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Social Activism and Citizen Engagement: Toward an Integrated Theory of Digitally Mediated Democratization in Divided Societies.

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Abstract

Existing theoretical accounts of digital activism have been developed substantially with reference to authoritarian or semi-authoritarian contexts in which the state actively suppresses civic space, most notably the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, while existing accounts of civic culture predate digital mediation entirely, having been developed to explain political attitudes and participation in comparatively stable, industrialized democracies. Neither tradition, taken alone, adequately theorizes citizen engagement in formally democratic but ethnically, religiously, or regionally plural developing states, where digital mobilization operates neither against outright authoritarian closure nor within a settled civic culture. This article addresses that gap conceptually and theoretically by integrating political science and mass communication literatures, rather than collecting primary data. It presents and critically examines the Theory of Social Activism and Citizen Engagement, an eclectic framework situating citizen engagement at the interaction of legitimate political action, state transgression, and the resources and identities citizens bring to that interaction. The article traces the theory's antecedents in Weingast's (1997) account of self-enforcing democratic constitutions, Howard's (2011) and Karpf's (2010) accounts of digital activism as resource mobilization, and Almond and Verba's (1963) civic culture tradition; specifies the causal mechanisms linking these lineages; presents four constitutive tenets and an integrated causal model running from social mobilization through critical citizenry to democratization; and examines internally identified boundary conditions, coordination dilemmas, the digital divide, and unresolved debates over civic capacity. The article's central argument is that the theory's distinctive contribution lies in explicitly incorporating these divided-society constraints, which much of the mainstream digital activism literature under-specifies, allowing it to explain how digital mobilization can simultaneously reinforce and be constrained by societal division. It is proposed as a candidate framework for comparative application to other plural, developing-democracy contexts beyond its originating case of Nigeria.

Keywords: social activism, citizen engagement, digital activism, democratization theory, divided societies, civic culture

Introduction

The study of how citizens organize to hold states accountable has, over the past two decades, been substantially reshaped by two partially overlapping but conceptually distinct theoretical traditions. The first, associated with the digital activism literature that gained particular prominence following the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, theorizes citizen engagement as a function of internet-enabled social networking, emphasizing the internet's capacity to lower the transaction costs of collective action and to circumvent the traditional gatekeeping functions of state-influenced broadcast and print media (Howard, 2011; Melki, 2014; Ogbonna, 2018). The second, rooted in the civic culture tradition established by Almond and Verba (1963) and subsequently developed through participation-representative models of democracy, theorizes citizen engagement as a function of political attitudes, institutional trust, and civic competence, largely independent of any particular communications technology (Dahl, 1992). This thought deepened into what Norris (2011) dubbed critical citizenry and is deeply embedded in the works of Ogbonna (2025).

Each of these traditions, developed substantially with reference to particular historical and institutional contexts, leaves an important gap when applied to a different kind of case: formally democratic but ethnically, religiously, or regionally plural developing states, in which digital mobilization operates neither against the outright authoritarian closure that animates much of the Arab Spring-derived digital activism literature, nor within the comparatively settled, institutionally stable civic culture that animates the classical participation literature. In such states, of which Nigeria's Fourth Republic is a paradigmatic instance, citizen engagement must be theorized as operating simultaneously within a formally open, competitively elected political system and within a public sphere fractured along ethnic, religious, and regional lines, where digital mobilization may as readily reinforce as bridge these underlying cleavages.

This article presents and critically examines a theoretical framework developed specifically to address this gap: the Theory of Social Activism and Citizen Engagement, an eclectic theory spanning political science and mass communication, situating citizen engagement at the interaction of legitimate political action, state transgression, and the resources and identities citizens bring to that interaction. While this theory has previously been deployed as an analytical framework within empirical research on Nigeria's democratization process (Ogbonna, 2025), it has not, to date, been presented, defended, or critically situated as a standalone theoretical contribution in its own right. This article undertakes that task directly.

