

# **A Typology of Political Participation Online: How Citizens Used Twitter to Mobilize during the 2015 British General Elections**

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## **Abstract**

This study investigates how, and to what extent, citizens use Twitter as a platform for political mobilization in an electoral context. Conceptualizing political participation as a process, we develop a typology of political participation designed to isolate mobilizing calls for action from the rest of the political discussion online. Based on Twitter data collected one week prior to the 2015 British general election, we then identify the top 100 most retweeted accounts using the hashtag #GE2015, classify them by actor type, and perform a content analysis of their Twitter posts according to our typology.

Our results show that that citizens – not political parties – are the primary initiators and sharers of political calls for action leading up to the election. However, this finding is largely due to an uneven distribution of citizen-driven mobilizing activity. A small number of highly active users, typically supporters of nationalist parties, are by far the most active users in our dataset. We also identify four primary strategies used by citizens to enact mobilization through Twitter: in-text calls for action, hashtag commands, sharing mobilizing content, and frequent postings. Citizens predominantly expressed political calls for action through Twitter's hashtag feature, a finding that supports the notion that traditional conceptions of political participation require nuance to accommodate the new ways citizens are participating in the politics of the digital age.

*Keywords:* social media; mobilization; participation; political communication

Political participation is fundamentally about citizens and their attempts to influence politics. Despite a growing body of evidence suggesting that social media stimulates political participation, few studies have focused on how citizens are using social networking sites (SNSs) to influence electoral outcomes. Instead, the extant scholarship primarily focuses on how politicians and parties use SNSs to campaign (Gibson & McAllister, 2015; Jacobs & Spierings, 2016; Lilleker & Jackson, 2011; Vergeer, Hermans, & Sams, 2013). Knowledge about how citizens use social media, meanwhile, is largely constrained to the literature on social movements (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Christensen, 2011). Whereas the former strand of research suggests that political actors are using social media to mobilize voters, the latter strand demonstrates that citizens successfully use SNSs to mobilize protests. Inspired by the shared focus on mobilization across both literatures, the present study investigates how citizens utilize social media as a platform for political mobilization and asks: How, and to what extent, do citizens use Twitter to mobilize in the context of national elections?

To answer our research question, we develop a typology of political participation designed to isolate mobilizing calls for action from the rest of the political discussion online. We focus on mobilization and social media, specifically, for four reasons. First, social media facilitate mobilization by allowing citizens to broadcast calls for action to an online audience larger than their personal networks. Second, mobilizing calls are often a precondition for political action. Third, the purpose of mobilization in an electoral context is to increase voter turnout, which is currently declining across many liberal democracies. Lastly, the few studies that do examine online “citizen-initiated mobilization attempts” (Hosch-Dayican, Amrit, Aarts, & Dassen, 2016, p. 138) during elections find that citizens are actively using online platforms to campaign, either as standalone actors or in a co-produced model of campaigning linked to political parties (Gibson, 2015).

Applying our typology to Twitter data from the 2015 British general elections, we find that citizens – *not* political parties – are the primary initiators and sharers of political calls for action on Twitter. However, we also observe uneven levels of citizen mobilization. A small number of highly active citizens, typically supporters of nationalist parties, account for the large majority of political calls for action. Honing in on the online activity of these most active mobilizers, we identify four principal strategies that citizens use to enact mobilization and increase the saliency of their message on Twitter: in-text calls for action, hashtag commands, sharing mobilizing calls, and frequent postings. Overall, the results suggest that citizens are strategically using Twitter during elections as a platform for political mobilization. Through innovative, online-specific modes of political participation, motivated citizens can disseminate mobilizing calls for action widely and become influential actors in political discussions alongside the political and media elites.

### **Political participation, citizen mobilization, and Twitter**

Political participation has traditionally been couched as the “acts” (Verba & Nie, 1972, p. 2) or “action[s]” (Brady, 1999, p. 737) taken by citizens to influence politics. This classic understanding’s focus on activity would seemingly preclude online communication from counting as participation, since the concrete ‘activities’ one can perform through a computer are limited to input commands like keystrokes and mouse clicks. However, an increasing body of research finds a positive link between citizens’ use of digital communication technologies and their future political activities. Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela (2012), for example, provide strong evidence that using SNSs for information-seeking has a “significant and positive impact” (p. 328) on citizens’ involvement in politics. Others show that accessing online news can stimulate political interest and serve as a gateway to offline political participation (Boulianne, 2011; Cantijoch, Cutts, & Gibson, 2015). Further, citizen mobilization through social networks has been demonstrated to increase voter turnout (Bond

et al., 2012; Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011), and even citizens' discussions on non-political online spaces, like lifestyle forums, can lead to political mobilization (Graham, Jackson, & Wright, 2016). Taken together, these studies support the notion that citizens' use of social media is an important component of political participation in the digital age.

How citizens use social media for information and communication, however, is not uniform. Rather, citizens enact a variety of forms and degrees of political engagement through SNSs (Bossetta, Dutceac Segesten, & Trenz, in press). To account for these nuances, we draw upon Ekman and Amnå's (2012) distinction between latent and manifest political participation. Latent participation primes citizens' "readiness and willingness to take political action" (Ekman & Amnå, 2012, p. 296). Examples of latent participation include reading political news, informally discussing politics among friends, and other activities that contribute to political awareness and potentially lead to individual or collective political action. Latent participation is an important influencer and precondition for manifest participation, which refers to the citizens' concrete activities aimed at affecting "politics and political outcomes in society, or the decisions that affect public affairs" (Ekman & Amnå, 2012, p. 289). Although Ekman and Amnå do not take into consideration the possibilities opened by social media for political participation, their latent category is relevant here because it acknowledges that information-seeking and communication relating to politics can influence political activity and subsequently, political outcomes.



