“It would be difficult to imagine how a development as world-changing as the emergence of the Internet could have taken place without having some impact upon the ways in which politics is expressed, conducted, depicted and reflected upon.” (Coleman and Freelon 2015)

Over the past few decades our world has lived through a revolution – created by the birth of the world wide web and the fast development of information and communication technology (ICT). Since their early inception, digital tools and widespread access to the internet have been elicited research on what is currently known as “digital politics” (Hague and Loader 1999; Hacker and van Dijk, J. 2000). About a decade ago scholars already pointed out that digital politics had entered the social science mainstream (Chadwick and Howard 2009). Consequently it comes as no surprise that we are now witnessing a fast growing literature at the crossroads among communication studies, political science and computer science paralleling fast evolving technology from Web 0.1 to Web 0.2 and beyond. Such a move has been facilitated by the availability of unprecedented arrays of political data generated in real time through the use of social media and social networking sites (SNSs) – digital Big Data - and the development of new techniques to analyze them (Alvarez 2016).

A number of major areas of research in the field of digital politics can be detected (Coleman and Freelon 2015). The first one deals with very broad theoretical issues revolving around the following question: are the Internet and social media just affecting politics or are they reshaping politics and, if so, how? As modern life is increasingly migrating to online social platforms, it is not surprising that this feature attracted both the positive and the normative sides of the debate. This is especially true for democratic theorists before and after the "deliberative turn" that occurred around the 1990s (Dryzek 2002). Moreover, as technology can be exploited by both democratic and authoritarian governments, its relevance is self-evident. Research examines key issues of Internet regulation, social media surveillance, privacy, potential of manipulation, and also growth of fragmentation and polarization among like-minded groups leading to extremism (Sunstein 2017). Related to this, a major focus of research deals with journalism and the Internet, examining major changes in the cycle of production-consumption of political news, the erosion of journalistic standards and the decline of expertise (see for instance Nichols 2017; special issue of Public Choice 2008). On the other hand, the role of social media in popular uprisings against Arab autocrats in 2011-12 created the notion of 'liberation technology', namely that ICT facilitates organization of anti-elites movements. Less optimistic observers contend that ICT is a tool of repression in the hands of autocrats, imposing further restrictions on political and social liberties (Rod and Weidmann 2015). Such a debate prompted research about the way digital tools affect political protest, both revisiting the conventional logic of collective action (Lance and Segerberg 2013) and
highlighting Internet-fueled social movements’ power and weaknesses (Margetts 2015; Tufektci 2017).

The second strand of research has a predominant descriptive/explanatory aim, although it is not easy to separate contributions motivated by truly scientific purposes from those of "committed" scholars advocating the use of digital tools as a panacea for all the ills of contemporary democracy. Hindman was among the first to suggest a close empirical inspection of what he called the "myth of digital democracy" (Hindman 2009). Many others have been focusing on the roles played by digital tools and social media at various stages of the democratic process.

At the electoral stage, research focuses on issues of access and security of e-voting, nowadays widely used in many countries (Alvarez and Hall 2010); voting advice applications (VAAs), which help voters to decide which political parties or candidates to support based on their policy preferences (see the special issue of Electoral Studies 2014, n. 36); campaign uses of the Internet and SNSs and the way they affect voters’ attitudes and politicians’ strategies (the latest being a growing subfield on its own: see for instance Gainous and Wagner 2014). A number of political parties (the Swedish Pirate Party, the Italian 5Star Movement) have also been using open sourced platforms for candidate selection.

At the legislative stage, research focuses on the use of social media by parliamentarians for communicating to voters (Dai and Norton 2008) or the interaction among MPs and citizens through processes of electronic petition signing (Hough 2012) and crowdsourcing legislation (see the special issue of Theory and Practice of Legislation, 2017 n. 1). A number of political parties have also been using open sourced platforms to allow citizens to offer suggestions to their political agendas and vote online on the issues they must vote on in parliaments. How forms of online activism affect legislative behavior and outcomes is a further topic attracting research.

On the government supply side, digital politics refers to interactive administration or e-government and has to do with the use by government agencies of information technologies that have the ability to transform relations with citizens, businesses, and so on. Research has explored how technologies can serve a variety of different ends: better delivery of government services to citizens, improved interactions with business and industry, citizens’ empowerment through access to information, or more efficient government management both at the national and local levels (IRMA 2012).

A further area of research is related to both the electoral and legislative stages as it studies online political talk and includes computational methods to collect and analyze digital data. New frontiers for research about digital politics are related to techniques of crowd sourced text analysis, sentiment analysis and network analysis. The focus on computational research methods fostered an interaction among computer/information scientists and social scientists, opening new avenues of research within well established subfields such as estimation of policy positions of parties, candidates and voters in a policy space (Benoit, K., Conway, D., Lauderdale, B.E., Laver, M. and Mikhaylov, S. 2016; Ecker 2017) or in emerging ones such as legislative speechmaking (Back 2016).
In short, digital politics is a fast-growing research field examining both online political behavior and how online politics affects offline politics. New research questions have been raised and old ones have been revisited by using massive arrays of data or new techniques of data analysis not available before.

The current research project builds on the previous literature with the broad aim of highlighting the way social media affect the relations among voters and elected officials in a representative democracy. The focus will be on the legislative stage. A great deal of theoretically-based information has been recently provided by Ceron (2017) who studied the Italian case to shed light on how social media affect parties’ electoral strategies, parliamentary behavior and government policy. However, the way social media affect the “relationship between legislatures and citizens remains seriously under-researched” (Su Seo and Raunio 2017).

Plan of activities

The ideal candidate should have a PhD in political science or related disciplines (Economics, Sociology, Social Science Methods) and a strong training in quantitative methods for social research.

In the next 12 months the applicant should work in close contact with the supervisor in order to:

a) scrutinize the relevant literature on web and parliaments (first three months), including the methodological issues raised by the use of digital data such as problems of replicability;

b) select a number of cases studies to be analyzed through an in-depth investigation (three months);

c) as Italy will undertake national elections in early 2018, an empirical study of Italian MPs should take into account the newborn Parliament, possibly comparing it with the previous one (XVII Legislature). Consequently, the plan is to elaborate a methodologically and theoretically informed pilot study about Italian MPs’ use of digital tools (especially Social Networking Sites) and explore interaction on line with voters with the aim of understanding the relationships among characteristics of MPs’ online political behavior with their offline behavior (legislative speechmaking, roll call voting) (six months).

The proposed research should provide a preliminary study to be replicated on a larger scale to address relevant questions such as whether digital tools help strengthen or weaken democratic representation.
Bibliographic references

Nichols T. (2017)*The Death of Expertise*, Oxford UP.