BETWEEN ALGORITHMS AND REGULATIONS: THE REGULATED ALGORITHMIC PUBLIC SPHERE AS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR DIGITAL POLITICAL PARTICIPATION – THE CASE OF TÜRKİYE

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to develop a theoretical framework called the Regulated Algorithmic Public Sphere (RAPS) to explain digital political participation in the Turkish context. RAPS argues that digital political participation is primarily shaped by three key sub-components. The first and most central dimension is platform algorithms. The visibility, circulation, and intensity of interaction of political content on social media platforms are determined by algorithmic systems. This prevents the equal circulation of political discourses in the digital public sphere, producing a hierarchical visibility regime. The second dimension considered by RAPS is regulations. Internet regulations and laws, legal obligations towards social media platforms, and content control constitute the structural limits of digital political participation. The existing literature shows that such regulations create uncertainty and unpredictability rather than censorship. In the Turkish context, the existence of regulations affecting social media platforms and governing freedom of expression is one of the fundamental elements determining which political expressions are considered possible and legitimate in the digital public sphere. Within the RAPS theoretical framework, the third and critical dimension is the perceived risk to freedom of expression by citizens. Decisions regarding political participation depend not only on the existence of legal regulations but also on how individuals perceive these regulations. Citizens' perception of the risk of legal sanctions, the possibility of social exclusion, and concerns about digital surveillance and profiling encourage self-censorship, silencing, and indirect or symbolic forms of participation. Finally, within the RAPS framework, digital state interfaces are positioned as a secondary dimension that does not directly produce political participation but transforms the context of citizen-state interaction. e-Government and similar digital public services create a technical dimension in citizen-state interaction. This situation carries the risk of reducing political participation to governance and service utilization.
Keywords: Türkiye, Digital Political Participation, Algorithmic Governance, Regulation, Perceived Expression Risk

1. INTRODUCTION

With today's technological advancements, and especially the increased use of social media platforms after the pandemic, digitalization has reshaped the conditions under which political participation and public communication take place. These reshaping conditions have implications that need to be evaluated from different perspectives. Social media platforms, online campaigns, and digitally mediated forms of interaction are widely associated with the expansion of civic voice, lowered participation costs, and increased opportunities for political engagement (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Shirky, 2011). Within this optimistic framing, the advantages of social media platforms appear relatively straightforward and difficult to contest. Early scholarship on digital media often approached new communication technologies with cautious optimism. From this perspective, digital platforms were seen as potential correctives to the structural limitations of traditional mass media.

Castells (2009), for instance, conceptualized digital technologies as democratizing forces capable of revitalizing the public sphere by expanding access and lowering barriers to participation. In a similar vein, some strands of the literature suggested that digitally mediated participation could enhance civic awareness and foster more engaged forms of citizenship. At the same time, this optimism was never uncontested. Placek (2017) offers a more ambivalent assessment, warning that digital political participation may reinforce existing inequalities and intensify polarization through the formation of echo chambers. Yet his findings complicate purely pessimistic interpretations. This suggests that the democratic consequences of digital participation are not inherent to technology itself, but contingent upon the broader political, institutional, and communicative context. Drawing on evidence from Central and Eastern Europe, Placek argues that digital participation does not necessarily undermine democratic engagement. Under certain conditions, it can contribute to the emergence of critical citizens, individuals who are more attentive to democratic backsliding and more willing to defend democratic norms, thereby acting as informal constraints on authoritarian tendencies.

More recent scholarship, however, has become increasingly sceptical of the assumption that digital participation carries inherent democratic benefits. A growing body of empirical research suggests that the expansion of online participation does not automatically lead to greater democratic inclusion, higher deliberative quality, or meaningful political influence. Instead, digitally mediated participation frequently amplifies polarization, concentrates visibility among already powerful actors, and reproduces, or even deepens, existing social and political inequalities (Schradie, 2019; Törnberg, 2022). From this perspective, digital technologies do not simply empower citizens; they restructure participation in uneven and often exclusionary ways.

Taken together, these studies point to a central tension in contemporary debates on digital political participation. Digital platforms can, under specific circumstances, support democratic vigilance and critical engagement. Yet without careful attention to the conditions under which participation unfolds, the same technologies may just as easily exacerbate inequality and fragmentation. This ambivalence underscores the need for theoretical frameworks that move beyond binary assessments of digital media as either democratizing or corrosive and instead focus on the structural and contextual factors that shape how participation is enabled, constrained, and distributed.