Figure 1. Three phases of political participation

To account for the link between latent and manifest forms of participation, we conceptualize political participation as a process whereby citizens' latent activities become manifest, concrete political actions aimed at influencing political outcomes. The process has three phases, as depicted in Figure 1. Facilitating the transition from latent participation (first phase) to manifest forms (third phase) is an intermediary phase, mobilization. Although we acknowledge mobilization can take various forms, we conceive mobilization here as any citizen-driven attempt to incite political action. Each of the three phases can be enacted online and/or offline. For example, one can read the latest news from print newspapers or from Twitter (latent), initiate mobilizing calls through social media or by canvassing (mobilization), or donate money through online bank transfers or in cash (manifest). Additionally, the participation process is not necessarily linear. Citizens enacting mobilization can relapse into latent participation, and mobilizing calls can spring up during manifest political action, like protests.

In this study, we focus only on latent participation and mobilization since Twitter does not support manifest participation forms (for example, Twitter does not offer money transfer services enabling direct donations to political organizations). For reasons outlined above, we consider mobilization an important aspect of political participation and operationalize mobilization as political calls for action: instructions to “do something” (Saxton & Lovejoy, 2012, p. 343) expressed linguistically as an imperative verb (e.g., “Vote,” “Join,” “Donate”). The political aspect of a call for action is crucial to our conceptualization. We consider political calls for action only those that explicitly command other users to engage in activities that exercise their rights and duties as citizens, for example: influencing electoral outcomes (“Vote for this party”), becoming involved in like-minded online networks (“Join this group”), or convening offline (“Meet in this place”). In this sense, we give a broader meaning to online mobilization than Earl and Kimport (2011), who restrict it to “situations in which the

web is used to facilitate the sharing of information in the service of an offline protest action” (p. 13).

In order for mobilizing calls to gain momentum and become manifest participation, they must be widely disseminated. Twitter is a social media platform particularly suited for the rapid and widespread diffusion of calls for action on account of its “digital architecture” (Bossetta et al., in press), the technological structures that both facilitate and constrain user behavior on the site. Twitter’s digital architecture is conducive to widespread content dissemination largely due to the hashtag feature. Hashtags index a message within a specific conversation on Twitter, and they often convey a concise opinion relating to that conversation. Hashtags therefore constitute a “*participatory*” system of “decentralized, user-generated tagging” (Saxton, Niyirora, Guo, & Waters, 2015, p. 156, our emphasis). Another feature of Twitter’s digital architecture, the retweet function, enhances the quick diffusion of information and facilitates the formation and maintenance of online networks (Ahn & Park, 2015; Bruns & Burgess, 2015). Retweeting also plays a key role in substantiating a political message by ‘keeping it alive’ and salient amidst the rapid and continuous generation of new Twitter content. Retweeting is therefore an important precondition for mobilizing calls to “spill-over” (Cantijoch et al., 2015, p. 1) into manifest political activity.

### **Typology of online political participation**

Contributing to the research on citizen-driven mobilization through social media, we introduce a typology of citizens’ political participation online. The typology is designed to isolate mobilizing content (having a call for action) from latent participation, since mobilizing calls carry the ambition and potential to incite manifest political activity (and therefore deserve special attention). The typology does not, however, capture whether mobilizing calls successfully translate to manifest activity or influence political outcomes, such as election results.

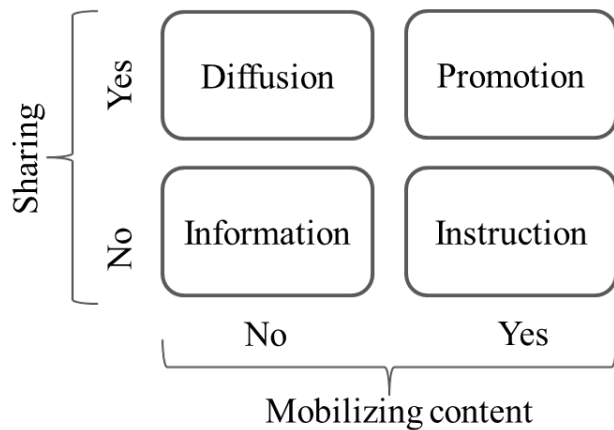


Figure 2: Typology of political participation

Figure 2 illustrates the typology matrix and its four categories of online political participation.

Beginning from the bottom-left quadrant and proceeding clockwise, the categories are:

- **Information:** Original content without a call for action
- **Diffusion:** Shared content without a call for action
- **Promotion:** Shared content containing a call for action
- **Instruction:** Original content containing a call for action

Horizontally, we make a distinction based on content and separate latent participation, the generating and spreading of information and commentary about politics (left side), from mobilization, the creation and spreading of calls for action (right side). Vertically, we make a distinction regarding the activities one can perform online. Users can either create new content (lower half) or share pre-existing content (upper half). We consider the creation and sharing of calls for action as two distinct, but interlinked, activities. Creating a new mobilizing call can generate manifest participation and indicates a high level of political awareness and commitment. However, calls for action must also be shared in order to increase their reach and maximize their chances of translating into manifest political action.

