ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Usages of an E-participation platform by legislators: lessons from the French parliament

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Abstract
The article intends to advance the study of e-participation in renewed directions by focusing on a category of actors that has long been overlooked: elected politicians. It zeroes in on legislators who while key actors of representative democracy chose to be involved in an e-participation initiative. This article generates theoretical propositions on how they make use of e-participation platforms in their work as parliamentarians. Based on a qualitative analysis of interviews about the main e-participation platform in France, *Parlement & Citoyens,* the article shows that parliamentarians' usages of such participatory tools tend either toward a policy-oriented logic or a vote-seeking purpose. These usages can also be categorized as tending toward either a representative or a participatory democracy logic. The article concludes that if platforms are originally designed as online participatory alternatives to conventional legislative processes, they are chiefly used as adjuvants to traditional political representation practices.

Keywords E-participation · Legislators · Parliament · Citizens · Online platforms · Representation

Introduction

It has been decades that democratic disaffection and ordinary citizens' growing scepticism, criticisms or even distance toward representative democracy processes are discussed (Dalton 2014; Hay 2007; Norris 1999). In the French context, citizens' distrust toward political elites has reached a new high with the Yellow vests movement during the Winter of 2018, following a longer trend of wavering trust in representative institutions and elected politicians (Grunberg 2019; Costa et al. 2012). Across established democracies, parliaments, governments or civil

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society actors have long tried, though diversely, to tackle this issue with the introduction of democratic innovations and specific communication and policy instruments (Jacquet and van der Does 2020; Blatrix 2010; Leston-Bandeira 2012). The development of information and communication technologies recently supported this evolution. Pundits coined the term 'e-democracy' to highlight the role of digital participatory schemes in potentially expanding the scope of participants to policymaking and changing its very nature (Perez et al. 2018; Griffith and Leston-Bandeira 2012).

In the past 10 years, e-participation platforms have been introduced in order to improve citizens' and civil society actors' involvement in policymaking (Ansell and Gash 2017, Randma-Liiv and Lember forthcoming). They generally aim at building open, direct and transparent relationships between public actors, including legislators, and citizens. But an extensive scholarship offers converging evidence that shows that e-participation initiatives result in disappointing outcomes in terms of the scope of participants, the deliberative process and the opening up of the process of policymaking (Mazeaud et al. 2012; Herz 2016; Perez et al. 2018).

Yet, the article suggests that these results may be partially skewed because of their focus on issues related to how e-participation platforms succeed (or not) in engaging citizens in policymaking. Following a recently developed strand of research, the article focuses instead on how decision-makers make use of e-participation initiatives. It brings in the analysis parliamentarians, as they are key actors of both e-participation and policymaking (Jacquet et al. 2015; Hendricks and Lees-Marschment 2019), alongside professional experts of participatory democracy (Mazeaud and Nonjon 2017; Mazeaud et al. 2016). This article asks how parliamentarians who decided to be involved in e-participation initiatives make use of participatory platforms in their work as parliamentarians. It aims to build an analytical framework on the usages of online platforms by legislators. For this purpose, the article draws on an empirical analysis of a crucial case of e-participation in order to generate theoretical propositions on the issue.

Usages are social practices that seize e-participation platforms as a set of opportunities in the work of parliamentarians and in the process of policy making, whether these opportunities are institutional or normative (based on Jacquot and Woll 2003, 9). The article explores whether public inputs are used by parliamentarians to reach policy goals or rather to serve their constituency and their relationships with it. It also illuminates whether parliamentarians' usages of an e-participation platform supplement their representative role with a participatory orientation or mainly support their traditional role in representative democracies.

Overall, the article intends to advance the study of policymaking through e-participation by analyzing how legislators, who stand at the center of representative democracy, make use of online participation platforms. This approach complements a focus on political leaders' views on public input (Hendricks and Lees-Marschment 2019; Sønderskov 2019) as the usages are embedded in representations, but include also decision-making and strategic considerations. In addition, the article contributes to studies of parliamentarians' roles by looking at how they translate to participatory initiatives as an additional domain of parliamentarians' activities (Blomgren and Rozenberg 2015).

The article conducts a case study of the French main e-participation platform for law-making at the national level. The French case is an extreme case of citizens' mistrust toward the (political) elites, as recently evidenced by the Yellow Vests movement (Boyer et al. 2020; Grunberg 2019). In this respect, the French case magnifies the issues of elected politicians' usages of participatory tools. The platform under study is called *Parlement & Citoyens* (Parliament and Citizens—thereafter P&C). It is a private initiative established as a non-profit organization. P&C is an online platform' enabling citizens and legislators to work together to find solutions to [France's] problems'. Seventeen senators and MPs have conducted 24 consultations (at the time of the fieldwork, during Winter 2019). Legislators are invited to upload draft laws on the platform that are open to comments and votes by citizens and organizations.

Based on our analysis, six distinct usages of digital participation by French parliamentarians are identified along two main dimensions. The results show that some of them are policy-oriented, while others are directed toward the parliamentarian's constituency. In addition, our analysis evidences that some of these usages are embedded in a logic of traditional political representation, while a few are underpinned with a participatory logic. Overall, the analysis points at the resilience of representative democracy practices in French parliamentarians' usages of the online platform.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows: In a first section, we review the relevant literature and present our approach. In a second section, we present the case selection, as well as methods of data collection and data analysis. The third section is dedicated to thematic analysis, and the fourth section discusses our conceptual analysis.

