uantwerpen.be

**TITLE PAGE**

**Going online.**

**Does ICT enabled-participation engage the young in local governance?**

**Peter Thijssen & Wouter Van Dooren**

**Abstract**

Local governments increasingly use online strategies to strengthen the political participation of citizens in policy and politics. Young people however are generally underrepresented. This article studies age patterns of participation across offline and online forms to examine whether online initiatives are able to overcome this age bias. We first present a case study of online and offline problem reporting to local authorities. We find that simply going from offline to online participation reinforces rather than mitigates age bias. We then present a case study on posting on an online political forum. In this case, age bias is alleviated. In contrast to traditional instrumental modes, an online forum is an expressive form of participation. Younger generations seem to value the *act* of participating over the *outcomes* of participation. These findings suggest a need for participation policies that speak to the expressive needs of younger generations. In recent years, social media has reinforced the potential for expressive participation.

**Keywords**: Participation, age bias, online, social media, expressive needs, uses-gratification

**Introduction**

Over the last two decades, governments of all tiers have invested in citizen participation (Feeney and Welch, 2012; Fung, 2015; Rolfe, 2016). Local governments in particular may benefit from the close cooperation of citizens in policy and politics (Fitzgerald and Wolak, 2014; Michels and De Graaf, 2010). Local politics offer the best prospects for political effectiveness and understanding. Local governments are more accessible for citizens and therefore offer more opportunities for them to express their political voices. While citizens often experience national policies and global trends as abstract or distant, local governments mostly address the lived experiences of citizens. If localities, as Hepburn (2014) argues, at the least remain significant to the people who live there (p.98), then local government is a viable avenue through which to develop meaningful participation and ultimately increase the legitimacy of, and trust in, governments (Haikio, 2012; Kim and Lee, 2012).

Participation in policy and politics, however, faces the threat of systemic exclusion of certain groups, such as religious minorities, indigenous peoples, women, the old, the LGBTQ population, the unemployed, recent immigrants, and the youth (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Roberts 2004; Barnes, 1999). Representation has therefore always been a principal issue in research on political participation (Pettersen and Rose 1996; Clark, Brudney, and Jang 2013; Young 2000). With the rising importance of deliberative democracy, the issue of representation becomes all the more pressing (Barber 2003). The active exchange of information between citizens and government is central for governmental decision making and policy formulation. The exclusion of youth from this exchange may lead to policies that are irresponsive to the

needs of this very group (de Graaf, Van Hulst, and Michels 2015; Michels and de Graaf 2010).

Many scholars have suggested that the Internet, as a new medium, may act as a catalyst for political action for younger generations (e.g. Delli Carpini 2000; Zukin et al. 2006; Mossberger et al. 2008; Mesch 2012). In practice, the assumption that e-participation may lower the threshold for the young has informed many online participation initiatives. But are the political voices of the young really better heard on the Internet? Initial optimism regarding the involvement of otherwise quiescent groups has gradually been replaced with a more variegated and often more skeptical view (Gibson et al. 2005; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2010). Bennett (2007), for instance, has stated that young people's perspectives on interactivity, control, and the value of participation are significantly different from older citizens. For this reason, the full potential of the Internet as a positive force for youth participation has not yet been exploited.

The current article studies age patterns of participation across offline and online forms of political action to examine whether online initiatives are able to overcome this age bias in participation. Gibson and Cantijoch (p.701) argue that limited attention has been paid to the relationship between online and offline political activity, particularly the extent to which online activity simply replicates offline activity. This is precisely the issue this article speaks to. We study whether going online with an offline, local reporting website replicates or suppresses age bias in participation. We find that age bias is indeed reinforced and attribute this to the instrumental needs to which the reporting website caters. We then present additional evidence from an online forum that suggests that the young value expressive, rather than instrumental, needs. Analysis is

based on two representative behavioural datasets examining both online and offline political participation.

First, we discuss explanations for age bias against youth in participation. Next, we propose a uses-gratification model to conceptualise differing expectations of participation for different groups. Uses-gratification theory specifies the distinct political needs of youth, as well as the ways in which different ways of using the Internet may gratify these needs. Based on this uses-gratifications model, we define the case contexts to study the hypotheses in section three. Finally, in the fourth section, we describe the results of the two case studies.

**Explaining age biases in participation**

Traditional explanations attribute lower political activity among youth to a negative lifecycle effect. In the course of their lifetimes, individuals accept a growing number of social commitments, such as parenthood or home ownership. Consequently, they have more interests to protect and are in turn more inclined to be politically active. Participation from this perspective primarily serves instrumental purposes, such as school quality, neighbourhood safety, or real estate value. Because younger generations have less established interests, participation is not instrumental for their objectives. This life cycle effect is further entrenched as individuals gradually habituate to political action (Franklin 2004).

Does going online have an influence on this lifecycle effect? Two hypotheses can be distinguished. The first is the *differential skills hypothesis*. Youth today are viewed as belonging to the 'Internet generation' (e.g. Bimber 1999; Krueger 2006). Hence, the

lifecycle effect is neutralised due to the specific context of technological socialisation in younger generations (e.g. Norris 2003; Best and Krueger 2005; Di Gennaro and Dutton 2006; Saglie and Vabo 2009). Digital natives supposedly possess unique resources in terms of Internet skills and/or access. These resources substantially reduce the cost of political activity for younger generations. Though today's youth may have less interest in participating in politics, acts of participation may be less demanding and more attractive for them in an online context. Some scholars even suggest that online participation favours younger generations over older ones, reversing the lifecycle effect (e.g. Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Dalton, 2002; 2008). Because today's youth are generally better educated and more prone to question hierarchical authority, they prefer action patterns that are more horizontal and reject traditional vertical modes of political activity drawn from a sense of civic duty (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Dalton 2008).