When applied to Twitter, we consider posts containing a political call for action indicative of Instruction, since such tweets instruct users to act towards influencing a political outcome.

Users who retweet content with a political call for action enact Promotion, since they help promote and substantiate a mobilizing call on the Twittersphere. If a tweet or retweet's content is political but does not include a call for action, we consider it Information and Diffusion respectively. Information tweets can either comprise the user's own text of political expression or introduce content from another source (e.g. a quote or link to a news story published on an external site). Diffusion refers to the act of retweeting informational content without a call for action. While Diffusion helps to raise awareness and encourage other forms of latent participation, both Information and Diffusion do not generate manifest participation directly since they lack the mobilizing calls necessary to incite concrete political activity<sup>1</sup>.

The typology can be applied to all digital communication forums (e.g. websites, blogs, messaging applications). Its focus on sharing is particularly suited to social media, since connectivity and networking are the primary features of SNSs. While a number of other typologies of social media behavior have been developed, ours is not particular to a specific category of social actor, such as the political class (Golbeck, Grimes, & Rogers, 2010; Graham et al., 2013; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011) or non-profit organizations (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Saxton et al., 2015). Studies offering a typology of citizens' online activity tend to focus solely on extra-parliamentary politics (Penney & Dadas, 2013; Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010). Those typologies that do incorporate multiple actor types (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013; Larsson, 2014) analyze online content but not whether the content is user-generated or shared. In contrast with these one-dimensional categorizations, our typology provides a rubric to isolate the mobilizing messages and to identify the most disseminated calls for action. Mobilizing calls can then be further analyzed to explore how they are formulated and which ones reach the broadest audience. In the following sections, we apply our typology to the Twitter activity surrounding the 2015 national election in the United Kingdom (UK).



## **The 2015 UK general election**

Britain is an appropriate case study for online political participation. The UK has high Internet penetration, with 87.9% of adults in the UK having accessed the Internet during the first three months of 2016 (Office of National Statistics, 2016). In particular, Twitter is a well-established social media platform in the UK. The British Twittersphere was estimated at 14.8 million accounts in 2015 (e-marketer, 2014), making the UK the second largest country of Twitter users behind the United States (Sysomos, 2014). Moreover, British politicians use Twitter to inform about political issues (Graham et al., 2013; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011), and British citizens have utilized online technologies during elections since at least 2001 (Bimber, Cunill, Copeland & Gibson, 2015). The 2015 national elections were no exception, and they yielded unexpected results.

Although the center-left Labour Party and the center-right Conservative Party had been polling evenly until the election booths opened, the widely anticipated possibility of a hung parliament was displaced by an unexpected, Conservative-led majority. In Scotland, a landslide victory for the Scottish National Party (SNP) stripped forty parliamentary seats away from Labour, who had previously held the majority of seats in Scotland. The UK Independence Party (UKIP), campaigning on a Eurosceptic platform and trying to capitalize on its historic victory in European Parliament elections the previous year, received 13.9% of the popular vote, their highest percentage in a national election thus far. The surprising twists in the outcome of the election may suggest an undercurrent of political activity that traditional opinion polling did not accurately capture.

The political agenda that dominated the elections included issues concerning the state of the economy and the future of austerity, Britain's membership in the European Union, and the power structure of the United Kingdom with Scotland vying for more autonomy (Finlayson, 2015). For parties on the right, like UKIP and the Conservatives, immigration was salient in

the debate, even though it went under-reported by the media (Nikolaidis, 2015). The state of the National Health System (NHS) was, particularly for the left, a topic circumscribed to the general discussions about the British economic situation in light of the financial crisis.

### **Data collection**

To operationalize our research question and investigate how citizens used Twitter to mobilize during the 2015 British national election, we collected original content (tweets, replies) as well as shared content (retweets) published on Twitter during the seven days preceding the election (April 30th - May 6th). In addition, we treated quote retweets as original content, since Twitter does not count these as retweets but rather as new tweets. The selection criterion was the main election hashtag, #GE2015, a method successfully employed by other studies of Twitter during elections (see Jungherr, 2015). Therefore, our dataset is comprised of those tweets directed at the general election discussion.

We obtained our data during the election by calling Twitter's Streaming API using the StreamR package for the programming software R. In total, we collected 555,536 tweets containing #GE2015. It is important to note, however, that the Streaming API does not deliver a full list of tweets. The only way to obtain 100% of tweets is to pay for access to the Twitter Firehose, which is not only expensive but also requires substantial technical resources. The Streaming API, on the contrary, is free but grants only low latency access to Twitter data, meaning that an unspecified number of tweets are "dropped" from the dataset. Although we cannot be sure exactly what percentage of the overall tweets we collected, we believe it is close to the results of a study that compared the two methods side-by-side and found that the Streaming API, on average, delivered 43.5% of the Firehose data (Morstatter, Pfeffer, Liu, & Carley, 2013).

The Streaming API has another key drawback compared to the Firehose: a search with the former will return a filtered sample of tweets if the search criteria generates results exceeding 1% of all global Twitter activity at a given time. Twitter activity has been demonstrated to spike significantly during elections (Jungherr, 2015, pp. 182-185), and given that the UK is the second most active country on Twitter, our search term #GE2015 could potentially make up more than 1% of global Twitter activity on election day. For this reason, we excluded the actual day of the election from our search query. While our dataset is therefore a sample of the overall tweets sent during the timeframe, to our knowledge the data has not been filtered by Twitter's algorithms.