To make sense of these debates, it is necessary to revisit the concept of the public sphere. According to classical theories, inclusivity and rational-critical debate are crucial for democracy to gain legitimacy. According to Habermas' approach, the public sphere functions as a communication space where citizens participate in rational discussions, form public opinion, and exert influence on political authority (Habermas, 1989). Although this model was developed within the context of print capitalism and face-to-face interaction, it has long been extended to analyse the transformations of public communication under mass media conditions (Habermas, 2006). With the advancement of technology, academic studies have attempted to adapt public sphere theory to digital environments. However, the digitalization of the public sphere has brought with it many different dynamics, unlike previous media-centric approaches. Algorithmic mediation, platform management, and regulatory oversight are fundamentally changing the mechanisms by which visibility, voice, and legitimacy are produced in contemporary public communication. Foundational work by Gillespie (2014) established that algorithms are not neutral intermediaries but political actors that curate public discourse by selecting what is deemed relevant. Building on this, van Dijck et al. (2018) argue that these mechanisms have institutionalized a specific platform logic that permeates all sectors of society, fundamentally altering how public values are negotiated.

More recent scholarship highlights the consequences of this transformation, for instance, Carlson (2017) demonstrates how digital dependencies compel journalists to fundamentally renegotiate their professional authority and legitimacy against algorithmic metrics. Petre (2021) also shows how algorithmic metrics compel media professionals to renegotiate their authority, often shifting the very criteria of what is considered legitimate public information. Furthermore, as Gorwa (2024) contends, this power dynamic has necessitated a new era of regulatory oversight, where governments are increasingly intervening to shape the rules of online content moderation and platform governance. Taken together, these studies indicate that algorithmic systems have become central arbiters of visibility, authority, and legitimacy within contemporary public communication.

Digital political participation has generated a theoretical debate in the academic literature. On the one hand, scholars stress how digital platforms have made it easier for people to take part in politics in new ways, such as through networked involvement, connective action, and personalised modes of engagement (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Chadwick, 2017). However, more and more empirical and theoretical studies show that digitally mediated public spheres are fragmented, polarised, and not everyone gets the same amount of attention and exposure (Sunstein, 2018; Bail, 2021). Rather than functioning as neutral arenas for deliberation, digital platforms operate through algorithmic systems that prioritize engagement intensity, emotional resonance, and commercial value. These systems structure political communication in ways that remain only partially transparent to users and largely beyond democratic control (Gillespie, 2014; Beer, 2017).

Digital political participation does not take place in an institutional vacuum. It is embedded in regulatory architectures that quietly but decisively shape what can be said, how it can be said, and by whom. Rather than functioning solely through explicit prohibitions, contemporary digital regulation operates across a layered terrain that includes internet laws, platform compliance regimes, and evolving content moderation practices. Together, these mechanisms delineate not only the formal boundaries of political expression but also its informal and socially perceived limits (Kaye, 2019; Helberger et al., 2018).

What characterizes this regulatory environment is not constant intervention, but persistent uncertainty. Governance increasingly relies on ambiguity, selective enforcement, and the outsourcing of responsibility to private platforms whose rules are opaque and unevenly applied. In such settings, political participation is shaped as much by anticipation as by prohibition. Individuals rarely respond only to explicit legal constraints; instead, they navigate a diffuse sense of vulnerability produced by unclear rules, shifting enforcement practices, and the visibility of past sanctions. This mode of regulation, often described as governance through uncertainty, reconfigures participation by transforming legal boundaries into subjective risk calculations (Hintz et al., 2019). The outcome is not necessarily silence imposed from above, but restraint generated from within, manifesting in self-censorship, withdrawal, or the preference for indirect and symbolic forms of political expression (Penney, 2016).

These transformations unsettle the normative foundations of public sphere theory. If political communication is continuously filtered by algorithmic systems, amplified according to opaque criteria, and conducted under conditions of regulatory indeterminacy, the classical conditions of rational-critical debate are fundamentally altered. Participation, under such circumstances, cannot be understood merely as access or voice. The more pressing issue becomes the durability and legitimacy of participation itself. Visibility is no longer guaranteed by expression alone, nor is legitimacy secured by formal inclusion. Instead, political engagement unfolds within a terrain where attention is unevenly distributed and expressive risks are unevenly borne.