Not all scholars agree that youth will benefit from the differential skills of online participation. More critical accounts have formulated a 'reinforcement effect' (e.g. Wattenberg 2008; Shah et al. 2005). Such accounts argue that the Internet only activates groups already politically active offline. The Internet therefore reproduces and reinforces existing age biases. These scholars expect to find a parabolic relationship, with the youngest and oldest citizens being less politically active, both off and online.

Not only do skills differ between generations, but also preferred gratifications. The *differential gratification hypothesis* is the second account of how going online affects the participatory propensity of the young. Expressive generations are in favour of political activities that allow them to directly challenge and influence the political ideas

of authorities and co-citizens. While the political activities of older generations may be generally driven by instrumental rationality (outcome-oriented), contemporary youth may be more motivated by value-expressive rationality (Inglehart and Welzel 2005). While the young are less outcome-oriented, they may nevertheless eagerly look for political activities that gratify a self-expressive necessity for dialogue. The Internet caters to these types of horizontal and self-challenging activities (Papacharissi and Rubin 2000; Bennett 2006). In this sense, it may be more appealing to the young (Dalton 2008: 66). The different participation patterns of younger generations lead Thijssen et al. (2015) to conclude that the generational decline is misunderstood. Instead of a decline in participation, younger genetaions have expanded their civic repertoire beyond traditional channels. However, participation in policy and politics often remains bound to traditional channels of participation.

In the remainder of the article, we test the hypotheses of differential skills (Internet generation or reinforcement effect) and differential gratifications. To do so, we first conceptualize the various ways the Internet is used for participatory initiatives, taking into account that those initiatives gratify specific needs in specific ways. To this end, we use an online political uses-gratifications model (e.g. Kaye and Johnson 2004).

**Online uses-gratifications model and research hypotheses**

The differential skill hypothesis assumes that the mere presence of political activity online is sufficient enough to compensate for the underrepresentation of younger generations (Thomas and Streib 2003). In terms of the behavioural dimensions defined by Milbrath (1965), the convenience of online contexts determines the appeal of participating politically online for younger generations. Convenience refers to the time and place independence of online activities. To test this hypothesis, we examine a participatory activity that exists both online and offline (Anduiza et al. 2009). Furthermore, this is a traditional activity that existed in a more or less similar form before the diffusion of the Internet. In terms of Milbrath's behavioural dimensions, this means a political activity that is elite- and outtakes-oriented, non-dialogical, and driven by instrumental rationality. Our case study fits these conditions well, comparing citizens who contacted officials by electronic mail with those who contacted officials through traditional means (Bimber 1999). The research design involves similar cases insofar as the same kind of co-productive activity is investigated, except for the variable 'medium'.

Differential skill hypothesis ("Internet generation"):
*Whereas the filing of offline problem reports to local authorities is characterized by a parabolic age effect with the youngest and oldest citizens being less politically active, no age effect is expected for problem reports by email.*

The differential gratification hypothesis assumes that some online activities may be particularly appealing for younger generations because they are particularly suitable for

the gratification of their expressive needs. In individualized societies especially, young individuals seek inter-subjective signals that strengthen their self-identity and shape their interests. They are in need of a discursive context in which they can anonymously test and express ideas. According to Polat's need-based typology, younger generations seem to require a virtual public sphere. However, such virtual spaces can be used in different ways. Most people visit a virtual public sphere only to passively take in the political outpourings of others. Internet researchers commonly call such people *lurkers* because they have a passive interest in unfiltered political information. Others, *posters*, are actively participating in political discussions. Contrary to the traditional elite-directed political activity assumed by the Internet generation hypothesis, both lurkers and posters are interested in horizontal, peer-oriented activities. Because posters actively express political views while lurkers are interested in the political expressions of others, a comparison of both groups is especially instructive to test the differential gratification hypothesis (e.g. Papacharissi and Rubin 2000; Wilhelm 2000).

Differential gratification hypothesis
*The young are over represented in the poster population of online political forums because it enables them to express and test their own standpoints.*

**Case studies**
We use two Belgian case studies that enable us to gather a reliable image of the population involved in two different online political activities, performed in a fairly homogenous political context.

The first case concerns a local initiative where residents can report problems in the public domain and propose solutions as to how the government could improve local living conditions. The program is comparable to *fix-my-street* reporting schemes used in many other cities (King and Brown, 2007; Meijer, Bannister, and Alfano, 2011). However, the scope of our case seems to be slightly broader, as around 15% of the reports are related to mobility. The program is a form of participation because professional service provision is guided by user-community consultations. Citizens are transformed into 'sensors,' 'detectors,' or 'reporters' of the problems facing the city (Clark, Brudney, and Jang 2013). We study the age structure of the citizens that report issues to local government. To this end, we rely on a population database of citizens who used the local Internet hotline in the district of Deurne (Antwerp, Belgium) between 2004-2007. The district of Deurne has a population of 70,000. It is one of the districts that make up the City of Antwerp (pop. 500,000). We focus on the age structure of three subgroups: citizens that have reported an issue on one or more occasions by email, citizens that have filed offline reports, and citizens who have not reported any problems.

The second case study examines the age structure of the members of an independent online political forum called Politics.be. In late 2006, we organised a web survey of members of this forum. As we were also granted access to the logfiles, we were able to distinguish between posters and lurkers.

Our data predates the era of social media. The exponential growth of Facebook users, for instance, only began in 2008 (Wakefield, 2014). Clearly, signification technological advances have been since we collected the data. However, there is value in comparing

data from a pre-Facebook era. Our study has a unique design with two cases that are clearly instrumental and expressive. Such a design would be much harder to produce today. Current social media venues may serve both expressive and instrumental purposes (Bonsón, Torres, Royo, and Flores, 2012; G. Lee and Kwak, 2012; Thorson, 2014). Tweets, likes, and shares can have instrumental aims, expressive qualities, or both. This makes analysis more difficult. Moreover, the underlying social mechanisms of different skills and needs that inform our analysis are more stable than technological advancements. For local politicians who want to reach out to the young, the insight that the young are motivated by expressive needs is still notable in the social media era. Finally, we believe the data has distinct empirical qualities. A correspondence of the data with a civil registry allows for in depth socio-demographic analysis. Moreover, the data describes actual, instead of reported, behaviour.