We identified the top 100 most retweeted users within the seven-day period and selected only their tweets and retweets for analysis (n=10,725). Since users tend to retweet what they consider relevant, other studies have selected the most shared tweets within a given time frame to control for "those messages that users deemed most important" (Jungherr, 2014, p. 251). By the same logic, we consider the 100 most retweeted accounts to be an approximate measure of the most important users in the #GE2015 discussion since their content was shared the most. However, we acknowledge that a number of other factors can affect a Twitter user's influence, for example: their number of followers, friend count, timing of posts, and Twitter proficiency in general. In addition, the aforementioned limitations of the Streaming API may impact who appears on our top 100 most important list, since the retweets counted are only those that were captured and aggregated in our dataset during the week prior to the election.

## **Method**

First, we categorized users according to their actor type, which we identified through the user's profile description. When in doubt, we searched for additional information to corroborate whether one's profile picture, Twitter activity, and followers corresponded to their profile description. Our purpose was to distinguish civic actors from other user types

such as political, media, and civil society organizations (CSOs). We then further separated the civic actors into two sub-types: citizens and public personalities. Even though public figures are indeed citizens, we distinguished the two in order to trace separately the mobilization strategies of ordinary citizens vis-à-vis their more socially influential counterparts. We identified public personalities based on indicators such as the occupation listed in their profile description, a high number of followers, and/or the existence of a Wikipedia page about them.

After categorizing the users by actor type, we performed a content analysis of Twitter posts based on a coding scheme corresponding to our typology. We chose the sentence as the unit of analysis, and we considered a hashtag to comprise a sentence if it contained both a noun and a verb (e.g., #VoteLabour). Via this method we could capture multiple expressions of calls for action housed within a single tweet, such as a call for action in the text and a hashtag command (e.g. “Vote Labour Today” and #VoteLabour). Consequently, a tweet could be double-coded, but only if it contained different ways to articulate a mobilizing command.

We coded original content (i.e. tweets, @mentions, and quote retweets) as Instruction if the tweet contained a call for action, albeit with a few notable exceptions. First, we excluded calls for action directed towards vague concepts or without prescribed actions, such as “fight the power” or “support democracy.” We would code, however, “save our NHS” because the call for action is directed toward keeping the National Health System in place through voting, a clear example of political activity. Second, we excluded calls for action aimed at promoting information, for example: “watch this video” or “click to find out more.” Such calls encourage others to seek out political information, but they do not mobilize individuals to influence politics. We did code, however, calls for action related to information sharing, such as “get the word out” or “retweet this message,” as these instructions are aimed at getting users to promote a message with the intent of influencing politics.

If an original tweet did not include a mobilizing call, we coded the tweet as Information. Our Information category included not only news and facts (e.g. a media story) but also opinions and statements of self-expression, including humor. We coded shared content (i.e. retweets) according to the same criteria. A retweet was classified as Promotion if it contained a call for action, and as Diffusion if it did not. For both Instruction and Promotion, we created three sub-codes to capture nuances in expressing a call for action: hashtag command, negative command, and negative hashtag command. As argued above, we focus on hashtags since they are one of the most important features of Twitter’s digital architecture in terms of facilitating political participation. Since recent literature suggests that parties increasingly use denigration campaigns as a strategy to attract voters (Ceron & d’Adda, 2015), we included a negativity measure to see whether citizens engage in similar practices.

<b>Content</b>	<b>Example</b>	<b>Original Content (Tweet, Mention, Quoted Retweet)</b>	<b>Shared Content (Retweet)</b>
<b>No Call For Action</b>		Information	Diffusion
<b>Call for Action in Text</b>	Vote for Labour	Instruction	Promotion
<b>Call for Action in Hashtag</b>	#VoteLabour	Hashtag Command	
<b>Negative Call for Action</b>	Don’t vote Labour	Negative Command	
<b>Negative Call for Action in Hashtag</b>	#DontVoteLabour	Negative Hashtag Command	

Table 1. Coding scheme

Coding was performed manually by two trained people, with an inter-coder agreement of 98%.

## Results

The tweets sent by the top 100 most retweeted user yielded 11,299 coded segments from 10,725 tweets and retweets. Figure 3 reports the following general results, distributed along the four cells of the typology matrix as follows:

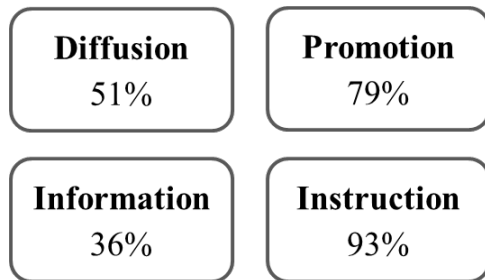


Figure 3. Overall results matrix

Even though a majority of the tweets were informative, Instruction is the second largest category (27% of all coded segments, excluding the double-coded instances), suggesting that Twitter has indeed been used as a platform for initiating political calls for action during the election campaign. However, these mobilizing calls were not shared often, as our Promotion category shows the lowest value in the matrix (only 4% of the coded units). On the whole, the users we analyzed generated more original content than shared content, an expected result on account of our selection criteria: the top 100 most retweeted users were bound to write original messages worthy of sharing.