This shift reframes a central question of democratic theory. The challenge today is not whether citizens are technically capable of participating in digital environments, but under what conditions their participation becomes recognizable, sustainable, and politically consequential (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Addressing this problem requires moving beyond isolated analyses of technology or regulation and toward an integrated perspective that accounts for how technological mediation, regulatory governance, and behavioural adaptation intersect.

Türkiye offers a particularly revealing context for examining these dynamics. High levels of social media penetration coexist with a strong structural dependence on a limited number of platforms and a dense, evolving regulatory framework governing digital communication (Akgül & Kırlıdoğ, 2015; Yesil, 2016). Political communication is intensely polarized, platform-based visibility plays a decisive role in agenda formation, and regulatory interventions shape both platform governance and everyday user practices. Existing research on digital participation in Türkiye highlights a paradoxical pattern: widespread engagement with platforms alongside cautious, indirect, and often symbolic modes of political expression (Erdogan, 2017; Hazar et al., 2023). Yet much of this literature approaches algorithms, regulation, or participation behaviour as separate analytical domains. What remains insufficiently theorized is how these dimensions interact to produce a form of participation that is conditional rather than uniform, stratified rather than equal.

This paper responds to this theoretical gap by proposing the Regulated Algorithmic Public Sphere (RAPS) as a conceptual framework for understanding digital political participation in Türkiye. Rather than advancing an empirical test, the study develops a theoretically grounded synthesis drawing on public sphere theory, research on algorithmic governance, and scholarship on digital regulation. RAPS conceptualizes participation as a conditional regime in which visibility, expression, and engagement are jointly shaped by platform algorithms, regulatory constraints, and individuals' perceptions of expressive risk. In this sense, the framework revisits Habermas's conception of the public sphere under conditions where communicative action is increasingly mediated by algorithms and disciplined by regulatory uncertainty.

The contribution of the paper is twofold. First, it offers an integrated theoretical account that moves beyond technologically deterministic narratives and narrowly institutional explanations of digital participation. Second, by situating the framework within the Turkish case, it illustrates how algorithmic power and regulatory salience converge in contexts marked by high platform dependency. Importantly, the aim is not to empirically validate the framework at this stage, but to establish an analytically robust foundation for future empirical research capable of examining how regulated algorithmic public spheres operate across different political and regulatory environments.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section revisits debate on digital political participation and public sphere theory, identifying their conceptual limitations. The subsequent section examines algorithms and regulation as structuring forces of political communication. The Regulated Algorithmic Public Sphere framework is then introduced in detail, followed by a discussion of its theoretical implications and directions for future research.

2. DIGITAL POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND PUBLIC SPHERE
2.1. Digital Political Participation: Expanding Access, Limited Transformation
Digital political participation has become a central theme in contemporary political communication research, largely driven by the rapid diffusion of social media platforms and digitally mediated forms of interaction. A substantial body of literature emphasizes the capacity of digital technologies to lower participation costs, expand access to political expression, and enable new forms of engagement that transcend traditional organizational structures.

From this perspective, digital platforms are often portrayed as facilitating more flexible, personalized, and decentralized modes of political participation.

One influential strand of this literature conceptualizes digital participation through the lens of connective action. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) argue that digital media enable individualized forms of political engagement that rely less on formal organizations and more on personalized content sharing across networks. Similarly, Chadwick's (2017) hybrid media system framework highlights how digital platforms interact with legacy media and political institutions, creating new opportunity structures for participation. Early contributions to this debate also stressed the mobilizing potential of social media, suggesting that digital networks could amplify civic voice and foster broader political involvement (Shirky, 2011).

While these perspectives offer valuable insights into how participation has expanded in technical and organizational terms, they tend to conceptualize participation primarily as activity which is measured through acts such as posting, sharing, commenting, or mobilizing. As a result, the broader conditions under which participation becomes visible, meaningful, and politically consequential often remain under-theorized. Increased participation does not necessarily imply increased influence, nor does it guarantee that participatory acts contribute to inclusive public debate. The emphasis on access and engagement metrics risks obscuring the power relations that shape whose voices are amplified and whose remain marginal.

Moreover, much of the digital participation literature adopts an implicitly individual-centered perspective, focusing on users' capacities, motivations, and networked behaviours. While this approach illuminates important aspects of participation, it frequently brackets out the structural forces that mediate participation at scale. Platform architectures, algorithmic curation, and regulatory constraints are often treated as background conditions rather than constitutive elements of participation itself. Consequently, digital political participation is frequently analysed without sufficient attention to how public communication is organized, filtered, and governed.