This article adopts a conceptual and theoretical research design rather than an empirical one: it does not collect or analyze primary or secondary quantitative or qualitative data. Instead, it develops and defends a theoretical framework by systematically synthesizing

existing scholarship. Methodologically, it proceeds through a targeted, integrative theoretical review. The literature examined was selected on three explicit criteria: (i) canonical or foundational status within the political science lineage of legitimate action, transgression, and self-enforcing democracy, principally Weingast (1997). The mass communication lineage of digital activism and resource mobilization (principally Howard, 2011; Karpf, 2010), or the civic culture tradition underlying both (Almond & Verba, 1963); (ii) direct conceptual relevance to the specific theoretical gap identified in Section 1.2; and (iii) prior deployment of the resulting framework in an earlier empirical study of Nigeria's democratization process (Ogbonna, 2025), which grounds the theory's plausibility in an applied case even though the present article's own contribution is theoretical rather than empirical. The analytical procedure applied to this literature involved, first, identifying the core causal and conceptual claims of each tradition considered separately; second, comparing these claims to establish points of complementarity, divergence, and potential integration; and third, constructing, from this comparison, the integrated four-tenet model and causal chain presented in Sections 3 and 4, together with the boundary conditions presented in Section 5. This procedure is made explicit in consistent with the conceptual, rather than empirical, character of the contribution.

The gap this article addresses are that neither the digital activism literature nor the civic culture tradition, taken alone or in combination, offers an integrated theoretical account of how digitally mediated citizen engagement translates into legitimate political action, transgressive mobilization, and democratic institutional change under conditions of formal democracy combined with ethnic, religious, or regional plurality. The article's central proposition is that these three elements, legitimate-action/transgression logic, digital resource mobilization, and civic culture, can be integrated into a single causal model linking social mobilization, critical citizenry, and democratization, and that this integrated model must further specify, rather than assume away, the coordination dilemmas, digital divide, and civic capacity constraints that condition its operation in divided societies. What the resulting Theory of Social Activism and Citizen Engagement explains, that existing accounts of digital activism or civic culture taken separately do not, is precisely this: how digital mobilization can simultaneously reinforce, and be constrained by, societal division, rather than functioning as a technologically determined solvent of political fragmentation. In doing so, the framework improves understanding of democratic processes in divided societies by making explicit the conditions under which digitally enabled citizen engagement is more, or less, likely to translate into sustained democratic accountability, rather than treating this translation as automatic.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 traces the theory's antecedents across political science and mass communication scholarship. Section 3 presents the theory's four constitutive tenets and its integrated causal model. Section 4 examines the theory as

applied to the specific causal chain linking social mobilization, critical citizenry, and democratization. Section 5 examines the theory's own internally identified boundary conditions and limitations. Section 6 discusses the theory's distinctive contribution relative to existing digital activism and civic culture scholarship, and Section 7 concludes with a call for comparative application beyond the theory's originating Nigerian case.

Theoretical underpinnings of Social Activism and Citizen Engagement

The Theory of Social Activism and Citizen Engagement draws on two disciplinary lineages, which it explicitly seeks to integrate rather than treat as competing alternatives.

- *The Political Science Lineage: Legitimate Action, Transgression, and Self-Enforcing Democracy*

From the discipline of Political Science, the theory draws on participation-representative models of democracy structured around two variables that Weingast (1997) argues citizens of any state can readily track: legitimate political action by the sovereign, and fundamental transgressions against the limits citizens and the state have mutually, if often implicitly, agreed upon. In Weingast's (1997) account, a stable democracy depends on citizens' willingness to react in concert, rewarding legitimate action and, crucially, coordinating a collective withdrawal of support in response to fundamental transgression, such that the constitution functions as a self-enforcing coordination device rather than a merely aspirational document. This account provides the Theory of Social Activism and Citizen Engagement with its foundational logic: citizen engagement is theorized not as a diffuse, unstructured disposition but as a specific, trackable behavioral response to the state's conduct relative to an implicitly or explicitly agreed set of limits. The political science lineage of the theory resonates with the dynamics of democratic praxis, in which citizens safeguard democracy through sustained vigilance - determining who governs, when they govern and for how long, while also shaping the governance agenda and influencing the manner in which it is implemented (Ogbonna et al., 2012; Ogbonna, 2012).

