# Are social networks reducing inequality in political participation?

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**Are Social Network Sites Reducing Inequality in Political Participation?**

*Abstract*

Political participation research has consistently shown that age and education among other factors, to a large extent determine who the activists are. The rise of social media services such as Facebook has however prompted hopes that new and more flexible forms of participation might lead to reduced inequality in political participation. This paper uses unique data on the political uses of social network sites in Sweden in order to study whether the participation through Facebook and other social media services reduces inequality, concentrating on three typical and widespread forms of participation: signing petitions, writing debate articles, and doing work in political organisations. The answer is that they do not: resource factors such as education are even more important in explaining participation through social media than through other channels.

Keywords: political participation, social network sites, social media

*Introduction*

The issue of equality in political participation is one of the central questions in political science. Any well-functioning democracy must offer equal opportunities for citizens to interact with the democratic system. However, people who do participate in politics have consistently been shown to be better educated than those who do not. They tend to be middle-aged rather than very young or very old. In most countries, they also tend to be more affluent than average. This has been referred to as the standard SES model of participation (although including not just socioeconomic factors) (Leighley, 1995: 181; Verba et al., 1995: 5).

   The possibilities of new technology to change the playing field of political activism by lowering the thresholds for participation have sparked debates throughout history (cf. Standage, 1999). One of the latest developments to renew this debate is the bundle of software innovations going under the common name of social network sites (boyd and Ellison, 2007). These seem to offer more flexible and low-cost ways of participating, and have quickly become important political tools, especially for young citizens. Against the backdrop of the ongoing discussion on growing political apathy in mature

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democracies, the revitalising prospects of one of the most pervasive changes in modern life and society must be duly studied.

This paper is devoted to the study of whether social network sites as platforms for participation can make certain factors, such as age, gender and education, less important for determining who will eventually participate. If this is true, we should expect that those who choose to participate through social network sites are different from those who participate through more traditional channels.

Sweden is an interesting case for studying the political use of social network sites. Internet and social media penetration rates are high in global comparison, with 95 % of 16-25 year-olds and nearly half the total population using social network sites (Findahl, 2013). Levels of interpersonal trust and political activity are also comparatively high (Teorell et al., 2007; Zmerli et al., 2007). The findings will therefore provide an example of how social network sites are used in a societal setting where access to social network sites at least for young people is almost universal and activity levels are quite high, thereby presenting a kind of crucial test to the idea that social network sites can have emancipating qualities: in a society where the access to participation is already high, can social network sites *on their own* have effects? This can in future

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research be contrasted with findings from countries where access is scarce and engagement levels are lower. The data presented are unique and provide the first representative study on different types of political participation and social network sites in Sweden.

*Definition of political participation*

In this study, political participation is defined as "activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take" (Verba and Nie, 1972: 2). Participation research has been characterised by uncertainty about exactly what the concept of political participation should signify, especially as new forms of participation have emerged over time (Anduiza et al., 2009: 862). Should posting political comments on a social media profile, for instance, be regarded as participation or not? And are various types of online participation at all comparable with offline types of participation? Research has shown that online and offline participation indeed is comparable (Gibson and Cantijoch, 2011) and in this paper, social network site participation is regarded as just another channel rather than as a distinct form of participation. This does not mean that there are specific acts that can only be carried out using social network

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sites and that can be different from various "offline" types of participation; but this paper concentrates on comparing channels. In order to facilitate comparison, the measures of participation that have been used are based on activities that may be carried out using both social network sites and traditional methods. In this way, specific types of action can be directly compared with regard to the demographic features of the participants. If SNS-specific activities had been included and some sort of general index had been created, the comparison would have rested completely on the specific acts included in the indices. Since participatory acts differ from each other in the correlation with factors such as age, education, and so on, this would have obscured the possible individual effects of the social network site as channel. In particular, it was decided to select three types of activities: signing petitions; writing articles for debate and contacting politicians; and work in political organisations or networks. These activities, although not covering all possible ways of engaging in politics beyond voting, have long been studied as political participation and are useful for comparing participants using different channels.

*Resources, incentives, and political participation*

Political scientists have built increasingly stable models for predicting participation. Ways of conceptualising explanatory factors of participation include focusing on incentives for participation. Bäck et al. (2011) focus on collective versus selective incentives, where collective incentives are related to the probability of actually influencing a political outcome and selective incentives include a sense of duty, a desire to express oneself, the desire to be entertained, and so on. To this, a list of resource factors (skills, income, knowledge, access to social networks etc.) is added in order to build a complex explanation of participation. Another way of conceptualising this is to make a distinction between motivational factors (such as life satisfaction, political interest, etc.) and capacitating factors (income, civic skills, organisation membership etc.) (Teorell et al., 2007).

