The Potential of Digital: Optimising Trustworthy Digital Contact

Social ties and relationships are an integral component of democratic governance. High trust interactions between citizens and political actors such as politicians, government officials, and journalists, enable collective action, inspire participation and ensure adherence to political rules and norms. Yet these bonds are subject to challenge and increasingly frayed. Digital technology has been heralded as one way of rebuilding social ties, but evidence of polarized debate, untrustworthy information, uncivil behaviour and transient engagement challenges this idea. Building on previous work revealing citizens' preferences for frequency, form and channel of communication from those political actors, we consider whether and under what conditions digital communication can strengthen or erode trust – specifically looking at communication via email, social media, chatbots, social media influencers, and AI-generated synthetic media. We expect minority communities will have different expectations for communication with political actors and will examine how women, ethnic minorities and diaspora communities respond to alternative forms of contact. Using surveys and experimental methods in Canada, France, Poland, and the UK, we examine whether and how each point of contact could be optimized to promote trust. Such analysis is vital to ensuring that trust is promoted across diverse communities and that inequalities and discrimination are not exacerbated in our political systems. Moreover, it allows us to determine whether singular modes of trustworthy communication exist, or whether potentially competing conceptions of trustworthy interaction need to be theorised. Importantly, we then ask elites and citizens about their responses to these strategies to assess viability.