- *The Mass Communication Lineage: Digital Activism and Resource Mobilization*

From mass communication scholarship, the theory draws on models of citizen engagement in politics that focus on the tools of social movements, popular protest, and mobilization, with particular attention to the use of the internet to form social networks for heightened political engagement and participation. Howard (2011, p. 145) offers the theory's operative definition of social (media) activism as "the act of using the internet to advance a political cause that is difficult to advance offline", a formulation that foregrounds the internet's comparative advantage over conventional organizing channels, rather than treating digital tools as a simple substitute for pre-existing mobilization methods. Complementing this definition, Karpf's (2010, p. 152) resource-mobilization

framing characterizes social activism as involving "a set of people mobilizing the resources at their disposal to either affect the choices of powerful decision makers or to replace those actors with others more attuned to the beliefs and preferences of the people," with activists using available tools, social media prominent among them, "to educate their fellow citizens and mobilize pressure tactics." Within this intellectual dimension, Ogbonna (2025) identified the use of social media in democratization as follows: stake maximization, authoritarian reversal, social inclusion, and social network. Within this frame, social media is able to serve as a tool of social inclusion in the political system. This resource-mobilization framing situates digital tools within a broader, technology-agnostic theory of collective action, rather than treating the tools themselves as theoretically primary.

- *The Deeper Root: Civic Culture*

Both lineages, the theory argues, ultimately extend a deeper and older theoretical root: the civic culture tradition established by Almond and Verba (1963), which theorized citizen political engagement as a product of underlying political attitudes, competencies, and orientations toward the political system, largely independent of any particular communications technology. The Theory of Social Activism and Citizen Engagement positions itself as a contemporary extension of this civic culture tradition, "domesticated within the prism of contemporary social ecology", that is, retaining the civic culture tradition's core concern with citizens' political attitudes and competencies while situating that concern within a social ecology substantially reshaped by globalization and digital connectivity. This positioning matters for how the theory should be read: it is not a claim that digital tools have created citizen engagement where none previously existed, but a claim that digital tools have reshaped the ecology within which a considerably older civic disposition toward political engagement operates and expresses itself.

An Integration of the Two Lineages: Mechanisms Linking Legitimate Action, Transgression, and Digital Resource Mobilization

The relationship between the disciplines of Political Science and Mass Communication lineages set out above is not merely parallel but causally interdependent, and this sub-section makes that interdependence explicit. Legitimate political action and fundamental transgression (Weingast, 1997) function, in the integrated theory, as the substantive content of the political conduct that digital activism monitors, publicizes, and mobilizes citizens to reward or punish; digital activism and resource mobilization (Howard, 2011; Karpf, 2010), in turn, function as the operative mechanism through which citizens' underlying civic dispositions (Almond & Verba, 1963) are converted into the sustained, coordinated behavioral response, tracking legitimate action and reacting to transgression, that Weingast's account requires for democratic self-enforcement but does not itself explain how citizens achieve.

Digital activism, on this account, operates through at least four, non-mutually-exclusive causal pathways: it can facilitate legitimate political participation, by lowering the transaction costs of conventional civic engagement such as voting mobilization, information-seeking, and lawful protest; it can enable transgressive action, where citizens' or state actors' online mobilization itself crosses previously agreed democratic limits; it can mobilize resources, in Karpf's (2010) sense, for collective action independent of its ultimate legitimate or transgressive character; and, cumulatively, it can contribute to the development or erosion of self-enforcing democratic institutions, depending on whether the resulting mobilization strengthens or undermines citizens' capacity to act in the coordinated fashion Weingast's model requires.

Which of these pathways predominates in a given instance is conditioned precisely by the boundary conditions detailed in Section 5: coordination dilemmas, the digital divide, and civic capacity constraints determine whether digitally mobilized resources reinforce a unified critical citizenry capable of coordinated reaction, or instead fragment along the same ethnic, religious, or regional lines that already divide the polity, in which case digital activism may mobilize resources without producing the coordinated legitimate-action/transgression response that Weingast's account treats as the foundation of democratic self-enforcement. This specification of mechanism and boundary condition together, rather than a simple juxtaposition of the two lineages, is what distinguishes the integration proposed here from a mere combination of existing concepts.

The Four Constitutive Tenets of Social Activism and Citizen Engagement

The Theory of Social Activism and Citizen Engagement is organized around four constitutive tenets, integrated into a single conceptual model linking social mobilization, critical citizenry, and democratization.