All models conceived to explain political participation ascribe importance to resource factors. Resources that stem from family background, education and income, as well as gender, age, and ethnicity play an important role in explaining not only who will participate, but also in what forms they will participate. These factors are also related, although indirectly, to other factors, such as the development of political interest and the access to social networks,

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and skills and feelings of efficacy derived from upbringing, education and job position.

*Age* is generally considered to be a powerful predictor of political participation.

According to Armingeon (2007: 362), it can be attributed to social integration. For youngsters, "questions of identity and self-realisation are typically of much greater salience than politics" (ibid.). As working life and family life become more important, the likelihood of being drawn into political life increases. The same is true of the later stages of life, as retirement and old age increasingly render people less socially integrated. However, as several studies have shown, age can also be associated with generational effects. Young people becoming socialised into society at a certain time might have a higher propensity for participation throughout life (Oscarsson and Persson, 2010). It is also the case that different modes of political participation are connected to different effects of age. Whereas some forms of participation, such as voting or contacting politicians, are strongly related to middle age, some activities are more associated with youth, such as various forms of protesting. We will therefore expect increasing age to lead to a higher level of

participation (up to a certain age), although this effect might differ depending on the activities measured.

*Gender* is related to political participation. Most standard models assume that men participate more than women, although this is not stable over time, space, issues and type of act (Burns et al., 2001; Inglehart and Norris, 2000; cf. Desposato and Norrander, 2009; Mohai, 1992; Stolle et al., 2005: 258). However, that is not true in the Swedish case, where women have been shown to participate at equal levels with men in voting as well as in extraelectoral acts, although effects vary across modes of participation (Adman, 2009). We therefore do not expect gender to have different effects depending on the channel of participation, but vary across different modes.

*Education* is considered to be a strong predictor for participation because it fosters civic skills, political knowledge, a sense of democratic duty, and feelings of self-efficacy (Armingeon, 2007: 362). Although it has recently been questioned whether it is in fact education in itself that increases participation or, whether, alternatively, education (or rather, choice of education) is a proxy for family socialisation (Persson, 2012), the degree of education should show a strong correlation with participation.

Being an *immigrant/non-citizen* should lead to lower rates of participation, due to the lack of integration in the domestic political system and society. Explanations of obstacles to political participation among immigrants include the lack of political knowledge, fewer opportunities to practise civic skills, and less sense of community in comparison with natives (cf. Myrberg, 2011). Although a complex explanation of political participation requires that collective and selective incentives must be taken into account, resources still matter. Since this particular research question deals with possible changes in the social composition of participants depending on the chosen channel for participation, the focus in this paper is on resource factors/capacitating factors. Age, gender, education and immigrant background are some of the most important of these factors. *If social network sites offer an easier and more effective way of participating, we expect the effects mentioned above to be weaker for participation through social network sites than through other ways.*

In the analysis, a series of motivational factors will be added to the resource factor-focused analysis: political interest, news consumption, trust in political institutions, democracy satisfaction and party identification. They are all expected to have a positive effect on political participation (cf. Teorell et al., 2007). The motivational factors are used as control factors: that is, if effects of

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age, gender, education and citizenship remain after control for motivational variables, this is seen as confirming the effects. The chosen motivational factors belong to what Bäck et al. (2011) describe as selective incentives. Due to restrictions of available data, controlling for collective incentives has not been possible.

*Social network sites and participation: The mobilisation hypothesis*

In this paper, social network sites and social media use are *not* treated as independent variables in explaining political participation. Social network sites are regarded as participation channels that can be compared with other channels. It is the difference between the channels we are interested in and not the effects of social network sites on participation. We are interested in whether resource factors, such as education, are as strong predictors for social network site participation as they are for 'traditional' participation. The mobilisation hypothesis simply states that, given that participation through social network sites should cost less in terms of effort or skills, resource factors should matter less.

Research that tries to estimate effects of overall internet use on political participation generally produce modest results (ibid; Bimber and Copeland,

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2013). Conceptualising social network site participation as a subset of political participation enables us to find out whether the tools provided through social network sites produce more equal participation than other forms.