This limitation becomes particularly salient in highly platform-dependent environments, where participation is not only enabled by digital infrastructures but also conditioned by them. Participation may be widespread yet unevenly distributed in terms of visibility and impact. These tensions suggest that while digital technologies have undoubtedly expanded opportunities for political engagement, their transformative effects on the public sphere remain ambiguous and contingent.

2.2. The Public Sphere in the Digital Age: Normative Ideals and Empirical Tensions

To assess the democratic implications of digital political participation, it is necessary to situate these developments within broader theories of the public sphere. Classical public sphere theory, most notably articulated by Habermas, emphasizes the normative importance of inclusive participation and rational-critical debate as foundations of democratic legitimacy. In this model, the public sphere functions as a communicative space in which citizens deliberate, form public opinion, and exert influence over political decision-making (Habermas, 1989).

Habermas's original formulation emerged in the context of print capitalism and face-to-face deliberation, yet the concept has been repeatedly adapted to account for transformations in mass-mediated communication. In later work, Habermas (2006) acknowledged the growing role of media systems in shaping political communication, while maintaining the normative aspiration of deliberative publicity. However, the digitalization of communication introduces dynamics that differ qualitatively from earlier media transformations.

Empirical research increasingly demonstrates that digitally mediated public spheres are characterized by fragmentation, polarization, and significant inequalities in attention and visibility. Rather than fostering inclusive deliberation, digital environments often segment audiences into ideologically homogeneous clusters and amplify emotionally charged or sensational content (Sunstein, 2018). As Bail (2021) shows, exposure to opposing views in algorithmically curated environments can intensify polarization rather than mitigate it, challenging assumptions about the deliberative potential of online communication.

These developments generate a tension between the normative ideals of the public sphere and the empirical realities of digital communication. While participation may be formally open, the conditions under which voices are heard and recognized are increasingly uneven. Visibility is not simply a function of participation, but the outcome of complex mediation processes that prioritize certain actors, issues, and styles of expression. As a result, the public sphere risks becoming less inclusive and less deliberative, even as opportunities for participation proliferate. Importantly, much of the public sphere literature continues to approach digital platforms as communication channels rather than as active structuring forces. Algorithms, platform governance, and regulatory interventions are often treated as external influences rather than as integral components of public communication. This analytical separation limits the capacity of public sphere theory to fully account for the power dynamics that shape digital participation.

2.3. Fragmentation Without Integration: The Limits of Existing Approaches

Taken together, existing approaches to digital political participation and the public sphere reveal a pattern of analytical fragmentation. Studies of participation behaviour focus on individual engagement and network dynamics; research on algorithms examines visibility, curation, and platform power; regulatory scholarship analyses legal frameworks and governance mechanisms. Yet these strands of literature often operate in parallel rather than in dialogue.

Research on algorithmic mediation has convincingly demonstrated that algorithms are not neutral tools but political actors that structure public discourse by shaping what becomes visible and relevant (Gillespie, 2014). Platform-centered analyses further show how algorithmic logics have become institutionalized across social domains, embedding commercial and engagement-driven priorities into public communication (van Dijck et al., 2018). At the same time, regulatory scholarship highlights how governments increasingly intervene in platform governance, often through indirect mechanisms that delegate responsibility to private actors (Helberger et al., 2018; Gorwa, 2024).

Parallel to these developments, studies of digital regulation emphasize the role of uncertainty, selective enforcement, and perceived risk in shaping political expression (Hintz et al., 2019). These insights illuminate how participation is constrained not only by formal rules but also by individuals' anticipatory responses to potential sanctions. However, such behavioural dynamics are rarely integrated into broader theories of the public sphere or participation.

The result is a conceptual landscape in which participation, mediation, and regulation are examined in isolation, despite their deep interdependence in practice. Digital political participation is neither solely a matter of individual agency nor simply the outcome of technological affordances or legal constraints. Rather, it emerges from the interaction of platform algorithms, regulatory environments, and users' perceptions of expressive risk.

This analytical fragmentation points to the need for an integrated theoretical framework capable of capturing these interconnections. Understanding digital political participation requires moving beyond additive explanations and toward a conception of the public sphere as a structured and conditional space. It is precisely this gap that motivates the development of the Regulated Algorithmic Public Sphere (RAPS) framework, which is introduced in the following section.

