# TOWARDS A CONCEPTUALISATION OF 'ALTERNATIVE' POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

## Yerkebulan Sairambay

© Yerkebulan Sairambay
PhD in Sociology, Visiting Research Fellow
Scholar at Risk, Centre for Oriental Studies, University of Tartu (Estonia)
E-mail: yerkebulan.sairambay@ut.ee
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2836-4765

*Abstract*. This paper conceptualises 'alternative' political participation. The lack of definition for 'alternative' political participation overlooks various political actions that do not fit the conventional-unconventional distinction. The present study offers a definition of 'alternative' political participation and the challenges facing civil societies in the digital era. The definition is based on Sairambay's (2020) reconceptualisation of political participation, taking into account the role of civic engagement. Various examples, arguments, and sources for 'alternative' political participation are discussed. Responding to Marcin Kaim's call, this paper further elaborates the topic of 'alternative' political participation.

*Keywords*: 'alternative' political participation, political participation, civic engagement.

## Introduction

Political participation is a central core of citizenship and democracy (Dalton 2008; McCaffrie and Akram 2014). It can be defined as "any action by citizens that is intended to influence the outcomes of political institutions or their structures, and is fostered by civic engagement"(Sairambay 2020a: 124). Traditionally, scholars tend to divide political participation into 'conventional'/'formal' versus

'unconventional'/'informal' forms of political actions (e.g., Verba and Nie 1972; Barnes and Kaase 1979; Kaase 1999; Van Deth 2001; Linssen et al. 2011; Lamprianou 2013; Riley et al. 2013; Akram et al. 2014). While the former involves actions such as voting, campaigning, and contacting government officials, the latter includes actions such as protests, boycotts, and riots. With such a dualistic understanding, observing and conceptualising political participation becomes difficult (Kaim 2021: 64). Iasonas Lamprianou also criticises the dualistic (formal and informal) categorisation of political participation as "outdated" and requiring to be "radically redefined" due to the emerging new forms of political participation, because signing petitions or participating in demonstrations "have increasingly become acceptable — and definitely much more widespread across the political spectrum" (Lamprianou 2013: 27). Apart from dualistic distinguishing political participation (conventional vs. unconventional), there has not been any clear demarcation of 'alternative' political actions.

The conceptual and theoretical framework of this study is based on Luhmann's (1997) system theory, Kaim's (2021) notion of alternative political participation, and Sairambay's (2022) reconceptualisation of political participation. To understand observed reality, dualistic differentiations such as government-opposition, institutionalised-non-institutionalised, and public-private are utilised (Luhmann 1990; 2002). For instance, Luhmann (1990; 1997) conceived of the government-opposition distinction as typical of democratic political systems in attempts to differentiate their environments. Drawing on Luhmann (1997), Kaim argues that "the unconventional represents features opposite to those dedicated to the conventional" (2021: 52). According to this logic, "the unconventional is always defined as the opposite of conventional" (Kaim 2021: 59).

Alternative political participation is thus "neither a substitute for conventional [political] participation nor a synonym for unconventional [political] participation, but rather an alternative to the division upon conventional and unconventional [...] It is everything in between the two opposites that constitute the conventional–unconventional distinction" (Kaim 2021: 52).

Luhmann (2002) argues that it is necessary to acknowledge social reality as constructed and at the same time understand how such construction reduces understanding of complex reality. Such approach of critical analysis is important for challenging harmful social norms and identifying social inequalities (see Paxton 2008; Strolovitch and Townsend-Bell 2013; McNay 2014; Kantola and Lombardo 2017). Kaim argues that "only through understanding how reality is constructed does it become possible to counter the adverse effects of such

construction" (2021: 65). Scholars (e.g., Paxton 2008; Strolovitch and Townsend-Bell 2013; Rowe 2015; Kantola and Lombardo 2017) also argue that social inequality and unequal representation may result from the exclusionary and reductionist nature of the dualistic distinction. According to Luhmann (2022), dualistic distinctions allow us to comprehend complex reality, even if they are exclusive. Here, Kaim claims that the paradox is that "we want to make sense of reality but in consequence reduce our perspective, which does not allow us to understand the whole picture" (2021: 65). It is therefore important to highlight the shortcomings of dualistic distinctions that do not encompass forms of political participation other than traditional and non-traditional ones.