- *Social and Digital Activism*

The theory's first tenet holds that social activism, the mobilization of available resources to affect the choices of powerful decision-makers or to replace unresponsive decision-makers with others more attuned to popular preference, increasingly operates through digital as well as conventional channels, with digital technologies used to educate fellow citizens and mobilize pressure tactics (Joyce, 2010; Karpf, 2010). A further dimension of this tenet concerns social media's overlapping function as both an *enabler* of social mobilization, in the sense of transmitting information and coordinating collective action, and an *escalator* of social mobilization, functioning as an active participant or amplifying agent in its own right rather than a neutral conduit. This dual enabler-escalator function distinguishes the theory's treatment of digital tools from a purely instrumental account in which technology serves merely as a passive channel for pre-formed civic intent.

- *Social networks induced by social media for Social Movements*

The theory's second tenet characterizes the social movements that digital activism organizes and sustains as networks of informal interaction among diverse actors, individuals, organizations, and groups, bound together by shared beliefs and ties of solidarity that allow participants to attach common meaning to specific collective events, and who become involved in political or cultural conflicts arising from, or demanding, social change. This network-centered characterization situates the theory within the broader social movement theory tradition, while emphasizing social media's specific role in inducing, sustaining, and rapidly scaling such networks beyond what pre-digital organizational forms could readily achieve.

- *Overlapping Engagement and Multiculturalism Under Globalization*

The theory's third tenet addresses the changing geography of civic engagement under conditions of globalization. In a globalized society characterized by proliferating networks organized around diverse social challenges, individuals become progressively less rooted to a single geographical area, with civic engagement instead characterized by permeable boundaries, interaction with diverse others, and switching between multiple, complexly structured, and often flatter network hierarchies. Applied to plural developing states specifically, this tenet implies that social media provides a platform through which citizens can express solidarity both within their own country, across regional and cultural lines that might otherwise constrain civic identification to a narrower, more parochial sub-national community, and with others in the wider region and beyond, extending the theory's applicability beyond a purely domestic frame of analysis.

- *Political Participation as Terminus*

The theory's fourth and culminating tenet holds that the terminus of the preceding three tenets is participatory engagement toward democratization through social mobilization, targeting the mustering of a citizen counter-balance against elements that would thwart democracy's course, or advancing the overturning of authoritarian governments or authoritarian tendencies within formally democratic systems. This tenet gives the theory its normative orientation: social and digital activism, network-induced social movements, and globalized, boundary-permeable engagement are not theorized as ends in themselves but as constitutive processes building toward the specific outcome of enhanced democratic political participation.