Although both cases concern forms of online participation, there are significant differences between the two. Online reporting follows a top-down logic, wherein authorities initiate the medium and seek participation from citizens. Activity on a political forum, on the other hand, is essentially horizontal in nature. Assuming that younger generations are more attracted to non-hierarchic horizontal participation while older citizens are more familiar with traditional reporting tools, we expect a different age structure in the groups of users participating in the two online venues (Amnå 2010). Moreover, the sending of an email is an activity neatly described by instrumental rationality, whereas the discursive context of participation in a political forum is related to expressive value. In this context, we combine Polat's (2005) typology of uses of online political action with Milbrath's (1965) gratification dimensions. The differences between cases are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 about here

The initial focus in both case studies is on the age structure of the group of participants, but special attention is given to the young. A methodological note is necessary, the question arises where the boundary between young and old lies. The age of adulthood, in most countries 18 years, is increasingly artificial, particularly in view of an extended adolescence. Moreover, in the context of voting participation research, a limit to 18 would lead to the absurd conclusion that there are, strictly speaking, no young voters. We therefore propose that age boundaries should be approached more broadly. In this study, the upper threshold of youth is expanded from 18 to 34 years of age. Age limits beyond 18 have been applied in other studies on young people, for instance, 18-24 (Rainie, Smith, Schlozman, Brady, and Verba, 2012), 16-29 (Xenos, Vromen, and Loader, 2014), 13-30 (Ekström and Östman, 2015), and 18-34 (Vromen, 2003, 2007). We thus follow the institutional approach in considering an emerging adulthood (Lee 2014). In the transition to adulthood, youth gradually commit to the institutions of adulthood. Around the age of 34, people tend to settle into more permanent jobs, become homeowners, engage in permanent relations, and start families. In other words, instrumental interest in policies and politics takes shape.

**Case study 1: Instrumental participation in local problem reporting by email**

**Dataset**

The dataset for the first case study consists of all reports by email or on paper submitted to the district authorities of Deurne between 2004 and 2007 (Thijssen 2009). The website and the paper form contained the following introductory statement, '*Use this document for free reporting of problems and suggestions relating to the local street environment or urban services*'. In total, 4,303 reports were filed. The annual number of reports filed for 2004, 2005, 2006, and 2007, respectively, were 1,068, 1,054, 1,082, and 1,099. The focus of research was individuals who filed a report. After eliminating reporters who participated for professional purposes, 2,451 'unique' individuals were retained who had reported at least once in the course of the four-year timeframe.

To describe this group of 2,451 persons as accurately as possible, individual reporters were linked with the population register on 1 August 2008. The overall success rate of this exercise was 80% or 1,950 cases. People that provided incomplete or inaccurate personal data, moved out of the district, or passed away could not be matched. The 1,950 reporters were compared with the remaining population of Deurne. To this end, a dataset with the 69,036 residents of Deurne who had not reported was compiled. Finally, the group of 1,950 reporters was divided into 721 reporters by email and 1,229 reporters by means of the paper based report form.

**Age difference**

Figure 1 compares the age distributions of the 721 individuals who reported at least once by email (dotted line), the 1,229 individuals who reported through an offline medium (stripes line), and the 69,315 residents of Deurne who filed no reports (black line) in the 2004-07 period. Age is regarded here as an uncategorised, continuous variable. The patterns that emerge are clearly curvilinear in both cases. In the group aged 35 to 70, there are disproportionately more residents who reported a problem by email. Under the age of 35 and above 70, there are comparatively fewer reports by email. Both the average and the median age of reporters who used email are 51, indicating that the distribution is fairly symmetrical. Dalton's assumption that the Internet is mainly for younger generations is called into question. It may well be the case that younger generations spend more time on the Internet, but apparently not to report on local policy issues. Furthermore, the data suggest that familiarity with the Internet from a young age is not a requirement for the use of this medium. On the face of it, the group reporting local problems by email mainly consists of middle-aged residents. Though, among senior citizens, there are also a number individuals who seem attracted to the comfort and speed offered by the digital realm. Wattenberg (2008) appears to be correct in asserting that, even in relatively new and electronically mediated forms of participation, younger generations are outnumbered by older generations. Though, it should be noted that this observation does not hold true for the oldest group, those over 70 years old. In other words, if the age variable were to be categorised, it would be worthwhile to also distinguish between citizens over 50 and over 70.

Figure 1 about here

For offline reporters, the age distribution is also parabolic. In this case, however, the top is slightly broader and flatter, encompassing reporters between the ages of 40 and 85. As before, younger generations are less inclined to report. The number of reporters remains low until the age of 40. The average age of the non-electronic reporter is 59, 8 years older than in electronic reporting. A noticeably larger proportion of those over 70 report problems to the local authorities through traditional channels of communication.

In both offline and online reporting, a parabolic relationship is observed. The logistic regressions shown in Table 2 confirm this.[1] A parabolic relationship is represented mathematically by means of a second-degree polynomial of the form $Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X + \beta_2 X^2$ and the parameter estimates of the logistic regressions indicate that both age and age squared have a significant effect on the likelihood of an individual to report. In the first regression model (M1), the sign of standardised age is positive (B = 5.47), suggesting that older citizens are more likely to report. At the same time however, the effect of the standardised age squared is negative (B = -4.81), indicating that the likelihood of reporting declines among the oldest respondents. Furthermore, we observe that these age effects are more pronounced among reporters by email (M1) than among users of the offline medium (M2) (Zage: B = 5.47 vs. B = 3.59 and Zage$^2$: B = -4.81 vs B = -2.45). This assertion is also reflected by the results of regression model 3. Whereas younger generations may use email more often than offline media in absolute terms, in relative terms they are outnumbered by middle aged people, as reflected by the age effect shown in model 3 (B = 1.93). The results of the logistic regressions lend credence to a reinforcement perspective, particularly as differences in terms of gender and ethnicity are also greater among those reporting grievances online. Men and those from

non-immigrant backgrounds tend to report more, especially by email. Moreover, the age effects persist after controlling for the duration of residence. This is important because people residing longer in a particular location tend to show more involvement with local policymaking.[2] Last but not least, for additional robustness, we checked whether the results would be similar if we focused on problem reports related to mobility, such as public transportation (N = 218). This is relevant because local issues may be less of a priority for the young because they tend to be more mobile. Interestingly however, in this case, the age effects in model 3 are slightly stronger (B = 2.18).