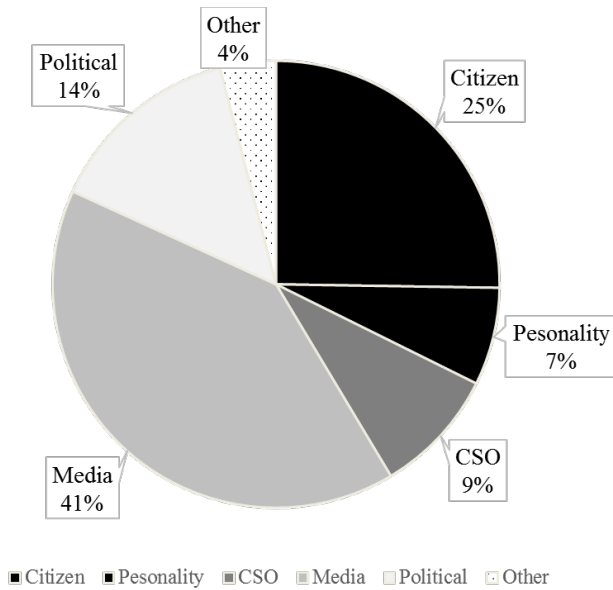


Figure 4. Distribution by actor type (of the 100 most retweeted accounts)

To gauge the extent that citizens used to Twitter to mobilize, we charted the distribution of all tweets and retweets with the #GE2015 hashtag according to actor type. Civic actors accounted for 32% of the tweets and retweets with the hashtag #GE2015, with citizens issuing more than a quarter of all Twitter posts (25%) and public personalities responsible for 7%. The rest is divided between the media (41%), political (14%), CSOs (9%) and other (4%) categories. The distribution by actor type suggests that citizens were influential users in the #GE2015 conversation, despite their lack of resources vis-a-vis other kinds of actors, such as media outlets and political parties.

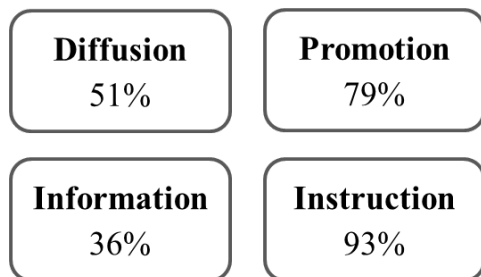


Figure 5. Civic actors' activity matrix (as percent of all actors' activity)

To find out *how much* mobilization can be attributed to civic actors alone, we singled them out across each of the four typology categories. Figure 5 clearly shows that citizens and public personalities were the most active generators and distributors of content across three of the four quadrants of our matrix. The civic category stands for 93% of all the original calls for action (Instruction) and for 79% of the retweeted mobilization posts (Promotion). Citizens and personalities were also the authors of most informational tweets (keeping in mind that for us, informational content included also personal opinion and commentary). For comparison, the media generated 34% of the information and 32% of the diffused content, signaling that media remains an important news provider on Twitter. Politicians and parties were the least productive. They created mostly informative tweets (13% of the total) and generated only 2% of the mobilizing content on Twitter.

We questioned whether the predominance of calls for action in the civic category was due to a small number of extremely active accounts or if the distribution of mobilizing calls was more even across the citizens. The data strongly supports the former scenario. The top five most active citizen users accounted for 82% of the calls for action in the Instruction category and 83% in Promotion, showing a very uneven level of activity within the civic group.

We also wanted to know *how* citizens use Twitter to mobilize during election campaigns. We find that the two primary ways to express mobilization were, according to our coding, through *hashtag commands* and *in-text calls for action*. Out of all coded segments containing a call for action by the civic category, 59% had a hashtag command exclusively, 26% had a call for action in the text exclusively, and 14% were double coded as housing both an in-text and hashtag command within the same tweet. Only 1% of our calls for actions were expressed as a negative command or negative hashtag command.