If participation is determined by an equation containing costs and benefits, lowered costs should mean a higher likelihood of participation, *ceteris paribus* (cf. Anduiza et al., 2010: 359; Bäck et al., 2011; Xenos and Moy, 2007: 706f.; Stolle and Micheletti, 2005). If participating through social network sites takes less time than participating in other ways, people who feel that they cannot devote extra time to activism might be encouraged to participate using the social network site channel (Park et al., 2009: 729). If participation by means of social network sites makes smaller demands on participants as regards skills, people with lower education might be encouraged to participate. If participation through social network sites does not require access to the existing infrastructure of formal political organisations, people with immigrant background might find it easier to participate. As Clay Shirky puts it in *Here Comes Everybody* (2008: 159) "[S]ocial tools don't create collective action – they merely remove the obstacles to it." The mobilisation hypothesis is also prominent in Yochai Benkler's *The Wealth of Networks* (2006: 213), which prophesies equalizing effects of software enabling communication within and

across social networks. The same argument is made by Devillart and Waniewski (2010: 198ff.), who claim that the possibility to create interconnected networks on the internet might bring about a globalised and more egalitarian form of political activism, drawing more people into engagement in political and social affairs. Similar lines of thought are present in e.g. Norris (2001); Rheingold (2002); and Mossberger and Tolbert (2010).

We would therefore expect the effects of resources, such as age, gender, education, and immigrant status, to be smaller for participation through social media than through other ways.

However, although several scholars have placed great hopes in new technology that foreshadows a lowering of thresholds, thereby making participation easier and attractive to a larger group of people, the empirical evidence of this is scarce. A number of available reviews and meta-analyses detail the relationship between digital media use in general and political participation (Mossberger and Tolbert, 2010; Boulianne, 2009). As stated above, these studies generally come to the conclusion that the effects of overall internet use on political participation are small. However, research has also shown that the effects of internet use on participation vary according to the purposes for which internet technology is used (Bimber and Copeland, 2013).

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Since the internet offers a large variety of sites, topics, actions, and so on, there is nothing inherent in the internet itself that might make people more likely to use it for political purposes. This goes both for the effects of internet use itself on participation, and for the social composition of those who participate using the internet or those who participate offline. In order to participate online, a person would have to go to a specific political website. And studying the effect of visiting political websites on political behaviour is bordering on the tautological. Studying social network sites, however, is something else: they can be used for a great number of reasons, but have also certain characteristics, such as the inherent social structure of the information and the element of surprise.

There is however few existing empirical studies on the possible correlation between political participation and specifically social network sites (Byrne, 2007; Park et al., 2009; Baumgartner and Morris, 2010; Zhang et al., 2010; Schlozman et al., 2010; Halpern and Lee, 2011; Bond et al., 2012). Problems with these studies include homogeneous and small samples (mostly US college students) and ambiguous measurements of participation. Schlozman et al. (2010) used a large representative sample of Americans, made in 2008, to try to discover the relationships between participatory inequality and the internet.

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They found that inequality persists when comparing offline and online participation. However, they also specifically studied the use of social network sites for political purposes. They find that the association between SES indicators and political participation is weaker for social network site users than for the total sample, although the strong domination of young people among social network site users makes it difficult to predict future SES status for those respondents. And since they only present bivariate analyses, they cannot study for instance the effect of education under control for age, as it is done in this paper. Bond et al. (2012) studied the effects of Facebook messages on voting behaviour and found that there was a positive effect on voting by those who saw statements by close Facebook friends that they had voted. The study does not however mention SES or compare different activities. Oser et al (2013) analysed the same data that Schlozman et al. used for their analysis, but with more sophisticated methods. Comparing participants using the online channel and participants using the offline channels, they find that while the mobilization hypothesis holds for age and gender, the reinforcement hypothesis holds for SES. They do however not separate social network sites from other types of online sites and services.

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The cited works come to differing conclusions on the possible effects of social network site use on participation. Comparisons between studies are made difficult because of the differences in operationalization and sampling. Summing up existing research, it seems clear that stable and unequivocal relationships between social network sites and participation have yet failed to materialise. Some studies give support, although weak, for the hypothesis that the features of social network sites have positive effects on participation, whereas others do not find a relationship.

*Data*

The analyses in this paper are based on data from the SOM institute's annual national survey from 2010.[1] The questions in the SOM surveys typically cover a wide range of attitudes regarding societal and political affairs and media consumption, as well as a large number of background variables.

The Riks-SOM 2 survey of 2010 contains the following question, devised by the present author:

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[1] The national survey in 2010 was conducted as three separate surveys each using a random sample of

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*Q. 23 Have you done any of the following during the past 12 months, via social media on the Internet or in other ways, with the intention of trying to bring about improvements or hinder impairments in society?[2]*

The question then listed seven items (signing petitions, writing debate articles, contacting politicians, and four different types of work in a political organisation or network) for which the respondent could answer 'no', 'yes, via social media' or 'yes, in another way.[3] The frequencies are listed in Table 1. In analyses of political participation, it often turns out that age has a curvilinear relationship with participation. In this case, participation using social media turned out to be disproportionally linked to younger generations, whereas this was not the case for participation in other ways. In order to take account of generational differences, dummy variables were created for age intervals. The oldest category, aged 69-85, is the reference category in the analyses. The age intervals were chosen based on equal size in the sample.[4] Gender is treated as a dummy variable with female as the reference category.

