

Does use of the Internet further democratic participation?

A comparison of citizens' interactions with
political representatives in the UK and Germany

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99,700 words

To my family.

Abstract

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(Submitted for the degree of DPhil in Information, Communication and the Social Sciences)

Tobias Escher, Keble College, Trinity 2012

This thesis explores the implications of the Internet for democracy, re-evaluating the various claims and counter-claims that have been made for the Internet's democratic potential. Based on a framework to measure democracy that emphasises popular control and political equality, it assesses whether the Internet gives a greater and more representative share of the population the opportunity to participate in the political process by focusing on use of the Internet to contact political representatives. The analysis combines secondary analysis of population surveys with original data collected in two online surveys from more than 14,000 users of successful contact facilitation platforms in the UK (WriteToThem.com) and Germany (Abgeordnetenwatch.de) 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. The processes that shape these patterns are identified by developing a basic theory of contacting and using the similarities and differences between the findings for the two countries. 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. This highlights the need to think carefully about how online platforms can be used, building on the – albeit limited – gains identified here, to strengthen them as a means of ensuring democratic participation.

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Declaration of interests

The research on the contact facilitation platform WriteToThem.com originated in evaluation efforts for which the author was contracted by mySociety (483 Green Lanes, London N13 4BS, UK), the organisation that runs this website (Escher, 2011).

I hereby declare that my research and the analysis presented in this thesis have been conducted fully independently and without any interference on behalf of representatives of mySociety.

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Glossary

AW	Abgeordnetenwatch
CDU	Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands (Christian Democratic Union of Germany)
DFG	Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Foundation)
ESS	European Social Survey
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
LRS	Logged Representation Scale
MdB	Mitglied des Bundestags (Member of German Parliament)
MEP	Member of European Parliament
MP	Member of Parliament
OxIS	Oxford Internet Survey
POC	Political Online Communication panel survey
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany)
WTT	WriteToThem

Chapter 1 The role of the Internet for democracy

In 2009 the UK parliament passed a law requiring all local authorities in England and Wales to create online facilities through which citizens could submit electronic petitions to them (HM Government, 2009). It was one of a number of measures aimed to *'reinvigorate local democracy'* and *'reconnect people with public and political decision-making'* (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2010: 5). With the similar motivation of an *'engagement and re-engagement of citizens in democracy'*, in the same year the Council of Europe (2009) had officially recommended its 47 member states to *'consider and implement e-democracy as the support and enhancement of democracy, democratic institutions and democratic processes by means of ICT'*.

The expectations placed on information and communication technologies (ICTs) as a means to improve democracy have by no means been confined to governments. Instead they reflect a general perception shared among significant parts of society. For example, in the 15 countries reporting to the World Internet Project in 2009 and 2010, on average between 20% and 30% of Internet users think that with the help of the Internet they can have more political power, better understand politics or make public officials care more about what they think (Cole et al., 2012: 135). The belief in technology is further illustrated for example by dedicated eDemocracy programmes of the UK's Hansard Society (2012b) or Germany's wealthiest foundation Bertelsmann Stiftung (2012), as well as other technology-driven efforts by civil society actors such as the websites by mySociety¹ in the UK, or the Liquid

¹ <http://www.mysociety.org/> [30.08.2012]

Democracy Association² in Germany which facilitates a public consultation for the German parliament on the *'Internet and digital society'* (Deutscher Bundestag, 2012).

Despite this popularity, we still know little about whether or not utilizing the Internet actually works to further democracy, for example by increasing participation. It is this gap between public belief in the democratic power of technology and the lack of empirically-grounded proof of its effect which is at the centre of this thesis. Through a comparative study of use of the Internet for political participation in the UK and Germany, namely for contacting political representatives, this thesis aims to contribute to answering the question of in what ways the technology can or cannot be used to further democratic participation, and to assess the role of the Internet for democracy more generally.

1.1 *The motivation of this research*

1.1.1 The Internet as a solution to the crisis of democracy

The question at the heart of this thesis is this: *Does the Internet have a positive effect on democracy?* This question derives its relevance and urgency from two contemporary debates, namely the perceived crisis of democracy and the discussion about the effects of communication technologies on society.

The crisis of democracy

To understand expectations of online participation, one needs first to understand that political participation itself has been the solution to a crisis of democracy which has many faces: from declining turnouts, declining party membership rates and declining social capital on the one hand, to growing citizen dissatisfaction with government and

² <http://liqd.net/en> [30.08.2012]

a feeling of inefficacy on the other. This is not a new debate, but instead represents *'decades of concern over a rise in political apathy and citizen disengagement from politics and public affairs'* (di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006: 299). While the accounts of the crisis are not unanimously shared (Norris, 2002), it is a little-disputed fact that citizens have grown less content with political institutions and the people who run them (Inglehart, 1999; Skocpol and Fiorina, 1999; Whiteley, 2003; Dalton, 2004; Pattie et al., 2004; Hansard Society, 2012a).

This must not represent a failure of democracy. There are good reasons to believe that the widespread dissatisfaction with the institutions of democracy is a success of democratic systems which have created a more knowledgeable and demanding people (Bennett, 1998; Dalton, 2004). These *'critical citizens'* (Norris, 1999) value democracy as a normative ideal but are disillusioned with the way it is actually implemented in practice. A prominent answer to this dissatisfaction has been to propose more opportunities for citizen participation in decision-making (Pateman, 1970; Barber, 1984; Habermas, 1992). It is argued that the more people participate, the more expertise can be fed into the political process, from which better policies might arise. More participation implies also increased legitimacy of decisions if those have been taken or at least supported by many citizens (Macedo, 2005). Participation also has an educative effect, aids the citizen's self-development and in the case of successful participation, can lead to more participation and more trust in the political system (Parry et al., 1992: 14pp; Pateman, 2012).

Political participation, be it in the form of a demonstration, a vote or a discussion with a representative, is an inherently communicative activity. As Coleman et al. (1999: 365) have put it:

'Citizens need information before they can make sensible choices about who will represent them. [...] Representatives need information from individual citizens and groups about those issues of local or national importance that they are expected to follow up. [...] Citizens need information from and about their representatives so that politicians can be evaluated on the basis of their record and so that representative institutions are transparent in their activities. [...] It is not fanciful to suggest that, without information, democracy in any of its forms could not exist. Indeed, information coupled to effective communication provides the lifeblood of a democracy.'

It should not come as a surprise that electronic information technologies, with their ability to be used for cheap and fast communication across time and space, have been perceived to offer solutions to enable (more) participation (Etzioni et al., 1975; Laudon, 1977; Krauch, 1982; Dutton, 1992; Vedel, 2006). These early hopes have gained new ground with the Internet, and while the first debate concerns enhancing participation independent from any specific technology, the discussions around the ways in which the Internet could facilitate participation or not form the second debate relevant to this thesis.

The role of the Internet for democracy

While there is little dispute about the opportunities of ICTs, there have been widely differing predictions about the ways in which these will actually affect democratic systems. The spectrum reaches from *cyber-optimists* who proclaim a new virtual agora, via *normalisation theorists* who argue that the Internet is simply replicating existing patterns of power and participation, to *cyber-pessimists* who fear the Internet might pose a threat to democracy.

Many of the early cyber-optimists (Rheingold, 1993; Grossman, 1995; Barlow, 1996; Poster, 1997) would basically hail the capabilities of the new technologies to eventually allow for a more direct form of democracy. While the most profound accounts of such revolutionary expectations are by now all more than a decade old,

this belief in the power of technology to radically transform society for good is by no means dead. Instead, it lives on in narratives of the uprising in the Arab world as a Facebook and Twitter revolution (Zuckerman, 2011), or in the various movements around *openness* such as *open access*, *open data* and *open knowledge* (see for example the Open Knowledge Foundation³) who follow the slogan of the early cyber-activists that *'information wants to be free'* (Clarke, 2000).

In contrast, there is a body of thought that believes neither in the positive effects proclaimed by cyber-enthusiasts nor in vastly negative effects. Instead it argues that those new technologies might not change existing inequalities but rather that these will continue to dominate political participation, even in the digital sphere (Margolis and Resnick, 2000). This has been the argument of the *normalisation hypothesis* which expects online technologies to reproduce existing biases and therefore reinforce them (for an overview of the rise of this thesis see Gibson et al., 2005b). It is based on the argument that while the Internet might lower some of the resource barriers to participation, it creates new ones such as the need to have access to the Internet and to possess the skills to use it (Norris, 2001; Mossberger et al., 2003; Deth, 2006; Helsper, 2008). What is more, some doubt it will increase motivation for participation (Bimber, 2003: 206). In summary, those following the normalisation perspective do not believe that there will be any fundamental change in political participation at all.

While the normalisation thesis might be seen as a kind of null hypothesis regarding the effect of the Internet on politics, there are others that do indeed ascribe effects of the Internet on democracy – but *negative* ones. Most of these more pessimistic accounts do not dispute the principal opportunities provided by the technology, but

³ <http://okfn.org/> [07.03.2012]

they believe that its actual application will lead to outcomes much different from the positive expectations of cyber-optimists. They see the new resource requirements posed by ICTs as not merely reinforcing but as actually deepening traditional divides, as those with less resources are now doubly disadvantaged. Furthermore, where cyber-optimists see abundance of information, pessimists argue for information overload, misinformation and a lack of trust. While the quantity of information increases, quality might lag behind (Noam, 2005: 58; Keen, 2007). The communities of interest, hailed by the optimists as the overcoming of limiting constraints, could also result in the fragmentation of 'real' communities (Alstynne and Brynjolfsson, 1996; Sunstein, 2001). In addition, the anonymity of the Internet will breed polarization even further and the enlightened discourse of well-informed citizens as envisaged by the optimists will end in flame wars. And quite apart from an arena of free speech, the new technologies offer much more advanced opportunities for surveillance and censorship (Morozov, 2011). Last but not least, while the Internet provides some additional opportunities for political participation, it provides countless more opportunities for other causes such as entertainment, which might drain the pool of active participants further by providing more tempting opportunities to spend time (Putnam, 2000; Coglianesse, 2006).

In summary, while the question about the role of the Internet for democracy is important because there is widespread dissatisfaction with the actual practice of democratic systems, whether the opportunities of the Internet will actually help to address these problems has been subject to intense debate. At the same time, as I discuss in this chapter, the empirical research so far has had only a limited ability to assess the potential of the Internet to contribute to democracy. This thesis aims to contribute to this debate and the next section summarises its approach.

1.1.2 Addressing the problems of existing research

The aim of this thesis is to establish whether the Internet can be used to contribute to democracy, and by which processes it facilitates positive or negative outcomes. To this end I analyse to what extent online means of contacting political representatives – and in particular dedicated platforms that are enabling citizens to get in touch with representatives – increase rates of participation and the representativeness of this form of political participation. I employ a structured, focused comparison of Germany and the UK as my two case studies. This approach is an attempt to overcome the problems I have identified with previous research into the democratic potential of the Internet that have made empirical assessments of the role of the Internet for democracy difficult.

The first problem is a *lack of a framework* for measuring democracy, because to assess any potential impact of the Internet requires a normative understanding of what constitutes democracy and a way to assess the extent to which these normative perceptions are met. In order to operationalise measurable indicators I follow an understanding of democracy as being essentially about popular control and political equality. I further focus on representative systems of democracy, and for those to ensure popular control and political equality requires representatives to be *responsive* to those whom they represent (Pitkin, 1967). From this derives a need for a constant flow of information between representatives and citizens. This is supposed to be guaranteed through political participation which therefore assumes a crucial relevance for ensuring responsiveness and in this way the democratic quality of representative systems. However, I show that most of the ‘crisis’ accounts of democracy claim that the dialogue between those who govern and those in whose name they govern is broken (Coleman, 2004; Lusoli et al., 2006; Coleman, 2009; Zittel, 2010).

I approach the problem on the micro level of individual participation and argue for operationalising popular control in political participation as the rates of people participating, and political equality in political participation as the descriptive representativeness of these people – i.e. in their socio-economic characteristics – in respect to the population. This constitutes a framework that can be applied to any form of political participation to measure the quality of this aspect of democratic systems.

The second problem of previous research is a *lack of focus* which applies both to the study of participation as well as to the study of the Internet. Political participation is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, and each form of participation is associated with distinct barriers, resulting in different patterns of engagement and suggesting that the impact of technology on these patterns will also be specific. I have chosen to apply my framework to contacting political representatives as one specific form of political participation. This includes all manner of ways in which citizens actively get in touch with political representatives, such as writing a letter to a Member of the European Parliament, phoning their constituency MP, or visiting the surgery of their local councillor. I show that contacting is a crucial form of participation to ensure responsiveness in representative systems and it is also an ideal showcase for studying the effects of the Internet. The reason for this is that contacting in its traditional form suffers from particular problems in terms of popular control and political equality and the Internet is particularly promising in addressing these problems. Despite this, my research is the first to engage at this level of detail with patterns of contacting in the contemporary media environment.

A further lack of focus relates to the technology itself. The Internet has far too many applications to expect it to have a simple, uniform effect, so it requires analysis of specific use cases. Therefore I analyse not only use of the Internet in general for contacting representatives, but also a specific type of Internet application for contacting, which I term '*online contact facilitation platforms*'. I define these as platforms that enable citizens to easily send messages to their political representatives, which are independent from the representatives themselves or related institutions and which provide an additional layer of transparency, for example by providing statistics on the responsiveness of the representatives contacted.

In combination with this lack of focus on specific technological applications comes a third problem; namely, a *lack of case studies*, as too little research has focused on the evaluation of actual implementations of online technologies that have the express aim of furthering political participation. The instances where case studies have been conducted have usually focused on small-scale, short-lived projects. In contrast, this research investigates WriteToThem in the UK and Abgeordnetenwatch (*'representative watch'*) in Germany, two platforms which in 2012 had already been operating for more than seven years and had each attracted hundreds of thousands of visitors. These have not been studied in any detail and provide access to an unprecedented amount of information about users and their activities.

The final problem I have identified is a *lack of comparative research* which would enable the researcher to put these findings in perspective relative to results of other case studies, as well as to analyse whether observed effects are actually stable or just unique. This criticism applies in particular to a lack of comparisons across different countries – but also within single countries. In contrast, this thesis conducts a cross-

country comparison by repeating the same analysis both in the UK and in Germany. In addition, within each country the patterns of online contacting are compared to the status quo which is formed by contacting via traditional means, as well as how contact facilitation platforms in particular compare to other ways of contacting.

The data on online contacting in general and the population data are derived from secondary analysis of the British Oxford Internet Survey (OxIS), the German Political Online Communication (POC) panel study and the European Social Survey (ESS). To research contact facilitation platforms, I have conducted online surveys of more than 14,000 users of these sites. This research employs a structured, focused comparison whose structure is provided by four research questions that are introduced in the next section.

1.1.3 Research questions and outline of thesis

Research questions

Motivated by existing patterns of participation that leave a lot to be desired from the perspective of the framework I have introduced, this research aims to establish whether or not the Internet contributes to a greater degree of popular control and/or political equality of contacting representatives as one particular form of political participation. From answering this question, it is expected that there are lessons to be learned about the contribution of the Internet to democracy more generally.

Any serious discussion of this issue must acknowledge that patterns of political participation and the criticised inequality inherent in them have been very stable for decades – regardless of technological advances in the meantime. Therefore, I do not expect a landmark transformation of these patterns simply by the availability of a new technology. Instead, it is far more likely that there is a gradual shift in patterns which

needs to be detected and assessed. This research therefore compares contacting patterns on the Internet with contacting patterns offline, to assess whether there is a positive or negative change. To achieve this objective, I examine four major research questions that build on each other.

Research Question 1: Does use of the Internet for contacting political representatives increase popular control and/or political equality compared to traditional means of contacting?

Contacting online can be done via many different ways. It might take the form of sending an email to a representative after finding the email address of the representative in an election leaflet or on the website of parliament, it could be via an online form on the personal website of an MP or local councillor, or it could be a message via a social networking site. There is now also an increasing number of websites provided by third parties that act as information intermediaries by providing a one-stop contacting facility. I call these websites *online contact facilitation platforms* and argue that these online platforms offer a particularly promising form way of engaging in this form of participation that can be distinguished from other forms of contacting online and offline. The question is whether such targeted efforts make any difference – in relation to offline contacting but also compared to other forms of online contacting.

Research Question 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?

This research focuses on one particular form of political participation, not only to say something about contacting, but also to use these findings to infer more about the Internet's role for democracy more generally. For this it is necessary to understand by

which processes the observed contacting patterns are shaped. To achieve this I conduct detailed case studies of contacting in the UK and Germany.

Research Question 3: What are the similarities and differences in contacting patterns between the UK and Germany in the use of the Internet or use of contact facilitation platforms for contacting political representatives?

With the results of this focused comparison, I attempt to trace the processes which have shaped how many and what kind of citizens get in touch.

Research Question 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?

One of the main features of this research is a distinction between online and offline participation. This distinction is a deliberate choice for analytical reasons but it is important to acknowledge that in today's world participation will increasingly consist not of one or the other but of both offline as well as online activities. The rationale of this research to separate those who only use offline means from those who also use online means (maybe in combination with offline means) serves the purpose of assessing the potential of this particular means of participation to contribute to popular control and political equality.

Outline of thesis

The four research questions provide a structure for the organization of this thesis, and it is the main objective of this first chapter to justify these and argue for a clear framework to assess democracy. From the perspective of this framework, the existing literature is reviewed with the result that it has not provided conclusive answers about the role of the Internet for political participation for a number of problems, and it is the task of Chapter 2 to show how my research addresses these issues. This chapter

introduces contacting as a form of political participation and outlines why this is well suited for the study of the Internet's impact on democratic participation. The lack of focus is addressed by the analysis of contact facilitation platforms, which are also introduced in Chapter 2 before a description of the cases analysed, the methods used and the data collected concludes the foundation of this thesis.

The next two chapters deal with the UK. Chapter 3 tackles Research Question 1, and analyses how online contacting in the UK is different from offline contacting in relation to popular control and political equality. The focus moves then to the contact facilitation platform WriteToThem which in Chapter 4 is first introduced and then analysed from the perspective of popular control and political equality in relation to offline contacting as well as online contacting. Chapters 5 and 6 repeat this analysis for Germany and the contact facilitation platform Abgeordnetenwatch.

This provides the basis for answering Research Question 3, and a comparison of the findings in the two countries is discussed in Chapter 7. This chapter also synthesizes the findings from the previous four chapters. Chapter 8 introduces a basic theory of contacting that is used to explain the key findings from this research. These findings form the basis for the concluding Chapter 9 which summarises the results and highlights their relevance for citizens' engagement with representatives before offering a general assessment of the role of the Internet for democracy beyond the immediate application for contacting. The chapter ends with an assessment of the research strategy, limitations of the thesis, and what directions seem promising for future research on the Internet's role for democracy.

1.2 Developing a framework to measure the quality of democracy

Before we can even begin to assess the contribution of the Internet to democracy, there needs to be clarity about the very nature of democracy and which activities, opinions, institutions or otherwise would constitute *more* democracy, and what would amount to *less* democracy. For example, a system such as that for making electronic petitions to the UK government⁴ does little to satisfy proponents of direct democracy as the final decision would still lie with the representatives and not with the people themselves. In the same way, it does not bring closer the ideals of deliberative democrats; the simple act of signing a petition does not engage people with differing views on an issue in any form of discussion aimed at a common resolution. It might, however, go some way in reforming a system of representative democracy to become more responsive to the people it represents by signalling issues of public concern to those in power. This means that the very same technological application that can be deemed to further democracy from one understanding of democracy can be considered ineffective or even dangerous for another idea of democracy.

I argue that the source of the diversity of contrasting expectations discussed earlier is first of all that they aspire to different conceptions of how democracy ought to function. However, debates about the Internet's democratic potential have been criticised for far too often failing to highlight their normative assumptions (Barber, 1997: 224; Zittel, 2003: 35). Also, research into electronic participation more generally has been criticised for being seriously '*under-theorised*' (Macintosh et al., 2009: 8). In other words, what is needed is to clearly state a normative theory of democracy and

⁴ <http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk/> [07.03.2012]

to define empirical indicators that allow assessment of how much an empirical phenomenon conforms to these normative standards (Teorell, 2006). Therefore, this thesis must formulate and justify its normative understanding of democracy, and based on this develop measures that operationalise key concepts of this framework which can subsequently be used to judge the current state of democracy that has been said to be in crisis. This is the task of this section.

1.2.1 Democracy, responsiveness and political participation

Democracy as popular control and political equality

The basic purpose of democracy as a political concept is to establish a way in which an association of people can reach decisions that are collectively binding. Despite the variety of models of democracy, this thesis argues that most, if not all, accounts of democracy have in common the aspiration towards two core principles: *popular control* i.e. that ultimately the power over decisions lies with the people who are bound by these decisions, and *political equality* i.e. that each and every member of the people has the same power to influence decisions. While this argument has been explicitly proposed by Beetham (1994) drawing on the works of writers such as Rousseau ([1762] 1997) and Dahl (1989), it is also implicit in the writing of many other authors (see for example Barber, 1984; Parry et al., 1992; Verba et al., 1995; Lijphart, 1997; Fuchs, 2007).

Different models of democracy have interpreted the meaning and actual implementation of these two core principles in different ways. This is aptly illustrated by the differences between direct and representative forms of democracy. While both strive to make sure that ultimately the power does not lie with a few but with the populace, in the former popular control is achieved by direct and regular participation

of the people in decision making, while in the latter *'popular control usually takes the form of control over decision-makers, rather than over decision-making itself'* (Beetham, 1994: 28).

This thesis will focus on representative democracy because this has become the dominant form of democracy today. It might include some elements of direct democracy such as referenda but in comparison to the representative mechanisms these are usually rarely used. While theoretically digital technologies might have a claim to removing some traditional barriers to make direct democracy more possible, today the technology first and foremost faces representative systems that – as outlined above – are in need of improvement. Therefore it makes sense to assess first the Internet's effect on representative systems.

Representation as responsiveness

A focus on representative democracy still says little about how the concepts of popular control and political equality are implemented, and when we can assume that there is more (or less) of it which would be a first step towards a measurable framework for assessing the quality of democracy.

In representative systems, popular control is supposed to be achieved through frequent, free and fair elections which carry with them the threat of taking the mandate away from the representative. But once representatives are elected, how are they supposed to behave? This has been a long-standing academic debate about the free versus the imperative mandate (trusteeship versus delegation), but in actual practice there is little ambiguity: in all representative democracies, representatives act not on the explicit orders of their constituents but essentially as trustees (Kevenhörster, 2003), reflecting a Burkean (1854 [1774]) conception of representation.

Theorists of elite democracy such as Weber (1968 [1922]) and Schumpeter (1944) would be content with regular but rare elections to ensure popular control – additional input by citizens between elections is not required. They emphasise that government should be left in the hands of the most knowledgeable, in other words an elite. As these elites are so much better able to make decisions on behalf of the common good, they should govern over the rest. However, I would argue that this is not democracy but what Dahl (1989) calls *'guardianship'*. First of all, it is open to abuse. As Macedo et al. (2005: 12) highlighted in their working group for the American Political Science Association, *'The obvious problem with this view is that there is not now, and never will be, a class of empathetic, non-self-interested elites who can be trusted to advance the common good.'* More importantly, however, it constitutes a fundamental violation of the second democratic core principle (Dahl, 1989: 31), i.e. political equality as *'an assumption that all citizens are equal with respect to their right to decide the appropriate political course of their community'* (Saward, 1994: 13).

So for reasons of political equality, representative systems cannot rely on elections alone to ensure popular control. Instead, in order to act in the best interest of their constituents, representatives must try to find out what the concerns of their constituents are, and constantly try to take these into account. This *'responsiveness'* has been described in Pitkin's (1967: 209) seminal work as the very essence of representation: *'representing here means acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them.'* Pitkin's concept of *'representation as responsiveness'* unites the representative as independent trustee that democracies require to be able to operate on such a scale, with the ability of the people to constantly exert control (albeit indirectly) over the decisions that affect them.

So in summary, contemporary democracies are by and large representative democracies. To enable popular control and political equality in such systems, representatives must be responsive to their constituents. The obvious question is then: how can responsiveness be achieved? The answer to this question lies in political participation.

Political participation: ensuring responsiveness in representative systems

The achievement of responsiveness requires representatives that listen to their constituents and that are ready to act in their interest as well as they can. But representative systems also place a duty on the represented to engage with politics if they see their interests threatened or if they want their interests promoted (Pitkin, 1967: 232). In other words, they need to participate in politics to communicate their preferences (Gay, 2002: 732).

Without such participation, even the best-minded representatives cannot ensure that the political system's policy is in the best interest of the people, and if such a situation persists a system cannot be considered a democracy anymore. Therefore political participation by citizens becomes key to ensuring the democratic quality of representative systems. As Parry et al. (1992: 3) state:

“Government by the people’ is the fundamental definition of democracy, and one which implies participation by the people. [...] citizen participation remains, nevertheless, of the greatest importance. Without it there would be no democracy.”

This participation can take many forms, of which taking part in elections is only one, and I have argued above that this is not enough because there needs to be a constant interaction between those who govern and those in whose name they govern. This is intended to ensure as much congruence as possible between the preferences of the represented and the actual decisions made by representatives. This has been the

motivation behind the participatory turn in democratic theory (Pateman, 1970; Barber, 1984) and this intention is shared in my approach to democracy.

Formally, political participation can be defined as a voluntary activity by citizens that is aimed at some aspect of the political system (Deth, 2006: 170). In the pluralist systems at work in most democracies, the most obvious form of citizen participation beyond voting is engagement in interest groups and political parties. But political participation involves many other acts that communicate the concerns of those active to the political representatives. These include signing petitions, donating money to parties, contacting politicians or taking part in demonstrations, protests or product boycotts. Increasingly forms of civic participation such as membership in sports clubs as well as volunteer work are considered part of the array of participatory activities that are relevant for the political system. The reason for this is that community involvement, and group ties more generally, play an important role for the formation of civic skills and political action (Putnam, 2000; Deth, 2006).

In summary, political participation by citizens is necessary for enabling responsiveness which creates the foundation to think of representative systems as democratic. However, participation as such is not sufficient to ensure popular control and political equality and hence democracy. For one, as outlined before, it requires a representative political system that is capable and willing to respond to the concerns brought forward by the people, and which does so in a way that ensures both of these principles, for example by treating all inputs equally fairly. But second, and more importantly, representatives can only do so if the input they receive ensures popular control and political equality.

This is the focus of this thesis: if political participation can come in various different shapes and qualities, how are we to judge whether it contributes to democracy? For this we can come back to the two core principles of democracy. Political participation only furthers democracy if it ensures popular control as well as political equality. In the following two subsections I propose indicators of these two core principles that can subsequently be operationalised in order to measure the degree to which (a form of) participation lives up to these ideals.

1.2.2 Measuring popular control in political participation

Popular control as rate of participation

In representative systems, citizens exert influence over policy-making – albeit indirectly – via communicating preferences to those who govern through various activities of political participation. Therefore, it seems relatively straightforward to equate more widespread engagement, i.e. more people engaging in forms of participation, as constituting greater popular control. As Verba and Nie (1972: 1) summarised: *‘Where few take part in decisions there is little democracy; the more participation there is in decisions, the more democracy there is’.*

To what degree is popular control realised in the representative democracies of the UK and Germany, which form the focus of this thesis? Table 1 reports the rates of engagement in various forms of political participation in the UK and Germany, based on data from the European Social Survey 2008/09. It shows that voting is the only form of participation in which a majority of the population have engaged, and even here a substantial share of people stays at home. Half of the population has engaged in at least one of the five forms of participations surveyed. Engagement in groups of a political or civic nature – which of all activities named in the table is arguably that

which requires most effort – is a clear minority phenomenon: even in Germany, where it is comparatively popular, only one in four citizens have done so.

Table 1 Percentage of population that engaged in political participation within the last year, UK and Germany (2008/09)

form of participation engaged in within the last year	UK	Germany
voted in last national election (only those eligible to vote)	70	83
at least one other act of political participation such as:	52	51
- signed a petition	38	29
- boycotted certain products	24	29
- contacted a politician/government official	17	16
- taken part in a lawful public demonstration	4	8
- worn or displayed a campaign badge/sticker	6	5
worked in a political party or action group	2	4
worked in another organisation or association	7	24

Source: ESS 2008/09 (N – UK=2,352; N – Germany=2,747)

These rates of activity reflect longer standing patterns that have similarly been reported for the UK (Parry et al., 1992; Pattie et al., 2004) and Germany (Uehlinger, 1988; Terwey and Bauman, 2010). Despite the crisis accounts discussed earlier, long-term participation patterns exhibit no decline in participation overall. Instead, specific activities of participation such as election turnout have declined while others such as taking part in demonstrations or signing petitions have risen (Whiteley, 2003). Contemporary patterns of participation are characterised by a move away from traditional activities (such as voting) and formal memberships (for example in parties or unions) to more fluid and transient involvements with a variety of causes and movements (Bennett, 1998; Bennett and Entman, 2001; Norris, 2002). In other words, rather than a general decline in levels of participation the studies report a transformation of the ways in which citizens engage in political participation, a

development that among others has been linked to growing individualism and the rise of post-materialist values (Inglehart, 1977; Parry et al., 1992: 25).

Having shown current rates of political participation in Germany and the UK, the question is whether these rates are enough to ensure popular control. The major argument against higher rates of participation has been that citizens might deliberately choose not to participate and that they should be free to do so. For example, pluralist theorists challenge the idea of widespread continuous participation as a necessary condition to uphold pluralist democratic systems. Instead they assume a general '*inertia*' (Dunleavy and O'Leary, 1987: 33); that is, most citizens are not politically active but they are well informed enough to immediately act or organise on behalf of their interests should these be threatened (Schudson, 1999; Graber, 2003).

However, if this is true, should the widespread public dissatisfaction with politics and its institutions as discussed at the beginning of this thesis not result in greater levels of participation? While it might be argued that citizens act rationally when not participating in politics because of the limited impact of their actions and the associated costs (Pateman, 1971; Goodin and Dryzek, 1980; Fuchs, 2007), the fundamental problem with all of these views is that they treat engagement in political participation simply as a matter of choice. However, as I will show below, rates of participation by and large do not reflect choice but first and foremost ability – or rather *inability* – to participate.

Barriers to participation

Clearly if people do not want to participate in politics their choice should be accepted. But in order to make this informed choice, citizens need to have the ability to participate in the first place, and research has consistently shown that political

participation requires resources. These are not only time to participate or money to spend, but also knowledge about the political process and skills to influence this process in one's favour, all together creating a feeling of efficacy. But these resources are not distributed equally in society. Instead, they are possessed primarily by citizens with high social and economic status who are therefore more likely to get politically engaged – one of the most often replicated findings of social science research which has been formalised in the Socio-Economic Status (SES) model (Milbrath, 1965: 115; Verba and Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 1978: 63; Barnes and Kaase, 1979; Parry et al., 1992; Verba et al., 1995; Schäfer, 2010; Böhnke, 2011).

This is also apparent in the profile of politically active citizens in the UK and Germany (see Table 24 for the UK and Table 27 for Germany). In both countries, while there are few gender differences, those who are politically active considerably more often have a university degree (by a factor of 1.5) than the population in general, and more often have a higher income while those on low incomes are under-represented and those who are unemployed are almost absent. Also the age structure differs from the general population, resembling what Milbrath and Goel (1977: 114) already found in the 1970s, namely that *'participation increases steadily with age until it reaches a peak in the middle years, and then gradually declines with old age'*. Group resources also play a strong role for political participation, for example by providing a means of mobilisation: consequently those who are politically engaged are about twice as often involved in political groups than the population average would suggest. Again, this confirms research in both countries that is twenty years old and has basically established the same patterns (Parry et al., 1992; Terwey and Bauman, 2010).

Of course resources are not the whole story. The availability of resources does not automatically imply participation if there is a lack of motivation to become active. Conversely, a specific issue such as a controversial piece of legislation can to some degree mitigate a lack of resources (Parry et al., 1992; Verba et al., 1995; Neller and Deth, 2006). However, motivation and capability to participate are closely intertwined: it is fair to assume that the motivation to participate is lower if there are fewer capabilities to participate. This begs the question of what is more important: not being able to participate (i.e. resources) or not wanting to participate (i.e. motives). Verba et al. (1995: 527) deliver a powerful argument about why the often measured lack of interest among the disadvantaged (i.e. those with few resources) is not simply free choice, but is also influenced by their very lack of resources that prevents them from perceiving a need to participate:

First, [...] political interest is, unlike an individual's preference for chocolate or vanilla, not simply a matter of taste. Instead, along with other measures of political engagement such as political information and efficacy, political interest derives from the same process we have been describing and is deeply influenced by the same socioeconomic factor – in particular, education – that produce participation. Therefore, if the less advantaged are less interested in politics, or are otherwise less politically engaged, these predispositions reflect resources as well as choice. Furthermore, political interest or engagement can go only so far in overcoming resource deficits.'

As a result of these resource barriers to participation, *'political disengagement appears entrenched and widespread among those living in 'very deprived' areas'* as a joint report by the Hansard Society and the Electoral Commission in 2006 (2006: 6) summed up. It echoes Parry and Moyser's (1994: 54) conclusion a quarter of a century earlier: *'However, perhaps more significant is that those who are disadvantaged under-participate. They have not succeeded in compensating for their weak economic position by raising their political voices.'*

The argument that widespread inactivity reflects satisfaction with government becomes something almost cynical when those who have benefited least are those

also least active (Macedo, 2005: 13). Instead of an informed choice not to participate, current rates of participation reflect a lack of resources and hence the lack of ability to participate. This suggests that if the resource-poor had the means to understand and to act, more people would (be motivated to) participate. Therefore current rates of participation constitute inadequate levels of popular control and there is a need for higher rates of participation.

So we can conclude that representative systems need certain levels of participation so that they can remain responsive and enable government according to the will of the people. While we should not expect everybody to participate, in general greater participation in terms of numbers ensures more popular control. I have argued that current rates of participation suggest a lack of popular control because significant parts of the population are excluded from participation due to their lack of resources. At the same time, engagement in political participation is no goal in itself. As long as not everybody participates there is a danger that those who act do not speak for those who remain passive (Fiorina, 1999). As Parry et al. (1992: 481) have put it aptly, *'participation is a right that benefits those who use it – whoever they may be and for good or ill. Political participation is not, therefore, an unalloyed democratic ideal.'* It is therefore necessary also to ensure that those who are participating are representative of the population – as the next section argues.

1.2.3 Measuring political equality in political participation

Political equality as descriptive representativeness

To ensure political equality in a representative system, each and every one of those represented must have the same reasonable chance to get their opinion considered. This means that for political participation to enable political equality it must ensure

that representatives get to know all relevant opinions concerning a certain matter. This is important because otherwise it leads to some interests being more powerful than others in the process of making policies while others are marginalised and never reach political representatives (Verba et al., 1995).

The differences in the distribution of resources that lead to differential abilities to participate constitute political inequality, because as Dahl (1989: 114,310) argues, political equality requires not only having the same formal right to participate, but it also requires having the same actual ability to use this right and to determine the outcome of collective decisions. While the findings of the previous section indicate that there must certainly be problems in relation to political equality, how can we actually measure the degree of political equality in political participation?

I argue that in order to ensure at least a minimum of political equality, citizens engaging in politics need to be representative of the population in terms of certain socio-economic characteristics. This can be called *descriptive representation* – that the participants in a certain endeavour are recruited representatively of the population (Verba et al., 1995: 165pp; Mansbridge, 1999). This is based on the assumption that there is some connection between socio-economic properties of individuals and their opinions and problems. Therefore Dahl (1989: 340) argues that one important aspect of political equality is that the people taking part in decisions are representative of the population, an argument that has been taken up by Verba et al. (1995). Similarly Parry and Moyser (1994: 57) argue that ‘*effectiveness*’ of participation means that people who participate are representative of the wider population. Even Pitkin (1967: 88), who would argue against descriptive representation of representative bodies (e.g.

legislatures), specifically excludes the participation of citizens to provide information to representatives from her critique of descriptive representation.

Criticism of descriptive representation

Those who oppose descriptive representativeness in political participation usually have two justifications. First, people who do not participate would simply choose not to because they are satisfied or are not interested. This argument has been countered in the previous section. The second argument is that those who are active would represent the concerns of everybody, even the inactive, no matter if they are representative in terms of socio-economic characteristics or not. This idea has been termed '*proxy representation*' (Verba et al., 1995: 175) but a number of studies have established that while often different social groups do have a variety of goals in common, this cannot be relied upon and those who do participate are indeed rather bad proxies for those who do not participate (Verba et al., 1995; Fiorina, 1999; Gilens, 2005; Macedo, 2005: 13; Bartels, 2006).

Hence if the principle of political equality is taken seriously, biases in political participation pose a real risk because those who are active have a better chance of being heard and of having their concerns considered in the political process while the views of the inactive are not equally well represented (Pattie et al., 2004: 109; Deth, 2006: 185). Thus Verba et al. (1995: 493) argue that '*The over- or underrepresentation of politically relevant groups among participants implies that public officials hear more from some kinds of citizens than from others and thus jeopardizes the democratic norm of equal protection of interests.*' Of course, descriptive representation does not necessarily mean that those participating would then also actively promote the interest of the group or class from which they are originating. It is, however, much more likely, that an unemployed

woman might speak for other women in her situation than that someone will do it who is completely alien to her situation. A participation which is descriptively representative ensures we do not have to rely on the activists to consider more than their own interests, and it also acts as a safeguard against the abuse of powers.

Summary of the proposed framework

This section has developed a framework with which to measure the democratic quality of representative systems. It is based on the argument that the quality of democracy depends on the degree to which it enables popular control and political equality. In representative forms of democracy, these can be ensured if the representatives are responsive to those who they represent. This requires a constant interaction between those who govern and those who are governed, and I focus on political participation as the main way in which citizens can try to bring their issues to the attention of their representatives. To ensure that political participation in representative systems contributes to popular control and political equality, I have argued that as many people as possible should participate and those who do should be representative of the wider population in major socio-economic characteristics. My discussion of the current patterns of participation in the UK and Germany has shown that it does not adequately fulfil either of the two criteria, which leads to distorted messages being communicated to the political representatives. In effect, there is unequal consideration of interests when decisions are being taken, violating the two principles of popular control and political equality.

I have discussed that the major reasons for this are the resource-requirements of participation. One obvious solution is to lower the barriers of participation and hence to weaken the connection between resources and participation. This has the potential

to not only increase rates of participation, but in particular to increase participation of those who currently remain largely passive and hence under-represented, that is those with less education, less money and less associational involvement. Amongst the ideas on how to facilitate this, communication technologies have occupied a prominent place. How digital communication technologies could help to address these problems, and if they actually do, is discussed in the next section.

1.3 The role of the Internet for democratic participation: previous research

If we accept the premises of the framework introduced above, namely that a positive contribution to democracy is constituted by enhancing popular control by increasing the number of people engaging in political participation, or by enhancing political equality by reducing the biases in the socio-economic profile of those who participate, the logical question is how a technology such as the Internet could facilitate such a contribution. This is discussed at the start of this section before summarising the existing empirical findings in relation to the Internet's contribution to popular control or political equality respectively. This research has largely failed to provide conclusive evidence on the contribution of the Internet to democratic participation and I discuss the reasons for this in the final subsection.

Linking the Internet to increased popular control and political equality

How could the Internet be related to political participation of more and/or different people? While I do not assume any simple deterministic effects of Internet technologies, I believe that technology is not simply neutral but can be linked to certain outcomes, however mediated through culture and society or else they may be (Winner, 1980; Chadwick, 2006; Schroeder, 2007). As such it is structuring choices

available to people (Chadwick, 2006: 17) but it is still up to the users to decide whether and how to make use of these choices (Dutton and Unesco., 2004: 42). Based on the characteristics of Internet technologies, I identify three main ways in which the opportunities provided by the Internet might be used to further democratic participation (a similar distinction has been suggested by Pratchet et al., 2009).

First, the discussion in the previous section has highlighted that political participation crucially depends on resources and that this is the major determinant of who participates. If widespread use of the Internet had the potential to *lower these resource barriers* to participation, this could result in more participation as well as participation from different people. Indeed, there are a number of arguments in favour of this. So the Internet can, for example, make participation less time-consuming if participation can take place remotely. For resource-poor parts of the population, online technologies could make participation cheaper, for example when emailing instead of mailing a letter to a representative, or easier, for example by allowing a petition to be signed with a simple click in the comfort of one's home.

Second, the Internet also creates *more opportunities for political participation* and it may well be that these can attract additional and/or socio-economically different groups of the population to engage in participation than traditional modes of participation have achieved (Ward and Vedel, 2006). Maybe among these new opportunities are forms that can engage (in particular) people from low-resource backgrounds by catering to their particular needs, or if there are more attractive and convenient forms of participation available than a signature collection on paper. Technical features such as direct feedback mechanisms, for example on the number of people who signed a petition or donated to a cause, or ways to track discussions and what happened to

input by citizens, all have the potential of making participation a more worthwhile experience and hence motivate additional citizens to become engaged.

Third, the Internet has undoubtedly *increased the information about politics* in manifold ways, and maybe this can provide more citizens with the necessary knowledge to participate. It has been shown that media use can increase political knowledge and eventually political participation (McLeod et al., 1999; Norris, 2000; Bimber, 2003: 24; Aalberg, 2005). Maybe by lowering information costs so that citizens use the Internet as a means of informing themselves, it can mobilise these citizens, thus contributing to more and different participation.

In each of these three ways the Internet could potentially be used to mobilise additional people to engage in political participation and in this way to increase popular control. Furthermore, if those who are engaged through those opportunities provided by the Internet come from groups who are traditionally less likely to participate in politics, the Internet could also increase political equality. Whether or not this is happening is discussed in the next two subsections based on the findings of empirical research so far.

1.3.1 Empirical evidence about the Internet's impact on popular control

Empirical evidence from the UK and Germany shows that the Internet is used to engage in politics, as I discuss below, before I review the research that has tried to ascertain whether these people are genuinely mobilised by the Internet.

Rates of online participation in the UK and Germany

For the Internet to have any potential to affect political participation, it needs to be used by citizens in the first place. In both countries, based on data from the ESS in

2008/09, around 70% of the population can be considered Internet users. In both countries, use of the Internet has a firm place in the repertoire of political participation channels, as Table 2 reports⁵. This is more pronounced in the UK where for example about half of those signing a petition or contacting a politician were relying on online means to do so. This widespread political use of the Internet is still a comparatively recent development. Data from the Oxford Internet Survey (OxIS) shows that by 2009 the online share of the three most popular political activities had increased by a factor of two to three as compared to the numbers in 2007 (Dutton et al., 2009: 47).

Table 2 Use of the Internet for political participation, UK (2009) and Germany (2008)

UK	signed a petition	contacted a politician, government or local government official	donated money to a political organisation or group
percentage of population engaged in this form of participation within last year	24	12	3
- only offline	13	6	2
- offline & online	5	2	0.4
- only online	6	4	0.5
percentage of people engaged in this form of participation who used online means	45	50	30

(Table continued)

⁵ Note that the levels of participation as reported in this table based on OxIS and POC differ from those reported by the ESS in Table 1. These differences are likely to be explained by the variation of sample distributions, as well as the influence of weighting and temporal differences as the data collection was about half a year apart. This has led to different measurements even where the exact same question wording was used as was the case in the UK. It is a marked illustration of the difficulty of comparing data from different sources that I discuss in more detail in Chapter 7. However, these differences do not matter for the analysis of the distribution of online and offline means of participation (in contrast to general levels of participation) as discussed here.

Table 2 continued

Germany	took part in a signature collection	contacted someone in a political role	donated money to a political organisation or cause
percentage of population engaged in this form of participation within last year	45	20	6
- only offline	38	14	5
- offline & online	5	4	0.3
- only online	2	2	0.4
percentage of people engaged in this form of participation who used online means	45	30	11

Source: UK: OxIS 2009 (N=2,004); Germany: POC 2008 (N=1,199)

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

This use of the Internet could contribute to popular control if through online forms of participation genuinely new people become politically active. However, it is also possible that those who rely on online means of participation are those who are already politically engaged and have either switched from more traditional offline forms, or are simply supplementing their offline activities with online engagement. This has been an important interest of research into the use of the Internet for politics, as is discussed in the next subsection.

Little mobilisation to participation through the Internet

In terms of popular control, it seems clear by now that the Internet at least does not decrease rates of political participation. So some of the pessimistic views outlined earlier seem unwarranted. Instead, most of the early studies conducted in the US in the late 1990s attested no effect on rates of participation at all (Quan-Haase et al., 2002; Scheufele and Nisbet, 2002; Bimber, 2003: 4; Jennings and Zeitner, 2003: 330).

Research in other countries has been lagging behind the US but what had been conducted until 2005 had basically yielded the same results. Ward and Vedel (2006: 215) concluded for the UK *'that the Internet per se is unlikely to stimulate widespread mobilisation or participation'*, based for example on the work by Curtice and Norris (2004) on the British Social Attitudes Survey. Similarly in Germany, Emmer et al. (2011) in their seven year panel survey starting in 2002 could find no indication of increased political participation through the Internet.

At the same time, even among those comparatively early studies there were signs that the Internet had the potential to *increase* participation and these indications have become stronger since. In the US a number of studies found that Internet use was associated with higher rates of political and civic participation as early as in the late 1990s (Johnson and Kaye, 2003; Weber et al., 2003; Rice and Katz, 2004). The Internet has been shown to increase voting turnout in the US even when controlling for factors such as socio-economic status (Tolbert and McNeal, 2003; Mossberger et al., 2008). Effects of Internet use on political participation are also manifest in the majority of the 38 US studies that Boulianne (2009) included in her meta-analysis. This also suggests that positive effects have become stronger in studies conducted since the year 2000. For the UK, despite mainly reinforcing effects (Curtice and Norris, 2004), there had also been some encouraging findings from data as early as 2002, indicating that the Internet offered a route into political engagement for some people who were not otherwise active (Gibson et al., 2005b: 578; di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006).

These more positive findings regarding mobilization derive in particular from studies that have moved beyond the assumption of simple deterministic effects of Internet

access and applied a more differentiated analysis of the ways in which citizens use the Internet. For example, the Internet has been shown to increase the number of people who access political information because it has lowered the information costs (Xenos and Moy, 2007; Emmer et al., 2011), and citizens who use the Internet to access political news have been shown to be more likely to engage in political activities, not just online but also offline (Shah et al., 2005; Gibson et al., 2010b; Cantijoch et al., 2011). The activating effect of new opportunities for participation has for example been shown in Germany by voting advice applications which have encouraged those to vote who did not initially want to do so (Marschall, 2011b; Marschall, 2011a). More recent results from Spain also suggest that increasing skills to use the Internet also increases political participation, even for those who have little or no interest in politics and who are usually not engaged at all (Borge and Cardenal, 2011).

In sum, there are empirical indications that through use of the Internet more people participate politically, not only in new forms of online activities but also in more traditional forms. However, while this is positive for popular control, if those who are mobilised belong to the same socio-economic groups that are already more likely to be politically active, then the result is still negative from a perspective of political equality, as it would further existing participatory biases. The question is therefore, whether the Internet can also help to engage people from groups that are under-represented in participation so far as documented previously.

1.3.2 Empirical evidence about the Internet's impact on political equality

The socio-economic profile of people who engage in online participation in the UK and Germany exhibits large deviations from the population which reflect wider patterns of online engagement reported by other empirical studies, as I show below.

Representativeness of online participants in the UK and Germany

Citizens in the UK and Germany who use the Internet to participate in politics are not representative of the population. In fact, those who use the Internet for political participation exhibit significantly greater biases from the population than the politically active who are already biased from the population. In particular, men, people with higher education and higher incomes and those active in political groups are more likely to (also) use the Internet for engaging in politics. This seems to suggest that online technologies as such cannot be used to address existing political inequalities in participation but on the contrary, that the concerns of proponents of the reinforcement theory were justified. However, the empirical evidence about the profile of those participating online offers a more nuanced assessment.

The Internet is activating the active

Studies enquiring into the profile of citizens who use the Internet to engage in politics have usually reported findings similar to the ones discussed in the previous section, namely that online forms of participation are dominated by men while those with lower education and on low incomes are under-represented. Studies both in Germany as well as in the UK have repeatedly shown that online participation is not more but in fact less inclusive than offline participation (Scherer, 1998; Siedschlag et al., 2002;

Gibson et al., 2005b; di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006; Albrecht et al., 2008; Lindner and Riehm, 2011).

This echoes the results reported around the world: even if the Internet can mobilise new people to participate in politics, those citizens come from socio-economic groups that are already more likely to participate offline, so that the Internet is '*Activating the Active*' (Norris, 2000; Norris, 2001). This would confirm the observations of earlier studies on so-called '*civic technologies*' that also failed to observe a greater activation of so far disengaged groups of society (Laudon, 1977: 111).

These findings have largely been attributed to the fact that the requirements to make use of the Internet or any form of digital communication technologies for political participation systematically exclude those who are already less likely to participate offline. The first of these requirements is access to the Internet, which is not distributed evenly in society (Dijk, 2009). For example, both in the UK and Germany those with more income and education are more often online, while Internet use declines with age (Dutton et al., 2009; Eimeren and Frees, 2011: 335). As a result, those who are already more likely to participate because they possess better education and more income, now have additional means to do so because they are also more likely to have access to the Internet.

However, with greater diffusion of the Internet, the focus has shifted because to make effective use of the Internet for political participation relies not only on access, but also on the necessary skills to use it such as searching and evaluating information (Mossberger, 2009). These skills have also been shown to increase political activity (di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006: 309; Ofcom, 2009a: 1; Borge and Cardenal, 2011) and form the second requirement for online political participation. But again, they are

possessed predominantly by those who already participate in politics, because they are associated with the same resources (such as education and income) that also increase the likelihood of participation. This has been shown in Germany (Emmer et al., 2011; Zittel and Freund, 2011), and in particular detail for the UK by Helsper (2008: 39) who concluded that *'There is a strong, clear, statistically significant, link between social exclusion and digital disengagement.'* In effect those who are already disadvantaged in society, for example by having a low income or education, are also most likely to be digitally excluded and hence cannot even consider using the Internet for political participation.

At the margins more involvement by under-represented groups

Should we then abandon the hope that the Internet can contribute to more political equality in political participation? This would be premature because even though most of the studies find the biased profiles discussed above, they also discover positive changes at the margins. An early example of this is a case study of an online council information system in the US by Docter and Dutton (1998: 143) in which they showed that it could bring in people from marginalized groups – by making access to information more flexible as well as by providing a certain anonymity – even though these are not indications of an overall shift.

Among the most substantiated findings in this regard is that the Internet offers a way to engage the young in political participation. Young people rely most heavily on the Internet for political information (Lusoli and Ward, 2005; Norris and Curtice, 2008; Fütting, 2010; Faas and Partheymüller, 2011) which in turn leads to more engagement in actual participatory acts. As a result, in online political participation young people are usually well- or over-represented compared to the population, even though they

are generally less active in forms of offline participation. This has been shown in the US (Best and Krueger, 2005; Smith, 2009), the UK (Curtice and Norris, 2004; Gibson et al., 2005b; di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006) and Germany (Füting, 2010; Emmer et al., 2011; Lindner and Riehm, 2011).

Also citizens with lower resources are not always as disadvantaged online as they are when it comes to participation offline, as has been shown in the US (Krueger, 2002; Jensen et al., 2007) but also by Gibson et al. (2005b) in the UK. Finally, many positive results for a more inclusive participation via online tools have been achieved by targeted efforts which aim to leverage the expertise of particular groups of citizens, as demonstrated for example with online consultations in the UK, Germany and beyond (Coleman, 2004; Stanley and Weare, 2004; Macintosh et al., 2005; Albrecht, 2006; Kubicek and Westholm, 2010; Neblo et al., 2010; Kubicek et al., 2011).

In summary, despite the hope for a weakening link between traditional resources and political participation, most research so far has found that resources still largely determine who participates – even with the help of the Internet. Those who lack the resources for traditional participation tend to also lack the resources to make effective use of the Internet for political participation. As a result, those socio-economic groups that are already more likely to participate offline tend to be even more dominant in political participation online. However, even though only on a small scale, the Internet has also been shown to bring in people who tend to participate less in traditional politics – most notably the young – as well as some disadvantaged groups.

Summary of findings of previous research

The overarching conclusion that must be drawn from previous research on the role of the Internet for political participation is that there is a scarcity of strong effects. From a perspective of popular control previous studies have found either no or only modest mobilisation effects. From a perspective of political equality research so far has established a tendency to activate the already politically active but this effect has not been strong enough to totally exclude certain social groups. Instead, there have also been modest effects to reach so far under-represented parts of the population.

From this the only conclusion that seems by and large unambiguous is that the enthusiastic claims for much greater and much more inclusive participation were exaggerated, but that also pessimistic fears about widespread disengagement have not materialised (Curtice and Norris, 2004: 114). Beyond this, that there were found at best only small effects can fail to convince that there are any effects of the Internet at all. This is compounded by the fact that little research has offered explanations for which processes are supposed to have led to the observed patterns. This would give us a clearer idea about the potential of the Internet to shape patterns of political participation, regardless of the size of actual effects observed. The next section discusses the reasons I have identified for these difficulties of previous research and how this thesis addresses these issues in order to provide a fresh perspective on these questions.

1.3.3 Problems of existing research

In order to show that the small effects of the Internet on political participation are indeed significant, it is important that research on this topic is well specified and that it can convincingly explain which processes have produced the observed usage

patterns. Ultimately we would require a theory that states under what conditions and by which application of technology we can expect positive outcomes for democracy – here defined as increasing participation rates and representativeness – and conversely, when we should likely see a failure of online participation initiatives to do so.

There is widespread agreement among scholars of online participation that the research field so far has failed to provide the building blocks of such a theory. In effect, when it comes to engaging citizens in political participation with the help of the Internet, we still know little about what does and does not work and why (OECD and Forss, 2005; Macintosh and Coleman, 2006; Kubicek et al., 2007; Macintosh et al., 2009; Pratchet et al., 2009; Kubicek et al., 2011). There are a number of reasons for this situation. Apart from the already criticised lack of normative foundations, I argue specifically that previous empirical research into online participation is marked by three problems. These are a *lack of focus*, a *lack of case studies* and a *lack of comparative research*. I discuss these problems in more detail below and introduce how this research addresses them.

Lack of focus

Much of the early research that focused on effects of Internet use as such on political participation had an impossible task, because for example there is a considerable difference depending on whether the demography of political bloggers is examined (Hindman, 2008), or that of signers of online petitions (Riehm, 2007; Lindner and Riehm, 2011). Given the myriad ways in which the Internet might be used, it would be surprising to observe simple uniform effects on political participation instead of a diversity of interacting and possibly contradictory effects (Bimber, 2000: 330; Anderson and Tracey, 2002: 139). What is necessary instead is to distinguish

particular types of online use and observe their specific effects, as studies have increasingly attempted to do as I have discussed above.

In addition, I have observed also a lack of focus on outcomes for particular forms of participation, as potential effects have all too often been assessed on political participation overall or at most distinguished between online and offline participation. However, as research into political participation has long established, different forms of participation are associated with different patterns of use (Parry et al., 1992; Verba et al., 1995; Pattie et al., 2004: 85; Deth, 2006). As a consequence a particular use of the technology can have different consequences for participation in donations than it will have for contacting.

The design of this research takes a different perspective by focusing on contacting political representatives as one particular form of participation, and one particular use of the Internet for this form of participation, namely contact facilitation platforms.

