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Going online. Does ICT enabled-participation engage the young in local governance?

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ABSTRACT

Local governments increasingly use online strategies to strengthen political participation of citizens in policy and politics. Young people, however, are generally under-represented. This article studies age patterns of participation across offline and online forms of action to test whether online initiatives are able to overcome this age bias. We first report a case study of online and offline problem reporting to local authorities. We find that simply going from offline to online participation reinforces rather than mitigates age bias. We then report a case study of message posting on an online political forum. In this case, age bias disappears. In contrast to the traditional instrumental modes, a forum is an expressive form of online participation. The young seem to value the *act* of participating over the *outcomes* of participation. For practice, these findings suggest a need for participation policies that speak to these expressive needs of young. In recent years, social media have reinforced the potential for expressive participation.

KEYWORDS Participation; age bias; online; social media; expressive needs; uses-gratification

Introduction

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

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Participation in policy and politics, however, faces the threat of systemic exclusion of certain groups, such as religious minorities, indigenous peoples, women, the old, the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer population, the unemployed, recent immigrants and the youth (Rosenstone and Hansen 2003; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Roberts 2004; Barnes 1999). Representation has therefore always been a principal issue in research on political participation (Pettersen and Rose 1996; Clark, Brudney, and Jang 2013; Young 2000). With the rising importance of deliberative democracy, the issue of representation becomes all the more pressing (Barber 2003). The active exchange of information between citizens and government is central for governmental decision-making and policy formulation. The exclusion of youth from this exchange may lead to policies that are irresponsive to the needs of this very group (de Graaf, Van Hulst, and Michels 2015; Michels and de Graaf 2010).

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

The current article studies age patterns of participation across offline and online forms of political action to examine whether online initiatives are able to overcome this age bias in participation. Gibson and Cantijoch (2013, p. 701) argue that limited attention has been paid to the relationship between online and offline political activity, particularly the extent to which online activity simply replicates offline activity. This is precisely the issue this article speaks to. We study whether going online with an offline, local reporting website replicates or suppresses age bias in participation. We find that age bias is indeed reinforced and attribute this to the instrumental needs to which the reporting website caters. We then present additional evidence from an online forum that suggests that the young value expressive, rather than instrumental, needs. Analysis is based on two representative behavioural data sets examining both online and offline political participation.

First, we discuss explanations for age bias against youth in participation. Next, we propose a uses-gratification model to conceptualise differing expectations of participation for different groups. Uses-gratification theory specifies the distinct political needs of youth, as well as the ways in which

different ways of using the Internet may gratify these needs. Based on this uses-gratifications model, we define the case contexts to study the hypotheses in the 'Online uses-gratifications model and research hypotheses' section. Finally, in the 'Case studies' section, we describe the results of the two case studies.

Explaining age biases in participation

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

Does going online have an influence on this lifecycle effect? Two hypotheses can be distinguished. The first is the *differential skills hypothesis*. Youth today are viewed as belonging to the 'Internet generation' (e.g., Bimber 1999; Krueger 2006). Hence, the lifecycle effect is neutralised due to the specific context of technological socialisation in younger generations (e.g., Norris 2001; Best and Krueger 2005; Di Gennaro and Dutton 2006; Saglie and Vabo 2009). Digital natives supposedly possess unique resources in terms of Internet skills and/or access. These resources substantially reduce the cost of political activity for younger generations. Though today's youth may have less interest in participating in politics, acts of participation may be less demanding and more attractive for them in an online context. Some scholars even suggest that online participation favours younger generations over older ones, reversing the lifecycle effect (e.g., Inglehart and Welzel 2005; Dalton 2002, 2008). Because today's youth are generally better educated and more prone to question hierarchical authority, they prefer action patterns that are more horizontal and reject traditional vertical modes of political activity drawn from a sense of civic duty (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Dalton 2008).

