Does use of the Internet further democratic participation?
A comparison of citizens' interactions with political representatives in the UK and Germany

Note: Draft version.

Abstract

This paper focuses on use of the Internet to contact political representatives and assesses whether the Internet gives a greater and more representative share of the population the opportunity to participate in the political process. As such it speaks directly to the conference’s main theme on inequality. The comparative analysis of the UK and Germany combines secondary analysis of population surveys with original data collected from 2009 to 2011 in two online surveys from more than 14,000 users of successful contact facilitation platforms in the two countries (WriteToThem.com in the UK and Abgeordnetenwatch.de in Germany) that enable sending messages to representatives.

The results show that in both countries the Internet in general has only marginally increased the number of people engaged in contacting. At the same time, contact facilitation platforms as specific online applications have attracted large numbers of people who have never before contacted a representative. While all online means of contacting primarily amplify traditional participatory biases, such as for gender and education, they can at least selectively engage traditionally under-represented parts of the population, for example young people or low-income groups. It demonstrates not only that participation continues to be dominated by traditional determinants that cannot be completely overcome by technology, but also that Internet applications can shape participation patterns – if designed to appropriately adapt to the context in which they operate, which is rarely the case.

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Introduction

Inequality in contemporary societies can be observed in many different shapes and forms, from the distribution of income, availability of education or access to health service to name just a few. This is true also when focusing only on democratic societies. However, the most glaring inequality of all, one from which arguably many of the others derive, lies in the inequality in power to shape politics. Even though democracy is by its definition government by the people and the political equality of all citizens (one person, one vote), the citizens that make up these very people have very different power to influence political outcomes. This is all the more unjust because as decades of Political Science research have shown, this inequality is heavily linked to differences in socio-economic characteristics and status. Those with more income and education as well as men in their 40s and 50s are more politically active than the rest and have a better chance to have their political preferences reflected in actual policy.

This paper focuses on this long-standing inequality in patterns of political participation and aims to establish whether new, online-mediated forms of political participation can alter these patterns. To this extent it focuses on one particular form of political participation, namely citizens contacting political representatives. This research compares Germany and the UK and how engagement in contacting online (e.g. via email) differs from contacting offline (e.g. via letter or in person). In addition, it contributes unique empirical data to assess the role of particular contact facilitation platforms that are focused on establishing such communication between those who govern and those who are governed. While the analysis is based on data that has been collected between 2008 and 2011, the findings have implications for the role of the Internet for political participation that are today as relevant as they have been at the turn of the decade.

This article first summarises the state of research on political online participation before it sets out in detail how it addresses the gaps in the existing research. The main part of this paper is a comparison of how many and who contact politicians in the UK and Germany, and how the socio-economic patterns differ between different modes of contacting including via the particular platforms WriteToThem and Abgeordnetenwatch. The discussion highlights the factors that shape the observed patterns before the conclusion summarises what the results imply for the role online participation can play to address existing inequalities in democratic participation.

Previous Work

Political participation describes the voluntary activity of citizens aimed at influencing the political decision-making process. Even though there is debate on just how much participation beyond voting in elections is necessary in democratic systems, regular input from citizens through forms of participation is generally seen as one important way to ensure that elected representatives are responsive to those who elect them (Eulau, Karps, 1978; Pitkin, 1967). One of the consistent findings of Political Science research is that usually only few engage in forms of political participation such as demonstrations, donations or public debates, and those who do are far from representative of the population. Instead, the politically active tend to be drawn from backgrounds with higher socio-economic status (as expressed by income and education), the middle aged and (even though less so today) men. This has been shown extensively for all Western democracies (Brady et al., 1995; Pattie et al., 2004; Schäfer, 2012). According to a popular explanatory model developed based on extensive research by Verba et al. (1995), the reasons for these patterns can be traced back to three sets of factors: Resources to enable participation (such as education), motivation to actually participate (such as political interest), and networks to mobilise for engagement (such as membership in clubs).

This research has also demonstrated the important role that resources play for motivation, hence the social structure determines what choices are available to people and tends to make the
underprivileged remain passive instead of increasing their propensity to participate in order to change their situation and make politics work for them. This is a problem not only from a perspective of normative democratic theory that postulates political equality as a cornerstone of democracy along with the educative effect of participation (Dahl, 1989). Also from a more instrumental perspective it has to be assumed that excluding certain parts of the population from the political process leads to suboptimal political choices as the interests of those who participate are more likely be taken up by representatives (Bartels, 2008; Gilens, 2005). As Arend Lijphart (1997: p. 1) put it: “unequal participation spells unequal influence”.

For this reason, and because participation is seen as a recipe to address deteriorating trust in political actors and institutions, for decades political theorists as well as practitioners have aimed to increase participation, both in terms of general rates and in terms of increasing engagement by so far underrepresented groups (Barber, 1984; Pateman, 1970). Many democratic innovations have been proposed, from widening opportunities for direct democratic participation such as through referenda to consultative forms such as planning cells and deliberative polls (Geissel, Newton, 2012). The affordances of the Internet have for many reinvigorated these hopes for a better way to make democracy work for all (Poster, 1997), while others have feared the replication or even the widening of existing inequalities (Margolis, Resnick, 2000; Norris, 2001). The ability to communicate independent of time and space for marginal costs could reduce the resource barriers to participation. At the same time, research so far has shown clearly the existence of new barriers and a digital divide not in access to the Internet, but in skills to use it to one’s advantage (van Dijk, 2012; Norris, 2001). Similarly, the easy availability of information and new means of participation can increase interest in politics as some studies have indeed shown (Boulianne, 2011; Colombo et al., 2012). Still, others fear misinformation and distraction (Keen, 2007; Prior, 2005) and the replacement of participation by clicktivism or slacktivism as a form of political participation assumed to have little political relevance (Karpf, 2010). Similarly, the undoubted potential to use networks could both be advantageous to organise new forms of collective action (Kriplean et al., 2012) but also lead to isolation in filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2001).

On balance, so far empirical research on the use of the Internet for political participation has yielded two main results. First, while participation rates have certainly not dropped as some had feared, there has been no sizable growth either. If anything, a few more people have been engaged in politics through the availability of new online means (Boulianne, 2009; di Gennaro, Dutton, 2006; Kroh, Neiss, 2012). Second, compared to traditional (i.e. offline) methods of engagement, the group of people that is politically active online is usually marked by greater biases in participation patterns. They exhibit a strong bias towards educated men with strong political interest. The only exception to this has been the increased engagement of young people (Emmer et al., 2011; di Gennaro, Dutton, 2006; Gibson et al., 2005a; Oser et al., 2013; Schlozman et al., 2010). Yet, despite this significant body of research, the contribution of online means to more democratic participation is still not fully answered. In particular, the factors and mechanisms that produce the observed effects and their variations over time (Bimber, Copeland, 2013; Emmer et al., 2011) are still largely unknown as research into political online participation lacks a theoretical framework explaining individual decisions to participation (Bimber, Copeland, 2013; Kubicek et al., 2011; Macintosh et al., 2009; Pratchet et al., 2009).

Even though the task at hand is complex, the lack of knowledge about causes and effects of the Internet on political participation can be traced to problems in the research design of many of the existing studies so far. Three problems are particularly pertinent. First, a lack of focus in that studies aimed to assess an impact of the Internet as a whole on political participation in general. This approach is misguided for two reasons. On the one hand, the Internet as a technology allows for many different forms of use that each have specific affordances that can play out differently for different forms of
However, only recently have studies employed this differentiated perspective and analysed different forms of Internet use and their effects (Bimber, Copeland, 2013; Boulianne, 2009; Cantijoch et al., 2011; Oser et al., 2013). However, on the other hand, what is still largely lacking is a differentiation of political participation. Political participation is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, and each form of participation is associated with distinct barriers, resulting in different patterns of engagement (Parry et al., 1992; Schäfer, Schoen, 2013; Verba et al., 1995) and suggesting that the impact of technology on these patterns will also be specific. However, the majority of existing research would either assess effects on political participation as a whole, or simply focus on voting in elections. Second, there is a lack of comparative research as few researchers have studied development over time (Bimber, Copeland, 2013; Emmer et al., 2011; Kroh, Neiss, 2012) or compared across countries. Research can benefit from a comparative approach because it places individual findings in a wider perspective that allows assessing how well a project achieves a certain goal. In addition, it helps discern the causal processes that have led to the observed participation patterns as for each project the settings will differ, for example in terms of different design decisions. Much of the still rare comparative research that exists tends to focus on use of the Internet for campaigning (see for example Anstead, Chadwick, 2009; Gibson, Cantijoch, 2011; Lilleker, Jackson, 2011) or more generally, use of new media by governments (Chadwick, May, 2003; Dunleavy et al., 2006).