Lack of case studies

The stronger focus that is required for future research into the potential of the Internet to further democracy suggests looking at specific instances of online participation such as a specific online consultation, website or mobile application. These constitute discrete uses of the technology which are focused on a specific form of participation. Moreover, these offer a comprehensive setting to observe potential effects which could contribute to discerning the causal processes behind the usage patterns. However, such case studies have been rare (Pratchet et al., 2009; Kubicek et al., 2011).

Even when case studies are conducted, they often cannot contribute to a more detailed understanding of the processes by which the technology might further or

hinder participation because they fail on two accounts. First, many focus on the process of use, for example how an online discussion is conducted, and not on an evaluation of the outcomes, such as who has become engaged and what have been the longer term consequences which has led to an *evaluation gap* (OECD and Forss, 2005: 10; Macintosh and Coleman, 2006: 6; Macintosh and Whyte, 2008: 19; Pratchet et al., 2009: 88).

Second, as there are only a few projects that have been sustainable and successful, for example by attracting many users, most of the evaluation efforts have focused on cases that have been experimental in character, lasting only for a short time and/or with few people participating (Pratchet et al., 2009: 75,91). Where evaluation has taken place at all, it has mainly been focused on publicly-funded top-down projects and not so much on bottom-up efforts or distributed campaigns (Macintosh and Coleman, 2007; Macintosh et al., 2009). Examples include evaluation of online deliberations in the US (Muhlberger, 2005), evaluations of online dialogues in the UK (Coleman, 2004; Macintosh et al., 2005) and Germany (Albrecht, 2006; Märker, 2007) or online petitions in Scotland (Carman, 2006) and Germany (Riehm, 2007; Lindner and Riehm, 2011) or voting advice applications (Marschall, 2011a).

This research addresses this problem by contributing original data from two projects aimed at political participation online that have been established for more than five years at the time of writing, and during this time have consistently attracted hundreds of thousands of visitors and tens of thousands of users. Not least, these are bottom-up initiatives by civil society, not top-down by governments.

Lack of comparative research

The final problem of previous research is that it has not made sufficient use of comparisons (Freschi et al., 2009). 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 (Leston-Bandeira et al., 2008: 50). This applies in particular to cross-national comparative research, where not only micro-level factors can be distinguished, but also the possible effect of macro-level factors such as political systems and institutions in which the projects operate.

A rare example of comparative online research is the *World Internet Project*, a comprehensive effort by institutions in more than 30 countries to collect data on use and non-use of the Internet. However, as politics is just one of its many foci it means it can only provide a cursory glance at political participation online (Cole et al., 2012). The little other comparative research that exists tends to focus on use of the Internet for campaigning (see for example Anstead and Chadwick, 2009; Gibson and Cantijoch, 2011; Lilleker and Jackson, 2011) or more generally, use of new media by representatives (Zittel, 2004; Dai and Norton, 2007; Zittel, 2010) or governments (Chadwick and May, 2003; Dunleavy et al., 2006). There is little comparative case study research, in particular which applies a cross-national perspective, and those that exist had to rely mostly on secondary analysis of available documents instead of specifically collected primary data (Albrecht et al., 2008; Pratchet et al., 2009; Kubicek et al., 2011). I address this problem by collecting original data both in Germany and

the UK. Through this focus my research also contributes to addressing a lack of cross-national studies in legislative research, which Norton (2002c: xi) has identified.

Summary of problems of previous research

This discussion has identified a number of reasons why previous research has contributed too little to our understanding of how and how much the Internet can contribute to democracy. In contrast, in this thesis I address all of these issues by focusing on use of the Internet for contacting political representatives through a comparative case study of Germany and the UK, with particular attention on contact facilitation platforms as specific and popular Internet applications to enable political participation online.

Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the major motivation of this thesis which is to assess whether use of the Internet can play a positive role for democracy. I have proposed a framework for measuring the democratic quality of political participation as one crucial element of democratic representative systems by the rates of political participation as one means to ensure popular control, as well as by the descriptive representativeness of those who participate as one means to guard against political inequality. On both measures contemporary democratic systems leave much wanting and I have discussed that so far research into the potential of using the Internet to positively impact on these patterns of political participation has found either no effects at all or only modest ones which for political equality partly also suggest a negative impact on democracy.

However, I have also argued that this existing research has not adequately addressed this question, leaving doubts about the significance of the established effects, in

particular because it has so far largely failed to offer empirically grounded explanations for the observed patterns of online participation. I believe that a stronger focus on particular forms of participation and Internet uses, for example through case studies of successful online initiatives for participation, as well as comparative research, could contribute to our understanding of if and how the Internet can contribute to democratic political participation. This thesis addresses these issues and the next chapter explains in detail my focus, my case studies and my comparative approach.

Chapter 2 The Internet and democratic participation in contacting political representatives

If one had to name one area in which the qualities of information and communication technologies could make a positive difference to democracy, the communication between citizens and representatives would certainly be right at the top of the shortlist. Accounts of a crisis of representative democracies usually find much at fault with the communicative link between representatives and represented. For example, in a representative survey conducted by the Hansard Society in 2007, three out of four Britons believed that government does not spend enough time listening to individual members of the public (Hansard Society, 2008: 33). As a later report concluded (Williamson, 2010: ii), *'citizens do not want passive, broadcast-only relationships with their MPs – the sort that has existed until now. They want to communicate and to engage, to track and to contribute to the democratic debate and the tools that they want MPs to use are "those that engage them directly with people".'* The Internet could provide these opportunities, hence potentially offering a solution to this problem of representative democratic systems.

Therefore my methodological response to the lack of focus I have identified as a main problem of previous research is to concentrate on this relationship between representatives and represented. Specifically, I focus on citizens who get in touch with their political representatives and I begin this chapter with introducing this form of political participation as well as highlighting its relevance for establishing whether or not the Internet has an effect on democracy. However, my critique of the lack of focus of previous research did not stop at political participation, but extended also to the lack of focus on particular Internet applications. Therefore, from all the diverse

means of getting in touch with political representatives using the Internet, I have chosen a particular online application that I have termed *contact facilitation platforms* and that is introduced subsequently. The final part of this chapter explains the choice of the countries as cases for study, how the framework introduced in Chapter 1 is operationalised for measurement, and which sources provide data for this analysis.

2.1 The function of contacting and the promise of the Internet

Citizen-initiated contacting of government and its representatives is a form of political participation whose earliest instances can be traced back to ancient times when people turned to their kings and rulers for help (Norris, 1997: 29), but it has only become of real significance with the emergence of representative systems of democracy. However, as my discussion highlights, despite the crucial relevance of contacting for enabling responsiveness of representatives to citizens, currently it does not satisfy the normative requirements of my proposed framework. Therefore the final part of this section is dedicated to arguing how these problems of contacting could be addressed by the use of Internet technologies.

2.1.1 The role of contacting in representative democracies

From all forms of political participation, ensuring communication between citizens and representatives is widely seen as the one most promising in ensuring responsiveness of representatives (Norris, 1997; Norton, 2002d; Saalfeld, 2002; Coleman, 2009; Coleman and Blumler, 2009; Zittel, 2010). It implies that those who are represented should themselves be able to express their opinions and concerns.

This can be done in a variety of ways which are all subsumed under the label of *contacting*. It includes mediated communication by writing a letter or email or by phoning, as well as through personal communication at private surgeries or public

events. 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 (Rawlings, 1990: 29; Norris, 1997: 30; Norton, 2002d: 24; Lusoli et al., 2006: 32). 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 (Patzelt, 1996; Elsner and Algasinger, 2001: 41p; Saalfeld, 2002; Bartels, 2008) but in general numbers of contacts have increased in both countries, not least caused by the diffusion of the Internet. MPs in both countries claim that communication by email has increased while other avenues of contact have not experienced a decline (Williamson, 2009b; Zittel, 2010).

Common to all these modes of contacting is that they establish a direct link between citizen and representative and that they have the capability of conveying a lot of information, much more than other forms of participation such as for example voting (Verba et al., 1995: 48). Moreover, by choosing what to talk or write about, contacting offers citizens a chance to set the agenda which is otherwise rare in their interactions with representatives, as Verba et al. (1972: 52) highlight.

Contacting as a form of political participation fulfils distinct functions for citizens and representatives which are introduced below and which in combination can act to ensure the responsiveness of the entire representative system.

Contacting representatives and its functions for citizens

For citizens, contacting representatives fulfils mainly two functions. It provides them with the opportunity to *express their opinion* or to *seek help* from their representative (Cain et al., 1987: 52). While expressing an opinion to a representative can simply act as airing a grievance without the expectation of any consequence – in the sense of a ‘*safety valve*’ (Norton, 2002d: 4) – the usual motivation of a citizen would be to influence a political decision in their favour and as such aiming at what Eulau et al. (1978) defined as ‘*policy responsiveness*’. However, clearly the chance to actually influence policy is very limited, classifying contacting as a form of participation with comparatively low impact on decision-making (Arnstein, 1969).

Where contacting representatives can have more direct consequences for citizens is when they seek information or help on individual problems from representatives, which forms the bulk of contacts made with representatives both in the UK and in Germany (Barker et al., 1970; Norton, 1982; Cain et al., 1987; Rawlings, 1990; Norton, 1994: 712; Patzelt and Süßmuth, 1995; Börnsen, 2006). By ensuring ‘*service responsiveness*’ (Eulau and Karps, 1978), representatives acting as welfare officers to citizens can also increase the legitimacy of the entire political system (Norton, 2002a: 185). While for example studies of citizenship explicitly include in their definition of political engagement interactions with public officials about service delivery on such issues as school or health services (Pattie et al., 2004: 110), it is not uncommon to treat personal requests for help, for example with social services or an issue with a bank, as basically private and apolitical concerns and hence not as political participation. For example, Verba et al. (1995: 57) suggest a distinction between

'particularized contacting' – about concerns that affect only the contacter herself – and political contacting, i.e. concerns that affect the whole community or nation.

But this distinction is much less straightforward than it might seem because dissatisfaction with a benefit received might constitute a general problem of the benefit system and hence be a political issue. In other words, an individual concern might well be a collective concern – regardless of whether or not the citizen actually frames it in this way (Rawlings, 1990: 30; Parry and Moyser, 1994: 51; Searing, 1994: 122).

The perspective which I follow in this thesis believes that all contacts by citizens with representatives are meaningful and relevant for a political system. For this, it is not necessary that citizens who contact their representative consider their act as a form of political participation. As Zittel (2010: 64) argues, *'every national policy in a democracy is necessarily the sum of the individual problems and worries of its citizens.'*

The function of citizens' communication for representatives

For representatives, communication from citizens can be useful as information that helps them to understand the effects of their policies and areas in which adjustments might be in order (Barker et al., 1970; Norton, 2002d: 21). It provides them with a valuable capacity for oversight that can have tangible gains, for example in improving administration or more responsive legislation (Elling, 1979; Johannes, 1979). A case in point is that there is regular reference by MPs to the volume of letters in their postbag in order to emphasise that an issue is of importance (Barker et al., 1970: 53). For example, in the ten years from 2000 to 2009, MPs have made more than 600 references to their *'postbag'* or similar in House of Commons debates (Escher, 2010).

A second important function of this form of participation is that – once the contact is established – it can enable representatives to provide feedback and explain their decisions to those whom they actually represent and hence to act as a trustee (Fenno, 1978). Finally, representatives can also use engagement in constituency service to increase their chances of re-election, if they convince their voters that they are responsive to them – even though this effect has been shown to be small (Cain et al., 1987; Serra and Cover, 1992; Norris, 1997; Norton, 2007: 358).

Because of these important functions it is all the more surprising that while contacting is regularly included as an item in studies enquiring about political participation of the public (Lane, 1959; Almond and Verba, 1963; Deth, 2006: 175), as a discrete form of participation it has rarely been analysed in detail. As Norton (2002b: xiii) points out:

Few if any substantial works have appeared on the subject [the relationships between parliamentarians and their constituents]. What may be considered one of the key relationships in a parliamentary democracy has gone largely unexplored.'

Therefore this research addresses this gap, which is all the more necessary because not only does contacting fulfil important functions as outlined above, but it is also marked by a particular lack of popular control and political equality, as the next section discusses.

2.1.2 Applying the measurement framework to contacting

The perceived crisis of democracy is often attributed to a crisis of the dialogue between those who govern and those in whose name they govern (Lusoli et al., 2006: 24). As Coleman (2009: 95) argues:

Public meetings, political parties, and MPs' surgeries have allowed citizens and representatives to exchange view with each other. But this relationship has never been anything like an easy, equal one. The public has generally been spoken at, rather than

with. Though not ignored as such, citizens were not invited to join the club. The public has been traditionally patronized, feared, or seduced.'

Communication – or rather the lack thereof – is seen as one possible factor for the ‘democratic deficit’, that is the gap between how citizens want to be governed and how they are governed, as Norris (1999: 23) explains.

In this section, I apply my framework to this form of participation to test whether these accounts are actually justified. Based on data primarily from the UK and Germany, this section shows that accounts of a crisis of communication between citizens and representatives do indeed have a basis, because this form of participation is lacking not only in number of people participating but in particular in its representativeness of the population.

Lack of popular control as too few contact

Data from the 2008/09 round of the European Social Survey reports that in the UK and Germany about one in six citizens (UK: 17%, Germany 16%) have contacted a politician, government or local government official in the last year. However, a significant share of those has contacted not a political representative, but a government official – which is important but is less relevant for the process of political representation of interests. For example, my analysis of the UK Citizenship Survey⁶ – as one of the few studies that distinguish in detail with whom citizens got in touch – suggests that in 2008-09 about a third of those who had contacted in the last year had only been in touch with officials and no representative at all. Similarly, a

⁶ A government-commissioned (first biennial, later continuous) survey of a random sample of around 10,000 people in England and Wales aged 16+, started in 2001 but discontinued in 2011. For more information see Department for Communities and Local Government: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/communities/research/citizenshipsurvey/> [19.05.2012]

survey by Ofcom (2009a: 11), conducted not long after the European Social Survey cited above, reported that only 7% had specifically contacted an MEP, MP, regional assembly member or local councillor within the last year.

It still means that contacting is one of the more popular forms of participation in both countries as Table 1 in the previous chapter has shown. Though not as popular as signing petitions and boycotting products – two activities that are arguably easier to accomplish – it is more often carried out than taking part in demonstrations or party work. While contacting has traditionally occupied this middle rank (Parry et al., 1992: 421; Pattie et al., 2004; Terwey and Bauman, 2010), there are clear indications that compared to the 1970s and 1980s, today more people contact their representatives who, as a consequence, have to deal with more communication (Koch, 1990; Norton, 2002a: 180; Lippa et al., 2009; Ipsos MORI, 2010).

Even though there are less popular forms of participation, because of the important function that the communication from citizens to representatives fulfils, it cannot satisfy the normative requirements of my framework that (to take the UK example) only 7% get in touch with their representatives while four to five times as many engage in less politically significant forms of participation such as signing petitions or boycotting products. Therefore I argue that the number of citizens engaged in contacting needs to increase. Otherwise citizens might use this form of participation to secure benefits only particular to them and disadvantage others who do not get in touch (Rawlings, 1990: 41). Not least, if representatives really use the information they receive from constituents, there is a danger that general policies reflect only the wishes of the outspoken, not necessarily of the majority (Norton, 2002d: 35).

Despite this one might argue that the rates of engagement in contacting do not matter, as long as those who need help get in touch to receive it, and as long as those who influence public policy through articulating their opinions to their representatives reflect broadly what the silent majority wants. In essence, popular control might not matter as long as political equality is guaranteed – but exactly this is not the case, because those who engage in contacting constitute a very select share of the population, as the next section discusses.

Lack of political equality as contacters are particularly biased

Contacting suffers from particular problems in relation to political equality, because those who engage in this activity are particularly biased from the population – making it particularly relevant to the focus of this research. As Table 24 (UK) and Table 27 (Germany) show, in both countries those who have contacted a representative differ in several characteristics from the population, and these deviations exhibit strong similarities in direction, if not extent, between the UK and Germany.

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. It comes as no surprise that the nature of the biases is similar between those who engage in contacting and those who are politically active more generally. However, 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 income (and further marginalizing those on low 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.

There are few exceptions to this general tendency of greater bias in contacting as compared to political participation overall. One is that low income groups in the UK are more or less fairly represented on this activity – which is not usually the case for political participation and probably relates to the importance of contacting as a way to obtain help in personal matters.

This socio-demographic profile represents long-standing patterns of engagement that confirm older research, for example in the UK (Parry et al., 1992; Pattie et al., 2004) but also from the US (Sharp, 1982; Verba et al., 1995: 255). There are two main reasons why contacting suffers from particular biases compared to other forms of participation. One reason is that it requires more resources than other forms of participation such as for example signature collections. Verba et al. (1978: 55; 1995: 48) have highlighted that these are not so much related to money, but in particular to communication skills which are associated with higher levels of education. These are necessary for example to find what representative to contact and how (Parry et al., 1992: 73).

Furthermore, contacting is a non-institutionalised form of political participation and these are prone to more biases (Deth, 2006: 185; Schäfer, 2010; Böhnke, 2011). In other words, voting with its regular and highly institutionalised events tends to be more inclusive than for instance contacting MPs – as it requires more motivation and initiative to participate. For this reason Milbrath (1965: 24) ranked it in the middle of the involvement scale in terms of effort as *Most persons, however, must take special pains to*

communicate with political leaders; seemingly, a large majority of them do not wish to take the trouble or may feel uncomfortable in attempting to do so.'

Summary of the role of contacting

Contacting politicians is an important form of political participation as it allows for direct communication between representatives and citizens, providing representatives with potentially valuable information and offering citizens the opportunity to communicate their concerns, seek help and influence politics, all together ensuring the responsiveness of representative systems. It constitutes an established and popular form of participation but at the same time an understudied phenomenon – a gap addressed by my research.

As I have shown at the beginning of this section, the communicative link between citizens and representatives has been unsatisfactory. I have outlined two main reasons for this assessment. First, even though relative to other forms of participation contacting is rather popular, overall too few people engage in this vital communication with their representatives. Therefore it can be used by a select few to further their interest and hence it is lacking in terms of popular control. This constitutes a problem because, secondly, even by the standards of political participation in general, those people who are getting in touch are particularly biased from the population. Altogether, this has important implications for the messages communicated to representatives, resulting in substantial political inequality.

But the criticism does not end there, because even when citizens succeed in getting in touch with representatives, this does not imply that they are being heard and that input from citizens will have any consequences. Thus Wahlke (1978: 79), as long ago as the 1970s, made the sobering assessment (in a summary of the research of studies

into the matching between constituents' policy preferences and the behaviour of their representatives) that *'Most report without surprise the lack of connection between any sort of policy-demand input from the citizenry and the policy-making behaviour of representatives.'*

Altogether, as a form of political participation, contacting political representatives in its current state does not satisfy the normative democratic standards I have formulated at the beginning of this thesis and is therefore in clear need of improvement. Given that it mainly involves communication, it should not be surprising that the opportunities of information and communication technologies have commanded particular interest to accomplish this, as the next section outlines.

2.1.3 Using the Internet for linking citizens and representatives

What are the potential effects of online communication for connecting citizens and representatives? I discuss these in this section and review the empirical evidence to assess whether these effects have materialised.

Potential of online communication

Online contacting can take place in many different forms. For example, constituents can send an email to the address found on an election leaflet, they can use an online form provided on the MP's personal website, or they might 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. This could play out favourably for this form of participation because it is primarily about one-to-one communication. 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

constituency MP, and lack of time is the most popular reason not to get engaged in political activity (Hansard Society, 2007: 18, 50). Altogether, this could activate more citizens to engage in contacting.

However, the main expectations placed on greater use of Internet technologies for this form of participation has been a more responsive relationship between citizens and representatives (Cook, 2002; Norton, 2007; Zittel, 2010). Coleman (2007: 375) elaborates on what this could mean:

'The feedback path inherent in digital media technologies makes possible a more direct communicative relationship between representatives and represented, allowing the former to consult the public regularly on matters of policy and the latter to feed their experience and expertise into the process of democratic governance.'

Even sceptical accounts of the use of the Internet for democratic participation, such as Margolis et al. (2000: 211), have seen its potential to increase responsiveness. A number of reports by the House of Commons produced since 2002 have expressed the hope that ICT adoption among other things *'could [...] enhance MPs' and assemblies' interaction with citizens.'* (Lusoli et al., 2006: 27).

Social media as one of the more recent developments of online applications offer a useful illustration of this potential of ICTs. In particular (micro)blogs such as Twitter or social network sites such as Facebook could 'connect' citizens and representatives in a qualitatively new way that would enable both citizens and representatives to exchange views and information in a continuous, ongoing fashion. For example, such media could enable representatives to give constituents a more accurate impression of themselves and their role as representative through frequent (status) updates, e.g. on their activities in the constituency and on behalf of constituents. In the same way, citizens could receive notifications about such updates and in this way stay permanently up to date. More importantly, such sites offer representatives a simple

way to seek views from constituents and other citizens, while these in turn could also approach their representatives via their profiles (Jackson and Lilleker, 2009a: 248).

So far I have focused on the positive potential of online communication. At the same time, the ways in which use of the Internet could alter this form of participation are not all welcomed. In particular, there are concerns that an activity already marked by inequalities in participation will get even more biased when engagement requires access to certain technologies and skills, resulting in even more unrepresentative engagement and distorted messages. The main fear of representatives has been email overload (Dai, 2007: 470), as *'Email means you get contacted by people who otherwise would not bother.'* (Coleman and Spiller, 2003: 7). Some have even argued that it might make contacting too easy, as the attention of politicians cannot increase by the same degree as the number of messages has (Goldschmidt, 2001; Wearden, 2001; Noam, 2005). Just to what degree the hopes or the fears can be substantiated by empirical research is the subject of the next section.

Empirical findings on using the Internet for contacting

The bulk of research on the subject has focused on representatives and their use – or lack thereof – of the Internet for interacting with citizens (Leston-Bandeira et al., 2008: 51). In the beginning, research has focused on establishing to what degree representatives made use of online means at all and which factors would explain adoption. Though at first sceptical about email since it was perceived as being inferior to paper mail (Coleman, 2002), by now most MPs are using email on a regular basis and many use it regularly to communicate with their constituents – at least on the national level (Rolke and Metz, 2006; Dai, 2007: 466; Norton, 2007; Williamson, 2009b: 8; Zittel, 2010). Based on these general studies, research has enquired more

specifically into how representatives make use of the technology (Hoff et al., 2004). For example in the UK, Williamson (2009b: 9) found that, *'there is a clear perception amongst [British] MPs that email is a valuable tool for keeping in touch with constituents.'* According to a survey of parliamentarians in the UK, Europe, Sweden and Portugal (Dai, 2007), political representatives quote as advantages of email communication that emails are convenient to use, that they are an easy way to establish a dialogue between representative and constituents, and that they might increase participation of young voters.

In contrast, few studies have looked at how citizens make use of these new opportunities to get in touch. If available, the analysis has usually been conducted in studies of political participation online in general without explicitly investigating contacting (di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006; Ofcom, 2009a; Emmer et al., 2011). A notable but limited exception is the Hansard Society's study of use of the Internet for political participation in Britain (Williamson, 2010). It showed that even among Internet users the highest social grades are more likely to use the Internet for contacting than the lowest social grades, but also that there is a public demand for a more responsive relationship as cited in the introduction to this chapter.

However, detailed research both in the UK and Germany as well as beyond found that MPs rarely used the interactive features of online technologies to really engage with citizens and their opinions. This is not only true for more traditional websites (Ward and Lusoli, 2005; Norton, 2007; Vicente-Merino, 2007; Zittel, 2010), but also for more recent technological developments such as social media. For example, research in the UK and Germany (Albrecht et al., 2007; Francoli and Ward, 2008) showed that take up of blogs by representatives has been limited. What is more, those

few representatives with a blog presence used it primarily for campaigning or just ‘to be there’ instead of soliciting contacts from constituents or for that matter any interactive dialogue. While data on use of social network sites by representatives is still patchy, it suggests that by now the majority of MPs in both countries have a presence on social network sites with Facebook being the most popular one (Williamson, 2009a: 521; Jackson and Lilleker, 2011; Meckel et al., 2011: 10; Siri et al., 2012: 10). However, few representatives seem to use their online presence on social networks regularly (Heimrich, 2010). Meckel et al. (2011: 10) suggest that only 10% of all those MPs present are using the sites actively.

In sum, 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. As a result, we are left with large gaps in our understanding of online contacting. Therefore, for an assessment of the role of the Internet for political participation more generally, the study of contacting offers a promising opportunity to provide the focus demanded in Chapter 1. The lack of focus on particular applications which I also criticised is addressed by the analysis of what I call online contact facilitation platforms and which the next section introduces.

2.2 Internet applications to enable contacting: contact facilitation platforms

When analysing ‘*online contacting*’ this research is studying the phenomenon in its whole variety, regardless of whether communication is established by email, via a social network site or by any other online means. However, in response to the problems I have identified in previous research, this research focuses in particular on one type of

contacting online: writing to representatives via what I call online contact facilitation platforms.

The first site of such kind has been the British *WriteToThem*⁷, 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 via their own postcode and then deliver a message to them typed on the screen. 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 also widely used German site *Abgeordnetenwatch*⁸ which forms the second case study of this research. These sites have inspired a variety of similar sites in other European countries. These include *MeinParlament* in Austria⁹, *CandidateWatch* in Ireland¹⁰, *PolitikerCheck* in Luxembourg¹¹, *Mail de politiek* in the Netherlands¹², *Parašykėjems* in Lithuania¹³ and *NapišteJím* in the Czech Republic¹⁴. 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 UK¹⁵ or *Campact* in Germany¹⁶) or in occasional newspaper campaigns offering a ‘Tell your MP’ feature such as The Times’ (2008) campaign to

⁷ <http://www.writetothem.com> [27.02.2012]

⁸ <http://www.abgeordnetenwatch.de> [27.02.2012]

⁹ <http://www.meinparlament.at> [27.02.2012]

¹⁰ <http://www.candidatewatch.ie/> [27.02.2012]

¹¹ <http://www.politikercheck.lu> [27.02.2012]

¹² <http://www.maildepolitiek.nl> [27.02.2012]

¹³ <http://parasykjemis.lt/> [27.02.2012]

¹⁴ <http://www.napistejim.cz> [27.02.2012]

¹⁵ <http://www.38degrees.org.uk/> [27.08.2012]

¹⁶ <http://www.campact.de> [27.08.2012]

open up family courts for the press which utilised a widget that allowed the reader to email his or her constituency MP.

2.2.1 Definition

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 accessible. To meaningfully enable this transparency, these sites would need to be independent of the representatives contacted and to take care of transmitting the messages to them. As a result, contact facilitation platforms are defined by three features:

1. they handle the transmission of messages to the representative
2. they are provided and operated independently from the representatives themselves
3. they add a level of transparency to the contacting taking place through the platform

So far, such sites have not previously been defined as a class of Internet applications in their own right. However, I argue that their set of features makes them distinct from other forms of online contacting, and this merits further investigation.

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. Moreover, only by transmitting the message on behalf of the citizen can these sites generate information on the process of participation and enable the transparency. To provide

statistics that can be trusted not to have been manipulated or interfered with by representatives, for example in order to appear more responsive to citizens' needs, these platforms need to be independent of the representative contacted. In effect, online contact facilitation platforms act as intermediaries between citizens and representatives, not just as a service provider to a representative. As a consequence, these websites are often run by non-governmental organisations such as is the case for the two websites analysed in this research.

The main feature of contact facilitation platforms is that they make contacting more transparent. At a basic level this is 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 before use of the Internet for contacting. But why is this so important? Because it has the potential to significantly increase the motivation of citizens to contact representatives.

We could assume that the information that a representative is very responsive might already help to convince more citizens to get in touch, but more importantly, 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. For example, even if a citizen fails to receive a response, her act has

left a trace on the site by showing others that the representative is not performing as expected – so the individual act was not in vain. Sites such as Abgeordnetenwatch where the entire message exchange is public also act as public repositories of information by providing answers to questions other citizens might have too. This can serve as an additional motivation as one user of Abgeordnetenwatch (AW216) highlights: *‘I perceive this as a good opportunity, to discuss questions of interest directly with the representative and to make the answers easily accessible to others.’*

In addition to the three core features I have defined above, there are further features that many of these sites employ. A fairly routine feature to ease contacting is a postcode search that shows who represents the constituency in which the provided postcode is located. In addition, some contact facilitation platforms focus not only on one particular level of government but also allow contacting representatives on local, national or European level. Sites do, however, differ in whether the communication between citizen and representative takes place in private or is made in public on the website. They also employ different policies towards whom citizens should contact. The British site WriteToThem encourages users only to contact the representatives of their constituency, while the German site Abgeordnetenwatch makes no such provisions. Also, there are different approaches towards the type of messages sent. Sites enabling public communication usually employ some form of moderation. In what ways these different approaches play out for contacting patterns on Abgeordnetenwatch and WriteToThem will be discussed in more detail in the two final chapters of this thesis.

2.2.2 Assessing relevance

It could be argued that contact facilitation platforms are an object worthy of study simply by virtue of the multitude of different sites of such kind as introduced at the start of this section, or of the large number of people that use them. Sites such as WriteToThem and Abgeordnetenwatch are regularly used by tens of thousands of people, as have campaign sites that employ such features (Dürr, 2010; Chatterton, 2011). However, the relevance of these sites goes beyond their relative success.

Potential of contact facilitation sites

By using features of the technology to make this form of participation easier to engage in, such as helping to find the contact details and delivering the messages, they address the resource barriers of traditional participation. Besides, as I have outlined above, they might also be able to increase the motivation to engage in contacting by adding transparency, and in this way giving an individual act of participation a collective relevance. Therefore contacting via contact facilitation platforms represents a new nature of this form of participation which is all the more relevant to the problem of political inequality as the growing individualisation of political participation is considered to reinforce participatory biases (Pattie et al., 2004: 79).

However, these platforms embody not only the positive potential of the Internet for democracy but also the problems associated with it. First, they have attracted criticism from politicians because they act as intermediaries between representatives and citizens (Christian Democratic parliamentary group of Baden-Württemberg, 2010; Gruber, 2010). Second, the ease of use of these sites can result in more messages and more noise which drowns out 'relevant' messages, as is arguably the case in the mass email campaigns for which such platforms are also used. Finally,

precisely this new transparency creates new challenges for representatives. For example, as Chapters 4 and 6 discuss, the responsiveness statistics of the two platforms under study have generated significant media coverage and some representatives felt unduly pressurized and unfairly judged as these statistics would not take into account their efforts in constituent communication beyond these websites. This is illustrated by a story about Conservative MP Iain Liddell-Grainger in February 2006 who was accused of trying to game his ranking in the responsiveness statistics of WriteToThem by emailing himself via the site, an action he justified as his low figures were used by an opponent to damage his standing¹⁷.

Lack of empirical research

Despite all these aspects that clearly make these sites relevant for research on the effects of the Internet on participation, to date these sites have not been perceived as a category of their own, and there has been no systematic study of such sites. Out of all the contact facilitation platforms cited in the introduction of this section, only Abgeordnetenwatch has received some notable academic attention. The work of Albrecht et al. (2010) is the only one that has shed some light on the users of Abgeordnetenwatch, but mainly on those passively reading the site (instead of using it for contacting) and based on a dataset of questionable quality dated from 2007. The work by Pautz (2010) subjects the site to a merely theoretical treatment of its potential role. Beyond this there have only been some student dissertations with very small samples of low quality and a focus on state representatives in 2006 (Focks, 2007) or on MPs' perception of the site (Klötzer, 2011). Apart from an interesting

¹⁷ BBC News, 21.02.2006 'Site axes MP over 'fake' emails.'
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4735330.stm [27.02.2012]; see also this topic on the mySociety blog: <http://www.mysociety.org/2006/02/22/ian-liddell-grainger/> [27.02.2012]

but anecdotal study into usage of WriteToThem by postcode area (Smith, 2007), the British site has received no academic attention apart from by this author (Escher, 2011). Less successful sites have commanded even less attention with the dissertation about the Austrian MeinParlament as a rare example (Wilhelm, 2009).

So in sum, contact facilitation platforms offer an ideal case for studying possible effects of the Internet on participation because they embody the potential for both positive as well as negative effects of the Internet on participation and because they have hardly been researched yet.

2.2.3 Comparison with other forms of contacting

While it is difficult to put precise figures on the ‘market share’ of contact facilitation sites on online contacting overall, as I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 7, I assume that for example the platform WriteToThem in the UK accounts for a low single-digit share of all those engaging with politicians online, and Abgeordnetenwatch in Germany for even less than half a percent of all annual online contacters. Regardless of the precise figures, it is clear that the majority of citizens using the Internet to get in touch with representatives are *not* relying on these contact facilitation platforms. This raises the question of what other online means they use. Also, could these be more suitable as a particular focus for this research in order to complement my analysis of online contacting in general which includes all possible forms of getting in touch with politicians via the Internet?

Email

The basic challenge of research into this form of participation is that there is no data available that would allow one to clearly discern by what means these citizens contact online, and as such to assess beyond doubt what are the most popular means for

contacting via the Internet. However, I assume that the vast majority of citizens who use the Internet to get in touch with politicians are relying on email communication. The main reason for this is that most citizens will follow traditional patterns of establishing contact: in the offline world that is to contact individually, by looking up contact details and sending a message directly to the representative, and it is to be expected that similar patterns are followed online. This is supported by the sparse evidence, for example, on the poor usage of social media for constituency communication as discussed earlier, as well as through anecdotal evidence by MPs who regularly complain about receiving so many *emails* – and not mobile phone messages, tweets or status updates (Williamson, 2009a).

However, even if individual emailing might be the most popular means of approach, to assess the potential of online technologies it is useful to focus on applications that offer additional features that could positively affect participation as is the case for contact facilitation platforms. Not least, from a methodological point of view, collecting data from a great variety of dispersed people who have sent an email to representatives poses greater challenges than relying on a platform as central contacting point.

Social media

If not popularity, but promising technical features, are of interest, then clearly social media suggests itself for study and I have discussed in particular the potential of social network sites above. However, for a number of reasons they do not offer a suitable testing ground for the effects of the Internet on the communication between citizens and representatives. First, apart from the fact that at the time this research got underway in 2007 social media were not yet very popular among the public, even

now when the majority of Internet users in both countries have a profile on a social network site (BITKOM, 2011: 7; Dutton and Blank, 2011: 34; European Commission, 2011: 199), use of such platforms is not yet as ubiquitous as use of email – at least for those above 25 years of age. This already puts limits on their ability to enable participation that is descriptively representative when significant parts of the online population do not have the means to engage.

Second, not only has take-up by representatives in Germany and the UK been lagging behind still further (Heimrich, 2010; Jackson and Lilleker, 2011; Lilleker and Jackson, 2011; Siri et al., 2012), the little research available also suggests that even now when the majority of MPs have a social media presence, it is hardly used to communicate with citizens, let alone constituents (Jackson and Lilleker, 2009a; Jackson and Lilleker, 2009b; Jackson and Lilleker, 2011). For example a study of social network sites and weblogs in the UK found that more than three quarters of MPs did not ask their visitors for their opinions or encourage contacting (Jackson and Lilleker, 2009a: 251). In the same way, a study by the UK Hansard Society (Williamson, 2009a: 525) concluded *‘While there is a significant rise in social networking, this seems to be either as a tool to manage campaigning, for awareness building, or as a further channel for publishing’*. Research in Germany has come to similar results (Siri et al., 2012). Even though only a few citizens try to contact representatives publicly via these sites, those who do hardly ever receive a reply (Heimrich, 2010: 42; Elter, 2012).

For these reasons social media did not constitute a promising case to analyse the effects of online contacting of representatives. In contrast, contact facilitation platforms are fully developed and established online efforts with a proven track record of usage as well as responsiveness by representatives. It can be argued that

they offer an intermediate stage in the development from individual email communication to interactive online relationships via social media because they already carry some profile information of representatives and make parts of the interaction publicly accessible – more clearly on Abgeordnetenwatch but also on WriteToThem with its responsiveness statistics – and through this transparency enable a more collective form of contacting. As such the results obtained from my research into these sites can be used to suggest reasons why social media have so far largely failed to establish communication between citizens and representatives, as I do in the final chapter of this thesis.

Campaign websites and online petitions

A popular way in which citizens get in touch with representatives is via campaigning websites, which often also meet my definition of contact facilitation platforms. For example, in the countries of interest to this study, such sites have been able to mobilise thousands of people to contact their MP (Dürr, 2010; Chatterton, 2011). However, campaigning sites offer the opportunity for contacting not on a regular basis but in connection with lobbying on selected issues, often with the help of pre-formulated letters. As these issues are not set by the individual citizens, they are bound to attract a certain share of the population – that share which is affected by them. In contrast, the contact facilitation platforms I analyse in this research allow citizens to choose for what reason and concern they get in touch with their representatives, suggesting a greater potential to reach out beyond those already politically active. Apart from this, campaigning sites are much less intended for establishing an interaction between representatives and represented which has been one of the concerns of this research.

For similar reasons petitions and their online variants are less suitable for the focus of this research. The main objective of a petition is to demand an action from, and not to establish a dialogue with, representatives. Besides, the popularity of petitions as expressed in the large rates of engagement in this activity (see for example Table 1 in the previous chapter) derives from the popularity of signing such petitions – not initiating them. But my focus is in particular on citizens as initiating this communication.

Summary: the relevance of contacting for the study of Internet effects

Contacting political representatives is a traditional form of political participation characterised by a particular bias in terms of representativeness. Given its crucial relevance for ensuring the responsiveness of representative systems, current rates of engagement in this activity do not satisfy the normative standards of democracy as proposed here. By utilizing the opportunities of the Internet, contacting representatives online offers a convenient way to improve the representative-citizen relationship. As such, it has been used extensively by representatives and constituents alike. At the same time, online contacting also poses new challenges such as email overload.

As a result, use of the Internet for contacting representatives offers a fruitful ground for testing the effects of the Internet on political participation. Despite this there is a lack of research on the subject. I address this not only by analysing use of the Internet for contacting in general – which includes all ways in which citizens get in touch with representatives online – but also by a special focus on online contact facilitation platforms. These significantly ease contacting and also transform

contacting from a traditionally individual endeavour to a more collective experience, for which they have attracted significant interest but also controversy.

In contrast to most previous research, I have chosen to focus not on the representatives but on the citizens as initiators of the interaction. The eventual aim of this research is to establish what makes citizens capable (or not) of taking initiative to approach representatives, what motivates citizens (or not) to do so, and how features of online technologies might (or might not) be able to support them in this endeavour. As such the patterns of use and the processes that shape them – which I observe through the study of online contacting and its particular applications – are applicable also beyond contacting because they allow one to infer what helps or hinders people to make use of the resources and opportunities provided by these new technologies and to ultimately use them to network according to their needs. In particular, the conclusions drawn are instructive to any kind of interaction between citizens and authorities or public institutions that is mediated via the Internet, such as citizens who engage with eGovernment services, efforts of administration to consult the public on issues of public interest, as well as non-political projects where citizens are asked to provide information or other forms of (user-generated) content.

Altogether, focusing on this activity has the potential to provide valuable insights into the effects of the Internet on contacting and political participation more generally, and the next section outlines the methodological approach to the study of this form of participation.

2.3 The method: structured, focused comparison of the UK and Germany

This research conducts a *structured, focused comparison* as defined by George and Bennett (2005: 67). This methodology is a form of case study research, i.e. it is an in-depth analysis of a phenomenon in its real-life context (as opposed to a laboratory setting) of a single or a few cases using multiple sources of data. Following the suggestion of other authors, my case studies include quantitative data such as surveys of contacters, as well as qualitative data for example in the form of comments made by website users (Diesing, 1972: 156, 170; George and Bennett, 2005; Platt, 2007: 111; Yin, 2009).

The study is structured through a set of research questions that is applied to each case (see Chapter 1), and it is focused as it deals with a particular aspect of these cases: the extent and the representativeness of citizen-initiated contacts with political representatives – here defined as people who have been elected to assume political responsibility – in the context of use of the Internet and online contact facilitation platforms. This research is comparative in nature, first and foremost as it studies and compares two countries. However, it takes the comparative method further by also conducting intra-country comparisons between users of contact facilitation platforms and people who use other forms of approaching representatives.

The following two subsections discuss why Germany and the UK are suitable cases for a comparative study of contacting, and why Abgeordnetenwatch and WriteToThem are the most suitable contact facilitation platforms for analysis, not just in their respective countries but also more generally. The final subsection introduces the measurement framework that operationalises engagement in

contacting as well as representativeness of this engagement as indicators for popular control and political equality.

2.3.1 Comparing the UK and Germany

Germany and the UK constitute the two cases of this comparative case study. 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 in the context of this research as I discuss below.

Shared characteristics

Both countries are 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 exceed two thirds of the population (Dutton et al., 2009; Eimeren and Frees, 2010). Furthermore, Table 3 reports a number of key measures in relation to political participation and highlights that in terms of general political interest and engagement, the population in both countries is very much alike. The majority is at least quite interested in politics and half the population has been engaged in political activities in the last year¹⁸. 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.

¹⁸ Please note that in the UK the rate of political engagement of the population as reported by the ESS 2008/09 is significantly higher than that reported by OxIS 2009 (52% vs. 34%) in Table 24. It can be assumed that this relates mostly to the different definitions of political participation applied as the ESS included more popular forms of participation. In addition, we might assume that temporal variations and sampling errors also account for part of the difference. The country-specific data is not affected by this issue because all the measures of political participation in the UK rely on the OxIS definition, including the one used for the user survey of WriteToThem.

Table 3 Differences in percentage of population that was politically interested and politically active within last year, UK and Germany (2008/09)

	UK	Germany	significance of difference
very or quite politically interested population	57	59	(*)
politically active population	52	51	-
contacted a politician or (local) government official	17	16	-
working in a political party or action group, or in another organisation or association	8	25	**
- working in a political party or action group	2	4	*
member of a political party	2	3	(*)

Source: ESS 2008/09, (N – UK=2,352; N – Germany=2,747)

Notes: Significance based on χ^2 -tests and indicated by ** $p \leq 0.01$; * $p \leq 0.05$; (*) $p \leq 0.1$. Political participation was defined as within the last year having done at least one of the following activities: contacted a politician, government or local government official, worn or displayed a campaign badge/sticker, signed a petition, took part in a lawful public demonstration, boycotted certain products.

Differences between the two countries

Despite these similarities the two countries also exhibit differences in participation patterns. German citizens are about three times more likely to be involved with some political or community group, and are also significantly more often active in a political group or member of a political party. Even though these are just a few differences, they indicate that the distinct political systems, institutions and cultures of the UK and Germany shape participation patterns differently in the two countries. An example of this that is very relevant to this research are the markedly different perceptions representatives have of their role. For British MPs dealing with communication from constituents is much more important than for their German colleagues.

These role perceptions have a tradition in parliamentary history in both countries. The British MP has traditionally been perceived as an advocate of her constituency's interest, as Searing notes (1994: 122) that *'For hundreds of years, high policy was addressed elsewhere, while the Commons concentrated on representing local matters arising from unsatisfactory administrative, fiscal, or social circumstances.'* In the second half of the 20th century these welfare roles had a notable revival (Searing, 1994; Norton, 2002d: 20; Gay, 2005). Norton for example asserts (2002d: 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, the majority of German MPs have regarded this activity with less relevance (Herzog et al., 1990: 67; Patzelt, 1997); they *'define themselves primarily as legislators and executive 'watchdogs' rather than constituency case workers'*, as Saalfeld (2002: 53) concludes.

These role perceptions have been advanced also through different electoral systems which for example on the national level elects all British MPs directly in comparatively small constituencies, while in Germany the system of personalised proportional representation assigns only about half of the MPs in parliament to much larger constituencies. Similarly, not least because of its federal organisation and its constitutional courts, there are numerous institutions to which German citizens can address their grievances. As these are less common in the UK, there is a greater demand on British MPs to provide service responsiveness.

In summary, the choice of Germany and the UK for research can be justified on the basis that both countries share a number of basic characteristics that can form a strong base for comparison, but at the same time they also differ in a number of aspects that can aid the explanatory approach of this research. Not least, in both

countries successful online contact facilitation sites exist which will be introduced in the next subsection.

2.3.2 Focusing on WriteToThem and Abgeordnetenwatch

Reasons for selection

The websites WriteToThem in the UK and Abgeordnetenwatch in Germany are suitable candidates for a study of the effects on contact facilitation platforms on online contacting for two main reasons. First, because they are very successful examples of this type of application. Second, the distinct realisation of these two sites helps to establish effects of individual technological features or the particular approach of these platforms.

Success can be defined in five dimensions:

1. In total numbers of people that have used these sites. In 2009, more than 100,000 people used WriteToThem to contact an MP, and an additional 20,000 contacted representatives at the local, regional or European level. Abgeordnetenwatch was used by more than 8,000 people to put questions to MPs and in addition, receives on average about 100,000 to 200,000 visits each month by people reading the documented conversations between citizens and representatives on the site.
2. In terms of sustainability, because the first instance of WriteToThem was set up in late 2000 while Abgeordnetenwatch was started in 2004.
3. Both sites are successful in what they do, i.e. in putting citizens in touch with their representatives. The UK site registers a response rate of MPs of more

than 60%, while on the German site – even when excluding standard replies – more than 80% of questions receive an answer.

4. In terms of visibility, as is discussed in the respective chapters both sites have attracted substantial coverage online as well as in traditional media formats.
5. Both sites have also been the blueprint for a number of similar sites in other countries, as I have discussed in the previous section.

While both systems fulfil the same basic function (namely putting citizens in touch with their representatives), the respective realisation is quite different. In particular the British system enables only private communication while the German system enables only public communication. The differences in approach between these two sites allow this research to compare whether and how this makes a difference for patterns of participation, for example if this encourages contacting for personal rather than collective motives (or vice versa) and what socio-economic profile of people is associated with these different motives. In effect, the chosen websites constitute archetypal cases of their kind, providing the opportunity to apply the findings to other sites with the respective approach to communication (Yin, 2009: 46). While Abgeordnetenwatch and WriteToThem are not the only online applications in their countries that help citizens to get in touch with representatives, the other relevant means are less suitable to provide answers to my research question as I outline below.

Alternatives to approach representatives

Sites that would meet my definition of contact facilitation platforms are campaigning sites such as *38degrees.org.uk* in the UK and *Campact* in Germany which have attracted tens of thousands of people to contact MPs (Dürr, 2010; Chatterton, 2011) but which I have already excluded on grounds that they are bound to attract an issue-biased

group of people in the first place as discussed in the previous section. I have also shown that online contacting of representatives by and large does not take place via social media which rules them out of this research.

In both countries there are services that invite users to pose questions, and those that receive the highest rating by the audience are subsequently being answered by the person addressed. However, the British service *Yoosk.com* seems largely defunct while the German *DirektZu* (literally translated as *DirectlyTo*) only focuses on a selected few representatives, again limiting their utility for more or more equal participation. The official national parliamentary websites *parliament.uk* and *bundestag.de* offer ways of finding out about the contact details of representatives too, but as these are not independent of the representatives they do not meet my definition of contact facilitation platforms. More importantly, they offer no feature that would provide a potential to contribute to more democratic participation – such as transparency or interactivity.

It is important to note that in Germany many citizens use petitions to bring their concerns to the attention of MPs. The German Bundestag receives between 15,000 and 20,000 petitions annually (Lindner and Riehm, 2009: 507), and in 2009 more than 6,500 petitions were submitted online, about 700 of which were public petitions receiving more than one million signatures altogether (Lindner and Riehm, 2011: 11). Apart from the fact that petitions are not the focus of my research as discussed previously, these cannot be considered in a comparative perspective because the UK

lacks a parliamentary online petitions system through which representatives could be contacted – even though petitions to government have proved very popular¹⁹.

Altogether, WriteToThem and Abgeordnetenwatch form the most suitable choices to research the impact of specific Internet applications for contacting representatives. They can be classified as ‘*crucial*’ or ‘*critical*’ cases (Eckstein, 1975; Yin, 2009; Tarrow, 2010) as they are very popular sites in stable democracies with high Internet penetration – if higher rates of participation and a better representativeness are not achieved under these circumstances, it might be difficult to achieve elsewhere too. How rates of participation and representativeness can be measured in the first place is discussed in the next subsection.

2.3.3 Measurement framework

The challenge of measuring effects of online participation

There is general agreement among leading researchers in the area of online participation that widely agreed standards for measuring the effect of the Internet on participation are still missing (OECD and Forss, 2005; Kubicek et al., 2007: 99p; Macintosh and Whyte, 2008; Macintosh et al., 2009; Kubicek et al., 2011). My response to the challenge of measuring effects of online participation has been to measure rates and representativeness of participation as indicators for popular control and political equality.

There are of course other possible approaches. For example, there are serious concerns that even if all participate equally, some might still have more power to influence the outcome of decisions. Hence one could examine more specifically the

¹⁹ <http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk/> [21.07.2012]

degree to which the articulated views and demands are actually responded to by those in power. However, this poses serious methodological difficulties which go beyond the scope of this thesis. By focusing on the representativeness of the participants I have chosen a reasonably feasible and straightforward proxy measure for the representativeness of policy outcomes because I assume that equal descriptive representation of people in political participation is a precondition for equal representation of opinions, even though it is of course no guarantee.

What is more, I argue that an evaluation of the contact between a constituent and a representative would fall short if it judges its impact only in terms of whether or not the citizen achieved her objective. Instead, what matters is that people get engaged in the first place because they might put their initiative forward in alternative ways if they feel they are (consistently) being ignored. In this approach this research follows Parry et al. (1992: 15) who argued that *‘The experience of participation, not only of the results but of the process itself, is crucial to the vitality of democracy itself’*.

Finally, the indicators for popular control and political equality that I use have the merit that they have been previously applied as evaluations standards from which these measures draw their relevance and validity (Verba et al., 1995; Gibson et al., 2005b; Macintosh et al., 2005; di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006; Kubicek et al., 2007; Kubicek et al., 2011). The next subsection discusses how I have operationalised these in detail.

Operationalising popular control and political equality

To begin with, the actual measurement of popular control as put forward in this thesis is fairly straightforward: the more people participate, the better. When analysing rates of participation in online contacting based on nationwide surveys, this

implies an increase in participation rates. This requires some analysis to link any increase observed to the availability of online tools for contacting which I provide in the relevant country chapters. To assess the contribution of contact facilitation platforms to more popular control, I consider that a suitable indicator is whether the sites succeed in attracting people who have never before contacted a political representative and who are not otherwise politically active or organised.

Participatory representativeness as an indicator of political equality is not a single dependent variable but a multi-dimensional concept. It is important to define on what characteristics those active should actually be representative of the population. It is clear that, unless large majorities of the population participate, those that are active can never be a perfect representation of the population on all existing characteristics. Previous research into political participation and in particular the socio-economic status model of participation suggest a number of characteristics which have been shown to determine participation and which also represent major societal cleavages (Verba and Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 1978; Parry et al., 1992; Verba et al., 1995). These are not only those variables commonly associated with social status, i.e. income, education and occupation, but also gender and age or having a disability²⁰. Together these form what Verba et al. (1995: 170) term '*politically relevant characteristics*' which are characteristics '*whose visibility to a public official might make a difference to their response to citizen participation*' (Verba et al., 1995: 170). These characteristics are not fixed but are bound to change over time and are context-dependent.

²⁰ An obvious relevant characteristic would have been ethnicity or minority status but it proved an insurmountable challenge to obtain data that were both comparable across countries and significant enough in terms of case numbers.

This research will treat all these variables as dependent, being influenced for example by factors such as a country's political system or a website's particular design, but clearly these characteristics are not independent of each other. Chapter 8 is dedicated to developing a basic theory that argues for which factors are relevant in influencing rates and representativeness of participation and in what ways.

Measuring representativeness with the Logged Representation Scale

This thesis uses two approaches to measure how representative the people contacting their representatives are: the Logged Representation Scale (LRS) developed by Verba et al. (1995: 182) and χ^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 the logarithm of the 'ratio of the percentage of the activist with the characteristic to the percentage with the characteristic in the population as a whole' or another comparator group (Verba et al., 1995: 183). Written in notation:

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

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 that has also been used by other authors (Conover et al., 2002; John, 2009; Miller, 2010). 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 4 Key values of LRS scores and the bias from a reference group they represent

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

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 (20% in the group of interest vs. 25% in the population) 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 χ^2 -test is applied against the null hypothesis of no distortion, translating into an LRS equalling 0 (Verba et al., 1995: 577). Specifically, this is a χ^2 -test for homogeneity, establishing the probability that the distribution of a chosen characteristic is the same in both samples. This requires to dichotomize variables with multiple categories in order to calculate the LRS (Conover et al., 2002: 43).

While this final subsection has discussed the measures that should be collected from the cases, the next section summarises how this data is obtained.

2.4 Sources and methods of data collection

Two main sources provide data for answering the research questions. First, for the analysis of online contacting in Germany and the UK I rely on secondary analysis of population survey data from the respective countries²¹. Second, to study online contact facilitation platforms I have conducted online surveys of users of WriteToThem and Abgeordnetenwatch. These sources are introduced in this section. In addition, Appendix G details the provisions that ensure the ethical treatment of participants and their data.

2.4.1 Comparative population data

Answering the research questions requires recent nationally representative data on citizens who contacted a representative, distinguished by whether these contacts were made using offline or online means. A careful review of available data sources in Germany and the UK made clear that there is no dataset available that would provide this information in a comparable fashion for both countries.

²¹ Please refer to Appendix H for a list providing references to the datasets used.

Even within countries the survey evidence is limited. By far the most common problem of existing survey research that carries an item on contacting at all is that it fails to employ a distinction between contacting via online versus offline means. In fact in each country there emerged only a single study that was considered suitable: the *Oxford Internet Survey* (OxIS) series in the UK and the *Politische Online Kommunikation* (Political Online Communication – POC) panel study in Germany which are both introduced below. In addition, to aid comparison of contacting in Germany and the UK for instances in which a distinction between online and offline activities is less relevant, I have chosen the *European Social Survey* (ESS) which lacks information on means of contact but which provides an attempt to harmonize concepts in demographic and socio-economic variables across countries.

All three surveys share the problem that their questions are not very specific about which type of political recipient has been contacted. Both OxIS and the ESS include politicians as well as government officials in their question about contacting behaviour, and the German POC study would even enquire whether *‘people in a political role’* were contacted, meant to include also those responsible in citizen action groups. While for methodological clarity it would have been desirable to have more specific data available, the impact on the distribution of socio-economic characteristics of contacters is minor. Not only are the majority of contacts made with actual representatives and not government officials, as I have discussed in the first section of this chapter, also the questions in all surveys analysed were phrased in such a way as to exclude purely bureaucratic queries to administration. As a result, if citizens decided to engage in contacting because of a personal problem or to provide policy input then whether the intended recipient was elected or not should not be related to their socio-economic characteristics.

Oxford Internet Survey

The Oxford Internet Survey (OxIS) is 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.

Political Online Communication (Politische Online Kommunikation)

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) whose details are reported in Table 5 below. 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 (Emmer et al., 2011: 69).

**Table 5 Sample sizes and response rates of panel survey
'Political Online Communication', Germany (2002 – 2009)**

year	wave	N	response rate	panel mortality
2002	1	1,460	44%	
2003	2	1,415	43%	38%
2004	3	1,573	46%	28%
2005	4	1,655	44%	24%
2006	<i>no survey</i>	-	-	-
2007	5	1,414	29%	55%
2008	6	1,199	31%	36%
2009	7	809		33%

Source: Emmer et al. (2011: 67)

Notes: Except for first wave, response rate represents that of group that was resampled to mitigate for panel mortality.