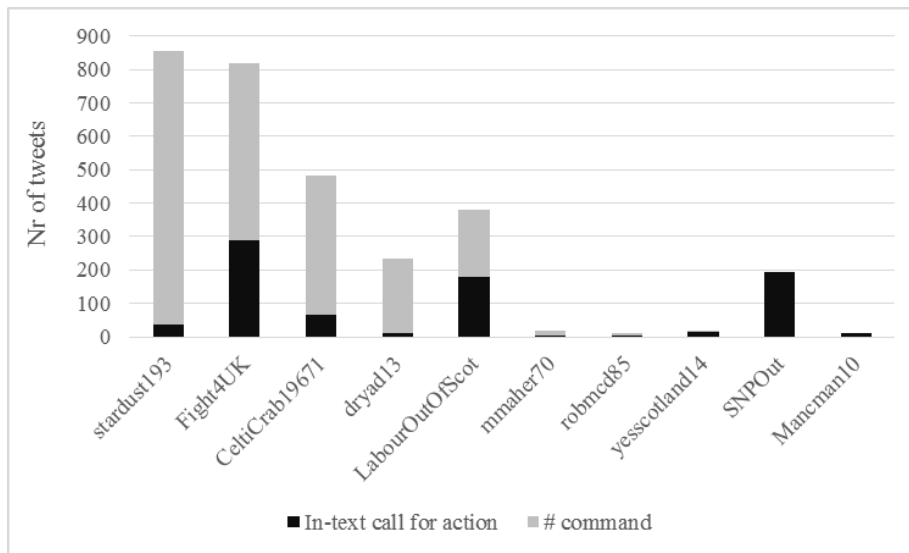


Figure 6: Most active civic actors in the Instruction category

### *Hashtag commands*

Figure 6 further breaks down the most active civic users in the Instruction category by individual accounts<sup>2</sup>, ordered according to the total number of hashtag commands issued by each user. Out of the 34 civic actors coded, only 16 used hashtag commands, and 6 users created less than ten hashtag commands over the entire period studied. The most active account, by contrast, issued 820 hashtag commands, highlighting again the uneven levels of mobilization attempts among Twitter users. The dominant hashtags for the two most active mobilizers pinpoint them as staunch supporters of the UK Independence Party (UKIP). #VoteUKIP was the most used hashtag by both @Stardust193 (773 times out of 820 hashtag commands) and @Fight4UK (492 times out of 528 with hashtag commands). The hashtag #VoteUKIPGetUKIP was present 717 times in the original Twitter messages of the two users combined. Political hashtag commands can therefore connect supporters of the same party and function as a signifier of political affinity, with @Stardust193 and @Fight4UK being each other's most retweeted user.

Another interesting feature shared by these highly active UKIP supporters was their strategic combination of Twitter features to microtarget their message to local constituencies.

@Fight4UK combined the hashtagged name of a precinct, an @mention of the local UKIP candidate standing in that precinct, and the command to vote for the party alongside other UKIP-specific hashtags, like here: “#Rochester Vote @MarkReckless #UKIP #GE2015 #GoPurple #VoteUKIP #BelieveInBritain.” By promoting individual UKIP candidates in connection with their respective constituencies, @Fight4UK was clearly trying to address and mobilize other citizens at the local level. @Stardust193 used a similar tactic with the exception of using @mentions.

Other common hashtag commands used by the most retweeted citizens were #VoteLabour, #VoteConservative, #VoteCameronOut, and #saveournhs. One particularly visible and polarized issue was Scottish separatism, with both pro- and anti-SNP accounts being very active. The third most used hashtag was #VoteSNP (supporting the Scottish National Party), used 416 times by @CeltiCrab19671, 201 times by @LabourOutOfScot, 155 times by @ChristainWright, and 121 times by @moridura. Opponents of the SNP were also quite prolific and used the hashtag #SNPout (which we did not code as a command due to its lack of an imperative verb). For the sake of illustrating the anti-SNP side, the hashtag #SNPout was used 933 times in the tweets and retweets of the user of the same name (@SNPout), an account that also used the mobilizing call for action “keep #SNPout” 196 times. The presence of accounts with names such as @LabourOutofScot and @SNPout suggests that although there were very few instances of negative (hashtag) commands, citizens still engaged in denigrating parties and candidates on Twitter.

### ***In-Text calls for action***

Even though in-text calls for action were less numerous than the hashtag commands, there were still quite a few examples in our data. The most active users of hashtag commands also

ranked highly as the most active initiators of in-text calls for action. This leads to the same issues being at the top of the agenda: support for UKIP and SNP, and opposition to SNP. The most common in-text calls for action by citizens and personalities were: “vote” (877 times), “keep” (306), and “join” (154). More specifically, the commands were connected to specific parties: “Vote #UKIP,” “Vote #SNP,” “Vote Plaid Cymru,” “Keep #SNPout,” and “Join #ThePeoplesArmy” (a slogan referring to the UKIP). There were also more general, unaffiliated commands, such as “make your vote count” but in much lower frequencies.

**Sharing mobilizing tweets**

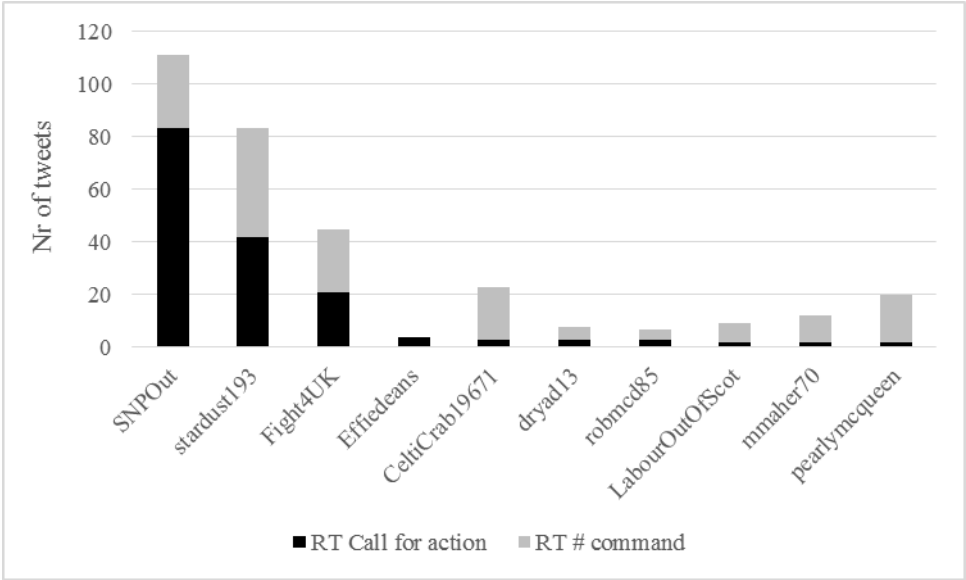


Figure 7. Most active civic actors in the Promotion category

A third strategy identified was the *sharing of mobilizing content*, captured by our Promotion category. Comparing Figure 7 with Figure 6, the same users appear in both charts, even though Figure 7 is ordered differently (according to the number of times an account retweeted in-text calls for action). We can therefore conclude that the same accounts were both active initiators and sharers of calls for action, with the effect of giving preponderance to the same political agenda: voting for or against SNP, or support for UKIP. Also noteworthy is the far lower number of retweets in comparison with new tweets, suggesting that the most retweeted

users do not share messages as much as they create new ones. Twitter seemed to be used more for formulating one's own mobilizing agenda rather than sharing others' calls for action.