Third, while there is no shortage on population surveys, there have been few in-depth case studies of particular online applications which allow to investigate also the context of such processes. Those that have been made have usually research small scale and/or pilot projects with limited significance for their small group of users (Kubicek, Westholm, 2010; Pratchet et al., 2009).

Overall, this means that the precise effects of certain Internet applications on particular acts of political participation are still largely unclear, and all the more so what shapes these effects, i.e. the decisions of individuals to get engaged (or not) in the political process via online means. This article aims to make a contribution to answer these questions and the next section outlines in detail the research questions and how the problems of previous research are addressed.

Research Questions & Design

This paper focuses on the question whether the Internet and its opportunities for engagement give a greater share of the population the opportunity to participate in the political process, and hence contribute to popular control, and whether those who become actively engaged online are more representative of the population than traditional engagement and as such contribute to political equality. In order to address the issues of previous research outlined above this research focuses on one particular form of participation, namely citizens who contact their political representatives, in a comparison between the UK and Germany. What is more, it will specifically compare different ways of contacting online. In particular, it pursues the following research questions:

1. Does use of the Internet for contacting political representatives increase popular control and/or political equality compared to traditional means of contacting?
2. Does use of a contact facilitation platform to contact political representatives increase popular control and/or political equality compared to other means of contacting?
3. What are the similarities and differences in contacting patterns between the UK and Germany?
4. What are the factors that impact on contacting patterns in use of the Internet or use of contact facilitation platforms for contacting political representatives?

The next sections will set out the design in detail.
Contacting politicians as a form of political participation

Citizens who get in touch with their political representatives engage in an important form of political participation as it allows for direct communication between representatives and citizens. It provides representatives with potentially valuable information and offers citizens the opportunity to communicate their concerns in order to influence politics. However, equally important are citizens, usually constituents of say an MP, who contact their representatives for help. Both of what Eulau and Karps (1978) term ‘policy responsiveness’ and ‘service responsiveness’ are treated as political participation, because as Zittel (2010: p. 64) argues, “every national policy in a democracy is necessarily the sum of the individual problems and worries of its citizens.”

Contacting constitutes an established form of participation that enjoys considerable popularity. In the UK and Germany - the two countries under consideration here - about one in six citizens (UK: 17%, Germany 16%) have contacted a politician, government or local government official in the last year. While there is a lack of precise numbers, the available evidence – which refers mostly to MPs on the national level – suggests that the most prominent way of contact is in the form of written communication, i.e. mail as well as email, while far fewer citizens approach their representatives through a phone call or by attending a surgery (Norris, 1997: p. 30; Norton, 2002a). To provide a sense of scale, in the UK a survey of MPs by Russel et al. (2006) reported that in 2004 every other MP received more than 150 letters, emails or phone calls from individual constituents per week. German representatives receive less communication from citizens (Elsner, Algasinger, 2001; Patzelt, 1996; Saalfeld, 2002). Despite its significance and its regular inclusion in surveys on political participation, contacting as a discrete form of participation it has rarely been analysed in detail (Norton, 2002a).

This is all the more surprising, because it is particularly suitable to assess the contribution of the Internet to democratic participation because even by the standards of political participation in general, those people who are getting in touch are particularly biased from the population. As Table 5 for the UK and Table 6 for Germany show, compared to the population, contacters are biased towards men, older age groups (in particular middle-aged) and those with more resources such as higher education and higher income. They are also more politically interested and active in other forms of participation as well as in political groups. Those who engage in contacting do not simply mirror biases inherent in political participation patterns, but significantly extend them. This is the case for the over-representation of people with university degrees, high incomes, and participation in political groups. Contacters are also by a large margin more politically interested. Particularly notable is the bias towards men: both in the UK and Germany, political participation exhibits no gender gap, but contacting politicians is an activity with a clear male bias. This greater bias is likely be caused be the resources necessary to approach for example an MP, in particular knowledge on whom to address and the ability to communicate appropriately. Altogether, this has important implications for the messages communicated to representatives, resulting in substantial political inequality.

Given that this participatory act mainly involves communication, it should not be surprising that the opportunities of information and communication technologies have commanded particular interest to address these distortions. No matter whether constituents send an email to the address found on an election leaflet, use an online form provided on the MP’s personal website, or use a chat or a video message, common to all these means of online contact is that they constitute comparatively easy, quick, low-cost and interactive communication independent of time and space which could lower the barrier to participate. Also, it is much easier with the help of the Internet for citizens to find the relevant contact details and get in touch with the representative in the first place. This is very relevant as for example in the UK survey evidence has shown that every other citizen does not know the name of their...

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1 Based on data from the European Social Survey in 2008/09 when the original data for this article was collected.
constituency MP, and lack of time is the most popular reason not to get engaged in political activity (Hansard Society, 2007: p. 18,50). Altogether, this could activate more citizens to engage in contacting, and despite a lack of precise numbers, in general numbers of contacts have increased in both countries which could be caused by the diffusion of the Internet (Williamson, 2009; Zittel, 2010).

Research on the consequences of online means for the communication between citizens and representatives has been focused almost exclusively on representatives and their adoption of online technologies (Dai, Norton, 2007; Zittel, 2010). This has included use of social network sites such as Facebook for constituency communication (Elter, 2012; Jackson, Lilleker, 2011; Meckel et al., 2011; Siri et al., 2012; Williamson, 2009: p. 521). It has found that representatives do indeed make use of these new tools but rarely in an interactive fashion. The perspective of the citizens and who engages in this activity has rarely been studied. This gap is address by this research. In response to the problems of existing research as identified above, this research studies not only online contacting in general (i.e. regardless of whether communication is established by email, via a social network site or by any other online means) but also one particular use of the Internet for contacting through what is termed here contact facilitation platforms.

Contact facilitation platforms

This research studies contact facilitation platforms that allow citizens to get in touch with their representatives. The first site of such kind has been the British WriteToThem², which is part of this research and whose first incarnation dates back to the year 2000. From the start, it has enabled users to find their representative from the local right up to the European level via their own postcode and then deliver a message to them typed on the screen. The entire communication between citizens and representatives remains private, but through a follow-up survey mySociety, the NGO who runs the site, collects information on the responsiveness of the contacted representatives that are published on the site³. In 2010, about 85,000 citizens used the site to send more than 140,000 messages to representatives. Most of those (70%) were directed at MPs while 15% contacted local councillors. MPs have answered about 60% of the messages sent to them via the site.

It has established a genre which has seen many variations of the basic pattern of sending messages to political representatives via a website. One of them is the widely used German site Abgeordnetenwatch⁴ which is also run by a NGO and forms the second case study of this research. It focuses on allowing citizens to contact national MPs that could be found by post code as well as representatives of selected local and state governments. In contrast to the British WriteToThem, the entire communication takes place in public on the platform for everyone to see. In 2010, about 4,500 people used the site to contact an MP with a total of 8,700 public questions. About 80% of those public questions to MPs receive an answer.

Together, WriteToThem and Abgeordnetenwatch have inspired a variety of similar sites in other European countries⁵. The defining feature of contact facilitation platforms is that they add a level of transparency to the activity of contacting through the Internet, for example by measuring the responsiveness of the representative contacted or by making the messages that were exchanged

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² http://www.writetothem.com [29.06.2016]
³ https://www.writetothem.com/stats/2015/mps [29.06.2016]
⁴ http://www.abgeordnetenwatch.de [29.06.2016]
⁵ These include MeinParlament in Austria, PolitikerCheck in Luxembourg, Mail de politiek in the Netherlands, Parašykiems in Lithuania and NapišteJim in the Czech Republic. While all these sites focus exclusively on enabling contact between citizens and representatives, the features of contact facilitation platforms can also be found on websites with a broader focus, for example on dedicated campaigning websites (such as 38degrees in the UK or Campact in Germany).
accessible. To meaningfully enable this transparency, these sites need to be independent of the representatives contacted and to take care of transmitting the messages to them. So far, such sites have not previously been defined as a class of Internet applications in their own right. However, in this article it is argued that their set of features makes them distinct from other forms of online contacting, and this merits further investigation.