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

Not only do skills differ between generations, but also preferred gratifications. The *differential gratification hypothesis* is the second account of how going online affects the participatory propensity of the young. Expressive generations are in favour of political activities that allow them to directly challenge and influence the political ideas of authorities and co-citizens. While the political activities of older generations may be generally driven by instrumental rationality (outcome-oriented), contemporary youth may be more motivated by value-expressive rationality (Inglehart and Welzel 2005). While the young are less outcome-oriented, they may nevertheless eagerly look for political activities that gratify a self-expressive necessity for dialogue. The Internet caters to these types of horizontal and self-challenging activities (Papacharissi and Rubin 2000; Bennett 2007). In this sense, it may be more appealing to the young (Dalton 2008, 66). The different participation patterns of younger generations lead Thijssen et al. (2015) to conclude that the generational decline is misunderstood. Instead of a decline in participation, younger generations have expanded their civic repertoire beyond traditional channels. However, participation in policy and politics often remains bound to traditional channels of participation.

In the remainder of the article, we test the hypotheses of differential skills (Internet generation or reinforcement effect) and differential gratifications. To do so, we first conceptualise the various ways the Internet is used for participatory initiatives, taking into account that those initiatives gratify specific needs in specific ways. To this end, we use an online political uses-gratifications model (e.g., Kaye and Johnson 2002).

Online uses-gratifications model and research hypotheses

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

insofar as the same kind of co-productive activity is investigated, except for the variable 'medium'.

Differential skill hypothesis ('Internet generation')

Whereas the filing of offline problem reports to local authorities is characterised by a parabolic age effect with the youngest and oldest citizens being less politically active, no age effect is expected for problem reports by email.

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

Differential gratification hypothesis

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

Case studies

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

The first case concerns a local initiative where residents can report problems in the public domain and propose solutions as to how the government could improve local living conditions. The programme is comparable to *fix-my-street* reporting schemes used in many other cities (King

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

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

Our data predates the era of social media. The exponential growth of Facebook users, for instance, only began in 2008 (Wakefield 2014). Clearly, significant technological advances have been since we collected the data. However, there is value in comparing data from a pre-Facebook era. Our study has a unique design with two cases that are clearly instrumental and expressive. Such a design would be much harder to produce today. Current social media venues may serve both expressive and instrumental purposes (Bonsón et al. 2012; Lee and Kwak 2012; Thorson 2014). Tweets, likes and shares can have instrumental aims, expressive qualities or both. This makes analysis more difficult. Moreover, the underlying social mechanisms of different skills and needs that inform our analysis are more stable than technological advancements. For local politicians who want to reach out to the young, the insight that the young are motivated by expressive needs is still notable in the social media era. Finally, we believe the data has distinct empirical qualities. A correspondence of the data with a civil registry allows for in-depth socio-demographic analysis. Moreover, the data describes actual, instead of reported, behaviour.

Although both cases concern forms of online participation, there are significant differences between the two. Online reporting follows a top-down logic, wherein authorities initiate the medium and seek participation from citizens. Activity on a political forum, on the other hand, is essentially horizontal in nature. Assuming that younger generations are more attracted to non-hierarchic horizontal participation while older citizens are more familiar with traditional reporting tools, we expect a different age structure in the groups of users participating in the two online venues (Amnå 2010).

Moreover, the sending of an email is an activity neatly described by instrumental rationality, whereas the discursive context of participation in a political forum is related to expressive value. In this context, we combine Polat's (2005) typology of uses of online political action with Milbrath's (1965) gratification dimensions. The differences between cases are presented in Table 1.

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

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

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

become homeowners, engage in permanent relations and start families. In other words, instrumental interest in policies and politics takes shape.

Case study 1: instrumental participation in local problem reporting by email

Data set

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

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

Age difference

Figure 1 compares the age distributions of the 721 individuals who reported at least once by email (dotted line), the 1,229 individuals who reported through an offline medium (stripes line) and the 69,315 residents of Deurne who filed no reports (black line) in the 2004–2007 period. Age is regarded here as an uncategorised, continuous variable. The patterns that emerge are clearly curvilinear in both cases. In the group aged 35–70, there are disproportionately more residents who reported a problem by email. Under the age of 35 and above 70, there are comparatively fewer reports by email. Both the average and the median age of reporters who used email are 51, indicating that the distribution is fairly symmetrical. Dalton's assumption that the Internet is mainly for younger generations is called into question. It may well be the case that younger generations spend more time on the