For cost reasons the research team opted for an annual re-sampling of additional participants to address panel mortality. As a result, the longitudinal analysis can rely only on significantly smaller sample sizes. For example, from 1,573 people in 2004 (wave 3), only 423 people (27%) responded to each of the three subsequent waves till 2008.

While in general it is preferable to use the most recent data available, the analysis in this thesis relies in particular on the information collected in 2008 because it provides 50% more cases than the final wave which benefits my analysis of sub-samples of this study (see Appendix F for a more detailed discussion of the viability of this approach). The reason for the small sample size for the final wave is that in 2009 only panel members (i.e. those who had participated at least in the previous 2008 survey) were surveyed without an additional re-sampling.

European Social Survey

The European Social Survey is 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 in this thesis 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 older²².

While this subsection has introduced the sources that provide information on the population and on online contacters overall, the next subsection discusses how data on users of the two contact facilitation platforms has been collected.

2.4.2 Web surveys of online contact facilitation platforms

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) to send a message to a national MP would receive an email with an invitation to participate in the survey, 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 (Couper, 2000: 485;

²² For my analysis I relied on the redressment weight 1 provided for Germany which accurately adjusts for the educational attainment distribution in Germany. See infas. (2009) *Report on Methods, European Social Survey Round 4*. Available at: <http://ess.nsd.uib.no/ess/round4/download.html> (see country specific variables for Germany) [30.08.2012]

Fricker Jr, 2008: 202). The specific details of its implementation are discussed in Chapters 4 and 6 of this thesis.

Ensuring comparability

To aid comparability, the questionnaires on these sites employed a largely identical design – save some differences to cater for site-specific characteristics and to accommodate the different political systems in which they operate. In order to enable the crucial comparison to the population characteristics in the respective countries, as far as possible the wording of the comparator surveys was followed, i.e. in particular OxIS and the POC. The resulting questionnaires are available in Appendices C and E of this thesis.

Furthermore, in contrast to the other surveys' data used in this thesis as discussed above, only those citizens were surveyed who had used the sites to contact a *national* MP. The reason is that it is by no means clear that the profile of citizens should not differ in relation to which level of government is contacted. For example, it could be assumed that biases are smaller on the local level as has been observed by Crewe (1985: 55) in the 1980s: *'It is the better educated and middle classes who are the more likely to make contact with the MP, whereas no such social self-selection operates in the case of local councillors.'* Parry et al. (1992: 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: 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.

For the data from contact facilitation platforms I can take these possible differences into account, which increases the comparability because it removes any variations in profile that could be due to the differences between the sites in the distribution of people who contact different levels of government. Not least, the focus on national MPs is also justified as it is by far the dominant use of these sites.

Reducing errors in web surveys

Web surveys have a number of important advantages over face-to-face or telephone interviews including lower costs and the opportunity for dynamic filtering based on user responses (Vehovar and Lozar Manfreda, 2008: 178). At the same time they pose challenges to data quality. I discuss these below in relation to four different types of survey errors identified by Groves (1989) and how these are addressed in this research.

As people leave their email address when using the contact facilitation sites, it is possible to construct a sampling frame without *coverage errors* (Couper, 2000: 485) i.e. the sampling frame includes all people in the survey population – here defined as people who have used the contact facilitation site to ask a question or send a message to their MP. In addition, to prevent people that are not in the sample frame from participating (out-of-sample participation) (Best and Krueger, 2008: 218), invitations were personalised to the respondent, quoting both their name and the message they sent to their representative.

Both surveys suffered from a particular type of *sampling error*, as frequent users of the site had a higher probability to be included in the sample because with each use of the site they had a chance to get invited – even if they had already received an invitation during a previous visit to the site. Neither the technical effort to prevent this nor its

obtrusiveness for users and their privacy could be justified. However, this issue should not have had any major impact on the quality of the sample as I discuss in Chapters 4 and 6 respectively. To ensure independence of the individual observations, for example to enable the application of χ^2 -tests, technical measures were implemented to prevent multiple submissions of the questionnaire by the same participant (Best and Krueger, 2008: 21; Baur and Florian, 2009): Abgeordnetenwatch used a cookie-based authentication that made multiple submissions more difficult though not impossible, while WriteToThem prevented it by individualised survey links.

Survey results can be affected by *measurement errors* that could be caused by poor wording of questions or by a lack of comprehension of respondents (Couper, 2000: 475). To address this, questionnaires made as much use as possible of tried-and-tested questions from ESS, POC and OxIS and both surveys were tested by a number of different people before they were made available to potential participants.

Failure to get everyone in the sample to complete the survey, i.e. *nonresponse*, is a particular problem for web surveys (Vehovar and Lozar Manfreda, 2008: 182; Baur and Florian, 2009). No incentives for participation were offered such as money or vouchers, not only because of the limited resources available but also because there is debate as to their effectiveness (Lozar Manfreda et al., 2008: 99; Baur and Florian, 2009; Dillman et al., 2009: 20,24,274). Instead emphasis was placed on the design of the survey and the corresponding communication as these have been clearly identified as a crucial factor affecting response rates.

The design followed three broad strategies as suggested by Dillman et al. (2009: 23) to increase participation. First, to increase the benefits of participation, the surveys

provided information about the goal of the survey, made it clear that contributions would be welcomed and aimed to be relevant to users by enquiring into their satisfaction with the communication with their representative. Second, to decrease the cost of participation, the online format was chosen to make it convenient to respond, the survey was kept as short as possible, and as little personal information as possible was requested (Best and Krueger, 2008: 218,233). In particular, all questions were optional and there were no required answers that could prevent people from participating. Third, in order to establish trust with respondents the surveys were clearly sponsored by the site operators as a trusted authority and great emphasis was placed on ensuring the confidentiality of the information and anonymity of the respondents (Couper, 2000; Best and Krueger, 2008: 218). Finally, the invitation to this survey took place via personalised emails which also helped to motivate response (Baur and Florian, 2009: 122).

However, there will always be users who choose not to answer a questionnaire. The issues from nonresponse derive not per se from the fact that some people will answer a questionnaire while others will not – but only when those that do are systematically different from those that do not (Couper, 2000: 473). As far as possible, my discussion in the relevant sections in Chapters 4 and 6 shows that those responding to the survey can be assumed to be broadly representative of the audience of these sites and that altogether, the measures taken to address these survey errors have resulted in good quality samples.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed in what ways the chosen research design is a direct answer to the problems of existing research into the role of the Internet on political

participation that I have identified in Chapter 1. The lack of focus is addressed by the analysis of citizens who contact political representatives as one form of political participation which is of particular relevance to ensure responsiveness in representative systems but which at the same time suffers from problems in relation to popular control and political equality. The Internet seems suited to address some of these problems, in particular a special class of web applications that I have termed contact facilitation platforms. My study of those not only provides a further focus on a specific form of Internet use, but also contributes to the so far small body of case study evidence which crucially derives from two successful eParticipation projects, namely WriteToThem and Abgeordnetenwatch. Finally, the lack of comparative research is addressed by the study of online contacting both in the UK and Germany. Having introduced the measurement framework and the sources of data, the next chapter forms the start of my empirical analysis, beginning with the role of the Internet for contacting in the UK.

Chapter 3 Using the Internet to contact representatives in the UK

As an established part of political reality in Britain, dealing with communication from citizens, i.e. primarily constituents, forms an important part of the daily routines of national MPs and local councillors alike. Yet it has always been a minority of the population that has engaged in this form of participation, and despite its function to address the grievances of individual constituents and provide them with help and assistance, it has always been dominated by resource-rich Britons. Research over the last decades has shown a stubborn stability of these threats to popular control and political equality but in recent years an increasing share of the population has been using the Internet to approach representatives and maybe this has finally increased numbers and/or reduced the biases of contacters.

This is the focus of this chapter, which provides an answer to the first research question. The first section focuses on the question of whether or not, with the availability of online means, more people get in touch with representatives than would without, in this way contributing to more popular control. The second section of this chapter then turns to the implications of online means of contacting for political equality by analysing the representativeness of online contacters for the British population.

3.1 *Measuring popular control in UK online contacting*

Do online opportunities for getting in touch mean that more people engage in this form of political participation? This question is addressed in three steps. First, in order to have any potential effect, online means must be used for contacting, and the next subsection reviews the available evidence. Second, if the Internet does lead

people who have not done so before to engage in contacting, we should – all else being equal – see a rise in the rates of contacting overall, i.e. regardless of the means of contacting used, and it is the task of the second subsection to ascertain whether this is the case. Third, the final part of this section discusses whether in the UK through the Internet genuinely new people get engaged in contacting.

My analysis of the development of online contacting is focused on the last decade (2001-2010) as during this time the Internet and hence the online means to contact became widely available. According to data from the International Telecommunications Union (2009), the share of Internet users in the British population (aged 16-74) in 2001 was just 34% while in 2009 OxiS reported that 70% of citizens (aged 14 years and older) had access to the Internet at home (Dutton et al., 2009: 8).

3.1.1 Rates of engagement in contacting via the Internet

The opportunities of the Internet to send messages to representatives can only have an effect – if there are any – if they are used. We know that in the past these contacts, at least to MPs, had been mostly in the form of a written letter (Dowse, 1972: 49; Rawlings, 1990: 29; Searing, 1994: 140). Even in a recent survey by Ofcom (2009a: 32) contact in writing was still the most common of several contacting choices. What role do online means such as emailing or contact forms play?

Unfortunately, the data on online contacting is very patchy, in particular for the first half of the decade. Few surveys with a focus on political participation have been

asking their respondents explicitly in what ways they used the Internet to get engaged. The few studies for which reliable data is available are summarised in Table 6 below²³.

Table 6 Rates of engagement in contacting politicians/ government officials within the last year and means used, UK (2002, 2005, 2009, 2010)

	2002	2005	2009	2010
percentage of population engaged in contacting	14 <i>(ever)</i>	8 <i>(MPs only)</i>	12	14
- offline only	12	6	6	7
- online & offline	1	1	2	2
- online only	0.5	0.7	4	5
- <i>online total</i>	2	2	6	7
percentage of those contacting				
- offline only	86	76	50.4	50
- online & offline	10	16	20	13
- online only	3	8	30	37
- <i>online total</i>	14	24	50	50
N	1,972	2,185	2,013	1,960
coverage	Britain, 15+ years	Britain, 14+ years	Britain, 14+ years	UK, 18+ years

Source: 2002: National Opinion Poll (NOP) (Gibson et al., 2005a; 2005b); 2005: OxIS 2005; 2009: OxIS 2009; 2010: BMRB post-election survey (Gibson et al., 2010a)

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

Despite the varying definitions of what type of person was contacted and in which time frame there has clearly been a major expansion in the role the Internet plays for citizens who contact politicians and government officials: from about 2% of the population in 2002 who had done so *ever*, to about 6 to 7% of the population who had done so *within the last twelve months* in recent years. The vastly increasing

²³ For the Ofcom (2009) study there was no data available to differentiate the multiple choices of contacting channels of individual citizens. For OXIS 2007 a coding error prevented reporting reliable numbers for engagement in contacting.

importance of the Internet for this form of participation becomes even more obvious if we look only at those engaged in contacting and their choice of medium: while in 2002 only 14% of all those contacting would have used the Internet, in 2009 this was about one in every two contacters, i.e. their share had more than tripled. Using the OxIS 2009 data as a conservative estimate, this represents more than three million people aged 14 and older who had used the Internet to contact a politician or government official²⁴. While 1.8 million (60%) relied only on the Internet, 1.2 million (40%) have used the Internet in combination with some offline means such as letters, phone calls or personal visits.

While the Internet is clearly being used for contacting politicians, and increasingly so, how do we know whether this is actually increasing participation in terms of number of people? After all, it might well be the case that in 2009 it was still the same people as in 2001 who engaged in contacting, but in 2009 they used online channels while in 2001 they were using letters, phones or personal visits. This is the concern of the next subsection.

3.1.2 Development of overall contacting rates

If through the Internet new people start to get in touch with representatives, one thing we might expect is that this would result in an overall increase of people who have *ever* engaged in contacting. Such an increase in contacting rates would be proof of the mobilisation potential of the new online opportunities because there is no reason to believe that suddenly more people start to become engaged in contacting by

²⁴ See Appendix D for underlying population data.

writing or phoning their representative, when throughout all this time the overall importance of offline means of contacting has been declining as Table 6 illustrates.

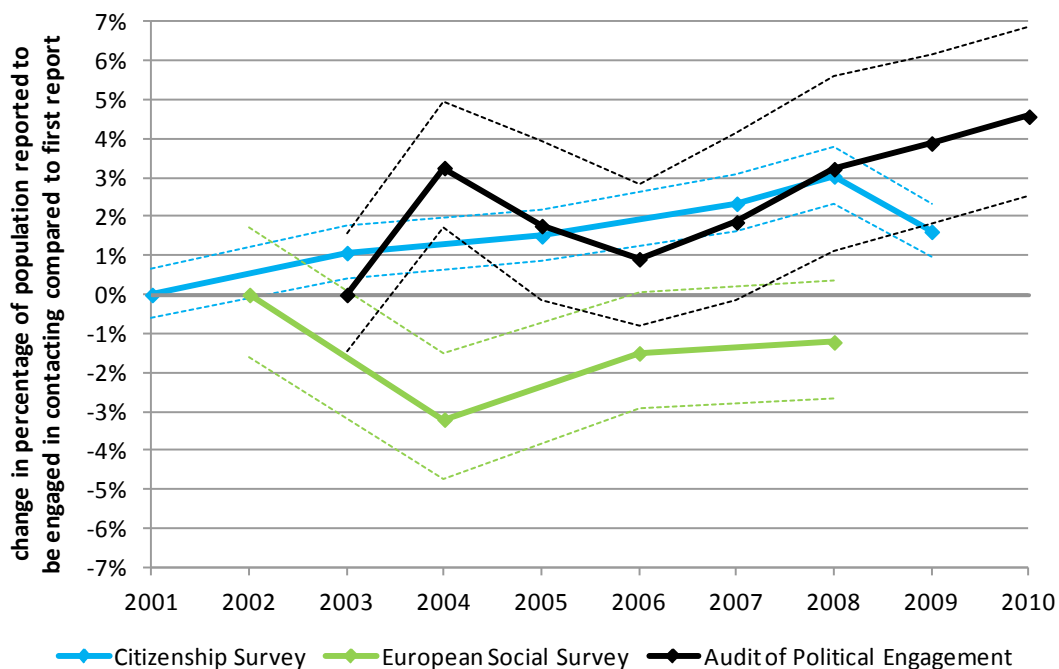
Unfortunately such an increase in participation rates is not straightforward to assess, because there are not enough studies that allow reliable tracking of the share of people who have *ever* engaged in contacting. The only candidates are the 2002 NOP study (Gibson et al., 2005a) cited above and the 2008 Ofcom study into *Citizens' Digital Participation* (Ofcom, 2009a). While these represent a statistically significant growth ($\chi^2=4$, $p<0.05$) from 14.2% in 2002 to 16.4% of people who ever contacted a politician, this is hardly reliable given the NOP poll relied on a quota-sample and had a broader definition of who was contacted than the Ofcom survey.

Because of this lack of data it is necessary to focus on the annual participation rates in contacting, i.e. on data from surveys that focus on political participation *within the last year* or within the last couple of years. This has implications for the inferences that can be drawn from these numbers because annual contacting rates do not tell us whether it is the same people contacting every year or whether it is also new people doing this. Before I provide this discussion in the final part of this section, how have annual contacting rates developed?

It is clear from a number of longitudinal survey research studies such as the British Social Attitudes Survey (National Centre for Social Research, 1983-2009) and an ongoing Ipsos MORI (2010) poll that engagement in contacting politicians increased in the 1980s. This rise is also reflected in the literature on the roles and behaviours of MPs, which has found activities focused on the constituency growing in importance – the so-called Constituency Member role (Searing, 1994; Norton, 2002d) – as well as a growth in communication directed to MPs (Norton, 1994: 711).

Developments of annual rates of contacting since the emergence of the Internet are less clear cut. Figure 1 plots the data available from the three survey series that offer consistent longitudinal data on contacting, namely the Citizenship Survey, the European Social Survey and the Audit of Political Engagement²⁵. In order to enable a better comparison, it does not report the shares of the population that have engaged in contacting as reported by the surveys, but takes the percentage of contacters as measured by the first report of the respective survey as a baseline and plots how any percentages measured by subsequent reports differs from it.

Figure 1 Changes in percentage of population reported to have been engaged in contacting relative to first measurement of respective survey, UK (2001 – 2010)



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, 2003-2010), based on quota sample of

²⁵ The Audit of Political Engagement is a representative survey of the British public (aged 18+) conducted annually by the Hansard Society since 2003 to measure political engagement. For more information see http://hansardsociety.org.uk/blogs/parliament_and_government/pages/audit-of-political-engagement.aspx [19.05.2012]

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: Data points visualised as squares, missing values in which no survey was undertaken are interpolated from adjacent data. Dotted lines represent confidence intervals of respective data points at 95% significance level. As an example of how to read this figure, the Audit of Political Engagement, represented as a black solid line, reported that in 2010 a total of 17.9% of the adult population had engaged in contacting within the last two or three years, which was 4.6% more than the 13.3% observed in the first Audit in 2003.

From the visualisation it is not immediately obvious whether there has been a growth in annual contacting rates that would accompany the growth of online contacting discussed above, because both the Citizenship Survey and the Audit of Political Engagement show variations that hardly move out of the confidence intervals of the initial observation and the ESS even reports a decline of contacting rates. Therefore I use simple linear regression models to test for an association between the years and the rate of contacters. This relies on the simple assumption of a linear growth. While growth might not be linear, e.g. as it might decrease towards the end of the decade or might be related to the electoral cycle, for the limited amount of data and in relation to the basic interest in whether at the end of the decade more people contact annually than at the beginning, this assumption suffices. The results are reported in Table 7 below.

Table 7 Linear models testing development of share of population engaged in contacting within the last year, UK (2001 – 2010)

	European Social Survey	Citizenship Survey	Audit of Political Engagement
years	2002, 2004, 2006, 2008	2001, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2009	2003 – 2010
correlation (Pearson)	-0.19	0.83	0.76
beta	-0.001	0.003*	0.048*
R ²	0.04	0.69	0.57

Source: See Figure 1 above

Notes: Significance of beta coefficient indicated by ** $p \leq 0.01$; * $p \leq 0.05$; (*) $p \leq 0.1$.

At a minimum, all surveys together suggest that there has been no decline in annual contacting during the decade, despite the variation registered by the ESS in 2002 and 2004. What is more, based on this analysis I argue that there has indeed been a growth in annual contacting rates in the UK in the first decade of the 21st century. This is shown by the Citizenship Survey that offers authoritative data because it relies on a large random sample and very specific questions about contacting of representatives. Even though it covers just England and Wales, a general growth tendency is also supported by the data from the Audit of Political Engagement which was conducted across the whole of the UK, although due to its smaller quota sample this data has not the same high quality as that of the Citizenship Survey.

The lack of support from the ESS for the growth hypothesis cannot be dismissed lightly given its high data collection standards. However, the evidence from the other two surveys weighs too strongly, and it is likely down to the only small increases and the longer intervals with data collection that the ESS does not show overall what the Citizenship Survey suggests – an increase in annual contacting rates in the first decade of somewhere in the region of one to two percent. Besides, given the large variation

in the first two rounds of the ESS, it is also possible that there have been some special circumstances or events impacting on data collection.

So summarising the development of annual contacting rates in the UK, these have not declined with the expansion of use of the Internet but instead the last decade has seen another, albeit very slight, rise in rates of contacting that is probably below the 2% mark. The question is whether this can really be attributed to the Internet?

3.1.3 Internet activation effects on engagement in contacting

This research aims to establish whether the new opportunities provided by the Internet increase the number of people who get in touch with their representatives and as such increase popular control. In effect, this constitutes two separate questions. First, can the Internet really bring people to contact their politicians who would otherwise not get in touch? Only if this is the case can we expect any rise in engagement in this form of participation. But even if this activating effect can be established, a second question remains, which is whether those newly activated people will also increase the total number of people who engage in contacting? This section addresses these questions in turn.

Mobilising new people into contacting representatives

Do the opportunities to use the Internet to send messages to representatives convince people to do so who would otherwise not do it? The short answer is that we cannot know for sure because there is a lack of data that specifically enquires into whether those who used the Internet for contacting have been motivated only by the online means to do so. There is also no panel research available that would track individuals' participatory acts over time to assess how many have not contacted before and now do so only because of the online opportunities.

However, it might be assumed that the fact that there is a significant number of people who have not been engaged in contacting offline at all, but who only relied on online means for getting in touch, is a sign that at least some people are mobilised through the Internet, as has been suggested by some authors (Gibson et al., 2005b; di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006). DiGennaro and Dutton (2006: 306) argued in their analysis of OxIS 2005 data that *'it is not simply the case that the same people are active on- and offline. For example, only 53% of those who had engaged in politics online had also engaged in offline politics. This means that the Internet can bring new people into the political realm.'*

This argument has some merit and the assumption of an increase in contacting is also supported by the evidence from a survey of MPs that found that with the advent of the Internet they receive more communication: the increase in emails is not met by a corresponding decline in traditional forms of communication (Williamson, 2009b; Zittel, 2010). However, one problem still remains and this is to put a number on the share of people who would not have got in touch with representatives if it were not for the online means that enabled it.

While the numbers from OxIS 2009 state that within the past year, 3.6% of the population or a third of all who contact have exclusively relied on online means to do so, the problem with annual contacting data is that we can never know what the surveyed citizens did prior to the last 12 months about which they are being surveyed. After all, we cannot know for sure that those people who now only rely on the Internet for contacting had not already been engaged in this contacting previously. However, it is clear that the majority of people each year who get in touch with a politician are not doing this for the first time – if they were, we should have seen a much greater rise in the overall contacting figures. This is for example indicated by

the fact that those contacters who rely exclusively on the Internet for contacting are just as politically engaged – in terms of other forms of participation and by being involved in community or political groups – as all the other people who get in touch with representatives, as Table 24 in Appendix A shows.

The bottom line is that from the data available, we can only make the assumption that the Internet is indeed mobilising people into participation, but it cannot be shown to what degree the Internet is successful in mobilisation. That only few online contacters can be considered apolitical seems to suggest that the availability of online means does not to a large degree lead people who would otherwise not do it to contact representatives. Does this small mobilisation translate into higher numbers of people contacting overall?

Increasing overall rates of contacting through the Internet

While it has been shown above that rates of contacting politicians and government officials have increased, this refers only to rates of *contacting within the last year*. It is theoretically possible that the annual contacting figures have increased not because more people became engaged in this activity, but simply because the same people contacted more often, without prolonged gaps in their participation, for example due to contentious issues in contemporary politics. However, despite some variations the growth of annual contacting figures, even though small, has been rather persistent during the decade which suggests that it is not just caused by some temporal issues in UK politics that might have sparked more contacting. I therefore assume that the Internet does indeed increase popular control, even though only in marginal ways.

Furthermore, the actual contribution of the Internet to popular control is likely to be larger than it seems from the small increase in annual contacting rates, because not

only has the share of offline contacting relative to contacting overall been constantly declining, the importance of offline contacting has also decreased in absolute terms. For example, in 2001 the Citizenship Survey reported that 11.8% of the population contacted an MP or local councillor. From the other data available it is clear that at this time the share of those who only used online means for contacting was a negligible few percent of all those contacting. In contrast, in 2009 about 30% of all contacters only used online means, as the numbers from OxIS 2009 suggest. As a result, in 2009 the share of people using offline means – some of them in combination with online – was only about 9.4%, which in effect represents a decline in offline contacting. This means that without those people who only relied on the Internet for contacting, participation rates in this activity would have dropped.

While these online-only contacters will to a substantial degree involve citizens who switched from offline to online contacting, the sheer scale gives new credibility to the assumption that the Internet activates more than just the already engaged. Therefore the contribution of online contacting could be higher than the slight increase of one or two percent suggests, but this mobilisation does not increase actual numbers much further than that because the rise in online contacting has to offset a decline in more traditional forms of contacting. Nevertheless, given the considerable margins of error from the data and the remaining uncertainties, it is probably safe to assume that the contribution of the Internet to overall contacting rates has been small and is in the region of one to two percent at most.

Weak effects on popular control

What can be concluded so far is that rates of contacting representatives have certainly not declined. Therefore the Internet has not led to disengagement in this form of

political participation, putting the dystopian fears of dwindling rates of engagement through the Internet cited in the introductory chapter to rest. Instead I have argued that the available online opportunities for approaching representatives have mobilised people to engage in contacting and that this adds to the overall share of contacters by about one to two percent. At the same time this discussion has demonstrated a clear need for better data and this research is contributing to this with the survey of contact facilitation platforms which enquires specifically into whether users have contacted a representative before. But before the next chapter turns to the analysis of this data, the second part of the first research question still requires an answer, i.e. whether online contacting can make participation more equal.

3.2 Measuring political equality in UK online contacting

People engaging in contacting are especially biased compared to the general population – even more so than traditional political participation. Can the particular characteristics of online means of contacting help to increase participation by women, people with less education, less income or of young age in order to increase the representativeness of this form of participation and hence contribute to more political equality? The discussion in the previous section which has shown that the Internet mobilises few new people to engage in this form of participation suggests already that the socio-economic profile of contacters will not change dramatically. But the question is if these newly mobilised people – even though few in number – impact positively on the so far biased profile of contacters.

3.2.1 The profile of online contacters

The first research question is interested in the contribution of the Internet to political equality as compared to offline modes of contacting. Therefore this analysis focuses

on the differences in characteristics between those people who *have used* the Internet for contacting, with those who *have not used* the Internet for contacting.

Figure 2 below visualises how much these two groups differ from the general British population in relation to the politically relevant characteristics that were defined in Chapter 2. These characteristics are binary variables derived from data of the Oxford Internet Survey 2009. In cases in which multidimensional variables had to be recoded into binary variables, the recoding choices represent characteristics on which people who engage in contacting differ significantly from the population – either as a whole or as one of its subgroups. The percentages underlying these calculations are reported in Table 25 in Appendix A while Table 26 reports which of the differences between the visualised groups are significant.

The visualisation makes use of the Logged Representation Scale (LRS) scores introduced in Chapter 2. For example, the LRS of 0.161 for the share of men in the group of online contacters signals that males are over-represented among people who use the Internet for contacting, i.e. men more often use the Internet for contacting than women. The value of 0.161 denotes an over-representation by a factor of almost 1.5: while men account for 48% of the British population, they constitute 70% of all people who have used the Internet to contact politicians and/or government officials.

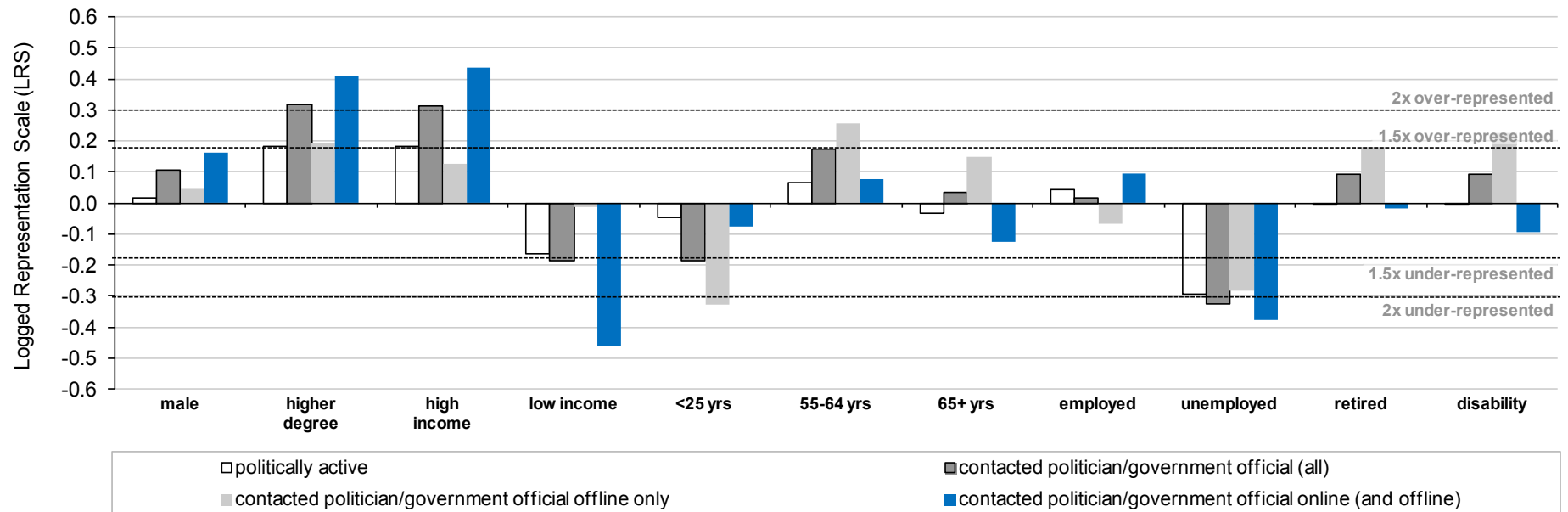
Those people who said they have used the Internet to contact a politician or government official in the last year – this could be in addition to use of traditional channels for contacting – are visualised by the blue bar in the figure. Even a cursory glance makes it immediately clear that the differences between the demographic profile of online contacters and the general population are plenty and often extensive. However, so are the differences between people who engage in contacting regardless

of the channel used. As a consequence, in order to see what is distinctive about the profile of online contacters it needs to be compared to that of offline contacters, i.e. those who only used offline means for contacting. The characteristics of this group are represented by the light grey bars in the diagram. The figure also shows the combined group of all people who have engaged in contacting – no matter in which way – as dark grey bars. For reference, the LRS scores of all people who have been politically active within the last year are also plotted as white bars.

As the previous chapter has discussed, people who contact politicians are more likely to be male, highly educated and of higher income, 45 years and older and because of this age more often retired or disabled than we would expect from the population averages. This is a pattern that has not changed much since the research of Parry et al. (1992) in the 1980s. The question is: does online contacting reduce these biases?

3. USING THE INTERNET TO CONTACT REPRESENTATIVES IN THE UK

Figure 2 Socio-economic biases of people who have used the Internet for contacting a politician or government official within the last year: comparison to other contacters and politically active citizens in general, UK (2009)



Source: OxIS 2009, N=2,013; N=687 (politically active); N=236 (contacted politician/government official); N=119 (contacted offline only); N=117 (contacted online)

Notes: Baseline of comparison is the British population aged 14 years and older. See Table 25 for definition of variables.

The short answer is: generally not. Quite the contrary, the dominant pattern at work is one in which online contacters significantly extend the biases reported for contacting offline. In fact, for some of the most relevant characteristics, such as gender, education and income, people who use traditional means of contacting are actually much less biased than online contacters. While only one in five citizens in the population holds a higher degree, every other person who used the Internet for contacting holds one, an over-representation by a factor of 2.5. Whilst amongst offline contacters, people with a higher degree are already over-represented by a factor of 1.5, online contacting extends this bias further.

The findings on income are very similar. Compared to offline contacters twice as many online contacters are from the highest income category (total household income before tax of more than £40,000 per annum): 16% in the population belong to this category, compared to 21% amongst traditional contacters and 43% amongst online contacters. In addition, online contacters rarely come from low-income backgrounds (less than £12,500 per annum). This is remarkable, because offline contacting has been exceptionally little biased from the population in this regard. While both in the population as well as amongst offline contacters, one in four reports a low-income, this is the case for less than one in ten online contacters. The pattern of extending the biases from offline contacting can also be found in the over-representation of men.

However, there is a contrasting pattern discernible, one that does not extend but diminishes the bias of offline contacters. This can be seen in relation to age, some kinds of occupation and disability. In respect to age, offline contacting is a domain in particular for the older people (aged 45 years and above) and differs significantly

from the population in every age group represented in the figure above. In contrast, online contacting exhibits a profile that is not significantly different from the population. On average, the people engaging in it are younger than those using traditional means. Specifically, it engages more people below the age of 25, and – in contrast to offline contacting – under-represents those 65 years and older, even though due to the small case numbers these differences only get significant for those 65 years of age and older.

The age differences between online and offline contacters are also likely to be responsible for the other characteristics in which this second pattern is at play. Pensioners are not over-represented in online contacting as they are offline – something which will also be the cause for the differences in the share of employed people (this includes self-employed) between these two groups – and hence disabilities are less than half as likely amongst online than offline contacters.

Summarising the results so far, it could be seen that on many characteristics, people who use the Internet for contacting politicians are much less representative of the population than people who use offline means for contacting. The primary exception is age, because people who use the Internet for contacting are generally younger than offline contacters and as such more representative of the population. This has implications for a number of other characteristics such as occupation and disability. However, from a perspective of political equality, I would argue that these contributions cannot mitigate the much more extreme biases towards highly educated, high-income and male people among online contacters.

Overall, the pattern of online contacters is unmistakably biased from the population and hence cannot satisfy the requirements of political equality that I have set out

earlier. In fact, traditional contacting performs much better from a perspective of political equality than online contacting. Has the Internet and the opportunities it offers for getting in touch with representatives not only failed to mend disparities in the demographic profile of contacters but instead contributed to widen the gap between those who contact their representatives and the rest of the population?

3.2.2 Long-term impact of the Internet on the profile of contacters

If the relatively new online tools do indeed cause such a particularly biased crowd to engage in contacting, this should surely impact on the overall profile of contacters (i.e. regardless of the channel used) and make it more biased, in particular in terms of gender, education and income, and hence decrease political equality – after all, the online contacters account for about half of all people engaging in contacting every year. However, it is actually unlikely that the Internet has decreased political equality very much, because for this, the Internet would need to mobilise many new people who have not been engaged in contacting before, but as I have shown in the previous section, this has not been the case.

Alternatively, it is possible that the same people engage in contacting that have always done it, but those from resource-richer backgrounds more often choose to use the Internet for contacting, while the others from resource-poorer backgrounds are more likely to continue using offline methods. In other words, we would observe a clustering process within the group of contacters which results in two different profiles of offline and online contacters, corresponding to those reported previously, but no change in the profile of contacters overall. If this is the case, we should see little difference between the profile of contacters in the early years of the last decade, when few people used the Internet for contacting, and the profile of contacters in the

latter years of the last decade, when one in two contacters used online means to do so.

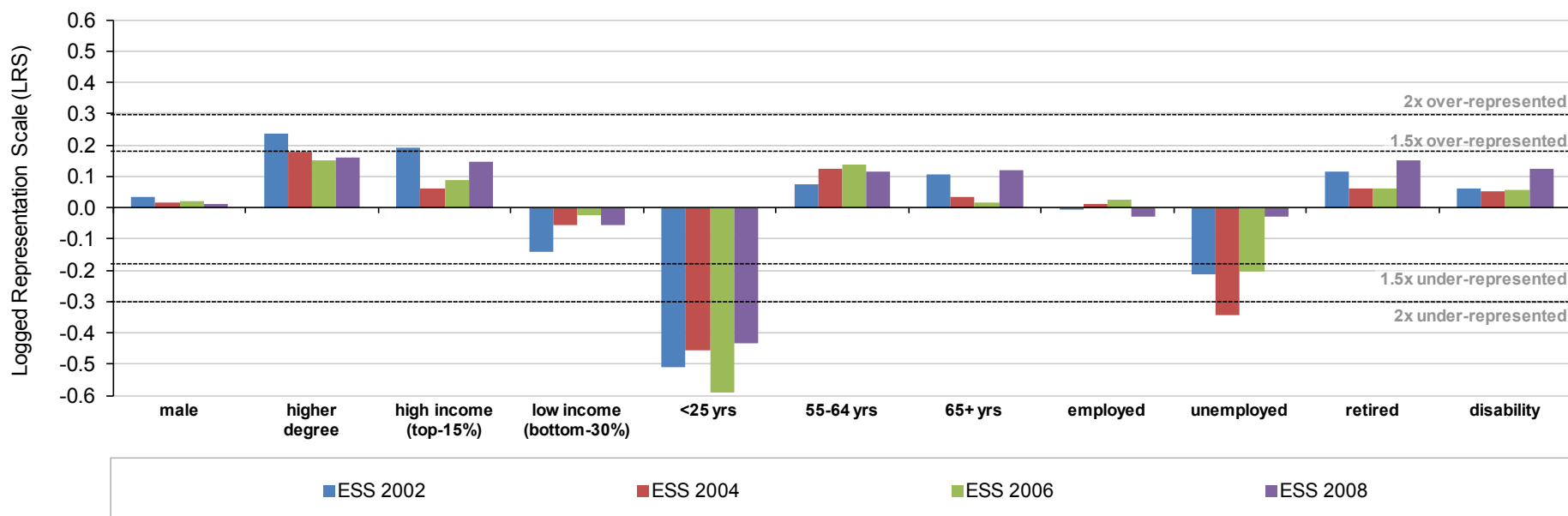
This assumption is tested with data from the ESS which offers largely consistent measurement of the profile of people engaging in contacting based on data from 2002, 2004, 2006 and 2008. During this time, according to the ESS's own measurement, personal use of the Internet increased from 49% to 71%, but more importantly, as was shown above, the share of contacters who used online means to get in touch with politicians has risen from one in seven to about one in two contacters (see Table 6 above). The nature of the LRS measure used – which relies on relative difference of a variable within each wave – makes the measurement internally consistent for each year and hence comparable across those four waves. This also counteracts any possible changes in the demographic profile of the UK during the period of analysis.

The biases reported by the ESS differ somewhat from those discussed above based on the OxIS 2009 data²⁶. In contrast to the OxIS 2009 data, the ESS data shows almost no gender gap and less pronounced education and income biases. However, this is not a serious issue because on each category, the ESS data shows the same direction of the bias, even though the extent is usually less pronounced (with the exception of the people under 25 years of age). More importantly, as I am only interested in whether the biases are increasing or remaining stable, the precise extent in relation to the OxIS data can be neglected.

²⁶ To compare the respective profile of contacters, one can refer to Figure 29 that shows the LRS scores of the UK population as reported by the ESS, and Figure 2 which illustrates the OxIS data.

3. USING THE INTERNET TO CONTACT REPRESENTATIVES IN THE UK

Figure 3 Development of socio-economic biases of people who have contacted a politician or government official within the last year, UK (2002 – 2008)



Source: ESS 2002-2008, sample size varies from 1,894 to 2,392; N – contacted: N=372 (2002); N=283 (2004); N=398 (2006); N=398 (2008)

Notes: Baseline of this comparison is the UK population aged 15 years and older. Low income is coded to include the lowest income categories which together represent approximately 30% of the population at the time, while high income uses the highest income categories which together represent about 15% of the population. Higher degree also includes those currently in education.

Figure 3 above visualises the profile of contacters as reported by the four waves of the ESS. What it shows is that while there are some variations in the profile of contacters throughout the years, these are usually small and could be related to sampling errors as well as some contemporary campaigns that might mobilise a particular group of people. For example, in 2008 there were more older people active, with consequences for the share of retired and disabled people.

However, while there might have been some change in the socio-economic profile of contacters, it is certainly not one we would expect if the Internet were to recruit more men and more resource-rich people to contacting. This would imply larger LRS scores for all variables except the age-related ones in 2008, when many more contacters used the Internet, than in 2002 when not many used it for contacting. However, apart from retirement and disability, where the 2008 figures are marginally higher than those in 2002, this is not the case. Certainly, there is no consistent shift from one particular pattern in 2002 to a different one in 2008.

When the profile of contacters remains largely stable despite the rise of online contacting, then what we witness instead is indeed a clustering effect as described above. This implies in turn that the profile of offline contacters must have changed between 2002 and 2009. Specifically, while in 2002 it should basically have exhibited the overall bias we measure throughout the years, these biases should have gradually decreased towards the end of the decade in order to mitigate against the strong biases inherent in the group of online contacters. This assumption cannot be tested with the available data. However, the socio-economic profile of contacters has shown a general stability over the decades since Parry et al.'s research from the 1980s and the

figures on the profile of contacters discussed above suggests that it has remained largely intact.

Therefore there can be little doubt that what we witness is primarily a clustering of contacters as a result of different contacting choices which are associated with different demographic profiles. Further evidence for such a clustering of contacters derives from an analysis of the differences in the socio-economic profile of contacters depending on whether they rely on online or offline means exclusively or both.

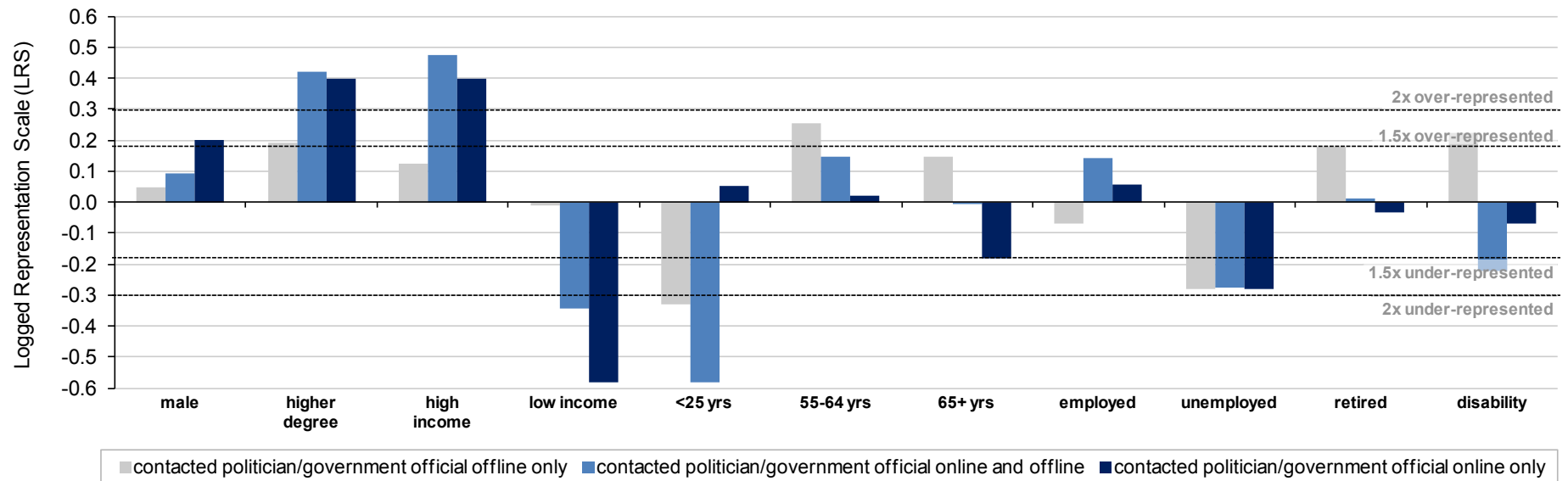
3.2.3 Profile of citizens contacting online only

It has already been argued that those who are only becoming engaged into the activity of contacting representatives because of the opportunities provided by the Internet are most likely to be found in the group of people who rely on online means only. In contrast, those who use both online as well as offline means are more likely to be people who have engaged in offline contacting previously but have started to make use of the new channels available. Can we find differences between those assumed to be more traditional and those assumed to be more recently activated contacters?

Figure 4 breaks down the people who have been engaged in contacting into three distinct groups and reports their respective LRS scores: once for people who have only used *offline* means to contact (light grey bars), once for those who have used both *offline as well as online* means (light blue bars), and finally for those who have used exclusively *online* means to contact (dark blue bars). Again, Table 26 reports whether the differences visible in the figure are actually significant.

3. USING THE INTERNET TO CONTACT REPRESENTATIVES IN THE UK

Figure 4 Socio-economic biases of people who contacted a politician or government official within the last year: differences according to means used, UK (2009)



Source: OxIS 2009, N=2,013; N=119 (contacted offline only); N=46 (contacted online and offline); N=71 (contacted online only);

Notes: Baseline of this comparison is the British population aged 14 years and older. See Table 25 for definition of variables.

The results show that those who are only using offline means and those who are only using online means are indeed two separate groups which differ significantly on almost any measure, while those who use both online and offline means occupy a middle ground between these two opposing groups.

In comparison with those who use both means for contacting, offline contacters significantly less often have a higher degree or a high income, are less often employed or self-employed and more often disabled. In other words, what differentiates offline contacters from those who make use of both means are resources and not gender or age. This fits with the previous argument about a clustering process that has divided the group of traditional contacters between resource-rich online users and resource-poor offline contacters. It is worth highlighting that offline contacters are poor in resources but not so much so that they could not afford access to the Internet. In fact, two-thirds of them are Internet users. Even if only considering Internet users, these are roughly evenly split between those who use it for contacting and those who do not. This suggests that access alone is not the main issue for the decision to contact online but that explanations such as Internet skills are more plausible.

Contrary to the differences between offline contacters and those who used both online and offline means, it might be expected that the latter do not differ from online-only contacters in terms of their levels of resources as both groups already have Internet access and use it for contacting. Instead, the main conceptual difference between these two groups is that those who make use of both are likely to resemble traditional contacters, while the others, namely those who only use the Internet for this form of participation, are more likely to include people who have become engaged through this medium and would not have been engaged in it otherwise. For

all we know, these groups could be very similar and indeed, their demographic profile shows only two significant differences – for age and for gender. Those who only use the Internet to approach politicians are more likely to be male and while age only gets significant for the group below 25 years of age, they are clearly younger in each of the three age variables reported here.

I argue that these are the main characteristics that distinguish those who become engaged only by the Internet from others who have always engaged in contacting or would have become engaged in any case without the Internet. This interpretation is also supported by previous research into political online participation in the UK that has also asserted a mobilisation of young people (Gibson et al., 2005b: 574,576; di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006: 305). In other words, those people who are activated to contact politicians through the opportunities provided by the Internet – and I have argued in the previous section that these are rather few in numbers – are younger and more often male. At least in terms of age, this is a positive contribution to political equality as I have defined it, even though it hardly mitigates many of the other strong biases inherent in online contacters, in particular in relation to resource-related variables. What does this imply for the answer to the first research question about the effect of online contacting on political equality?

No increase in political equality

The simple answer to this research question is that the Internet does not increase political equality. What is more, not only are those who use the Internet to contact representatives *not less* biased from the population than those who only use offline means – on the whole, they are in fact *much more* biased, most importantly in strongly increasing the dominance of well-educated men with a high income.

However, beyond this simple answer is a more complex scenario. Contrary to what this simple answer suggests, the Internet does not increase the biases towards resource-rich people amongst contacters. Instead, the overall profile of the average contacter has not changed much in the last decade. The reason for this is that the Internet largely fails to activate people to become engaged in contacting. Much of the biased profile of online contacters is not because of an increased take-up of contacting by resource-rich individuals, but because the group of contacters self-selects into two subgroups: the resource-poor who use offline means, and the resource-rich who use the Internet for contacting. So altogether, there are certainly no more resource-rich people becoming engaged in contacting than were in the past, but those who do prefer online contacting – exclusively or in combination with offline.

But the picture is not altogether bleak, as we see a positive contribution of the Internet at the margins. I have argued earlier that there is a small contribution of the Internet in bringing more people into contacting than before, and the findings suggest that these are by and large significantly younger than the contacters who normally become engaged in this activity but also – and this is less positive from a perspective of political equality – more often male.

Conclusion

The first research question enquires into whether use of the Internet for contacting political representatives increases popular control and/or political equality compared to traditional means of contacting. For the UK my analysis has shown that as a whole, online means for contacting do very little to increase the number of people who get in touch with their representative, and that except for young people, those

who use it exhibit greater biases from the population than those relying on traditional forms of getting in touch. Nevertheless it has not decreased political equality in contacting overall, as due to the low numbers getting engaged through the Internet, those who use it represent by and large those who have always contacted. Overall then, the Internet has contributed only little to popular control and – with the exception of engaging more young people – nothing to political equality.

However, I have argued in the introductory chapter that the diversity of online applications also implies a potential diversity of effects. Therefore research should compare discrete online forms of participation and their effects. Furthermore, the analysis of online contacting has been hampered by the lack of data from which the potential of the Internet to mobilise new groups of the population into this form of participation could be determined. My research into the contact facilitation platform WriteToThem addresses both of these problems and the next chapter discusses the results of this analysis.

Chapter 4 WriteToThem.com: a British contact facilitation platform and its users

In 2009 each MP at the parliament in Westminster received on average about four messages a week from a website whose name encapsulates its whole mission: WriteToThem. In that year alone it was used by about 100,000 people to send more than 120,000 messages to their MPs. None of them needed to know the name of their representative in Westminster or her email address because when they provided their postcode the site would work it out for them and deliver their message. Maybe this contact facilitation platform can provide what the Internet as such has largely failed to achieve, namely to significantly increase the number of people who engage in contacting, and mobilise in particular women, young people and those from lower resource backgrounds in order to contribute to greater popular control and political equality in this form of political participation.

This is the concern of the second research question, and to answer it more than 13,000 people were surveyed who used the site between February 2009 and July 2010. This chapter discusses in detail how many of those users became engaged through the website, and how the profile of its users compares to that of people using other forms of online contacting or traditional means to get in touch with representatives. To start with this chapter provides an overview of the history and function of the site, the ways in which it is used by citizens and perceived by representatives, and how the data was collected.

4.1 *WriteToThem: an introduction*

4.1.1 Overview of contact facilitation platform

The website *WriteToThem.com* enables people to send email messages to representatives at local (e.g. councillors), regional (e.g. Scottish Parliament), national (MPs) as well as European level. It is free of charge and has been used by hundreds of thousands of citizens but it has not been popular with all representatives as this introduction highlights.

Function and history

The history of WriteToThem dates back to February 2000 when Tom Loosemore and Stuart Tily built a site called *FaxYourMP.com*, which allowed users to send a fax to their MP via the web. It was officially launched on 29th November 2000 (BBC News, 2000) and delivered more than 100,000 faxes until 2004. In February 2005 the site re-launched as WriteToThem.com and has existed in much the same form ever since.

The website covers all elected political representatives in the UK as well as the Lords. To contact representatives through the platform, users need to type in their postcode so that the site can provide them with a list of all representatives who were elected in the respective constituency as shown in Figure 5 below. After selecting the individual representative or the group of representatives of the same level (e.g. all MEPs), users write their message on screen. This is checked automatically for copy-and-paste letters, but no other control of the content takes place before it gets delivered to the appropriate email address of the selected representative(s).

Figure 5 Screenshot of WriteToThem illustrating interface after user provided a postcode

The screenshot shows the WriteToThem website interface. At the top, there is a yellow header with the 'WriteToThem' logo and the 'mysociety.org' logo. Below the header, a progress bar indicates five steps: 1. Enter postcode, 2. Pick representative (highlighted), 3. Write message, 4. Check message, and 5. Confirm email. The main heading reads 'Now select the representative you'd like to contact'. Below this, a paragraph of text explains that users have several elected representatives at different levels of government and provides a link to 'this advice'. The interface is divided into four columns, each representing a different level of government:

- Your District Councillors:** Describes the role of the 2 Carfax District Councillors on the Oxford City Council, responsible for local services like planning, council housing, and rubbish collection. Lists representatives Tony Brett and Stephen Brown, both Liberal Democrats.
- Your County Councillors:** Describes the role of the 2 West Central Oxford County Councillors on the Oxfordshire County Council, responsible for local services like education, social services, transport, roads, and libraries. Lists representatives Alan Armitage and Susanna Pressel, both Liberal Democrats.
- Your Member of Parliament:** Describes the role of the Oxford East MP in the House of Commons, responsible for making laws in the UK and overall scrutiny of government. Lists representative Andrew Smith, a Labour member.
- Your Members of the European Parliament:** Describes the role of the 7 South East MEPs in the European Parliament, responsible for scrutinising proposed European laws and the budget. Lists representatives Sharon Bowles, Peter Skinner, James Elles, Marta Andreasen, Catherine Bearder, Keith Taylor, and Nigel Farage, representing various parties including Liberal Democrat, Conservative, UK Independence, and Green.

Each column includes a link to 'Write to all your [representative type] Councillors/MPs/MEPs' and a link to 'Have you spotted a mistake in the above list?'.

Source: <http://www.writetothem.com/who?pc=ox13pg> [21.03.2011]

Since the re-launch in 2005 the website has been run by mySociety, a charitable organisation of politically-minded software developers which is responsible for a number of participatory websites in the UK including *TheyWorkForYou.com* (a site that makes available information about the members and proceedings of various UK parliaments and assemblies) and *WhatDoTheyKnow.com* (a site that can be used to submit and view Freedom of Information requests).

Funding for the website had originally come from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's e-innovations fund, from which mySociety received £196,000 to develop a

number of projects including WriteToThem. The annual running costs are estimated to be about £8,400 as the site requires little administrative effort (Escher, 2011). There is only one part-time staff member attending to email enquiries and the occasional day spent by a mySociety developer to fix technical issues.

Reception among public and representatives

From early on the site has picked up a number of awards, such as in 2006 the ‘*New Statesman Media Award*’ in the category ‘*Contribution to Civic Society*’²⁷. The website is also regularly mentioned in newspapers mainly in the UK (Escher, 2011). What is more, the site has been used by newspapers itself in a number of campaigns that urged their readers to contact their MPs about certain issues (The Times, 2008). For example, in April 2009, The Mirror newspaper prompted its readers to email their MPs in a campaign to get full citizenship rights for Gurkhas who served for the British Army (Parry and Brough, 2009).

However, the site has attracted most publicity but also most controversy about the responsiveness statistics it publishes on its site. This is based on a brief email survey which is sent out by the site to a user two to three weeks after the message had been delivered. About 70% of all users reply to this survey, thereby creating a form of transparency that is absent from other types of contacting and that constitutes one of the defining features of these online contacting platforms. Even though at the time of writing the publicly available update of these responsiveness statistics has been suspended²⁸, during the survey time frame it was still very much relevant to the users

²⁷ <http://www.newstatesman.com/nma/nma2006/nma2006winners.php> [29.03.2012]

²⁸ This is caused by a number of technical issues that need to be resolved but for which mySociety could not make enough resources available. This does not represent a new strategy but a temporal issue.

as some of their comments quoted later indicate – not least because the lack of update only transpired towards the end of the 17 months long survey period.

Table 8 shows the development of the responsiveness of representatives based on this user survey. While overall almost 60% of messages sent via WriteToThem get a reply, there is considerable difference between the types of representatives addressed. For example, while MPs answer about 60% of messages they receive, users sending a message to an MEP have less than a 50% chance of getting a reply.

Table 8 Percentage of messages sent via WriteToThem that received a reply from representative, by level of government (2005 – 2010)

year	Councillor	MP	MEP	Other	total
2005	49	63	53	42	60
2006	51	61	45	31	56
2007	52	60	48	36	56
2008	53	60	46	42	58
2009	52	61	43	37	58
2010	53	56	38	40	54

Source: mySociety simple user survey 2005 – 2010 (N=489,108)

Notes: Based on people that sent one message at a time (i.e. no messages to groups of representatives). Data for 2010 includes messages sent until end of December for which responses to questionnaire were received until end of February 2011.