First, by taking care of delivering the message to an up-to-date address, contact facilitation sites are simplifying the process of contacting and as such can be expected to lower barriers to participation just in the positive way hypothesized earlier. Second, these sites make contacting more transparent. At a basic level this is by displaying information about the number of people engaging in this activity or how many citizens have written to a particular representative but depending on the setup of the site, some of these platforms also provide information on the topics raised to representatives, how many representatives reply and how fast they do so. This type of information was hardly available and has the potential to significantly increase the motivation of citizens to contact representatives. Third, this information transforms an act of participation which has usually been carried out in solitude (the mass mailing campaigns aside) into a more collective form of participation. Information about other contacters can encourage participation, for example by showing one is not alone in this endeavour. In addition, by ensuring that the individual participation has relevance beyond the act of contacting – as it contributes also to collective information – such platforms create additional reasons for contacting. Altogether such sites have the potential to increase numbers of contacters but so far they have received little academic attention and the few existing studies lack solid empirical basis (Albrecht, Trénel, 2010; Focks, 2007; Klötzer, 2011; Pautz, 2010; Smith, 2007).

Case studies: Germany and the UK

This article compares participation patterns in the UK and Germany in order to put the results into perspective and to identify possible factors influencing participation. While one motivation for their selection has been that they are home to two successful contact facilitation sites, they are particularly suitable for a comparison because they share a number of important characteristics. So are both countries stable, representative democracies and as such the principles of popular control and political equality can be applied. They have also similar levels of economic development and – as a necessary condition for online participation – share similar rates of Internet penetration that exceeded two thirds of the population at the time this research was conducted (Dutton et al., 2009; Eimeren, Frees, 2010). Furthermore, in terms of general political interest and engagement the population in both countries is very much alike. According to data from the European Social Survey in 2008/09, the majority of the population is at least quite interested in politics and half the population has been engaged in political activities in the last year. Even when it comes specifically to engagement in contacting both countries exhibit striking similarities with about one in six citizens having contacted a politician, government or local government official in the last year.

At the same time, both systems also exhibit differences, most importantly in their models of democracy. Following Lijphart’s (1984, 1999) distinction, the British model of democracy can be characterised as majoritarian which is ‘exclusive, competitive, and adversarial’, the German one is consensual and as such ‘characterized by inclusiveness, bargaining and compromise’. From this originate further differences such as the electoral systems (plurality in the UK and proportional representation in Germany) or the role perceptions of MPs whose implications will be discussed later on.
Data
For the analysis of online contacting in Germany and the UK this article relies on secondary analysis of population survey data from the respective countries. For the UK, this had been the Oxford Internet Survey (OxIS), a biennial survey of the British population conducted by the Oxford Internet Institute since 2003. Data from the fourth wave of OxIS (Dutton et al., 2009) provides information on the British population aged 14 years and above, based on personal interviews of 2,013 people (response rate 62%) in February and March 2009. The data is weighted to be representative for the population on gender, age, social grade and region. It enables a detailed distinction of participatory activities online and offline.

The primary data set providing comparative population data for Germany is the study ‘Politische Online Kommunikation’/ Political Online Communication (POC) by Emmer et al. (2011). In contrast to the other comparative data in use throughout this thesis it employs a panel design. It was established by the Universities of Ilmenau and Düsseldorf in 2002 with seven annual waves (with a gap in 2006). It is based on telephone interviews with randomly selected people living in Germany aged 16 years and older. The data is weighted only according to education.

In addition, standardised comparative data is also obtained from the European Social Survey, a bi-annual survey started in 2002 which provides comparative data for more than 30 European countries. It is based on strict probability random sampling of participants based on computer-assisted personal interviews (ESS Round 4, 2008). The data used here derives primarily from Round 4 for which in the UK 2,352 individuals were interviewed (data collected 1 September 2008 – 19 January 2009, response rate 55.8%) and in Germany 2,751 (data collected 27 August 2008 – 31 January 2009, response rate 48%). It is weighted to be representative of individuals aged 15 years and older.

Second, to establish who and what kind of citizens use online contact facilitation platforms, an online survey was carried out on each of the two case study sites. People who used the platforms during the survey time frame (WriteToThem: 11 February 2009 – 26 July 2010; Abgeordnetenwatch: 15 July 2010 – 15 September 2011) would receive an email with an invitation to participate in the survey. Importantly, in order to ensure comparability only those people are part of the analysis who used the site to send a message to a national MP (in contrast to representatives on the local or the European level). Each email invitation was accompanied by a link to an online questionnaire available from the respective site. In the typology of web surveys by Couper (2000) this constitutes a list-based sampling frame of a high (in this case full) coverage population.

A randomly sampled group of WriteToThem users (20% of users) were invited to the survey at the earliest two weeks after they had used the site. The sample comprises a total of 13,520 people who responded to the questionnaire and provided sufficient data to be included in the analysis. This represents a response rate to the survey of at least 45%. For Abgeordnetenwatch, as a standard procedure, the site sends an email to the user once the representative has provided an answer to their question. During the course of this research, this email prominently featured a link at the top and at the bottom inviting them to take part in the survey. The sample includes the responses from 668 people who received an answer to their message to an MP in the 14 months between 15 July 2010 and 15 September 2011 and who provided sufficient data to be considered for this analysis. This represents a response rate of about 17%. While for both samples there is only limited information available to assess their representativeness, apart from a possible over-sampling of frequent users the samples should basically be representative of the user population at large.
Results

This research aims to establish whether through use of the Internet more people contact their political representatives, and whether these people in their sociodemographic profile are less biased from the population than traditional contacters. This section will first discuss the results for online contacting in general in Germany and the UK, before discussing in particular the users of online contact facilitation platforms.

Contacting a politician online

Increasing the number of people engaged in contacting

The data from both the UK and Germany confirm that the Internet is indeed used to contact representatives, and increasingly so. For 2009 the data for the UK in Table 1 shows that half of all people who had been engaged in contacting in the previous year had used online means (some in combination with offline means) to get in touch with politicians or government officials. In contrast, in Germany (Table 3) at most 30% of all those who had contacted in the previous year had done so online. So clearly, Internet use for contacting is much more popular in the UK than in Germany.

The first concern of this research is whether or not use of the Internet will increase the number of people who take part in this particular form of participation. One possible sign of such an increase would be if the representative population surveys exhibit a rise in the share of the population who have engaged in contacting. At least for the UK this seems to have been the case. So do some (if not all) studies for the UK show that there was a very small but significant growth in the share of the population that within a given year got in touch with a political representative (Table 2). The most convincing explanation for this small rise is the increasing take-up of online means for contacting, because the share of online contacting has risen constantly.

In Germany rates of annual engagement in contacting someone in a political role had stayed constant, still there are signs that the new online means do activate people to contact politicians who might otherwise not have done so. Using the panel data it can be shown (see Table 4) that amongst all those who had not been in touch with someone in a political role before (defined as not having contacted in the year prior), there had been a significant share that had used only the Internet to do so. These constitute about 10% of all Internet users who contact for the first time in a given year which in itself represents less than 2% of all annual contacters. While these have not increased contacting rates overall, it can be assumed that these people had indeed been activated by online means and remained passive otherwise.

So in sum, there is a very small activation effect of the Internet that in the UK has contributed to a small increase in contacting rates, while in Germany this might have offset what was otherwise a decline in traditional contacting.

Reducing inequality in participation

The second main concern of this article is the question of whether those people who use the Internet to engage in contacting are more representative of the population with respect to a number of politically relevant characteristics than those who only rely on traditional (i.e. offline) means. If this were to be the case then online means of contacting would contribute to greater political equality.

For selected politically relevant characteristics, Figure 1 shows the deviation of the profile of those who used online means for contacting from those who relied only on offline means. To aid the comparison, the visualisation uses the Logged Representation Scale (LRS) to measure the bias of online contacters from offline contacters. It is explained in more detail in the Appendix but basically it is a symmetric measure of just how over- or underrepresented a particular characteristic is among online contacters.
contacters in relation to the group of people who engage in offline contacting. For example, for the UK it reports an LRS of 0.3 for the characteristic high income. This indicates that the share of high-income online contacters is twice as high as that among traditional contacters, reflecting the fact that 43% of online contacters earn more than £40,000 while this is the case for only 21% of offline contacters (see Table 5 and Table 6 for actual numbers from the UK and Germany respectively).