Based on Niklas Luhmann's (1997) system theory, it can be argued that the apprehension of political participation in relation to dualism is reductive because "it overlooks those acts of participation that do not fit the conventional-unconventional distinction" (Kaim 2021: 50). The following activities exemplify the issue: connective action (Bennett and Segerberg 2012), lifestyle politics (Portwood-Stacer 2013), the Indignados movement (Eklundh 2014), participatory theatre (Chou et al. 2015), and information activism (Halupka 2016). Although some scholars (e.g., Norris 2002; Ekman and Amnå 2012; Van Deth 2014) have proposed new ways to categorise political participation, "they tend to politicize specific modes of participation while excluding others" (Kaim 2021: 54). Responding to Marcin Kaim's call (2021: 66), my paper further elaborates the topic of 'alternative' political participation.

Some scholars such as Marsh (1990), Bourne (2010), and Rilley et al. (2010) characterise barricading a community as 'elite-challenging' political participation, shooting at police officers as 'unorthodox' political participation, and electronic dance music culture as an 'alternative' political participation (Lamprianou 2013: 25–27). The existing literature suggests the "proliferation of new developments and alternative forms of political participation" (Chou et al. 2015: 607). The importance of 'alternative' political participation has already been emphasised (Bang 2009; 2011). It might well be challenging for scholars to measure 'alternative' political participation without a clear concept that "facilitate[s] systematic measurements of new forms of political participation in the broader repertoires of citizens" (Sairambay 2020b: 219). It is important to study 'alternative' political participation not only to address such measurement issues but also to improve our ability to reason and make inferences in the research field. We should pay equal attention to these new forms of political participation, as we do to formal and informal ones, because political regimes, resources, and the experiences of ordinary people vary greatly across time and space.

## Various Examples of 'Alternative' Political Participation

The earlier work on unconventional political participation can be traced to *Political Action: Mass Participation in Five Western Democracies* by Barnes and Kaase (1979), which has launched a wider research into 'alternative' forms of political participation. In addition to new social movements, Kaase (1999) argues that since the 1960s there has been a rise in 'non-traditional' forms of political participation.

Representative democracies around the world consider 'alternative' political participation as an additional component to its existing models (Kovalev et al. 2021: 214). "There are special models of new [alternative] political participation in Brazil, Germany, Switzerland, and Uruguay" (Kovalev et al. 2021: 204). Similarly, various political actions beyond voting are occurring in South Korea, which are "evidenced by the candlelight vigils of 2008 and the ones from 2016 to 2017, the latter of which led to the unprecedented impeachment of Park Geun-hye" (Kim et al. 2020: 1). Lam argues that the study of political participation in Hong Kong must also take into account alternative and local expressions (Lam 2003: 491). Ordinary citizens' communication of preferences with politicians can be emphasised by other forms of political participation and learnt more "through alternative participation than through voting" (Mathisen and Peters 2023: 199). Political participation in a non-voting or alternative activity by young people "can be a valuable source of political education, politically relevant knowledge, awareness, understanding and skills" (Roker et al. 1999).

The classical 'civic culture' approach of Almond and Verba (1963) has been updated somewhat by the addition of *contestation*, which "represents challenges to the political order" and "is particularly important in less open and more autocratic societies" (Sairambay 2021: 116–117). In autocracies, citizens might be less inclined to challenge governments through formal political participation compared to people in democratic societies (Junisbai and Junisbai 2019: 40). However, 'alternative' political participation, such as self-actualisation through popular music (Isaacs 2019; Insebayeva 2019) and hashtag activism on social media (Kosnazarov 2019: 264; Sairambay 2022b), is growing in such countries. The Russian war in Ukraine, for instance, "has contributed to the emergence of more alternative (and perhaps new) ways of political participation through new media that avoid and defy state punishment" (Sairambay 2023: 45).