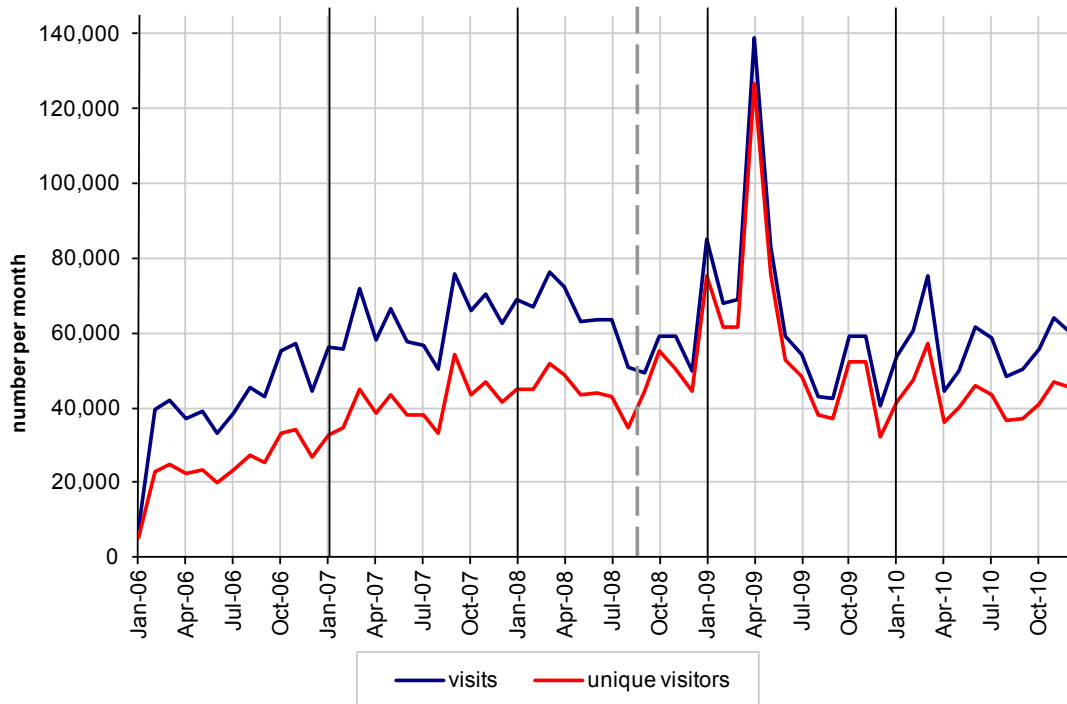
While basic responsiveness statistics were produced for every elected body, what has attracted most publicity is the list that detailed for every individual Westminster MP how many messages he or she received and importantly how often they replied. These rankings have been happily picked up by journalists, in particular in local papers, in order to praise or shame the local MP (Bergen, 2006; Nottingham Evening Post, 2008; Coulbeck, 2009). The ranking has been criticised in particular by MPs classified as least likely to respond who doubt the method (Bourley, 2007; Press Association, 2007) or blame wrong email addresses (Wales on Sunday, 2006; Halifax

Courier, 2007). Some MPs even refuse to accept messages sent via WriteToThem, though in 2011 this applied to only four of all 650 MPs²⁹. Nevertheless, MPs differed in their assessment of the site. While Andrew Miller MP was convinced that *'The website is performing a valuable public service.'* (Coulbeck, 2009), his colleague David Maclean MP (now Lord Blencathra) believed that *'The survey is rubbish and so is the service it offers. If constituents want to contact me they do through my website, e-mail or by letter.'* (Press Association, 2007). Regardless of this criticism, up until 2009 WriteToThem experienced a steady growth in usage numbers as is discussed below.

4.1.2 Usage figures

Since 2007 the number of visits to the site has remained fairly stable between 50-70,000 visits (40-50,000 unique visitors) every month as visualised in Figure 6. Every year, during parliamentary summer recess between July and October, there is a noticeable drop in traffic to the site, as there is during the turn of the year. Spikes are often related to particular campaigns mobilising their supporters to use the site. While WriteToThem applies spam filters to prevent mass mailing of copy-and-paste letters, many users do take the time to draft an individual letter, hence the spike in traffic through these campaigns. The figure below shows that April 2009 has been the busiest month to date when two campaigns coincided: the one by The Mirror already mentioned above and one that aimed to lobby MPs against a rise in fuel tax.

²⁹ Personal communication with Deborah Kerr (WriteToThem user support) from 15 April 2011.

Figure 6 Usage of WriteToThem: monthly visits and unique visitors to site (2006 – 2010)

Source: Escher (2011)

Notes: From September 2008 onwards, a new tracking tool was introduced so numbers might not be directly comparable.

The web statistics give only an indication of actual usage of the site. It is more instructive to measure how often the site was used to send a message to a representative by analysing the database which records when a message is sent and to whom – though not the content itself. As Table 9 shows, in 2010 the site was used more than 140,000 times to send a message to a representative.

Table 9 Usage of WriteToThem: number of times site was used to send a message and distribution of usage according to level of government (2005 – 2010)

year	number of times used	percentage of usage for sending messages to			
		<i>Councillor</i>	<i>MP</i>	<i>MEP</i>	<i>Other</i>
2005	42,512	9	71	17	4
2006	87,492	13	71	7	9
2007	135,526	16	65	8	11
2008	140,587	15	67	7	10
2009	174,641	12	71	8	9
2010	143,300	15	70	6	10

Source: WriteToThem database records

Notes: Sending multiple messages at once (e.g. to all your MEPs) was counted as one use.

The table also shows that most usage of the site is related to contacting Westminster MPs: two out of three times the site is used it is to contact this type of representative. Contacting representatives other than MPs has remained on a fairly stable level since 2007 while use for contacting MPs has steadily increased until 2009. The decline in 2010 can be attributed both to the unusually high levels of contacting in 2009 as well as to the General Election in 2010 when for about three weeks there were no MPs to contact. This pattern differs from the pattern of contacting in general because local councillors are usually more often contacted than MPs (Hansard Society, 2011). For example, the UK Citizenship Survey suggests that in 2009/10 about 6% of citizens aged 16 years and older in England and Wales contacted an MP, but 10% contacted a local councillor. While there might be a lack of awareness amongst the public that WriteToThem can actually also be used for contacting local representatives and not only MPs, it could also be that the interaction at the local level is more likely to happen offline.

The analysis of contact facilitation platforms focuses on those people who used the site to contact an MP. In 2009 these amounted to more than 100,000 people as Table 10 shows.

Table 10 Usage of WriteToThem: number of people who contacted an MP and percentage of frequent users (2005 – 2010)

year	number of users	share of people using site more than once
2005	24,126	10%
2006	52,955	11%
2007	75,903	11%
2008	80,134	12%
2009	105,463	11%
2010	84,520	12%

Source: WriteToThem database records

Notes: The number of users is based on unique email addresses. All measures relate to use in respective year.

The table above also reports that in any given year only about one in ten users sends more than one message to an MP. The low return rate does not represent the great satisfaction that users report with the site. As the survey carried out for this research showed, more than four out of five users would recommend the site to a friend or a colleague. What users particularly like is the ease of use as these comments from the user survey highlight:

'It made the process very quick and easy and increases the likelihood that I would contact my representative again in the future' (WTT11858)

'It was a very easy way of getting through to my MP which I would not have known otherwise.' (WTT74)

'It's much easier and quicker than writing so you tend to do it rather than just think you will (immediately before you run out of time to do it' (WTT318)

Others mention explicitly the added transparency that is a distinguishing feature of contact facilitation platforms:

'Uniquely useful means of finding out who your representative is, contacting them, and tracking their response (or indeed as often is the case, lack of it).' (WTT4602)

'The site really brings democracy into one's home...and it's nice to feel that our representatives are being monitored!!' (WTT330)

'I'd like our MPs to know that their responses to their constituents is being monitored.' (WTT8016)

However, for better or worse, user satisfaction with the site is very much tied to the responsiveness of representatives. As the survey data shows, if users received a reply that satisfied their question, they would be overwhelmingly positive. Asked about their likelihood of recommending the site, half of these users would select the highest score. In contrast, of those who did not receive an answer at all only a third would say they are very likely to recommend the site.

So far this section has introduced the contact facilitation platform WriteToThem. Before I discuss in detail whether it contributes to more popular control and political equality, the final part of this section summarises the data basis for this subsequent analysis.

4.1.3 Online survey of WriteToThem users

Users of the platform WriteToThem have been surveyed since April 2002. As mentioned above, those who have contacted an individual representative are emailed a simple survey after they have sent a message via the site, asking them whether their representative had replied and whether it is the first time they had ever written to their representative. The questionnaire is sent out two weeks after the message was

delivered to the representative and again one week later if there was no response from the user.

A more comprehensive survey was launched in late June 2008 in order to get a more detailed picture of the demography and political engagement of WriteToThem users, originally intended for an evaluation of the site for which the author was contracted by mySociety (Escher, 2011). In order to fit the requirements of this doctoral research, this survey was extended in March 2010 to cover additional aspects such as the type of representative contacted and the concern of the message sent. This questionnaire is available in Appendix C. An automatic mechanism randomly selected participants to this extended survey with a probability of 20% from all those users who i) had completed the original simple survey containing just the two questions cited above and who ii) had not answered the questionnaire before. As explained in Chapter 2, this analysis focuses only on those users who contacted an MP.

The data used in this analysis covers a total of about 17 months of survey responses collected from 11 February 2009 until 26 July 2010. Given that users were invited to the survey at the earliest two weeks after they had used the site, this translates roughly into people who had used WriteToThem to contact their MP between 28 January 2009 and 12 July 2010. 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% as the detailed discussion in Appendix C shows. The response rate compares favourably to that of other online survey research (Lozar Manfreda et al., 2008: 90) and gives credibility to the assumption that the sample is representative. However, because little is known about the population of WriteToThem users, there are only a few markers available

that can be used to assess how well the sample really represents the overall population of users of the site. It is possible that there occurred an over-sampling of more frequent users of WriteToThem, but as the detailed discussion in Appendix C argues, it seems that this had only limited impact.

Altogether, the user survey provides a reliable basis on which to analyse whether WriteToThem and its particular features as a contact facilitation platform increase popular control and political equality. This is the concern of Research Question 2 to which I turn in the remaining sections of this chapter.

4.2 Measuring the contribution to popular control

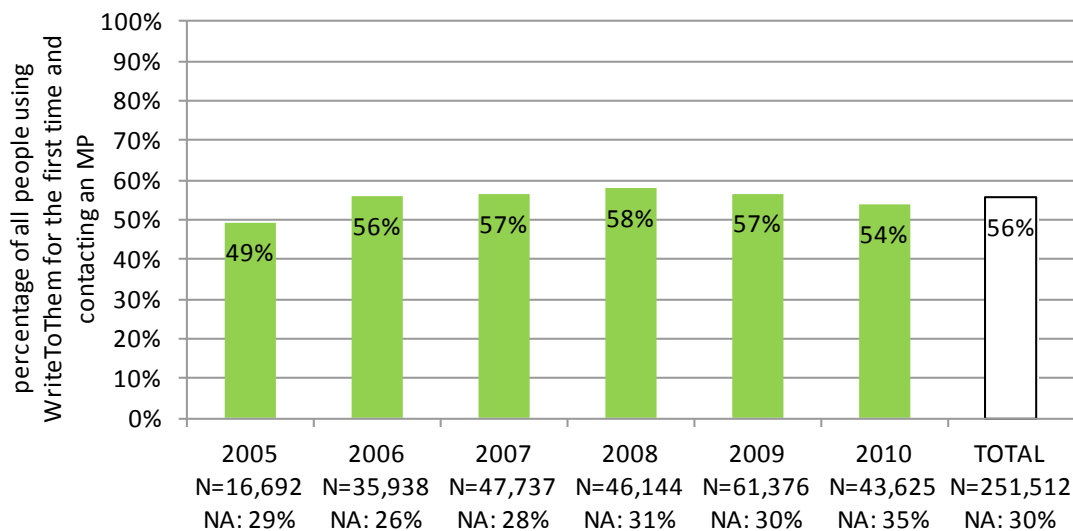
In the previous chapter the empirical evidence for assessing popular control in online contacting was more limited. In contrast, the original data available for WriteToThem enables this research to assess more directly whether users have been engaged in contacting before and to what degree these can be assumed to be new to the political process in general rather than to be already engaged in other ways.

4.2.1 Using WriteToThem to contact for the first time

If it can be shown that WriteToThem succeeds in activating people into contacting who previously have not done so, it would also offer proof that such online tools can indeed contribute to an increase in the number of people contacting. To establish this, users of WriteToThem were asked specifically whether their latest message was the first time they have ever contacted one of their political representatives by any means. While completely voluntary, two out of three times the site is used to contact an MP this question is answered by the user, and because this simple survey has been conducted since 2005, the analysis relies on more than 250,000 responses collected between 2005 and 2010.

Figure 7 shows that when people come to the site for the first time to send a message to an MP, more than half of those (56%) have never before contacted a representative in any way. Taking these rates as indicative for the whole WriteToThem audience that used the site to contact MPs, it can be assumed that from 2005 to 2010 more than 200,000 people approached their MP who had never been in touch with any representatives before.

Figure 7 Percentage of people using WriteToThem to contact an MP who had never before contacted a representative by any means (2005 – 2010)



Source: WriteToThem simple user survey 2005 – 2010 (N=251,512)

Notes: Only questionnaire replies related to the first time of usage of the platform are considered because replies related to subsequent usages would usually count as frequent users with no way to determine whether the first time of contact was through WriteToThem or by any other means. 'N' indicates number of valid responses received while 'NA' reports nonresponse rate.

Based on this data, Research Question 2 can already be answered affirmatively as WriteToThem does indeed increase participation in contacting. It is not the case that the site is only used by those people who have in the past already been in touch with MPs or other kinds of representatives. Instead, more than half of the users of the site are absolutely new to this activity.

However, to get a sense of the real significance of this grade of activation, it is necessary to put the numbers into a wider perspective and ask how many people are normally starting to get engaged in contacting each year – irrespective of the means of contacting used. While none of the national surveys asks this question directly, it is possible to estimate the percentage, which is explained in Appendix D. While these calculations are based on a number of assumptions and the data is not absolutely precise, even in the most generous scenario the share of people among annual contacters who get in touch for the very first time is only 18%, i.e. just about a third of the rate of WriteToThem. However, more realistic is that the annual share of first-time contacters is around 10%. So through WriteToThem about five times as many people start to become engaged in contacting representatives than could be expected based on the estimated standard rates of contacting.

In absolute numbers, in 2010 more than 35,000 users of WriteToThem were first-time contacters who contacted their MP. My estimates in what I consider to be the most realistic scenario in Appendix D suggest that overall each year somewhere around 320,000 people contact a representative for the first time. In other words, WriteToThem could account for more than 10% of the annual number of people who start to become engaged in contacting for the very first time – and this includes only those who use the site to contact an MP for the first time and not a local councillor or other representative. What is more, while first-time contacters are somewhat younger than those who contacted before, as my discussion of political equality below shows, overall there are very few young people who use WriteToThem. Therefore the high mobilisation rate cannot be explained by a large number of first-time voters, i.e. people who we might argue had not yet had a chance

to get in touch with a representative before, making the contribution of the site all the more relevant.

It can be concluded that WriteToThem is very successful in attracting people who have never been in touch with any representative before to contact their MPs. But while this proves that many people use the site to engage in this form of participation for the first time, how are we to know that they would not have gotten in touch in any case, regardless of the availability of the site?

4.2.2 Genuine mobilisation to contact

While it is impossible to know for sure how people would behave in a hypothetical situation – in this case, if WriteToThem had not been available to them – there are a variety of strong indications that users of the site who have never before contacted a representative would not have done so without the contact facilitation platform.

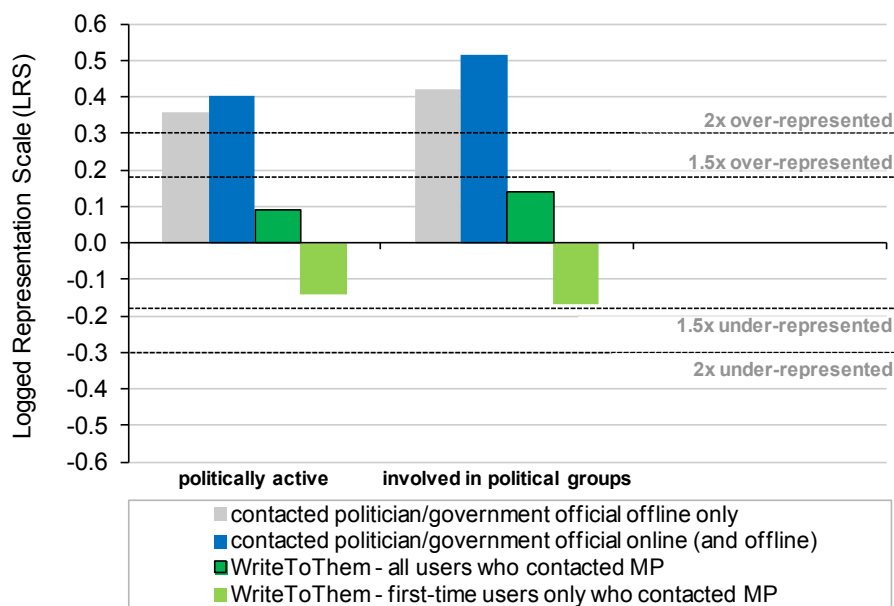
Political involvement of WriteToThem users

To assess whether first-time contacters are genuinely mobilised by WriteToThem it is useful to analyse to what degree they are being politically active already. I argue that first-time contacters who are very politically active in other ways are more likely to sooner or later engage in this activity anyway, regardless of the availability of the site, because they have already overcome the barrier to participation. In contrast, those who so far are neither politically active nor organised in political groups have less motivation or resources to participate and apparently for those it required a special opportunity such as WriteToThem to overcome their passivity.

Figure 8 visualises how many users have engaged in political activities beyond using WriteToThem, such as signing a petition or joining demonstrations, as well as the

people that are active in political groups (the actual numbers are available from Table 25). The figure reports the biases from the population separately, once in light green bars only for those users of WriteToThem who contacted an MP and have never before contacted a representative (i.e. first-time contacters), and once in darker green for all users of the platform that contacted an MP. These LRS scores are put in comparison with data on the British population from OxIS 2009, namely those who contacted a politician offline (light grey) as well as those who contacted a politician specifically online (blue).

Figure 8 Political involvement of WriteToThem users who contacted an MP: comparison to people who contacted via other means, UK (2009/10)



Source: OxIS 2009 (N=2,013; N-contacted politician/government official offline=119; N-contacted online (and offline)=117); WriteToThem users: mySociety user survey 2009/10 (N=13,520; N-first-time contacters=6,050)

Notes: Baseline of comparison is the British population aged 14 years and older. See Table 25 for definition of variables. For population data political participation excludes 'contacting politicians', for WriteToThem it excludes contacting politicians via the platform.

Those people who use WriteToThem to contact a representative for the first time are indeed significantly less often politically active or organised in political groups than

the British population. For instance, 25% of those WriteToThem users have been politically active within the last twelve months compared to 34% of the population.

The real significance of this finding only becomes apparent if compared to the level of engagement of other contacters, visualised in grey bars. As was discussed in the previous chapter, people engaging in contacting – no matter if offline only or also online – are very often politically active also in other forms than just contacting: about 80% of contacters have been involved in additional forms of participation in the last year. In addition, about a third of contacters are also active in political groups. The contrast with first-time contacters on WriteToThem could not be starker: here we see indeed a real different set of people getting engaged in contacting. Therefore what can be concluded is that first-time contacters on WriteToThem are not citizens already otherwise politically active who happen to just now contact a politician for the first time. Instead they are indeed people who are genuinely new to the political process since, for the most part, they have not been otherwise politically active or been organised in groups of a political nature in the last twelve months. It could be the case that those first-timers on WriteToThem have been active previously but just not in the twelve months prior. However, the fact that within a year they have only been involved in this single act of political participation puts them into the more passive part of the population because OxIS shows that within a year the majority of contacters are involved in additional forms of political activity, not just contacting.

All this goes to show that the majority of WriteToThem users contacting a representative for the first time are not just new to contacting but new to political participation overall. In addition, most of them also stay away from organised groups. By and large this finding is not only true for the first-time contacters on

WriteToThem but for all WriteToThem users. Even though they are somewhat more politically active than the British population and in particular more active in political groups, this engagement is still on a significantly lower level than that of those who contact politicians in general, i.e. regardless of the means used.

Finding out about WriteToThem

The contribution of WriteToThem to mobilise inactive parts of the population is also apparent from the way people who never contacted a representative before come to the site, as visualised in Figure 9 below. With two out of five first-time contacters, the largest share finds out about the site from a search engine. This is also helped by an advertising campaign sponsored by Google (Escher, 2011). The top search queries on Google that lead to WriteToThem are for combinations of terms including *'who is my local mp/councillor'* and *'write/contact/email my mp'*. They all highlight that once citizens feel the need to get in touch, many face two problems. First, a lack of knowledge of whom to contact, and second, a lack of knowledge about how to get in touch. WriteToThem has solved these two problems as many comments by first-time contacters show:

'its a great service for people who are not sure how to contact their local MP.'
(WTT384)

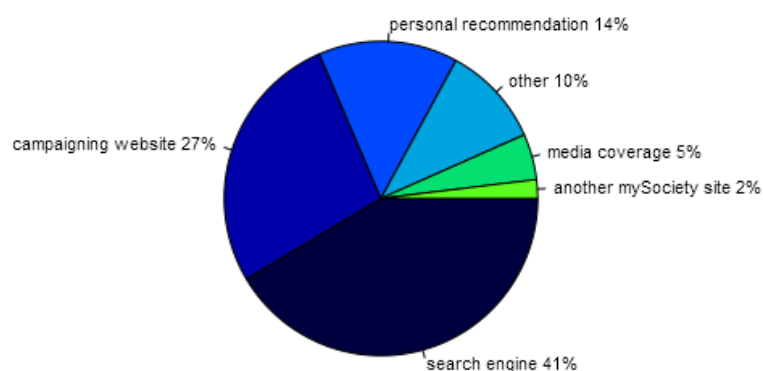
'it made it so simple to try and locate and contact my local MP. I had previously telephoned the council and waited ages and then they didn't know. I then went to the local library and although they were helpful it took several answers to get the right name. Your site is excellent in finding the names quickly and I like the email audit trail too.' (WTT1070)

'You made the matter of contacting my MP so easy and I would probably not have done so without your help. [...] Without your site I would probably not have sat down to write the letter. Thank you.' (WTT7104)

These comments make it clear that many first-time contacters believe that they would not have been in touch with representatives were it not for the opportunities offered by the website.

With about a quarter of first-time contacters, the second largest share comes from campaigning websites. This will include many people who would not have thought about contacting an MP in the first place, but the ease of contacting through the connection of the campaigning sites to the WriteToThem facility – as for example in a campaign for family courts by *The Times* (2008) – suddenly puts this form of participation within reach. The third largest share, with about one in seven first-time contacters, finds out about WriteToThem through personal recommendation. It is the experience of others that in the majority are satisfied with the site, as highlighted earlier, which helps people who have never done it before to also try to contact their representatives.

Figure 9 How people who have never before contacted a representative find out about WriteToThem (2009/10)



Source: mySociety user survey 2009/10 (N=5,470)

Notes: Only those users of WriteToThem who contacted an MP.

Strong contribution to popular control

Summarising the findings for WriteToThem in relation to popular control, there can be no question that this contact facilitation platform brings in a large number of people that are not only contacting for the first time but that are also genuinely less politically engaged and organised in political groups than the population. Even beyond first-time contacters, the profile of the average WriteToThem user who approaches an MP is far less biased towards people with engagement in other forms of political participation or in political groups than is the case amongst contacters in general. Clearly this is a positive contribution to the number of people who engage in this activity and hence to popular control.

At the same time, while those who get engaged through the site are often new to political participation, this does not necessarily imply that they come from sections of the population that are generally less often politically active. In order to not only increase popular control but also political equality, those newly activated people would need to be recruited in particular from women, younger people and parts of the population with lower resources. Whether WriteToThem can achieve this is discussed in the next section.

4.3 Measuring the contribution to political equality

While the users of WriteToThem are part of the overall group of online contacters, the features of the website as a contact facilitation platform distinguish it from other forms of online contacting. These do indeed have an effect as was shown by the platform's success in being a means for people to contact an MP that have never before got in touch with a representative. But do these special features also attract people with a profile that is less biased than that of other contacters and as such

contribute to more political equality? This part of Research Question 2 is the concern of the analysis below.

4.3.1 The profile of WriteToThem users

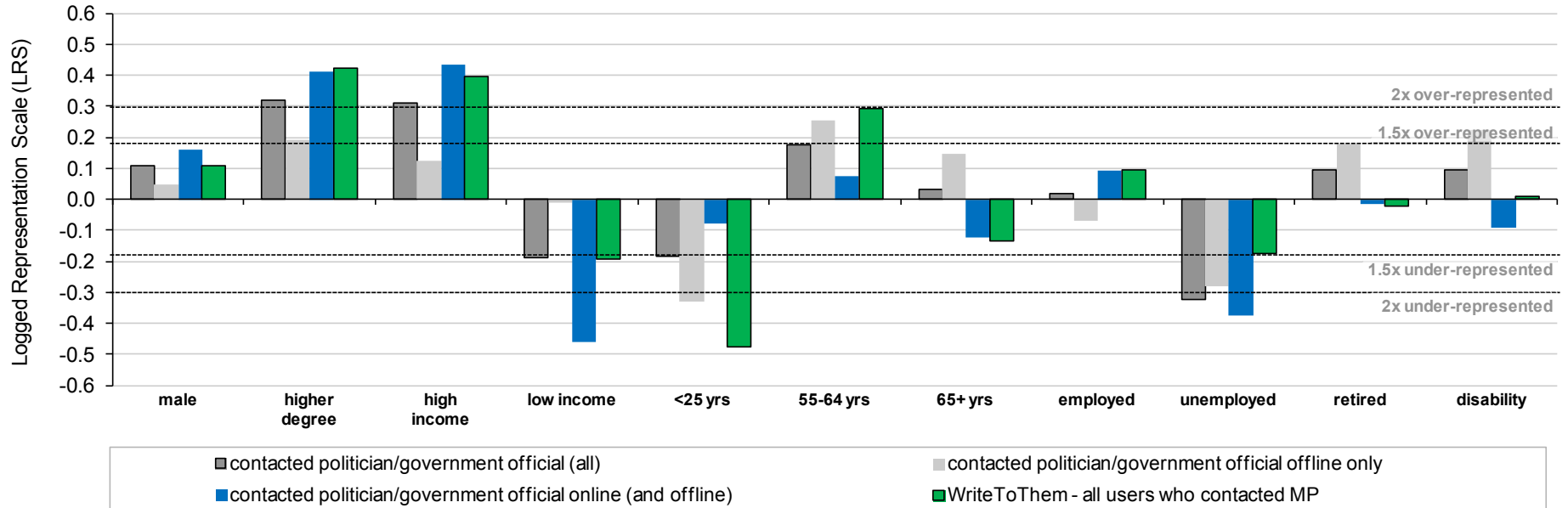
To assess the contribution of WriteToThem to political equality in relation to other channels of contacting, I compare the profile of WriteToThem users with data from OxIS 2009 on offline and online contacters. First, the profile of WriteToThem users is compared to those contacters who use only offline means for getting in touch. Second, users of the platform are compared with the group of people who have used the Internet to contact politicians or government officials in the last year. This includes those who have only used online means as well as those who have used both online and offline means. Figure 10 illustrates the profile of WriteToThem users in green bars, the OxIS data on offline contacters in light grey and the online contacters from OxIS in blue. The latter two groups make up the contacting group overall which is given in dark grey bars for reference.

Before I discuss the results, two notes on these comparisons are in order. First, as discussed in Chapter 2 in the section on methodology, the comparative population data available from OxIS does not specifically focus on contacting MPs but on *politicians and government officials* in general. While I argued in that chapter that there should not be a logical difference in profile between those who contact politicians and those who contact government officials, I expected differences in the profile of contacters depending on the level of government they approach. However, even if the comparative data does not differentiate levels of government, overall it is still sensible to use it because as I discuss in more detail in Chapter 8, the differences

between those who contact councillors and those who contact MPs are not so extensive and all the biases point in the same direction (see Figure 30).

Second, a comparison between the numbers of online contacters as reported by OxIS and WriteToThem users is possible even though by definition the latter are included in the data on online contacters from OxIS. This is because despite the popularity of WriteToThem it still constitutes only a small share of the overall online contacting audience. Using the figures estimated in the previous chapter, about three million British citizens have contacted a politician or government official online within the last twelve months. In 2009, WriteToThem was used by 105,000 people to contact an MP which accounts for just 3.5% of all online contacters and will not impact substantially on the results of this comparison.

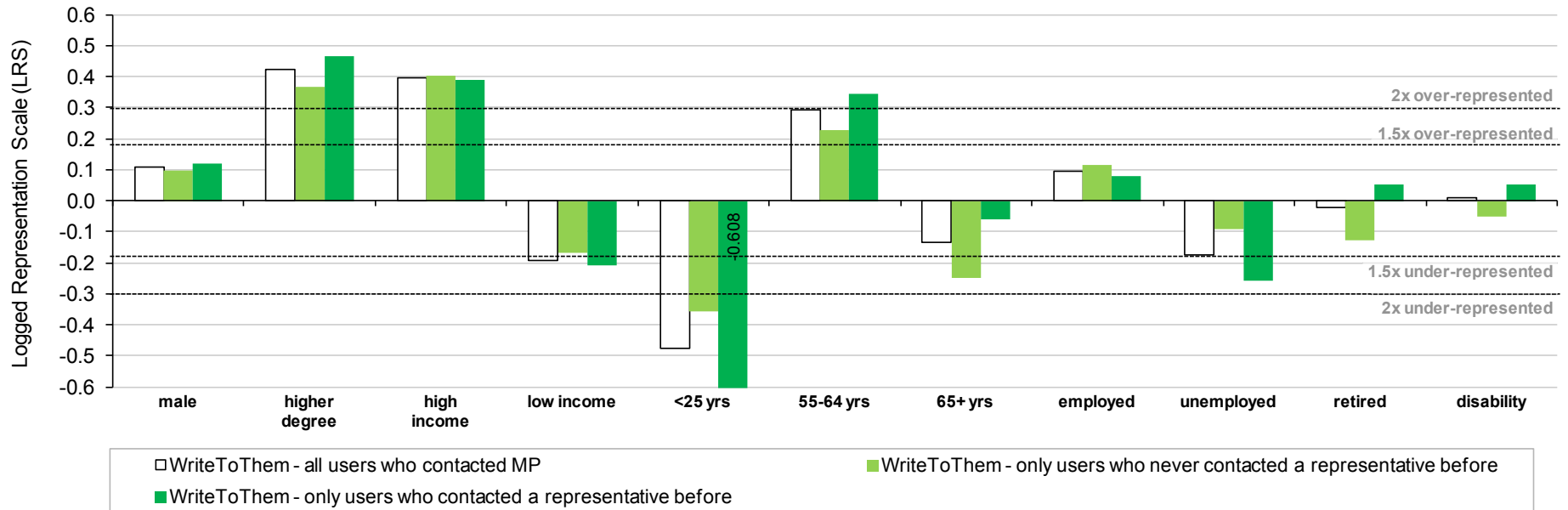
Figure 10 Socio-economic biases of WriteToThem users who contacted an MP: comparison to people who contacted via other means, UK (2009/10)



Source: OxIS 2009 (N=2,013; N contacted – all=236; N contacted – offline only=119; N contacted – online (and offline)=117), mySociety user survey 2009/10 (N=13,520)

Notes: Baseline of comparison is British population aged 14 years and older. Refer to Table 25 for definitions of variables.

Figure 11 Socio-economic biases of WriteToThem users who contacted an MP:
differences between those who have never contacted a representative before and other users, UK (2009/10)



Source: OxfIS 2009 (N=2,013); mySociety user survey 2009/10 (N – all=13,520, N – first-time contacters=6,050; N – contacted before=7,470)

Notes: Baseline of comparison is British population aged 14 years and older. Only users who have contacted an MP. See Table 25 for definition of variables.

Do WriteToThem users who contact MPs differ from people who only use offline means for contacting in the same way as the online contacters discussed in the previous chapter, or is there something special about WriteToThem users?

As it turns out, their profile basically mirrors the differences between online contacters and offline contacters reported in the previous chapter because the characteristics on which WriteToThem users are significantly different from offline contacters are the same on which online contacters in general (i.e. as reported by OxIS) differ significantly from offline contacters. WriteToThem users are more often male, and biased towards resource-rich parts of the population as they are more likely to have a university degree and high incomes (instead of low incomes). At the same time, they are less often of retirement age (65 years and older) and hence more often (self-)employed and less often retired or disabled. In summary, WriteToThem users are by no means less biased than offline contacters. They are in fact by and large much more biased, in particular in relation to gender and the resource-related characteristics. As a result, the platform does not contribute to more political equality compared to offline contacting but rather further reduces equality in contacting.

While WriteToThem users and online contacters in general have a lot in common it would be wrong to conclude that WriteToThem users are just the same as the rest of the online contacters. Instead, WriteToThem users are significantly less male dominated (62% of WriteToThem users are male compared to 69% of online contacters) and represent people from low income groups better (17% vs. 9%). However, these positive findings are countered by the fact they consist of far fewer young people (under 25 years of age) while many more in pre-retirement age (55-64 years) are participating. In total, from a perspective of political equality, I would argue

that WriteToThem users do not offer a real improvement in relation to online contacting, because despite some of the positive findings of a decreased bias, it reproduces the strong over-representation of highly educated contacters with a high income while failing to engage the young.

4.3.2 Differences between experienced and first-time contacters

As far as political engagement is concerned, I have already shown that differences exist between those WriteToThem users who have never before contacted a representative, and those users who have engaged in contacting before. Are these two groups also different in relation to their demographic profile? Figure 11 above shows first-time contacters as light green bars and the rest of WriteToThem users in darker green. For reference, the profile of all users of WriteToThem who contacted MPs (i.e. both groups combined) is illustrated in white bars.

While the differences between first-time contacters and those who have done it before might seem mostly small, these betray significant differences on every single variable except high income (see Table 26). This is aided by the large number of survey responses. Overall, those who use the site and who never contacted a representative before are – not by large degrees but significantly – less biased on gender, education and low income. They are also less biased towards older people, which is the likely reason for the under-representation of retired and disabled people. It is noteworthy that amongst first-time contacters, the unemployed are better represented than in any of the other groups I have discussed so far.

In general, on most of the characteristics first-time contacters are significantly less biased from the population than those WriteToThem users who have contacted a representative before. The only deviation from this general pattern is that amongst

first-time contacters, those aged 65 years and older are under-represented, which has some implications for occupation and disability. Altogether this confirms my findings regarding the role of online contacting for political equality as discussed in the previous chapter: those users who are activated to contact their representative through the opportunities of the Internet – as is the case for the first-time contacters on WriteToThem – are younger than the other people who engage in contacting.

Nevertheless, even among first-time contacters on WriteToThem one bias continues to stand out, and this is that they are still older than other online contacters. So for everything else the platform can do in terms of recruiting new people to contacting and increasing participation by women and low-income groups, for an online platform WriteToThem attracts a surprisingly old audience.

Mixed contribution to political equality

While WriteToThem has mobilised citizens who are less politically active and organised to engage in contacting, these people are still primarily drawn from resource-rich parts of the population. This results in a large bias of the users of this platform from those that use traditional means of contacting. Compared to them, WriteToThem decreases political equality.

The previous chapter has shown that online contacters are biased from the population and those who use WriteToThem are no exception to this. Nevertheless, there are remarkable differences between users of the platform and other online contacters. The platform is successful in engaging people from low-income groups as well as better representing women which constitutes a positive contribution to political equality compared to online contacting in general. At the same time, there is

a lack of young users that is all the more surprising as in the previous chapter these have been shown to engage in online contacting.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that the contact facilitation platform WriteToThem is very successful in engaging people in getting in touch with representatives, and that as such it is contributing to popular control. These newly engaged users are less often politically active and organised than contacters who use other online means or get in touch offline. At the same time, they continue to be recruited from groups of the population with more resources such as education and income and appeal more to men than to women. Compared to offline contacters, WriteToThem not only fails to contribute to political equality but decreases it. In relation to online contacting, WriteToThem shows both positive and negative contributions and on balance neither increases nor decreases political equality. Whilst among its users there are more from low income groups and more women, there are very few young people. That is, the only significant improvement of online contacting, i.e. that it would reduce the marginalization of the young, is not reproduced on WriteToThem.

Summary of UK findings

With the findings from this and the previous chapter, i.e. from both the discussion of online contacting in Britain in general as well as of the particular application WriteToThem, it is possible to answer the first two research questions for the British case. The original evidence gathered on WriteToThem has shown beyond doubt that contact facilitation platforms mobilise people to get in touch with representatives. This also proves the potential of the Internet more generally to make a contribution to popular control. However, it seems clear that WriteToThem is not representative

of other forms of online contacting as these by and large only activate few people to become engaged in this form of participation. Therefore, engagement in contacting as indicated by the annual rates of participation in this activity has only risen by one or two percent in the last decade.

The analysis has also shown that the Internet is not a simple solution to address the severe socio-economic biases in the profile of contacters: those who use the Internet to get in touch with representatives – even with the help of such a specialised platform – are more often male, highly educated and also rich in terms of other resources than those who use offline means. Still, the Internet has not decreased political equality in contacting. Not least because it has failed to substantially recruit more people to this form of participation, there are certainly not more resource-rich people becoming engaged in contacting than there were in the past. Instead, the resource-rich – both those who become engaged as well as those who already are – are more likely to use online means for contacting than those contacters who are poorer in resources. Nevertheless, use of the Internet for contacting is useful to a more limited degree by increasing participation of some under-represented groups in some settings. Young people more often use the Internet for contacting, and a particular application such as the contact facilitation platform can make online contacting more attractive for women and low income groups.

Do these patterns of engagement online as well as more specifically on the contact facilitation platform reflect general trends, or are these specific to the national context in which they take place, or the particular technical design through which they occur? It is the objective of the following two chapters to provide answers to Research Questions 1 and 2 and to establish whether the British findings can be reproduced in

Germany. Therefore the next chapter repeats the analysis of online contacting from Chapter 3 for Germany, while Chapter 6 examines the German contact facilitation platform Abgeordnetenwatch.

Chapter 5 Using the Internet to contact representatives in Germany

The activity of getting in touch with representatives is a minority affair in Germany, more often pursued by men and by parts of the population with high education and high incomes. Do the opportunities for contacting offered by the Internet increase the number of people engaging in this activity, and help women, young people and those with lower resources to have their voices heard more often? Or are these going to be used mainly by those who have already been active in contacting, as I have shown for the UK? To answer these concerns of Research Question 1, I am in the exceptional position to be able to draw on longitudinal data from a panel survey that tracked the continuities and changes of individual use of the Internet in Germany in seven annual waves from 2002 to 2009.

This analysis discusses contacting in Germany as a whole and considers the Internet's contribution to popular control and to political equality in turn. While 40 years of German separation are still visible in the somewhat different political cultures and resulting patterns of participation in East and West Germany (Deth, 2001; Linden, 2007), it is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss potential differences in contacting behaviour in relation to this in further detail. However, it should be noted that the adoption of the Internet has taken place in a country that had already been reunified for more than a decade.

5.1 *Popular control in online contacting in Germany*

To assess the contribution of the Internet in general for rates of engagement in contacting, I discuss first to what degree these new opportunities are actually used and how rates of engagement in contacting have developed overall. On this basis, the

final part of this section addresses the research question by establishing whether the Internet increases the number of people engaged in contacting.

Again, I focus this analysis on the last decade (2001-2010) when the Internet and with it the means to get in touch online became widely available. While the share of Internet users in the German population (aged 16-74) was only 32% in 2001 according to the International Telecommunication Union (2009), in 2009 the POC reported that 68% of Germans (16+ yrs.) had access to the Internet at home.

5.1.1 Development of contacting rates with and without the Internet

To assess the role of the Internet for contacting in Germany requires determining what percentage of the population is actually engaging in this activity and how this compares to rates of contacting irrespective of the means chosen. Based on the POC study Table 11 reports these numbers for 2002 to 2009. It shows that on average about a fifth of the population (21%) has been in touch with someone in a political role within the last year. Based on an assumed German population of about 70m (aged 16+), this translates into about fifteen million people (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2011: 12). In 2008, about 30% of those have used online means to do so – also including those who used both offline as well as online means – which amounts to approximately 4.5 million people.

Table 11 Rates of engagement in contacting someone in a political role within the last year and means used, Germany (2002 – 2009)

	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
percentage of population engaged in contacting	20	20	24	23	-	19	20	21
- offline only	18	18	19	18	-	14	14	15
- online & offline	2	2	3	3	-	4	4	4
-online only	0.5	0.7	2	2	-	2	2	1
- use of online	2	2	5	5	-	6	6	6
percentage of those contacting								
- offline only	90	88	81	80	-	71	71	73
- online & offline	8	9	13	13	-	20	22	21
- online only	3	4	6	7	-	9	8	6
- use of online	10	12	19	20	-	29	30	27
N	1,460	1,415	1,573	1,655		1,414	1,199	809
coverage	Germany, 16+ years							

Source: POC 2002 – 2009

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

Clearly, the opportunities of the Internet for engaging with representatives are used by the public. However, this has not increased engagement in contacting overall: while there are some variations, there is no consistent pattern of growth or decline. Consequently, a simple linear regression as summarised in Table 13 below fails to show any association, in other words there is no significant linear growth (or decline) in overall contacting rates.

However, the POC applied a rather broad definition of contacting which not only included politicians but also other ‘people in a political role’ – this implies people who can be expected to be involved with political decisions and the survey question cited representatives of a citizen’s initiative as possible examples. Maybe this obscures how contacting of representatives in particular has developed. Therefore the analysis is

repeated with data from the ESS which applies a more specific definition of contacting which includes only politicians or (local) government officials and whose observations are reported in Table 12 below.

Table 12 Rates of contacting politicians, government or local government officials within the last year based on European Social Survey, Germany (2002 – 2008)

	2002	2004	2006	2008
percentage of population engaged in contacting	12%	10%	12%	16%
N	2,919	2,868	2,908	2,747
coverage	Germany, 15+ years			

Source: ESS 2002–2008

Even though at first sight the ESS data might suggest otherwise, a linear regression model exhibits no significant correlation with time as Table 13 shows. Hence, the ESS data supports the findings of constant rates of contacting from the analysis of the POC data. This implies that there are few differences between whether only politicians and government officials are contacted, or whether the definition includes also other people in political roles. Besides, this research is interested in the choice of means for getting in touch and it is not obvious that these would be related to whether a representative or a citizen's initiative is contacted.

While rates of contacting overall show no increase, clearly use of online means for contacting has risen. The percentage of the population who have contacted someone in a political role with the help of the Internet (exclusively or in combination with offline means) has almost tripled from 2.1% in 2002 to 5.7% in 2009. The rising significance of online channels for contacting becomes even more obvious when considering the continuously increasing share of online use on contacting overall: in 2009, almost three out of ten respondents who contacted someone in a political role

at some point used online means to do so. Both these developments are significant as Table 13 shows.

Table 13 Linear models testing development of share of population engaged in contacting within the last year, Germany (2002 – 2009)

	European Social Survey	Political Online Communication		
years	2002, 2004, 2006, 2008	2002 – 2005, 2007 – 2009		
	<i>total contacting</i>	<i>total contacting</i>	<i>online contacting</i>	<i>share of online on contacting total</i>
correlation (Pearson)	0.68	-0.25	0.92	0.95
beta	0.006	-0.002	0.005**	0.028**
R ²	0.46	0.06	0.85	0.90

Source: See Table 11 and Table 12.

Notes: Significance of beta coefficient indicated by ** $p \leq 0.01$; * $p \leq 0.05$; (*) $p \leq 0.1$.

The fairly stable rates of contacting overall, coupled with the increasing use of online channels for contacting, signals that offline contacting must have declined in importance. Indeed, the share of those people who only rely on offline channels has been constantly dropping until 2008 as Table 11 documents. It also shows that this expansion of online contacting is mainly related to the combined use of online and offline means for contacting. In contrast, the exclusive use of online means for approaching people in political roles is increasing far less. This suggests that the Internet does not mobilise genuinely new people to this form of participation but that it is instead mainly those people who are already engaged in contacting via offline means who are now in addition also using online channels for contacting. As a result, the rise of online contacting would not lead to increased popular control.

To establish whether this is the case, I discuss two questions in turn. First, I analyse whether there is an activating effect of the Internet on contacting at all, in other words, if the Internet can bring in new people into contacting. Second, I focus on those people who have traditionally been engaged in contacting offline and discuss whether they are adding online channels to their repertoire of contacting choices or whether online contacting is replacing offline.

5.1.2 Internet activation effects on engagement in contacting

While there is no overall increase in annual contacting rates, this by itself does not indicate that the opportunities of the Internet would not entice people into contacting who have not done it before. For example, any activation through online means could be mitigated by a corresponding decline in offline use, resulting in constant contacting rates overall. Alternatively, small activation rates of online means could be lost in the error rates of the surveys reporting overall contacting rates. To accurately assess whether mobilisation through the Internet takes place at all requires us to examine individual citizens' choices about how to get in touch with representatives for the first time. The POC data provides an opportunity to do this albeit with certain limitations as I discuss below.

Defining first-time contacts in panel data

Ideally, this analysis would track the behaviour of panel participants through the entire lifetime of the panel, focusing on those who had not been engaged in contacting to begin with and who became engaged in contacting online (and maybe in addition also offline) some time after they got access to the Internet. However, due to panel mortality and the dynamic nature of the panel, there are not a sufficient number of suitable cases available for such an analysis. Instead, this study measures the degree

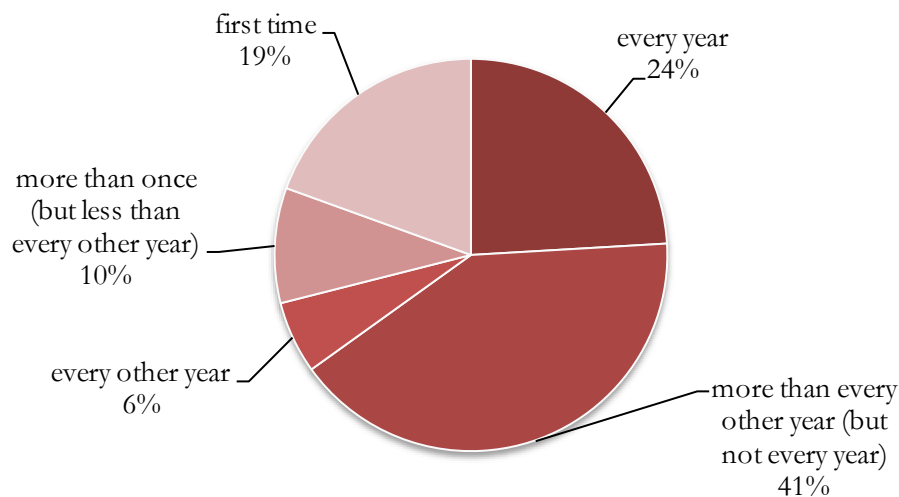
of activation for each wave separately. This has the added benefit of allowing the detection of possible variations in the activation potential of the Internet over the course of the years.

The drawback of this approach is that there is more uncertainty in defining those people who contact for the first time. Given that each survey wave is only enquiring into contacts made in the past year, the only way to determine whether respondents have been engaged in contacting before is by their answers to previous panel waves. However, focusing only on those who have *not* contacted in the immediately preceding wave will inevitably classify people as first-time contacters who are in fact regular contacters but simply did not get in touch in the specific year. At the same time, the more preceding data is required, the more people drop out of the analysis because they did not participate in several subsequent panel waves.

To find suitable criteria to determine first-time contacters, Figure 12 illustrates how regularly those people who in 2009 had contacted someone in a political role did actually get in touch in the previous years. For this analysis to be meaningful, it includes only people who took part in at least the preceding two waves (i.e. 2007 and 2008). It shows that of all those who engaged in contacting in 2009 about one in six are first-time contacters, that is people who have never contacted before – at least as far as we can know from their participation in previous panel waves. Given that the panel data provides only a time-limited insight into the past behaviour of citizens, the numbers tend to over-estimate the share of first-timers: these are defined as those respondents who have not been engaged in contacting in at least the previous two years, but these people might well have been in touch prior to that, on which no data is available in the panel survey.

While these numbers are not precise but constitute estimates, they clearly indicate that contacting is not a rare activity. Instead, the data suggests that more than 80% of those who get in touch during any given year are regular contacters who over the course of several years get in touch repeatedly. In fact, a quarter approach politicians every single year and in total about 70% of all annual contacters engage in this activity on average at least once every two years.

Figure 12 People who had contacted someone in a political role within the last year: how regularly did they engage in contacting in previous years, Germany (2009)



Source: POC 2002 – 2009 (N=144)

Notes: Based on all who in 2009 reported to have contacted someone in a political role in the previous year and who took part in at least the two preceding survey waves (i.e. 2007 and 2008). Data weighted according to weights of wave 2009.

This implies that if we define first-time contacters as people who have contacted in a given year but not in the year before, then we could expect this to classify on average about 85% of contacters correctly into first-time and repeat contacter. This is because only 15% of annual contacters are ones that would not have contacted in the previous year even though they are still regular contacters – but those who engage in contacting not more than every other year.

Subsequently, in order to measure the degree to which the availability of online means activates people into contacting, I focus only on those people who at a given panel wave i) have contacted someone in a political role within the last year, ii) have never before been engaged in contacting (as suggested, this is operationalised as respondents who have not been engaged in contacting in the wave of the previous year), and iii) currently have access to the Internet. The latter yields higher rates of activation than focusing on all first-time contacters, i.e. even those without access to the Internet. This makes detection of any possible mobilisation effect easier but requires putting the numbers into the perspective of contacting in general later on.

This entire group of people are considered to be first-time contacters (with Internet access). How many of them used only online means for their first contact – and hence can be assumed to have been mobilised by the availability of the Internet?

Means used for first-time contact

Table 14 reports the activation rates for this sample and shows that the majority (i.e. between 71% and 86%) of first-time contacters rely exclusively on offline means for getting in touch: usually around three quarters of them engage in this way. Clearly, the preferred choice for contacting someone in a political role for the first time is *not* the Internet. This is despite the fact that this analysis only considers Internet users, i.e. those who would actually have the technical means to get in touch online. In addition, there are 6% to 18% who have used both online and offline channels. It is not possible to establish whether these people were first using online means before also using offline or vice versa, therefore I cannot count these as people who were activated by the Internet.

Nevertheless, the analysis shows that a substantial amount of between 6% and 15% of first-time contacters are choosing the Internet for getting in touch. Due to the small sample size, the confidence intervals of the proportions are large (based on standard error estimates) but they prove with a level of confidence of 95% that the proportions are definitely greater than zero. As we would expect, earlier in the decade mobilisation of the Internet was weakest. In 2003 only 6% used the Internet for their first contact. Its relevance has grown since and the numbers indicate that the engagement effect of online means (i.e. the share of those first-time contacters who used only online means) was greatest in the middle of the decade, but there is too little data to state this with confidence.

Table 14 Means used for Internet users' first-time contact with someone in a political role, Germany (2003 – 2009)

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

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.

This analysis has defined first-time contacters as those who have not contacted in the previous year. As was argued above, this assumption is not fully correct. However, the same analysis based on a definition of first-time contacters as those who have not been engaged in contacting for the *two* preceding waves (instead of one) basically

corroborates this finding, even though on a significantly smaller case base and hence broader confidence intervals. Therefore the data clearly supports the assumption that the Internet can indeed activate people into contacting who have not done so before. However, not only does this happen on a far lesser scale than for offline means – also those few who get engaged through the Internet are just about as politically active beyond contacting or organised in political groups as those who get engaged through other means of contacting.

In summary, it is clear that the Internet in Germany has brought people into contacting someone in a political role – which includes contacting representatives. However, compared to traditional means of getting in touch this mobilisation of people who have not been engaged in this activity remains small. While more than 80% of Internet users still become engaged in contacting without using the Internet, only about 10% of Internet users who get in touch for the first time are using the Internet to do so. My discussion in this chapter has shown that overall about 10-20% of all annual contacters can be considered to be first-time contacters. If from those approximately 10% are using the Internet to do so, this suggests that about 1-2% of annual contacters (or less than 0.5% of the population) are people who get in touch for the first time by using the Internet. Even this is bound to over-estimate the actual share of first-timers through the Internet, because the calculation of the first-timer rate as outlined above has been based on Internet users only, who are of course more likely to use the Internet to get in touch.

I have shown earlier that the Internet plays an increasingly important role as a means for contacting politicians while overall rates of engagement in contacting remain stable. At the same time, I have established that by and large the Internet is not

recruiting many additional people to this form of political participation. In the light of this evidence it must be assumed that online means have become more popular for contacting because traditional contacters have discovered these new opportunities, as is discussed below.

5.1.3 Supplementing traditional means of contacting through the Internet

The POC panel data offers the unique opportunity to examine whether traditional contacters abandon offline means of contacting for new online opportunities, or whether they use them in combination. In other words, the question is whether online contacting replaces or supplements offline contacting? To investigate this issue, the analysis below focuses on Internet users who have been contacting within the past year and have been exclusively engaged in contacting offline in the prior wave. Again, applying stricter criteria would exclude too many cases.

Table 15 shows that a substantial share of *offline* contacters is moving towards using online means and increasingly so. While in 2003, almost nine out of ten offline contacters continued to rely on offline channels for their subsequent engagement in contacting, in 2009 this number had dropped to seven out of ten. However, what is also clear is that more often than not, offline channels are not replaced but supplemented by the use of online channels: more than 85% of those who now use online means continue to rely on offline too.

Table 15 Means used for Internet users' contact with someone in a political role for those who previously contacted exclusively offline, Germany (2003 – 2009)

	2003	2004	2005	2008	2009
<i>number of Internet users who contacted within the last year and who contacted exclusively offline in the year prior</i>	66	86	99	54	55
of those percentage who used:					
- only offline means	88	85	83	71	73
- both online and offline means	8	12	15	25	25
- only online means	3	3	1	4	3
(N)	(2)	(3)	(1)	(2)	(1)

Source: POC 2002 – 2009

Notes: The data has been weighted with the weights of the respective wave.

Table 16 Means used for Internet users' contact with someone in a political role for those who previously contacted online, Germany (2003 – 2009)

year	2003	2004	2005	2008	2009
<i>number of Internet users who contacted within the last year and who contacted online (or in combination with offline means) in the year prior</i>	14	21	38	37	29
of those percentage who used:					
- only offline means	30	36	26	35	34
- both online and offline means	57	55	49	53	59
- only online means	12	8	25	12	6
(N)	(2)	(2)	(9)	(5)	(2)

Source: POC 2002 – 2009

Notes: The data has been weighted with the weights of the respective wave.

In contrast, as Table 16 shows, the majority of those users who have previously been using *online* means for contacting (some of them in addition to offline means) continue to rely on online channels. They usually use online means not exclusively but in combination with offline channels. However, about a third of those who in the past (i.e. the previous wave) relied on online channels abandon these subsequently

(i.e. in the following wave) in favour of offline means – even though this might just be temporary.

In summary, the majority of those who today use the Internet to get in touch with someone in a political role are people who have previously used traditional means such as letters or phone calls to get in touch. They continue to use these offline channels but supplement them with online means. Once they have discovered the opportunities of the Internet for contacting, most of them do not switch back to using traditional channels only. As a consequence, the growth in the use of the Internet for contacting is primarily based on an increasing use of online means as an additional channel to get in touch by those who are already contacting offline. Altogether, this implies that in Germany the Internet makes only a very minor contribution to popular control in this form of political participation.