Parliamentarians and policymaking through e-participation platforms

In the past years, e-participation platforms have spread across established democracies (Perez et al. 2018, Randma-Liiv and Lember forthcoming). They aim at improving the process of policymaking by making it more transparent and by including inputs of participants that are usually not considered, typically that of ordinary citizens (Stromer-Galley et al. 2012). Yet, despite the surge of these platforms, the existing scholarship depicts a rather bleak picture of their impacts with regard to their initial objectives. First, when it comes to their very effect on the process of policymaking and policies themselves, studies report that it is difficult to track empirically (Mazeaud et al. 2012); and even when it is possible to do it, evidence points at a limited effect of e-participation (Johnson 2015; Michels 2011). Second, case studies show that e-participation platforms do not improve significantly the nature of deliberation as such (Farina et al. 2013; Moss and Coleman 2014): They fail to improve the quality of public discussions (Herz 2016), and they fall short of their potential to expand the scope of participants (Moss and Coleman 2014; Pautz 2010).

Yet, online participatory platforms are widely used, even more so over time, and governments have engaged in the growing institutionalization of such initiatives (De Blasio and Selva 2016). Further research is thereby needed to take stock of these developments while pushing the investigation of policymaking through

e-participation platforms in renewed directions. Recent advances suggest indeed that the study of digital and non-digital participatory initiatives should include a category of actors that has long been overlooked: politicians themselves (Jacquet et al. 2015; Schiffino et al. 2019; Niessen et al. 2019; Hendricks and Lees-Marschment 2019). Existing research, mostly anchored in deliberative democracy theories, paints leaders as 'willing, passive, disinterested or duplicitous recipients of public inputs' (Hendricks and Lees-Marschment 2019, 600). Beyond the somewhat contradictory assumptions regarding politicians' views on citizens' participation, there is still little empirically based knowledge about leaders' actual understandings of participative democracy. Scattered evidence suggests that politicians value public inputs both for instrumental and epistemic reasons (Hendricks and Lees-Marschment 2019). Existing scholarship also reports that politicians see participatory initiatives on a continuum with representative democracy (Schiffino et al. 2019; Cupps 1977; Bingham et al. 2005), as they may be critical of the way participatory democracy works and may be reluctant to share their decision-making power with citizens (Hendricks and Lees-Marschment 2019; Mahrer and Krimmer 2005; Jacquet et al. 2015).

This emerging strand of research illuminates how democratic participatory innovations may supplement or combine with the existing processes of representative democracy at the level of politicians' views and representations. But by focusing on politicians, in general, whether they have been involved or not in participatory initiatives, this body of works sidelines how public inputs may be used in the process of designing policies. Yet, politicians, and legislators specifically, stand at the core of the process of policy design and may act as gate keepers who allow or prevent digital participation to enter the arena of rule-making and policymaking. Concomitantly, they may be in a position to shape the outcomes of e-participation platforms.

To bridge this gap, the article zeroes in on politicians who chose to be involved in e-participation initiatives. Specifically, it investigates their usages of e-participation platforms. Usages are defined as social practices that seize e-participation platforms as a set of opportunities in the work of parliamentarians and in the process of policy making, whether these opportunities are institutional or normative (based on Jacquot and Woll 2003, p. 9). In that sense, usages combine actors' strategic considerations and normative preferences. We argue that parliamentarians' usages of e-participation platforms are structured along two main dimensions: The first dimension depicts the nature of their political work, that is, how they see and strategize about their role in the parliament; the second dimension refers to the normative orientation of their role toward a classic representative logic or toward its participatory supplement. We discuss each dimension in turn. One should note that the four poles structuring these dimensions (vote-seeking vs policy-oriented logics and representative vs participatory logics) are conceptual and aim at providing clear points of reference against which empirical situations can be assessed.

Parliamentary roles have been the topic of a large debate in the scholarly literature. Diverging perspectives have been sustained, from a rational choice approach (e.g., Müller et al. 1999) to sociologically underpinned analyses (e.g., Searing 1994). The literature concurs on the existence of a pervasive tension between two distinct parliamentary role: that of the trustee, and that of the delegate (for a general discussion, see: Blomgren and Rozenberg 2015; Rehfeld 2005). A trustee puts emphasis on the policy

work in the parliamentary arena. She follows her own will and ideas to define and follow policy goals. She is oriented toward impacting policymaking by being a policy advocate. In other words, she is policy-oriented. On the contrary, a delegate entertains a closer relationship to her constituency. She is typically more involved and active at the constituency level than in parliament (Brouard et al. 2013b, a). In parliament, her political work is oriented toward the representation of her constituents, not that of the whole nation or the broader political community. She may support certain policy options, but the main focus of her political work is to serve her constituency. In that sense, she is vote-seeking (here we use the phrase coined by Müller et al. 1999 without subscribing to their full theoretical framework).

In addition, we suggest to combine the analysis of parliamentary roles with a study of their normative underpinnings toward representative or participatory democracy. In doing so, we draw from recent advances in the participation literature that argues that parliamentarians' conceptions of their own role include both an expected logic of political representation and a less expected logic of participation. Schiffino and colleagues' original research (2019) on Belgian politicians even persuasively demonstrates that for them, political representation and participation can be located on a same continuum (see also Hendricks and Lees-Marschment 2019). Specifically, they show that some of them see participation as a way to legitimize decisions made by elected representatives. In general terms, the logic of political representation features a specific and central role of the parliament and elected politicians, who are deemed to be in charge of collecting external stakeholders' opinions and preferences on policy proposals. They are also entrusted with the charge of building support coalitions within the citizenry in general, or particular groups, including their constituency. In contrast, the participatory logic involves a rather horizontal understanding of the process of policymaking, based on individuals participating collectively to make decisions (Pateman 2012). Emphasis is put on collaboration, partnership, co-production and the specific value-added of each group of participants (Arnstein 1969). In addition, the participatory logic typically argues for the necessary broadening of the scope of participants beyond organized interests (interest groups, trade unions) to individual citizens (Barber 1984). Last, the participatory logic may be associated with a strong advocacy of participatory democracy as such.