'Alternative' political participation such as *monstration* — a youth march with elements of carnival — is becoming more popular among young people (Sairambay 2022c: 60). Monstration has been organised

in Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Moldova, Thailand, and Ukraine (Janusz 2019) as well as in Belarus and Bulgaria. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, only within Russia in 2019, *monstrations* were organised in 30 cities and towns (Pavlova 2019), and after that they have been organised online, including in Kazakhstan (vedomosti. ru; Sairambay 2022b: 167). A 25 years-old librarian from Barnaul (Russian town), Milana, argues that *monstration* "is not just an artistic and entertainment action as pro-state media warn, on the contrary, a monstration is used as an option to reach out the authorities and the Russian people with current issues Russia faces today" (Sairambay 2023: 104).

Apart from *monstration*, various 'alternative' political actions such as circulating political songs, jokes, humour, painting graffiti, using flying paper airplanes during political events, and performing oral folk songs on musical instruments are "very important in youth political participation and new-media tactics especially in high-risk political climates" (Sairambay 2023: 104). Such 'alternative' ways of political participation, which challenge political order, further extend Scott's (1987; 1990) 'hidden transcripts' and Lee's (2018) 'hidden tactics'. In his seminal book entitled *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, James C. Scott (1990) identified 'hidden transcripts' as forms of resistance and dissent that remain safe outside the purview of those in power and might, however, come to the surface during conflicts. Similarly, Lee argues that young social-media users rely heavily on 'hidden tactics' in navigating contentious politics and expressing dissent, and finds that such tactics are "for the most part, *by design*, non-violent, non-disruptive, and non-conventional" (Lee 2018: 4110). Hidden transcripts and tactics have long existed, for example, in American slave society (www.diggitmagazine.com), "family histories told only to kin" (Rotenstein 2019), and the peasantry (Atkins 2021).


## Various Arguments for 'Alternative' Political Participation

Despite a decline in traditional political participation, there has been an increase of 'alternative' political actions that work outside conventional arenas (e.g., Occupy, Avaaz, and MoveOn) (McCaffrie and Akram 2014: 47). "The ways in which citizens express themselves in the political realm have changed dramatically" (Marien et al. 2010: 187). Norris argues that "like a swollen river flowing through different tributaries, democratic engagement may have adapted and evolved in accordance with the new structure of opportunities, rather than simply

atrophying" (Norris 2002: 216). Some scholars such as Harris (2001) and Gill (2007) have argued that a relative decline in traditional political activities has been matched by a rise in 'alternative' political participation, such as being a member of the grrlzine/gURL scene movement. This movement, for example, is about "creating one's own spaces in which to live out alternative values, shifting political participation to the 'everyday' individual or informal group level" (Riley et al. 2010: 347). The extent of political participation is less not only because of citizens' disengagement but also because of governments, which "must learn to utilize and involve citizens and accept that they mobilize in varied ways" (McCaffrie and Akram 2014: 53). This point also shows a growing interest in conceptualising 'alternative' political participation.

'Alternative' political participation, such as buycotting, monstrations, squatting, hacking, pinging, and X-led mobilisations, exemplifies that "rather than disengagement, the repertoire of political action is broadening" (Dalton 2008: 93). According to many scholars (e.g., Flinders and Wood 2018: 3), the political participation of citizens, especially young people, is changing from traditional forms to non-traditional and 'alternative' ones. For example, "[y]oung Europeans have become increasingly alienated from parties and politicians, but are active in 'politics' in a broader sense" (Sloam 2013: 850). In other words, this shift might not show apathy but 'alternative' choices in citizens' political repertoire. Dalton argues that citizens have moved from conventional 'duty' based participation to unconventional and 'alternative' 'norms of engaged citizenship' (Dalton 2008: 88).

We also need to distinguish between political participation and civic engagement because some actions might not be political participation, but rather a form of social engagement with no intention to influence the outcomes of political institutions or their structures (see Sairambay 2020b: 220). For example, for some scholars (e.g., McRobbie 1994; Malbon 1999; Pini 2001; Wilson 2006) electronic dance music culture (clubbing, raving, partying) can be seen as 'alternative' forms of social engagement. This overlap between political and social actions signals not only the need for a proper conceptualising of political participation (Norris 2002), but also for a clear definition of 'alternative' political participation.