3. THE REGULATED ALGORITHMIC PUBLIC SPHERE (RAPS)

The preceding discussion has demonstrated that existing approaches to digital political participation remain analytically fragmented. Participation-focused studies tend to privilege individual agency and engagement metrics, while research on algorithms and regulation often proceeds in isolation from participation theory. To address this gap, this section introduces the Regulated Algorithmic Public Sphere (RAPS) as an integrated theoretical framework for understanding digital political participation under conditions of platform-mediated communication and regulatory governance.

RAPS conceptualizes the public sphere not as an open and neutral arena of communication, but as a structured and conditional space in which participation is enabled, constrained, and differentiated through the interaction of technological, institutional, and perceptual forces. In contrast to accounts that treat algorithms or regulation as external influences on participation, RAPS positions them as constitutive elements of the public sphere itself. Political participation, from this perspective, is not merely an act of expression but a process shaped by the conditions under which expression becomes visible, legitimate, and sustainable.

3.1. Conceptual Foundations of RAPS

At its core, RAPS builds on the normative aspirations of public sphere theory while departing from its assumption of relatively transparent and stable conditions of communication. Classical accounts emphasize inclusivity, rational-critical debate, and the circulation of public opinion as foundations of democratic legitimacy. RAPS does not reject these ideals; rather, it examines how they are reconfigured under contemporary conditions characterized by algorithmic mediation and regulatory uncertainty.

The framework rests on three foundational premises. First, digital public communication is algorithmically mediated, meaning that visibility and reach are not direct outcomes of participation but are filtered through opaque and dynamic systems of curation. Second, participation unfolds within regulatory environments that define not only formal legal boundaries but also informal and anticipatory constraints. Third, individuals respond to these conditions through perceptions of expressive risk, which shape how, when, and whether they choose to participate politically.

Together, these premises shift the analytical focus from participation as access to participation as conditional engagement. RAPS thus conceptualizes the digital public sphere as a participation regime in which opportunities for expression exist, but their democratic consequences are unevenly distributed.

3.2. Core Dimensions of the Regulated Algorithmic Public Sphere
3.2.1. Platform Algorithms

The first and central dimension of RAPS is platform algorithms. Algorithms function as gatekeeping mechanisms that organize attention, prioritize content, and structure the circulation of political communication. Unlike traditional gatekeepers, algorithmic systems operate through continuous data-driven optimization processes that remain largely invisible to users. As a result, political participation does not automatically translate into public visibility.

Within the RAPS framework, algorithms are understood as constitutive political actors that shape the public sphere by defining the conditions under which speech gains prominence. Engagement-oriented metrics, emotional resonance, and commercial priorities become embedded in public communication, producing hierarchies of visibility that advantage certain actors, topics, and styles of expression. Participation, therefore, is not simply a matter of speaking, but of navigating algorithmic environments that selectively amplify some voices while marginalizing others.

This dimension highlights a central tension: while digital platforms expand opportunities for expression, algorithmic mediation simultaneously restructures participation by redistributing attention in uneven ways. RAPS treats this redistribution not as a technical by-product, but as a defining feature of contemporary public communication.

3.2.2. Regulatory Frameworks

The second core dimension of RAPS consists of regulatory frameworks governing digital communication. Regulation shapes the public sphere through internet laws, platform compliance obligations, and content moderation regimes. Importantly, regulation does not operate solely through explicit prohibitions or sanctions. Instead, it often functions through ambiguity, selective enforcement, and the delegation of governance responsibilities to private platforms.

Within RAPS, regulation is conceptualized as a structuring condition of participation rather than an external constraint. Regulatory environments define the boundaries of permissible expression while simultaneously generating uncertainty about enforcement. This uncertainty transforms regulation into a dynamic force that shapes participation indirectly by influencing expectations, interpretations, and anticipatory behaviour.

By integrating regulation into the public sphere itself, RAPS moves beyond models that treat legal frameworks as background variables. Instead, regulation becomes a constitutive element that interacts with algorithmic mediation to shape the conditions under which political communication unfolds.

3.2.3. Perceived Expressive Risk

The third core dimension of RAPS is perceived expressive risk. This dimension captures how individuals interpret and respond to the combined effects of algorithmic visibility and regulatory uncertainty. Participation decisions are shaped not only by formal rules but also by subjective assessments of potential legal, social, and platform-related consequences.

Perceived expressive risk operates as a behavioural mechanism through which structural conditions are translated into participation outcomes. When individuals anticipate negative consequences such as legal sanction, social backlash, or algorithmic downranking, they may engage in self-censorship, withdraw from explicit political expression, or adopt indirect and symbolic forms of participation. These responses do not eliminate participation but reconfigure it in less visible and less confrontational ways.