For some characteristics the deviations are large, but not all of the differences visible in the diagram are actually significant. Those biases that are not significant are displayed in shaded bars. Both countries share patterns in respect to a number of characteristics. One important shared result is that the Internet does not significantly alter the engagement patterns of traditional contacting in relation to those 55-64 years old, the unemployed or the degree of other political engagement. This means that the Internet in both countries fails to make a positive contribution to greater political equality for these characteristics compared to offline contacting. Worse still, given that offline contacters are already biased on these characteristics, this means it is mirroring these biases. Online contacting also fails to significantly alter the under-representation of the young inherent in offline contacting. Still, online contacters clearly are less biased against young people and also Figure 1 shows that more young people contact online than offline but in both countries the numbers of young people engaged in contacting, in particular offline, are simply too small to indicate that these differences are significant.

The real negative impact of the Internet for contacting – in comparison to those who only contacted offline – is that it extends a number of existing biases or even introduces new ones. So in both countries online contacters are more often male, for example in Germany 53% of people who got in touch offline are men, while 73% of those who use online means (also in combination with offline) are men. In both countries online contacters are also more often employed or self-employed than offliners (both by a factor of about 1.35), while retired people are strongly under-represented. In the UK the resource bias of online contacters is much stronger than in Germany as in the UK these are better educated, have higher incomes and much less often low incomes.

So in sum, with the exception of increased engagement by young people, online contacters do not reduce existing biases in the profile of contacters. On the contrary, as online men with a higher income (and at least in the UK, better education) are even more likely to contact, existing biases are exacerbated.

Contacting via contact facilitation platforms
While the results presented above offer little justification to assume the Internet would improve existing inequalities in participation – at least when it comes to contacting – the question remains whether the effects of specialised online applications such as the contact facilitation platforms differ from the effects of Internet use for contacting as a whole.

Increasing the number of people engaged in contacting
More than half of the people who have used WriteToThem to contact an MP have never before contacted any kind of representative. On average through the years from 2005 to 2010, 56% of the more than 250,000 users of the site said they contacted a representative for the first time. The rate for Abgeordnetenwatch is slightly lower but according to the survey still more than 40% of its users have only ever contacted a representative with the help of the platform. Putting these figures in perspective is not straightforward, but it can be estimated that the share of people who contact for the first time amongst all people who contacted representatives in any given year, regardless of the means used, is about 10-20% of all annual contacters (see Escher, 2013 for a detailed discussion). Despite the error that is inherent in these estimates it is beyond doubt that both contact facilitation
platforms are much more successful in bringing people to get in touch with representatives than other ways of offline or online contacting.

While in this way both platforms are clearly contributing to increase popular control in this form of political participation, WriteToThem is the more successful, having a higher share of first-timers. In addition, the British contact facilitation platform is also much more successful in activating people into contacting that are less engaged in political participation (beyond use of the platform) and that are less often active in political groups, in this way also contributing to more popular control beyond contacting. So are only 25% of people who used WriteToThem for the first time otherwise politically active, while amongst contacters in general this figure is 82% (see first-time contacters in Table 5). The British site is also more heavily used to get in touch with MPs than Abgeordnetenwatch, and even though the numbers can only be estimated, it is beyond doubt that WriteToThem accounts for a larger share of all online contacters in the country.

Reducing inequality in participation

In both countries the profile of people who use contact facilitation platforms exhibits differences from the profile of offline as well as from the profile of other online contacters – so these platforms do indeed constitute a particular form of contacting representatives. However, with a few exceptions in both countries the profile of people that these contact facilitation platforms attract tends to decrease rather than increase political equality, but the patterns in the two countries are not exactly the same as Figure 2 and Figure 3 show. Again, those biases that are not significant are displayed in shaded bars, and only those differences between the countries are highlighted where both exhibit a significant bias which is also significantly different from each other.

In relation to the biases from traditional contacters, users of these platforms are more often male and university-educated than offline contacters but the level of under-representation of the young and over-representation of those 55-64 years old corresponds to that of offline contacters. In terms of resources users of these platforms are more biased than offline contacters. This bias is stronger in the UK with a greater bias towards high-income and employed or self-employed people accompanied with a bias against unemployed and low income people. What is more, compared to offline contacting, WriteToThem strongly under-represents old and retired people. While Abgeordnetenwatch has an even stronger bias towards educated users (1.3x stronger than the UK bias), it exhibits positive contributions to political equality by increasing representation of the otherwise resource-poor such as those with low income and those in unemployment (by factor 3.7) while reducing the over-representation of (self-)employed people.

When platform users are compared to those using other forms of online contacting, both WriteToThem and Abgeordnetenwatch exhibit positive and negative contributions. On the positive side, both platforms increase representation of resource-poor parts of the population, most notably in relation to those with low incomes but also by including more unemployed – even though this fails to get significant as these are so few in numbers amongst online users. Not least both platforms reduce the over-representation of those organised in political groups. On the negative side, both contact facilitation platforms exhibit a strong bias against young people, both under-representing them by a factor of about 2.5 compared to online contacters. Instead, they extend over-representation of 55-64 year olds. In addition, Abgeordnetenwatch has a particular negative effect on political equality because it further exacerbates the over-representation of men with university degrees which cannot be offset by the positive contribution in increasing engagement of unemployed and low-income parts of the population.

So overall, also the two contact facilitation platform do little to reduce participatory biases. Some positive effects occur at the margins with the sites drawing more people from backgrounds with low-
income and/or in unemployment and without existing ties in political organizations, but in particular Abgeordnetenwatch further extends the distortion on gender and education.

Discussion
From the perspective of this article, if through use of the Internet more people contact their political representatives this would increase popular control. Similarly, if these people in their sociodemographic profile are less biased from the population than traditional contacters, it would enable greater political equality. Overall this would contribute to what can be called more democratic participation. This section will discuss whether the results reported above suggest such an interpretation, before discussing in more detail what can be assumed to have shaped the observed patterns.

More democratic participation through the Internet?
Does the Internet engage people to contact representatives who have not done so before? The short answer is yes, but only in very minor ways. For one thing it can be shown that both in the UK and Germany people get in touch with representatives online who have not been engaged in contacting before. This has been very clearly demonstrated by the contact facilitation platforms in both countries on which about half of it users state they have never before contacted a representative. This is particularly notable for the British site, which attracts people who are not otherwise politically engaged and which is more successful in activating people who are not organised in political groups than Abgeordnetenwatch in Germany.

However, this activation effect has been limited to these particular platforms. Overall, there was no sizeable increase in annual figures of engagement in this form of participation from the early 2000s when the Internet played little role for contacting, to 2009 when it accounted for a substantial part of activity in contacting. It is possible that new online forms of contacting have mitigated waning engagement in traditional contacting in what would otherwise had been a decline in contacting rates but clearly, online means of contacting have only marginally activated formerly passive people to engage in contacting. Therefore, the opportunities of the Internet for contacting representatives constitute only a very minor contribution to popular control. It is larger in the UK where contacting rates have risen and more people only rely on the Internet for contacting than in Germany where the majority of those using online means are actually traditional contacters who have added the Internet to their repertoire of contacting channels.

What is more, in both countries online contacting has not made a positive contribution to political equality. Instead, compared to traditional ways of contacting it has had a negative impact on political equality, in particular so in the UK. On the Internet, existing biases towards men with university degrees and higher incomes are extended further. The picture is little different for the contact facilitation platforms. Compared to offline forms of contacting both platforms decrease political equality because both exacerbate the gender bias and extend other biases as well – either education (as in Germany) or resources (as in the UK). Compared to online means of contacting both platforms exhibit some positive signs but fail to make a sizable positive contribution. While they do draw participation from resource-poor parts of the population, they do not reduce the strong gender and education bias or as in the case of Abgeordnetenwatch make it even worse. Particularly surprising is the underrepresentation of young people on both platforms as compared to online contacting in general as this is usually the only contribution of the Internet for participation.

Despite these biases of online contacting, in both countries, the profile of people engaged in contacting has not changed very much with the growing use of the Internet for contacting during the first decade of the 21st century. If online contacting had changed the composition of contacters, then one would
expect to see a growing bias towards male and resource-rich contacters, but nothing like this has taken place. Instead, the distinct profiles of online and offline contacters are the result of a differentiation process within a rather stable (in numbers and profile) group of contacters in which the resource-rich contacters more often choose online means, the resource-poor ones more often offline means. The stability of contacting patterns is also a logical consequence of the only minor contribution to popular control as the Internet brings only very few new people into contacting. For this reason it does not have the potential to alter the socio-economic profile of contacters very much.