In conclusion, we consider that it is an empirical question to investigate how individual legislators interpret the institutional and political constraints they face. Their uses of e-participation platforms therefore sit at the crossroads of their parliamentary role and their normative conception of representation and participation, in a given institutional context they make sense of.

Methods: a case study of *Parlement & Citoyens* in France

Case selection

In this section, we successively present the case of e-participation platform under scrutiny, namely *Parlement & Citoyens* (P&C), and the characteristics and role of the French Parliament.

P&C website (https://parlement-et-citoyens.fr/) introduces the platform as an online solution that 'enables citizens and parliamentarians to work together to find solutions to [France's] problems'. The website was put online in February 2013. It is a private initiative managed originally by a small group of citizens.[1] Legally, at the start, P&C was only a website and later became a non-profit organization in April 2017. P&C has not become an 'institutional platform' as it is supported neither by the Senate nor by the National Assembly. The parliament's bureau refused to financially support the initiative or endorse it as an official platform available to their members. One justification is that it is open to lawmakers from any political party, regardless of their radical political leaning.

P&C is structured around three goals to tackle what it calls the threefold crisis of French representative democracy: First, increasing policy efficiency by diversifying MPs and senators' sources of information; second, strengthening the legitimacy of law making by opening legislative work to as many citizens as possible to 'restrict the influence of lobbies and partisan interests and ensure a better knowledge and representation of the common good'; third, improving trust between citizens and elected politicians by building an open and transparent collaboration.

Practically, P&C provides two participatory instruments to connect citizens and parliamentarians. Individual (or a group of) MPs or senators can submit a draft law for citizens and stakeholders as companies, subnational governments, public institutions or interest groups, from civil society organizations to business associations, to comment, discuss and amend. This is the core service provided by P&C. Citizens and civil society organizations can also launch petitions on the website, but this is only rarely used and is therefore not further analyzed here. Regarding consultations, MPs or senators can use the platform not only to engage in a discussion on specific components of a draft law, but also to consult citizens and stakeholders about a given issue, usually in the context of an information mission of one of the assemblies. The issues range from artificial intelligence, to the protection of biodiversity or the status of elected politicians. The formal consultation process proceeds in five steps: (1) the presentation, (2) the consultation, (3) the synthesis and the lawmaker's answers, (4) a live debate, and (5) the report publication or the law itself. But the technical features of the platform grants parliamentarians with some flexibility as they may skip one or several steps.

The platform operates in a specific institutional context, namely that of a weak legislative institution in comparison to an powerful executive branch of government (Elgie and Grossman 2016). The French Fifth Republic is a semi-presidential system where the president is directly elected and enjoys a wide array of competences. But

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[1] In July 2014, bolstered by the experience of P&C, the founders of the platform founded a civic-tech startup called Cap Collectif. This company develops participatory technologies and services (originally designed based on P&C) and sell them to customers seeking e-participation solutions to support their decisions: either municipalities, governments, assemblies, councils, associations, or private companies. Among its customer portfolio, there are French or French-speaking public institutions, such as the Public Hearing Office on the Environment of the Province of Québec (Canada) or the Parliament of Wallonia (Belgium). Several companies, professional associations, political parties, universities or unions also bought the access to Cap Collectif's platforms.

the prime minister and the government actually hold the executive power as long as the parliament allows it (Duverger 1980). The upper and the lower houses are comparatively weak even though recent reforms in 2008 attempted at strengthening them (Thomas and Tacea 2015). Yet, the executive branch still controls most of the parliament's agenda. In addition, the constitution grants it with extensive instruments to limit the role of the parliament (Huber 1996). In that respect, Brouard and colleagues (2013b, a) demonstrate that French MPs 'focus more on constituency work than on parliamentary work' due to the electoral rules, the nature of the French state and the widespread holding of multiple mandates at the same time. This important activities of French legislators on the ground and the weakness of the French chambers in the public eye lead to what Costa et al. (2012) call a paradoxical relationship between French citizens and their parliament (309–310). While the parliament has not succeeded in gaining the interest of citizens, the latter also consider MPs and Senators as key political actors who benefit from political, economic, and social networks that may help to solve their problems (Costa et al. 2012).

In addition to the French context that magnifies the issues of elected politicians' usages of participatory tools, P&C as a case is also particularly relevant to draw theoretical propositions from its analysis. It is a platform that is neither limited to one issue nor a one-shot initiative, unlike many of the democratic innovations rolled out at the national level in France. Instead, P&C was established as a long-term initiative intended to be available for parliamentarians and citizens over time to discuss draft laws regarding any issue. In that regard, P&C is a unique empirical case to investigate all types of parliamentarians' usages of e-participation platforms, regardless of the policy issue at stake, the specific context of e-participation, and whether these usages are related to conjectural or structural motives.