Table 2 about here


**Case study 2: Expressive participation in an online political forum**

The first case found that switching from offline participation to online participation reinforces age bias rather than mitigating it. Going online will not solve age bias in participation. However, the uses-gratification theory also suggests that online participation should gratify specific needs younger generations. Rather than a medium shift, we may require a more fundamental shift in how participation operates. Rather than responding to the instrumental needs of citizens, participation may need to respond to expressive needs to involve younger generations. A case study from a forum for political participation provides some evidence for this proposition.


Data

In this second case study, we focus on the audience participating in an online political forum called Politics.be (Thijssen 2008). Politics.be (http://forum.Politics.be) is an independent forum for the debate of domestic and international politics, moderated by

volunteers. Between 25 August 2006 and 14 October 2006, a web survey was sent to the addresses of the then 7,433 registered members of Politics.be. In total, 1,329 people responded. The request to participate in the survey came from the researchers but was disseminated by the moderators of Politics.be. Followed the initial email on 25 August, reminders were sent on 6 September and 4 October.

The web survey reached 18% of the forum's registered members. However, this figure is an underestimation, as the longevity of email addresses tends to be short. Given that the online forum Politics.be was launched in 2002, it is reasonable to assume that a substantial proportion of the originally registered email addresses were no longer valid at the time of the survey. Moreover, it is also reasonable to assume that some individuals registered several times on the forum, but responded to the survey only once. After comparing the subjective survey data with the objective log data, we found that of the 1,115 members who posted at least one message during the period from 1 January 2006 to 14 October 2006, 438 participated in the survey, suggesting a response rate of 39% among posters. Focusing on the 369 most intensive posters during the same period, each of whom posted over 100 messages, the response rate further rises to 50%. The 1,330 respondents accounted for 188,042 messages during the aforementioned period, amounting to 51% of the total number of messages (367,549) posted within that timeframe.

**Age difference**

Figure 2 represents the age distribution of the population of 1,329 registered members who participated in the web survey. We look separately at the 563 lurkers (42%) and the 766 posters (58%). As discussed, lurkers are registered users who follow the debates

but do not actively participate in them. Unlike the previous case study, this case confirms Dalton's Internet generation hypothesis, reflecting that youth do not participate less, but merely use a different repertoire. The figure shows that the prevalence of younger generations is stronger among posters (black line) than among lurkers (grey line). The peak representing young adults, for example, is more pronounced among posters than among lurkers. Interestingly, the peak for young posters ranges from 16 to 35 years of age, confirming the sociological trend of a prolonged adolescence.

Figure 2 about here

In contrast to the parabolic relationship observed in the first case study, an inspection of the scatter plot related to the age structure of participants in Politics.be reveals a decreasing function. The differences between passive lurkers and active posters, however, come to the fore most clearly among younger respondents. Proportionally, there are many more posters among young respondents. It comes as no surprise that the multivariate testing, shown in Table 3, reveals a statistically significant inverse tapering effect of age.

Table 3 about here

Unlike electronic reporting of a problem, an instance of vertical interaction between citizens and government, debate between forum members is an example of horizontal interaction. Furthermore, problem reporting serves a concrete policy purpose, whereas reasons for participating in an online political debate are more diffuse. In problem

reporting, the benefit to be gained is essentially extrinsic and users' motivation is instrumental. In the case of forum participation, the benefits are essentially intrinsic and users tend to be driven by a gratification of expressive needs.

Case 2 seems to confirm the differential gratifications hypothesis. Table 4 provides an overview of the principal reasons for various age groups to participate in the political forum. For lurkers, the forum serves first and foremost as a correlation tool (i.e. finding opinions to associate with) and an information tool. On one hand, they wish to gain insight into other people's thought. On the other, they want to stay informed about politics. These functions relate to with the passive attitude of this type of forum user. Yet even here, we see a remarkable difference in terms of age. Whereas the youngest generation of lurkers tends to focus primarily on correlation (36%) and less so on information (20%), the preferences among the older generation of lurkers are reversed. For example, among the young seniors (56-70 years), 24% give precedence to correlation compared to 37% to information.

Interestingly, correlation is also important for posters. In the active age group (35-55 years) and among young seniors (56-70 years), this is by far the most commonly cited reason for forum use. Though, as before, those under 35 diverge slightly from the other respondents. A typical motive among respondents from the youngest generation is deliberative in nature, using the forum to discuss public policy. As hypothesized, this deliberative motive is less prominent among older generations. Given the phenomenon of emerging adulthood, we may assume that many respondents in the youngest age group are still forming a political identity (Lee, 2014). Unlike older groups, they are therefore more interested in confronting their own ideas with those of others.

Table 4 about here

A word of caution is warranted. While online forums may address age bias against the young, they do not clearly address bias towards the highly educated. The forum mainly consists of members who are highly educated. This is true of posters on Politics.be, of whom 50% completed a form of higher education, whereas the corresponding proportion among lurkers is 43%.

**Conclusion**

Unrepresentative participation in policy and politics can lead to biases in policy outcomes and political responsiveness. We should therefore take representation in participation seriously. One of the most persistent biases in participation is towards younger generations. Since younger generations typically have fewer institutional commitments and fewer interests to protect, the instrumental value of participation is lower. This article studied whether and how online applications are able to overcome this age bias. We discussed two different cases: online and offline participation in the reporting hotline of a local authority, and participation in an online political forum.