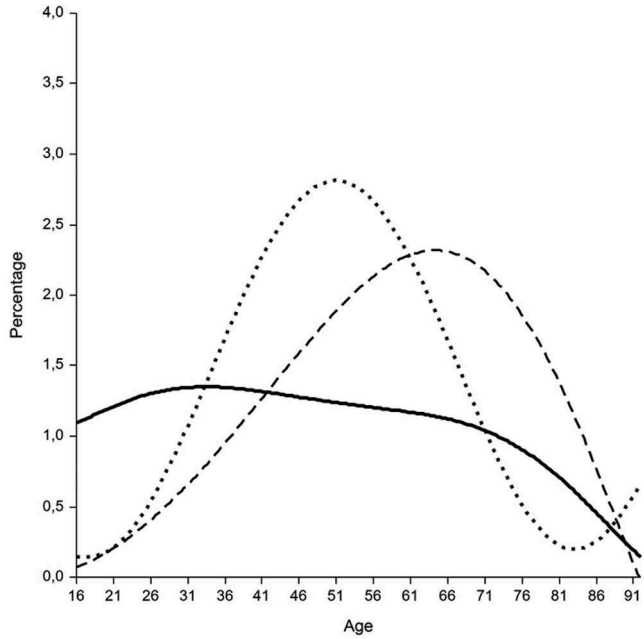

Figure 1. Polynomial smoothed age structure. Reporters by email (dotted line), by offline medium (stripes line) and the rest of the population (black).

Internet, but apparently not to report on local policy issues. Furthermore, the data suggest that familiarity with the Internet from a young age is not a requirement for the use of this medium. On the face of it, the group reporting local problems by email mainly consists of middle-aged residents. Though, among senior citizens, there are also a number of individuals who seem attracted to the comfort and speed offered by the digital realm. Wattenberg (2008) appears to be correct in asserting that, even in relatively new and electronically mediated forms of participation, younger generations are outnumbered by older generations. Though, it should be noted that this observation does not hold true for the oldest group, those over 70 years old. In other words, if the age variable were to be categorised, it would be worthwhile to also distinguish between citizens over 50 and over 70.

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

Table 2. Who reports to local authorities?

	M1. Report by email (a) versus no report (b)		M2. Report by offline medium (a) versus no report (b)		M3. Report by email (a) versus complaint by offline medium (b)	
	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.
Z age	5.472***	.426	3.592***	.296	1.931**	.586
Z age^2	−4.810***	.362	−2.451***	.223	−2.402***	.477
Z Residence period	.217***	.048	.201***	.035	.068	.064
Gender						
Female	.000		.000		.000	
Male	.659***	.080	.483***	.060	.301*	.106
Ethnicity						
Non-immigrant	.000		.000		.000	
Immigrant	−1.364***	.161	−.598***	.107	−.517*	.194
Family composition						
Single, no children	.000		.000		.000	.000
Single with children	−.078	.195	.095	.134	−.286	.242
Couple with children	.508***	.114	.058	.091	.269†	.152
Couple, no children	.421***	.110	.008	.072	.253†	.139
Other	.070	.368	−.494	.341	.587	.515
Constant	−5.816***	.136	−4.895***	.099	−.927***	.176
n	712		1218		712	
N	55,634		56,140		1,930	
% correctly classified	.987		.958		.642	
Nagelkerke Pseudo R^2	.077		.058		.135	

Logistic regression analysis, dependent variable: Issuing a complaint: yes = 1 and no = 0; *n* = total *a*; *N* = total *a* + total *b*. ***$p < 0.0001$; **$p < 0.001$; *$p < 0.01$; $^{\dagger}p < 0.10$.

problems to the local authorities through traditional channels of communication.