Using electronic dance music culture, Riley et al. suggest that one useful concept for understanding 'alternative' political participation might be 'everyday politics', which "involves a personalizing of politics and an 'aloof' stance regarding official institutions" (2010: 345). The authors of this proposition claim that personal lives and youth/musical subcultures (e.g., 'the 'identity politics' of feminism; gay/lesbian liberation and black power; and aspects of musical movements such as

soul, punk, reggae and hip hop') have earlier been the basis for 'alternative' political participation (Riley et al. 2010: 346).

In recent decades, the literature on political participation has recognised the diversification of participation repertoires (Karpf 2010; Vromen and Coleman 2011; Sairambay 2020a). New media, such as information and communications technologies and social media, are cited to cause the most significant changes in political participatory actions (please see Vegh 2003; Bang 2009; Van Laer and Van Aelst 2010; Bennett and Segerberg 2012, Sairambay 2022a), deepening globalisation and shifting centres of political power (Della Porta and Tarrow 2005; Oates 2006; Barnes et al. 2007). New media could provide citizens not only with alternative information, but also with alternative ways of connecting, creating and distributing, selecting and popularising sources as well as other numerous actions such as 'liking', 'disliking', and/or 'commenting'. Such alternativeness of using new media positively affect new-media-led political participation (Sairambay 2023: 137).

It is important to conceptualise 'alternative' political participation as the forms of people's political engagement are changing and/or are complemented by new perspectives. ICTs, social media, and AI have brought new developments also in political participation. We can observe increasing cyber activism such as signing/proposing e-petitions and online interference during elections worldwide. Citizens play a significant role in such actions. People are equally able to create or be involved in various political activities online. In times of crisis, under governments' restrictions and surveillance as well as censorship, people tend to find new possibilities which can be described as 'Nu, Pogodi!' — the title of a cartoon from the Soviet time —, in which the wolf (the government) never catches the hare (politically active people). One good example could be a virtual private network (VPN), which allows people to use social media and the Internet in certain restricted zones.

In the realm of 'alternative' political participation, some "private institutions, such as university administrations and businesses, are also targeted for political actions because they can pose challenges to existing rules, norms and practices" (Lam 2003: 491). In fact, citizens might take advantage of any opportunity to reach political institutions or their structures, and this can sometimes be done through private institutions and regarded as political participation. Depending on situation, gatekeepers and influencers might be both private or public political intuitions or their structures, and political issues sometimes do require the interference of private institutions. Political actions take place in various private and public institutions and simultaneously

target various social, economic, and political actors (Micheletti 2003; Forno and Graziano 2014). Thus, our concept of 'alternative' political participation must take this growing complexity into account (Norris 2002; Fox 2014), because non-governmental organisations, charitable organisations, private businesses (e.g., oil and gas companies) along with central and local public institutions can be the targets of citizens' political actions.

Capturing the contingent nature of political participation, Norris argues that "rather than eroding, political activism has been reinvented in recent decades by a diversification of the *agencies* (the collective organisations structuring political activity), the *repertoires* (the actions commonly used for political expression) and the *targets* (the political actors that participants seek to influence)" (Norris 2002: 215–216). If new *agencies* here include other interest groups (e.g., 38 Degrees, MoveOn) apart from parties and new *repertoires* include 'alternative' political participation, the new *targets* of participation incorporate, for instance, "multi-national corporations like Shell or Microsoft, global governing bodies like the World Bank, or non-governmental organisations like Oxfam" (Flinders and Wood 2018: 2).

The importance of political participation is usefully captured by Van Deth, who argues that "actual conclusions about important changes in democratic societies depend on the participation concept used" (Van Deth 2014: 350). He suggests that "actual conclusions about important changes in democratic societies depend on the participation concept used" (Van Deth 2014: 350). Thus, "what is 'included' and 'excluded' from a definition of political participation (that is, how it is operationalised) is critical for understanding the implications we draw from empirical analysis of participation dynamics" (Flinders and Wood 2018: 3).


## Towards a Conceptualisation of 'Alternative' Political Participation

Considering the lack of conceptualising for 'alternative' political participation and recent reconceptualising of political participation by Sairambay (2020), the following definition of 'alternative' political participation is developed in this article:

> 'Alternative' political participation is any action by citizens that does not fit into the conventional-unconventional dualism and is aimed at influencing the outcomes of private or public political institutions or their structures, and is encouraged by civic engagement.