Insignificant contribution to popular control

If the Internet were to be successful in engaging large numbers of people to contact representatives who have not done so before, then we would have expected to observe a rise in the annual rates of contacting. That I have conclusively shown that this has not happened – but that instead these rates have remained stable – already shows that any potential contribution of the Internet to popular control can only be a minor one. Indeed, my analysis suggests that every year only about 10% of all Internet users who get in touch for the first time can be considered to do so because of the availability of online means. This represents not even 2% of all people who get in touch with someone in a political role during any given year. While this shows that the Internet is one route into contacting, it is hardly important considering that through traditional means about ten times as many people get engaged. Furthermore,

it is by no means clear if these people would have refrained from getting in touch if it were not for the Internet, or if they would have used alternative – i.e. offline – means. Therefore it can be concluded that the Internet does not decrease popular control but that it does only contribute in a very marginal way to more popular control that fails to significantly increase overall rates of contacting. Still, the Internet does play a significant role for enabling people to contact representatives and other people in political roles. However, in Germany these opportunities are overwhelmingly used by those who were already engaged in contacting and who now turn their attention to online channels – mostly to supplement offline contacting and rarely to replace it. As a consequence I do not expect online contacting to significantly alter the biases in the profile of contacters, which is the focus of the next section.

5.2 Measuring political equality in German online contacting

This section focuses on the second part of the first research question and enquires into how the socio-economic profile of people who use the Internet for contacting differs from those of people who use only traditional means. As I have discussed in Chapter 2, so far contacting of people in a political role in Germany is very much a domain of older (45 years and above), well-educated men with a high income. Is the profile of people who use the Internet to get in touch with politicians any different? This section first compares the profile of online contacters to that of offline contacters before discussing in more detail to what degree the Internet has impacted on political equality in contacting overall. This analysis relies primarily on POC data from the year 2008 because this offers better quality data than the 2009 wave as I discuss in Appendix F.

5.2.1 The profile of online contacters

The analysis of the socio-economic profile of contacters follows the approach already applied to the analysis of contacting in the UK discussed in Chapter 3. In particular, I use the Logged Representation Scale (LRS) to measure for each group the deviation of politically relevant characteristics from the population. The visualisation of LRS scores in Figure 13 shows the bias from the population of those who have contacted someone in a political role in the last year as dark grey bars, those who relied exclusively on offline means to do so as light grey bars, and those who used online (maybe in relation with offline) means for contacting in blue bars. As a reference, the profile of those citizens who in the last year have been politically active in any way is displayed in the white bars. The data underlying these calculations are reported in Table 28.

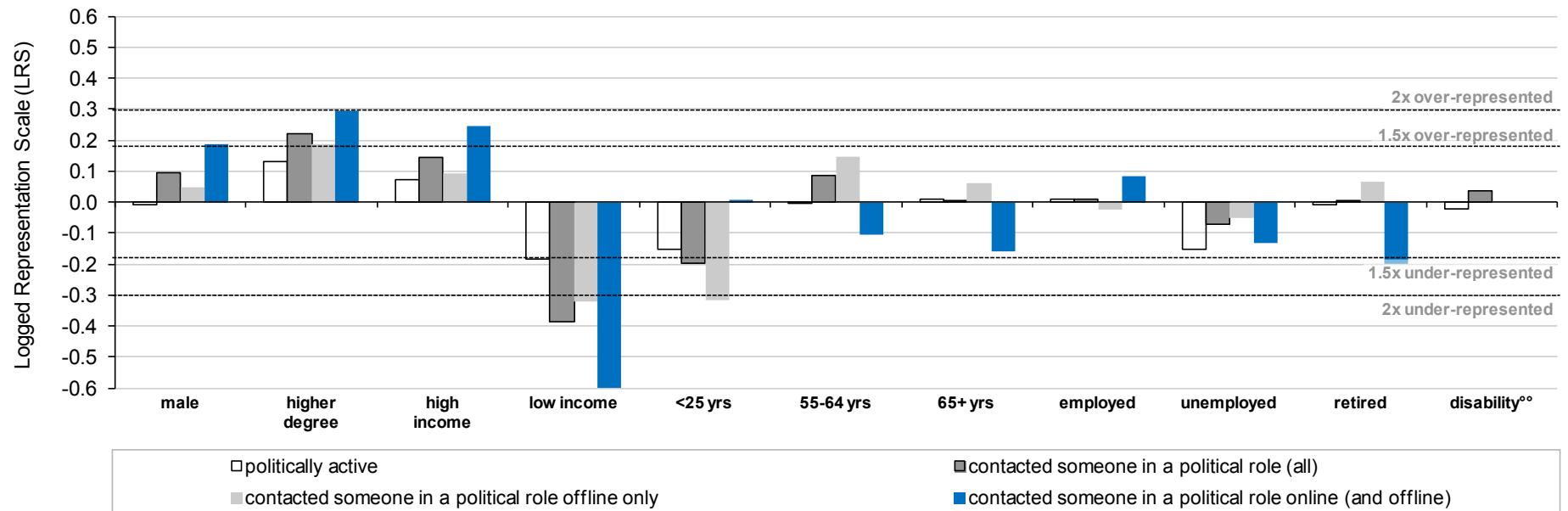
The activity of contacting is characterised by marked inequalities in relation to resources (education, income, engagement in groups) as well as gender and age that are larger in extent than the already biased profile of politically active people overall. Does online contacting make any difference to this pattern? It does indeed, but those who use online means of contacting – this includes those who do so in combination with offline means – are with a single exception not less, but more biased from the population than those who use traditional modes of contacting.

Thus, onliners are much more likely to be male (73% vs. 53%). In addition, three out of four belong to the highest income category compared to 52% of offliners. A similar bias towards greater resource-richness of online contacters is also apparent for (self-)employment as significantly more onliners are in work. This tendency to enhance traditional resource biases is also suggested for education (33% of online

contacters have a university degree compared to 26% of offline contacters) even though this does not become significant. Also the stark differences for low-income groups do not get significant as the underlying number of cases is very small. While offline and online contacters share similar rates of engagement in other forms of political participation beyond contacting, those who use online means for getting in touch are significantly more often active in political groups (53% vs. 34%).

Altogether this means that online contacting is even more biased than offline contacting. However, there is one exception to this general assessment. Online contacters are significantly younger throughout all age groups under 55 and most obviously below 35 years, even though in the classification I have chosen for calculating the LRS this does not get significant due to the small case numbers. As a consequence of these age differences, offliners are twice as often retired as are onliners – as a matter of fact one in three offliners is already retired.

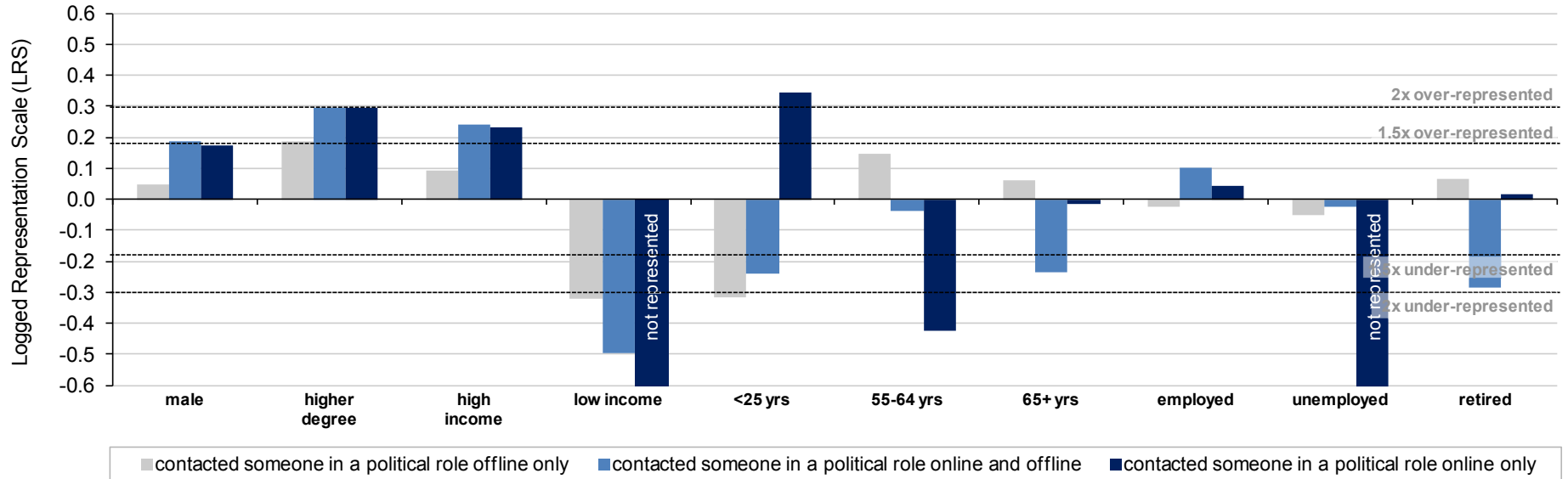
Figure 13 Socio-economic biases of people who have used the Internet to contact someone in a political role within the last year: comparison to other contacters and politically active citizens in general, Germany (2008)



Source: POC 2008 (N=1,199; N – politically active=630; N – contacted someone in a political role=237; N – contacted offline=167; N – contacted online (and offline) =70)

Notes: Baseline of this comparison is the German population aged 16 years and older, except ^{oo} as these measures were not provided from the POC data, the population data is derived from ESS 2008 based on population aged 15 years and older; for this data no information available on means of contact used. Refer to Table 28 for definition of variables.

Figure 14 Socio-economic biases of people who contacted someone in a political role: differences according to means used, Germany (2008)



Source: POC 2008 (N=1,199; N – contacted offline only=167; N – contacted online and offline=52; N – contacted online only=18)

Notes: Baseline of this comparison is the German population aged 16 years and older. There are no people with low income or who are unemployed in the group of online-only contacters. Refer to Table 28 for definition of variables.

Figure 14 above illustrates the differences between contacters based on whether they used only offline means, only online means or both. However, it is difficult to differentiate online users further because only a very small group relies exclusively on the Internet. This prevents almost any significant statements. In any case, there are a lot of similarities between both groups. This is further supported by the fact that the majority (72%) of those who only contacted online still relied heavily on other forms of *offline* political participation if not contacting. It is likely that most of them are people who would in principle contact via both means but just in the last year used only the Internet. Still, online-only contacters are significantly younger and less often politically organised (even though just on a 90% confidence level) which could indicate that these include at least some people who are activated only by the opportunities of the Internet for contacting.

As a summary of the comparison of online contacting with traditional forms of contacting, it is clear that using the Internet for getting in touch with representatives is resource-driven. Those who contact online are in work and have higher incomes, are four times as often active in political groups than the general population, and tend to have higher education (even though this does not get significant in the data). On top of this, it is dominated by men who are on average younger. In contrast, the exclusive use of offline means for contacting is clearly the domain of the older and retired people. At the same time, it does not disadvantage women in the same way as online contacting. Overall, with the exception of younger people, offline contacting exhibits less severe biases from the population than online contacting, even though it is still far from being representative for the population. Whether these contrasting patterns have any consequences for political equality in contacting is the focus of the next subsection.

5.2.2 Long-term impact of the Internet on the profile of contacters

If the Internet were to mobilise in particular male and resource-rich citizens to become engaged in contacting, this should suggest that with ever expanding use of the Internet for participation, contacters grow less and less representative of the population. However, the previous section has shown that only few people get activated by the Internet to engage in contacting – overall less than 2% of all annual contacters. To induce any noticeable change in the profile of contacters would require a long time. Altogether this suggests that the differences in socio-economic profile between offline and online contacters are not caused by people who become newly engaged in contacting because of the availability of online means.

Instead I have demonstrated that the Internet is primarily used by traditional offline contacters who now also use online means. Therefore the distinct profiles of online and offline contacters should be the result of choices made by the very same segment of the population that has always been engaged in contacting and from which contacters have always been recruited. If this is the case then the profile of the average contacter, i.e. regardless of the channel used, would not have changed much from a time when the vast majority relied on traditional means of contacting, to more recent years where about a third would (also) use online means. The POC panel data allows tracking the profile of contacters from 2002 to 2009 because it used the same definitions throughout all the years. Figure 15 shows from 2002 to 2009 the profile of people who in the respective survey wave answered that they had contacted someone in a political role within the previous year.

The overall impression is one of stability of patterns amongst contacters rather than of change towards increasing biases. This is also supported by a simple linear

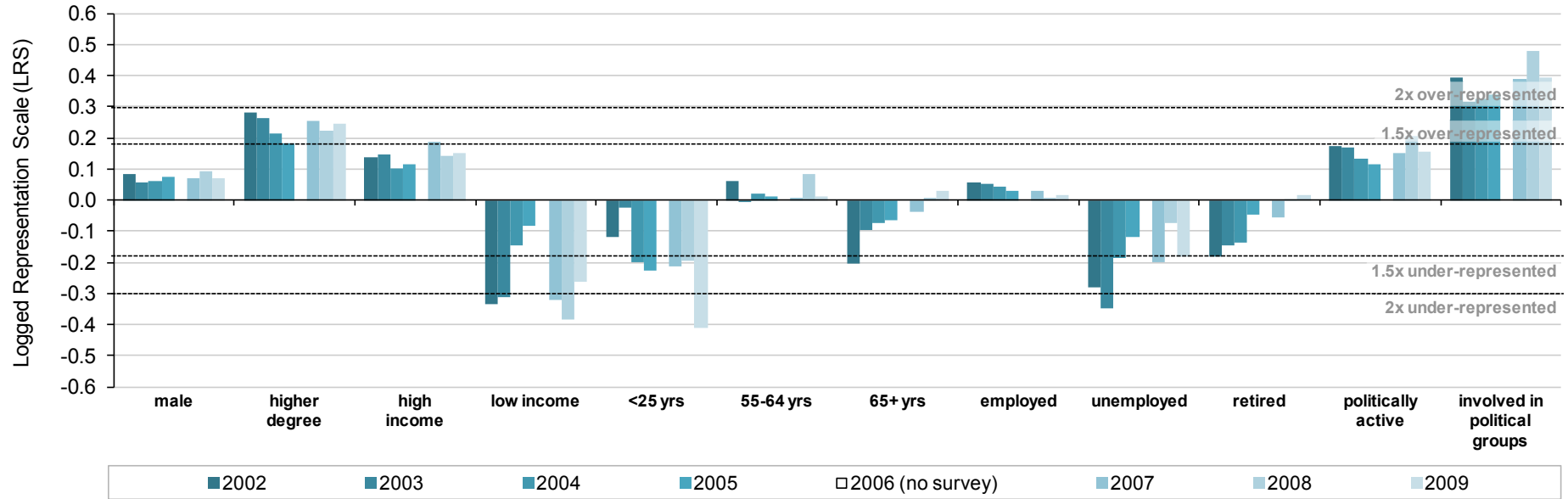
regression analysis testing for any linear development of LRS scores between 2002 and 2009 as reported in Table 17. The lack of change in any particular direction is particularly obvious for the biases in gender, education, high income as well as engagement in other political activities and in political groups. In other words, for some of those characteristics for which online contacting could be expected to introduce the most extreme biases – if it would recruit additional people to this form of participation – there is no indication of any growing (or for that matter, declining) biases of contacters overall.

The smaller bias for low-income people in the middle waves has no obvious explanation, but the rates for the earliest and latest waves are similar and there is certainly no lasting or directed change. The fluctuations for those who are unemployed are more marked because of the overall small numbers on which the analysis is based and because it is subject to natural fluctuations in the labour market. If it shows a tendency (that, however, fails to get significant) then it would be one of better representation of the unemployed, which is exactly the opposite of what could be expected from any influence induced by online contacting.

The only linear developments that are statistically identifiable relate to age and, because of this, to occupation. There is a significant trend towards increasing representation of 65+ year olds while at the same time those under 25 years are increasingly under-represented. Associated with this is a decline of the over-representation of (self-)employed people together with an increasingly better representation of retired people. Again, these developments would go counter to any hypothesized effect of online contacting because, as was shown above, if anything mobilisation through the Internet should increase the share of young people. The

most likely explanation for the developments observed is that it is an artefact of the panel survey: those respondents who took part in more than one wave caused the sample panel to age (Emmer et al., 2011: 69). As contacters are in general in their middle ages, it can be assumed that many contacters who in some of the earlier waves were still employed or self-employed became retired towards the later waves of the panel. At the same time, the whole sample lacks proportionally more young people than old ones. The younger participants were more likely to drop out and the most obvious decline of young people in 2009 was caused by the fact that in this year there was no resample to mitigate against panel mortality. Altogether, this implies that there was also no real change in the age structure of contacters.

Figure 15 Development of socio-economic biases of people who have contacted someone in a political role within the last year, Germany (2002 – 2009)



Source: POC 2002 – 2009 (Sample sizes for population vary from N=809 to N=1,655, sample sizes for contacters vary from N=168 to N=373)

Notes: Baseline is the German population aged 16 years and older. Refer to Table 28 for definition of variables.

Table 17 Linear models testing development of LRS scores for politically relevant characteristics of people who contacted someone in a political role in relation to population, Germany (2002 – 2009)

	male	higher degree	high income	low income	<25yrs.	55-64yrs	65+yrs	employed	un-employed	retired	politically active	active in pol. groups
correlation (Pearson)	0.32	-0.28	0.39	-0.16	-0.78	0.08	0.93	-0.95	0.66	0.96	0.17	0.58
beta	0.001	-0.004	0.004	-0.007	-0.035*	0.001	0.027**	-0.006**	0.023	0.028**	0.002	0.012
R ²	0.10	0.08	0.15	0.03	0.61	0.01	0.87	0.90	0.44	0.92	0.03	0.33

Source: POC 2002 – 2009, for case numbers refer to Table 11

Notes: A linear model is fitted for each politically relevant characteristic, using as independent variable the year of data collection (2002 to 2009 without 2006) and the respective LRS value as dependent variable. Significance of beta coefficient indicated by ** $p \leq 0.01$; * $p \leq 0.05$; (*) $p \leq 0.1$. See Table 28 for definition of variables.

In summary, the profile of contacters has been stable since 2002 even though during this time engagement in online contacting has increased from one in ten contacters to more than one in four. In particular, all the characteristics for which online contacting could extend an existing bias – if these people were to be genuinely new to the activity of contacting – show no signs of increase. Instead, the biases in relation to gender, education, income, and participation in political groups remain basically on the same level. This underscores the earlier finding that online contacting is a domain of those already engaged in contacting. The different socio-economic profiles of offline and online contacters are the result of different choices of those who have traditionally engaged in contacting: those older and poorer in resources (in terms of income and education) tend to continue using traditional channels or tend to choose those if they contact for the first time. In contrast, younger men with more resources are using the Internet in addition to traditional means for getting in touch. Altogether, this leaves established patterns of political equality in contacting basically unchanged.

No increase in political equality

The findings discussed in this section give a clear answer to the research question: people who use the Internet for contacting do not diminish the known biases in contacting. Instead they extend many of the existing biases, for example in relation to higher income, occupational status, engagement in political groups and education, and they introduce a male bias. Other biases are mirrored, so there are no differences in general political participation beyond contacting even though clearly online contacters prefer online channels. The only positive effect of the Internet for contacting is that it does not marginalize the young as does offline contacting.

However, on balance this cannot offset the otherwise severe biases, so online contacting does not contribute to more political equality in contacting.

At the same time, neither does the Internet decrease political equality: because it largely fails to mobilise new people to become engaged in this form of participation, those who are today participating in contacting are by and large the same groups of the population who have done so ten years ago. The only difference is that younger men with higher income and education are also using online means for getting in touch, while those older and with fewer resources continue to rely exclusively on traditional means.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that through the opportunities for getting in touch with politicians that are offered by the Internet, in Germany only few people become engaged in contacting. My analysis suggests that only about 10% of all first-time contacters each year who have access to the Internet (which translates into less than 2% of all annual contacters) get in touch because of the Internet while the majority still uses only offline means. One result of this is that the average socio-economic profile of people who contact someone in a political role has not changed significantly through the last decade. Those using online means are younger but otherwise more strongly biased from the population than those who rely only on traditional forms of contacting. However, these differences represent primarily different media preferences for contacting by resource-poor and resource-rich parts of the population instead of any change in the rates of participation of those groups – except for young people.

What is noteworthy is that the use of the Internet for contacting is not simply a question of access to the Internet (or lack thereof) because for example in 2008 three out of four offline contacters actually had access to the Internet. Maybe special online opportunities for contacting could help in particular women and those with less income and education to make use of the Internet to get in touch with representatives. The German contact facilitation platform Abgeordnetenwatch constitutes a particular form of online contacting distinct from emailing and other forms of online contacting, and whether it could contribute to more popular control and political equality is the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter 6 Abgeordnetenwatch.de: a German contact facilitation platform and its users

The German contact facilitation platform Abgeordnetenwatch (literally translated as ‘representative watch’) is a website that citizens can use to put a question to a representative and request an answer – all in public on the Internet. This simple idea by a small non-profit has managed to divide representatives in Germany, and these divisions run straight through parties: while the national MPs of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) make extensive use of the site and even feature it on their homepages³⁰, their party colleagues in the state of Baden-Württemberg were urged by the leader of their parliamentary group not to use the site (Christian Democratic parliamentary group of Baden-Württemberg, 2010). What is more, they even obtained a cut in funding that had already been pledged to support the platform by the state’s *Agency for Civic Education* (Abgeordnetenwatch.de, 2011: 5). But even though the site has not been unanimously welcomed among representatives, the majority of them have made themselves available to citizens via Abgeordnetenwatch. In 2009 more than 14,000 people queried MPs of the German Bundestag almost 15,000 times, and four out of five questions received a substantial reply.

Can Abgeordnetenwatch with its special features as a contact facilitation platform and its public approach to communication succeed in doing what the Internet in Germany has largely failed to achieve, namely to increase popular control and political equality in contacting? This chapter provides an answer to this second research question for the German case and starts with an introduction of the site and

³⁰ See for example information on CSU Minister Ilse Aigner http://www.cdusuede/Titel_ilse_aigner/TabID_23/SubTabID_24/AbgID_12/WP_17/Abgeordn_ete.aspx [01.09.2012]

how data was collected from more than 600 of its users between July 2010 and September 2011. Subsequently the results of this survey are discussed in separate sections from the perspective of popular control and political equality respectively.

6.1 *Abgeordnetenwatch: an introduction*

6.1.1 Overview of contact facilitation platform

The website *Abgeordnetenwatch.de* provides information about political representatives but the feature for which the site is most widely known and which is the focus of my analysis is the public communication that it enables between citizens and representatives.

Function and history

The main way of accessing information about particular representatives is by entering a postcode. The information that is available varies depending on the respective parliament but it is generally most comprehensive for national MPs. Figure 16 provides an example of such a profile for a Member of the German Bundestag which starts with basic biographical data and also gives information on parliamentary business including a voting record on selected issues (see middle of page). The main part of the site (see the text in Figure 16 under ‘öffentliche Äußerungen’, i.e. ‘public communication’) is dedicated to displaying questions from citizens and their respective answers. In order to ask a question, users need to provide their name (the only information that will be displayed in public), place of residence and an email address.

Figure 16 Screenshot of Abgeordnetenwatch illustrating profile of a national MP

abgeordnetenwatch.de
weil Transparenz Vertrauen schafft

Thema, Politiker...

WAHLEN NRW ■ **BUNDESTAG** ■ LANDTAGE ■ EU-PARLAMENT ■ ARCHIV ■ PROJEKT

Abgeordnete Abstimmungen Ausschüsse Wahlrecht


Startseite ▶ **Bundestag** ▶ Abgeordnete ▶ **Hans-Christian Ströbele**

Hans-Christian Ströbele (GRÜNE)

Angaben zur Person

Geburtsdag	07.06.1939	Wahlkreis	Berlin-Friedrichshain - Kreuzberg - Prenzlauer Berg Ost ▶
Berufliche Qualifikation	Rechtsanwalt	Ergebnis	46,8 %
Ausgeübte Tätigkeit	MdB	Landeslistenplatz	5, Berlin ▶
Wohnort	Berlin	weitere Profile	■ Bundestagswahl 2009 44 Fragen / 43

„ (...) Zu den gesellschaftlichen Gruppen in Deutschland gehören auch Muslime. Auch für sie gilt die Forderung nach Auseinandersetzung mit Homophobie, nach Entgegenwirken und nach einem Klima des Respektes. Eine Diskriminierung der Muslime sehe ich darin nicht. (...)“



zum Thema "Integration"

Parlamentarische Arbeit / Nebentätigkeiten

Abstimmungsverhalten **Ausschussmitgliedschaften** Redebeiträge Nebentätigkeiten

26.02.2010	Verlängerung Afghanistaneinsatz (ISAF)	NEIN	18.12.2009	Bundeswehreinsatz in Bosnien Herzegowina	NEIN
18.12.2009	Kampf gegen Piraten (ATALANTA)	NEIN	04.12.2009	Verzicht auf Mehrwertsteuersenkung für das Hotelgewerbe	JA
04.12.2009	Wachstumsbeschleunigungsgesetz	NEIN	03.12.2009	Verlängerung Afghanistaneinsatz (ISAF)	NEIN

▼ [Alle Abstimmungen](#) [Zu den Abstimmungen](#) ▶

Öffentliche Äußerungen

Auswahl der Fragen und Antworten
Alle Themen

◀ vorherige | Seite 1 ... 14 15 16 | nächste ▶

Frage zum Thema Soziales 11.04.2010

Von: Marc Sebastian Ellis


Sehr geehrter Herr Ströbele!

Wie stehen Sie zu der Idee des bedingungslosen Grundeinkommens (nach dem Modell von Götz Werner)?

Mit freundlichen Grüßen
Marc Sebastian Ellis

Antwort von Hans-Christian Ströbele 16.04.2010

1 ★ Empfehlung

 Sehr geehrter Herr Ellis .

Das bedingungslose Grundeinkommen befürworte ich, allerdings nicht genau das, was Götz Werner vorschlägt. Dieser Meinung bin ich schon seit Jahren. Zu den Gründen habe ich nicht vielfach geäußert, auch schon bei abgeordnetenwatch.

Mit freundlichem Gruß
Ströbele

Source: http://www.abgeordnetenwatch.de/hans_christian_stroebele-575-37994.html [03.05.2010]

Before questions are forwarded to the respective representative by email they are pre-moderated by the team of Abgeordnetenwatch following a codex that covers in particular the content (e.g. a ban on abusive language) but also the number of

permitted questions per user and a prohibition of mass emails in order to prevent use of the site for campaigning. Questions are the only permitted format of contact, simple expressions of opinions are not possible. Users have the right to appeal to a Board of Trustees if they feel their question has been wrongfully denied publication.

When the website Abgeordnetenwatch was started in December 2004 by Gregor Hackmack and Boris Hekele, it covered only the 121 representatives of the state parliament of Hamburg and the contacting function was thought of as a minor addition to the site (Albrecht and Trénel, 2010: 26). The platform has steadily increased its coverage ever since and as of August 2012 the platform enables contacting the German Members of the European Parliament, the Members of the German Bundestag as well as the MPs of eight of the sixteen state parliaments (*Landtage*)³¹. In addition, the members of more than 50 city and district councils can be contacted with the help of the platform. Throughout the years, the platform has also enabled contacting the candidates running for office in every election on the state or national level.

Coverage of the German Bundestag commenced on 8 December 2006, when funding of about €200,000 (about £160,000) through a non-profit venture capital firm enabled the transformation of the project from a volunteer effort to a professional organisation (Tönnemann, 2006). In 2010 Abgeordnetenwatch had a total of nine staff as well as various volunteers (Abgeordnetenwatch.de, 2011: 18). The total annual cost of the project was put at almost €214,000 (£170,000). The most important source of income is through donations which generated more than €110,000

³¹ These are Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg, Berlin, Hamburg, Hesse, Lower Saxony, North Rhine-Westphalia and Schleswig-Holstein.

(£88,000) in 2010. The rest of the money came from foundations and other institutional supporters, premium profiles provided for candidates in elections, partnerships and advertisements.

Reception among public and representatives

Within less than two months after Abgeordnetenwatch enabled contacting MPs, the platform registered its 2,000th question and, perhaps more importantly, also its 1,000th answer (Albrecht and Trénel, 2010: 24). Both in 2005 and 2007 the website was nominated for the prestigious German *Grimme Online Award* (Grimme Online Award, 2005; Grimme Online Award, 2007). Even though it failed to win the award, this was proof of the relevance of the project even at these very early stages. In a recognition of its achievements, Gregor Hackmack, one of the two founders, was selected as Ashoka Fellow in 2008.

Abgeordnetenwatch has also received widespread recognition in the media, to which the ever growing number of articles in its press review is testimony, recording almost 200 mentions in press, radio and television in 2011 alone (Abgeordnetenwatch.de, 2012). The site provides statistics on the responsiveness of individual representatives, and it is in particular this kind of transparency – which is a distinctive feature of contact facilitation platforms – that has been gratefully picked up by media (Hoffmann, 2010). The platform also operates a number of partnerships with media companies that integrate content from Abgeordnetenwatch on their websites, including *Spiegel Online*³², one of Germany's most popular online news sites (Abgeordnetenwatch.de, 2011: 2). Further evidence of the popularity of

³² <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/> [25.07.2012]

Abgeordnetenwatch is that it has also found adopters in Austria, Ireland, Luxembourg and the Netherlands where the source code has been licensed from the German project (Abgeordnetenwatch.de, 2011: 2). Not least the usage figures that are discussed in more detail in the next subsection are proof that Abgeordnetenwatch has clearly struck a chord with the public.

In contrast, Abgeordnetenwatch has not been unanimously welcomed by representatives themselves. The list of representatives' criticisms is long. It includes that communication is too anonymous and too public to be really meaningful (Gardiner, 2007: 182,190), the lack of address details beyond an email address (Albrecht and Trénel, 2010: 57) and that the platform would increase communication demands to levels that cannot be coped with by representatives (Albrecht and Trénel, 2010: 5). Many standard replies of representatives mention a willingness for a dialogue directly via the representative's office but not via an external and public platform³³. Representatives have also tried to cast doubt on the political independence of Abgeordnetenwatch (Voßhoff, 2009; Bosbach, 2010) reflecting a long-standing scepticism about the platform as an intermediary that could obstruct the direct contact between citizens and representatives (Tönnemann, 2006). However, it seems as if this is not how users perceive the role of the platform as these comments in the user survey highlight:

'Because I appreciate the direct contact with the requested person.' (AW222)

'It offers the opportunity to get in touch with the representative directly.' (AW652)

³³ See for example the standard replies by Wolfgang Schäuble, German minister for finance (e.g. http://www.abgeordnetenwatch.de/dr_wolfgang_schaeuble-575-37919--f312438.html#q312438 [01.09.2012])

'Because I can put questions and problems directly to the elected representatives.'
(AW440)

Furthermore, the public visibility of the response – and particularly the lack of such a response – is criticised for putting pressure on representatives to answer the questions (Albrecht and Trénel, 2010: 5). This perception is no accident. Instead, the site operators intentionally try to create pressure for example by compiling reports which assign school marks to representatives and their responsiveness. Users perceive the role of the public communication in much the same way, as some of their comments from the user survey show:

'Through the public nature Abgeordnetenwatch creates a certain pressure to answer the questions meaningfully. The representative is quasi forced to engage with the concern.'
(AW52)

'Abgeordnetenwatch is great. One can contact politicians directly and place them in the spotlight. In this way it exerts more pressure to reply and also the answer has to seem plausible as many people read it.' (AW170)

'Because it is possible, with some public pressure (who answers questions directed to him?) to get information that would otherwise not be available or only with difficulty.'
(AW256)

Despite their concerns, representatives do participate in the public conversation created on the platform. This is illustrated by the overwhelming responsiveness of representatives. Throughout the years about 80% of questions posed on the platform have received an answer (Abgeordnetenwatch.de, 2011: 12). Specifically, MPs answered 82% of the 8,712 questions asked in 2010. Every MP received at least one question in 2010 and only 42 (7%) did not reply at all (Hanneforth and Hekele, 2011). These figures clearly show that by and large Abgeordnetenwatch is, if not embraced, at least generally used by MPs.

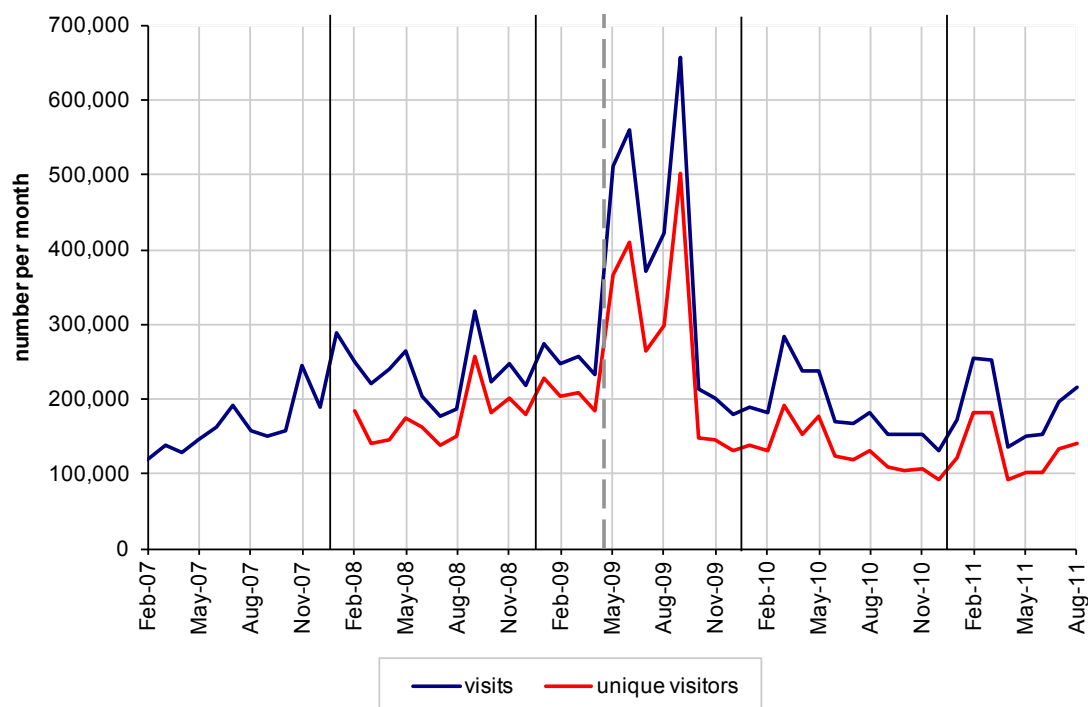
Unfortunately, apart from an explorative bachelor thesis based on interviews with 19 members of the Bavarian state parliament by Klötzer (2011), there has been no systematic study of representatives' assessment and usage of Abgeordnetenwatch. Klötzer found that representatives use the platform primarily out of a fear of negative consequences if they do not, because – unlike in other forms of contacting – their lack of response is transparent to the general public. This becomes particularly obvious in their assessment of the site, which for the majority is very negative (Klötzer, 2011: 41). Most of the MPs interviewed by Klötzer saw no additional value in the platform, criticised that it is abused by people who are not interested in a dialogue but rather in voicing an opinion, and felt that it is adding to the burden of representatives' work.

But not all representatives share this negative assessment. For example, Andrea Nahles, General Secretary of the German Social Democrats, who answers most questions posed to her on the site, believes that overall Abgeordnetenwatch creates the opportunity for serious engagement with citizens' concerns in a space that is objective and fair through the intervention of the moderation (Politik Digital, 2009). Support comes from the little research that has already been conducted on the platform. Thus Albrecht and Trénel (2010: 55), based on a small random sample of 100 questions that received answers, could show that both the questions and in particular the answers are usually well-founded, objective and polite, even though about half the messages contained a criticism of the MP or his party. Also Focks (2007: 72) found that 84% of questions to the members of the state parliament of Hamburg were neutral while only the remaining 16% being more provocative or even aggressive in tone.

6.1.2 Usage figures

On average the platform receives in the region of 200,000 visits each month as Figure 17 reports. The considerable spike up to a remarkable half a million monthly unique visitors in summer 2009 is related to the general election of this year as the platform also allowed questioning of parliamentary candidates.

Figure 17 Usage of Abgeordnetenwatch: monthly visits and unique visitors to site (February 2007 – August 2011)



Source: Hanneforth and Hekele (2011)

Notes: From May 2009 onwards, a new tracking tool was introduced so numbers might not be directly comparable.

The numbers show a great public interest in accessing information on the site, but what about active use of the platform to contact representatives? Table 18 reports the number of people (based on the email address provided) who asked at least one question in the respective year. The main reason for the marked drop in usage in 2010 is likely to be a change in the technical system: from summer 2009 onwards, users were provided with a search function to discover similar questions before

posting their own. In addition, a new system for moderating questions employed stricter criteria too. Both measures have acted to reduce the number of users posing questions but the effect was not fully felt until 2010 because in 2009 due to the general election many more people came to the site to get in touch with representatives as well as prospective candidates.

Table 18 Number of people who used Abgeordnetenwatch to contact an MP and percentage of frequent users (2007 – 2010)

year	number of users asking questions in this year	share of users who posed more than one question
2007	6,218	30%
2008	8,014	29%
2009	8,253	29%
2010	4,452	30%

Source: Hanneforth and Hekele (2011)

Notes: Number of users is based on unique email addresses. Considered are only those questions that were published on Abgeordnetenwatch and were directed to (prospective) MPs.

In a given year about 30% of people used the site more than once, indicating a certain satisfaction with the site. In the user survey, more than two-thirds of participants are very likely to recommend the site. In their comments they mentioned a number of reasons, including ease of use:

'Because with the help of Abgeordnetenwatch it is comparatively easy to get in touch.'
(AW732)

'because one can quickly and without hassle get in touch with representatives'
(AW251)

'It is the easiest way to get in touch with a representative.' (662)

The public nature of the communication – which distinguishes Abgeordnetenwatch from the British contact facilitation platform WriteToThem – is one of the major

motivations cited for use of the site. This is not just because it puts the pressure to respond on representatives as highlighted by the comments cited earlier, but also to make the actual content of the replies more widely known:

'A great way to communicate with representatives. I value in particular that every representative in the future has to be judged according to the written response'
(AW729)

'Abgeordnetenwatch is a great way to get competent information about political issues from representatives, and to publicly demand accountability for their political positions and actual decisions at the same time. And: No reply is also a telling response.'
(AW51)

'I think it is great that it becomes public if representatives try to make fools of us.'
(AW78)

Unsurprisingly, together with the number of users, also the number of questions posed to MPs has declined as Table 19 shows. Still, in 2010 more than 8,700 questions to MPs were published on the site. In 2009 the average number of questions per MP was 24 but some received significantly more. The actual number of questions submitted is even higher, but around a third of those are not published as they violate the codex of the site in some way.

Table 19 Number of messages sent via Abgeordnetenwatch to MPs and percentage that received a reply (2007 – 2010)

year	number of questions to MPs	answer rate
2007	11,197	77%
2008	15,260	82%
2009	14,781	83%
2010	8,712	75%

Source: Hanneforth and Hekele (2011)

Notes: Considered are only those questions that were published on Abgeordnetenwatch and were directed to (prospective) MPs. Answer rate excludes standard replies.

If a question is published, there is a good chance of receiving an answer: in 2010 three out of four questions received a substantive reply. Including also those replies that are considered to be standard (as classified by the moderation, e.g. answers stating ‘please contact me directly’), the response rate was as high as 82%. However, standardised replies are one of the main causes of users’ dissatisfaction with representatives, which also impact on the assessment of the platform itself, as these comments highlight:

‘But I have not assigned the highest mark because in particular the highest ranking politicians escape [public scrutiny] by providing standard replies / no replies at all.’ (AW481)

‘On the one hand I think Abgeordnetenwatch is a great idea. This is why I tell friends about it. On the other hand so far I have only received standard replies or no reply at all to my questions. This is boring and only increases frustrations with politicians.’ (AW101)

‘Because many representatives only reply with standard answers, much later or not at all.’ (AW129)

Previous research had already indicated that people do not necessarily use the site to get in touch with their constituency MP (Focks, 2007: 57; Albrecht and Trénel, 2010). The data from this research finds that users are equally split between those who get in touch with their constituency MP and those who contact another MP, reflecting the findings of research on German MPs and their constituency service (Herzog et al., 1990; Bartels, 2008; Zittel, 2010). The final part of this section describes the data underlying this analysis which also forms the base of the assessment of popular control and political equality in the subsequent sections of this chapter.

6.1.3 Online survey of Abgeordnetenwatch users

Up until now no reliable data had been available on those users of Abgeordnetenwatch who have contacted a representative via the site. Previous

surveys relied on pop-up windows to recruit respondents, so they included primarily ‘passive’ recipients of the information provided on the site as those who actively put a question to a representative account for less than 0.5% of the total audience (Focks, 2007; Albrecht and Trénel, 2010)³⁴. Not least, these surveys left little possibility to judge the quality of the sample.

For this research, only users who posed a question to a national MP were invited. 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 questionnaire itself (see Appendix E) was designed to generate data comparable to the survey on WriteToThem. However, the public nature of the communication on Abgeordnetenwatch made it necessary to drop a number of questions from the WriteToThem questionnaire to reduce the possibility of cross-referencing information on the site with data in the user survey to identify individuals. For details please refer to the discussion of the ethical issues in Appendix G.

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% (see discussion in Appendix E for details). Given the response rates of other online surveys (Lozar Manfreda et al., 2008: 90) this is clearly at the lower end. This is primarily the result of the suboptimal sampling strategy

³⁴ In 2009 15,411 people used the site to pose questions to any kind of representative and 3m unique visitors were recorded on the site. In 2010 5,886 users and 1.6m unique visitors were recorded. The number of unique users is likely to be inflated as it cannot be absolutely accurately measured using web tracking tools.

because users could easily miss the link to the survey as the bulk of the invitation email was concerned with their question and the answer. Participation also required a certain effort as users would first want to read their answer and then would have to go back to the email to click the survey link. However, this sampling represents the best achievable compromise between the needs for this research on the one hand, and the concerns of site operators and their users on the other, namely to allow for easy implementation and to not unduly burden users with additional emails.

Given these issues, the fact that about one in five contacters provided usable responses to the survey represents a considerable achievement. Nevertheless, the lower response rate leaves scope for bias in the sample. The risk of a biased sample was further compounded by the fact that the sampling procedure excluded people who did not receive an answer from their representative, and it would invite frequent users not just once but every time they used the site. However, as the detailed discussion in Appendix E highlights, from the markers available it can be concluded that the sample largely represents the target audience.

Therefore the sample can be expected to deliver reliable information about those who use Abgeordnetenwatch to contact representatives and to answer Research Question 2 for Germany. The next two sections focus on whether through the contact facilitation platform Abgeordnetenwatch more people engage in contacting and in particular people with characteristics that are usually under-represented in groups that use other contacting channels.

6.2 *Measuring the contribution to popular control*

In order for Abgeordnetenwatch to increase popular control in contacting, the platform would have to mobilise people who have so far not been engaged in

contacting to get in touch with an MP. To establish whether this is the case, I first discuss to what extent the platform mobilises people at all, before I address the question of whether these people can be considered new to the political process in general or to have already been politically involved in other forms of participation or in political groups.

6.2.1 Using Abgeordnetenwatch to contact for the first time

To assess whether through the contact facilitation platform Abgeordnetenwatch people get activated into contacting who have not done so before, users in the survey were asked: *'Before you used Abgeordnetenwatch to pose a question, have you ever contacted one of your representatives, by any means?'* The answers show that more than two out of five users (42%) have never before contacted a representative by any means.

This rate can be considered the minimum actual number of first-time contacters for two reasons. First, while the question was framed in such a way as to enquire about any form of contact *predating* the use of Abgeordnetenwatch, it could well be that some users would read over this detail, stating they have contacted representatives before even though this was only with Abgeordnetenwatch. Second, frequent users who by definition cannot be first-time contacters are slightly over-represented in the sample due to the previously discussed sampling strategy.

This rate of first-time users seems a very clear sign that the platform is indeed activating people to become engaged in contacting. But how does it rate in relation to the take-up of contacting as a form of political participation that takes place via the use of other channels? In other words, of all people who engage in contacting in any given year, what share does so for the first time? My discussion in the previous

chapter has already provided the answer: the analysis on which Figure 12 is based suggests that around one in five annual contacters does so for the first time.

As a result it can be concluded that clearly through Abgeordnetenwatch more people start to get engaged in contacting than should be expected from the population average. Based on the data it can be estimated that the platform is at least twice as successful than other – online or offline – means in bringing people into contacting who have not done so before. Considering that the POC data tends to over-estimate real first-timer rates while the Abgeordnetenwatch data tends to under-estimate them, it could well be that the platform mobilises people to get engaged in contacting by a rate up to three times as high as other means for approaching representatives.

The next subsection discusses in more detail if we can consider Abgeordnetenwatch to be instrumental for the engagement of these first-time contacters and if these can be perceived as previously apolitical.

6.2.2 Genuine mobilisation to contact

What first-time contacters would have done if it were not for Abgeordnetenwatch is hard to determine. After all, it is a hypothetical situation. Certainly some first-time contacters feel that Abgeordnetenwatch was instrumental in enabling them to get in touch as this comment indicates:

'Because it is the only way I know of to contact representatives' (AW688)

However, one way to approach this question is to examine the political involvement of users who contact a representative for the very first time. If they constitute a group of people who have so far not been involved in politics, we might assume that for them Abgeordnetenwatch was instrumental to become engaged in participation. Conversely, for those first-time contacters who are already engaged in other forms of

political participation or in political groups – only not up until now in contacting – we might assume that they are more likely to have contacted regardless of the site.

Political involvement of Abgeordnetenwatch users

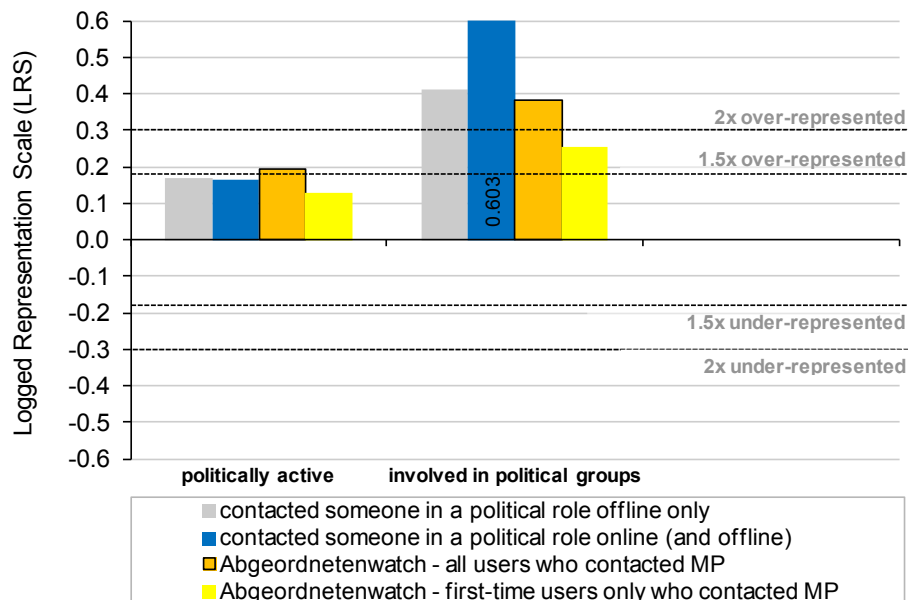
In this research political involvement is measured on the one hand in terms of engagement in political participation beyond contacting or use of Abgeordnetenwatch, and on the other hand by involvement with political groups. Figure 18 reports the bias from the population on these two measures. The figure shows all users of Abgeordnetenwatch in orange bars, while those who used the platform to contact a representative for the first time ever are shown in yellow. The other bars represent those parts of the population who have contacted someone in a political role within the last year – those who only used offline means in light grey and those who contacted someone using online means (or online and offline means) in blue.

The figure highlights that Abgeordnetenwatch users – even those who have never contacted before – are significantly more often politically engaged as well as active in political groups than the population. This can hardly be surprising given the established patterns of contacting that were discussed in Chapter 2. So these findings need to be put into the context of the profile of people who used other forms of contacting and that are visualised in grey bars in the figure. This shows that beyond use of the site, Abgeordnetenwatch users are neither more nor less politically engaged than other contacters. Even though first-time contacters are significantly less active than the other Abgeordnetenwatch users (71% of those have been previously politically engaged compared to 91% of the frequent users), they still resemble other

contacters both online and offline and as such are significantly more politically active than the population.

However, the political involvement of Abgeordnetenwatch users still differs from that of other contacters. Those who contact for the first time are much less often organised in political groups than people who use other forms of contacting. Even considering all users of Abgeordnetenwatch still shows that these are much less active in groups than other online contacters.

Figure 18 Political involvement of Abgeordnetenwatch users who contacted an MP: comparison to people who contacted via other means, Germany (2008, 2010/11)



Source: POC 2008 (N=1,199; N – contacted offline only=167; N – contacted online (and offline)=70); Abgeordnetenwatch user survey 2010/11 (N=668; N – first-time contacters=272)

Notes: Baseline of this comparison is the German population aged 16 years and older. Refer to Table 28 for definition of variables. For population data political participation excludes ‘contacting someone in a political role’, for Abgeordnetenwatch it excludes contacting politicians via the platform.

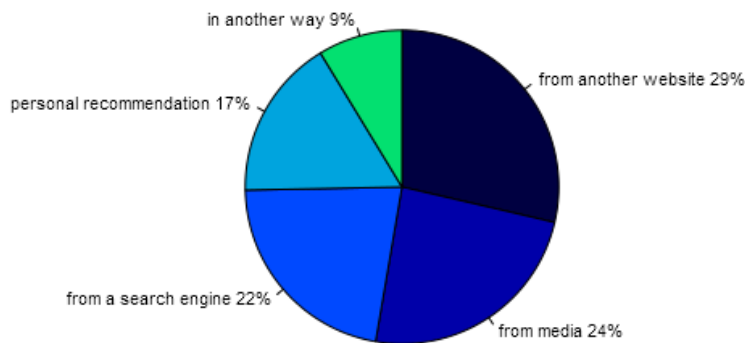
On the whole, it is hard to think of Abgeordnetenwatch as a major way to mobilise people to participate politically who have so far remained passive. This does happen, but not to a greater degree than for other forms of contacting. However, the platform still succeeds in mobilising a particular segment of these already active people, namely

those who are less often active in political groups. Usually people who are not organised in political groups are less likely to approach representatives. The fact that Abgeordnetenwatch helps these people to start to become engaged in contacting implies that at least to some degree it is genuinely mobilising people who would otherwise not get in touch. Furthermore, as I have already shown for WriteToThem in the UK, the average age of first-time contacters on Abgeordnetenwatch is well into middle age, and only 5% are younger than 25 years. This indicates that these are not young people who only just reached voting age and simply did not have a chance to get in touch any earlier, but that these are people who could have contacted before but needed a site such as Abgeordnetenwatch to actually do so.

Finding out about Abgeordnetenwatch

An analysis of how users find out about the platform also underscores that most users of Abgeordnetenwatch cannot be considered passive; they already have some interest in politics. For example, Figure 19 shows that the most important sources of information about Abgeordnetenwatch for first-time contacters are other websites. This suggests that they have been looking for politically relevant content online, i.e. they had a prior interest in political issues which eventually led them to the platform. The same is likely to be true for the media which are another important referrer for first timers and with 29% the most important source of information for all users of the site. Use of the site always requires citizens to identify a need to contact in the first place. For more than a third of first-time contacters this need was satisfied with a suggestion by a search engine or by a personal recommendation, which might or might not have been in relation to other forms of political involvement.

Figure 19 How people who have never before contacted a representative find out about Abgeordnetenwatch (2010/11)



Source: Abgeordnetenwatch user survey 2010/11 (N=241)

Notes: Only those users of Abgeordnetenwatch who contacted an MP.

Strong contribution to popular control

Summarising the findings on popular control, I demonstrated that Abgeordnetenwatch can indeed bring new people into contacting: four out of ten users of Abgeordnetenwatch have never before contacted a representative and this rate is significantly higher than for other forms of contacting. What is more, while the majority of those first-time contacters are already active in other forms of participation, they are significantly less often organised in political groups. Given that these are traditionally less likely to engage in contacting, it can be assumed that many of those have been genuinely mobilised by the platform. Given that two-thirds of first-time contacters are in their middle age (45+ years) or well past it, they could have been engaged in contacting before but apparently they required a site such as Abgeordnetenwatch to do it. Altogether, this constitutes a strong contribution to popular control.

This is also illustrated by the following comments from users who have never before contacted a representative. They show that Abgeordnetenwatch contributes to more popular control also beyond contacting as the positive experiences of this particular form of participation encourage users to further political participation and increase their feeling of political efficacy:

'Abgeordnetenwatch is a means to give citizens an understanding of politics and to prevent disenchantment with politics' (AW16)

'By enabling a direct dialogue with the representatives Abgeordnetenwatch creates a sense that ordinary citizens can also directly influence politics.' (AW272)

'Simply having direct access to politicians who can otherwise not simply be confronted with a question is already extraordinary. That [name of representative] then apparently takes the time to actually answer the question is a real gift and creates a desire for more real participation.' (AW763)

Abgeordnetenwatch attracts a group of people that is not just simply the same people who have always engaged in contacting, as many of them have not done it before and many are not organised in political groups. However, the question is whether its users – and in particular those contacting for the first time – also differ from other contacters in terms of their socio-economic characteristics and in such ways as to contribute to more political equality in contacting. This is the focus of the next section.

6.3 Measuring the contribution to political equality

In order for Abgeordnetenwatch to increase political equality, the requirement would be that those who use the platform – and in particular those who are activated by the platform – to engage in contacting do not represent the average contacter, i.e. do not only consist of well-educated, middle-aged men with a high income. The previous chapter has illustrated that with the exception of attracting more young people, online

contacting as such has even exhibited greater biases from the population than traditional forms of getting in touch. Can Abgeordnetenwatch with its features as a contact facilitation platform change this pattern of participation? To establish this it is necessary to compare the profile of users of the platform with those who use other means of getting in touch.

The profile of Abgeordnetenwatch users

By definition the data on online contacters from the POC data includes also people who use Abgeordnetenwatch. Nevertheless, a comparison of the online survey data on Abgeordnetenwatch with the POC data is still viable because the vast majority of online contacters do not use Abgeordnetenwatch but rely on other online means. Even in 2009 when Abgeordnetenwatch experienced a record usage, the number of all people who used the platform in that year still accounted for less than 0.5% of all people who engaged in online contacting³⁵.

As has been the case in the UK, while the data collected from the contact facilitation platform relates specifically to users who have contacted MPs, the comparative population data describes the profile of people who have not only contacted MPs but more generally *people in a political role*. However, the data from the ESS (as illustrated in Figure 29 in Chapter 8) shows that the profile of those who contacted specifically MPs is broadly reflected in the profile of those who engage in contacting more widely.

³⁵ Based on an assumed German population aged 16+ of 70m (see Appendix F), 5.7% of the population who had engaged in contacting using online means based on POC 2009 data (i.e. almost 4m people) and a total number of unique users across the whole Abgeordnetenwatch platform of 15,411 people in 2009 (Hanneforth and Hekele, 2011).

Figure 20 reports the profile of Abgeordnetenwatch users who have contacted an MP as orange bars and compares it to the profile of all who have engaged in contacting (dark grey bars) as well as differentiated between those who have done so exclusively using offline means (light grey) and those who have used online (and offline) means (blue), according to the data from the POC study.