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[2] All translations of questions, variable names, etc. from the survey were made by the author.

[3] Although it was possible in the survey to tick multiple boxes, i.e. reply 'yes, via social media' AND 'yes, in another way', almost none of the respondents did so; they interpreted the alternatives as mutually exclusive. This should yield clearer results.

[4] Analyses were tried out using age as a continuous variable, which clearly showed the linear relationship for social network sites and a very slight curvilinear relationship for other ways. Results were however not robust due to large multicollinearity between age variables. Analyses were also carried out using other reference categories, but these yielded similar results.

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The variable for education used in the analyses is a four-level categorical variable, where Low education indicates a maximum of nine year compulsory education, Mid-low education indicates a maximum of upper secondary school education, Mid-high indicates post gymnasium education but no university degree, and High education indicates a university degree. From this variable, dummy variables have been created with Low education as the reference category.

Non-citizen is a dummy variable based on citizenship. Swedish citizenship is the reference category.[5]

A set of control variables for selective incentives was added to the background variables in the analyses. If the results hold even after controlling for selective incentives, it is considered as giving additional support for the hypothesis.

News consumption is an additive index based on several variables measuring the rate of consumption of different types of news media.[6]

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[5] Analyses were also tried out using other measurements; i.e. being raised abroad, parents' background etc., which all yielded very similar and (in the multivariate analyses) insignificant results.

[6] In the analyses, signing petitions and writing debate articles as well as a composite measure for engagement in political organisations have been used as dependent variables. Contacting was left out because of the very small number of respondents reporting contacting through social media. Recruiting friends to a political organisation was left out since it is often defined as not being an act of political participation (cf. Verba et al., 1995). Engagement in political organisations using social media/by other means are two dummy variables created through a combination of the questions concerning participation in an event organised by a political organisation, joining a political organisation and

Trust in political institutions is an additive index created from seven variables measuring the trust in respectively the government, parliament, municipal executive boards, the political parties, the European Commission, the European Parliament and the United Nations.

Democracy satisfaction is an additive index created from four variables measuring the level of satisfaction with the democracy in respectively the European Union, Sweden, the county of residence and the municipality of residence.

Finally, party identification is a dummy variable based on the question "Do you consider yourself a devout follower of [a political party]?".

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engaging actively in a political organisation. The value 1 is assigned to those who have answered yes to any of the three questions. This was done since the number of answers for each individual acts was small.

Table 1: Frequencies for political participation. N = 1653.

| Item | No (percent) | Yes, via social media (percent) | Yes, in another way (percent) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Signed a petition | 70,3 | 15,1 | 13,1 |
| Written a debate article | 85,7 | 6,6 | 3,4 |
| Contacted a politician | 86,7 | 1,6 | 8,2 |
| Participated in an event organised by a political party/organisation/network | 86,4 | 3,2 | 7,3 |
| Joined a political party/organisation/network | 90,4 | 3,0 | 3,5 |
| Done work in a political party/organisation/network | 91,1 | 1,5 | 4,7 |
| Encouraged friend/acquaintance to join political party/organisation/network | 87,7 | 2,9 | 6,5 |

It is obvious that social network sites have very rapidly become an important channel for political participation, especially for signing petitions and writing debate articles. Of the possible forms of participation listed, it is not surprising that signing petitions is the by far most common. Signing a petition does not take a lot of time, does not require any special skills and it is not a long-term engagement. It is also a form of participation that easily lends itself to social media, as is discernible from the fact that it has indeed become more common to sign petitions using social media than doing it the traditional way. This is

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also true for writing debate articles, whereas actions related to organised politics – attending meetings, joining organisations, doing work and recruiting – seem to be associated with other forms of engagement than through social media. Perhaps a little surprising, contacting politicians is still much more popular through other means than using social media. It is often claimed that social network sites offer direct contact with elected officials, and this might make one expect that contacting politicians through social media would have become a quite common thing to do, but this is obviously not the case.