In review of the findings, in relation to this particular form of political engagement, online means of participation have delivered very few of the hopes for more and more equal participation. Still, there are significant differences in effects between different modes of contacting online, and also between the countries analysed. The next section discusses on what can be inferred from these similarities and differences for the factors that shape participation patterns online.

What shapes participation patterns online?

Differences between online contacting and contact facilitation platforms

The overarching finding of this research is that new online means for getting in touch with politicians have done little to increase rates of engagement or change the biases in participation patterns. Based on the explanatory model of political participation outlined earlier, the findings suggest that the resources necessary to get in touch online are not significantly lower than the ones required for traditional contacting, and that the new opportunities do no increase motivation to get active. At the same time, contact facilitation platforms could activate people so the question is what these do differently?

Turning to resource barriers first, in both countries contacting representatives via the Internet exhibits biases, in particular in terms of resources. Citizens who have a higher education and more income are more likely to use the Internet for contacting than those who have not. It is indeed not hard to see why online participation – despite the hopes of making participation easier – in the first instance creates additional barriers to participation by demanding more resources. Without access to the Internet there can be no online participation, but very much in the same way as income and education determine political participation, they also determine Internet usage (Helsper, 2008; Norris, 2001). What is more, it is not just access to the Internet but also the relevant skills to use it that have been shown to increase political activity online (di Gennaro, Dutton, 2006; Ofcom, 2009). Again, it is basically those people who lack traditional resources who also lack these skills (Helsper, 2008; Mossberger et al., 2003). It is also unlikely that any behaviour of representatives could reduce this disadvantage of resource-poor citizens. In effect, those who are already disadvantaged by their lack of education or income – that prevents many of them from offline participation – are for the same reasons also less likely to use the Internet for political participation. As such there exists a double barrier to online participation, i.e. the barrier is even higher than those for participation offline. Therefore it is no surprise that online participation is more biased than offline participation and the contacting figures show that impressively.

In contrast, contact facilitation platforms could activate people for engagement and it was hypothesized that this is because the opportunity to find representatives via a postcode and the few steps required to send a message would make it easier to contact representatives. Indeed, comments of those people who used the platform to contact a representative for the first time in their life illustrate that they have indeed been helped by this ease of use:

‘It hand holds you through the process so you can almost switch your brain off! This is the best aspect.’ (WTT969)
‘One of the simplest sites to use I have ever come across. [...] I found myself writing to my MP before I knew it! I love the way all the links are there and you can almost follow it all through with just mouseclicks. Very user friendly – even my mother would be able to follow it!’ (WTT72)

‘finally a website that offers a very good and very simple way to question representatives concerning political issues, which is otherwise cumbersome or rather impossible’ (AW186)

‘Abgeordnetenwatch makes it easy to contact the appropriate representative’ (AW252)

As such it can be instrumental in getting people to contact which is highlighted by these comments of people who used these site to contact a representative for the first time:

‘i would have had NO IDEA how to contact my MP before using your site.’ (WTT4447)

‘This has made the difference between me not writing to my MP and actually doing it.’ (WTT9090)

‘It is the only way I know of to establish a direct contact with my representative.’ (AW2)

‘Because apparently in this country even in the 21st century this is the only opportunity to directly participate in our democracy’ (AW5)

Apart from resources, does online contacting also increase motivation to get in touch with politicians? While to contact a representative by email might be cheaper and faster than to write a letter, this in itself is apparently not enough to increase motivation. Clearly, this is different for the contact facilitation platforms as they provide responsiveness statistics and it was hypothesized that this can motivate citizens to contact representatives. Again this can be confirmed by comments from first-time contacters:

‘I like the idea of someone monitoring our MPs and whether or not they are doing their jobs’ (WTT8846)

‘It makes the process extremely easy and I suspect the MPs cannot ignore messages coming from this site because they know their actions are being tracked.’ (WTT7946)

‘The representatives should know that I monitor their political behaviour.’ (AW300)

‘Abgeordnetenwatch is an excellent portal to control politicians and to inform oneself.’ (AW307)

In the case of Abgeordnetenwatch some users are additionally motivated by the public record of the conversation:

‘because I am of the opinion that my question and in particular their answers are of interest to the public too’. (AW111)

‘For me this is a good opportunity to discuss interesting questions directly with the representative and make the answers available to others in an easy way.’ (AW345)

In summary, online contact facilitation platforms achieve their high rates of activation of people who have so far never contacted representatives by increasing both the capabilities of citizens to contact – by making it easier to get in touch – as well as the motivation to do so by keeping track of the responsiveness of representatives and, as in the case of Abgeordnetenwatch, making the
communication public. This also increases representatives’ motivation to respond and as such increases citizens’ motivation to use such a site.

Nevertheless, the effects of the two contact facilitation platforms analysed here differ both in rates of activation but also in the profile of people who use it. The next section discusses likely explanations for this.

Differences between WriteToThem and Abgeordnetenwatch

While the contact facilitation platforms in both countries share similar effects, in detail there are a number of differences in the observed participation patterns that merit investigation. Broadly speaking, from a perspective of democratic participation the British site WriteToThem performs better than Abgeordnetenwatch because it activates more people into contacting that have never done so before and in contrast to Abgeordnetenwatch, it does not further extend the bias towards men and people with a university education. When considering the reasons for these differences, three distinct factors can be identified. These are the levels of government that can be contacted via the sites, the motives of people using the site, and the publicness of the communication.

First, it does make a difference which level of government is contacted. Research has established that people who contact local representatives are less biased from the population than people who contact national MPs (Crewe, 1985: p. 55; Parry et al., 1992: p. 416). Parry et al. (1992: p. 418) argued that the reason for this is that on the local level citizens have more political knowledge and oversight due to their immediate involvement and experience – which reduces the resource barriers. As a result, citizens feel that if at all, they can have more political influence in local rather than national affairs (Pattie et al., 2004: p. 46). An additional explanation can be found in the particular responsibilities of local level representatives, such as council housing, which attracts more contacts by those on low incomes who are reliant on such provisions. Of the two contact facilitation platforms analysed here, only the British WriteToThem facilitates to contact also local and district councillors. An analysis of the users of the site confirms these findings of previous research (see Figure 4). So are those who get in touch with local councillors significantly less biased from the population in terms of gender, education and lower income groups. More importantly, however, they are also less politically active beyond use of the site and are less often organised in political groups. Not least, the majority (70%) have never contacted a representative before which is significantly more than is the case among those who get in touch with MPs.

Therefore through enabling contacts with representatives on the local level, WriteToThem activates so far passive and hence under-represented groups of the population. This matters for the analysis presented here - which has focused exclusively on contacting MPs - because almost one in five of those who first used the site to contact on the local level continued to use WriteToThem to get in touch with MPs too. In other words, through the opportunity to contact local representatives, WriteToThem attracts less politically involved citizens who are then ‘recruited’ to contacting MPs. In contrast, Abgeordnetenwatch, by focusing mainly on the national and state level, lacks this avenue for engaging usually less involved citizens. As a result, WriteToThem users include more from otherwise under-represented backgrounds.

Second, turning to motives of contact, earlier on two major functions of citizen contacts were distinguished. Influencing policy (Policy responsiveness) or seeking help (service responsiveness). In other words, citizens may contact a representative with a collective motive, i.e. something that affects several people (e.g. tax breaks for families), or with a personal motive that affects primarily the contacter herself (e.g. sorting out an issue with the immigration office). However, as the data from WriteToThem users in Figure 5 shows, contacters with personal motives are more representative of the population than are those with collective motives. Those with clearly personal motives are
significantly less biased in relation to gender, education, income, unemployment as well as political activity and group involvement. In addition, they are less politically active and organised than the population, illustrated also by the fact that the majority has never before contacted a representative (54% vs. 31%). Apparently a personal grievance can act to increase motivation to overcome usual resource barriers. In contrast, a motivation to influence collective issues relies on resources such as time as well as education to actually foster a feeling of political efficacy.

On WriteToThem, 20% of users have such clearly personal motives, while this is the case for only 4% of Abgeordnetenwatch users, hence the greater biases in terms of gender and education amongst users of the German site. There are two reasons for why personal motives for contacting play a greater role on the British site. One derives from the fundamentally different role perceptions of MPs in the two countries. For British MPs concludes Norton (2002b: p. 32) that ‘In terms of their representative role, their work on behalf of the constituency and individual constituents is seen as more important than their other representative roles.’ In contrast, their German counterparts see this Welfare Officer role much more critical (Herzog et al., 1990: p. 67; Patzelt, 1997) and define themselves ‘primarily as legislators and executive ‘watchdogs’ rather than constituency case workers’ (Saalfeld, 2002: p. 53). These role perceptions derive from the different models of democracy in place discussed earlier.