We found that simply going online with offline participation reinforces rather than mitigates age bias. The Internet generation hypothesis, predicting that better mastery of the Internet by the young evens the age bias, does not hold. Middle-aged groups more easily find their way to both online and offline reporting channels. This finding confirms Gibson and Cantijoch's (2013) observation that 'individuals basically use whatever tools are available to undertake their chosen action' (p.714) (see also

DiMaggio et al. (2001) and Xenos and Moy (2007)). The instrumental objectives of the participation initiative (i.e better public service outcomes in neighbourhoods) cater to the needs of older age groups that have a long-lasting interest in and affiliation with their living environment. Interestingly however, our findings remain true when we focus on problem reports related to mobility, an issue that is likely more salient for young residents. A diminished sense of place lowers the stakes for younger generations, even though reporting forms are easily accessible online. The implication for participation is that offering an online channel is not enough to entice younger generations to participate. On the contrary, the age bias might even become stronger (Wattenberg 2008).

In contrast, we found that those under 35 years of age are well represented among the users of the online political forum Politics.be. This finding offers potential venues for increased participation. We suggest that the motives for online participation are different for different ages group and that younger generations seek to gratify different needs. While older generations participate to discover information, young people often expect to gratify expressive needs. Discussing politics, rather than the outcomes of participation, is the main added value. Participation initiatives from governments can learn from political participation forums when addressing age bias against younger generations.

Posting on the online forum in this study is an example of expressive action. The informal and decentralised discursive logic of the forum fundamentally deviates from the formalised and government-initiated consultation logic of the reporting hotline. The forum explicitly aims to foster political debate. The advent of social media, after our

data collection, has arguably further increased opportunities for the young to fulfil expressive political needs (Ekström and Östman, 2015). Though, compared to the political forum we examined, the role of social networks in political self-expression may be more diffuse. Thorson (2014), for instance, argues that younger generations often refrain from political discourse on Facebook because the audience which they interact with is diffuse, encompassing friends, acquaintances, and the rest of the world. Facebook offers a *context collapsed* network audience that combines social contacts from a variety of contexts in an individual's life. These uncertainties may hinder political self-expression through social media. A one-sided reliance on social media to tap into the expressive needs of the young may in turn lead to new biases.

Our findings have a number of implications for local governance. First, the results suggest that merely offering offline services online will do little to address age bias in participation. On the contrary, biases are likely to be stronger. This is not to say that e-participation is not useful. The main goal should be, however, service quality and client-friendliness, rather than equity. Governments should also be wary of the biases that instrumental e-participation creates. Second, the results suggest that if participation is to include younger generations, more attention to expressive, non-instrumental motives is necessary. A viable design for participation needs to take differential gratifications into account and can also distil information on policies and politics from forums. This could be done, for example, by making room for forum-like discussion groups on public service delivery, policies, and politics. Basic discursive processes such as who speaks, how knowledge in participation is constituted, what can be said, and who summarises, should be critically challenged (Fischer 2006). A good design should be supported by investments in the communicative capacity of public professionals, adapting the nature,

tone, and conditions of conversations to the expressive needs of the young and not lapsing into a thin, instrumental perspective (Bartels 2013; Moynihan 2003). More work needs to be done to develop what Gibson and Cantijoch (2013) call an e-expressive mode of participation. This is necessary because offline equivalents of online e-expression are not readily available (Gibson and Cantijoch, 2013) and the impacts of online and offline participation may differ between media (Vissers, Hooghe, Stolle, and Maheo, 2012).

Research on e-participation suggests that although local governments adopt online applications, continued efforts are necessary to create interactive, expressive applications (Bonsón et al., 2012; Ellison and Hardey, 2014; G. Lee and Kwak, 2012; Norris and Moon, 2005). Online platforms provide new opportunities for online interaction that could actively contribute to reinvigorating local public spheres (Ellison and Hardey, 2014). Local governments can take an active role in this by providing forums for dialogue that are tolerant and non-partisan, fostering a civil attitude to different points of view (Hepburn, 2014). For younger generations in particular, e-expressive modes of participation may foster their voices and simultaneously help them to develop a sense of civic duty. For such effects to occur, policies promoting e-participation need to do more than simply going online.

**Notes**

[1] These analyses are restricted to adults in the research population (18 years or older).

[2] Unfortunately, we possess no data on the extent of individual home ownership, nor for that matter on individuals' educational levels, as this information is not included in the population register. However, residence period is a suitable proxy for home

ownership. Certainly in Belgium, people who have lived in the same location for a long period of time tend to own their dwelling. Moreover, age effects on local problem reporting do not change significantly if home ownership is included as an aggregated variable at the neighbourhood level (Thijssen, 2009).

**References**

Amnå, E., 2010. *New Forms of Citizen Participation. Normative Implications*. Baden-Baden: Nomos.

Barber, B.R., 2003. *Strong democracy: Participatory politics for a new age*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Barnes, M. 1999. Researching public participation. *Local Government Studies*, 25(4), 60–75.

Bartels, K.P.R., 2013. Communicative Capacity: The Added Value of Public Encounters for Participatory Democracy. *Public Administration*, 91 (2), 469-483

Bennett, L.W., 2007. *Civic life online: Learning how digital media can engage youth.* Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.

Best, S.J. and Krueger, B.S., 2005. Analyzing the Representativeness of Internet Political Participation. *Political Behavior,* 27, 183-216.

Bimber, B., 1999. The Internet and Citizen Communication with Government: Does the Medium Matter? *Political Communication*, 16, 409-428.

Bonsón, E., Torres, L., Royo, S., and Flores, F. 2012. Local e-government 2.0: Social media and corporate transparency in municipalities. *Government Information Quarterly*, 29(2), 123–132.

Boyte, H. C. 2005. Reframing Democracy: Governance, Civic Agency, and Politics. *Public Administration Review*, 65(5), 536–546.