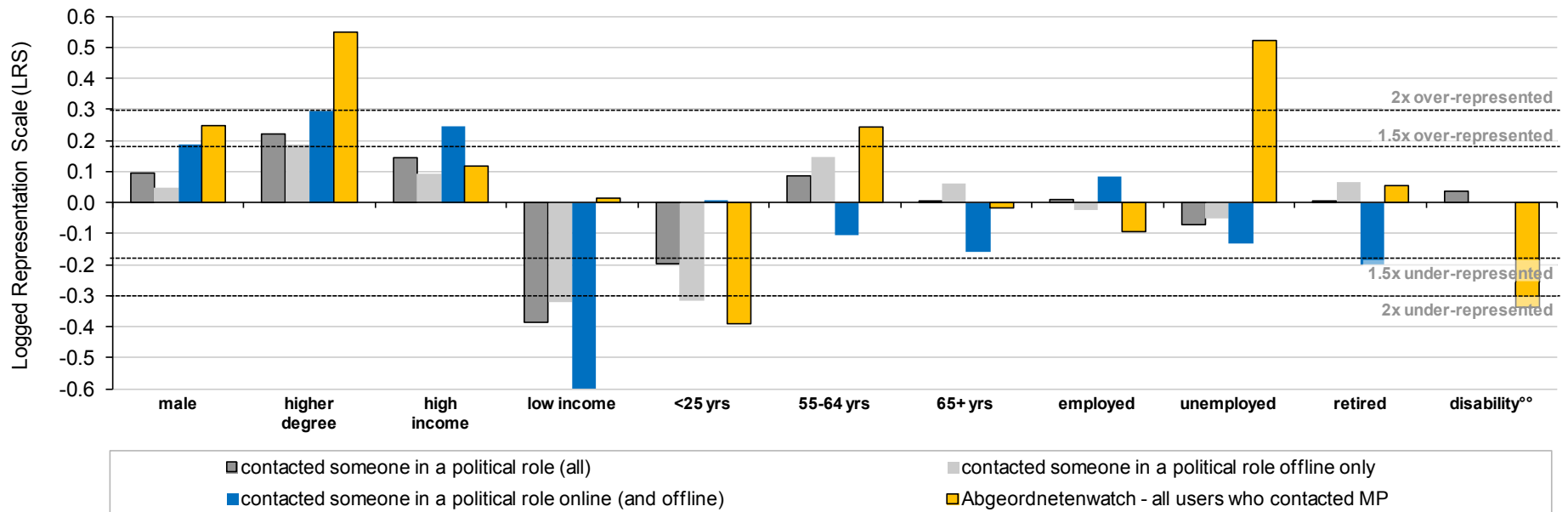
How do Abgeordnetenwatch users compare to those who use only traditional means such as letters or phone calls to get in touch with someone in a political role? While users of the site exhibit a stronger bias towards men and in particular people with a university degree, they share a number of biases in relation to higher income groups, age and retired people. Also, in relation to those from low income backgrounds, Abgeordnetenwatch users are much more representative of the population and its large bias towards unemployed people can be considered a positive contribution, given that these are usually under-represented when it comes to contacting. So compared to offline contacting, Abgeordnetenwatch contributes to the better representation of some low-resource groups of the population.

This is all the more surprising as those who use the Internet for contacting would usually tend to favour those rich in resources much more than traditional contacters as the previous chapter has discussed in detail. But Abgeordnetenwatch users differ significantly from other online contacters on almost any characteristic. However, these differences cannot all be considered positive: instead the pattern is mixed, exhibiting both positive as well as negative contributions to political equality. Positive from this perspective is that users of Abgeordnetenwatch much better represent people from lower incomes as well as higher incomes, therefore diminishing the bias towards those rich in financial resources inherent in online contacting. This is also

true for the increased representation of unemployed (instead of employed or self-employed) and retired people.

At the same time the biases towards men and in particular educated people are severely extended by Abgeordnetenwatch. For example, almost three out of five Abgeordnetenwatch users have a university degree which is 3.5 times as many as in the population and still almost twice as many as the bias reported for those engaging in online contacting in general. What is more, the only positive contribution of the Internet for contacting, i.e. that it would engage younger people, is completely lost on the Abgeordnetenwatch users whose age structure resembles much more closely that of traditional contacters. Under-represented amongst Abgeordnetenwatch users are also those citizens who have a disability and who are not normally excluded from participation in contacting.

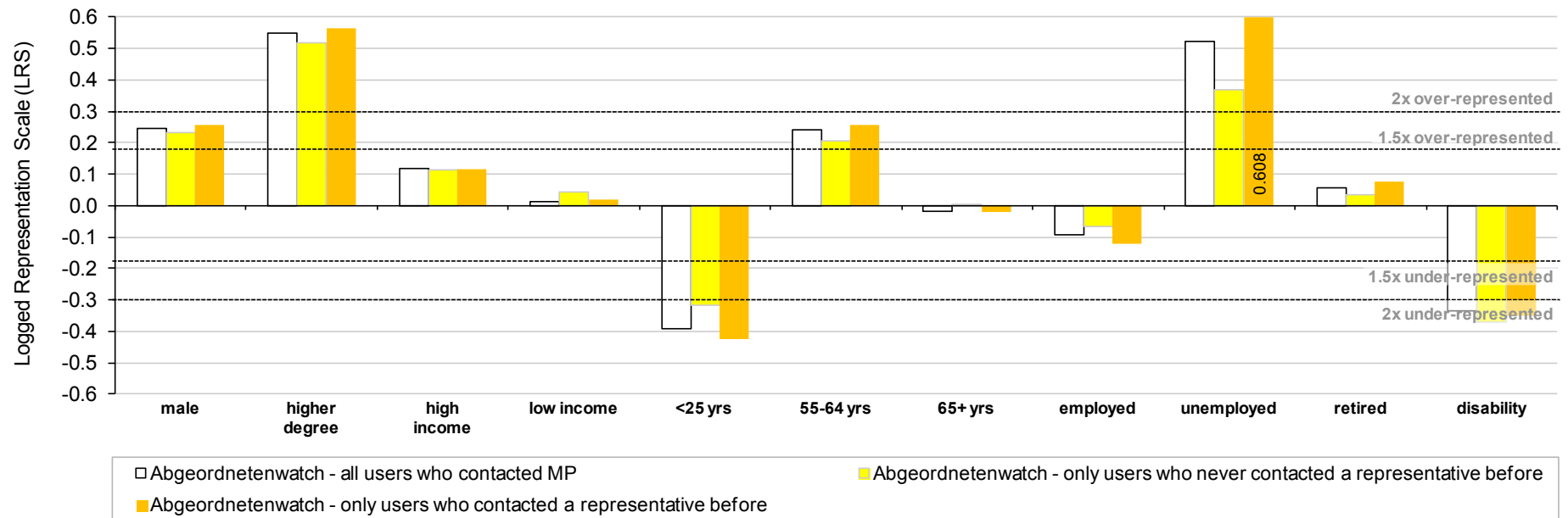
Figure 20 Socio-economic biases of Abgeordnetenwatch users who contacted an MP: comparison to people who contacted via other means, Germany (2008, 2010/11)



Source: POC 2008, (N=1,199; N – contacted someone in a political role=237; N – contacted offline only=167; N – contacted online=70); Abgeordnetenwatch user survey 2010/11 (N=668)

Notes: Baseline of this comparison is the German population aged 16 years and older, except ^{oo} as these measures were not provided from the POC data, the population data is derived from ESS 2008 based on population aged 15 years and older; for this data no information available on means of contact used. Refer to Table 28 for definition of variables.

Figure 21 Socio-economic biases of Abgeordnetenwatch users who contacted an MP:
differences between those who have never contacted a representative before and other users, Germany (2010/11)



Source: POC 2008 (N=1,199); Abgeordnetenwatch user survey 2010/11 (N=668; N – first-time contacters=272; N – contacted representative before=374)

Notes: Baseline of this comparison is the German population aged 16 years and older. Only those Abgeordnetenwatch users who have contacted an MP. Refer to Table 28 for definition of variables.

Summarizing these findings, is it possible to think of Abgeordnetenwatch as contributing to more political equality in contacting? I argue that on balance, the answer is no and that overall it even acts to decrease political equality. The reason for this is that it severely extends the over-representation of those with a university degree as well as of men, even though these are already significantly more likely to engage in contacting. Furthermore, it fails to engage young people even though this is the group that seems to be the one most easily reached via the Internet. Altogether this makes participation in contacting not more but less equal. This is not to say that the contact facilitation platform cannot be used at all to address some biases in contacting. For example, it is very successful in offering people with low incomes and without a job a way to get in touch with their MP. However, this does not mitigate those biases that are severely extended through Abgeordnetenwatch.

Differences between experienced and first-time contacters

Overall Abgeordnetenwatch attracts in particular those groups of the population who have always been engaged in contacting, that is, in particular well educated men in their middle ages. But what about those first-time contacters who were mobilised to engage in contacting through the platform? Do these offer a less biased profile so that Abgeordnetenwatch could be considered to mobilise so far under-represented groups of the population to contacting, even though overall its users are recruited from those parts of the population who are already over-represented in this form of participation?

Figure 21 compares those users of Abgeordnetenwatch who have never before contacted any kind of representative in yellow bars, to those who have been in touch with representatives before, visualised as orange bars. While there are a few variations

in the profiles, none of the differences in socio-economic characteristics is significant. Above all this implies that not only is Abgeordnetenwatch a platform used primarily by middle-aged men with high education, the platform is even mobilising more people from exactly these backgrounds. The only significant and positive difference in profile exists in relation to prior political activity and engagement in political groups where first-time contacters are less active than the rest of users – as was discussed in the previous section on popular control.

Positive and negative effects on political equality

Summarising, the positive contribution of Abgeordnetenwatch is to reduce the income biases that are particularly noticeable for online contacting. Even though the unemployed are now strongly over-represented and the (self-)employed under-represented, this can be considered a positive contribution given that this somewhat counters the bias towards resource-rich segments of the population. Also, Abgeordnetenwatch users have been shown to be less engaged in political groups. However, these positive contributions need to be weighed against the major biases towards men, university graduates and in particular middle-aged people together with the lack of engagement of the young. This is all the more notable as it exacerbates biases for gender and university graduates on which online contacters are already in severe violation of principles of political equality.

Those people who become activated for contacting through the platform (i.e. first-time contacters) are less politically active and organised, but they belong to the same group of people as the experienced contacters on Abgeordnetenwatch. In this way the platform further adds to political *inequality* by recruiting additional people into contacting that are already over-represented in this form of participation.

Conclusion

Reviewing the discussion of this chapter, it has clearly been shown that the contact facilitation platform Abgeordnetenwatch increases popular control by mobilising people to get engaged in contacting who have not done so before. It does so much more successfully than other forms of contacting and overall more than 40% of its users can be considered first-time contacters. At the same time, the people using the platform are very often men with a university degree and as such significantly extend those biases which are already inherent in other forms of contacting both via offline as well as online means. Atypical for a form of online contacting, the platform also fails to engage young people. While it can claim a contribution in reaching out to people with low incomes and in unemployment, on balance the platform does not contribute to more but less political equality. In fact, the very success of Abgeordnetenwatch in mobilising new people to contacting and hence increasing popular control results in a particularly negative impact on political equality because the people it mobilises come by and large from the already over-represented parts of the population – even though they are less often active in political groups.

Summary of German findings

The findings of Chapter 5 and 6 have analysed the role of the Internet for contacting representatives in Germany and as such provide answers to Research Questions 1 and 2. It has been shown that through the opportunities for getting in touch with politicians that are offered by the Internet, new people become engaged in contacting that have not done so before. But this does not come naturally with online forms of contacting but requires particular online tools, as only the contact facilitation

platform Abgeordnetenwatch could mobilise a significant number of people to become active in getting in touch with representatives.

However, the people that are becoming engaged in contacting through Abgeordnetenwatch are mostly highly educated men but few young people and as such the platform does not increase but in fact decreases political equality. This is also not outweighed by the stronger participation of low-income and unemployed people. In contrast, use of the Internet for contacting as such neither decreases nor increases political equality. While it exhibits a stronger bias towards men and resource-rich people, this is mainly the result of those people who have been engaged in contacting before who are now using online means too. The Internet attracts more young people to this particular form of participation, but given the low rates of mobilisation this fails to impact on the profile of the average contactor, i.e. regardless of the means of contacting used, which has changed little since the Internet has started to become widely available.

The last four chapters have discussed in detail in what ways use of the Internet and in particular contact facilitation platforms for contacting representatives has contributed (or not) to popular control and political equality, for the UK and Germany respectively. It is now time to bring the findings together and turn to Research Question 3 in order to highlight similarities and differences in the role of the Internet for contacting in those two countries.

Chapter 7 Contacting online in the UK and Germany: a comparison

The UK and Germany are two liberal democracies that share similar rates of political participation, engagement in contacting representatives, and Internet penetration. And yet, as I show in this chapter, the ways in which use of the Internet and contacting platforms shape patterns of engagement in contacting differ between the two countries.

This chapter focuses on Research Question 3 and on *the similarities and differences in contacting patterns between Germany and the UK in use of the Internet for contacting political representatives*. The emphasis is on tracing out where the patterns of engagement in contacting between the countries match, and conversely where they differ and to what extent they do so. The analysis presented here prepares the ground for answering Research Question 4 (which is the focus of the next chapter) because it helps to discern whether the contacting patterns are shaped by characteristics specific to the country or the actual technical application, or by more universal processes of political participation or technologically-mediated communication.

This chapter begins by laying out the methodological approach to the comparison of the two countries and by summarising the main indicators for the analysis. This is followed by the first comparison which focuses on use of the Internet for contacting in relation to offline modes of contacting. Subsequently the comparison of WriteToThem and Abgeordnetenwatch starts by highlighting the shared characteristics as well as differences between these contact facilitation platforms, before their contributions to popular control and political equality are assessed, once

in comparison to use of offline modes of contacting, and once in relation to use of the Internet for contacting.

7.1 Comparing the UK and Germany: approach and summary of results

When a common dataset is lacking, the task of comparing two countries is not trivial. Therefore this section explains the approach of this research to comparing the two countries in some detail. At the end of this discussion the main indicators for the comparisons are summarised as a reference for the more detailed discussion in the subsequent sections.

7.1.1 Methodological approach of comparison

Problems of comparing countries

Ideally, a comparison of different countries can draw upon survey data that was collected during the same timeframe and applied matching definitions of the survey population, the sampling frame, the sampling procedure and the weighting. Most importantly, it should use questions that are understood by all respondents in the same way. However, rarely does social science research encounter such ideal situations. Only the data of the ESS comes close to this but it is of limited value for the purpose of this research as it lacks information on use of the Internet for contacting representatives.

Therefore I need to rely mainly on the country-specific data available through the OxIS and POC surveys. However, to start with these do not share the same definition of contacting. OxIS asks about contacting a *'politician, government or local government official'* while POC enquires more broadly about contacting *'someone in a*

political role'. Moreover, the OxIS data was collected in 2009 while the POC data analysed in this research derives mainly from 2008. These are just some of the challenges for the comparability of the two datasets. On top of this I rely on data from the two surveys of contact facilitation platforms which introduce additional variation. These challenges signal that a comparison requires special care and the main strategy applied in this research is to rely strictly on relative measures as I discuss below.

Comparing relative differences between countries

The research questions are concerned with the contribution of the Internet or contact facilitation platforms in contrast to other means of contacting. Therefore, I compare the relative difference between the profile of online contacters and the profile of offline contacters. This is because this research is interested in comparing the effect of the Internet (or contact facilitation platforms for that matter) on existing contacting patterns and not on contacting overall. In other words, regardless of the current level of bias in offline contacting, what difference does use of the Internet make to these existing patterns?

This can be illustrated with the following example: assume that the share of men in the population is 50% in both countries but that in the UK only 40% of traditional contacters are male while in Germany men constitute 60% of traditional contacters. Further assume that amongst online contacters in the UK 60% are men and in Germany 90%. Measuring the bias of online contacters from the population would result in an LRS of 0.079 for the UK and 0.255 for Germany. This suggests that the Internet has a more negative impact on the profile of contacters in Germany than it has in the UK. However, the effect of the Internet on existing contacting patterns is

actually the same in both countries, namely it increases engagement of men by a factor of 1.5 (LRS 0.176). The differences in the profile of online contacters in both countries are not associated with the Internet but instead with the underlying patterns of engagement in contacting which are different in the two countries.

This reliance on relative measures has the added benefit that it reduces any potential impact that the somewhat different definitions of contacting in the underlying population data might have – or indeed any differences among the country-specific data in the definitions of individual characteristics such as education or income. By comparing only the difference between the profile of online contacters and the profile of offline contacters as measured by an LRS score, what is compared is the relative difference between online and offline but based on the same definition of contacting.

The same strategy is followed for contact facilitation platforms in that it compares the relative differences that contact facilitation platforms make respectively to offline and online contacting. Nevertheless, such a comparison must content itself with tracing out the broader trends because the nature of the data is such that smaller variations could be related to a difference in the survey methodology or the approach of the comparison. With these strategies I can embark on finding similarities and differences between the two countries in the contribution that the Internet and online contact platforms in particular make to contacting representatives. The next section provides an overview about the results of this comparison which are discussed in more detail in the subsequent sections.

7.1.2 Summary of main indicators for comparison

To aid accessibility, the following section provides a comprehensive overview of the measures on which the individual comparisons discussed in the subsequent sections of this chapter are based.

Indicators of popular control

Throughout this research the extent of popular control has been measured in two main ways: first, as the share of people who engage in this particular form of participation as well as the share of those who are mobilised to engage, and second, as the extent to which those who are and those who just become engaged are genuinely new to politics rather than being already politically involved, i.e. being politically active beyond contacting or organised in political groups. Table 20 provides a summary of these measures in various contexts.

Table 20 Findings on popular control in comparison between the UK and Germany

contacting in general	UK	Germany
annual rate of contacting politicians or (local) government officials (ESS 2008) <i>- number of people (15+yrs.)</i>	17% <i>~8.3m</i>	16% <i>~11.3m</i>
development of annual rates of engagement in contacting 2001-2009	rise of ~1-2%	mostly stable
annual share of first-time contacters	2-18% <i>(estimate)</i>	< 20% <i>(approximation)</i>
political engagement beyond contacting	above average (2.4x)	above average (1.5x)
active engagement in political groups	above average (2.9x)	above average (3x)

(Table continued)

Table 20 continued

online contacting	UK	Germany
percentage of population engaged in online contacting in the last year <i>- number of people</i>	6% (as of 2009) ~3.0m (14+yrs.)	6% (as of 2008) ~4.1m (16+yrs.)
percentage of annual contacters that used online means <i>of those, what share did so exclusively</i>	50% 61%	27-30% ^{a)} 22-26% ^{a)}
political engagement beyond contacting active engagement in pol. groups	above average (2x) above average (3x)	above average (1.5x) above average (4x)
contact facilitation platforms	WriteToThem	Abgeordnetenwatch
number of annual users who contacted MP <i>- share of population 15+ years</i>	2008: 80,134 2009: 105,463 2010: 84,520 2008: 0.16% 2009: 0.21% 2010: 0.17%	8,014 8,235 4,452 0.011% 0.012% 0.006%
annual users who contacted MP as share of annual contacters (2009) annual users who contacted MP as share of all annual <i>online</i> contacters share of people using the platform who never contacted representative before	~1.3% ^{b)} ~3.5% (2009) 56%	~0.07% ^{b)} ~0.2% (2008) 42%
political engagement beyond use of the site <i>first-time users only</i>	above average (1.2x) below avg. contacter (-1.9x) <i>under average (-1.4x)</i> below avg. contacter (-3.3x)	above average (1.6x) same level as avg. contacter <i>above average (1.4x)</i> same level as avg. contacter
active engagement in pol. groups <i>first-time users only</i>	above average (1.4x) below avg. contacter (-2.1x) <i>under average (-1.5x)</i> below avg. contacter (-4.3x)	above average (2.4x) below avg. contacter (-1.3x) <i>above average (1.8x)</i> below avg. contacter (-1.7x)

Source: UK: OxIS 2009; mySociety user survey 2009/10; ESS 2008; Germany: POC 2008; Abgeordnetenwatch user survey 2010/11; ESS 2008

Notes: Engagement in political participation and in political groups is compared to respective rates of engagement in population (i.e. average). 'average contacter' refers to profile of people who contacted in the past year, regardless of means used. The calculations of the actual number of people are based on estimates of the size of the population in the UK and Germany reported in Table 33 and Table 36 respectively.

^{a)} Range is based on POC data from 2008 (which is of better quality and therefore used throughout this research) and 2009 (which corresponds to the timeframe of the O×IS data). ^{b)} Note that this calculation takes as its base the overall contacting figures from the ESS as reported in the first row of the table as these are directly comparable in contrast to the country-specific datasets O×IS and POC.

Indicators for political equality

The similarities and differences between the UK and Germany in relation to political equality are summarised in Table 21 below. It is based on twelve politically relevant characteristics, including those for political involvement but omitting the characteristic ‘disability’ which was not consistently available across all datasets. To aid analysis the table makes use of a scheme that highlights on the left hand side of the table those biases from the respective population that are significant. Based on these the actual similarities and differences between the countries are reported on the right hand side of the table according to the following considerations:

- If an LRS score does not become significant in either of the two countries then they share a common pattern, in this case a lack of a bias and hence offer a good representation of this characteristic.
- If an LRS score is only significant in one country then it follows that the countries differ and one country is biased in this characteristic.
- If an LRS score is significant in both countries, the extent of the bias is compared by calculating the difference of the LRS scores between the countries which yields another LRS score. Given that the comparison relies on population data that is not completely standardised between the countries, LRS differences larger than 0.1 are interpreted which translate into a minimum difference of at least factor 1.25. If the difference between the countries is less than that, they share a pattern, in this case a similar bias on this characteristic. If the extent of the bias is larger than 0.1 then the bias is stronger in one country compared to the other, or the deviations might actually point in different directions.

Table 21 Findings on political equality in comparison between the UK and Germany

bias of online contacters from offline-only contacters			
UK	Germany	similar bias	different bias
male*	male**		
education**	education	<i>no significant bias</i>	<i>only UK bias</i>
high income**	high income**	25yrs.	education (1.7)
low income**	low income ^{a)}	55-64yrs.	low income (-2.8)
<25yrs.	<25yrs. ^{a)}	unemployed	65+yrs. (-1.9)
55-64yrs.	55-64yrs.	pol. part	<i>only German bias</i>
65+yrs*	65+yrs.		pol. groups (1.5)
employed*	employed*	<i>bias for</i>	<i>both countries biased but extent differs</i>
unemployed	unemployed ^{a)}	male (~1.35)	high income:
retired*	retired*	employed (~1.35)	UK (2) vs. Germany (1.4): 1.4
pol. part.	pol. part.	retired (~-1.75)	
pol. groups	pol. groups**		
bias of contact facilitation platform users from offline-only contacters			
UK	Germany	similar bias	different bias
male(*)	male**		<i>only UK bias</i>
education**	education**		high income (1.9)
high income**	high income		65+yrs. (-1.9)
low income*	low income**		retired (-1.6)
<25yrs.	<25yrs.		pol. part. (-1.8)
55-64yrs.	55-64yrs.	<i>no significant bias</i>	pol. groups (-1.9)
65+yrs.**	65+yrs.	<25yrs.	<i>only German bias</i>
employed**	employed(*)	55-64yrs.	unemployed (3.7)
unemployed	unemployed*		<i>both countries biased but extent differs</i>
retired**	retired	<i>bias for</i>	male:
pol. part.**	pol. part.	-	UK (1.2) vs. Germany (1.6): 1.4
pol. groups**	pol. groups		education:
			UK (1.7) vs. Germany (2.3): 1.3
			low income:
			UK (-1.5) vs. Germany (2.2): 3.3
			employed:
			UK (1.4) vs. Germany (-1.2): 1.7

(Table continued)

Table 21 continued

bias of contact facilitation platform users from online contacters			
UK	Germany	similar bias	different bias
male(*)	male*		<i>only UK bias</i>
education	education**		pol. part. (-2.0)
high income	high income**		<i>only German bias</i>
low income(*)	low income**		education (1.8)
<25yrs.**	<25yrs.* a)		high income (-1.3)
55-64yrs.*	55-64yrs.*	<i>no significant bias</i>	employed (-1.5)
65+yrs.	65+yrs.	65+yrs.	retired (1.8)
employed	employed**	unemployed ^{b)}	<i>both countries biased but extent differs</i>
unemployed ^{b)}	unemployed ^{b)}		male:
retired	retired*	<i>bias for</i>	UK (-1.1) vs. Germany (1.1): 1.3
pol. part.**	pol. part.	<25yrs. (-2.5)	low income:
pol. groups**	pol. groups**		UK (1.9) vs. Germany (4.1): 2.2
			55-64yrs.:
			UK (1.7) vs. Germany (2.2): 1.3
			pol. groups:
			UK (-2.4) vs. Germany (-1.7): 1.4

Source: UK: OxIS 2009; mySociety user survey 2009/10; Germany: POC 2008; Abgeordnetenwatch user survey 2010/11

Notes: Numbers in brackets denote the factor by which this characteristic is over-represented (positive numbers) or under-represented (negative numbers) as compared to respective population. When both countries exhibit a bias, the comparison reports factor by which bias (measured as factor based on LRS) in Germany differs from bias in UK. Significance based on χ^2 -tests (applying Yates correction for continuity) and indicated by ** $p \leq 0.01$; * $p \leq 0.05$; (*) $p \leq 0.1$. Occupational variables in the UK exclude the category 'sick/disabled' to match definition of German data. The characteristic 'employed' includes self-employed. Political participation excludes contacting a politician, government or local government official, someone in a political role or using WriteToThem or Abgeordnetenwatch respectively. Refer to Table 25 and Table 28 for definition of variables.

^{a)} Expected case numbers of less than 5 hence χ^2 -tests are not applicable; if significance is provided this is based on Fisher's exact test. ^{b)} Both contact facilitation platforms exhibit a bias towards unemployed users, but because of the low number of unemployed people who use the Internet in general for contacting, these do not get significant.

Feature and usage comparison of contact facilitation platforms

Table 22 compares the main features and key usage indicators of WriteToThem and Abgeordnetenwatch which inform the discussion in the last section of this chapter.

Table 22 A comparison of WriteToThem and Abgeordnetenwatch

	WriteToThem	Abgeordnetenwatch
year of inception	2005 <i>(since 2000 as FaxYourMP.com)</i>	2004 <i>(since 2006 covering national MPs)</i>
operator	mySociety	Parlamentwatch GmbH
objective	non-profit	non-profit
assemblies whose representatives can be contacted via the platform	European Parliament House of Commons House of Lords regional assemblies local and district councils <i>(all)</i>	European Parliament Bundestag state parliaments <i>(8 out of 16)</i> city councils <i>(only a few)</i> <i>(candidates in national and state election campaigns)</i>
annual costs (2010)	£8,400	€214,000 (~£185,000)
<i>implementation</i>		
type of communication	private	public
moderation	no	yes
intended use case	contact constituency representative	question to any representative
other functionality	no (indirectly via link to partner site TheyWorkForYou.com)	information on representatives and voting record
<i>usage</i>		
number of visits to website (in thousands)	2009: 800 2010: 682	4,130 2,240
number of users who contacted MP	2009: 84,520 2010: 105,463	8,235 4,452
how users find out about the platform: share of all survey respondents	search engine: 39% another website: 34% personal recommendation: 13% media: 4%	media: 29% another website: 24% search engine: 21% personal recommendation: 17%
number of messages sent to MPs (average number of messages per MP)	2009: 124,051 (191) 2010: 99,697 (153)	14,781 (24) 8,712 (14)
share of messages which were answered by MPs (excl. standard replies)	2009: 61% 2010: 56%	83% 75%

(Table continued)

Table 22 continued

	WriteToThem	Abgeordnetenwatch
top 3 most popular topic categories: share of all survey respondents	democracy & civil rights: 23% economy & finance: 10% health: 10%	democracy & civil rights: 24% economy & finance: 14% welfare: 11%
reason to contact representative		
concern of message to representative		
<i>feedback</i>		
share of users very likely to recommend site ^{a)}	71%	68%
of those receiving a reply:		
- satisfied with reply	80%	35%
- intending to reply	41%	63%

Source: Abgeordnetenwatch user survey 2010/11; Escher (2011), Hanneforth et al. (2011); mySociety user survey 2009/10; WriteToThem database records

Notes: ^{a)} 'How likely is it that you would recommend this site to a friend or colleague? (assuming they would be interested in such a service)' and those choosing 8, 9 or 10 on an eleven point scale from 0 = not at all likely to 10 = extremely likely

The indicators presented above are used in the subsequent sections to assess in which ways the Internet has shaped the number and profile of people who contact

representatives in the same or in a different manner in the two countries. Use of contact facilitation platforms is assessed separately from use of the Internet in general for contacting which is the focus of the next section.

7.2 The contribution of online contacting in comparison

This section focuses on how through use of the Internet for contacting – i.e. regardless of any specific applications such as contact facilitation platforms that I discuss later – the patterns of engagement in contacting have changed in the two countries. I start with a comparison of how it has contributed to popular control, before the profile of online contacters and its implications for political equality are discussed.

7.2.1 Consequences of online contacting for popular control

The first concern of this research has been whether or not use of the Internet will increase the number of people who take part in this particular form of participation. To this end I have analysed how rates of engagement in contacting have developed since the widespread diffusion of the Internet began.

Rates of contacting online and offline

The first overarching finding for both countries is that the Internet has certainly not led to a decline in engagement in respect to this particular form of participation. The most reliable comparative data from the ESS put the annual rates of contacting in 2009 to 16% in Germany and 17% in the UK which represents no significant decline compared to the early 2000s. Instead, based on the country-specific data from OxIS and POC I have argued that in the UK in the first decade of the 21st century, engagement in contacting of MPs or local councillors has risen by about one to two

percent while in contrast in Germany annual engagement in contacting someone in a political role has stayed constant.

This data also shows that in the UK in 2009, half of all people who have been engaged in contacting in the last year have used online means (some in combination with offline means) to get in touch with politicians or government officials. In contrast, in Germany at most 30% of all those who have contacted in the last year have done so online. So clearly, use of the Internet for contacting is much more popular in the UK than in Germany.

Furthermore, in Germany the majority of those contacting online do so in combination with offline means: in 2008 and 2009 only about a quarter of online contacters used only the Internet to get in touch. In contrast, in the UK it is exactly the opposite with the majority relying exclusively on the Internet (61%). The main reason for this is that in Germany those who take up online contacting are primarily people who are already involved in contacting via traditional means: in 2008 three out of ten so-far offline contacters (but with Internet access) now use online means. For the vast majority of those (more than 80%) offline channels are not replaced by online means but instead offer an additional way to get in touch with representatives. For the UK, due to the lack of panel data it is harder to come to conclusions about the choices of traditional contacters. However, the much larger share of 'online-only' users could be an indication that it includes more people who have so far not been engaged in contacting at all.

Increasing the number of people engaged in contacting

Does the Internet engage people to contact representatives who have not done so before? The short answer is yes. For Germany, based on panel data it can be shown

that amongst all those who had not been in touch with someone in a political role before (defined as not having contacted in the two years prior), there is a significant share that has 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. In the UK the available data makes it more complex to answer this question but also in this case I find evidence that people engage in contacting who have not done so before: overall rates of contacting have gone up slightly and the most convincing explanation is the increasing take-up of online means for contacting.

Therefore it is difficult to argue that the Internet has not made any contribution at all to popular control, for one thing because I have shown that both in the UK (more tentatively) and Germany (more clearly) people get in touch with representatives online who have not been engaged in contacting before. Not least, this is clearly demonstrated by the contact facilitation platforms that I discuss in more detail below.

However, to significantly increase popular control I would expect these online contacters to add to the annual figures of engagement in this form of participation and hence to see an increase 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. Instead, the Internet has not substantially increased overall rates of contacting or it has just acted to mitigate a decline in offline 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, as the next subsection shows, in both countries online contacting has not made a positive contribution to political equality.

7.2.2 Consequences of online contacting for political equality

The second main concern of this thesis 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.

Figure 22 below shows the deviation of the profile of those who used online means for contacting from those who relied only on offline means. The deviations are large, but referring to the overview in Table 21 above makes clear that not all of the differences visible in the diagram are actually significant. Those biases that are not significant are displayed in shaded bars, and for the comparison between the countries only those differences are highlighted where both exhibit a significant bias which is also significantly different between the countries.

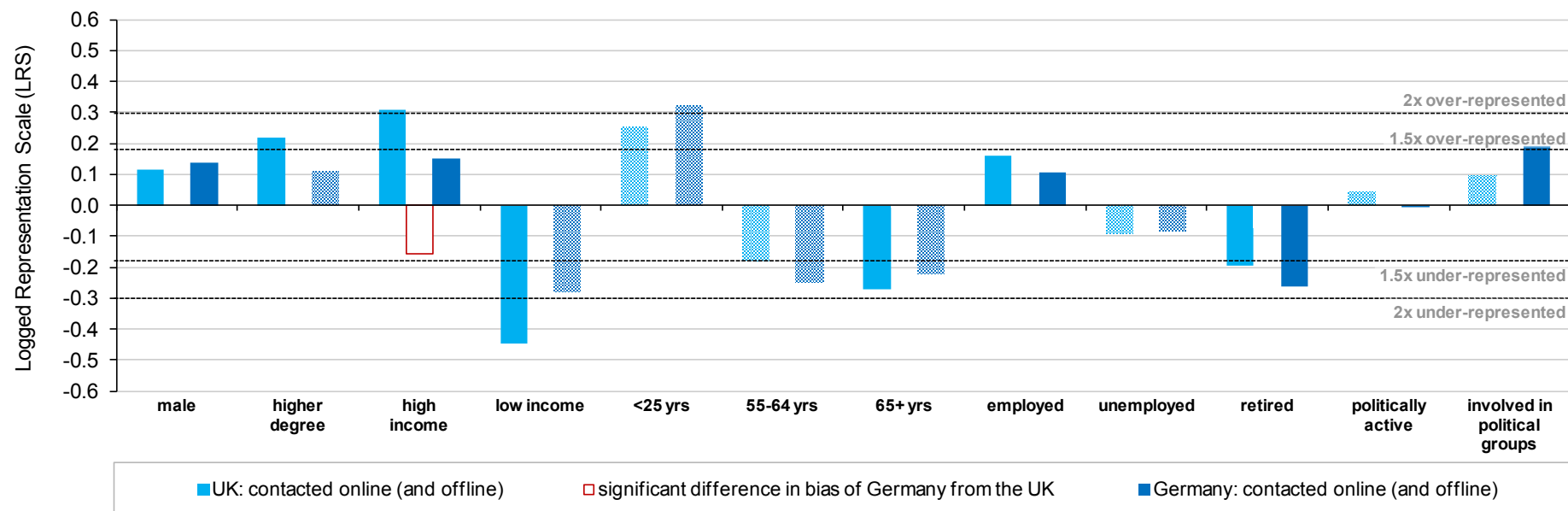
Both countries share patterns in respect to a number of characteristics. One important shared pattern is that the Internet does not significantly alter the engagement patterns of traditional contacting in relation to those 55-64 years old, the unemployed or the degree of other political engagement. This means that the Internet in both countries fails to make a positive contribution to greater political equality for these characteristics as compared to offline contacting and worse, 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. However, as I have discussed in the country-specific chapters, online contacters clearly are less biased against young people and also Figure 22 shows that online, more young people contact than offline. However, 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 contribution of the Internet for contacting – in comparison to offline contacting – is that it extends a number of existing biases or even introduces new ones. So in both countries online contacters are more often male and 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.

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.

**Figure 22 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 refer to Table 21. For variable definitions, refer to Table 25 for UK and Table 28 for Germany. Political participation excludes contacting politicians or someone in a political role.

Minor effects on popular control and political equality

Assessing the findings as a whole, it is clear that the Internet has not contributed to greater political equality in contacting. Instead, compared to traditional ways of contacting it has had a negative impact on political equality, in particular so in the UK. While this might imply that online contacting would then increase political inequality in contacting overall, I have argued that this is not the case. This is 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 contrast, the country-specific chapters have demonstrated that contact facilitation platforms had a more significant impact and these are compared in the next section.

7.3 The contribution of contact facilitation platforms in comparison

Whether or not the two contact facilitation platforms at the centre of this research make any difference to contacting patterns must be assessed in relation to patterns of *offline* contacting on the one hand and to patterns of *online* contacting on the other. I discuss these comparisons once with a focus on popular control and once with a focus on political equality. However, before I do so I compare the two platforms themselves in order to highlight where differences might lead us to expect differential effects.

7.3.1 WriteToThem and Abgeordnetenwatch: a comparison

Similarities and differences

While WriteToThem and Abgeordnetenwatch share the features of contact facilitation platforms, the platforms' distinct approaches to communication – where WriteToThem keeps all communication private between citizen and preferably their own representative, while Abgeordnetenwatch makes the whole conversation between a citizen and any representative publicly available on the site – results in marked differences in use of the site as summarised in Table 22.

One of them is the need for moderation on Abgeordnetenwatch which is one important reason that the site costs about twenty times more to operate than WriteToThem. Another consequence is that the German site records about five times as many visits as its British counterpart because it offers information on the site also for people who do not wish to get in touch with representatives. However, when it comes to actually contacting representatives it is the British site which has ten to twenty times as many people who get in touch with an MP than Abgeordnetenwatch, resulting in about ten times as many messages sent to MPs. In part this will be related to the public nature of Abgeordnetenwatch because some users will not need to get in touch with a representative if a similar question by someone else was already answered on the site. However, as far as contacting representatives goes, I assume that WriteToThem is indeed more popular than the German site.

I believe that another direct consequence of Abgeordnetenwatch's public approach is that it achieves a greater responsiveness of MPs, with four out of five questions receiving a substantive reply, while on WriteToThem this is only the case for three out of five messages. This is because the lack of responsiveness seems more

damaging for a representative's reputation on a public site, which increases the pressure to actually deal with citizens' queries. At the same time, this pressure is also increased by the deliberate publicity efforts of the organization behind Abgeordnetenwatch that runs a blog and actively maintains cooperation agreements with the media. These are another explanation of the higher costs of the site but they are also successful in getting users to the site as media mentions are the most important way via which users come to the site. In contrast, this avenue of approach is negligible for WriteToThem, not least as active PR for the site is pretty much non-existent. Therefore search engines are twice as important for the British site as for the German one.

The different approaches to enabling communication between citizens and representatives have also a more indirect effect, namely on the motivation with which citizens use these contact facilitation platforms as I discuss below.

Distinguishing personal from collective motives

Previous research has considered motives of contacters primarily from a perspective of whether they can be deemed personal or 'political' – a notion which I have criticised in Chapter 2 – but it has usually been rather unspecific about how to distinguish personal from what we might call more collective motives. Therefore I propose to consider motivations along two dimensions, namely the function (or reason) for getting in touch as well as to whom the contact is relevant. Specifically I combine Cain et al.'s (1987: 52) measure of the reason for a contact, with a typology used by Verba et al. (1995: 549) which captures who is concerned by the issue communicated.

While it could be assumed that messages concerning just the contactor or her immediate family can be considered personal, expressing an opinion to a representative about for example an inadequate amount of childcare benefit could well constitute a collective motive. Conversely, those messages which deal with issues that affect all people in the nation or at least all people in the community could be considered collective. But if it is in the form of seeking help from the representative, for example to improve council housing, this could well constitute a personal motive. It is also not immediately obvious whether contacting a representative in order to obtain information – the dominant function of messages on Abgeordnetenwatch – should be considered personal or not. This becomes clearer only by using the additional information about who is concerned by the communication. Therefore measuring motivations in two dimensions is better suited to differentiate personal from collective motivations than using any single dimension.

The resulting matrix is schematically visualised in Figure 23 below. I consider *clearly collective motives* to be those that express an opinion that relates at least to all people in the community (marked in blue), while *clearly personal motives* are those that seek help on a problem that only affects the contactor or her family or others like them (marked in red). For the other cells in the matrix the motives are not unambiguously attributable so these are shaded and termed *rather collective* or *rather personal* motives. Finally, there are motives that are not attributable at all from the information available. This is the case for those who contact ‘for some other reason’ (WriteToThem: 13%, Abgeordnetenwatch: 18%). The user comments indicate that many of those do actually seem to fit into the other categories, for example Abgeordnetenwatch users named quite frequently ‘*getting to know the point of view of the representative*’ or helping to make a voting decision which could also have been

classified as seeking information. WriteToThem users highlighted a number of times *'getting the MP to do something'*, such as signing an Early Day Motion, arranging a visit at the House of Commons or attending an event. Similarly difficult to classify are the 10% of users on WriteToThem and 5% on Abgeordnetenwatch who contact about issues that do not affect them but only other people. While some users indicated they contacted on behalf of someone else, it seems that more often it is about other groups of people such as the Gurkha campaign in the UK mentioned in Chapter 4 or even animals and their rights.

Figure 23 Category scheme of motives for contacting political representatives

function of message	concern of message				
	<i>only contactor or family</i>	<i>contactor or family as well as others like them</i>	<i>all people in the community</i>	<i>all people in the nation or all people in the world</i>	<i>only other people but not contactor or family</i>
<i>seek help on problem affecting contactor</i>	clearly personal motives		rather collective motives		motivation unclear
<i>seek information</i>	rather personal motives		clearly collective motives		
<i>express an opinion</i>					
<i>for some other reason</i>	motivation unclear				

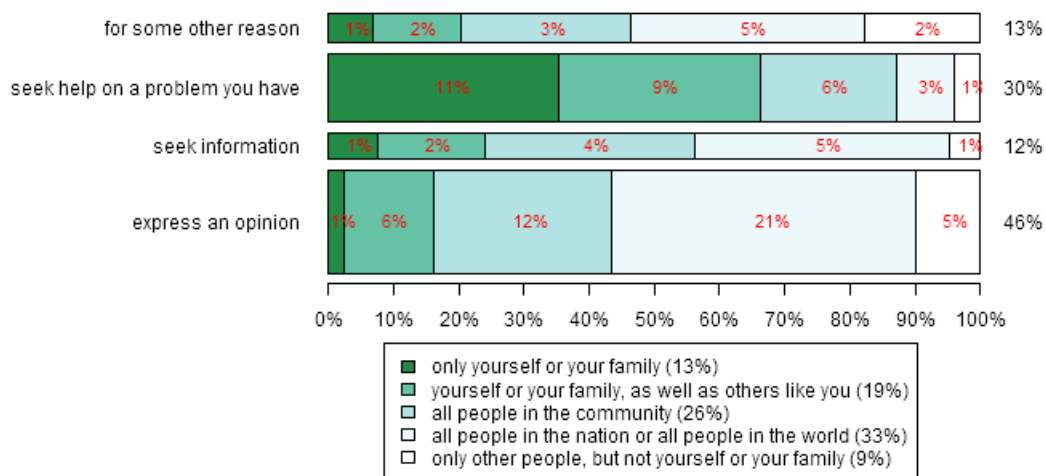
Notes: Function classification based on Cain et al. (1987: 52). Classification of concern (i.e. who is affected by the issue raised in the communication) based on Verba et al. (1995: 549)

Motives of contactors

Based on this two-dimensional scheme the motivations with which WriteToThem users contact are visualised in Figure 24, and those of Abgeordnetenwatch users in Figure 25. The figures highlight the differences in motivation between users of the sites. Clearly personal motives are very rare on Abgeordnetenwatch. No one is contacting with issues that just concern herself or her family and only 4% of contacts

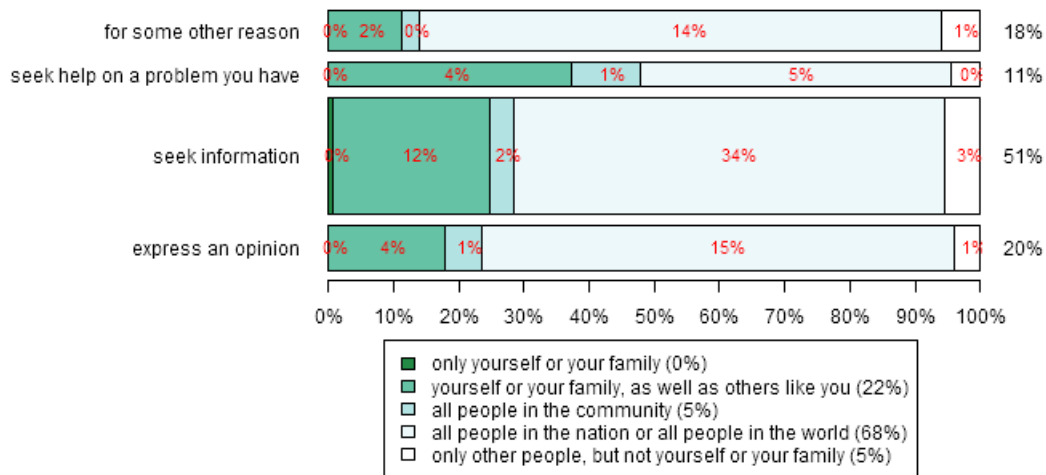
fall into this category while on WriteToThem it is the motive of 20% of all users. Apart from personal motives the British site is also used with clearly collective motives by a third of its users. In contrast, on Abgeordnetenwatch collective and rather collective motives dominate, but most of them are seeking information. That this is the most dominant function on Abgeordnetenwatch should not be surprising given that the site requires the format of a question for contacting representatives. Apparently seeking information overlaps with expressing an opinion, not least as these questions by Abgeordnetenwatch users probably often actually constitute comments on public policy by asking the MP why she did this or that – an assumption supported by interviews with Bavarian MPs who felt that many users on Abgeordnetenwatch were not interested in a dialogue but rather in voicing an opinion (Klötzer, 2011).

Figure 24 WriteToThem users: motives for contact (2009/10)



Source: mySociety user survey 2009/10 (N – answered questions about motives=2,457)

Notes: Quoted are percentages of total.

Figure 25 Abgeordnetenwatch users: motives for contact (2010/11)

Source: Abgeordnetenwatch user survey 2010/11 (N=636)

Notes: Quoted are percentages of total.

In sum, Abgeordnetenwatch is primarily used with motives that are rather or clearly of collective nature, while on WriteToThem a significant share of more than a third of users is coming to the site with motives that can be characterised as rather or clearly personal. I would argue that this goes back to the nature of the communication of the site: the public communication on Abgeordnetenwatch does not lend itself to putting forward personal issues in the same way as the private communication on WriteToThem.

I have highlighted that from these different approaches to communication derive also markedly different ways in which citizens use the site, yet both achieve the same high level of satisfaction of its users with more than two-thirds of them being very likely to recommend the site. Whether these different approaches also translate into different usage patterns is the focus of the next section.

7.3.2 Degree of mobilising citizens to engage in contacting

Contact facilitation platforms are a special form of online contacting and my analysis has shown that these platforms are able to contribute to popular control in ways the

Internet in general could not. More than half of the people who have used WriteToThem to contact an MP have never before contacted any kind of representative. The rate for Abgeordnetenwatch is slightly lower but still more than 40% of its users have only ever contacted a representative with the help of the platform. To put these figures in perspective, I have estimated 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, to be about 10-20% of all annual contacters. 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 share of first-timers that is four to five times as high as the 'normal' rate, while for Abgeordnetenwatch it is 'only' two to three times as much. 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.

The British site is also more heavily used to get in touch with MPs: about 0.2% of the population has been using the site in a given year, which is about 20 to 25 times more than for the German site. In addition, WriteToThem accounts for a small single-digit percentage of all those Britons engaged in contacting with the help of the Internet, while in contrast Abgeordnetenwatch can claim less than half a percentage on all German online contacters. All these shares are lower-bound estimates, because they

only consider usage of the sites for contacting MPs while the population includes contacts with all types of politicians and officials. Even though these calculations rely on somewhat differing definitions of contacting in the underlying population data, the sheer scale of the difference between the countries means it is beyond doubt that WriteToThem accounts for a larger share of all online contacters.

The overall greater positive contribution to popular control of the British WriteToThem becomes also clear when the political involvement of all of its users – not just first-time contacters – is compared to those using other modes of communication. Thus Abgeordnetenwatch does not significantly alter any of the strong biases of traditional contacters towards greater political participation and greater engagement in political groups. Only in relation to other online contacters does Abgeordnetenwatch reduce at least the bias towards those engaged in political groups. Conversely, both in relation to offline as well as online contacters WriteToThem reduces the bias of contacters towards engagement in politics and in political groups by a factor of about two.

In summary both contact facilitation platforms contribute to popular control because they engage people into this form of participation who have not done so before, and they do so at higher rates than other means of contacting. However, the British site contributes more to popular control not only because it has higher rates of activation but also because those people who are activated by the platform participate less in politics and political groups than is the case for Abgeordnetenwatch. However, this important contribution to popular control is not matched by a similarly positive contribution to political equality as I discuss in the next subsection.

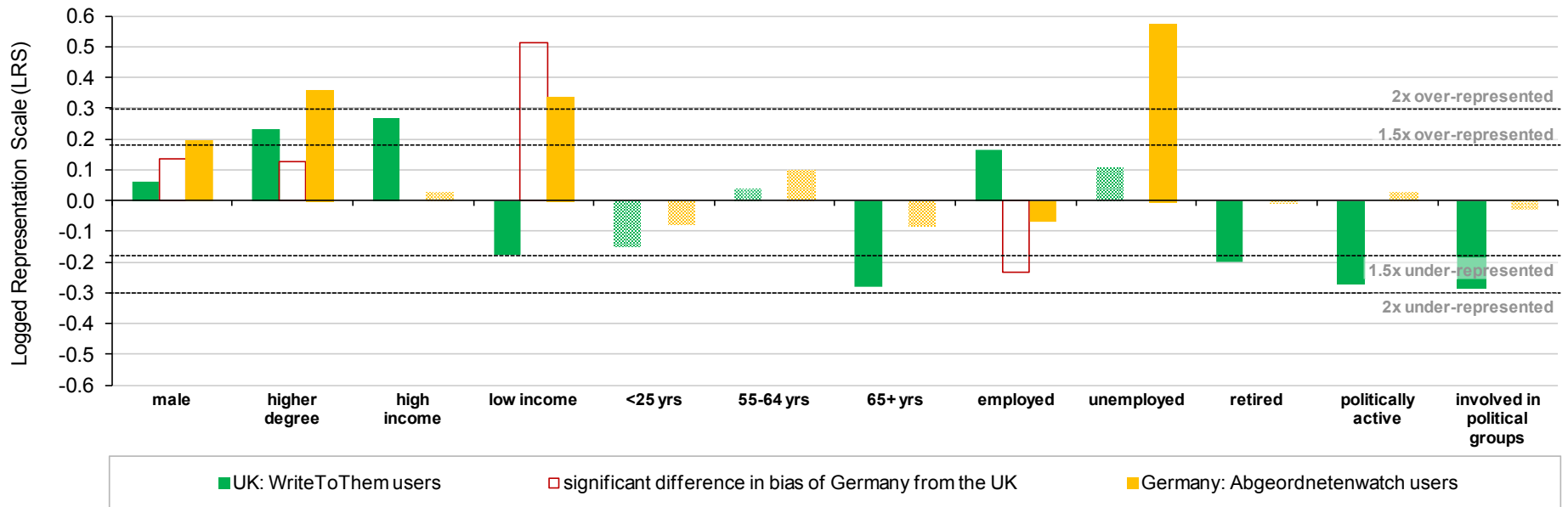
7.3.3 Differences between platform users and other contacters

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 26 and Figure 27 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 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 offliners. 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 contributions. Thus 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. At the same time, 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.

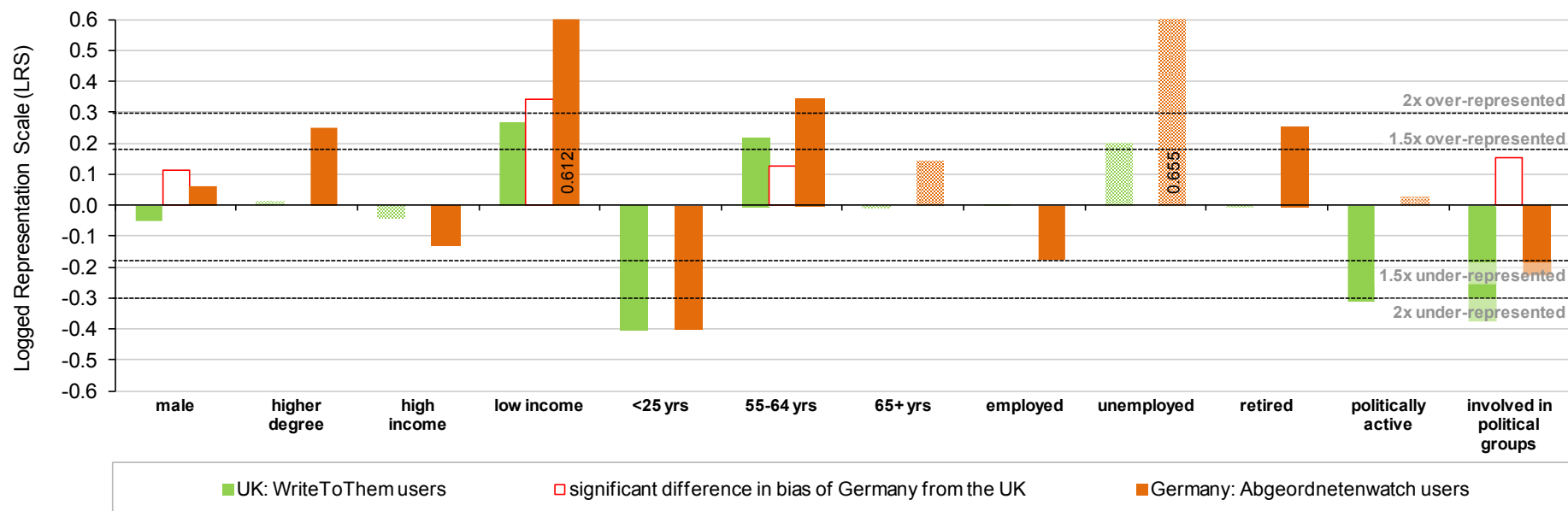
Figure 26 Socio-economic biases of people who used a contact facilitation platform to contact an MP from those who contacted offline only: comparison between WriteToThem (2009/10) and Abgeordnetenwatch (2010/11)



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 refer to Table 21. For variable definitions, refer to Table 25 for UK and Table 28 for Germany. Political participation excludes contacting politicians or someone in a political role or use of the contact facilitation platform respectively.

Figure 27 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. For other notes refer to Figure 26 above.

All this makes it difficult to arrive at a uniform assessment about the platforms' contributions to political equality. The judgement depends largely on how the importance of the individual characteristics is assessed in relation to each other; in other words if those characteristics on which contact facilitation platforms add an additional bias are considered to be more or less important than those characteristics for which an existing bias is reduced.

From my interpretation, I judge that in relation 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). These negative contributions cannot outweigh the clearly positive contributions to increase involvement of people from low-resource backgrounds that are visible in particular in Germany. Even though Abgeordnetenwatch can claim some positive contributions to political equality over offline contacting while WriteToThem cannot, I still consider the German site somewhat more negative for political equality because it does extend the biases in terms of gender and education while the British site does not.

In relation to *online* forms of contacting I judge Abgeordnetenwatch to be negative for political equality while WriteToThem is neither positive nor negative. While both platforms fail to increase involvement of the young but instead reduce it, WriteToThem exhibits fewer other biases that are a cause for concern together with some positive signs such as reducing the bias towards men and increasing representation of the resource-poor. In contrast, while the German platform has many positive contributions to political equality in relation to the resource-poor, its stark over-representation of educated users together with a bias towards men (even if

small) means that on balance it rather decreases than increases equality. This more positive assessment of the British site is also supported by the fact that it mobilises more people who are not involved in politics than the German platform.