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

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

Case study 2: expressive participation in an online political forum

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

Data

In this second case study, we focus on the audience participating in an online political forum called Politics.be (Thijssen 2008). Politics.be (http://forum.Politics.be) is an independent forum for the debate of domestic and international politics, moderated by volunteers. Between 25 August 2006 and 14 October 2006, a web survey was sent to the addresses of the then 7,433 registered members of Politics.be. In total, 1,329 people responded. The request to participate in the survey came from the researchers but was disseminated by the moderators of Politics.be. Following the initial email on 25 August, reminders were sent on 6 September and 4 October.

The web survey reached 18% of the forum's registered members. However, this figure is an underestimation, as the longevity of email addresses tends to be short. Given that the online forum Politics.be was launched in 2002, it is reasonable to assume that a substantial proportion of the originally registered email addresses were no longer valid at the time of the survey. Moreover, it is also reasonable to assume that some individuals registered several times on the forum, but responded to the survey only once. After comparing the subjective survey data with the objective log

data, we found that of the 1,115 members who posted at least one message during the period from 1 January 2006 to 14 October 2006, 438 participated in the survey, suggesting a response rate of 39% among posters. Focusing on the 369 most intensive posters during the same period, each of whom posted over 100 messages, the response rate further rises to 50%. The 1,330 respondents accounted for 188,042 messages during the aforementioned period, amounting to 51% of the total number of messages (367,549) posted within that time frame.

Age difference

Figure 2 represents the age distribution of the population of 1,329 registered members who participated in the web survey. We look separately at the 563 lurkers (42%) and the 766 posters (58%). As discussed, lurkers are registered users who follow the debates but do not actively participate in them. Unlike the previous case study, this case confirms Dalton's Internet generation hypothesis, reflecting that youth do not participate less, but merely use a different repertoire. The figure shows that the prevalence of younger generations is stronger among posters (black line) than among lurkers (grey line). The peak representing young adults, for example, is more pronounced among posters than among lurkers. Interestingly, the peak for

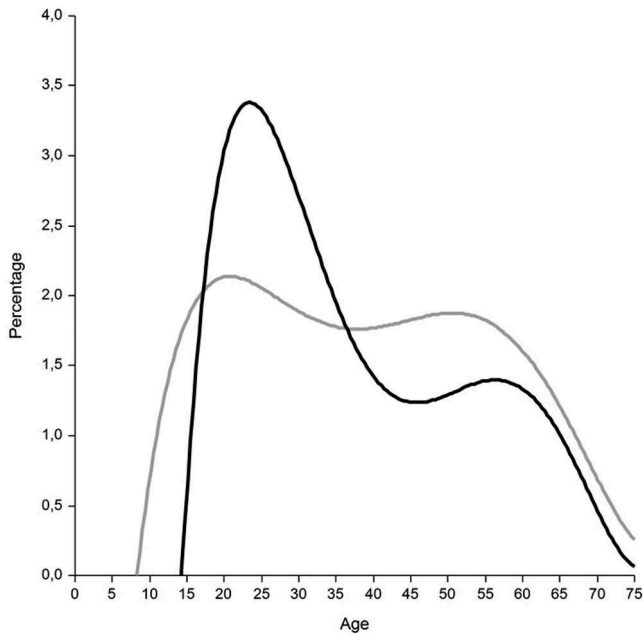

Figure 2. Polynomial smoothed age structure of posters (black) and lurkers (grey).

young posters ranges from 16 to 35 years of age, confirming the sociological trend of a prolonged adolescence.

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

Unlike electronic reporting of a problem, an instance of vertical interaction between citizens and government, debate between forum members is an example of horizontal interaction. Furthermore, problem reporting serves a concrete policy purpose, whereas reasons for participating in an online political debate are more diffuse. In problem reporting, the benefit to be gained is essentially extrinsic and users' motivation is instrumental. In the case of forum participation, the benefits are essentially intrinsic and users tend to be driven by a gratification of expressive needs.

Case 2 seems to confirm the differential gratifications hypothesis. Table 4 provides an overview of the principal reasons for various age groups to participate in the political forum. For lurkers, the forum serves first and foremost as a correlation tool (i.e., finding opinions to associate with) and an information tool. On the one hand, they wish to gain insight into other people's thought. On the other hand, they want to stay informed about politics. These functions relate to the passive attitude of this type of forum user. Yet even here, we see a remarkable difference in terms of age. Whereas the youngest generation of

Table 3. Who posts on the online political forum?

