring political information through online environments, particularly via the Internet and social networks. Similar findings are analysed by Murray-Švidroňová, Kaščáková, and Bambuseková (2019), who examined the Slovak presidential election and found that the information and recommendations spread by friends are often more trustworthy than candidates' posts. Their results emphasize the massive influence of social networks on voters, particularly highlighting that the number of comments from other voters influenced people's opinions more than candidates' posts. Moreover, among young people, this trend shows an equally significant increase. We assume that the sources from which individuals obtain political information also exert a mobilizing influence on electoral participation, as evidenced by a direct correlation between politicians' online activities and increased mobilization during elections. In other words, social media serves as a popular forum where voters can interact with politicians and express their views on politics and public affairs (Vaccari et al. 2015).

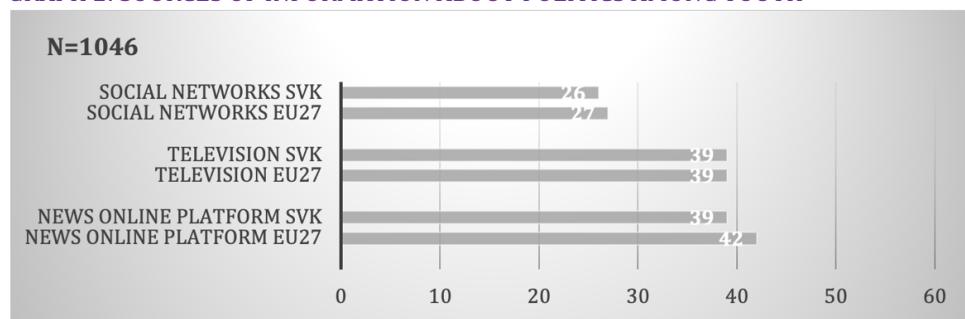
GRAPH 1: SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT POLITICS



Source: Author according to NMS Market Research Slovakia (2024).

Comparing the data from Table 1 and Table 2, along with Graph 1, we can observe a clear connection between the success of political parties in elections and their campaign activities in the online space. Political parties that received the highest number of votes were significantly active in the online environment. Based on the data from Graph 1, it is evident that citizens primarily obtain information from social networks and television. Notably, up to half of the population in Slovakia gets information about domestic and foreign politics from social networks. This trend is particularly pronounced among young people, where information acquisition from online sources reaches even higher levels, as illustrated in Graph 2.

GRAPH 2: SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT POLITICS AMONG YOUTH



Source: Author according to European Union (2025).

More than 18% of Slovak youth consider political podcasts a crucial source of information about politics and society. This places Slovakia third, after Denmark and Czechia (European Union 2025). Additionally, news podcasts have emerged as an interesting phenomenon, gaining a larger audience share than print media. From a sociological perspective, a typical podcast subscriber tends to be under the age of 35, holds a university degree, and resides in an urban area. In contrast, television remains the primary source of information for individuals aged over 65 (MNS.global 2024). Furthermore, it relates to the examination of voter turnout and geographical areas in the Slovak Republic, where Kevický (2020) notes higher voter turnout in developed regions situated in western and northwestern parts of the country.

5 CONCLUSION

The processes and possibilities of activating citizens to increase their interest in public affairs are a long-standing phenomenon. However, in recent years, we have observed a growing appeal for its enhancement. One outcome of these developments is the variety of alternatives that today's modern and constantly evolving society provides. We consider the significant impact of information and communication technologies on all areas of an individual's life, including civic participation, as a crucial tool for raising public awareness of public affairs. At the same time, we recommend these technologies as effective means to ensure transparency and openness in public administration. The same demand exists at the municipal level, influenced by challenges such as sound financial management, engagement of citizens, eGovernment, digital transformation, crisis management, and a package of ambitions known as European Green Deal (Ručinská, Mital', Fečko and Miňová 2022).

Based on our findings, we assert that the stated goal of this contribution has been achieved, specifically through an analysis of both traditional and innovative forms of participation. We have highlighted the ongoing relevance of utilizing online spaces to support activism and engage citizens in decision-making processes. Additionally, we examined the phenomenon of slacktivism and conducted a subsequent analysis of its impacts, evaluating both its potential positive and negative consequences.

We also note that our hypotheses were confirmed. Using the example of increased voter participation in the parliamentary elections in 2020 and 2023 in the Slovak Republic, we demonstrated the mobilization potential of campaigns conducted in online spaces, primarily through social networks (Strauszová and Nemečkayová 2023). We also confirm that slacktivism does not have the

potential to bring about significant social change without real participation. The same findings emerged in research by Kancik-Kołtun (2024), which confirmed through analysis across Visegrad countries that slacktivism will have negative long-term consequences for civic engagement and public spaces. Additionally, citizens' online views may remain less visible compared to their physical presence at public assemblies.

Given the continuously evolving processes of modernization, Europeanization, and globalization, we lean toward the prevailing perspective that online participation will play a significant role in the future. In light of recent global events, it is essential to acknowledge the fragility of democracy. As Norval (2016) emphasizes, we become democrats repeatedly through our daily activities, thus the health of democracy is also dependent on citizens' activism.

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INOVATIVNE OBLIKE UDELEŽBE: PRIMER SLOVAŠKIH PARLAMENTARNIH VOLITEV

Eden izmed dolgoročnih raziskovalnih interesov politologije je proučevanje obsega državljanske in politične participacije v javnih zadevah. Trenutni upad državljanske angažiranosti je pogosto povezan s krizo predstavniške demokracije, ki se kaže v naraščajočem nezaupanju do politikov in političnih institucij. Inovativne oblike participacije predstavljajo eno izmed možnih orodij za ublažitev tega stanja in spodbujanje večje vključenosti državljanov v demokratične procese. Rezultati primerjalne analize kažejo, da je spletni aktivizem politikov pomembno vplival na politično zavest volivcev ob slovaških parlamentarnih volitvah v letih 2020 in 2023. Poleg tradicionalnih medijev so imele spletne kampanje zlasti leta 2023 izrazit mobilizacijski učinek na volilno udeležbo. Kljub temu pa spletna participacija državljanov pogosto ostaja na ravni t. i. slacktivista – oblike participacije, ki ne vodi do dejanskih družbenih sprememb.

Ključne besede: sodelovanje; civilna družba; kriza predstavniške demokracije; slaktivizem.