This definition is based on Sairambay's (2020) work. Sairambay's (2020) reconceptualisation of political participation has a number of advantages and can also be very useful for conceptualising 'alternative' political participation.

First, when one classifies political participation, it is necessary to consider whether the action fits within the distinction between conventional and unconventional political actions. If the action does not fit into this dualism, then such political participation should be considered as 'alternative' political participation. This is particularly noticeable in high-risk political environments where citizens attempt to use alternative channels, groups, platforms and activities to engage in politics. All this means that before we call any action 'alternative' political participation, we need to first check and ensure that it is political participation, and then we can distinguish whether the action is conventional, unconventional, or 'alternative' political action. This is done to avoid overlapping of political actions with social/civic actions, which may represent a wide range of citizen actions. Alternative action does not always mean social action. Political participation can also be alternative; and alternative actions usually mean new, innovative, and 'not-seen-before' actions, which might challenge political order, elites, and outcomes.

Second, the targets of 'alternative' political participation can be both private and public political institutions. In most cases, public political institutions and their structures are the targets of conventional and unconventional political participation. Apart from public institutions, political actions directed at private institutions might well represent 'alternative' political participation with(out) 'hidden' intentions to influence the political institutions or their structures.

Finally, the distinction between political participation and civic engagement is vital because the two concepts may overlap due to the variety of citizen activities in the digital age. The presence of civic engagement as a stimulating part of the definition gives us an understanding that civic engagement is often a precursor to political participation, including to alternative one. Here, I should also mention that the recognition of 'alternative' political participation is not solely dependent on the actions of those engaging in them, but also on how such actions are perceived and attributed by various observers. Drawing on Luhmann's (1997; 2002) importance of observation within social systems, it is crucial to acknowledge that meaning is constructed not only through action but through its interpretation by others. In this sense, 'alternative' political participation is shaped through processes of attribution by multiple actors. I argue that these may include the general public, the state, the media, academic observers, and political

opposition, all of whom may ascribe different meanings, intentions, and/or levels of legitimacy to such participation. What one such actor interprets as a meaningful 'alternative' political participation may be dismissed by another as disruptive and/or illegitimate. Here, I should note that attribution is not a neutral or automatic process but is contingent upon the position, interests, and normative frameworks of the observers. For instance, the media can amplify or diminish the perceived legitimacy of an 'alternative' action depending on how it is framed, whilst state responses may reflect strategic interests in the long-term perspective rather than an objective assessment of democratic participation. It highlights the relational and communicative dimension of political participation, whereby visibility, recognition, and the framing of actions play a central role in their political importance. Therefore, understanding 'alternative' political participation requires us to consider not just what is done, but how it is observed, interpreted, and acknowledged across different segments of society.

The following examples illustrate what 'alternative' political participation means in this article:

– If one paints graffiti with a political message or spreads political jokes, humour, or songs, then such actions should be considered 'alternative' political participation, since they do not correspond to either conventional or unconventional political participation, but the intention is still to influence the outcomes of political institutions or their structures.

– If one hashtags, comments, or shares a political post with the intention of influencing the outcomes of political institutions or their structures, then such actions should be regarded as 'alternative' political participation and without such intention they should be considered civic engagement.

– If a meme or humorous song become widely circulated and interpreted as a critique of political authorities, they could be retrospectively classified as 'alternative' political participation based on how others attribute meaning to them.

– If clubbers at a music event are perceived by authorities or media as expressing political dissent (e.g., dancing and gathering against restrictions or social norms), then such actions could be considered 'alternative' political participation because of these external attributions.

– If one engages in clubbing or partying through electronic dance music without any intention of influencing political institutions or their structures, then such activities should not be considered either political participation or 'alternative' political participation.

## Examples of the Developed Concept
## of 'Alternative' Political Participation

In what follows, I give examples of the developed concept on various real political actions of citizens. Distributing songs with political content to influence the outcomes of private or public political institutions or their structures can be a good example of 'alternative' political participation. Political songs such as the Italian protest folk song 'Bella ciao' (*Goodbye beautiful*) and its various versions, the Kazakh song 'Jyie' (*System*) by Marhaba Sabi, and the Soviet song 'Hochu Peremen!' (*I want changes!*) by Viktor Tsoi are used by ordinary citizens not only for singing and listening, but also for dissemination on social media: sometimes intentionally in order to somehow influence some political results. I argue that scholars can measure such intention by asking whether citizens intentionally circulated songs or not. Otherwise, these types of actions might also constitute purely civic engagement on the Internet.