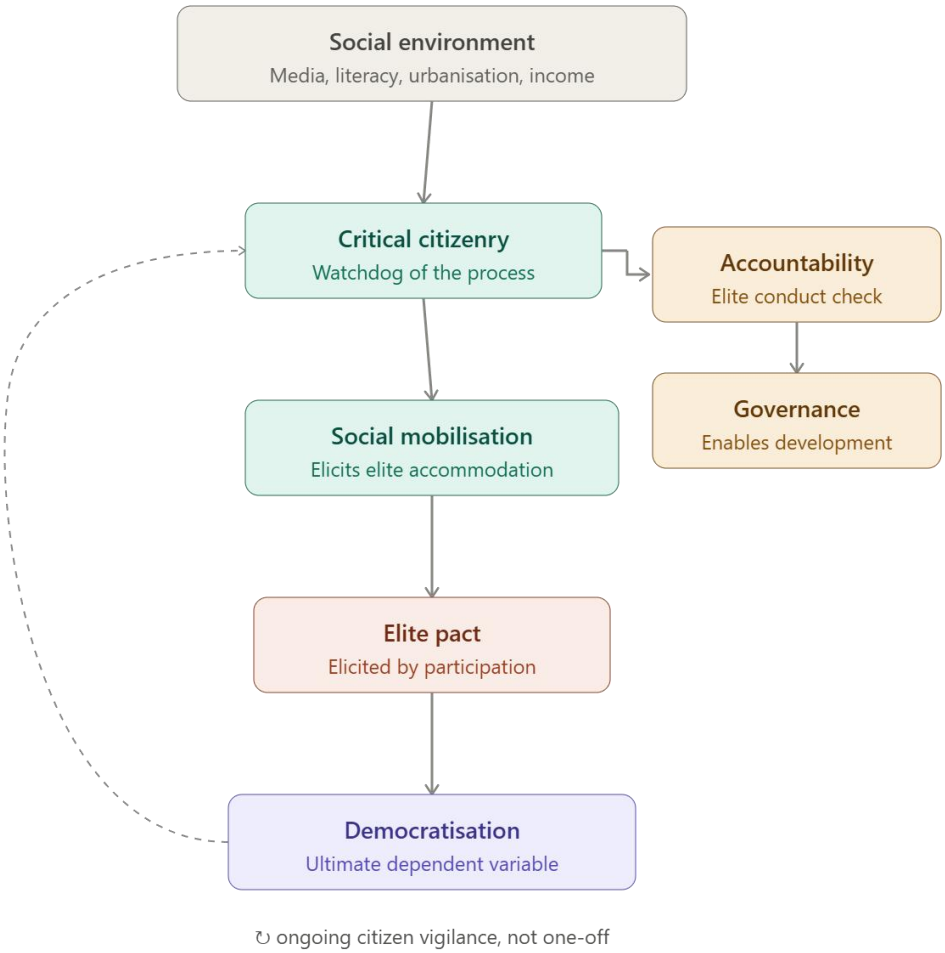
- *The Integrated Model*

These four tenets interpret the institution of a coordinated citizen reaction to government, comprising civil society actors including trade unions, farmers' associations, student groups, professional associations, organized intelligentsia, and religious associations, as functioning as a conditioner and intermediator of the process and outcome of governance, deploying social media tools and internet-based digital citizenship to operate substantially

unhindered by traditional geographic and institutional boundaries (Ogbonna, 2025; Ogbonna, 2018). In the theory's integrated causal model, social mobilization, drawing on literacy level, social capacity, and media tools including social media, produces civic competence, social network capacity, and social activism and political mobilization as its manifest indicators of impact on critical citizenry; critical citizenry, in turn, drives democratization directly, with citizens remaining alert to policing socio-political outcomes, employing both social and mass media to engage government, rewarding legitimate action, and punishing fundamental transgression by the sovereign or government officials. The theorized end product of this process is, in the short term, government responsiveness to citizens' policy demands, political inclusiveness and consensus, and rule of law and accountability; and, in the longer term, a stable democracy "a set of political institutions and rights of citizens that define limits on the state, and a shared set of beliefs among the citizenry that those limits are appropriate and worth defending" (Weingast, 1997, p. 253), which the theory further links to development and good governance more broadly.

Social Mobilization, Critical Citizenry, and Democratization

The theory's central substantive claim is that democratization should be understood as the outcome of an interaction among three variables: social mobilization, critical citizenry, and democratization itself, with democratization treated as the ultimate dependent variable of theoretical interest. Within this three-variable model, elite pact, the negotiated settlements among political elites often emphasized in transition literature, is theorized not as a stand-alone driver of democratization but as itself elicited by prior political participation, which in turn depends on the presence of a critical, engaged citizenry.



Source: *Authors' illustration*

This sequencing carries a specific and testable implication: what activates elite accommodation of democratic norms is not elite goodwill or institutional design considered in isolation, but the anticipated or actual mobilization of a critical citizenry capable of imposing costs on elites who transgress democratic limits. Critical citizens, in this account, are not merely able to compel elite involvement in the democratization process but also gauge the level of government accountability associated with, and on the long run leading to, good governance and development. The citizenry is theorized as the principal actor in the political process of democratizing states specifically, bestowed by virtue of legal entitlement with rights enabling them to determine who governs, when, and how, rights whose exercise is itself conditioned by the citizens' surrounding social environment, including media exposure, literacy, urbanization, and income levels, each of which functions as a stimulus conditioning the nature and quality of citizens' political input. A progressively democratizing state, on this account, requires a vigilant citizenry functioning as watchdog and guardian of the political process, precisely because

leadership failure is not theorized as subject to automatic self-correction: sustained democratization instead requires the continuous, active mobilization of citizens toward increasing political relevance and engagement, rather than a one-off transition event after which citizen vigilance can safely recede.

Self-Critique and Boundary Conditions

A distinctive feature of the Theory of Social Activism and Citizen Engagement, and one this article treats as central to its scholarly value, is that it incorporates its own internally identified boundary conditions and critiques, rather than presenting itself as a universally applicable model. Three such boundary conditions merit sustained theoretical attention.