But we are not interested in the absolute levels of participation. Rather, we want to know whether those who participate through social network sites are different from those who participate in other ways. Figure 1 gives a quick overview of the differences between those who participate through social media and those who choose other ways. It is also possible to examine the features of groups of participants as compared with those of the entire sample. From the hypothesis, we would expect those participating through social media to be younger and less educated than those participating in other ways. And indeed, they are younger: the mean age of those who participate through social media is 40 years compared with 50 years for those who participate through other ways. The mean age for the entire sample is 51 years. They are

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however also more highly educated: 35 percent of those who participate through social media have a university degree, compared with 31 percent of the others. Of the total sample, 24 percent have a university degree. There is also an interesting gender difference: a higher share of the group of participants through social media is female (57 percent for social media and 51 percent for the others, compared to 48 percent women in the total sample). Looking at the share of non-citizens (i.e. not Swedish citizens) we can see that the share of participants not having a Swedish citizenship is higher for social media participants (7 percent) than for those who participate through other ways (5 percent). In the sample, the total share of non-citizens was 6 percent. But this is a very crude measure. It is quite possible that the relationships are different for every act.

**Figure 1. Choice of channel (social media or other) for participation.
N=1653. [7]**
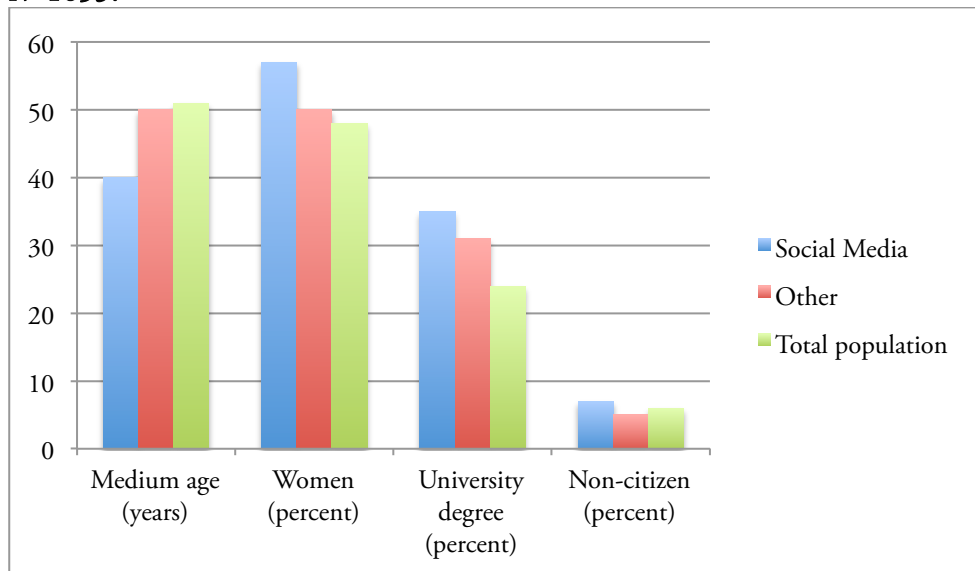


In figures 2a-c, we can see the results for each act. We can also see how the

participants are dispersed in different age groups, and in four different

categories of education.

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[7] 'Social media' (blue) indicates those who have participated using social media (i.e. an index); 'Other' (red) indicates those who have participated using other ways (i.e. an index). 'Total population' (green) indicates the survey population. For 'medium age', the individual bars indicate the medium age in years for participants in the two channels and for the survey population, respectively. For women and college degree, the individual bars indicate the share of participants in the two channels and the survey population who are women and have a college degree, respectively.

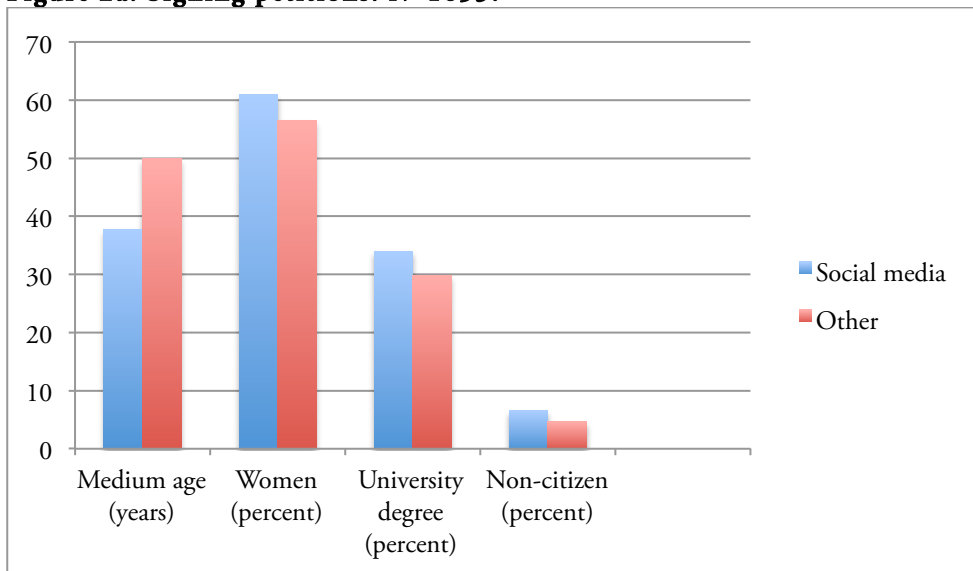**Figure 2a. Signing petitions. N=1653.**