Data collection

Data was collected through desk research and interviews (see the list of interviews in Appendix 1).[2] The interviews with lawmakers and their staff (parliamentary assistants) who participated to at least one online consultation on P&C were then systematically analyzed through a thematic analysis (see next section). As the purpose of this exploratory research is to generate theoretical propositions on legislators usages of e-participation platforms, we consider that the analysis of interviews about six parliamentarians (out of 17) with different profiles offers sufficient empirical traction to get access to a significant overview of the issue at stake. We acknowledge that the limited scope of our data set induces some limitations as regard to any potential

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[2] Desk research was helpful to contextualize information collected through interviews and prepare the discussions with our different interlocutors. We collected legal texts, public documents on MPs' and Senators' websites, data from the platform as well as press articles about *Parlement & Citoyens*. We also conducted a total of ten interviews with a range of different actors, including citizens who participated in consultations and the founder and president of P&C (see the list of interviews in Appendix 1). All these interviews aimed at acquiring an in-depth understanding of the platform. However, for the purpose of this article, the systematic analysis is restricted to interviews with lawmakers and their staff (parliamentary assistants) who participated to at least one online consultation on P&C.

inference and generalization. Nonetheless, the objective of this article is not to draw general conclusions. Instead, the aim of this qualitative analysis is to build an analytical framework aiming at mapping the different usages that central actors of representative democracy can make of e-participation initiatives. The rationale for this methodology, structured around an exploratory analysis of a crucial case, is to formulate propositions to be tested subsequently among a larger number of cases (Lijphart 1971). Also, the fact that all our interviewees were not lawmakers themselves does not introduce a bias in our analysis since we were looking not only at perceptions or representations denoting a system of norms, but also at behaviors and events denoting usages of the platform (Donegani et al. 2002). In fact, parliamentary assistants were the key actors to collect information about consultation processes, as they were actually tasked with the implementation of the online consultation.

The six legislators under scrutiny have different profiles in terms of political experience and consultation conducted on P&C (see Table 1). Three of them are members of the *Sénat* (the upper house) while the other three are members of the *Assemblée nationale* (the lower house). Two senators conducted, respectively, two and four consultations, while the others conducted only one. As regards to legislators' party affiliation, a majority of them are member or associated with left-wing parties (green or socialist parties). This distribution reflects a general trend among parliamentarians using P&C: leftist or centrist legislators use P&C more than right-wing politicians. Also, the fact that our interviewees are male reflects the overall pattern among users. Overall, the heterogeneity of the sample under investigation corresponds to the diversity of legislators who had used P&C at the time of the fieldwork.

Last, we would like to address the context of data collection. Interviews were conducted in January and February 2019 in the midst of the movement of the Yellow Vests, which started in November 2018. The claims of protesters focused on the increase of purchasing power and the improvement of the dialogue between citizens and their representatives. Undoubtedly, this context impacted on the interviews in the sense that it raised the salience of the topic that we went through with the interviewees. The political context stressed the topicality of an online platform that aims at connecting citizens and policymakers. Several interviewees pointed out that the movement of the Yellow Vests denoted a gap between citizens and political elites that participatory initiatives may contribute to close (i.e. itw3, itw7, itw8). If anything, the political context of fieldwork facilitated the discussion about online participation, policymaking and parliamentarians' engagement with them.

Data analysis

Data analysis is organized in two steps: a thematic analysis and a conceptual categorization. In essence, the thematic analysis refers to a descriptive intention, while the conceptual categorization refers to an interpretative intention. The thematic analysis sorts and clusters data to provide a synthesis of the content that speaks to existing theoretical knowledge (Boyatzis 1998). First, units of coding were identified; then, they were thematized (thematization); and, third, the thematization was refined and

Table 1 Overview of legislators under scrutiny

Legislator	Chamber	# Mandate [dates]	Political party	# Consultation on P&C	Year of consultation
S1	*Sénat*	1 [2014–…]	Socialist Party *Parti socialiste*	2	2017, 2018
S2	*Sénat*	1 [2017–…]	Green party *Europe Écologie Les Verts*	1	2018
S3	*Sénat*	2 [2011–…]	Green party *Europe Écologie Les Verts*	4	2013, 2015, 2017, 2018
MP1	*Assemblée nationale*	3 [2001–2002; 2007—2017]	Socialist Party *Parti socialiste*	1	2013
MP2	*Assemblée nationale*	1 [2017–…]	La République en Marche	1	2018
MP3	*Assemblée nationale*	4 [1997–2017]	Socialist Party *Parti socialiste*	1	2015

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on data retrieved from Parlement & Citoyens: https://parlement-et-citoyens.fr/projects

the themes were clustered around thematic axes. It results in an overview of empirical data in the form of a thematic tree (see Appendix 2). The conceptual categorization starts from theoretical considerations as discussed in Sect. 1, builds analytical dimensions, and then confronts empirical data to these dimensions. The objective is to denominate perceptible phenomena through a conceptual reading of a research material, or in other words, to identify experiences or logic of the actors under scrutiny in a theoretical perspective (Paillé and Mucchielli 2016, 319–320). In that sense, the conceptual categorization allows for a discussion of the first step of the empirical analysis. Based on both steps, the article provides a map of the parliamentarians' usages of an e-participation platform.