Amidst greater biases contributions to political equality and popular control

What has been shown is that both contact facilitation platforms increase the number of people who engage in contacting and that this is a contribution to popular control. 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.

In relation to political equality the British site is also somewhat more successful but here the findings are rather bleak. Both platforms are decreasing political equality in relation to offline means of contacting. Compared to online means of contacting the platforms do only a little better. WriteToThem on balance at least does not decrease political equality even if it fails to increase it. In contrast, Abgeordnetenwatch has a negative effect on political equality in relation to online contacting. This is in particular 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.

Conclusion

This chapter has summarised in what ways the UK and Germany share common patterns of contacting and in which aspects they differ in relation to use of the Internet for contacting representatives and use of contact facilitation platforms in particular. It has involved interpreting the findings from a perspective of whether or not they contribute to popular control and political equality. However, this is

essentially a normative judgement because it depends on how individual elements of popular control and political equality are prioritised. Therefore this conclusion reflects my interpretation of the results.

I argue that based on the findings from Chapter 2 regarding contacting in general, a positive contribution to popular control would be an increase in the numbers participating in this form of political participation or a reduction of the bias of contacters towards those with involvement in other forms of political activity or political organizations. The comparison has shown that in both countries use of the Internet per se has only marginally contributed to more popular control by bringing some new people into this form of participation. In the UK this works better than in Germany because there the Internet constitutes a much more important channel of participation without increasing the bias towards organised group interests as is the case in Germany. In contrast, contact facilitation platforms have been shown to be a major contribution to popular control by bringing large numbers of people into this form of participation who have never done so before. Again, the contribution in the UK is larger because here the contact facilitation platform reduces the bias towards politically active and organised contacters by a large degree.

Based on what we know about the profile of those people who get in touch with politicians, I argue that a positive contribution to political equality would be a reduction in the bias towards male and educated users with high income. Alternatively, given the under-representation of young people and those poor in financial resources (low income, unemployment), a better representation or even an over-representation of these groups would also contribute to more political equality.

In both countries use of the Internet for contacting as such shows only a single positive sign by better representing young people – even though this does not reach significance due to the small case numbers. Otherwise online contacting offers either no significant improvement or worse, as in the case of for example gender, even exacerbates existing biases. This is stronger in the UK than in Germany. In both countries this is primarily a question of choice of the medium by traditional contacters, not a consequence of recruitment of particularly biased groups of the population to online contacting. Therefore online contacting does not constitute a negative contribution to political equality.

For contact facilitation platforms the findings do not show a uniform direction of increasing or decreasing political equality but in fact have aspects of both. Abgeordnetenwatch extends the bias towards male and more educated users in relation to other forms of contacting, and compared to online contacting it severely under-represents the young. This has a negative effect on political equality that I consider greater than the undisputable contributions of the platforms towards a better representation of those with low income and in unemployment. WriteToThem has a negative impact on political equality only in relation to offline contacting because apart from the gender bias it also much exacerbates the resource bias. In relation to online contacting I attribute neither a positive nor a negative contribution because despite some positive signs in relation to decreasing the gender imbalance and the better representation of low income people, the stark under-representation of young people means the platform fails to reach its potential as an online form of contacting.

Altogether, I consider the platforms to make a negative contribution to political equality, with the UK doing better because in relation to online contacting it remains without an impact. However, this overall assessment does little justice to the more nuanced findings. If for example the aim is to increase political equality by increasing representation of those with low incomes or those who are unemployed regardless of any other biases that might be associated with it, then contact facilitation platforms have proved their ability to do just that. It is in the balance of all findings, however, that my assessment remains largely negative.

This chapter has summarised the results of the primarily descriptive part of this research, but it has offered few explanations for the findings. It remains the task of the next chapter to infer from the available evidence which processes have led to the observed patterns.

Chapter 8 Explaining use of the Internet for contacting representatives

While the Internet as such has done little to contribute to popular control in contacting representatives, contact facilitation platforms have activated a large number of people to get in touch with their MPs who have never done so before. This is true both in the UK as well as in Germany but I have yet to establish whether this positive contribution can be attributed to the distinctive features of contact facilitation platforms or to other factors. However, to be able to meaningfully utilise the Internet to further democratic participation requires an understanding of the ways in which the technology can be linked to certain outcomes and how its use for political participation is interdependent with other, non-technical factors.

Therefore in this chapter I set out to offer explanations for the findings described in the previous chapters in order to answer Research Question 4 about the factors that impact on contacting patterns in use of the Internet for contacting political representatives. The first section of this chapter discusses how this research uses the evidence from the case studies for causal inference. It highlights the important role of a coherent theory and so the remainder of the first section is dedicated to setting up the building blocks of a basic theory of contacting. In the second and third section of this chapter I apply this basic theory to explain the origin of the main findings of this research, once in relation to use of the Internet in general for contacting, and once for use of contact facilitation platforms in particular.

8.1 *Developing a basic theory of engagement in contacting representatives*

Before attempting to analyse why the countries share some contacting patterns while they diverge on others, it is necessary to discuss in what ways the data available has explanatory power at all. Therefore this section starts by arguing how the evidence from the two countries can be used to suggest explanations for the findings discussed in the previous chapters, as well as the limits I face in doing so. The argument is that this is only possible if there is a viable theory of engagement in contacting representatives that can be brought to bear on my findings, and therefore the main part of this section is dedicated to setting out the building blocks of a basic theory of contacting.

8.1.1 Causal inference based on case studies

This chapter signals a shift in my analysis from a primarily descriptive approach that has established contacting patterns in the UK and Germany, to an explanatory approach that relies on the descriptive evidence provided in the previous chapters with the aim of establishing why the observed patterns occur (King et al., 1994: 75). However, the utility of case studies to offer explanations is contested.

The major criticism against case study research is that it bases its causal explanations on just a few cases in which they have been shown to be at work (Lieberson, 1992; Mahoney, 2000; Gerring, 2004; Tarrow, 2010). The main response to this criticism is to have a sound theoretical reason to expect a certain effect as the result of a particular factor. Even in research with a great number of cases, the argument for a causal connection between two variables relies not solely on a statistically significant association. Instead the claim for causality follows in particular from an underlying

theory that can convincingly explain why a factor could exert a certain effect (Mahoney, 2000: 397; Ragin, 2007: 75). George and Bennett (2005: 182) have termed this theory-driven approach *congruence method* which starts with a theory that is tested for whether or not it can actually explain the observed outcomes. Essentially the same approach has also been described as '*pattern-matching*' (Mahoney, 2000; Gerring, 2004: 348; Yin, 2009: 136).

However, simply observing a match or congruence between a theory's prediction and the observed outcome in a case (or two of them for that matter) is not a proof of a causal effect. To address this, case studies allow the application of another strategy, i.e. to trace and test causal processes or mechanisms. Causal mechanisms explain how one factor can exert influence on a dependent variable. The effort to locate the mechanism that links certain independent variables with a particular outcome of the dependent variable in ways that the theory has predicted has been named '*process tracing*' (George and McKeown, 1985: 153; George and Bennett, 2005). It is enabled because case studies – by virtue of their limited number of cases – afford a greater depth of analysis than usual statistical analysis coupled with extensive background knowledge of the cases (Coppedge, 1999; 2004: 348).

Therefore to offer explanations for the observed contacting patterns this research requires a theory that posits *which factors* shape contacting patterns and *through what mechanisms*. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to systematically develop and test a comprehensive theory of engagement in contacting representatives, based on the knowledge generated through the descriptive part of this analysis in combination with the findings of previous research it is possible to sketch out a basic theory of contacting. It is the task of the remainder of this section to provide the building

blocks of this basic theory of contacting. This includes a model of which processes shape engagement in contacting and a systematisation of the various factors that have the potential to exert an influence on these patterns.

The further sections of this chapter use these building blocks to generate hypotheses about which factors exert an influence and through which processes, and these hypotheses can be matched with the empirical findings. This is supported through an additional strategy to increase the number of cases by *within-case analysis*, that is, disaggregating a case into multiple observations within each case – this is achieved by comparing offline contacting, online contacting as well as contact facilitation platforms within each country (King et al., 1994; Mahoney, 2000; Gerring, 2004; George and Bennett, 2005; Yin, 2009; Tarrow, 2010). Nevertheless, for all these efforts, it is clear that the degree to which the explanations I offer can convince the reader will depend on their plausibility.

8.1.2 Elements of a basic theory of contacting

The patterns of contacting I have analysed throughout this thesis can be understood as the result of individual citizens' choices to engage in contacting – or not. Therefore a theory of contacting with or without the Internet must focus on the analytical micro-level. To assess how the Internet or particular applications can affect these choices requires an understanding of what shapes them and for this I can follow the example of Norris' (2001: 2) *Internet Engagement Model* and come back to established theories of political participation that I have discussed in Chapter 1.

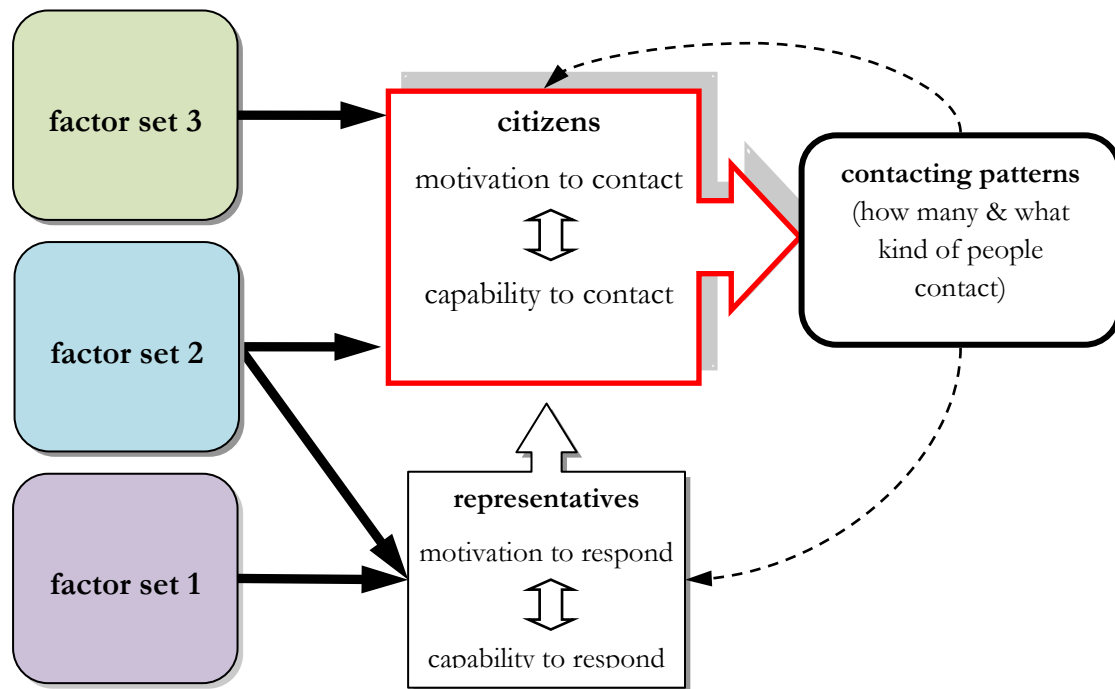
According to these theories the individual decision to participate is shaped by both motivation as well as resources to engage where motivation is in major ways also tied to the resources required to do so: as I have discussed in Chapter 1, not wanting to

participate is often related to not being able to participate. If by some process a factor can increase the ability of citizens to engage in contacting, for example by providing time or skills to do so, then all other things equal this should result in greater numbers of people deciding to engage in this form of participation. The same is true if a factor increases the motivation of citizens to contact, e.g. by providing a tangible benefit for doing so or by a particular salient issue. This concept can be summarised in a simple model.

A model of how contacting patterns are shaped

Figure 28 illustrates a simple model to conceptualise the overall process which results in particular contacting patterns. At its centre are citizens with their motives and capabilities that might or might not lead them to contact a political representative. A change in contacting patterns would be induced by a change in either motivation or capability or both. As highlighted above, there might also be interactions between motivation and capability.

Figure 28 Model of how engagement in contacting representatives is shaped



It is prudent to assume that citizens' motivation to contact will increase if representatives are responding to their concerns. For example, Norton (2002c: 8) cites a 1950s MP who argues against answering letters from citizens because *'it only encourages them'*. Just as with citizens' choice to contact, the responsiveness of representatives is the result of a process shaped by representatives' motivation to respond – for example as it might increase their chances of re-election – as well as by their ability to do so, for example in the form of sufficient time or staff. These can be influenced by a set of factors (1) such as the size of a representative's constituency. The process through which it can exert an influence on a representative's responsiveness is because a larger constituency means more people contact her – all other things equal, this could lead to less capability to respond to constituency communication.

While responsiveness is not the most important factor impacting on citizens, the model highlights it separately not only because representatives are the targets of the citizens' participation but because a number of factors (2) have the ability to impact both on citizens as well as representatives. One example of such a factor is the medium through which the communication between citizens and representatives takes place. Depending on its characteristics it can make composing and transmitting a message easy or difficult and in this way influence the capability of citizens as well as representatives to engage in this form of participation.

Finally, citizens' motives and capabilities are also subject to a separate set of factors (3) that exert their influence only on them but not on representatives. These are for example the traditional determinants of political participation, such as education that provides the skills required for contacting and as such increases capability.

Distinguishing levels of contacting patterns

This model is generic in that it describes through which processes contacting patterns are shaped regardless of any specific factors such as availability of the Internet for contacting. However, it aids the analysis of different countries and different forms of contacting to conceptually distinguish three different levels of contacting patterns that build upon each other.

The *first level* is formed by general contacting patterns, i.e. regardless of a specific contacting channel used. This represents the model outlined above with all factors that are not specific to a contacting channel. Examples of such factors are variables on the macro-level such as the political culture of a country which might or might not encourage the communication between citizens and their representatives. These

contacting patterns form the basis on which the effects of factors associated with use of a specific channel for communication unfold.

Given the focus of this thesis on the Internet for contacting, the *second level* are online contacting patterns that are the result of the first level general contacting patterns together with the Internet-specific factors such as the digital divide that exert their influence through the model outlined above. As I have discussed at the start of Chapter 7, even if the channel-specific factors exerted the same influence in both countries, the result could still be different contacting patterns if the first-level patterns on which they impact differ.

On the *third level* are patterns of contacting through online contact facilitation platforms which I conceptualise as the result of factors specific to these platforms (such as a particular technical design, for example public or private communication) that influence citizens' motivations and capabilities together with the other factors that already shaped patterns on level one and two. As such how many and what kind of people engage in contacting via these platforms is not just determined by factors specific to the platform but also by the underlying patterns of online contacting (that I have called level two) which are in themselves based on the general patterns of contacting (which form level one).

It is important to note that this distinction is purely conceptual to help highlight the dependence of any channel-specific effects on the already existing patterns of contacting. In empirical reality all factors are shaping contacting patterns through the processes illustrated in the model at the same time. But which specific factors have the potential to shape contacting patterns by exerting influence on citizens' motivations and capabilities?

A framework of factors impacting on contacting patterns

Table 23 outlines a framework of factors that I have found to be relevant for the patterns observed in this research. The framework is not exhaustive but I believe that it covers the most important factors. It is based on my understanding of contacting developed through the course of this research and the findings of previous research (Clarke, 1978; Elling, 1979; Johannes, 1979; Stone, 1979; Cain et al., 1987; Serra and Cover, 1992; Searing, 1994; Patzelt and Süssmuth, 1995; Verba et al., 1995; Freeman and Richardson, 1996; Norris, 1997; Elsner and Algasinger, 2001; Norris, 2001; Norton, 2002c; Zittel, 2009).

Theories of political participation have usually focused on micro-level factors, i.e. on those variables that pertain to the individuals participating. On the micro-level I follow Verba et al. (1995) and their *Civic Voluntarism Model* in the distinction of *participatory factors* which are independent of any particular form of political participation, and factors related to the actual mode of participation which in this case are *contacting factors*. However, a comparative case study of two countries needs to consider macro-level factors such as the political system or culture of a country too because these form the context in which individual participation takes place and can differ from one country to another.

It is important to note that the grouping provided through this framework is intended to aid the analysis by offering some structure for considering the numerous factors, but by no means are the individual factors independent of each other. Clearly, the political culture on the macro-level will impact on an individual citizen's motivation to participate, just as these motivations are not independent of the mode of participation chosen.

Table 23 Framework of factors that shape patterns of engagement in contacting representatives

macro-level		micro-level		
		participatory factors	contacting factors	
<i>political system</i>	A1: organization of government (e.g. majoritarian/consensual, federal structure, resources for representatives)	<i>resources</i>	<i>individual representatives</i>	C1: constituency factors (e.g. size, social composition, urban/rural)
	A2: electoral system			C2: political factors (e.g. level of government, marginal constituency, party)
<i>political culture</i>	A3: alternative institutions that address citizens' concerns	<i>motives</i>	<i>communication transmission</i>	C3: individual characteristics (e.g. age, gender, Internet abilities)
	A4: role of representatives			C4: effort of communicating
	A5: political participation and engagement in contacting			C5: confidentiality of communication
	A6: media system			C6: design (e.g. usability, moderation, local context, transparency)
			<i>technical system of transmission</i>	C7: visibility

Summary

This section has discussed the need for a theory of why people engage in contacting in order to derive explanations from the case study data. I have subsequently outlined the building blocks of a basic theory of contacting. These consist of a simple model that conceptualises through which processes engagement in contacting is shaped, a strategy of how this can be applied to different levels of analysis in relation to which channel of contacting is used, and a framework of factors that I consider to shape contacting patterns through these processes. What is yet missing for this basic theory are the hypotheses that detail the expected effects of the factors and the mechanisms through which these exert an influence on citizens' motivations and capabilities for contacting. These are provided in the next two sections in the context of examining similarities and differences in the findings from the two cases.

The scope of this thesis does not allow subjecting this basic theory of contacting to a systematic test, but it has also not been the aim of this research to develop a comprehensive theory. Instead, the aim is to identify factors that can reasonably be assumed to explain the findings of the descriptive part of this research and as such offer guidance for how to use the Internet to further democratic participation in contacting as well as beyond. I illustrate the utility of the basic theory to do just that in the following two sections of this chapter by considering the patterns of online contacting in general and the patterns of contacting via contact facilitation platforms in turn.

8.2 Explaining contacting via the Internet

As I have done throughout this thesis, I consider the findings from the perspective of popular control on the one hand and political equality on the other. For each

perspective the most important observations are phrased in the form of questions that I attempt to answer with the help of the basic theory outlined above.

8.2.1 Online contacting and popular control

Why is the contribution of the Internet to popular control so low?

It follows from the model outlined above that in order to increase the number of people who engage in contacting the Internet would need to be associated with an increase in the motivation or the capabilities of citizens to engage in this form of participation. However, there are few reasons to assume that this is the case.

In terms of citizens' capabilities, online contacting provides a mixed contribution. On the one hand it increases the capabilities of citizens by making it easier to find contact details and to send a message (which refers to the factor '*effort of communication*', labelled as C4 in the framework summarised in Table 23 above) as well as making it cheaper to send a message, therefore reducing some of the traditional resource requirements (B1) that act as barriers to contacting. On the other hand, using the Internet to get in touch with representatives requires resources too, namely online access and specific online skills such as searching for the relevant information, and these form another set of barriers (B2). Since these factors weigh against each other (B1/C4 vs. B2), it is hard to argue that the capabilities of citizens are likely to be enhanced through online contacting.

Similarly, when thinking about motivations, there is little to suggest any sizeable impact of the Internet on the propensity of citizens to contact their representative. An additional channel of communication by itself does not provide a higher motivation. In a minor way online campaigns might have some potential to increase motivation compared to paper-based campaigns by providing a specific motive (B4)

together with an easy way of getting in touch through a simple click (C4). Making it easier to participate could increase motivation to do so, an interaction between motivation and capability that I have also described in the model.

By now all representatives in both countries at least on the national level have email addresses and hence are available to be contacted online (Rolke and Metz, 2006; Norton, 2007: 359; Williamson, 2009b: 8), but there are no reasons to assume that representatives would be more responsive online than via other means and that this would thus increase citizens' motivation. If anything, for a considerable time online messages had been treated with less importance by representatives. This attitude towards new technologies has been shown to be shaped by individual factors of the representative such as age (C3) but also by general party policies (C2) and whether or not the constituency consists of digitally affluent people who demand it (C1) (Ward and Lusoli, 2005: 67; Williamson, 2009b: 22; Zittel, 2010). By now this attitude has given way to a largely positive assessment of emails as a tool of constituency communication (Williamson, 2009b: 9; Zittel, 2010: 218) but apart from features such as public responsiveness statistics – which are still rare – representatives have no greater motivation to respond to online messages than to offline ones.

While the technology might have increased the capability of representatives to deal with citizen queries by offering more cost and time efficient communication (C4), this effect is at least mitigated by the fact that representatives now receive many more messages than they did before the advent of the Internet so that many feel overwhelmed by the amount (Saalfeld, 2002: 61; Ward and Lusoli, 2005: 62; Norton, 2007: 360; Williamson, 2009b: 19; Zittel, 2010: 241). Therefore, because the Internet

fails to increase representatives' motivations and capabilities to deal with citizens' communication, we cannot expect any increased responsiveness from representatives.

In sum, neither for citizens' capability nor their motivation to contact are there any reasons to assume an increase through the Internet, either directly or via representatives' increased responsiveness, and this is reflected in the low contribution of the Internet to popular control.

Why do more people in the UK use the Internet for contacting?

In the UK every other contactor uses the Internet to get in touch, which is twice the share observed in Germany. The reason for this is hard to determine.

The finding is particularly counter-intuitive when considered from the perspective of the representatives' capabilities: research has shown that in part due to their greater resources in terms of money and staff (A1) (Kelly, 2009; Williamson, 2009b: 14p; Kelly, 2010; Feldkamp, 2011), German representatives at least on the national level were more advanced than their British colleagues in using online tools and making themselves available online (Jackson, 2003: 126; Ward and Lusoli, 2005: 66; Rolke and Metz, 2006: 47; Vicente-Merino, 2007: 443; Williamson, 2009b: 8; Zittel, 2010: 125). As a result we would expect that more German citizens use online means to get in touch with representatives than British ones, but the opposite is true. This might be because research has shown that in both countries representatives do not use these technologies for an interactive dialogue with their constituents (Ward and Lusoli, 2005: 61; Norton, 2007: 366p; Vicente-Merino, 2007: 448; Williamson, 2009b: 22; Zittel, 2010: 198), or because on the local level (C2) – which accounts for the majority of contacts – these differences do not hold.

Therefore it seems the explanation must lie rather with citizens and their motivations and capabilities. Differences in resources to use the Internet (B2) can be discarded as a reason because in both countries levels of Internet access are comparable. One possible explanation could be that citizens in Britain who want to impact policy or who have personal grievances they want addressed would almost always have to contact either their national MP or their local councillor, and at least for the national level these are all available online.

In contrast, German citizens have more alternatives to which they can turn (A3) but many of those might still be more prone to accepting offline communication. On the one hand, this includes the members of the 16 state parliaments because of Germany's federal organization of government (A1). These have been shown to be less often available online and hence would require getting in touch offline (Wolling et al., 2010). On the other hand, as mentioned in Chapter 2, Germany has a well-established parliamentary petitions system which is designed to deal with individual grievances and increasingly public policy concerns too. The numbers on the national level show that the majority of petitions are still submitted offline (Lindner and Riehm, 2011: 11) and it can be assumed it is even higher on the state level. It is possible that many of those citizens who submitted a petition (in contrast to those who just signed one) would consider this as contacting a politician or government official. However, their overall number is just about a few tens of thousands of people which will only impact marginally on contacting figures.

On balance, the arguments are rather speculative and case study research needs to accept that there are limits to its explanations. For all the hypotheses made above

what remains is a large amount of uncertainty over why in the UK rates of online contacting are higher than in Germany.

8.2.2 Online contacting and political equality

Why are online contacters more biased than traditional contacters?

I have shown that 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 unlikely that this is because these people would have a higher motivation because I have argued above that there is little impact of the Internet on motives, so the observed patterns imply that resource-rich citizens have a higher capability to engage in online contacting.

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 (B2), but very much in the same way as income and education (B1) determine political participation, they also determine Internet usage (Norris, 2001; Helsper, 2008). 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 and Dutton, 2006: 309; Ofcom, 2009a: 1). Again, it is basically those people who lack traditional resources who also lack these skills (Mossberger et al., 2003; Boes et al., 2006; Helsper, 2008). 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

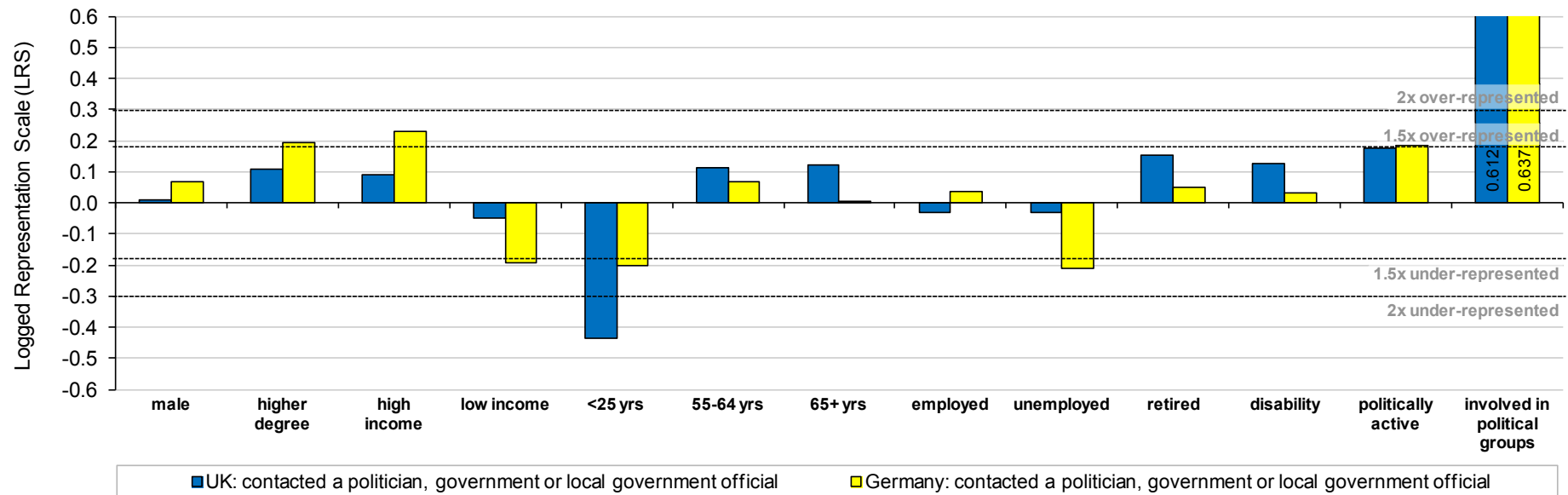
less likely to use the Internet for political participation. As such there exists a double barrier to online participation (B1 + B2), i.e. the barrier is even higher than those for participation offline. Therefore it is no surprise that online participation is more biased than offline participation and the contacting figures I have analysed show that impressively.

Why is online contacting in the UK more resource-biased than in Germany?

The reason online contacters are more biased from offline contacters in Britain than in Germany is that first-level contacting patterns are less biased in Britain than in Germany, as Figure 29 illustrates based on the ESS data. It shows that the resource bias of contacters is much stronger in Germany than in the UK, with many more people with high incomes and fewer with low income or being unemployed. On top of this is a male bias that is unique to German contacting, even though OxIS reports a male bias of contacters in Britain too.

In Britain more resource-poor people than in Germany engage in this form of political participation but because of the double barrier discussed above they do not use online means. This creates a group of offline contacters with a low bias from the population, and British online contacters are thus very biased from this group because they are those with the resources and skills to use online means (B1, B2). In contrast, contacting in Germany already exhibits strong biases from the population. Those who rely only on offline means have fewer resources than online contacters but they are more biased from the population than British offline contacters. Therefore the bias of the German online contacters – who are the same high-resource individuals as British online contacters – as against the offliners is less severe than in the UK.

Figure 29 Socio-economic biases of people who contacted a politician or (local) government official within the last year: comparison between the UK and Germany based on European Social Survey (2008/09)



Source: ESS 2008/09 (N – UK=2,352; N – UK contacted=398; N – Germany=2,749; N – Germany contacted=437)

Notes: Baseline of this comparison is the population of the respective country aged 15 years and older. Higher degree indicates completion of tertiary education (ISCED 5-6) and excludes those still in education. Income is total household income after tax and compulsory deductions. Low income is less than £14,440 (€22,100) annually, high income is £30,870 (€45,201) and more annually. Occupational variables include a category for sick/disabled people. Political activity was defined as within the last year having done at least one of the following activities: worn or displayed a campaign badge/sticker, signed a petition, took part in a lawful public demonstration, boycotted certain products. Involvement with political groups was defined as having within the last twelve months worked in a political party or action group.

This is a pointed illustration of the way in which online contacting patterns, or second-level contacting patterns as I have termed them, depend on the established (first-level) patterns of contacting, i.e. those independent of any particular channel of communication. Therefore these are included as a separate factor (A5) in the framework of factors above.

The major reason for these different first-level contacting patterns is a notable difference in the function of this form of participation. As I highlighted in Chapter 2, in Britain there is a long tradition of representatives acting as *Welfare Officers* whose main role it is to provide assistance with the problems of individual citizens (Searing, 1994; Norton, 2002d). Emphasis on such a role for representatives (A4) means that contacters will not only put forward collective but also personal issues (B3). This increases the motivation of resource-poor people to get in touch because while these might be less likely to be interested in changing housing policy, they are more likely to require help to get a better council flat. As a result we observe more participation by resource-poor people as their greater motivation – due to a particular motive (B3) – overcomes their greater barriers to participation (B1). In contrast, representatives in Germany see themselves first and foremost as legislators (Saalfeld, 2002: 53) and do not encourage contacting for personal grievances for which alternative avenues of redress such as petitions are offered (A3).

The different role perceptions of German and British representatives go back to macro-level factors which I can here only sketch out. They originate in very different models of democracy. In Lijphart's (1984; 1999: 2) distinction, the British model of democracy can be characterised as majoritarian which is '*exclusive, competitive, and adversarial*', while the German one is consensual and as such '*characterized by inclusiveness,*

bargaining and compromise'. These different perceptions of democracy result in a different organization of government (A1).

In Max Weber's distinction (Patzelt, 1997: 56; Saalfeld, 1997: 43) Westminster is a *debating parliament* ('*redendes Parlament*'). It increases the capability of representatives to respond to citizens as it creates a large number of backbench representatives that have the time to deal with constituent communication. At the same time, it also increases their motivation to do so because it can increase their chances of re-election as they are all directly elected (A2). In contrast, the German Bundestag can be characterised as a *working parliament* ('*arbeitendes Parlament*'). As German MPs are heavily involved in policy making, they have less time to devote to their constituency and hence less capability to respond to citizens' communication. They also have less motivation to do so as votes are based primarily on party and less on constituency performance, not least due to a system of mixed-member proportional representation (A2) in which half of national MPs are not directly elected in a constituency, but via a party list. Largely these distinctions hold also for the lower levels of government.

Altogether, in Britain online contacters are more biased from offline contacters than in Germany because – due to British representatives acting as Welfare Officers – there are more resource-poor people who engage in contacting in the first place. Therefore the double barrier to online participation (B1 + B2) described above differentiates contacters in the UK more strongly than in Germany.

This section has used the basic theory of contacting developed in the first part of this chapter in order to offer explanations for the rates of contacting through the Internet and the people who engage in this activity. The next section applies the same approach to the patterns observed for use of contact facilitation platforms.

8.3 Explaining contacting via contact facilitation platforms

This section starts with the findings related to the number of people who use contact facilitation platforms, i.e. popular control, before turning to their socio-demographic characteristics and hence political equality.

8.3.1 Contact facilitation platforms and popular control

Why do contact facilitation platforms contribute so much to popular control?

While online contact facilitation platforms are a form of online contacting and hence subject to the same processes that were described above for use of the Internet for contacting in general, they are vastly more successful in engaging people into contacting who have not done so before. So what distinguishes them from other online opportunities for contacting?

I argue that contact facilitation platforms can improve both capability as well as motivation of individual citizens. In terms of capabilities, by features such as the opportunity to find representatives via a postcode and the few steps required to send a message, the platforms make it easier to contact representatives (C4). This ease of use is a dominant theme in the comments of users as illustrated by these first-time contacters:

'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, as I have shown in the specific chapters and as also highlighted once more 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)

That these capabilities are valued is also expressed in the high user satisfaction, as more than two thirds of users of both sites are very likely to recommend the site to friends or colleagues. What also contributes to the increased capabilities of citizens to contact is that both sites have a good online visibility (C7), expressed by the fact that three out of four WriteToThem users and almost half of Abgeordnetenwatch users find the site online, i.e. through a search engine or campaigning website.

At the same time, even though the sites might be easier to use than other online means, their users still seem to have better Internet skills than the rest of the population (B2). This can be shown for WriteToThem where half of users claim to have excellent abilities to use the Internet; significantly more than Internet users in general or even other online contacters. On Abgeordnetenwatch only a quarter claim to have such excellent Internet abilities but unfortunately we lack comparative population data to put this into perspective. This suggests that ease of use cannot be

the only reason for using the site because many users have the skills that would also enable them to use other means of contacting.

Instead, those platforms are successful in engaging people who have not contacted before because they also increase the motivation of citizens to do so. They achieve this first and foremost by providing responsiveness statistics, a design feature (C6) that many users value very much as these comments by first-time contacters highlight:

'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)

The user comments suggest that first-time contacters are motivated by the ease of use, while those who contact more frequently like the monitoring function of these sites. The evidence from these comments also implies that the transparency feature is more important for Abgeordnetenwatch users, while WriteToThem users more often mention 'ease of use'. This should probably not come as a surprise, given that on the German platform the responsiveness statistics are immediately obvious, while on the

British site these remain in the background and users are only directly confronted with it *after* they have used the site when they receive the survey email.

The most likely way in which contact facilitation platforms can influence representatives is through an increased motivation to reply because of public scrutiny in the form of responsiveness statistics (C6) which have met with a media (A6) susceptible to measuring the performance of representatives. This increased motivation is not met with increased capabilities, however. While these platforms decrease effort (C4) by reducing spam and mass mailings of standard letters through automatic analysis or moderation (C6), at the same time they increase the overall amount of messages to which representatives need to attend.

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.

Why does WriteToThem contribute more to popular control than Abgeordnetenwatch?

WriteToThem is more successful than Abgeordnetenwatch in relation to popular control. This is not only expressed in the higher share of first-time contacters but also by the fact that it engages many more citizens who are not politically active in other ways or organised in political groups.

One reason for this could be the higher search engine visibility (C7) of WriteToThem which helps twice as many first-time contacters to find the site as compared to

Abgeordnetenwatch (41% vs. 22%). This is supported by an advertising campaign on the search engine Google and increases the capability to find the site particularly for those who are less knowledgeable about politics, in other words exactly those not engaged in other forms of political participation or organization.

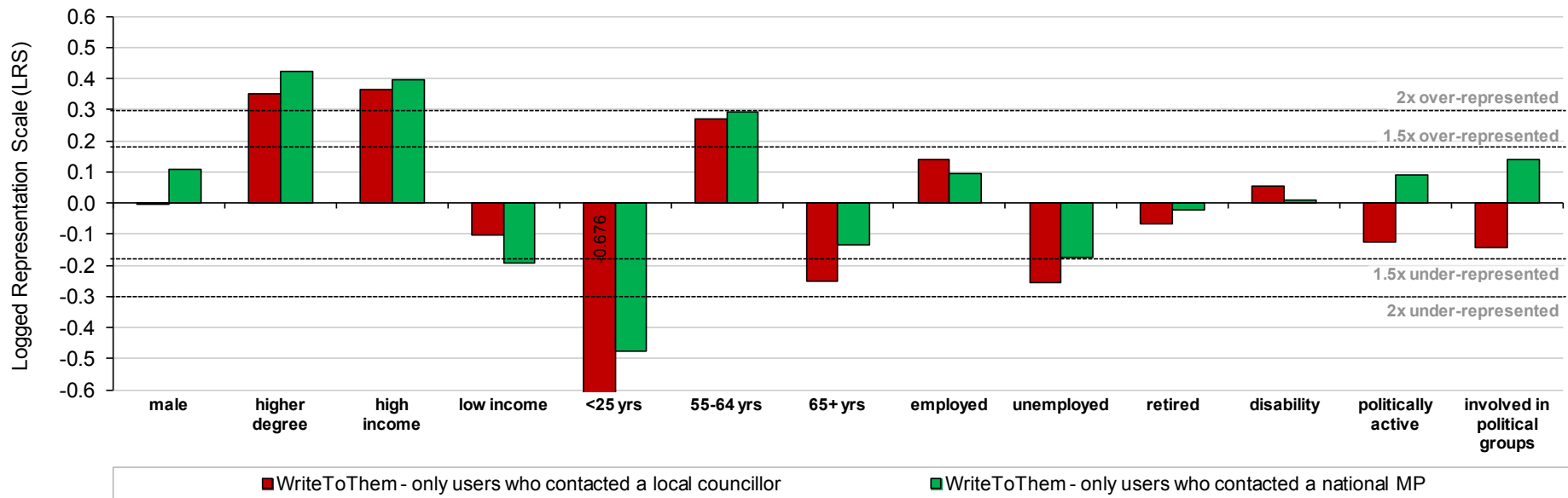
Another important explanation of why Abgeordnetenwatch might attract fewer apolitical citizens is the public nature of its communication and that all the information is personally attributable (C5). As I have discussed in Chapter 7, a result of this is that contacters on Abgeordnetenwatch usually use the platform to communicate collective issues to representatives and not personal ones (B3). It clearly makes sense to expect Abgeordnetenwatch users to be more politicised because they choose a public forum to discuss a collective issue, and I discuss these distinct profiles associated with different motives in more detail in the next subsection.

Another reason why WriteToThem attracts in particular more politically inactive people is the fact that it caters also for contacting representatives on the local level, while Abgeordnetenwatch covers only a few local councils (C6). Research has established that on the local level political equality in political participation is greater, as I have briefly discussed in section 2.4 of Chapter 2 (Crewe, 1985: 55; Parry et al., 1992: 416). My analysis of WriteToThem users as illustrated in Figure 30 below shows the same pattern, namely that those who get in touch with local councillors are 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.

Considering all users of WriteToThem since 2005, 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. Abgeordnetenwatch, by focusing mainly on the national and state level (C6), lacks this avenue for engaging usually less involved citizens. However, even here the relevance of the local context is visible because those who have never before contacted a representative use Abgeordnetenwatch significantly more often to get in touch with their constituency MP than those who have already in the past contacted representatives (53% vs. 43%).

In summary, WriteToThem reaches more people who have never contacted a representative before and who are in particular less often politically involved, because it has a higher search engine visibility, caters to contacters with personal motives too and provides the opportunity to first engage in contacting on the local level which can lead the more apolitical citizens to also get in touch with national representatives.

Figure 30 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 25 for definitions of variables.

8.3.2 Contact facilitation platforms and political equality

Why do contact facilitation platforms mainly decrease political equality?

My findings have shown that on most characteristics users of contact facilitation platforms are more biased from the population than offline contacters. The findings are similar in comparison to online contacting: while both sites offer selective contributions, for example by engaging resource-poor citizens or – as in the case of WriteToThem – more women than other forms of online contacting, on balance they do not increase political equality (WriteToThem) or even reduce it (Abgeordnetenwatch). The reasons for this are not hard to find. Contact facilitation platforms rely on online means of communication. They build upon the already biased second-level contacting patterns (A5) and are subject to the same double barrier to participation (B1 + B2) discussed in the previous section. Therefore both sites reflect many of the biases of online contacters.

However, both platforms also increase some of the biases of online contacting. This is most notable for the severe under-representation of young people (<25yrs.). This cannot be explained by a lack of capabilities because the young are the most avid and experienced Internet users who also use online means to contact representatives – but not contact facilitation platforms. If it is not capabilities, it follows that they must lack motivation to use these sites. I expect them to prefer alternative means to get in touch (A3) which tie in more closely with their other online uses (C6), such as Twitter and social networking where most representatives are now present – even though not very (inter)actively as I have shown in Chapter 2.

There is little in which the behaviour of representatives could impact on political equality on contact facilitation platforms. In sum, contact facilitation platforms suffer

from the same barriers to participation as do other online means of contacting and as such they exhibit a similarly biased profile. Any biases that differ from that of online contacters should be related to their specific design.

Why, compared to online contacting, is the gender and education bias stronger on Abgeordnetenwatch than on WriteToThem?

While WriteToThem exhibits biases that are similar to those of online contacters, Abgeordnetenwatch exacerbates the over-representation of men and people with a university degree. I argue that the reason for this can be found in the design of the sites (C6) which results in different motivations to use them (B3). As discussed in Chapter 7, because of the public nature of its communication (C5), Abgeordnetenwatch is mainly used by people with motives that can be considered collective, or at least non-personal, while by enabling citizens to contact their representatives in private, WriteToThem also encourages contacting for personal motives.

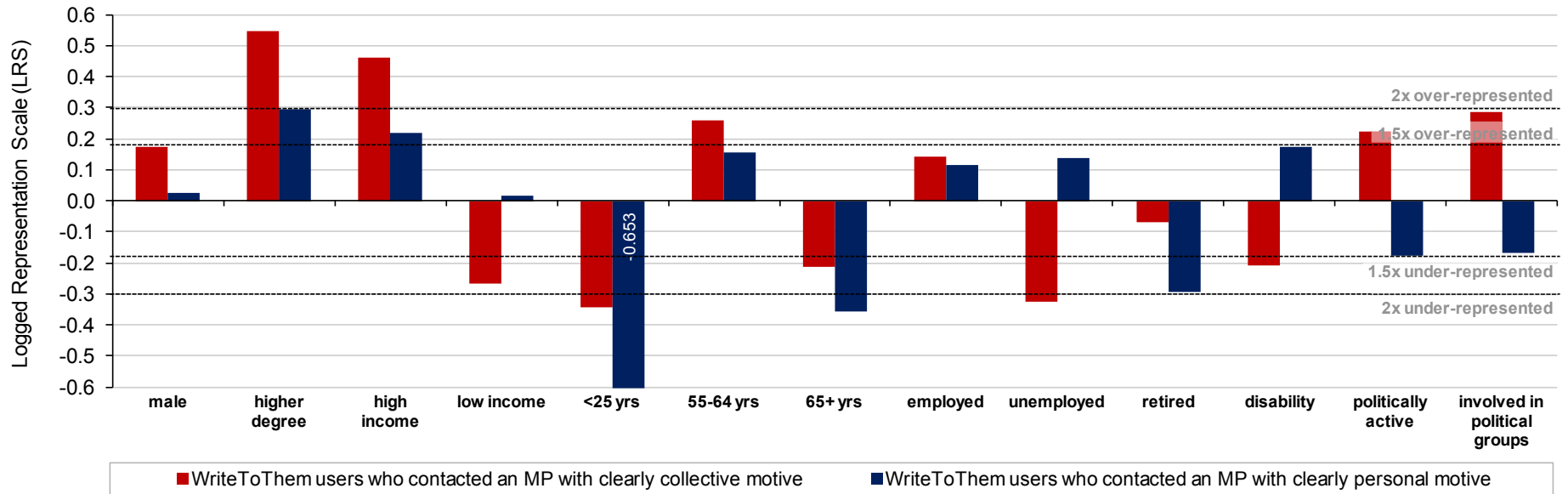
However, contacters with personal motives are more representative of the population than are those with collective motives as Figure 31 shows for WriteToThem users, following the distinction of motives put forward in Figure 23 of Chapter 7. Those with clearly personal motives are significantly less biased in relation to gender, education, income, unemployment as well as political activity and group involvement. In particular, they are representative in terms of gender and low income. In addition, they are less politically active and organised than the population, illustrated also by the fact that the majority have never before contacted a representative (54% vs. 31%).

It is not too difficult to think about explanations for this association between motives and socio-economic characteristics. A personal grievance (B3, B4) can act to increase

motivation to overcome usual resource barriers (B1). 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. By only allowing public communication (C5), Abgeordnetenwatch effectively prevents those with personal motives from contacting (B3) and hence lacks the mitigating effect on the more biased profile of people who contact with collective concerns. In addition, the opportunity of WriteToThem to recruit local level contacters – as discussed in the subsection on popular control above – will also contribute to the less biased profile of WriteToThem users.

In summary, 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.

Figure 31 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 based on Figure 23=1,312)

Notes: Baseline of comparison is British population aged 14 years and older. The classification of motives is based on Figure 23. Political activity excluded use of WriteToThem. Refer to Table 25 for definitions of variables.

Why does Abgeordnetenwatch attract more resource-poor citizens than WriteToThem?

Contact facilitation platforms – despite the problematic biases discussed above – do on several dimensions of political equality offer an improvement over the profile of online contacters. Both sites increase representation of those with low resources such as low income or unemployment, but this positive effect is stronger on Abgeordnetenwatch. This is despite the fact that the site is predominantly used for collective motives and as such exhibits stronger biases in terms of education and gender as discussed above. To get to the heart of this issue, I focus on the group of unemployed users as naturally these also decrease high-income bias and increase low-income representation.

On WriteToThem unemployed users are significantly more often first-time contacters, politically inactive and not organised in any groups. In contrast, those unemployed on Abgeordnetenwatch are among the more frequent users of the site and exhibit the lowest rate of first-time contacters (29%), significantly lower than (self-)employed users (45%). Moreover, while unemployed users of WriteToThem contact MPs most often about *(un)employment* (18%), the most common topic for unemployed users of Abgeordnetenwatch is *democracy & civil rights* with more than a third (37%) of all unemployed getting in touch about such issues (B4) – among those who are employed or self-employed this is only 23%. Altogether, the unemployed on Abgeordnetenwatch are more politicised than their British counterparts and as such do not represent the typical unemployed.

As it turns out, the action of the unemployed Abgeordnetenwatch users 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.

This illustrates the complex interplay of factors of the basic theory. A decision on the macro-level provided a particular motive for action (B4) on the micro-level. This took place independent of the contact facilitation platform, but through its design (C6) Abgeordnetenwatch has increased the capability of unemployed citizens to receive a response by giving them an easy opportunity (C4) to demand an explanation in public (C4). As discussed before, 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.

Abgeordnetenwatch not only succeeds in attracting more people from low-resource backgrounds than WriteToThem, but it also better represents retired people even though these are normally under-represented when it comes to online contacting. Data from both sites show that mentions in the media are most relevant for retired users to find out about the platforms. For example, on the German site 38% of retired people find out about it from the media compared to 28% of (self-)employed people. However, the German site has a higher visibility (C7) in the media (A6): almost 30% of its users find out about the platform from the media, compared to only 5% for WriteToThem. The main reason for this are Abgeordnetenwatch's cooperation agreements with media which are also facilitated by the fact that its communication is public (C5).

In sum, Abgeordnetenwatch can more successfully reach out to citizens with lower resources as its design was particularly suitable to a topical problem in the political context in which it operates. Just as engagement by resource-poor people is unusual for online participation, so is engagement by retired people. Abgeordnetenwatch succeeds in reaching out to older age groups by visibility in the media.

Conclusion

Drawing on research into political participation online and offline, in this chapter I have developed a basic theory of contacting. At its centre are citizens and their individual choices to engage in contacting which are shaped by their motivation as well as their capability to do so. It consists further of a framework of factors and a simple model of how these shape contacting patterns.

In my analysis of the results of this research, I have successfully identified a number of processes through which the factors of the framework can be assumed to have influenced the patterns of contacting shared among the countries as well as those where they differ. 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. Not least, I have also been able to show 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. I have 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.

The reasons for some patterns have remained unclear, for example the greater use of online means for contacting in the UK. Furthermore, a limitation of case studies is that they '*remain much stronger at assessing **whether** and **how** a variable mattered to the outcome than at assessing **how much** it mattered*' (George and Bennett, 2005: 25 - emphasis by the original authors). The reliance on evidence from two case studies means also that rather than as final proof of an impact we need to think of the described factors as reasonably likely to be responsible for the observed outcome.

Nevertheless, the analysis has provided many important avenues for linking the described patterns to factors from which they originate and it is one of the tasks of the final chapter to outline how further research can explore these processes and their outcomes in more detail. The remaining objectives of the final chapter are to summarise the results and discuss their implications for the relationship between citizens and their representatives, as well as what can be learned from them more generally about the role of the Internet for furthering democratic participation.

Chapter 9 The role of the Internet for furthering democratic participation: summary of findings

This thesis started with the question of whether or not the opportunities provided by the Internet can be used to further democracy. I have approached its answer with a focus on democratic participation and a detailed study of use of the Internet for contacting representatives. Ten years ago, when the Internet was still considered a new technology by most people, Robin Cook MP (2002) as then Leader of the House of Commons had formulated his hope about how to revive democracy:

'There is a connection waiting to be made between the decline in democratic participation and the explosion in new ways of communicating. [...] The new technologies can strengthen our democracy, by giving us greater opportunities than ever before for better transparency and a more responsive relationship between government and electors.'

This study is a critical assessment of the degree to which this has been realised in the UK and Germany, and this chapter provides my conclusions from this research. I start with a summary of the answers to the four research questions and emphasise their implications for contacting as a form of political participation and the constituent-representative relationship at large. The second section discusses the implications of my findings for the role of the Internet for democratic participation more generally, before the final section reviews the approach of this research and highlights future research avenues.

9.1 Assessing the role of the Internet for contacting representatives

The four main research questions introduced in Chapter 1 have focused on the consequences that derive from use of the Internet and particular platforms for

contacting political representatives in a comparative perspective between the UK and Germany. This section provides a summary of the answers, before discussing their implications for this form of political participation more widely as well as for future research.

9.1.1 Answering the research questions

This research was structured by four research questions whose answers are summarised below, once for contacting with the help of the Internet in general, and once for use of contact facilitation platforms.

Internet in general contributes little to democratic participation in contacting

The first research question was interested in whether use of the Internet for contacting political representatives increases popular control and/or political equality. What my analysis of data from the British OxIS 2009 and the German POC study 2002-2009 has shown is that in both countries the Internet contributes very little to increased popular control as it helps only a few people to get engaged into contacting. However, if only a marginal number of people get activated, this also implies that the vast majority of those using the Internet for contacting are people who previously used offline means for contacting.

From this follows that there is little scope for any improvement in political equality. Instead, in both countries those who use the Internet for contacting representatives are far more biased from the population than those who use traditional means to get in touch. As a result, apart from engaging some additional young people, the Internet does not increase political equality. At the same time, as a result of the limited contribution to popular control, the Internet cannot effectively reduce political equality, because it is more or less the same people who have always been engaged in

contacting, only that now the resource-rich are more likely to use the Internet, while the rest, i.e. the resource-poor, are more likely to rely on traditional means.

Overall the Internet contributes little to democratic participation through more, and more equal, engagement in contacting. In the course of answering Research Question 4 I have identified as the main reason for this that while the additional communication channel by itself might somewhat alter which resources are necessary to participate, it does not significantly weaken the connection between those resources and socio-economic status. What is more, it fails to provide additional motivation to engage in this form of participation.

As part of Research Question 3 I also examined the differences in engagement in contacting between the UK and Germany. While both countries share the same broad patterns, a detailed comparison reveals that in terms of popular control the UK scores better because many more people use the Internet to engage in contacting and those who do are not more biased towards those organised in political groups. The reason for this greater popularity of online means for contacting in the UK remains an unresolved puzzle of this research. In respect of political equality Germany scores better because online contacting in the UK exhibits a much stronger resource bias. I have linked this to the generally more equal patterns of engagement in contacting in the UK so that the double barrier of participation – constituted by traditional resource requirements of political participation in addition to new requirements for engaging online – differentiates British contacters more strongly than German contacters that share already a comparatively greater bias.

Based on my critique of previous research, Research Question 2 repeated the analysis of popular control and political equality with a focus on contact facilitation platforms

as one particular Internet application for contacting for which already successful implementations exist. The results are summarised below.

Contact facilitation platforms prove the Internet can contribute to democratic participation

What I have been able to show is that in both countries contact facilitation platforms increase popular control by significantly enhancing the number of people who engage in contacting and by drawing these from segments of the population that are less active in political groups. One important reason for this is that these sites have made contacting very easy. By providing the opportunity to search for representatives via entering a postcode and by taking care of message delivery, Abgeordnetenwatch and WriteToThem have lowered the resource barrier to participation and this has been instrumental in getting people to engage in contacting who have never done so before.

The analysis has also confirmed my hypothesis in Chapter 2, namely that through statistics on the response behaviour of representatives, contact facilitation platforms have provided citizens with additional motivation to engage in contacting. This is because their act of participation acquires the additional function to generate information for the community of like-minded citizens about the representatives' performance. The mobilisation potential is particularly noteworthy in the case of WriteToThem which recruits people who are less politically active than other contacters. I have argued that this, among other reasons, is because the British platform enables contacting not only on the national, but also on the local level which is associated with less politically involved contacters of which many go on to also contact on the national level.

In relation to political equality contributions are visible in particular in engaging resource-poor people but at the same time both platforms strongly amplify existing biases, for example in relation to education, high income, age or gender. Particularly, both platforms fail to appeal to young users. If an assessment is based on the contribution to political equality overall, then on balance both platforms fail to increase political equality because on such important characteristics as gender or education they offer no contribution or in fact make matters worse. Overall this applies more strongly to the German platform Abgeordnetenwatch than both in comparison to offline as well as online contacting exacerbates gender and education biases, while WriteToThem is neutral at least in comparison to online contacting. However, if political equality is more narrowly defined as contributing to certain relevant characteristics, for example increasing involvement of those with low incomes, then both platforms offer contributions.

As online forms of participation, contact facilitation platforms suffer from the same double barrier of participation as does use of the Internet for contacting in general. The strong biases are therefore hardly surprising. I have argued that the differences in contacting patterns between the two sites – with WriteToThem reaching for example more women and those with less education – are in particular down to the different motivations with which citizens use them. These are rooted in the specific political traditions of the respective country to which the particular approach to communication of these sites is adapted: not least because WriteToThem enables communication in private, a considerable share of its users has personal motives that are linked to increased participation by women and resource-poorer parts of society. In contrast, users of Abgeordnetenwatch with its publicly visible communication almost entirely put forward collective concerns which can be associated more often

with resource-richer parts of the population. At the same time, it is exactly this public nature of the site that is the reason for one important contribution of Abgeordnetenwatch to political equality: it has offered a particularly mobilised group of unemployed people a forum to take their representatives publicly to account about an injustice they perceived in the system of unemployment benefit.

This subsection has summarised the major findings of this research in relation to use of the Internet or particular platforms in order to contact representatives. What are the implications of these findings for the relationship between citizens and representatives that has received much criticism as I have discussed in Chapter 2?

9.1.2 Implications for the relationship between citizens and representatives

Increasing democratic participation through targeted online efforts

Early on in this thesis I have criticised that contacting fails on both popular control (as too few people engage in this important form of participation) as well as on political equality (as those who do tend to be men with high education and income in their middle age). What the findings illustrate first of all is that simply making available an additional channel through which citizens can get in touch does little to change these long established patterns of participation (Parry et al., 1992; Verba et al., 1995). The reason for the lack of effect is that this additional channel by itself does not significantly lower the barriers or increase the motivation to engage in this form of participation.