RAPS treats perceived expressive risk as a mediating dimension that links institutional structures to individual behaviour. In doing so, the framework avoids reducing participation to either rational choice or technological determinism. Instead, it highlights how participation is shaped through the interaction of structure and perception.

3.3. A Secondary Dimension: Digital State Interfaces

In addition to its core dimensions, RAPS incorporates digital state interfaces as a secondary and contextual element. Digital government platforms, such as e-government services, reshape citizen–state interactions by increasing efficiency, accessibility, and administrative responsiveness. However, these interfaces primarily facilitate transactional engagement rather than deliberative participation.

Within RAPS, digital state interfaces are not treated as direct drivers of political participation. Instead, they function as background infrastructures that influence how citizenship is practiced in digital environments.

By channelling engagement toward service provision and administrative interaction, digital state platforms may subtly redefine participation in technocratic terms, potentially substituting political contestation with governance-oriented engagement.

This secondary dimension underscores the broader institutional context in which algorithmic and regulatory dynamics operate, without overextending the explanatory scope of the framework.

3.4. RAPS and the Turkish Context

While RAPS is proposed as a general theoretical framework, its analytical relevance becomes particularly visible in the Turkish context. Türkiye combines several structural conditions that intensify the dynamics RAPS seeks to theorize: high levels of social media penetration, strong platform dependency for political communication, pronounced political polarization, and a dense and evolving regulatory environment governing digital expression. Together, these factors create a setting in which digital political participation is both widespread and highly conditional.

Recent studies consistently show that social media platforms have become central arenas for political communication in Türkiye, particularly in contexts where trust in traditional media is low and alternative channels of expression are constrained (Yesil, 2016; Akser & Baybars, 2023). Platform dependency is therefore not merely a matter of convenience, but a structural feature of political communication. Under such conditions, algorithmic visibility regimes play a decisive role in shaping which political messages circulate, gain traction, or disappear from public attention. Participation is thus inseparable from platform logics that prioritize engagement, virality, and affective intensity, often amplifying polarizing content while marginalizing nuanced or deliberative forms of expression (Tufekci, 2018; Sunstein, 2018).

At the same time, digital political participation in Türkiye unfolds within a regulatory environment characterized by frequent legal interventions, platform obligations, and evolving content moderation practices. Rather than relying solely on systematic censorship, regulation often operates through uncertainty, selective enforcement, and retrospective sanctioning. This produces a climate in which the boundaries of permissible expression are formally defined yet practically ambiguous. As a result, regulation shapes participation not only through direct restrictions, but also through anticipatory effects that influence how individuals assess the risks associated with political expression online.

Empirical research suggests that these conditions contribute to widespread practices of self-restraint, indirect expression, and symbolic participation in Türkiye's digital public sphere. Users may remain politically active on platforms while avoiding explicit statements, adopting coded language, humour, or issue displacement as strategies to mitigate perceived expressive risk (Erdogan, 2017; Hazar et al., 2023). From a RAPS perspective, such practices are not anomalies or signs of disengagement, but adaptive responses to the interaction between algorithmic mediation and regulatory uncertainty.

Importantly, RAPS allows these dynamics to be analysed without framing the Turkish case as exceptional or sui generis. While the intensity of polarization and regulatory salience in Türkiye may be comparatively high, similar patterns are increasingly observable across a range of political systems. Studies of platform governance and digital regulation in Europe, Latin America, and Asia indicate that uncertainty-driven regulation and platform-mediated visibility regimes are becoming defining features of contemporary public communication (Gorwa, 2024; Flew et al., 2019). Türkiye thus functions as an analytically productive case that foregrounds dynamics likely to become more pronounced elsewhere.

By situating Türkiye within a broader comparative horizon, RAPS highlights how national political and regulatory contexts shape the operation of algorithmic public spheres without reducing them to national idiosyncrasies. The Turkish case demonstrates how platform algorithms, regulatory governance, and perceived expressive risk converge to produce a form of political participation that is conditional rather than uniform, stratified rather than egalitarian. In this sense, Türkiye does not merely illustrate RAPS; it helps reveal the broader logic of regulated algorithmic public spheres under conditions of heightened political contestation.

3.5. Analytical Contribution of RAPS
The primary contribution of RAPS lies in its capacity to integrate dimensions that are often examined separately. By conceptualizing digital political participation as a conditional regime shaped by algorithms, regulation, and perceived expressive risk, the framework offers a more comprehensive account of how public communication operates under platform-mediated governance.