The other reason goes back to the third factor, publicness of communication. By only allowing public communication, Abgeordnetenwatch effectively prevents those with personal motives from contacting and hence lacks the mitigating effect on the more biased profile of people who contact with collective concerns. As a result, Abgeordnetenwatch exhibits more severe biases for gender and education because by focusing on public communication between citizens and representatives, it primarily attracts those with collective motives, who are more often male and rich in resources. However, public communication is not necessarily in opposition to elicit participation from marginalised groups as the relatively large usage of Abgeordnetenwatch by unemployed people highlights. An analysis of this usually under-represented group reveals that their activity had been prompted by a major German welfare reform of 2003 by the name of Hartz IV. This legislation determines the amount of benefits paid to those without a job. It has always been controversial and at the time of the fieldwork period the Bundestag was in the process of amending this law. Hundreds of messages written to MPs during the fieldwork period contain references to this issue. Through its design Abgeordnetenwatch had increased the capability of unemployed citizens to receive a response by giving them an easy opportunity to demand an explanation in public. This increases the likelihood of receiving a response as it increases the motivation of representatives to respond because of the public scrutiny enabled by the site. In turn this increased capability would also translate in increased motivation to engage in contacting because the chances of receiving a response are greater, altogether resulting in a larger number of unemployed users.

This discussion has identified a number of processes through which the patterns reported earlier are shaped. Among these are the design of the site and how for example the responsiveness statistics as a distinctive feature of contact facilitation platforms increase motivation to contact, or how simple to use online tools address the – compared to offline contacting in fact larger – barriers to participation online. What is more, it has highlighted the complex interplay between macro- and micro-level factors which for example shape the roles of representatives and as such impact on the motives of citizens. It was shown that this has important implications for their socio-economic profile, as has the nature of communication (public vs. private) as well as the level of government that is contacted.

**Future research**

Apart from updating the figures reported here, future research on contact facilitation platforms would benefit from systematically including the perspective of the political representatives because too little
is known about how they perceive these sites. The analysis of platforms in additional countries would be a test of the stability of the patterns reported here. Additionally, interviews and focus groups with users are a way to learn about what individuals perceive as barriers and opportunities of such sites. A focus on the issues that are brought to the attention of representatives via such sites might also be promising, for example by analysing the effects of specific campaigns on their audience. Not least, a comparable in-depth study of use of emails, letters and surgeries would provide valuable references to put the findings into perspective.

While this research has focused on the act of participation itself and not on its consequences, it would be useful to have more research in relation to assessing the impact of these forms of online participation on those individuals who engage in it. Are they more satisfied? Does it increase their feeling of political efficacy? For example it is also possible that a failed participatory action (however ‘failed’ is defined) might discourage citizens from more action in the future.

Future research should certainly assess how the context of contacting has changed since the start of the decade. At the time of this research, most political representatives were using social media but virtually no serious interaction took place via these means. Since then social media as well as campaigning sites have increased prominence and whether these have become an additional channel of communication between citizens and representatives needs to be assessed. In addition, the common complaint of representatives about email overload can hardly be substantiated based on empirical evidence because there is a lack of (longitudinal) studies of amount and type of communication received by representatives. Those few that are available are out of date, focus on the national level and lack sufficient detail. On the other hand, the population survey research into political participation is lacking. For a dedicated study of the influence of the Internet on contacting, what is needed is representative survey research that distinguishes what type of representative was contacted, how often and when it was done (ever or only in the last year) and which means were used to do so.

**Conclusion**

At the core of this research has been the question of whether the Internet contributes to greater mobilization of citizens to engage in political participation, in particular for those from traditionally under-represented groups of the population. This has been analysed using the example of citizens who get in touch with their political representatives. This form of participation offers a suitable testing ground because it exhibits particular biases in the sociodemographic profile of contacters and the opportunities afforded by new information and communication technologies are especially suited to transform communication between citizens and representatives.

In sum of all the results presented here it can be concluded that the opportunities offered by the Internet can indeed mobilise citizens to engage in this specific form of political participation who have so far remain passive. This addresses some of the long-standing inequalities outlined in the beginning of this article. However, this is true only with two important limitations: First, this potential applies in particular for the contact facilitation platforms that have been analysed here but hardly for the Internet in general. In contrast to this, contact facilitation platform in both countries could activate about half of the users of these platforms that had never before got in touch with a representative. Second, apart from engaging some additional young people, this mobilisation through the Internet occurs mainly in groups that are rich in resources such as education and income and as such already over-represented in the political process. As a result the profile of online contacters differs very much not only from the population, but also from that of other forms of participation.
Given that the data analysed in this article was collected between 2008 and 2011, there is an obvious question as to how relevant the findings are today. While future research will need to update the analysis to reflect the development of recent years, on the basis of the longitudinal data presented here it is unlikely that there has been a significant increase in rates of contacting. Also, the sociodemographic patterns of contacters have shown remarkable stability over the reported timeframe so that any significant change is unlikely. Most importantly, the findings obtain their relevance from the fact that they reveal some basic mechanisms of political participation online. Specifically from this research into contacting representatives three more general conclusions can be drawn for the potential of the Internet for political participation:

The Internet can further democratic participation

It is a major finding of this research that it is possible to use the Internet to further democratic participation. This empirical research has shown this not in any hypothetical sense but in actual practice, and not just in a singular event but independently from each other in two countries and sustained over time. While previous research, based on the little effects observed would need to assume small effects, this comparative research with its focus on a particular form of participation has shown that online forms of participation do not necessarily extend traditional patterns of participation. Instead, particular online application can break traditional patterns of participation. In the cases analysed, the specifically designed online applications broke traditional motivation patterns (i.e. that only few people get engaged into participation who have not done so before), traditional group patterns (i.e. that political participation is associated with higher involvement in political groups), and in part also traditional socio-economic resource patterns (i.e. that those low in resources participate less).

These findings bode well for other forms of online participation: there is a real opportunity to use online technologies for successfully reaching out to disengaged people. But it is when looking at the processes that have enabled these positive effects that it becomes clear also how difficult this is as the next finding shows.

Traditional factors constrain the potential of the Internet to further democratic participation

The second major finding of this research is that despite the positive results cited above, the processes that have shaped traditional participatory patterns are far from dead. This is clearly illustrated in both countries by the large bias in many socio-economic characteristics of online contacters which are dominated by men with high education, higher incomes and in their middle-age. Even though the analysed platforms markedly differ in their design, e.g. in terms of publicness of communication or who can be contacted, overall the participation patterns exhibit substantial overlap, suggesting the important role played by factors independent of the technology itself.

As such this research provides a qualification of the theories about the optimistic expectations for the Internet. It cannot be expected that applying the Internet to political participation will automatically solve the participatory dilemmas that have been so well documented for the last few decades. The analysis of online contacting in general has shown that the traditional socio-economic biases inherent in this particular form of participation together with the inequalities in Internet access and online literacy act as a double barrier to online contacting. This results in an extension and amplification of the already existing biases and hence a diminishing of democratic participation. This is not limited to the form of political participation that has been the focus of this research. Instead, these processes apply in just the same way to online efforts for other forms of political participation or for citizen-government interactions more generally.
Participation is not only determined by resources that enable participation but also by motivation to do so. However, many of the factors that impact on the motivations of citizens to participate are beyond the control of online platforms. For example, it was shown how macro factors such as the role perception of political representatives can impact upon the participation motives of individuals, or how governmental legislation can create an atmosphere in which even people with low propensity for engagement become ready to participate. However, this research has also shown that online applications still have the power to shape participation patterns by the way in which they are adapted (or not) to the specific context in which they operate. This points to the crucial role of design that forms the third finding.

The design of Internet applications matters

The third major finding of this research is that the design of Internet applications - i.e. the functionality that is offered and the way interaction with the site is organised - matters for their success or failure to further democratic participation. How appropriately the applications respond to the context in which they operate can determine their success or failure to make a positive contribution to democratic participation.