Clark, B. Y., Brudney, J. L., and Jang, S.-G. 2013. Coproduction of Government Services and the New Information Technology: Investigating the Distributional Biases. *Public Administration Review*, 73(5), 687–701.

Dalton, R.J., 2002. *Citizen Politics: Public Opinion and Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. Chatham: Chatham House Publishers.

Dalton, R.J., 2008. *The Good Citizen. How a Younger Generation is Reshaping American Politics.* Washington, D.C.: CQPress.

de Graaf, L., Van Hulst, M., and Michels, A., 2015. Enhancing participation in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods. *Local Government Studies*, 41(1), pp. 44-62.

Delli Carpini, M., 2000. Gen.com: Youth, Civic Engagement, and the New Information Environment. *Political Communication*, 17, 341-349.

Di Gennaro, C. and Dutton, W., 2006. The Internet and the public: Online and Offline Participation in the United Kingdom. *Parliamentary Affairs,* 59, 299-313.

DiMaggio, P., Hargittai, E., Neuman, W. R., and Robinson, J. P. 2001. Social Implications of the Internet. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27, 307–336.

Ekström, M., and Östman, J. 2015. Information, Interaction, and Creative Production: The Effects of Three Forms of Internet Use on Youth Democratic Engagement. *Communication Research,* 42(6), 796–818.

Ellison, N., and Hardey, M. 2014. Social Media and Local Government: Citizenship, Consumption and Democracy. Local Government Studies, 40(1), 21–40.

Feeney, M. K., and Welch, E. W. 2012. Electronic Participation Technologies and Perceived Outcomes for Local Government Managers. Public Management Review, 14(6), 815–833.

Fischer, F., 2006. Participatory Governance as Deliberative Empowerment: The Cultural Politics of Discursive Space. The American Review of Public Administration, 36(1), pp. 19–40.

Fitzgerald, J., and Wolak, J. 2014. The roots of trust in local government in western Europe. *International Political Science Review*, 37 (1). Pp. 130-146.

Franklin, M.N., 2004. *Voter turnout and the dynamics of electoral competition in established democracies since 1945.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fung, A. 2015. Putting the Public Back into Governance: The Challenges of Citizen Participation and Its Future. *Public Administration Review*, 75(4), 513–522.

Gibson, R., and Cantijoch, M. 2013. Conceptualizing and Measuring Participation in the Age of the Internet: Is Online Political Engagement Really Different to Offline? *The Journal of Politics*, 75(3), 701–716.

Gibson, R., Lusoli, W. and Ward, S., 2005. Online Participation in the UK: Testing a ' Contextualised Model of Internet Effects. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations,* 7, 561-583.

Haikio, L. 2012. From Innovation to Convention: Legitimate Citizen Participation in Local Governance. *Local Government Studies*, 38(4), 415–435.

Hepburn, P. 2014. Local Democracy in a Digital Age: Lessons for Local Government from the Manchester Congestion Charge Referendum. *Local Government Studies*, 40(1), 82–101.

Hustinx, L., Meijs, L. C. P. M., Handy, F., and Cnaan, R. A. 2012. Monitorial Citizens or Civic Omnivores? Repertoires of Civic Participation Among University Students. *Youth and Society*, 44(1), 95–117.

Inglehart, R., and Welzel C., 2005. *Modernization, cultural change and democracy: The human development sequence.* New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Kim, S., and Lee, J. 2012. E-Participation, Transparency, and Trust in Local Government. *Public Administration Review*, 72(6), 819–828.

King, S. F., and Brown, P. 2007. Fix my street or else: using the internet to voice local public service concerns. In: Proceedings of the 1st international conference on

Theory and practice of electronic governance (pp. 72–80). ACM. Consulted from: http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=1328076

Kupchik, A., and Catlaw, T. J. 2015. Discipline and Participation: The Long-Term Effects of Suspension and School Security on the Political and Civic Engagement of Youth. *Youth and Society*, 47(1), 95–124.

Lee, G., and Kwak, Y. H. 2012. An Open Government Maturity Model for social media-based public engagement. *Government Information Quarterly*, 29(4), 492–503.

Lee, J.S., 2014. An Institutional Framework for the Study of the Transition to Adulthood. Youth and Society, 46(5), pp. 706–730.

Meijer, A., Bannister, F., and Alfano, G. 2011. Adapting bureaucracy to the Internet. The case of Venice Local Government. *Information Polity: The International Journal of Government and Democracy in the Information Age*, 16(1), 5–22.

Mesch, G.S., 2012. Minority status and the use of computer-mediated communication: A test of the social diversification hypothesis. Communication Research, 39(3), 317-337.

Michels, A., and de Graaf, L., 2010. Examining citizen participation: Local participatory policymaking and democracy, *Local Government Studies*, 36(4), pp. 477-491.

Milbrath, L.W., 1965. *Political participation. How and why do people get involved in politics?* Chicago, IL: Rand McNally College.

Mossberger,K., Tolbert, C.J. and McNeal, R.S., 2008. *Digital Citizenship. The Internet, Society, and Participation*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Moynihan, D. P. 2003. Normative and Instrumental Perspectives on Public Participation: Citizen Summits in Washington, D.C. *The American Review of Public Administration*, 33(2), 164–188.

Norris, D. F., and Moon, M. J. 2005. Advancing E-Government at the Grassroots: Tortoise or Hare? *Public Administration Review*, 65(1), 64–75.

Norris, P. 2001, *Digital Divide. Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet Worldwide.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Papacharissi, Z. and Rubin A.M., 2000 Predictors of Internet Use. Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media, 44(2), 175-196

Pettersen, P.A. and Rose, L.E., 1996. Participation in Local Politics in Norway: Some Do, Some Don't, Some Will, Some Won't. *Political Behavior*, 18, 51-97.

Polat, R.K., 2005. The Internet and Political Participation. Exploring the Exploratory Links. European Journal of Communication, 20, 435-459.