The usages of an e-participation platform by French legislators

We identified six thematic axes that correspond to six different usages of P&C by French legislators. The presentation of the results starts with the thematic axis that was the most frequently identified (five parliamentarians out of six) and ends with the one that was the least frequently observed (two legislators). However, the aim of this presentation is not to weight the thematic axes, but to provide an overview of all the elements of discourse traced by the analysis (see the section dedicated to data collection). Quotes retrieved from interview transcripts illustrate each thematic axis.[3]

Securing support to the policy

Legislators use P&C to garner and secure support to the policy at stake in the consultation (itw1, itw3, itw6, itw9, itw10). First, online consultations are considered as a means to demonstrate public support to a given policy option (itw3, itw6, itw10). Legislators thereby use P&C to legitimize the policy option they support:

> [The purpose of the consultation was] to show that there was a strong will among the population [...] This is often the case with consultations, it is often one of the objectives, it is to legitimize a fight or a subject and the direction we give to it. (itw3)

Consultations also are used to offset lobbying actions from the private sector. Here, the aim of the legislator by using P&C is to show that citizens support the orientation he favours (in the case at hand, more regulation to better protect the environment), as opposed to the positions advocated by the industry:

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[3] All interviewees filled and signed a consent form in which they accept their name and quotes to be published in reports and academic publications. That is why we can include direct quotes from interview transcripts. However, we decided to anonymize all quotes for privacy purpose.

Therefore, [the consultation] puts in perspective… One sees that finally the debate in the decision-making process is nowadays dominated by the industries, but the reality is that the citizens they, they have other objectives. (itw3)

On a slightly different line, some legislators also use P&C to identify sticking points emerging from debates about a given issue (itw3, itw9). These sticking points may then be addressed and defused during the drafting phase of the legislative proposal. Parliamentarians may also rely on online consultations to test the relevance of experts' advice and information against the perspective of everyday citizens (itw6, itw10), and thereby assess the extent to which they would engage in favour of the policy proposal that derives from it.

The real benefit is that on the one hand, the information we were able to get from the professionals, the technicians, I wanted to cross-check it. If what these experts said was not too far from what the public opinion was saying. (itw6)

Legislators also address policy stakeholders, and not exclusively citizens, in order to estimate their support (or opposition) to a given policy proposal (itw1, itw6). For instance, this legislator used P&C to involve policy stakeholders (and citizens) in the decision-making process in order to secure their support and 'build trust':

We also see that a lot, in the current debate with the Yellow Vests. This mistrust of citizens vis-à-vis their elected representatives is huge. Sometimes we have the feeling that, it is unfair but... it's fascinating to see how even organized actors, politicized people, have a total distrust in the activity of elected officials, especially when actually we come to present them with a perfectly transparent, perfectly participative approach by saying: 'we work on this subject, we need you'. [...] It was necessary to build trust and these tools are essential to build this trust. (itw1)

Overall, this thematic axis highlights the usage of P&C by legislators as a legitimizing instrument that garner and secure support to a policy proposal through the very involvement of stakeholders and citizens in the policy design. At the same time, online consultations also serve as a forecasting instrument that allows them to predict ordinary citizens and other policy stakeholders' reactions and policy support.

Strengthening one's political reputation

Second, parliamentarians use P&C to strengthen their position and political reputation within and outside the parliament (itw1, itw3, itw6, itw8, itw9). Within the parliament, the use of P&C reinforces their standing, particularly amongst their parliamentary group (itw1, itw3, itw6, itw 8). Conducting a consultation on P&C is instrumental in increasing their leadership on a specific issue and in framing it as potentially benefiting the whole parliamentary group (itw 3). Linked to that, P&C may also be used to bypass the French parliament's restrictions on the rights of parties in the opposition. A single day per month is reserved to bills proposed by the opposition and minority groups (Brouard et al. 2013b, a, 40–41). In this

context, the battle to get one's legislative proposal put on the agenda, and thus benefit from public exposure, is fierce. A consultation on P&C serves as an additional argument to negotiate a slot on the agenda with one's own parliamentary group (itw1). Another parliamentarian argues that the use of P&C allowed him to work together with another Senator from another parliamentary group in order to present a common proposal, which was not trivial:

> There is a lèse-majesté issue here, because two senators who work together, from two different groups […] So, people were upset, especially within the groups in which he and I belong. (itw8)

Outside the parliament, P&C generates additional publicity on the work of legislators and increases their access to the media (itw6, iwt9). A former MP explains how P&C did boost the dissemination of his information mission report (which reports are already a means used by parliamentarians to benefit from public exposure):

> I think my report was unanimously appreciated. It was widely advertised for a parliamentary report, very well publicized. I went in all the radio and TV stations, which is very unusual for a report of this type. I think *Parlement & Citoyens* has helped me to communicate.... [...] It was an advantage, it was something. I sold the report thanks to this... So, overall, it helped me. (itw6)

Last, online consultations may also strengthen a legislator's position not only within the parliament, but also toward the government, and make himself known toward the powerful executive branch:

> I think that in the parliament and in the government, I think no one really knew how much contributors participated. And so, my interest was to say basically 'I opened up the process, it was a massive consultation, and so we must not disappoint the people, in quotation marks'. 'The people', according to what you just told me, is 350 people [the actual number of contributors]. It's not 'the people', I agree. Nevertheless, it was just a way for me to get a message out.

In sum, legislators use P&C to strengthen their reputation toward three types of audience: inside the parliament toward their parliamentary group or fellow legislators, toward the public via media coverage and toward the government.

Collecting experiences and expertise

A third usage of P&C by parliamentarians is to collect experiences and expertise from a wide range of groups and actors (itw1, itw3, itw8, itw9, itw10). First, since the platform is online and in public access, it allows legislators to get connected to everyday people:

> It is important for MPs and Senators to launch this type of consultation on these topics, because it brings them out of a bubble, out of the Parisian bubble, I'd say. (itw9)

A legislator explains that experiences and opinions expressed by ordinary citizens feeds his analyses. However, he perceives himself not as a mouthpiece of citizens' demands but, primarily, as focused on all citizens' long-term interests that he defines as the 'common good'.