In the same vein, new media such as social media and digital tools offer endless opportunities for political dissent. It is difficult for scholars to label various online activities as conventional or unconventional political activities because they can be disguised as broad online citizen activities without clear political content or direction. Yet, sometimes only deeper analysis can reveal the real intentions and consequences of such actions. While some users write comments, 'like' and share posts to support or save them, others might do so to influence their peers or followers by adding their own voices.

Wearing Harris or Trump T-shirts or badges that convey a political idea or statement can signify both political participation and civic engagement. I argue that we, as scholars, need to work on mechanisms that clearly differentiate the actions of citizens to avoid conflicting outcomes in the research field. Those who wear T-shirts, badges, or similar items without any direct intention or reason should not qualify for political participation: we all know that some people can simply wear such things without political stance or intention. But when people do so with a clear political stance and intention, then we can consider such actions as 'alternative' political participation. Likewise, considering purchasing fair-trade products as an 'alternative' political participation should be approached with caution. In practice, many people do not pay attention to whether the products they purchase are fair-trade or not, although some people deliberately check and purchase such products. As a result, only those who intentionally purchase fair-trade products for political reasons can be considered to be participating in politics.

Veganism and vegetarianism as an environmental stance can be both a creative form of political participation and simply citizens' practice of living. It is therefore important that citizens' actions meet all three parts of the presented definition of 'alternative' political participation. The fact that veganism and vegetarianism do not fit into the conventional-unconventional dualism is not enough to take it into account as 'alternative' political participation; the second part of the definition, which requires actions be aimed at influencing the outcomes of private or public political institutions or their structures, is also important. For instance, the activities of individual shoppers and organisers involved in the French alternative food movement and American farmers' markets can be seen as 'alternative' political participation because they actively promote certain lifestyle choices (Brown and Miller 2008; Dubuisson-Quellier 2015).

Table 1 below shows some examples of conventional, unconventional, and 'alternative' political actions by citizens.

Table 1. Examples of political activities

| Actions | Conventional | Unconventional | 'Alternative' |
|---|---|---|---|
| Voting | + + + | | |
| Contacting public officials | + + + | | |
| Campaigning | + + + | | |
| Protesting | | + + + | |
| Boycotting | | + + + | |
| Singing (e)petitions | + + | + + | |
| Circulating political songs, jokes, humour | | | + + + |
| Painting graffiti on political topics | | | + + + |

As can be seen from the table above, voting in an election or party campaigning are formal types of political participation, while protesting and boycotting refer to informal political activities. Both forms are very important because citizens' political participation is the 'heart' of democracy. The widespread practice and long-lasting history of such actions firmly emphasise the importance of them also in distinguishing as conventional and unconventional political participation. Here, I argue that 'alternative' political participation should also gain equal importance because of new forms of political participation expressed by ordinary people in different terms.

Actions such as protesting give voice to certain issues, emphasising the importance of unconventional forms of political participation: the governments act to listen to or suppress protestors; NGOs and opposition also react; citizens start discussing, supporting or rejecting the protests. I argue that 'alternative' political participation should also receive such attention from different parties because unconventional political participation can simply be dangerous in some political regimes. 'Alternative' forms of political participation can sometimes be the only way to deal with politics because (a) conventional forms do not work (well); (b) unconventional ones lead to prison or other types of punishment; and/or (c) people have some reasons to indirectly affect politics due to various threats (e.g., employment).

## Conclusions

In conclusion, the paper has set out to conceptualise 'alternative' political participation. The definition developed in this paper has a number of advantages. It helps us study different political actions of citizens, which are often called 'alternative' political participation. It is clear from the definition that in order to distinguish 'alternative' political participation, one needs to check it against the formal and informal political actions. The concept also emphasises the civic engagement of citizens to avoid overlap with social actions. It is believed that the presented definition will allow scholars to pay due attention to various political actions that do not fall under the conventional-unconventional distinction. Moreover, the developed definition encompasses both private and public institutions or their structures as targets of political actions.

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