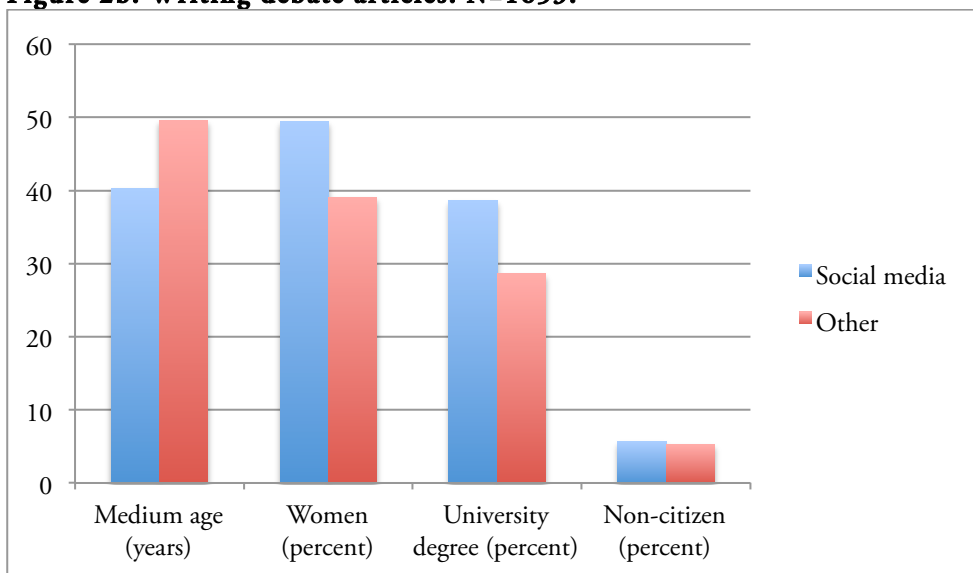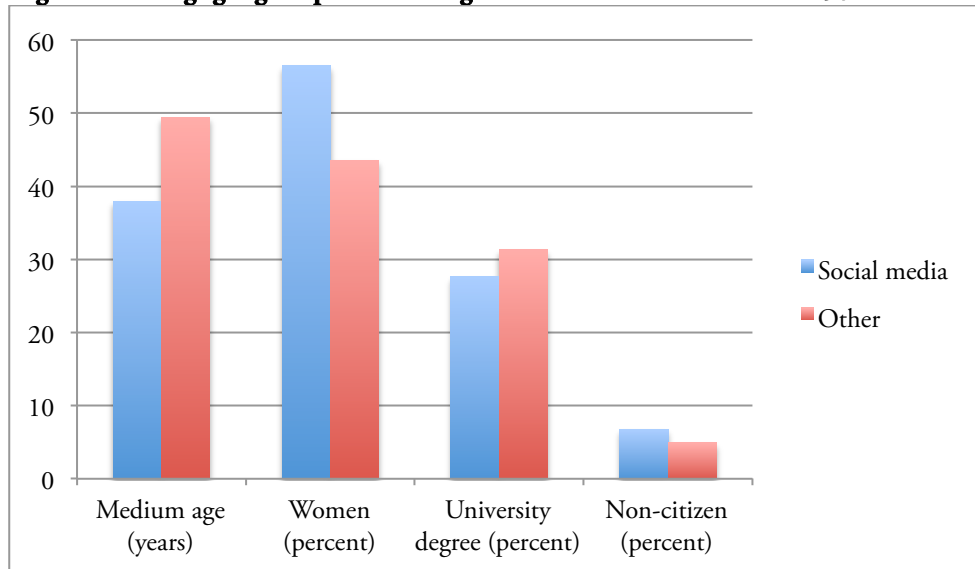**Figure 2b. Writing debate articles. N=1653.**

**Figure 2c. Engaging in political organisations/networks. N=1653**



The first impressions from figure 1 appear to be validated, but with nuances.

The median age across all three types of acts is lower for participants using

social media than for participants using other ways. When looking at gender,

we can see that the women's share of the participants is higher when we look

at social media participants than when looking at the others, across all three

types. But we can also see that there are differences. For instance, women's

share of those who sign petitions using social media is as high as 61 percent

(57 percent of those who sign petitions using other ways). Signing petitions

seems to be a more 'female' act, whereas writing debate articles seems more

'male'. For engaging in political organisations, however, (Figure 2c) we can see

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that women are in the majority of those who organise through social media (57 percent women) but in the minority of those who organise through other ways (44 percent women).