> The elected representative, woman or man, is an individual, with convictions, with values, and with ideas. [...] And, to be sure that he makes the right decision when drafting laws, well, the more he will collect different opinions, the more he will get an idea that will be closer to the truth. (itw8)

In a similar vein, P&C is considered as a tool to open-up the parliament to 'non-organized citizens' and reach out to them, as opposed to stakeholder organizations representing the 'organized citizens' who can be heard during regular consultations:

> The number of actors who can be auditioned is still limited, there are not many timeslots. So [P&C allows to] open the consultation to actors who are not auditioned, open the consultation to people who would like to give their opinion, who have ideas, who drive initiatives in the field. (itw9)

This third thematic axis indicates that P&C is used not only to collect expert information but also experiences from citizens, as well as to broaden the scope of actors who participate in parliamentary consultations beyond the 'usual suspects' (experts, representative organizations) and include everyday citizens.

Promoting participative democracy

For some parliamentarians, conducting an online consultation on P&C is part of their advocacy for the cause of participative democracy (itw1, itw3, itw8, itw10).

> Anyway, we act as activists, there is a strong militant dimension in our work [with P&C] (itw1)
> Yes, some see the opportunity to legitimize a policy issue or their action, some others are sincere and think that consultations are essential and must be generalized. [...] but yes, I think that in, amongst parliamentarians and their staff, there are many people who, who are advocates of the democracy, who want our democracy to work, and who realize that currently, there are big problems. And so, every time we can, we try to push for things to get better, so that practices change and that ... that takes a lot of time, there is a huge inertia and ... but here people are committed. (itw3)

Online consultations may be an instrument for politicians to lead by example and thereby promote e-participation (itw3). While recognizing the limited number of individuals who have to date accessed and contributed to the platform, a Senator highlights that the main contribution of this type of participatory initiatives is to provide citizens with opportunities to get involved in policy design (itw8). He claims that this 'opportunity to participate' is one of the responses to social and political unrest, referring here to the movement of the Yellow Vests. According to another legislator, using P&C also opens a broader discussion with his fellow

parliamentarians about the role of citizens in legislative work (itw10), thereby explicitly articulating participatory democracy with political representation. This fourth thematic axis underlines that parliamentarians use P&C to promote participatory initiatives. These are considered as a solution to fix the French malfunctioning democratic system.

Making the parliament more transparent to citizens

A fifth usage of P&C by parliamentarians relates to the increased transparency of legislative procedures, and the French Parliament more generally, in the eyes of everyday citizens (itw3, itw6). For instance, parliamentarians use P&C to publicize the positions of each stakeholders they met.

> It is an open process, people have a record of what was said, the arguments that have been made, the various stakeholders can introduce themselves. [...] And so, for the transparency of the different points of view, it's interesting. (itw3)

One former MP explains that he strictly enforced a 'mandatory disclosure term' when he headed a parliamentary information mission through P&C and that because of it, some private companies did not accept to meet with him:

> By the way, there are some private companies that I met… who did want to meet me, and when I told them that anyway everything would be published on *Parlement & Citoyens*, so open [...]. They refused to meet me. Amazon, for instance. (itw6)
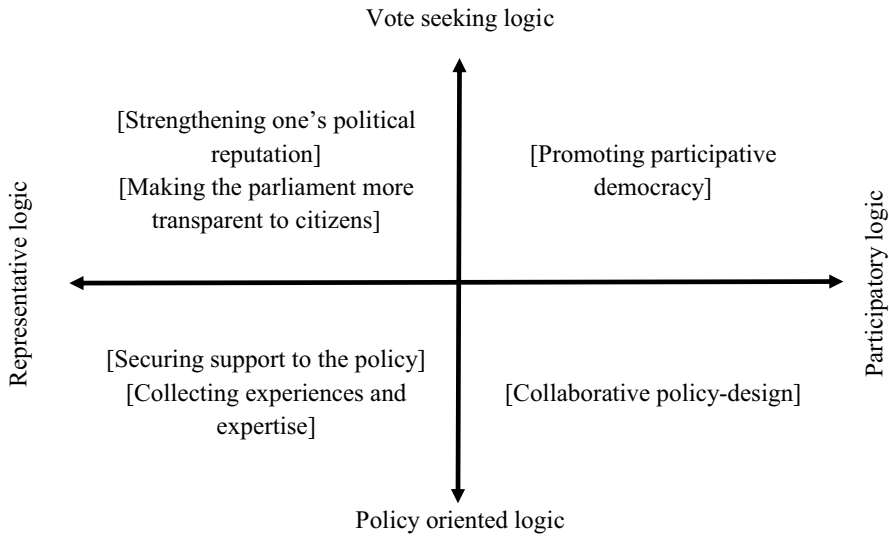
Collaborative policy-design

Last, a sixth usage of P&C by parliamentarians deals with the co-construction of policies (itw1, itw8). These parliamentarians emphasize their commitment to take the input of individual citizens into consideration and go 'beyond a mere consultation'.

> There is still a very positive element of mandatory co-construction. And a link with the citizens, beyond a mere consultation. There is a consultation: very good. But there are actual results subsequently. It is a mandatory co-construction and inclusion. (itw8)

Another legislator highlights the necessity to engage with specific stakeholders to tackle the issue of the consultation he launched. He considers that these stakeholders hold the expertise and are the actors expected to implement the potential future law (itw1). Here, the collaborative policy-design purpose of P&C intersects two other usages of the platform, which are securing the support of stakeholders and collecting a wide range of expertise and experiences.