This research has been able to demonstrate this by the intra-country comparison between use of the Internet for contacting in general and contact facilitation platforms in particular. Contact facilitation platforms have a narrow focus, implement features to make contacting easy and add additional value through transparency. All this leads to a number of positive contributions for democratic participation as discussed above. In contrast, without such specific measures use of the Internet tends to diminish democratic participation because it rarely achieves a mobilisation and considering all those who used the Internet for contacting exhibits mostly increasing biases. The power of design is also highlighted by the failure of contact facilitation platforms to engage young people: the only reason for their avoidance of these platforms is that their design does not cater to their media preferences, because young people do in fact use the Internet to contact representatives – only they rely on other means. Through their design online applications can improve the capability of potential participants as well as their motivation – even though within the limits set by external factors, as outlined above. The difficulty is discerning the relevant factors and developing the appropriate design responses.

As a last note, from a methodological perspective, this research represents the first detailed comparative analysis of contacting representatives from the perspective of citizens in the UK and Germany. Furthermore, contact facilitation platforms as one particular use of the Internet to enable this form of participation have hardly been researched at all, and this research has contributed original data from two of the largest of such sites, based on the responses of several thousand users. It has confirmed that the research strategy outlined in the beginning - which has argued for a focus on particular forms of Internet use and certain acts of political participation in a comparative context - is indeed fruitful to discover effects of the Internet on political participation and how these are shaped.
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Tables

Table 1: Rates of engagement in contacting politicians/government officials within the last year and means used, UK (2002, 2005, 2009, 2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Percentage of Population Engaged in Contacting</th>
<th>Percentage of Those Contacting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Offline only</td>
<td>Online &amp; Offline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>14 (ever)</td>
<td>12 (MPs only)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N: 1,972 2002; 2,185 2005; 2,013 2009; 1,960 2010

Notes: Values are rounded except those smaller than 1%.

Table 2: Linear models testing development of share of population engaged in contacting within the last year, UK (2001 – 2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>European Social Survey</th>
<th>Citizenship Survey</th>
<th>Audit of Political Engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Correlation (Pearson)</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beta</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>0.003*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Citizenship Survey, based on a random sample of the population aged 16+ in England and Wales, sample size varies from 9,305 to 10,115; European Social Survey, based on random sample of the UK population aged 15+. Sample size varies from 1,894 to 2,392; Audits of Political Engagement (Hansard Society) based on quota sample of UK adults, sample size varies from 1,051 to 2,038. The Citizenship Survey asked about contacts with local councillors and MPs in the last year, as did the Audit of Political Engagement albeit for contacts within the last two to three years. The ESS enquired about contacts with politicians or (local) government officials in the last year.
Notes: Significance of beta coefficient indicated by ** p≤0.01; * p≤0.05; (*) p≤0.1.
Table 3: Rates of engagement in contacting someone in a political role within the last year and means used, Germany (2002 – 2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2002</th>
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<th>2006</th>
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<td>percentage of population engaged in contacting</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>- offline only</td>
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<td>-</td>
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<td>15</td>
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<td>- online only</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- use of online</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>percentage of those contacting</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- offline only</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- online &amp; offline</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- online only</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- use of online</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N coverage</td>
<td>1,460</td>
<td>1,415</td>
<td>1,573</td>
<td>1,655</td>
<td>1,414</td>
<td>1,199</td>
<td>809</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: POC 2002 – 2009

Notes: Values are rounded except those smaller than 1%.

Table 4: Means used for Internet users’ first-time contact with someone in a political role, Germany (2003 – 2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>number of Internet users who contacted within the last year but not in the year prior</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>58</td>
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<tr>
<td>of those percentage who used:</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- only offline means</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- both online and offline means</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- only online means</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95% confidence interval</td>
<td>[1,18]</td>
<td>[5,21]</td>
<td>[8,27]</td>
<td>[4,20]</td>
<td>[5,24]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(N)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>(8)</td>
<td>(10)</td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>(7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: POC 2002 – 2009

Notes: The data has been weighted with the weights of the respective wave. Confidence intervals based on assumption of a standard normal distribution of the respective proportion.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>percentage of respective group with this characteristics (N)</th>
<th>male</th>
<th>higher degree</th>
<th>high income</th>
<th>low income</th>
<th>&lt;25 yrs</th>
<th>55-64 yrs</th>
<th>65+ yrs</th>
<th>(self-) employed</th>
<th>unemployed</th>
<th>retired</th>
<th>disability</th>
<th>politically active</th>
<th>active in pol. groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>population (2,013)</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>politically active citizens (687)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internet users (1,401)</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contacted politician/government official (236)</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- only offline (119)</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- online (and offline) (117)</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>36</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- only online (71)</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WriteToThem users (who contacted MP) (13,520)</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- first-time contacters (6,050)</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>- contacted before (7,470)</td>
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<td>57</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>16</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>21</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

(Table continued)
Table 5 continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Logged Representation Scale (LRS) scores</th>
<th>male</th>
<th>higher degree</th>
<th>high income</th>
<th>low income</th>
<th>&lt;25 yrs</th>
<th>25-44 yrs</th>
<th>45-64 yrs</th>
<th>65+ yrs</th>
<th>(self) employed</th>
<th>unemployed</th>
<th>retired</th>
<th>disability</th>
<th>politically active</th>
<th>active in pol. groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>politically active citizens</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>-0.17</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.29</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet users</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>-0.26</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>-0.34</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
<td>-0.32</td>
<td>-0.24</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contacted politician/</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.32</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>government official</td>
<td>- only offline</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.33</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>-0.28</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- online (and offline)</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>-0.46</td>
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<td>0.08</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>-0.38</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- online &amp; offline</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>-0.34</td>
<td>-0.58</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-0.28</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.22</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- only online</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>-0.58</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
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<td>-0.03</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WriteToThem users</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
<td>-0.48</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(who contacted MP)</td>
<td>- first-time contacters</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>-0.17</td>
<td>-0.36</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>-0.25</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>-0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- contacted before</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>-0.21</td>
<td>-0.61</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>-0.26</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: OxIS 2009, mySociety user survey 2009/10. Respective case numbers are reported in brackets in first column above.

Notes: The LRS scores report the bias of the respective group from the British population aged 14 years and older. Higher degree is university degree or equivalent, excludes those who were still in education (except those on postgraduate degrees). High income is total annual household income before tax of more than £40,000 (WriteToThem: £37,500); low income is no more than £12,500.

Engagement in contacting was based on the following question: ‘There are different ways of trying to improve government or help prevent things from going wrong. In the last year, have you done any of the following? Option a): Contacted a politician, government or local government official (e.g. your MP or a councillor).’
Political participation and the politically active part of the population was defined as within the last year having done at least one of the following activities: signed a petition, took part in a demonstration, deliberately bought certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons, donated money to a political or civic organisation or group, contacted a political party or joined a civic organisation or association or a political party. For WriteToThem, it excludes use of the site itself to contact a representative.

Engagement in groups was based on the following questions: for political groups: ‘Do you participate to the activities of: A trade union, an environmental or animal welfare organisation, any other political or campaigning organisation?’; for WriteToThem based on the following question: ‘In the last twelve months have you been involved with a political or a community group, e.g. by being a formal member or by volunteering? a political group (e.g. a party, an union, a civic organisation e.g. for human rights)’. 
Table 6: Politically relevant characteristics: distribution and bias from German population for those who contacted someone in a political role and users of Abgeordnetenwatch (2008, 2010/11)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>percentage of respective group with this characteristics (N)</th>
<th>male</th>
<th>higher degree</th>
<th>high income</th>
<th>low income</th>
<th>&lt;25 yrs</th>
<th>55-64 yrs</th>
<th>65+ yrs</th>
<th>(self-) employed</th>
<th>unemployed</th>
<th>retired</th>
<th>disability</th>
<th>politically active</th>
<th>active in pol. groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>population (1,199)</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>politically active citizens (630)</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet users (841)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contacted someone in a political role (237)</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- only offline (167)</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- online (and offline) (70)</td>
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<td>74</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- online &amp; offline (52)</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- only online (18)</td>
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<td>33</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abgeordnetenwatch users (who contacted MP) (668)</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- first-time contacters (272)(^a)</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- contacted before (374)(^a)</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Table continued)
Table 6 continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Logged Representation Scale (LRS) scores</th>
<th>male</th>
<th>higher degree</th>
<th>high income</th>
<th>low income</th>
<th>&lt;25 yrs</th>
<th>25-54 yrs</th>
<th>55+ yrs</th>
<th>(self) employed</th>
<th>unemployed</th>
<th>retired</th>
<th>disability</th>
<th>politically active</th>
<th>active in pol. groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>politically active citizens</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet users</td>
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<td>0.1</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.37</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>-0.33</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contacted someone in a political role</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>-0.38</td>
<td>-0.2</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- only offline</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>-0.32</td>
<td>-0.32</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- online (and offline)</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>-0.6</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>-0.2</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- online &amp; offline</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>-0.49</td>
<td>-0.24</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.29</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- only online</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>-0.42</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abgeordnetenwatch users (who contacted MP)</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.39</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.34</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- first-time only</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>-0.32</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>-0.37</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- contacted before</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.43</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>-0.35</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: POC 2008; Abgeordnetenwatch user survey 2010/11. Respective case numbers are reported in brackets in first column above.