Education is strongly connected to participation. In figure 1 we could see that having a college degree is much more prevalent among those who participate than in the entire sample. When we compare the share of college degrees between social media participants and other participants, we can see that the share of college degrees is even higher for participation through social media – at least for signing petitions and writing debate articles. 38 percent of those who write debate articles using social media have a college degree, compared to 29 percent of the 'other' category. But for political organisation, this relationship is reversed: 28 percent of those who organise using social media have a college degree compared to 31 percent of those who do it in more traditional ways. This is not a big difference, but still interesting. Finally, we can see that the share of non-citizens is larger among those who participate through social media than through other channels. This is especially clear for political organisation, where 7 percent of those who organise through social media have another citizenship than Swedish compared to 5 percent of those in the 'other' category.

This exposé is however mostly done for the sake of giving a visual overview. For instance, young people tend not only to be avid users of social media, but also better educated than their elders. It would be dangerous to draw from only figures 1 and 2a-c the conclusion that social media participation is especially connected to high education. In order to take account of multi-causation, logistic regression analyses were carried out for testing the relationships between resource variables and participation.

**Table 2. Effects of resource and motivational factors on political participation using traditional channels and social media (logistic regression)**

| | Petitions other | | Petitions SM | | Debate art other | | Debate article SM | | Polorg other | | Polorg SM | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1a | 1b | 2a | 2b | 3a | 3b | 4a | 4b | 5a | 5b | 6a | 6b |
| Constant | -2,485*** | -2,900*** | -4,136*** | -4,407*** | -5,313*** | -4,665*** | -4,734*** | -5,345*** | -3,35*** | -4,096*** | -3,611*** | -4,295*** |
| age 16-32 | 0,164 | 0,456 | 2,745*** | 3,066*** | -0,241 | 0,179 | 1,367** | 1,791*** | 0,217 | 0,580 | 1,831*** | 2,212*** |
| age 33-46 | 0,237 | 0,462 | 2,111*** | 2,338*** | -0,087 | 0,343 | 1,030* | 1,446*** | 0,288 | 0,642* | 1,020* | 1,357** |
| age 47-58 | 0,801** | 0,932** | 1,496** | 1,609*** | 0,432 | 0,772 | 0,338 | 0,584 | 0,367 | 0,628* | 0,080 | 0,317 |
| age 59-68 | 0,570* | 0,526 | 0,826 | 0,794 | -0,127 | -0,149 | 0,147 | 0,175 | 0,277 | 0,294 | 0,088 | 0,130 |
| male | -0,188 | -0,372* | -0,386* | -0,561*** | 0,745** | 0,294 | 0,209 | -0,024 | 0,387* | 0,124 | -0,198 | -0,397 |
| education ML | 0,468 | 0,390 | 1,064** | 0,995** | 0,964* | 0,779 | 0,720 | 0,651 | 0,030 | -0,09 | 0,339 | 0,277 |
| education MH | 0,807** | 0,582* | 1,558*** | 1,342*** | 1,087* | 0,530 | 1,49** | 1,174* | 0,835** | 0,488 | 0,519 | 0,191 |
| education H | 0,761** | 0,432 | 1,622*** | 1,323*** | 1,045* | 0,216 | 1,543** | 1,084* | 0,684** | 0,158 | 0,539 | 0,099 |
| noncitizen | -0,250 | -0,077 | -0,176 | -0,048 | -0,117 | 0,010 | -0,292 | -0,117 | -0,268 | -0,091 | -0,127 | 0,016 |
| pol intr ML | | -0,239 | | -0,152 | | -1,155 | | 0,593 | | -0,017 | | 0,463 |
| pol intr MH | | 0,350 | | 0,528 | | 0,947 | | 1,469 | | 1,020* | | 1,513* |
| pol intr H | | 0,974** | | 0,975** | | 2,399** | | 2,491** | | 1,920*** | | 2,241*** |
| news consumption index | | 0,082*** | | 0,067** | | 0,029 | | 0,026 | | 0,042 | | 0,009 |
| trust in pol inst index | | -0,007 | | -0,020 | | -0,016 | | -0,001 | | -0,030 | | -0,051* |
| democracy satisfaction index | | -0,040 | | -0,004 | | -0,057 | | -0,11* | | 0,021 | | 0,047 |
| party identification dummy | | 0,064 | | -0,160 | | -0,124 | | 0,564* | | 0,431* | | 0,407 |
| | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| N | 1569 | 1569 | 1569 | 1569 | 1569 | 1569 | 1569 | 1569 | 1569 | 1569 | 1569 | 1569 |
| Nagelkerke's R2 | 0,040 | 0,087 | 0,207 | 0,242 | 0,041 | 0,175 | 0,095 | 0,183 | 0,036 | 0,126 | 0,102 | 0,172 |