RAPS does not seek to resolve normative tensions surrounding digital participation. Instead, it provides an analytical tool for examining how democratic ideals are negotiated, constrained, and reconfigured within contemporary public spheres. The framework thus lays the groundwork for future empirical research capable of assessing how different configurations of algorithmic mediation and regulatory governance shape political participation across contexts.

4. DISCUSSION: THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE REGULATED ALGORITHMIC PUBLIC SPHERE
This paper set out to address a central tension in contemporary debates on digital political participation: the coexistence of expanded opportunities for expression with increasingly unequal, fragmented, and conditional forms of public communication. By introducing the Regulated Algorithmic Public Sphere (RAPS), the study advances a theoretical framework that integrates platform algorithms, regulatory governance, and behavioural adaptation into a unified analytical perspective. This section discusses the broader theoretical implications of RAPS for the study of digital political participation, public sphere theory, and platform governance.

4.1. Reframing Digital Political Participation as a Conditional Regime
One of the primary contributions of RAPS lies in its reconceptualization of digital political participation as a conditional regime rather than a direct outcome of access or engagement. Much of the existing literature implicitly equates participation with activity, emphasizing the frequency and diversity of participatory acts enabled by digital platforms. While this perspective captures important changes in how citizens engage with politics, it often overlooks the structural conditions that determine whether participation becomes visible, influential, or politically meaningful.

RAPS shifts attention away from participation as mere expression toward participation as a process shaped by structural mediation. From this perspective, participation is not evenly distributed even when access appears universal. Algorithmic curation, regulatory constraints, and perceived expressive risk interact to produce differentiated participation outcomes. Some forms of expression are amplified and legitimized, while others remain marginal or are strategically withheld. This challenges technologically optimistic perceptions that treat digital participation as inherently democratizing and highlights the importance of examining how participation is organized and stratified.

4.2. Revisiting the Public Sphere under Algorithmic and Regulatory Conditions

RAPS also contributes to public sphere theory by revisiting its normative foundations under contemporary conditions of algorithmic mediation and regulatory governance. Classical theories emphasize inclusivity, transparency, and rational-critical debate as the basis of democratic legitimacy. RAPS does not abandon these normative ideals; instead, it interrogates the extent to which they remain attainable within digitally mediated environments.

Algorithmic systems fundamentally alter the conditions of publicity by redistributing visibility according to opaque criteria that privilege engagement, affect, and commercial value. At the same time, regulatory environments characterized by uncertainty and selective enforcement undermine the stability and predictability assumed in classical public sphere models. Together, these dynamics challenge the assumption that participation alone is sufficient to sustain deliberative democracy. RAPS thus extends public sphere theory by incorporating the infrastructural and governance conditions that shape contemporary public communication, revealing how normative ideals are constrained and reconfigured rather than simply eroded.

4.3. Algorithms and Regulation as Joint Structuring Forces

A further theoretical implication of RAPS concerns the relationship between algorithms and regulation. Existing scholarship often examines these dimensions separately, treating algorithms as technical systems and regulation as a legal or institutional constraint. RAPS argues that this separation obscures how these forces operate jointly to structure political participation.

Algorithmic visibility regimes determine which expressions circulate and gain prominence, while regulatory frameworks define the boundaries of acceptable speech and generate uncertainty about enforcement. When combined, these forces shape participation not only by enabling or restricting expression, but by influencing how individuals anticipate and assess the risks of political engagement. RAPS demonstrates that participation decisions are shaped by the interaction of algorithmic amplification and regulatory governance, producing behavioural adaptations such as self-censorship, indirect expression, and selective engagement. By theorizing algorithms and regulation as interconnected structuring forces, RAPS offers a more comprehensive account of how power operates within digital public spheres.

4.4. Beyond the Turkish Case: Analytical Generalizability of RAPS

Although RAPS is grounded in the Turkish context, its analytical value extends beyond any single national case. Türkiye represents a context in which platform dependency, political polarization, and regulatory salience are particularly pronounced, making the dynamics captured by RAPS more visible. However, similar patterns are increasingly observable across a range of political systems, including liberal democracies grappling with platform governance and emerging regulatory regimes.