Vote seeking logic

[Strengthening one's political
reputation]
[Making the parliament more
transparent to citizens]

[Promoting participative
democracy]

Representative logic

Participatory logic

[Securing support to the policy]
[Collecting experiences and
expertise]

[Collaborative policy-design]

Policy oriented logic

Source: Authors' own elaboration

Fig. 1 Conceptual categorization of legislators' usages of the e-participation platform

Discussion: an analytical framework on legislators' usages of e-participation platforms

In this section, we build a conceptual categorization of legislators' usages of P&C by relying on the usages identified by the thematic analysis and projecting them on a two-axis model that we derived from existing research on participation and parliamentary roles: first, is each usage about vote-seeking or is it policy-oriented? Second, is it oriented toward political representation or toward participatory democracy? One should note that the conceptual categorization does not denote an exclusive focus on either logic, only the dominant orientation of parliamentarians' usages (Fig. 1).

First, the usages of P&C by French parliamentarians under scrutiny are leaning toward a vote-seeking logic rather than a policy-oriented logic as most of them stress some dimensions of the former and less of the latter. Strengthening their position within the parliament and in the public eye falls into the vote-seeking category. The media coverage of P&C initiated consultations has indeed the potential to increase the notoriety of parliamentarians toward potential voters. The usage that revolves around making the parliament more transparent to citizens is also oriented toward vote-seeking. Indeed, by opening up the legislative work to everyday citizens, the legislators position themselves toward the electorate as champions of transparency. However, here the objective is not to get citizens involved but to make them, as represented (and voters), aware of the work of their representatives. Last, the promotion of participatory democracy could also be categorized as a usage tending toward a vote-seeking logic. Being involved in participatory initiatives is considered by

these parliamentarians as a solution to fix a dysfunctional French democracy. This argument also frames them as responsive politicians who hear and listen to social protests, notably highlighting the shortcomings of the French political system. This negative perceptions about the French representative system has also been observed among parliamentarians for decades (Cayrol et al. 1971), while they feel 'that their National Assembly work has little, if any, impact on policy-making and oversight' (Costa et al. 2012, 298). Ultimately, French legislators' promotion of participatory democracy increases their electoral appeal, by putting forward "innovative solutions" to tackle these old representation issues.

Other parliamentarians' usages of P&C are policy-oriented. These are less frequent among the legislators surveyed in this research. The first one is that of securing policy support. Legislators use P&C as a forecasting to anticipate citizens' and stakeholders' reactions and support to a policy proposal. The explicit intention here is to increase the odds of success of their policy proposals. Collecting citizens' experiences is another policy-oriented legislators' usage. By doing so, they are oriented toward policy efficiency by diversifying their sources of information. P&C becomes thereby an add-on to the traditional consultations and discussions with stakeholders. Finally, another policy-oriented usage of online participation is collaborative policy-design. There, citizens are considered as full-fledged actors of a collaborative process of policy-design as opposed to be only consulted. This usage is the least mentioned by the parliamentarians we interviewed. Overall, as regards to its usage by the French legislators under scrutiny, *Parlement & Citoyens* falls short of fully fulfilling its promise to change policymaking through the inclusion of citizens' and stakeholders' inputs, as the platform usages tend to be oriented toward vote-seeking rather than toward policy objectives.

Second, when interviewed parliamentarians' usages of P&C are categorized based on their normative preferences, the orientation toward a representative democracy logic clearly dominates to the expense of the orientation toward participatory democracy. Two usages only are underpinned with political views which challenge mainstream political representation and parliamentarians' prominent role therein, namely collaborative policy-design and promoting participatory democracy. More often, interviewed parliamentarians see P&C and online participation as tightly embedded within a classic understanding of political representation that puts them centre-stage and gives them a specific and exclusive role of decision-makers. Legislators we met do make use of the platform as a means to reinforce traditional 'representational' processes of policymaking, where parliamentarians are the ultimate decision-makers, and proceed at best to (transparent) arbitration between different preferences expressed by different stakeholders and citizens. P&C is used by parliamentarians under scrutiny to raise their visibility, get additional insights or gain more leverage on the policy process, either within their own parliamentary group or within the parliament more generally. In other cases, it is also used to strengthen the parliamentary institution. In that sense, the specific French context of a weak legislative branch clearly shapes the surveyed parliamentarians' usages of online participation as a means to gain centrality in a particular type of representative system which leaves them aside (Brouard et al. 2013b, a).

More generally, the analysis of P&C suggests that French legislators mainly use this e-participation platform in a way that is similar to their standard practices as parliamentarians, whether they conceive their role as trustees or delegates (Rehfeld 2005; Blomgren and Rozenberg 2015), which as a consequence reinforces their role embodiment. From a delegate perspective, e-participation platforms may be considered as digital substitutes of constituency offices which are the main points of contact between legislators and citizens (Kerrouche 2009). The platform provides delegates with a tool that is instrumental to define the constituency's interests to advocate for in the parliament. From a trustee perspective, participatory platforms may serve as an additional venue where parliamentarians can publicly act as informed arbitrators between divergent positions and build support to their positions. The platform allows legislators to face potential legitimacy deficits by acquiring a status of defender of participation and democracy by gathering citizens' support and collecting expertise, while building support to their own preferences and decisions (Jacob and Genard 2004).