- *Coordination Dilemmas in Divided Societies*

The theory's first identified limitation concerns what it terms coordination dilemmas: an underlying assumption, drawn from Weingast (1997), that democratic survival depends on a self-enforcing constitution whose maintenance is in the interest of all citizens to uphold, and whose survival depends on citizens willing to defend it or withdraw support from it collectively. The theory acknowledges that a constitution, beyond its philosophical and logical appeal, offers no reliable cure for democratization in the absence of prior reconciliation of coordination dilemmas -those lingering differentials that undermine social cohesion and obstruct the emergence of consensus on the limits of state power, the acceptable elasticity of political transgression, and the appropriate nature and timing of mass citizen reaction. Coordination dilemmas encompass economic diversity that may render some citizens less able to function as sophisticated agents of democratization, with poverty, ignorance, and disease producing, in one formulation, "a measure of moral degradation, a dwarfed mental outlook and an inability to understand the full scope of individual rights and to muster resources to realize them, as well as a lack of preparedness for the complex question of generally monitoring activities of the state" (Awa, 1996, p. 4). Coordination dilemmas further encompass conflicting relationships arising from ethnic diversity and distrust, unresolved legacies of colonial manipulation and structural deficit, and the residues of civil conflict. Because most social mobilization, on this account, targets short-term change rather than the lasting construction of social cohesion through political reform grounded in social justice, societal diversity risks becoming a burden weighing down the relevance of social networks as an instrument for citizens' collective policing of the state, a burden the theory suggests can be substantially, if not wholly, addressed through power-sharing institutional reforms capable of allowing critical citizens a more enduring basis for unified reaction to fundamental transgression.

- *The Digital Divide*

The theory's second identified limitation concerns the digital divide: while social media provides a critical alternative avenue for the expansion of the political space, disparities in access to social media through internet connectivity impede the efficacy of grassroots reach and mobilization through digitally mediated channels. This digital divide, broadly conceived, encompasses the gap between individuals, households, businesses, and geographic areas at different socio-economic levels, both in their opportunities to access information and communication technologies and in their capacity to use the internet for a wide variety of activities. The theory further notes the more acute possibility of deliberate state action to close this space entirely through internet shutdowns, as occurred during the 2011 Egyptian protests, when internet access was suspended nationally for six days, an extreme instance illustrating that the digital layer of citizen engagement the theory theorizes remains, in the final analysis, contingent upon infrastructure and state forbearance that cannot be assumed constant (Ogbonna, 2025; Ogbonna, 2018).

- *Civic Capacity*

The theory's third identified limitation engages a longstanding debate in democratic theory concerning citizens' civic capacity for self-governance. Dahl (1992) raises the question of civic competence directly, arguing that functioning democracy requires a certain threshold level of political competence among citizens, who must understand the value of unity of purpose and sustained commitment to the democratic project without succumbing to the distractions of internal division. Kuchan (2012, p. 64) extends this concern, observing that democracies "can be nimble and responsive when the electorates are content and enjoy a consensus born of rising expectations, but they are clumsy and sluggish when the citizens are downcast and divided," while Fukuyama (2012, p. 53) adds that "ideas do not become powerful unless they speak to concerns of a large number of ordinary people." Citizens must, on this reading, be not merely comfortable with the principle of self-rule but genuinely available, capable, and committed to its practice. The theory acknowledges a further, more structurally skeptical counter-current in this debate: the theory of elite circulation, which favors an essentially antithetical account of political stability grounded in elite pacts that social mobilization may disturb only temporarily, since new elites will regenerate and command the allegiance of the larger population, if necessary through the deployment of coercive instruments, as illustrated by episodes of authoritarian reversal such as that experienced in Egypt following its own 2011 uprising (Putnam, 1965).

Positioning the Theory of Social Activism and Citizen Engagement Within Digital Activism Scholarship

The preceding sections have presented the Theory of Social Activism and Citizen Engagement in full, including its own internally identified limitations. This section

situates the theory's distinctive contribution relative to the two theoretical traditions from which it draws.