Notes: The LRS scores report the bias of the respective group from the German population aged 16 years and older, except for the data on disability which is derived from ESS 2008 and based on population aged 15 years and older. High income is total monthly household income after tax of more than €2,250 (~£1,800), low income is total monthly household income after tax of no more than €1,100 (~£875). Higher degree stands for university degree or equivalent, excludes those who were still in education.

Engagement in contacting was based on the following questions: coded as ‘online’: ‘Within the last year, did you have any personal contact online with someone in a political role, i.e. via email, chat or a newsgroup? This would not only include professional politicians but also for example a representative of a citizen’s...
Within the last year, did you have any personal contact via telephone or mail with someone in a political role? This would not only include professional politicians but also for example a representative of a citizen’s initiative!

The data on disabilities is derived from the European Social Survey 2008, as the respective variable was not available from POC data. It lacks a differentiation by means used to contact.

Political participation and the politically active part of the population was defined as within the last year having done at least one of the following activities: signed a petition, took part in a demonstration, or other person in a political role, donated money to a political group or for a political cause, displayed a political button/sticker. For Abgeordnetenwatch, also included ‘boycotting a product’ but excludes use of the site itself to contact a representative.

Activity in political groups was based on the question: ‘In the last year, have you actively worked in a trade union, political party, citizens’ initiative, organisations for the protection of animals or the environment or any other political organisation.’ (Note: this question was only asked of respondents who indicated they were already a member of the respective group). For Abgeordnetenwatch users based on the question: ‘In the last twelve months have you been involved with any of the following groups? ... a political party or group (e.g. a union, an environmental or human rights group)”

The case numbers of first-time contacters on Abgeordnetenwatch and those who have contacted previously do not add up to the total as not all respondents answered the question about whether or not they had contacted any type of representative before.
Figures

Figure 1: Socio-economic biases of people who used the Internet to contact a politician from those who contacted offline only: Comparison between UK (2009) and Germany (2008)

Source: UK: OxIS 2009 (N – contacted politician/government official offline only=119; N – contacted politician/government official online (and offline)=117); Germany: POC 2008 (N – contacted someone in a political role offline only=167; N – contacted someone in a political role online (and offline)=70)

Notes: Baseline of this comparison are those people who only used offline means to contact politicians or someone in a political role in the respective country. Those biases that are not significant are displayed in shaded bars, and for the comparison between the countries only those differences are highlighted in red where both exhibit a significant bias which is also significantly different between the countries. For a detailed overview and variable definitions, refer to Table 5 for UK and Table 6 for Germany. Political participation excludes contacting politicians or someone in a political role.
Figure 2: Socio-economic biases of people who used a contact facilitation platform to contact an MP from those who contacted offline only: comparison between WriteToThem (2009/10) and Abgeordnetenwatch (2010/11)

Source: UK: OxIS 2009 (N – contacted politician/government official offline only=119); mySociety user survey 2009/10 (N=13,520); Germany: POC 2008 (N – contacted someone in a political role offline only=167); Abgeordnetenwatch user survey 2010/11 (N=668)

Notes: Baseline of this comparison are those who used only offline means to contact politicians or someone in a political role in the respective country. Only contact facilitation platform users who contacted an MP. Those biases that are not significant are displayed in shaded bars, and for the comparison between the countries only those differences are highlighted in red where both exhibit a significant bias which is also significantly different between the countries. For a detailed overview and variable definitions, refer to Table 5 for UK and Table 6 for Germany. Political participation excludes contacting politicians or someone in a political role or use of the contact facilitation platform respectively.
Figure 3: Socio-economic biases of people who used a contact facilitation platform to contact an MP from those who contacted online: comparison between WriteToThem (2009/10) and Abgeordnetenwatch (2010/11)

Source: UK: OxIS 2009 (N – contacted politician/government official online (and offline)=117); mySociety user survey 2009/10 (N=13,520); Germany: POC 2008 (N – contacted someone in a political role online (and offline)=70); Abgeordnetenwatch user survey 2010/11 (N=668)

Notes: Baseline of this comparison are those who used online means to contact politicians or someone in a political role in the respective country, including those who used both online and offline means. Only contact facilitation platform users who contacted an MP. Those biases that are not significant are displayed in shaded bars, and for the comparison between the countries only those differences are highlighted in red where both exhibit a significant bias which is also significantly different between the countries. For a detailed overview and variable definitions, refer to Table 5 for UK and Table 6 for Germany. Political participation excludes contacting politicians or someone in a political role or use of the contact facilitation platform respectively.
Figure 4: Socio-economic biases of WriteToThem users:
comparison between those who contacted a local councillor and those who contacted a national MP, UK (2009/10)

Source: OxIS 2009 (N=2,013); mySociety user survey 2009/10 (N – councillors=1,041; N – MPs=13,520)

Notes: Baseline of comparison is British population aged 14 years and older. Political activity excluded use of WriteToThem. Refer to Table 5 for definitions of variables.
Figure 5: Socio-economic biases of WriteToThem users who contacted an MP: differences between those contacters with a collective and those with a personal motive, UK (2009/10)

Source: OxIS 2009 (N=2,013); mySociety user survey 2009/10 (N – answered questions about motives and could be categorised according to classification below=1,312)

Notes: Baseline of comparison is British population aged 14 years and older. Clearly collective motives: Users who stated they wanted to express an opinion on an issue concerning all people in the community, nation or world. Clearly personal motives: Users who stated they sought help on a problem affecting only themselves or family or people like them. Political activity excluded use of WriteToThem. Refer to Table 5 for definitions of variables.
Appendix - Logged Representation Scale

This article uses two approaches to measure how representative the people contacting their representatives are: the Logged Representation Scale (LRS) developed by Verba et al. (1995: p. 182) and $\chi^2$-tests. The LRS offers a simple and convenient way of indicating the degree of distortion of a single characteristic, in other words the size of the gap between a population and a sample. It is calculated as follows: 

$$LRS = \log\left(\frac{\%\text{age of people in group with given characteristic}}{\%\text{age of comparator group with given characteristic}}\right)$$

For example, suppose the people contacting an MP via WriteToThem are 70% male while men constitute 50% in the population, then the LRS is 0.15 (logarithm of 70 divided by 50). The useful properties of the LRS as highlighted by Verba et al. (1995) are:

- 0 indicates no distortion between sample and population;
- positive values indicate an over-representation in the active group (as in the example), negative values indicate an under-representation;
- it is symmetrical and has no upper or lower bounds (-\infty to +\infty) so that a LRS of -0.15 indicates the same gap between two groups as 0.15 but in the former case a group is under-represented and in the latter over-represented;
- the LRS is dimensionless and therefore comparable across different categories.

The LRS provides a simple and easily comparable measure of distortion. However, one issue with the LRS is that due to its logarithmic nature it is not completely intuitive to compare the extent of bias represented by two LRS scores. For example, while an LRS of 0.18 indicates an over-representation by factor 1.5, an LRS of 0.352, i.e. twice that amount, represents in fact only an over-representation by a factor of 2.25. Instead, a bias of twice that size (i.e. by factor 3) is represented by an additional 0.3 value in the LRS score, i.e. 0.48. The following table summarises some key values of LRS scores to help compare the extent of biases.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LRS score</th>
<th>over-representation by factor</th>
<th>LRS score</th>
<th>under-representation by factor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>0.667</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-0.30</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-0.48</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-0.60</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>-0.9</td>
<td>0.125</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: For example, in a group of interest 25% of members share a certain characteristics while in the reference group, e.g. the population, only 20% exhibit this characteristic. This represents an over-representation by a factor of 1.25 which is indicated by a LRS score of 0.1. Conversely, if the shares are reversed the LRS score of -0.1 indicates an under-representation by factor 0.8.

In order to test whether any given LRS score is statistically significant, a $\chi^2$-test is applied against the null hypothesis of no distortion, translating into an LRS equalling 0 (Verba et al., 1995: p. 577).