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

Logistic regression analysis, dependent variable: poster = 1 and lurker = 0. ***$p < 0.0001$; *$p < 0.01$; †$p < 0.10$.

Table 4. Reasons for forum participation by age (%).

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

lurkers tends to focus primarily on correlation (36%) and less so on information (20%), the preferences among the older generation of lurkers are reversed. For example, among the young seniors (56–70 years), 24% give precedence to correlation compared to 37% to information.

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

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

Conclusion

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

We found that simply going online with offline participation reinforces rather than mitigates age bias. The Internet generation hypothesis, predicting that better mastery of the Internet by the young evens the age bias, does not hold. Middle-aged groups more easily find their way to both online and offline reporting channels. This finding confirms Gibson and Cantijoch's (2013) observation that 'individuals basically use whatever tools are available to undertake their chosen action' (p. 714) (see also DiMaggio et al. 2001 and Xenos and Moy 2007). The instrumental objectives of the participation initiative (i.e., better public service outcomes in neighbourhoods) cater to the needs of older age groups that have a long-lasting interest in and affiliation with their living environment. Interestingly, however, our findings remain true when we focus on problem reports related to mobility, an issue that is likely more salient for young residents. A diminished sense of place lowers the stakes for younger generations, even though reporting forms are easily accessible online. The implication for participation is that offering an online channel is not enough to entice younger generations to participate. On the contrary, the age bias might even become stronger (Wattenberg 2008).

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

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

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

Our findings have a number of implications for local governance. First, the results suggest that merely offering offline services online will do little to address age bias in participation. On the contrary, biases are likely to be stronger. This is not to say that e-participation is not useful. The main goal should be, however, service quality and client-friendliness, rather than equity. Governments should also be wary of the biases that instrumental e-participation creates. Second, the results suggest that if participation is to include younger generations, more attention to expressive, non-instrumental motives is necessary. A viable design for participation needs to take differential gratifications into account and can also distil information on policies and politics from forums. This could be done, for example, by making room for forum-like discussion groups on public service delivery, policies and politics. Basic discursive processes, such as who speaks, how knowledge in participation is constituted, what can be said and who summarises, should be critically challenged (Fischer 2006). A good design should be supported by investments in the communicative capacity of public professionals, adapting the nature, tone and conditions of conversations to the expressive needs of the young and not lapsing into a thin, instrumental perspective (Bartels 2013; Moynihan 2003). More work needs to be done to develop what Gibson and Cantijoch (2013) call an e-expressive mode of participation. This is necessary because offline equivalents of online e-expression are not readily available (Gibson and Cantijoch 2013) and the impacts of online and offline participation may differ between media (Vissers et al. 2012; Vissers and Stolle 2014).

Research on e-participation suggests that although local governments adopt online applications, continued efforts are necessary to create interactive, expressive applications (Bonsón et al. 2012; Ellison and Hardey 2014; Lee and Kwak 2012; Norris and Moon 2005). Online platforms provide new opportunities for online interaction that could actively contribute to reinvigorating local public spheres (Ellison and Hardey 2014). Local governments can take an active role in this by providing forums for dialogue that are tolerant and non-partisan, fostering a civil attitude to different points of

view (Hepburn 2014). For younger generations in particular, e-expressive modes of participation may foster their voices and simultaneously help them to develop a sense of civic duty. For such effects to occur, policies promoting e-participation need to do more than simply going online.

Notes

1. These analyses are restricted to adults in the research population (18 years or older).
2. Unfortunately, we possess no data on the extent of individual home ownership, nor for that matter on individuals' educational levels, as this information is not included in the population register. However, residence period is a suitable proxy for home ownership. Certainly in Belgium, people who have lived in the same location for a long period of time tend to own their dwelling. Moreover, age effects on local problem reporting do not change significantly if home ownership is included as an aggregated variable at the neighbourhood level (Thijssen 2009).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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