- *A Corrective to Technologically Deterministic Accounts of Digital Activism*

Much of the mainstream digital activism literature, developed substantially with reference to the Arab Spring and comparable episodes of authoritarian-context mobilization, risks an implicit technological determinism in which the arrival of digital platforms is treated as sufficient, in itself, to explain the emergence of sustained civic mobilization. The Theory of Social Activism and Citizen Engagement offers a corrective to this tendency by explicitly theorizing digital tools as operating within, rather than independently of, a considerably older civic culture tradition (Section 2.3), and by incorporating coordination dilemmas, the digital divide, and civic capacity constraints (Section 5) as boundary conditions limiting digital mobilization's efficacy, rather than treating digital access as a sufficient condition for successful mobilization. This corrective is particularly consequential for the theory's applicability to plural, ethnically or religiously divided developing democracies, where, as the theory's own coordination-dilemma critique makes explicit, societal diversity may weigh down the relevance of digitally enabled social networks as instruments of collective state accountability in a manner not fully anticipated by digital activism scholarship developed with reference to more comparatively homogeneous authoritarian-context cases.

- *An Extension, Rather Than a Rejection, of Civic Culture Theory*

Simultaneously, the theory offers a productive extension, rather than a rejection, of the classical civic culture tradition established by Almond and Verba (1963). Where civic culture theory in its original form was developed without reference to digital mediation, and has sometimes been criticized as insufficiently attentive to the changing technological ecology within which contemporary civic attitudes and behaviors are formed and expressed, the Theory of Social Activism and Citizen Engagement retains civic culture theory's core concern with citizens' underlying political attitudes and competencies while situating that concern within a globalized, digitally mediated social ecology. This positioning allows the theory to draw on civic culture theory's more developed treatment of civic competence (via its engagement with Dahl, 1992, and related debates) while extending that treatment into a domain, digitally mediated collective action, that classical civic culture theory did not originally address.

- *Limitations of the Theory as Currently Formulated*

Notwithstanding these contributions, the theory as currently formulated carries limitations that should be acknowledged directly. First, the theory remains, at present, empirically anchored substantially to a single national case (Nigeria), and its propositions, while plausible extensions of the underlying Weingast, Howard, and Almond and Verba

traditions, have not been formally tested through comparative application to other plural developing democracies. Second, the theory's integrated causal model, while conceptually coherent, has been operationalized empirically primarily through survey-based measurement of respondents' perceptions of social mobilization, critical citizenry, and their correlates, rather than through direct behavioral or longitudinal measurement of the theorized causal sequence running from social mobilization through critical citizenry to democratization outcomes. Third, the theory's boundary conditions (as contained in Section 5), while conceptually well specified, have not themselves been subjected to comparative empirical testing, for instance, through cross-national comparison of coordination-dilemma severity, digital-divide magnitude, or civic-capacity indicators against variation in the theorized social mobilization–critical citizenry–democratization relationship. These limitations suggest specific, tractable directions for the comparative research programme called for in the conclusion herewith.

Conclusion

In an effort to address the absence of an integrated theoretical account of digitally mediated citizen engagement in formally democratic but plural developing states, this article traced the antecedents of, and critically examined, the Theory of Social Activism and Citizen Engagement, and made explicit the causal mechanisms linking its political science and mass communication lineages.

This article has presented, traced the antecedents of, and critically examined the Theory of Social Activism and Citizen Engagement, an eclectic framework spanning political science and mass communication developed to theories citizen engagement in formally democratic but plural developing states, a category of case underserved by both the predominantly authoritarian-context digital activism literature and the pre-digital civic culture tradition. The theory's core contribution lies in its integration of three elements not typically combined within a single framework: Weingast's (1997) legitimate-action/transgression model of self-enforcing democratic constitutions; Howard's (2011) and Karpf's (2010) accounts of digital activism as resource mobilization; and an explicit, self-critical treatment of the coordination dilemmas, digital divides, and civic capacity constraints that condition digital mobilization's efficacy in plural, unevenly developed societies. This combination of an integrative causal model with explicitly theorized boundary conditions distinguishes the theory from more technologically deterministic accounts of digital activism, and positions it as a candidate framework for comparative application beyond its originating Nigerian case. Realizing this comparative potential, however, will require precisely the kind of cross-national empirical testing the theory has not yet undergone, a research agenda this article offers as a direct invitation to scholars of comparative democratization and digital activism working on other plural, developing-democracy contexts where the tension between formally open political competition and

underlying societal fragmentation remains, as in Nigeria, a defining feature of the political landscape.

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