Those mobilizing tweets that were shared, however, contained a greater proportion of in-text calls for action vis-à-vis hashtag commands, which were less prominent in the Promotion category than in Instruction.

### **Frequent postings**

A fourth strategy of mobilization has to do with the *frequency of posting calls for action*. We noted a marked distinction between users that sent only one or a few tweets (but still amassed enough retweets to break the top 100) and those who made the top 100 by sending a large volume of tweets, picking up retweets in piecemeal fashion. In the first category were mostly public personalities, whereas the second was generally comprised of ordinary citizens.

Nevertheless, some citizens sent highly impactful tweets despite having significantly less followers than the typical public figure, demonstrating that citizens can exert similar levels of influence by creating tweets that go beyond their own immediate follower network. For example, comedian Eddie Izzard sent only one tweet with #GE2015 during the week before the election, expressing his personal opinion of why he is #NotVotingUkip. His post was retweeted 769 times, landing his account at number 63 on our top 100 list. @RobertsonSteff, a pro-SNP citizen account, sent only 10 tweets. However, one in particular, which included a picture of her daughter waving a Scottish flag, received 1,125 retweets. Even though @RobertsonSteff had only 418 followers (compared to @EddieIzzard's 3.7 million), she landed higher on our list at number 33.

Not enjoying the same level of influence as public personalities and having smaller numbers of followers, the average citizens in our dataset typically had to post many times in order to garner enough retweets equivalent to a celebrity's single tweet. Looking at the timestamps of tweeted content, we also found that our most active mobilizers posted every minute or less,

suggesting that they may have automated the process by enlisting the support of a third-party bot client to “spam” the #GE2015 Twitterflow.

## **Discussion**

Despite the fact that political parties and candidates have access to the financial resources and know-how that would allow them to run extensive online campaigns, our data shows that the civic category (i.e. citizens and public personalities) created and spread the most political calls for action leading up to the 2015 UK general election. Hosch-Dayican et al. (2016, p. 147) also find a significant proportion of citizen-driven mobilization attempts during the 2012 Dutch election; however, in their study the mobilizing attempts of citizens were outnumbered by those of political actors. In contrast, our dataset suggests the opposite, namely that British political parties and candidates seemed not to utilize Twitter heavily as a means for mobilization in the 2015 election. One explanation for this difference may be linked to our criteria for data selection. We only collected tweets including the predominant election hashtag, #GE2015. It may be the case that citizens are more likely to use general campaign hashtags, while political actors trend towards more specific hashtags targeting specific conversations, issues, or supporters. Nevertheless, our finding that civic accounts comprised one-third of the top 100 most retweeted users means that they figured prominently in the #GE2015 conversation alongside traditional political and media elites. This supports the tentative conclusion of Larsson and Moe (2014) that Twitter holds the “potential for an anonymous citizen to gain leverage and attention in a politically themed online setting” (p. 11).

Citizens were the most active mobilizers and promoters of calls for action among our top 100 most retweeted users, though not all of them tweeted equally as much or as often. The high amount of citizen calls for action is predominantly due to a small number of highly active users, whose messages generally supported nationalist parties (UKIP and SNP). Mobilizing

calls backing mainstream parties (i.e. Conservatives, Labour, and LibDems) were pale in comparison. Gibson (2015) argues that since British political parties are traditionally formal and hierarchical, they are less likely to encourage the informal supporter networks comprising the core of “citizen-initiated campaigns.” This may explain why calls for action to vote for the overall winner of the election, the Conservatives, were largely absent from our dataset.

Although neither the SNP nor UKIP’s official Twitter accounts appeared in the top 100, both parties’ electoral messages were salient in our dataset because of their very active backers who spread mobilizing messages widely (tweeting many times a day) and pointedly (targeting specific constituencies). While this suggests that the bulk of online political campaigning can be carried out by citizens (and not necessarily parties), more research is needed, particularly in multi-party systems, to determine whether Twitter support for a political party during elections is correlated to a party’s polling position and/or resource capacity.