Overall, in a context featuring a weak legislative institution (Elgie and Grossman 2016), P&C provides parliamentarians with an opportunity to strengthen their position, notoriety or reputation toward different audiences—their fellow legislators, the public, the media, or the government—and therefore gain power and significance within the political system at the national level. As such, P&C is just another tool in parliamentarians' toolbox, and neither a means of a transformative change in the role of legislators in policymaking in general nor a move toward the reconfiguration of their role specifically.

Conclusion

This article develops an original contribution to the study of digital policymaking and e-participation by focusing on a category of actors that has long been overlooked, parliamentarians. Legislators stand indeed in a central position as policymakers who may decide to integrate or not the inputs of digital participation into law-making. The developed approach has delved into parliamentarians' strategic considerations as well as normative orientations (Hendriks and Lees-Marshment 2019; Schiffino et al. 2019). Given the modest number of legislators under scrutiny, the objective of this article was not to draw general conclusions on why parliamentarians use participatory platforms but instead, build an analytical framework aiming at understanding further how central actors of representative democracy make use of these e-participation initiatives. Also, this research analyses one e-participation platform in a particular context. Nevertheless, this focus on the French main e-participation platform looms large as French citizens' disaffection toward their political elites magnifies the issues of elected politicians' usages of participatory tools. Further analyses may draw from the analytical framework developed in this article to study other e-participation platforms in different contexts and in a comparative perspective.

Based on a thematic analysis and a conceptual categorization of interview transcripts, the article shows that French legislators' usages may be

policy-oriented as parliamentarians take advantage of the online platform to collect information and experiences, secure support to a policy proposal they designed upstream or engage in actual collaborative policy-design. Other parliamentarians' usage of the platform tend toward a vote-seeking logic as legislators may use the platform to strengthen their political reputation, make the parliamentary work more transparent to voters or position themselves as champions of participative democracy toward the electorate. Second, French parliamentarians' usages of e-participation platforms can also be categorized based on normative underpinnings, tending toward either a representative democracy logic (strengthen political reputation, make the parliament more transparent, garner support to a policy or collect experiences and expertise) or a participatory democracy logic (engage in a collaborative policy-design or promote participative democracy as such).

More specifically, as regards to the MPs and Senators surveyed, our analysis concludes that the e-participation platform is mainly used to reinforce their role as citizens' representatives, rather than introduce a participatory logic into policymaking. Overall, through the analysis of some parliamentarian users, we contend that P&C is more likely used as an adjuvant to traditional political representation practices that takes place in the parliament rather than as an online participatory alternative to conventional legislative processes.

Finally, the case study sheds new light on legislators' usages and emphasizes that their usages display some variance: some of the MPs and Senators who initiated a consultation also value as such participatory democracy and are committed to co-produce policies. There is therefore no uniform usage of e-participation by elected politicians and some do in fact implement alternatives to established representation processes.

Appendix

Appendix 1: List of interviews

- Itw1, Parliamentary assistant of a Senator, Paris, January 2019.
- Itw2, Founder and president of *Parlement & Citoyens*, CEO of Cap Collectif, Paris, January 2019
- Itw3, Former parliamentary assistant of a Senator, Paris, January 2019
- Itw4, Citizen using P&C, member of the association 'Le GALAIS' (local currency organization), Skype interview, January 2019
- Itw5, Parliamentary assistant of a MP, Paris, January 2019
- Itw6, Former MP (1997–2017), Puteaux, January 2019
- Itw7, Citizen using P&C and other participatory platforms (amongst the most active users of different online participatory initiatives), Pontarlier, January 2019
- Itw8, Senator, Paris, January 2019
- Itw9, Parliamentary assistant of a MP, Paris, January 2019

- Itw10, Former MP (2001–2002; 2007–2017), Nantes, February 2019

Appendix 2: Thematic tree: the usages of an e-participation platform by French legislators

See Table

Thematic axes	Themes	Legislators
Securing support to the policy	Ensure non-rejection of the policy by policy stakeholders	S2
	Identify the sticking points surrounding a policy	S3, MP2
	Show political support of citizens toward the policy	S3, MP1
	Test proposals with citizens	MP1
	Check the validity of experts' opinions with the public	MP3
	Participate in a collaborative consultation (consultation about collaborative economy)	MP3
	Get an overview of public opinion	MP3
Strengthening one's political reputation	Strengthen the position of the legislator in the parliament (e.g. vis-à-vis his parliamentary group)	S1, S2, S3, MP3
	Increase the reputation of the legislator	S3
	Publicize the parliamentary work (parliamentary information mission)	MP2, MP3
	Strengthen the position of the legislator toward the government	MP3
Collecting experiences and expertise	Collect the positions of citizen associations	S1
	Collect the opinion of citizens	S1
	Benefit from the expertise and experiences of citizens / stakeholders	S2, MP2
	Consult the citizens to feed the parliamentary work	S3
	Consult 'non-organized' citizens	MP1
	Open the parliamentary consultation process to non-organized actors	MP2
	Collect proposals for the policy field at stake	MP2
	Benefit from the expertise and experiences of experts	MP2
	Allow the legislator to reconnect to the actors on the ground	MP2

Thematic axes	Themes	Legislators
Promoting participative democracy	Promote and use a participative democracy tool	S2, S3, MP1
	Promote and sensitize legislators about participatory democracy	MP1
	Offer a participation opportunity to citizens	S1
Making the parliament more transparent to citizens	Make the parliamentary consultation process more transparent	S3, MP3
Collaborative policy-design	Involve citizens in decision-making / parliamentary work	S1
	Involve policy stakeholders in decision-making	S2

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