Rather than treating Türkiye as an exceptional case, RAPS positions it as an analytically productive site for theorizing broader transformations in public communication. The framework highlights how varying configurations of algorithmic mediation and regulatory governance can produce different participation regimes across contexts. This approach enables comparative analysis without assuming uniform outcomes, emphasizing instead the conditional and context-dependent nature of digital political participation.

4.5. Implications for Future Empirical Research

Finally, RAPS provides a foundation for future empirical research without collapsing theoretical complexity into overly narrow indicators. While the present study does not advance empirical testing, the framework identifies analytically distinct dimensions that can be operationalized in subsequent work. Future studies might examine perceptions of algorithmic visibility, experiences of regulatory uncertainty, and subjective assessments of expressive risk to assess how these factors interact to shape participation behaviour.

By clarifying the structural and perceptual conditions under which participation unfolds, RAPS offers a roadmap for empirical research that moves beyond descriptive accounts of online engagement. Such research could contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how democratic participation is reshaped within regulated algorithmic public spheres.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper set out to develop a theoretically grounded framework for understanding digital political participation under conditions of platform-mediated communication and regulatory governance. Rather than approaching digital participation through technologically optimistic or narrowly institutional lenses, the study argued for the need to conceptualize participation as a structured and conditional process. In response to this need, the paper introduced the Regulated Algorithmic Public Sphere (RAPS) as an integrated theoretical framework that brings together platform algorithms, regulatory environments, and individuals' perceptions of expressive risk.

The central contribution of the paper lies in reframing digital political participation beyond questions of access, activity, or technical affordances. By situating participation within a public sphere shaped by algorithmic visibility regimes and regulatory uncertainty, RAPS highlights how participation becomes differentiated in terms of visibility, legitimacy, and sustainability. In doing so, the framework challenges assumptions that increased opportunities for online expression necessarily translate into democratic inclusion or deliberative quality. Participation may be widespread, yet its political consequences remain uneven and contingent upon structural conditions that shape who is seen, heard, and recognized.

By revisiting public sphere theory under contemporary digital conditions, the paper contributes to ongoing debates on the transformation of democratic communication. RAPS does not reject the normative aspirations associated with the public sphere, such as inclusivity and rational-critical debate. Instead, it demonstrates how these ideals are reconfigured in environments characterized by algorithmic mediation and governance through uncertainty. This perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of democratic participation that neither romanticizes digital technologies nor reduces political communication to institutional control.

Grounding the framework in the Turkish context further illustrates the analytical value of RAPS. Türkiye provides a setting in which platform dependency, political polarization, and regulatory salience intersect in particularly visible ways. However, the paper has deliberately avoided treating Türkiye as an exceptional or anomalous case. Instead, it has argued that the dynamics observed in the Turkish digital public sphere reflect broader transformations that are increasingly present across diverse political systems. In this sense, the Turkish case serves as an analytically productive context for theorizing regulated algorithmic public spheres more generally.

Importantly, this study has been explicitly theoretical in scope. It does not advance empirical claims about participation behaviour, nor does it seek to test the proposed framework. This limitation is intentional. The aim has been to establish a coherent conceptual foundation capable of guiding future empirical research. RAPS identifies analytically distinct dimensions—algorithmic mediation, regulatory governance, and perceived expressive risk—that can be operationalized and examined through qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method approaches.

Future research may build on this framework by empirically investigating how these dimensions interact across different political and regulatory contexts. Comparative studies could examine variations in algorithmic visibility, regulatory uncertainty, and expressive risk to assess how participation regimes differ across countries and platforms. Such work would not only test the explanatory capacity of RAPS but also contribute to a more systematic understanding of how democratic participation is reshaped within contemporary digital public spheres.

In conclusion, the Regulated Algorithmic Public Sphere framework offers a theoretically integrated approach to digital political participation that moves beyond fragmented analyses and binary assessments of digital media. By foregrounding the conditional nature of participation, RAPS provides a foundation for future research aimed at understanding the evolving relationship between technology, regulation, and democracy.

USE OF AI-ASSISTED TOOLS
In the preparation of this manuscript, AI-assisted tools were used in a limited and transparent manner. Specifically, ChatGPT (version 5.2) and QuillBot were employed to support paraphrasing, language editing, stylistic refinement, translation, and spelling or grammar corrections. These tools were used solely to improve clarity, coherence, and readability of the text.

All theoretical arguments, conceptual frameworks, interpretations, and academic judgments presented in this study were developed by the author. The use of AI-assisted tools did not influence the intellectual content, analytical structure, or scholarly contributions of the paper. Responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the work rests entirely with the author.

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