Rainie, L., Smith, A., Schlozman, K. L., Brady, H., and Verba, S. 2012. Social Media and Political Engagement. Washington D.C.: Pew Research Center.

Roberts, N. 2004. Public Deliberation in an Age of Direct Citizen Participation. The American Review of Public Administration, 34(4), 315–353.

Rolfe, S. 2016. Divergence in Community Participation Policy: Analysing Localism and Community Empowerment Using a Theory of Change Approach. *Local Government Studies*, 42(1), 97–118.

Rosenstone, S. J. and Hansen, J.M., 2003. *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America.* New York: Longman.

Sacco, D., 2002. *Cybering Democracy. Public Space and the Internet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Saglie, J. and Vabo, S.I., 2009. Size and e-Democracy: Online Participation in Norwegian Local Politics. *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 32, 382-401.

Schlozman, K.L. Verba, S., and Brady, H.E., 2010. Weapon of the strong? Participatory inequality and the Internet. *Perspectives on Politics*, 8(4), pp. 487-509.

Shabe, P.M., 2004. Democracy Online. *The Prospects for Political Renewal Through the Internet*. New York/London: Routledge.

Thijssen, P., 2008. Het is stil waar het nooit waait. Online politieke fora als bakermat van publieke opinie. *Res Publica*, 50(2), 169-178.

Thijssen, P., 2009. Wie klaagt waar? Waar klaagt wie? *Bestuurswetenschappen*, 63(4), 47-64.

Thijssen, P., Siongers J., Van Laer, J., Haers, J., and Mels, S. (eds.), 2015 *Political engagement of the young in Europe. Youth in the crucible*. London/New York: Routledge.

Thomas, J. C., and Streib, G. 2003. The New Face of Government: Citizen-Initiated Contacts in the Era of E-Government. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 13(1), 83–102.

Thorson, K. 2014. Facing an uncertain reception: young citizens and political interaction on Facebook. Information, *Communication and Society*, 17(2), 203–216.

Van Dijck, J.A.G.M., 2005. *The Deepening Divide. Inequality in the Information Society*. London: Sage.

Verba, S., Schlozman, K.L., and Brady, H.E., 1995. *Voice and Equality*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Vissers, S., and Stolle, D., 2014. The Internet and new modes of political participation: online versus offline participation, *Information, Communication and Society*, (17)8, pp. 937-955.

Vissers, S., Hooghe, M., Stolle, D., and Maheo, V.-A. 2012. The Impact of Mobilization Media on Off-Line and Online Participation: Are Mobilization Effects Medium-Specific? *Social Science Computer Review*, 30(2), 152–169.

Vromen, A. 2003. "People Try to Put Us Down …": Participatory Citizenship of "Generation X". *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 38(1), 79–99.

Vromen, A. 2007. Australian young people's participatory practices and internet use. *Information, Communication and Society*, 10(1), 48–68.

Wakefield, J. 2014. Facebook turns 10 but are its days numbered? Consulted on 12/01/2016, from http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-25953225

Wattenberg, M.P., 2008. *Is Voting for young People?* New York: Pearson Longman.

Wilhelm, A.G., 2000., *Democracy in the digital age. Challenges to political life in cyberspace.* New York: Routledge.

Xenos, M., and Moy, P. 2007. Direct and Differential Effects of the Internet on Political and Civic Engagement. *Journal of Communication*, 57(4), 704–718.

Xenos, M., Vromen, A., and Loader, B. D. 2014. The great equalizer? Patterns of social media use and youth political engagement in three advanced democracies. *Information, Communication and Society*, 17(2), 151–167.

Young, I. M. 2000. Inclusion and democracy. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Zukin, C., Keeter, S., Andolina, M., Jenkins, K. and Delli Carpini, M.X., 2006. *A New Engagement? Political Participation, Civic Life, and the Changing American Citizen.* New York: Oxford University Press.

**Table 1: Online political uses-gratifications model as applied to the cases.**

| Case Study | Filing a problem report to the local authorities | | Being active on a political forum | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Medium | OFFLINE Via papermail | ONLINE Via email | ONLINE 'lurker' | ONLINE 'Poster' |
| Political Uses | Communicating with political decision makers | | Browsing forum discussions | Participating forum discussions |
| Manifest Gratifications (Polat) | Need for policy influence | | Need for political information | Need for political group dialogue and discussion |
| Particular Characteristics (Milbrath) | Less convenient | More convenient | Convenient (timing and place independent) | |
| | Open | | Covert (anonymous) | |
| | Instrumental | | Instrumental | Expressive |
| | Outtakes-oriented | | Outtakes-oriented | Inputs-oriented |
| | Elite-oriented - Vertical Elite-approaching | | Horizontal Limited impact of gatekeepers | Peer-oriented - Horizontal |
| | No political self-monitoring | | Political self-monitoring | Political self-monitoring |
| | One-way interaction | | One-way interaction | Two way interaction |
| Hypotheses | ←→ 'Differential skill hypothesis' | | ←→ 'Differential gratification hypothesis' | |

**Table 2: Who reports to local authorities?**

| | M1. Report by email (a) versus no report (b) | | M2. Report by offline medium (a) versus no report (b) | | M3. Report by email (a) versus complaint by offline medium (b) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | B | S.E. | B | S.E. | B | S.E. |
| Z age | 5.472*** | .426 | 3.592*** | .296 | 1.931** | .586 |
| Z age$^2$ | -4.810*** | .362 | -2.451*** | .223 | -2.402*** | .477 |
| Z Residence period | .217*** | .048 | .201*** | .035 | .068 | .064 |
| Gender | | | | | | |
|   Female | .000 | | .000 | | .000 | |
|   Male | .659*** | .080 | .483*** | .060 | .301* | .106 |
| Ethnicity | | | | | | |
|   Non-immigrant | .000 | | .000 | | .000 | |
|   Immigrant | -1.364*** | .161 | -.598*** | .107 | -.517* | .194 |
| Family composition | | | | | | |
|   Single, no children | .000 | | .000 | | .000 | .000 |
|   Single with children | -.078 | .195 | .095 | .134 | -.286 | .242 |
|   Couple with children | .508*** | .114 | .058 | .091 | .269° | .152 |
|   Couple, no children | .421*** | .110 | .008 | .072 | .253° | .139 |
|   Other | .070 | .368 | -.494 | .341 | .587 | .515 |
| | | | | | | |
| Constant | -5.816*** | .136 | -4.895*** | .099 | -.927*** | .176 |
| | | | | | | |
| n | 712 | | 1218 | | 712 | |
| N | 55634 | | 56140 | | 1930 | |
| % correctly classified | .987 | | .958 | | .642 | |
| Nagelkerke Pseudo R$^2$ | .077 | | .058 | | .135 | |