Table 2 presents summaries of 12 models (1a - 6b). For each action (signing petitions (models 1-2); writing debate articles (models 3-4); engaging in political organisations (models 5-6)) separate models were run for the various channels (by other means and through social media). Separate models were also run with background factors only (age, gender, education and citizenship; models labelled 'a'), and with controls for political interest, trust in political institutions, democracy satisfaction and party identification (models labelled 'b').

If participation through social media is a result of young age rather than a combination of young age and high education, the effect of education should disappear when controlling for age. And if participation through social media is really more attractive and easy for citizens with lower education, we should also expect education have weaker effects on participation through social media than on participation by other means. If the differences persist even after controlling for selective incentives, this is to be interpreted as rendering further support for the hypothesis.

Comparing signing petitions by other means or through social media (models 1a and 2a), it is immediately clear that the difference between being

aged 47-68 and being older (i.e. the reference category) is significantly associated with participation, whereas the difference between youth and the reference category is significantly and strongly associated with participation through social media. Being male has a negative effect on signing petitions through social media. Higher education is significantly related to signing petitions regardless of channel, but more strongly so to signing petitions using social media. The effects remain when controlling for selective incentives (models 1b and 2b).

Moving on to writing debate articles, the pattern is repeated (models 3a and 4a). Youth is strongly and significantly associated to participation through social media, and the effects of education are stronger on participation through social media than on participation by other means. The differences persist when controlling for selective incentives (models 3b and 4b).

Finally, for engagement in political organisations (models 5a and 6a), the pattern is more complicated. The age relationships persist (youth is strongly and significantly associated with participation through social media). Higher education has however a significant effect only for participation by other means, whereas there is no effect of higher education for participation through social media. Moreover, the effects for youth on participation through social

media persist when controlling for selective incentives (models 5b and 6b), but effects on education disappear for participation by other means.

   Generally, the effects of age and education were strong, as predicted. Youth is positively and significantly associated with participation using the social media channel. On the other hand, belonging to the middle-age category has a significant effect only on signing petitions by means other than through social media. But most importantly, high education has a significant effect for actions in both channels. For signing petitions and writing debate articles, the effects are even stronger on participation through social media.

*Discussion*

The analyses in this study show that effects of education remain strong and are even stronger for participation through social media than by other means. That the results are so marked for signing petitions and writing debate articles – actions that intuitively seem very well suited to social network sites – is a clear indication that the hopes of more equal participation through social media might have been set too high. In a social network site like Facebook, there are virtually endless possibilities to exchange ideas and express views. However, it seems to be the case that education is still an important factor for

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determining whether an individual will participate. This link seems to be weaker for engagement in political organisations. Whether this means that the advent of social media makes it easier for people without higher education to engage in organisations should be a task for further research to study.

Age does not seem to be an impediment to political action. This is a fascinating finding that should be further studied. Although the data for this study are the result of a cross-sectional survey, they still offer an indication that if it is possible to see participation through social media as equal to participation in other channels, the curvilinear relationship of age and participation might be receding. This has recently also been confirmed by Oser et al. (2013).

That social media do not seem to provide a silver bullet for more equal participation can be interpreted in different ways. Brodock (2010) discusses activism in relation to the 'digital divide'. She discusses three manifestations of the digital divide: unequal access, unequal skills and censorship. Censorship might not have a place as an explanatory factor in a liberal-democratic context, but even if access to basic technological infrastructure (high-speed internet connections, computers and mobile devices) is fairly equally dispersed across socio-economic groups in Sweden, skills for which education might serve as a

proxy (organisatory skills, linguistic self-confidence) are not abated by the use of social media.

The limitations of this study include the fact that only certain political actions were surveyed. The cross-sectional nature of the study makes it difficult to reveal causal directions. One obvious direction for further study is to create models of participation that are sensible to that resource factors might have different effects in different generations or age groups, and that development of relationships must be studied over time. There also seems to be an important difference regarding the chosen channel for participation. In further studies, the operationalisation of participation should be tailored to allow for the study of more possible acts – also those that are impossible or difficult to carry out in social media or using other ways than social media.

This might provide us with better empirical knowledge on whether we are experiencing an age of more equal participation, more unequal participation, or simply more diverse forms of participation.

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