Using our typology to isolate political commands from the rest of the #GE2015 conversation, we identified four strategies that citizens use Twitter to mobilize during elections: in-text calls for action, hashtag commands, sharing calls for action, and frequent posting. The predominant in-text call for action was “Vote” – an expected finding since voting is the manifest participation form typically associated with elections. Messages urging others to support a political organization or candidate are considered mobilization, and not a form of campaigning, because they are issued by citizens and not by parties or party activists. More interesting is that in-text calls for action were by-and-large positive and in support of a party rather than negative, as in Hosch-Dayican et al.’s (2016, p.13) study. This difference may be contextual on account of our cases (the 2012 Dutch national election versus the 2015 British one), or it may result from a difference in our measurement of negativity. Primarily focusing on calls for action, we only captured negativity when mobilizing commands instructed others

*not* to do something political. Negative opinions about a party, such as those found in the Dutch election study, would fall into our Information category if they lacked a call for action. Far outnumbering in-text calls for action were hashtag commands, a finding that is particularly interesting in light of previous research suggesting that political participation can take online-specific forms (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Vissers & Stolle, 2013). Hashtags were citizens' call for action of choice since they can increase the reach of a post outside of one's immediate follower network (Bossetta et al., in press). Like in-text calls for action, the majority of hashtag commands were issued by a small number of users. Moreover, our top three hashtags (#VoteUKIP, #VoteSNP, and #SNPout) expressed clear partisan positions for or against a political party. Shared political hashtags can signify ideologically coherent networks indicative of online publics (Bruns & Burgess, 2015), who can use social media to exchange information, foster trust, and spur political engagement (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). While this has generally been considered positive for democracy, it can also lead to the increased fragmentation and polarization of political debate. The latter scenario seemed to play out in the "hashtag war" we identified between pro- and anti-SNP camps, which were formed around the hashtags #VoteSNP and #SNPout. Especially in the context of contentious political events like elections, the deployment of mobilizing commands in hashtag wars can polarize public opinion and make effective governing post-election more difficult.

The formation of such polarized in-groups was also identified in the third mobilization form, sharing mobilizing calls. For example, the mutual retweeting of our top two users, both UKIP proponents, supports current research investigating information diffusion through SNSs and finds individuals are "more likely to pass on information that they have received from ideologically similar sources" (Barberá, 2015, p. 10) than dissimilar ones. The last mobilization strategy, frequent posting, is marked by the sheer volume, rapidity, and repetitive content of our most active mobilizers. We suspect that the most prolific citizen-

users were tech-savvy enough to use a third-party bot client, allowing them to send recurring tweets and spam the #GE2015 Twitterflow. Somewhat unexpectedly, users avoided retweeting existing content and preferred instead to create numerous new messages with very similar content.

Lastly, accounts of public personalities ranked low in both our Instruction and Promotion categories, as well as in the overall volume of tweets. This is unsurprising since public figures use Twitter primarily as a platform for performing politics to their large, generally young followership (see Loader, Vromen & Xenos, 2016). Having more potential influence on the Twittersphere than the average citizen, public personalities may have more to lose by attempting to mobilize their fan base around a political issue that is potentially divisive or off-putting to some. In addition, celebrities do not need to repeat their message often; it is sufficient they make one call for action to get many retweets. Posting too often, especially about politics, may put public personalities at risk of losing followers, an indicator of their social influence. The same reasoning may explain why the most active ordinary citizen accounts in both the Instruction and Promotion categories remained anonymous: publishing without disclosing one's identity reduces the social risk of exposing oneself to criticism and social exclusion.

## **Conclusion**

Our study sought to understand how, and to what extent, citizens are using Twitter to mobilize during national elections. We find that, in the week preceding the 2015 British general elections, citizens and public personalities comprised one-third of the top 100 most retweeted accounts using the hashtag #GE2015. To further investigate *how* these civic actors used Twitter during the election, we developed a typology that distinguishes four categories of online political participation: Information, Diffusion, Instruction, and Promotion. Our content analysis revealed that civic actors tweeted and retweeted the highest number of mobilizing



messages; however, this is primarily due to a small number of extremely active citizen-users representing particular political positions, usually those of challenger parties (UKIP and SNP).

The high frequency of postings made by these most active mobilizers may be due to the use of bot clients, producing recurring tweets aimed at spreading political messages to the widest audience possible. The use of bots is a topic illuminated by our research but remains open to further investigation. In addition, whether or not the mobilizing calls for action sent by citizens translated into manifest participation (e.g. donating money or voting) was also beyond the scope of our study. Testing the effectiveness of online mobilization requires additional research that would follow the entire process of political participation, from latent to manifest via mobilization.

The four strategies used by citizens to mobilize during the election were in-text calls for action, hashtag commands, sharing mobilizing calls, and frequent postings. Hashtag commands appeared as the predominant citizen-driven mobilization attempt, presumably because hashtags can help reach a large audience and facilitate connectivity among like-minded users. However, we also find that hashtags can be used to wage hashtag wars, such as the one between pro- and anti-SNP accounts. This conflict may be the continuation of the debates during the Scottish independence referendum, which occurred just eight months prior to our case study. The question of whether issue-centered online publics remain active and/or adapt over successive electoral contests is a subject in need of further empirical inquiry.

Our case study is limited to one election within a single national context, and our use of the Streaming API for data collection delivered only a sample of the overall Twitter conversation. Additionally, our dataset comprised only the main election hashtag at the expense of other hashtags or keyword searches. As an avenue for future research, we invite others to incorporate other cases (e.g. extra-parliamentary politics or local/supranational elections),

countries, and social media platforms, since our typology is applicable to multiple contexts and provides a common ground for cross-platform analyses.

## Notes

1. Because of our definition of call for action, we only coded Twitter *text* (no images). We did not follow embedded links to check for calls for action on external sites, since we are interested in participation on this SNS exclusively.
2. We do not consider it a breach of ethics to display the e-identity of the civic accounts, since the tweets we collected and coded are all publicly available and searchable via the Twitter official interface at the time of writing.

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