*Note*: Logistic regression analysis, dependent variable: issuing a complaint: yes = 1 and no = 0; n = total  a; N = total a + total b*** p < 0.0001; ** p < 0.001; * p < 0.01; ° p < 0.10.

**Table 3: Who posts on the online political forum?**

| | Posters on online forum vs lurkers | |
|---|---|---|
| | B | S.E. |
| Z age inverse (1/Age) | .238*** | .062 |
| Gender: | | |
| Female | .000 | |
| Male | .250 | .168 |
| Education level: | | |
| Primary | -.760° | .317 |
| Lower secondary | -.563* | .190 |
| Higher secondary | -.292° | .130 |
| Higher | .000 | |
| | | |
| Constant | .314° | .171 |
| | | |
| n | 719 | |
| N | 1242 | |
| % correctly classified | .585 | |
| Nagelkerke Pseudo $R^2$ | .031 | |

*Note*: logistic regression analysis, dependent variable: poster = 1 and lurker = 0; *** $p < 0.0001$; ** $p < 0.001$; * $p < 0.01$; ° $p < 0.10$.

**Table 4: Reasons for forum participation by age (percent)**

|  |  | Age | | | | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  |  | <35 | 35-55 | 56-70 | >70 |  |
| *Lurker* | Insight into the views of others | 36 | 30 | 24 | 39 | 31 |
|  | Keeping up to date with politics | 20 | 30 | 38 | 39 | 28 |
|  | Forming a personal opinion | 5 | 2 | 5 | 0 | 4 |
|  | As a pastime | 3 | 6 | 7 | 0 | 5 |
|  | Representing an organization or party | 2 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 1 |
|  | Making one's voice heard | 10 | 8 | 5 | 0 | 8 |
|  | Discussing politics and society | 13 | 12 | 2 | 8 | 10 |
|  | Being able to express one's opinion freely | 8 | 12 | 14 | 15 | 11 |
|  | Convincing others | 2 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 2 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Total | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |
|  | N | 157 | 164 | 87 | 13 | 421 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| *Poster* | Insight into the views of others | 26 | 34 | 35 | 18 | 30 |
|  | Keeping up to date with politics | 13 | 15 | 14 | 35 | 14 |
|  | Forming an opinion | 6 | 4 | 3 | 0 | 5 |
|  | As a pastime | 6 | 3 | 5 | 6 | 5 |
|  | Representing an organization or party | 5 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 4 |
|  | Making one's voice heard | 8 | 14 | 13 | 12 | 11 |
|  | Discussing politics and society | 26 | 13 | 11 | 6 | 19 |
|  | Being able to express one's opinion freely | 7 | 14 | 15 | 18 | 11 |
|  | Convincing others | 3 | 1 | 3 | 6 | 2 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Total | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |
|  | N | 307 | 205 | 100 | 17 | 629 |

Figure 1: Polynomial smoothed age structure. Reporters by email (dotted line), by offline medium (stripes line), and the rest of the population (black).
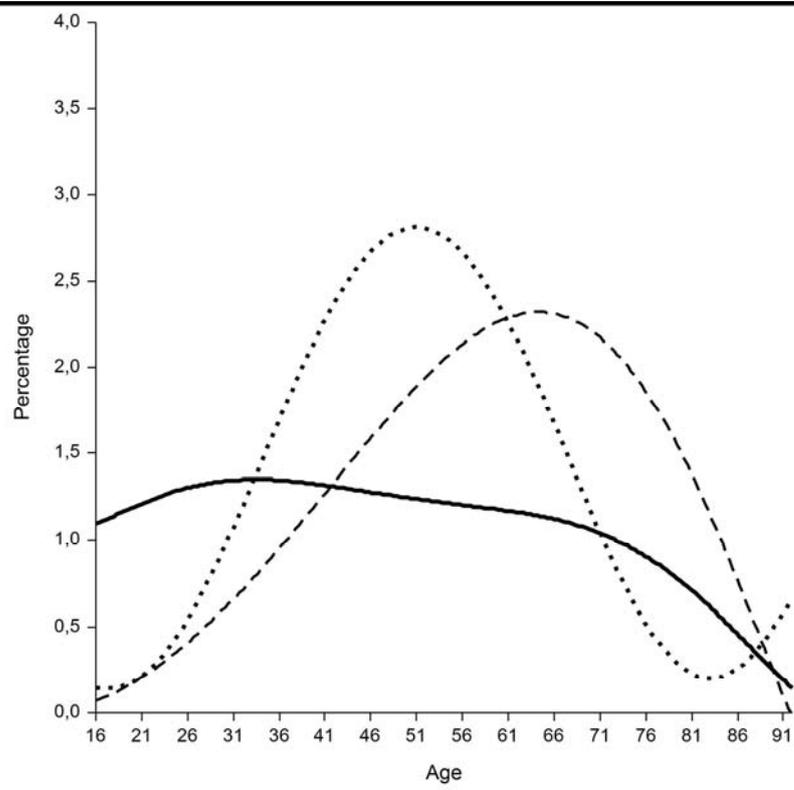
Figure 2: Polynomial smoothed age structure of posters (black) and lurkers (grey).