At the same time, my findings show too that through specifically targeted efforts that are designed appropriately, the Internet can indeed be used to contribute to democratic participation, although the actual extent depends on how one prioritises

the different dimensions of popular control and political equality. I have demonstrated this for contact facilitation platforms: if the aim is to reach more people regardless of their socio-economic profile, then these sites are clearly successful. However, if the aim is to make engagement more equal in terms of raising contacters' overall representativeness of the population, the platforms offer a number of contributions but overall largely fail compared to other forms of contacting. Conversely, if the aim is to reach out specifically to low-resource groups of the population, or to those not organised in interest groups, the sites can be considered helpful too.

Improving how many and which citizens participate in contacting is only a first step towards improving the relationship between representatives and represented. To achieve the responsiveness that Pitkin (1967) has described as the ultimate goal of representative systems and that was discussed in Chapter 1, it is at least equally important that representatives listen to the concerns brought forward by citizens and deal with them in a satisfactory way. Chapter 2 has discussed the hopes connected to the use of ICTs for this form of participation and my results show that at least some of them have been fulfilled.

Improving the link between representatives and represented

Citizens take the initiative to talk to their representatives online and more often than not they get a reply – which is by no little means helped by the fact that response behaviour is publicly measured. As such my results offer a more positive picture of the use of ICTs by representatives than that of Williamson (2009b: 22) who concluded his survey of UK MPs with the sobering assessment that the Internet '*is seen and used primarily as a tool for communicating to, rather than engaging with, constituents*',

echoing similar findings in the UK and Germany (Ward and Lusoli, 2005: 61; Norton, 2007: 366p; Vicente-Merino, 2007: 448; Zittel, 2010: 198).

At the same time this immediate responsiveness itself is not sufficient if it is not connected to substantive responsiveness in the form of serious engagement with citizens' concerns by representatives. One of the hopes voiced by many authors was that online communication would allow for greater responsiveness through an increased dialogue between citizens and representatives (Norris, 1997; Norton, 2002d; Saalfeld, 2002; Coleman, 2007; Coleman, 2009; Coleman and Blumler, 2009; Zittel, 2010). For example Coleman (2009: 97) asserted '*a need for legitimate online spaces in which political representatives and represented citizens can exchange views and seek clarification from one another*' and I would argue that contact facilitation platforms go some way in achieving this as these user comments illustrate:

'It was a personal response; she answered my query and gave reasons for her action on the campaign.' (WTT7113)

'Though I disagree, it was a full letter (3 pages) outlining a coherent position.' (WTT7394)

'The representative did reply to my question individually, with short and precise information. This also happened unexpectedly fast.' (AW161)

'A very extensive, comprehensible answer together with reasonable arguments. Overall very helpful.' (AW186)

What these comments show is that the online interaction can indeed lead to substantive responsiveness by providing help to citizens, by furthering citizens' understanding for political decisions and by increasing the input representatives receive.

Achieving satisfaction

Whether a meaningful and satisfying interaction between citizens and representatives can be established depends only in part on the willingness of individual representatives to engage with these online opportunities – and I have shown that this is not universally given. It is more importantly rooted in role perceptions of representatives and the institutional frames in which they operate and that incentivises some behaviours while punishing others. This has meant that in Britain, where the role of MPs is more geared towards attending to constituents' issues, citizens use WriteToThem to a significant extent to achieve service responsiveness for personal concerns. While only about two thirds of users of WriteToThem receive a reply, about 80% of those were satisfied with the reply they received. In other words, most of them achieve substantive responsiveness of their representative as these user comments illustrate:

'MP has taken action to help me. Waiting for result of this action.' (WTT783)

'He said that he would write a further letter on my behalf to the appropriate person, plus gave me a further 2 possible roads to go down.' (WTT2180)

'She has taken my case on board and I have had several contacts from both her and her office' (WTT3824)

Conversely, while on Abgeordnetenwatch 80% of citizens receive a reply, only a third of them are satisfied with the response received, indicating a widespread failure to achieve substantive responsiveness. In their comments to the survey, Abgeordnetenwatch users very often complain about standard replies and politicians who do not answer the questions being asked:

'The answer completely missed the point of my question and the core of the problem. I think my question was deliberately not answered.' (AW7)

'Answer does not reflect the kind of policy I expect' (AW33)

'They escape the questions.' (AW246)

This is very likely down to the fact that the concerns of Abgeordnetenwatch users are focused more often on policy responsiveness which is much harder for MPs to provide – not least as German MPs are also less willing to provide it because they perceive their main role as legislators and lack the electoral incentives.

Implications for other forms of online contacting

My research has demonstrated that what keeps citizens from engaging in contacting is a lack of resources, a lack of motivation and a lack of responsiveness on behalf of those whom they address. These findings are not limited to the specific case of contact facilitation platforms but are instructive also for other means of online communication between citizens and representatives. For example, in Chapter 2 I have discussed the potential of social network sites to facilitate a more responsive relationship, but I have also shown that so far this has been rarely realised (Jackson and Lilleker, 2009a; Heimrich, 2010; Jackson and Lilleker, 2011; Meckel et al., 2011).

My findings suggest that among the reasons that explain this is that for representatives social network sites offer neither an additional capability nor an additional motivation to respond. It is not easier to reply on social network sites than it is via email and because representatives keep control of their pages, there is little transparency about their lack of responses. What is missing to actually increase responsiveness is a form of organization or mechanism that systematically exposes non-response and which does so in a way that puts pressure on representatives, e.g. via the media.

Because of this lack of responsiveness statistics or similar transparency features, there is little to suggest why the presence of an MP on say Facebook would increase the motivation of citizens to get in touch. While the limited public information in the form of walls and comments could create some sense of community which I have suggested as supportive for engagement, contacting via these sites remains predominantly an individual activity. Social networks also do little to address the resource barrier of participation: even if we assume that the sites might be particularly easy to use to send a message, citizens would still need to find their representative in the first place. Only if they have done so might a social network profile and the personal information it provides make a representative look more approachable and as such encourage contacting.

Altogether, this discussion highlights not only why contact facilitation platforms are more popular than social network sites for getting in touch with representatives, but also how their findings can inform further research as is the concern of the subsection that follows this one.

Summary of implications for the citizen-representative relationship

On the whole, the utility of the Internet to engage the previously unengaged – not only but including from some particular socio-economic backgrounds – has been demonstrated, as well as its utility to create a dialogue between citizens and representatives. This means that use of the Internet can address some, but not all of the problems of engagement in contacting – but only as long as the efforts are specifically designed to ensure effectiveness. Because this is by and large not the case in the current way in which the Internet is used to facilitate contacting, these benefits have only rarely materialised and as such it is hard to argue that the Internet has

revolutionised this form of participation. It is noteworthy that this assessment applies to both countries that I have analysed, even though they exhibit a number of important differences in relation to the culture and practice of contacting representatives, which suggests that these effects are very stable.

The final part of this section summarises how this research has contributed to the study of the relationship between representatives and citizens and highlights how future research can follow up on the themes of this thesis.

9.1.3 Future research on citizen-representative interactions

I have conducted 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 my research has contributed original data from two of the largest of such sites, based on the responses of several thousand users.

By offering empirical data and analysis on the impact of the Internet on the relationship between constituents and representatives, my research is in the tradition of legislative research such as of Norton (1994; 2002c; 2007) in the UK and Patzelt (1995; 1997) in Germany as well as others (Barker et al., 1970; Cain et al., 1987; Rawlings, 1990; Searing, 1994; Norris, 1997; Elsner and Algasinger, 2001; Saalfeld, 2002). My particular focus on citizens as the initiators of this communication complements these previous studies with their emphasis on representatives' perception and behaviour towards constituents' communication, that is also dominant in more recent literature on the effects of the Internet for this relationship (Ward and Lusoli, 2005; Coleman, 2006; Dai and Norton, 2007; Coleman and

Blumler, 2009; Williamson, 2009b; Zittel, 2010). My analysis of the motives of citizens for getting in touch with their representatives and the socio-economic profiles that are associated with particular motives has provided valuable empirical evidence that adds to the knowledge about implications of the constituency service role of MPs (Norton, 1994; Searing, 1994; Norris, 1997; Norton, 2002c).

Despite my assessment that overall, only few additional people become engaged in contacting through the Internet, I have discussed in Chapter 2 that MPs across Europe unanimously claim that email has vastly increased their communication demands, because it comes on top of the already received letters, phone calls and surgeries which have not accordingly decreased (Saalfeld, 2002; Dai, 2007: 470; Williamson, 2009; Zittel, 2010). In the light of my findings this must imply that those people who contact representatives now do so more often than before the Internet, maybe because it has become easier to do so. This is supported by data from the POC study (Emmer et al., 2011: 152), but clearly this is an area for further research.

On the one hand, this 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 (Barker et al., 1970; Kevenhörster and Schönbohm, 1973; Cain et al., 1987; Herzog et al., 1990; Norton, 1994; Patzelt, 1996; Norris, 1997; Elsner and Algasinger, 2001; Russel and Bradbury, 2006). 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. For example, as a result of the rapid development of the Internet today email messages can already be considered a *traditional* means to contact representatives while there are many additional ways to get in touch electronically such as Web 2.0 technologies (Chadwick, 2009).

However, despite the scholarly interest in social media, their use by citizens for contacting representatives has not yet been studied in any detail. Most research of political uses of Web 2.0 has focused on their use for election campaigns (Beckedahl et al., 2009; Utz, 2009; Williams and Gulati, 2009; Baumgartner and Morris, 2010; Gulati and Williams, 2010; Lilleker and Jackson, 2011; Schweitzer and Albrecht, 2011; Elter, 2012). Those few that have considered the citizen-representative relationship have exclusively focused on the utilisation of such tools by MPs, not by citizens (Jackson and Lilleker, 2009a; Williamson, 2009b; Jackson and Lilleker, 2011; Meckel et al., 2011; Siri et al., 2012). Here clearly there is a gap in this still recent scholarly literature that needs to be addressed.

In contrast, future research on contact facilitation platforms would benefit from systematically including the perspective of the political representatives because currently we know too little about how they perceive these sites. Apart from this the analysis of platforms in additional countries would be a test of the stability of the patterns I have reported. Conversely, if additional contact facilitation platforms emerge in the two countries I have analysed, their study could help test the influence of their design. Additionally, interviews and focus groups with users are a way to learn about what individuals perceive as barriers and opportunities of such sites. For example, what is it exactly that young people miss on those platforms? 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 my findings into perspective. Undertaken in a comparative perspective, such research could help to clarify why the Internet is more heavily used for contacting in the UK than in Germany.

While this section has discussed implications of my findings for the particular form of participation that is contacting representatives, the next section expands on what can be learned from them about the role of the Internet for democratic participation more generally.

9.2 Assessing the role of the Internet for democratic participation

This research project has been motivated by the question of whether the Internet furthers or diminishes democracy. Because a multitude of applications of the Internet can affect diverse aspects of democracy in a variety of ways, this question cannot be answered in absolute terms. Of interest is rather if there are instances at all in which it can be proven beyond reasonable doubt that the Internet has been used to further democracy and how this was achieved.

From my research into the use of the Internet for contacting representatives three main findings have emerged that are relevant to understand the role of the Internet for democracy, because they help to assess how the Internet can and cannot contribute to democratic participation – which I have argued forms one crucial element of representative democracies and on which I have built my framework introduced at the outset of this research.

9.2.1 Finding 1: The Internet can further democratic participation

It is a major finding of this research that the Internet can indeed be used to further democratic participation. This was demonstrated through the large degree to which contact facilitation platforms mobilise people who have so far not engaged in contacting and who are less often involved in political organizations, as well as through their ability to activate at least some people from poorer socio-economic backgrounds. In this way my empirical research has shown this ability to use the Internet for furthering democratic participation 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.

This research offers therefore an important qualification of the normalisation thesis that I have discussed in Chapter 1 (Margolis and Resnick, 2000; Norris, 2001). Online forms of participation do not automatically extend traditional patterns of participation. Instead they can break traditional patterns of participation. In the cases I have 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).

As a result both of these online applications have succeeded in their respective countries to further democratic participation by increasing popular control and – even though only selectively and on a small scale – by increasing political equality on a few characteristics. It is important to note that this is primarily a success of online efforts targeted specifically at this particular form of participation. In contrast, use of

the Internet as such has done little but it has at least managed to engage more young people, even though the impact of this might not be felt before these people get older.

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, because while these highlight that the technology and its design and adaptation to the context play an important role in activating the ‘right’ people, processes beyond the control of the online applications put heavy constraints on their potential to further democratic participation.

9.2.2 Finding 2: 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 as well as the user base of the analysed online applications that are dominated by men with high education, higher incomes and in their middle-age. Even though the analysed platforms markedly differ in their design (see the comparison in Chapter 7), the participation patterns overall exhibit substantial overlap, suggesting the important role played by factors independent of the technology itself.

As such my research provides a qualification of the theories about the optimistic expectations for the Internet. We cannot expect that applying the Internet to political

participation will automatically solve the participatory dilemmas that have been so well documented for the last few decades. My 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, in my case studies I have shown how macro factors such as the political organization and culture of a country 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.

In effect, both the resources as well as the motivation to participate are shaped to a greater degree by factors which are not directly related to the specific technological application. Any Internet application can only act upon these existing patterns of participation – that can be country-specific, as I have shown – but not independently of them. However, my 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 my third finding.

9.2.3 Finding 3: The design of Internet applications matters

The third major finding of this research is that the design of Internet applications matters for their success or failure to further democratic participation. By design I refer not so much to the graphical layout but to the functionality that is offered and the way interaction with the site is organised as well as the supporting organisation that operates and markets the platform – which we might call institutional design. 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.

In my research I have 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 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 for Finding 2 above. The difficulty is discerning the relevant factors and developing the appropriate design responses. It relies on an understanding of the macro- and micro-level factors at work that I have outlined in the previous chapter. This requires in-depth research that often will not be feasible. However, based on how the specific instances of the technology researched here have achieved their selective contribution to democratic participation, I have identified five universal design recommendations that enable more efficient use of such technologies to further democratic participation. While these are derived from my research into contacting representatives, they form general recommendations that are applicable to other forms of online participation too.

1. *Context adaptation*: Online applications cannot be completely independent of the ways in which citizens traditionally engage in participation. While these existing patterns of participation are usually those that are found wanting from a democratic point of view, the applications need first to tap into them to have a chance of being used in the first place. Only then can their specific design aim to achieve more desirable patterns of participation by offering additional motivation or lowering resource barriers, for example through the recommendations that follow below. In the cases I analysed, citizens considered the online applications relevant because they catered for their dominant motives for getting in touch with representatives. The different contacting motives in the two countries are reflected in the different decisions with regard to making the communication public or private. In the same way, by allowing users to contact only the constituency MP (WriteToThem) or any

MP (Abgeordnetenwatch), the design of the sites reflects the specific national relationships between representatives and constituents³⁶ which has helped to secure the cooperation of MPs without whose responsiveness such sites would have hardly been used at all.

2. *Simplicity*: Online applications need to be easy to use in order to minimise the impact of barriers to participation such as education and Internet literacy. This is helped by a focus on particular activities rather than aiming to be a one-stop shop for all forms of participation. For example, the platforms analysed in this research have very limited use cases – they can mainly be used to contact representatives – but that has allowed them to make the process of participation very easy, requiring very few steps to send a message to a representative. In addition, they use common knowledge (i.e. the postcode) to give access to information rarely known in particular by the socially disadvantaged (i.e. the contact details of the representative). This has been instrumental for mobilisation because ease of use has been one of the key arguments of people who used the sites and who had never before contacted a representative.
3. *Transparency*: On the one hand, the importance of transparency derives from its ability to increase the motivation of citizens to use the application. For example, the responsiveness statistics of contact facilitation platforms have meant that the individual actions of the users acquired an additional, collective significance. Abgeordnetenwatch benefits in particular from this mechanism

³⁶ British MPs are bound by House rules to only reply to emails by constituents (Williamson, 2009b; Norton, 2007: 360), while no such provision exists for German MPs who regularly receive up to half of their communication from outside their constituency (Elsner and Algasinger, 2001: 41).

as the openness of the platform has been an additional motivation for its users who feel that they are contributing to a common base of knowledge. On the other hand, the transparency has also increased the motivation of representatives to reply and through this contributed to the motivation of citizens to participate. It is sensible to assume that such transparency about action or inaction on behalf of those addressed could also be a relevant factor for engagement in other forms of participation.

4. *Locality*: Binding a participatory action to something that is relevant for people locally helps to activate the usually marginalized because by being affected it increases their motivation, and by being about their local environment it increases their capabilities in terms of knowledge. In my research this was shown by the contact facilitation platform in the UK whose feature to contact local representatives had marked positive effects for measures of popular control and political equality.
5. *Visibility*: Potential users of a service first need to learn about it. But it matters how to do this if the aim is to increase political equality by otherwise rarely active socio-economic groups. The analysis of the contact facilitation platforms has shown that a high visibility on search engines can help to reach those who lack knowledge about politics from other engagement in politics or political groups. Furthermore, traditional media (also in their online version) are very conducive to engaging older people who are usually hard to reach online, and campaigns – depending on the issue at stake – are also an important way to reach out beyond the usual suspects. Finally, incorporating

such sites into the social media sphere such as Facebook and Twitter might help to target young people.

These recommendations conclude the summary of the findings of my research on the role of the Internet for democratic participation. It is the task of the final section to place these findings into the context of previous research and to review the research strategy in order to highlight its benefits as well as its limitations and suggest future avenues of research.

9.3 Reviewing results and approach of research

9.3.1 The research in perspective

The results of this thesis offer confirmation of previous research into political participation – both online as well as offline – but also go beyond it in a variety of ways as I highlight below.

The findings in the context of online participation

In 2006, when revisiting the findings concerning the potential of the Internet for political participation in the UK for a special issue of the journal *Parliamentary Affairs*, Ward and Vedel (2006) concluded '*that the Internet per se is unlikely to stimulate widespread mobilisation or participation*'. Partly my research confirms this assessment because I have established the minor contribution of the Internet as such to popular control. At the same time I have been able to show the mobilising effect of contact facilitation platforms, and this comparison of Internet use in general and technological applications in particular provides a telling illustration of the need to focus research into political participation online on specific applications, hence offering support for this approach suggested by Bimber (2000) and Anderson et al. (2002).

The mobilisation of contact facilitation platforms is in stark contrast to the at best modest findings of previous research: almost half of its users have never engaged in this form of participation before and many of those have not been involved in political groups – as is usual – or other forms of participation. I have been able to demonstrate this mobilising effect with a specificity that goes beyond the assumptions of mobilisation through the Internet that are based upon the observation of people who rely exclusively on the Internet for participation as proposed in previous studies (Gibson et al., 2005b; di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006).

In terms of political equality, my research has confirmed previous findings about the profile of online participants in the UK (di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006) and Germany (Albrecht et al., 2008), namely that those engaging online are by and large less representative of the population than those who engage offline. In line with explanations of political participation offline (Parry et al., 1992; Verba et al., 1995) and online (Norris, 2001; Helsper, 2008; Mossberger, 2009), my analysis has also shown that this is in particular a question of resources that provide the ability to participate. However, my research has moved beyond this in several ways.

First of all, by analysing longitudinal data I have been able to show that the Internet as such had little impact on the profile of participants overall. Therefore the Internet does not increase participation by resource-rich individuals but instead causes those who participate to divide between the resource-rich who tend to use online means, and the resource-poorer who tend to engage offline. Not least given the observation that the Internet in general is activating few people, this finding demands a re-evaluation of Norris' (2000; 2001) claim that the Internet is only '*Activating the Active*'.

Second, while the potential of the Internet for engaging young people has been one of the few undisputed findings of research so far (Gibson et al., 2005b; di Gennaro and Dutton, 2006; Emmer et al., 2011), my case study websites and their lack of young users have been an exception to this pattern. This failure of contact facilitation platforms to attract young people shows that it is possible to influence who engages in online participation through the design of Internet applications – even if with this power also comes the chance to fail.

Third, and most importantly, I have identified processes that have shaped participation patterns and contributed a basic theory of factors that influence engagement in contacting representatives. This has allowed me to address one of the main criticism of research into electronic participation, namely its lack of theory and explanations for observed outcomes (Macintosh and Coleman, 2006; Macintosh et al., 2009). Specifically, I have concluded that for citizens to engage in any form of online interaction, they need to overcome a lack of resources, a lack of motivation and a lack of responsiveness, i.e. a lack of effect as a result of their action. As these processes are not specific to contacting representatives, this theory is also applicable to other forms of political participation and more generally, it is instructive for any form of interaction between citizens and institutions which relies on citizens assuming an active role. I have demonstrated this when applying my findings to social network sites to analyse why they largely fail to engage citizens and representatives in a dialogue.

These findings are all the more relevant because they are based on online platforms that have sustained a large user base for a long time (in Internet terms) instead of ephemeral, short-lived projects with few participants that have formed the basis of

much previous research (Pratchet et al., 2009). As such it addresses not only the proclaimed ‘*evaluation gap*’ (OECD and Forss, 2005; Kubicek et al., 2011), but also the lack of standards and indicators as well as the lack of strong empirical data that has been criticised by notable scholars of online participation research (Kubicek et al., 2007; Macintosh and Whyte, 2008; Pratchet et al., 2009: 15,88,199).

The findings in the context of traditional models of political participation

I have discussed that resources, motivation and responsiveness are shaped first and foremost by factors beyond the technology, hence severely limiting what can be achieved by its application. As such my findings confirm the continued importance of traditional determinants of political participation but this research has been able to go beyond this general assertion to detail how the context of political participation, i.e. both macro-level factors such as the political culture of a country as well as micro-level factors such as educational attainment, shapes online engagement. This provides the opportunity to better design efforts for online engagement and I have made a number of appropriate recommendations above.

This analysis was aided by the comparative approach of this research. The inter-country comparison has demonstrated the stability of traditional participation patterns – as online contacting in both countries has rarely engaged previously inactive users and exhibits heavy biases. Not least, studying Germany and the UK has allowed me to compare different political contexts for contacting as well as different technical designs for facilitating these contacts.

My research has delivered a powerful argument to counter claims that biased participation is due to a lack of interest and motivation of those under-represented – which tend to be those with lower resources. For example, the heavy use of

Abgeordnetenwatch by unemployed Germans to advance their interest (in this case in relation to an unemployment benefit reform) shows that these less privileged groups are indeed motivated to become politically active. By demonstrating that many citizens – or at least a greater share than currently participates – want to participate when given suitable opportunities, my results offer some support not only for the more optimistic expectations of the Internet and political participation, but also for those advocating more participation as a way to reinvigorate democracy (Pateman, 1970; Barber, 1984; Pateman, 2012).

This and my further findings of the many biases of participation online and offline have offered support for the basic assumptions of the *Civic Voluntarism Model* developed by Verba et al. (1995) that considers individual participation decisions to be the result of resources, motivation and personal networks. However, in the course of my analysis I have conceptually extended this model to also take account of factors connected to the (technical) means through which participation is mediated, as well as for the macro-level factors that are at play when comparing participation patterns across different countries.

What is more, I have also rejected Verba et al.'s dismissal of personal or '*particularized*' motives for engagement as simply being apolitical and irrelevant to participation. Instead I have offered a detailed analysis of how these different motives are associated with distinct socio-economic profiles and used my basic theory to illustrate how these are rooted in certain macro-level factors such as the organization of government and the roles this implies for representatives. To do so I have developed a framework to classify collective from personal motives that offers a reliable way to distinguish between service and policy responsiveness – concepts which despite

regular reference have so far only been loosely defined (Eulau and Karpis, 1978; Cain et al., 1987).

While the methodology applied by this research has proved itself by enabling it to provide findings that go beyond that of previous research, a number of aspects remain which could be improved. The second part of this section highlights these as well as a variety of areas in which further research could confirm the validity of these findings and contribute to a better understanding of the role of the Internet for democracy.

9.3.2 Research challenges and future research

The detailed analysis of a very specific context, namely contacting in Germany and the UK, has enabled me to isolate effects and identify processes that link certain factors to certain outcomes, resulting in the observed patterns. By using '*logical or scientific inference*' (Mitchell, 1983; Platt, 2007: 106) or '*analytic generalization*' (Yin, 2009: 38) it can be demonstrated that many of these processes are not specific to the focus of this research, i.e. online contacting, but apply just in the same way to use of the Internet for other forms of political participation, and are instructive for online interactions between citizens and authorities more generally.

Getting to the bottom of these processes would have been much more difficult without the specific qualifications I put in place, because without such a focus the often contradictory effects, e.g. as observed between use of the Internet in general and use of particular Internet applications, would have made identifying the processes almost impossible. Furthermore, my analysis has illustrated the need to rely on multiple sources of data, both quantitative as well as qualitative, including survey research, comparative accounts of political systems and theories of political

participation, and covering areas such as technological features as well as current affairs at the time of research. Such depth is one of the strengths of case study research and not possible with a purely quantitative approach and a larger number of cases. In effect, limiting the focus of analysis to contacting was not a constraint but a means of ensuring that the conclusions could apply to different forms of participation.

At the same time, a case study cannot offer final statistical proof. My conclusions are based upon interpretations of the evidence that are plausible but there is always a chance these might not hold for other cases. However, this research provides a solid basis for other research efforts to try and replicate the findings in different contexts and different forms of participation – not only for other contact facilitation platforms as suggested above, but also for other specific online applications that mediate between citizens and their representatives or authorities. Ideally, these should have proven their sustainability and their ability to attract significant numbers of people. Online citizens budgeting and online consultations seem like suitable candidates, but also online efforts whose political nature can at least be put into question – such as problem reporting³⁷ or Freedom of Information sites³⁸. Not least, while the applications I have researched were initiated by non-governmental organisations, what difference would it make to such projects if they were run by government?

It will remain an important challenge of such future research to obtain reliable data from these online applications. I have experienced this challenge for example in the

³⁷ For example FixMyStreet in the UK (<http://www.fixmystreet.com/>) or Maerker (<http://maerker.brandenburg.de/>) in Germany.

³⁸ For example, WhatDoTheyKnow in the UK (<http://www.whatdotheyknow.com/>) or FragDenStaat (*'question the government'*) in Germany (<https://fragdenstaat.de/>).

impracticality of implementing non-obtrusive measures to exclude repeat users from getting invited to the survey more often – an issue that should not have left a big mark as I have discussed, but that nevertheless should be addressed in any future research. Likewise, while the contact facilitation platforms offered an environment conducive to data collection, certainly the response rate of the survey of Abgeordnetenwatch users could be improved upon.

The experience of this research has emphasised the benefit of a comparative approach which should be pursued more often. At the same time conducting comparative research has proved a challenge. Obtaining relevant data from different countries is not always possible and even where surveys use similar definitions, the data might not always be easily comparable, for example as it derives from different years. I have encountered these problems more than once, as I have discussed at length in Chapter 7 among other places. This has not only been a problem across countries but also within. For instance, the surveys on contact facilitation platforms were conducted in later years than the population surveys with the consequence that some of the observed differences between the population data and the platform data might not be due to actual differences but rather temporal variations. However, the distributions of the majority of socio-economic characteristics of interest in this research change very little in the course of a couple of years.

I have argued that every research into the role of the Internet for democracy needs a normative reference that can be translated into a measurable framework. The framework used throughout this thesis suggests itself because the distinction between popular control and political equality could be applied with few problems, and the chosen operationalisations could be implemented in a survey design. It provided a

measurement that struck a balance between being sufficiently general to be applicable and manageable, as well as being precise enough to highlight nuances such as the high engagement of low-resource users in an otherwise very biased environment as demonstrated by my analysis of the users of Abgeordnetenwatch.

The logged representation scale (LRS) has proved valuable, providing a single and relative measure of bias that raised attention to the real deviations and not just to those appearing large in absolute numbers. However, an interesting avenue for future research would be to determine how much a lack of descriptive representation actually matters for the representation of the ‘true’ interests of all who are affected by a policy. For example, it could well be that an under-representation of women, expressed in a LRS score of 0.3, results in a greater misrepresentation of interests than an under-representation of unemployed people by the same LRS score. This would help to weight the observed biases in participation according to how much they affect active representation and hence political equality.

Finally, while my research has focused on the act of participation 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.

Having discussed the results of this thesis in relation to previous research and provided an assessment of the research strategy to suggest promising issues for further research, the last part of this chapter turns to the final conclusion.

Conclusion

This thesis started from the basic question of whether or not the Internet has a positive effect on democracy. I have shown that this question has previously not received a definitive answer, and one of the main reasons for this is that this question seems simple only at first sight. Ultimately the answer needs to be a theory that states under what conditions and by which application of technology we can expect positive outcomes for particular aspects of democracy. This research has contributed to such an answer by developing a theory that accounts for how online contacting as one specific form of political participation interacts with established patterns of participation and by demonstrating on the basis of empirical evidence in which respects this has positive and in which respects this has negative consequences for democratic participation as one element of representative democracies.

To this end, my research has provided a framework to assess the quality of democratic systems which emphasises popular control and political equality and has focused on the degree to which these are realised in political participation as one important means to enable the responsiveness – and hence democratic nature – of representative systems (Pitkin, 1967; Eulau and Karps, 1978). The extent of democratic participation has been measured in terms of the number of people participating and their representativeness for the distribution of socio-economic characteristics in the population. Apart from the frequent absence of such explicit normative premises, my review of previous studies of online participation further identified a lack of focus that has been addressed by examining not only political participation and the Internet in general, but by contributing original data and analysis to the study of contacting and contact facilitation platforms in particular. This has also enabled me to extend the limited amount of case studies that evaluate electronic

participation efforts, and I have done so in comparative perspective (which is rare) between the UK and Germany.

Based on the findings of this research I answer the question about the Internet's effect on democracy as follows: from the framework of popular control and political equality in political participation as proposed here, *Internet applications have been shown to make a number of significant positive contributions to democratic participation and through this to democracy – but only selectively and only if appropriately designed.* In particular, these applications need to accommodate established patterns of participation which still very much structure participation – also online.

The most important message from this research is that the success or failure of online efforts to further democratic participation relies crucially on their specific institutional and technical design – in other words, specific choices about functionality and organization of the technology – and how this adapts to the specific contexts in which the sites operate. On the one hand, the implication is that the Internet can indeed be used to contribute to democracy, as I have shown for example for the amount of people that have been mobilised to engage in political participation through contact facilitation platforms. I have been able to substantiate this finding across political cultures in different countries. This is very important in light of the cyber-pessimistic views because it emphasises that the Internet has a democratic potential and this potential is not just theoretical but put to effect in actual practice. Not least, the results demonstrate that on behalf of citizens there is indeed a large demand for participation if provided with feasible and suitable opportunities to do so, confirming the assumption of proponents of participatory democracy (Pateman, 1970; Barber, 1984).

On the other hand, this strong relevance of the particular way the technology is implemented entails that the positive effects for democracy are not a simple function of applying the Internet to participation. This has been illustrated by the inconclusive or negative results of previous research into effects of the Internet on political participation, and my research has confirmed this by observing only marginal effects of the Internet in general on engagement in contacting. What these findings underline is that the Internet does not simply overcome the effects of traditional determinants of participation and the established patterns of participation that flow from it. One example of such established patterns is citizens' widespread discontent with the political systems and its actors, as is also apparent in these comments from users of the contact facilitation platforms:

'It is a waste of time to search for credible politicians' (AW209)

'Because it does not make sense to communicate with these elites, they are far to detached from the people' (AW568)

'My MP doesn't seem to take much notice of local people's problems which basically reflects the whole situation with the entire country and politicians.' (WTT11583)

'politicians are very economical with the truth and cannot be trusted' (WTT6859)

All of these comments were made by users of contact facilitation platforms who had never before contacted a representative and after they had received a response from an MP. This offers support for Norris' (1999) argument about '*critical citizens*' that value democracy and want to participate but are dissatisfied with what they can achieve, as discussed in the introductory chapter. More importantly, it highlights that with the help of the Internet not all of the problems of representative democracies can be addressed, such as for example long-standing, fundamental inequalities in access to resources and a lack of responsive representation which leads to

dissatisfaction. As a consequence, even in situations in which the technology can offer a positive contribution to democratic participation, such as the mobilisation of previously inactive citizens, it can still fail to achieve the kind of substantive responsiveness that is desired and thus fail to ensure popular control and political equality in representative systems.

Current initiatives that promote the application of the Internet to further democracy, such as those outlined at the beginning of this thesis, would do well to remember that technology is not the solution to all of democracy's woes. While I have shown that they can be a means to address some aspects of these problems, even with appropriately targeted and contextualised Internet technologies, it is not possible to address all of them, not least as participation online is associated with additional barriers to participation such as the requirement of online access and skills.

As a consequence, responsiveness – even though crucial to ensure popular control and political equality in representative systems, as I have argued at the beginning – continues to suffer both in terms of demand as well as supply. My research has shown in great detail that too few citizens demand responsiveness from their representatives by way of getting in touch with them, and those who do are rich in resources – violating both the normative principles of popular control and political equality. At the same time, the response and satisfaction rates and many user comments collected in the survey also indicate that even for many of those privileged few who get in touch, representatives do not supply the desired response. In other words, despite having available a powerful technology to connect and involve *‘the people’*, representative democracies in the 21st century do barely more justice to the

democratic ideals of popular control and political equality than their offline versions did in the 20th century.

In conclusion, the Internet can make some significant – but selective – contributions to democracy, for example by mobilising citizens to participate. These include those who have so far not participated in politics and political organisations as well as some from poorer socio-economic backgrounds. However, even this somewhat limited potential is not fully realised because most attempts at online participation are not adequately designed: such design is difficult and requires a very good understanding of the determinants and the context of participation. This is often lacking, as exemplified by the blanket introduction of electronic petitions for local authorities in England and Wales cited in the introduction of this thesis. As a result, so far the contribution of the Internet to democracy has been very small.

It remains to be seen whether this contribution can be increased in the future. What this thesis has shown is that the Internet is neither unreservedly positive nor completely negative for democracy and approaching its role in such absolute terms is not helpful. Instead, we need to think carefully how technology platforms can be used, building on the – albeit limited – gains that have been identified here, to strengthen them as a means of ensuring popular control and political equality.

Appendix A Results tables UK

Table 24 Profile of British population, people who contacted politicians or government officials and users of WriteToThem (2009, 2009/10)

	British population			British citizens who contacted a politician or government official					WriteToThem users who contacted an MP		
	<i>total</i>	<i>politically active</i>	<i>Internet users</i>	<i>total</i>	<i>offline only</i>	<i>online (and offline)</i>	<i>online & offline</i>	<i>online only</i>	<i>total</i>	<i>contacted never before</i>	<i>contacted previously</i>
male	48	50	49	61	53	69	60	76	62	60	63
higher degree	20	30	27	41	31	51	52	49	52	46	57
household income (gross/year)											
≤ £12,500	26	18	14	17	26	9	12	7	17	18	16
£12,501–£40,000	58	58	64	50	53	48	41	53	44 ^{a)}	42 ^{a)}	45 ^{a)}
> £40,000	16	24	22	33	21	43	48	40	40 ^{a)}	40 ^{a)}	39 ^{a)}
age											
< 18 years	6	6	8	5	2	8	0	13	1	1	0
18-24 years	10	9	12	6	6	6	4	6	5	6	4
25-34 years	18	14	22	14	8	19	13	23	15	17	12
35-44 years	18	19	22	16	15	17	19	16	20	23	17
45-54 years	16	20	18	21	20	22	28	18	23	22	23
55-64 years	12	14	10	18	22	14	17	13	24	20	27
65-74 years	12	12	7	14	18	10	17	7	12	9	14
≥ 75 years	8	5	2	6	9	4	2	6	3	2	3

(Table continued)

APPENDIX A - RESULTS TABLES UK

Table 24 continued

	British population			British citizens who contacted a politician or government official					WriteToThem users who contacted an MP		
	<i>total</i>	<i>politically active</i>	<i>Internet users</i>	<i>total</i>	<i>offline only</i>	<i>online (and offline)</i>	<i>online & offline</i>	<i>online only</i>	<i>total</i>	<i>contacted never before</i>	<i>contacted previously</i>
occupation											
(self-)employed	49	54	61	51	42	61	68	56	61	64	59
retired	23	23	11	28	34	22	23	21	22	17	26
unemployed	8	4	6	4	4	3	4	4	5	7	4
sick/disabled	3	3	1	4	7	1	2	0	3	3	3
home caretaker	8	6	9	4	7	2	0	3	4	4	3
student	9	10	13	9	6	11	2	16	5	6	4
disability	15	15	9	18	25	12	9	13	15	13	17
active in political group	11	23	13	32	29	36	51	25	15	7	21
pol. participation (excluding contacting)											
no activity	66 (68)	- (6)	60 (62)	(18)	(22)	(14)	(9)	(17)	58	75	44
offline only	19 (19)	56 (54)	19 (19)	(35)	(57)	(13)	(19)	(10)	7	5	8
online only	4 (5)	13 (13)	6 (6)	(16)	(7)	(25)	(11)	(33)	19	13	23
online & offline	11 (9)	31 (27)	15 (13)	(32)	(14)	(49)	(62)	(44)	17	7	25
N	2,013	687	1,401	236	119	117	46	71	13,520	6,050	7,470
source	OxIS 2009 based on British population aged 14 years and above								WriteToThem user survey 2009/10		

Notes: Numbers reported are percentages of respective group. See further notes below.

APPENDIX A - RESULTS TABLES UK

Notes from Table 24 continued:

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, contacted a politician, 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. The numbers reported in brackets exclude the activity of contacting politicians. For WriteToThem, it excludes use of the site itself to contact a representative.

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)'.

Higher degree is university degree or equivalent, excludes those who were still in education (except those on postgraduate degrees).

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 community groups: 'Do you participate to the activities of: any social or sport club, a residents, neighbourhood, school or other local group, a charity organization or social aid organisation, religious or church 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) and/or a community group (e.g. a charity, an initiative, a church, a sports club, a volunteer organisation)'.

^{a)} For WriteToThem, the cut-off value between the medium and the highest income category is £37,500, not £40,000 as in the O×IS data.

APPENDIX A - RESULTS TABLES UK

Table 25 Politically relevant characteristics: distribution and bias from UK population for those who contacted a politician or government official and users of WriteToThem (2009, 2009/10)

percentage of respective group with this characteristics	male	higher degree	high income	low income	<25 yrs	55-64 yrs	65+ yrs	(self-) employed	unemployed	retired	disability	politically active	active in pol. groups
population	48	20	16	26	16	12	19	49	8	23	15	34	11
politically active citizens	50	30	24	18	15	14	18	54	4	23	15	100	23
Internet users	49	27	22	14	20	9	9	61	6	11	9	40	13
contacted politician/ government official	61	41	33	17	11	18	21	51	4	28	18	82	32
- only offline	53	31	21	26	8	22	27	42	4	34	25	78	29
- online (and offline)	69	51	43	9	14	14	14	61	3	22	12	86	36
- online & offline	60	52	48	12	4	17	19	68	4	23	9	91	51
- only online	76	49	40	7	18	13	13	56	4	21	13	83	25
WriteToThem users <i>(who contacted MP)</i>	62	52	40	17	5	24	14	61	5	22	15	42	15
- first-time contacters	60	46	40	18	7	20	11	64	7	17	13	25	7
- contacted before	63	57	39	16	4	27	17	59	4	26	17	56	21

(Table continued)

APPENDIX A - RESULTS TABLES UK

Table 25 continued

Logged Representation Scale (LRS) scores	male	higher degree	high income	low income	<25 yrs	55-64 yrs	65+ yrs	(self-) employed	unemployed	retired	disability	politically active	active in pol. groups
politically active citizens	0.02	0.18	0.18	-0.17	-0.06	0.07	-0.03	0.04	-0.29	0	-0.01	0.47	0.32
Internet users	0.01	0.14	0.14	-0.26	0.09	-0.11	-0.34	0.09	-0.16	-0.32	-0.24	0.04	0.09
contacted politician/ government official	0.11	0.32	0.31	-0.19	-0.19	0.18	0.03	0.02	-0.32	0.09	0.09	0.38	0.47
- only offline	0.05	0.19	0.13	-0.01	-0.33	0.26	0.15	-0.07	-0.28	0.18	0.22	0.36	0.42
- online (and offline)	0.16	0.41	0.44	-0.46	-0.08	0.08	-0.12	0.09	-0.38	-0.02	-0.09	0.40	0.52
- online & offline	0.09	0.42	0.48	-0.34	-0.58	0.15	0	0.14	-0.28	0.01	-0.22	0.43	0.67
- only online	0.20	0.40	0.40	-0.58	0.05	0.02	-0.18	0.06	-0.28	-0.03	-0.07	0.39	0.37
WriteToThem users (who contacted MP)	0.11	0.46	0.40	-0.19	-0.48	0.30	-0.13	0.10	-0.18	-0.02	0.01	0.09	0.14
- first-time contacters	0.10	0.37	0.41	-0.17	-0.36	0.23	-0.25	0.11	-0.09	-0.13	-0.05	-0.14	-0.17
- contacted before	0.12	0.46	0.39	-0.21	-0.61	0.34	-0.06	0.08	-0.26	0.05	0.05	0.22	0.29

Source: OxiS 2009, mySociety user survey 2009/10. Respective case numbers are reported in Table 24 above.

Notes: The LRS scores report the bias of the respective group from the British population aged 14 years and older. 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. Political activity excludes contacting, for WriteToThem users excludes use of the site. Refer to Table 24 above for further notes

Table 26 Politically relevant characteristics: significance of difference between British population, those who contacted a politician or government official and users of WriteToThem (2009, 2009/10)

	British population		British citizens who contacted a politician/government official					WriteToThem users who contacted an MP	
	<i>total</i>	<i>politically active citizens</i>	<i>total</i>	<i>offline only</i>	<i>online (and offline)</i>	<i>online & offline</i>	<i>online only</i>	<i>total</i>	<i>contacted never before</i>
<i>British citizens who contacted a politician/government official</i>	male** education** high income** low income** <25yrs** 55-64yrs** unemployed** retired* pol. part.** groups (pol.)**	male** education** high income* <25yrs* 55-64yrs* retired* disability* groups (pol.)**	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>- offline only</i>	education** <25yrs** 55-64yrs** 65+* retired** disabled** pol. part.** groups (pol.)**	not tested		-	-	-	-	-	-

(Table continued)

APPENDIX A - RESULTS TABLES UK

Table 26 continued

	British population		British citizens who contacted a politician/government official					WriteToThem users who contacted an MP	
	<i>total</i>	<i>politically active citizens</i>	<i>total</i>	<i>offline only</i>	<i>online (and offline)</i>	<i>online & offline</i>	<i>online only</i>	<i>total</i>	<i>contacted never before</i>
<i>- online (and offline)</i>	male** education** high income** low income** employed** unemployed(*) pol. part.** groups (pol.)**	not tested		male* education** high income** low income** 65+yrs.* employed** retired* disability*		-	-	-	-
<i>- online & offline</i>	not tested	not tested	not tested	education* high income** employed** disability* pol. part.(*) groups (pol.)**			-	-	-
<i>- online only</i>	not tested	not tested	not tested	male** education* high income* low income** <25yrs.* 65+yrs.* employed(*) retired(*) disability(*)			male(*) <25yrs.* groups (pol.)**	-	-

(Table continued)

APPENDIX A - RESULTS TABLES UK

Table 26 continued

	British population		British citizens who contacted a politician/government official					WriteToThem users who contacted an MP	
	<i>total</i>	<i>politically active citizens</i>	<i>total</i>	<i>offline only</i>	<i>online (and offline)</i>	<i>online & offline</i>	<i>online only</i>	<i>total</i>	<i>contacted never before</i>
<i>WriteToThem users who contacted an MP</i>	male** education** high income** low income** <25yrs.** 55-64yrs.* 65+yrs** employed** unemployed** pol. part.** groups (pol.)**	not tested	education** high income(*) <25yrs.** 55-64yrs.* 65+yrs.** employed** retired* pol. part.** groups (pol.)**	male(*) education** high income** low income* 65+yrs.** employed** retired** disability** pol. part.** groups (pol.)**	male(*) low income(*) <25yrs.** 55-64yrs.* pol. part.** groups (pol.)**	not tested	male* low income(*) <25yrs.** 55-64yrs.* pol. part.** groups (pol.)*	-	-
<i>- contacted never before</i>	not tested	not tested	not tested	education** high income** low income(*) 65+yrs.** employed** retired** pol. part.** groups (pol.)**	male* low income* <25yrs.* pol. part.** groups (pol.)**	not tested	male** low income* <25yrs.** pol. part.** groups (pol.)**		-

(Table continued)

Table 26 continued

	British population		British citizens who contacted a politician/government official					WriteToThem users who contacted an MP	
	<i>total</i>	<i>politically active citizens</i>	<i>total</i>	<i>offline only</i>	<i>online (and offline)</i>	<i>online & offline</i>	<i>online only</i>	<i>total</i>	<i>contacted never before</i>
<i>- contacted previously</i>	not tested	not tested	not tested	gender* education** high income** low income* <25yrs. ^a (*) 65+yrs.** employed** retired* pol. part.** groups (pol.)(*)	low income(*) <25yrs.** 55-64yrs.** pol. part.** groups (pol.)**	not tested	male* low income(*) <25yrs.** 55-64yrs.* pol. part.**	male** education** low income* <25yrs.** 55-64yrs.** 65+yrs.** employed** unemployed** retired** disability** pol. part.** groups (pol.)**	

Source: OxIS 2009; mySociety user survey 2009/10

Notes: Each cell in the matrix lists the politically relevant characteristics on which the group named on the left-hand side of the row is significantly different from the group named at the top of the column. Significance based on χ^2 -tests (applying Yates correction for continuity) and indicated by ** $p \leq 0.01$; * $p \leq 0.05$; (*) $p \leq 0.1$. Refer to Table 25 for actual extent of the biases.

The characteristic 'employed' includes self-employed. Political participation excludes contacting, for WriteToThem users excludes use of the site.

^a) Expected case numbers of less than 5 hence χ^2 -tests are not applicable; if significance is provided this is based on Fisher's exact test.

Appendix B Results tables Germany

Table 27 Profile of German population, people who contacted someone in a political role and users of Abgeordnetenwatch (2008, 2010/11)

	German population			German citizens who contacted someone in a political role					Abgeordnetenwatch users who contacted an MP		
	<i>total</i>	<i>politically active</i>	<i>Internet users</i>	<i>total</i>	<i>offline only</i>	<i>online (and offline)</i>	<i>online & offline</i>	<i>online only</i>	<i>total</i>	<i>contacted never before</i>	<i>contacted previously</i>
male	47	47	50	59	53	73	73	71	84	81	85
higher degree	17	23	21	28	26	33	33	33	59	55	62
household income ^{a)} (net/month)											
≤ €1,100 (~£875)	20	13	14	8	9	5	6	0	20	22	20
€1,101 – €2,250	39	38	34	34	39	21	21	29	25	24	25
> €2,250 (~£1,800)	42	49	52	58	52	74	73	71	55	54	55
age											
< 18 years	2	1	3	2	3	0	0	0	1	1	0
18-24 years	8	6	11	4	2	10	6	22	4	4	4
25-34 years	11	9	14	6	5	10	10	11	9	10	7
35-44 years	19	21	23	20	18	23	21	28	15	17	13
45-54 years	23	25	26	26	25	29	37	11	24	21	27
55-64 years	15	15	14	18	21	12	13	6	26	24	27
65-74 years	16	18	9	19	20	14	13	22	19	20	19
≥ 75 years	7	5	1	5	7	1	0	0	3	3	3

(Table continued)

APPENDIX B - RESULTS TABLES GERMANY

Table 27 continued

	German population			German citizens who contacted someone in a political role					Abgeordnetenwatch users who contacted an MP		
	<i>total</i>	<i>politically active^{a)}</i>	<i>Internet users</i>	<i>total</i>	<i>offline only</i>	<i>online (and offline)</i>	<i>online & offline</i>	<i>online only</i>	<i>total</i>	<i>contacted never before</i>	<i>contacted previously</i>
occupation											
(self-)employed	64	66	78	66	61	78	82	71	52	56	49
retired	28	27	13	28	32	17	14	29	31	30	33
unemployed	2	2	3	2	2	2	2	0	7	5	9
home caretaker	5	5	5	4	5	2	2	0	2	3	2
student	1	1	2	0	0	2	0	0	7	7	8
disability	28	27	21	31	-	-	-	-	13	12	13
active in political group	13	23	16	40	34	53	60	33	32	24	38
political participation (excluding contacting)											
no activity	47 (52)	- (9)	43 (49)	(23)	(23)	(23)	(23)	(28)	18	29	9
offline only	42 (41)	80 (78)	42 (41)	(60)	(70)	(36)	(37)	(33)	10	10	11
online only	2 (1)	3 (3)	2 (2)	(1)	(1)	(3)	(2)	(0)	27	22	29
online & offline	9 (6)	17 (11)	12 (8)	(16)	(7)	(39)	(38)	(39)	46	39	51
N	1,199	630	841	237	167	70	52	18	668	272 ^{b)}	374 ^{b)}
source	Political Online Communication (POC) 2008 (based on German population aged 16 years and above)								Abgeordnetenwatch user survey 2010/11		

Notes: Numbers reported are percentages of respective group. See further notes below.

APPENDIX B - RESULTS TABLES GERMANY

Notes from Table 27 continued:

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, contacted a politician or other person in a political role, donated money to a political group or for a political cause, displayed a political button/sticker. The numbers reported in brackets exclude the activity of contacting politicians. For Abgeordnetenwatch, also included 'boycotting a product' but excludes use of the site itself to contact a representative.

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 initiative!'; coding as 'offline': '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!'

Higher degree stands for university degree or equivalent, excludes those who were still in education.

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.

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)'

^{a)} Due to a different category scheme in use for the POC panel surveys, the data on income could very slightly underestimate the size of the low as well as the high-income group in the population/ amongst contacters.

^{b)} 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.

Table 28 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)

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

(Table continued)

Table 28 continued

Logged Representation Scale (LRS) scores	male	higher degree	high income	low income	<25 yrs	55-64 yrs	65+ yrs	(self- employed	unemployed	retired	disability	politically active	active in pol. groups
politically active citizens	-0.01	0.13	0.07	-0.18	-0.15	-0.01	0.01	0.01	-0.15	-0.01	-0.02	0.28	0.24
Internet users	0.02	0.11	0.1	-0.15	0.13	-0.01	-0.37	0.08	0.14	-0.33	-0.13	0.03	0.08
contacted someone in a political role	0.09	0.22	0.14	-0.38	-0.2	0.08	0.01	0.01	-0.07	0	0.04	0.17	0.48
- only offline	0.05	0.19	0.09	-0.32	-0.32	0.15	0.06	-0.02	-0.05	0.07		0.17	0.41
- online (and offline)	0.19	0.3	0.25	-0.6	0.01	-0.10	-0.16	0.08	-0.13	-0.2		0.17	0.60
- online & offline	0.19	0.3	0.24	-0.49	-0.24	-0.04	-0.23	0.10	-0.02	-0.29		0.17	0.66
- only online	0.17	0.3	0.23	-	0.35	-0.42	-0.02	0.05	-	0.02		0.14	0.40
Abgeordnetenwatch users (who contacted MP)	0.25	0.55	0.12	0.01	-0.39	0.24	-0.02	-0.09	0.52	0.06	-0.34	0.19	0.38
- first-time only	0.23	0.52	0.11	0.05	-0.32	0.21	0	-0.07	0.37	0.03	-0.37	0.13	0.25
- contacted before	0.26	0.56	0.12	0.02	-0.43	0.26	-0.02	-0.12	0.61	0.08	-0.35	0.24	0.46

Source: POC 2008; Abgeordnetenwatch user survey 2010/11. Respective case numbers are reported in Table 27 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).

Political activity excludes contacting, for Abgeordnetenwatch users excludes use of the site. Refer to Table 27 above for further notes.

Table 29 Politically relevant characteristics: significance of difference between German population, those who contacted someone in a political role and users of Abgeordnetenwatch (2008, 2010/11)

	German population		German citizens who contacted someone in a political role					Abgeordnetenwatch users who contacted an MP	
	<i>total</i>	<i>politically active citizens</i>	<i>total</i>	<i>offline only</i>	<i>online (and offline)</i>	<i>online & offline</i>	<i>online only</i>	<i>total</i>	<i>contacted never before</i>
<i>German citizens who contacted someone in a political role</i>	male** education** high income** low income** <25yrs* minority* pol. part** groups (pol.)**	male** education* high income** low income* 55-64yrs* unemployed ^{a)} disability* minority* pol. part** groups (pol.)**	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<i>- offline only</i>	education** high income** low income** <25yrs* 55-64yrs* unemployed ^{a)} pol. part** groups (pol.)**	not tested		-	-	-	-	-	-

(Table continued)

APPENDIX B - RESULTS TABLES GERMANY

Table 29 continued

	German population		German citizens who contacted someone in a political role					Abgeordnetenwatch users	
	<i>total</i>	<i>politically active citizens</i>	<i>total</i>	<i>offline only</i>	<i>online (and offline)</i>	<i>online & offline</i>	<i>online only</i>	<i>total</i>	<i>contacted never before</i>
- <i>online (and offline)</i>	male** education** high income** low income** employed* unemployed ^{a)} retired(*) pol. part.** groups (pol.)**	not tested		male** high income** low income ^{a)} employed* unemployed ^{a)} retired* groups (pol.)**		-	-	-	-
- <i>online & offline</i>	not tested	not tested	not tested	male* high income* low income ^{a)} 65+yrs(*) employed* retired* groups (pol.)**			-	-	-
- <i>online only</i>	not tested	not tested	not tested	education ^{a)} low income ^{a)} <25yrs ^{a)} * 55-64yrs ^{a)} 65+yrs ^{a)} unemployed ^{a)} retired ^{a)} pol. part. ^{a)}		male ^{a)} high income ^{a)} low income ^{a)} <25yrs ^{a)} (*) 55-64yrs ^{a)} 65+yrs ^{a)} employed ^{a)} unemployed ^{a)} retired ^{a)} pol. part. ^{a)} groups (pol.)(*)		-	-

(Table continued)

APPENDIX B - RESULTS TABLES GERMANY

Table 29 continued

	German population		German citizens who contacted someone in a political role					Abgeordnetenwatch users who contacted an MP	
	<i>total</i>	<i>politically active citizens</i>	<i>total</i>	<i>offline only</i>	<i>online (and offline)</i>	<i>online & offline</i>	<i>online only</i>	<i>total</i>	<i>contacted never before</i>
<i>Abgeordnetenwatch users who contacted an MP</i>	male** education** high income** <25yrs** 55-64yrs** employed** unemployed** disability** pol. part.** groups (pol.)**	not tested	male** education** low income** 55-64yrs* employed** unemployed** disability** groups (pol.)*	male** education** low income** employed(*) unemployed*	male* education** high income** low income** <25yrs ^{a)} * 55-64yrs* employed** unemployed ^{a)} retired* groups (pol.)**	not tested	not tested	-	-
<i>- contacted never before</i>	male** education** high income** <25yrs** 55-64yrs** employed* unemployed** disability** pol. part.** groups (pol.)**	not tested	male** education** low income** employed* unemployed(*) disability** groups (pol.)**	male** education** low income** groups (pol.)*	education** high income* low income** <25yrs ^{a)} 55-64yrs* employed** unemployed ^{a)} retired(*) groups (pol.)**	not tested	not tested		-

(Table continued)

APPENDIX B - RESULTS TABLES GERMANY

Table 29 continued

	German population		German citizens who contacted someone in a political role					Abgeordnetenwatch users who contacted an MP	
	<i>total</i>	<i>politically active citizens</i>	<i>total</i>	<i>offline only</i>	<i>online (and offline)</i>	<i>online & offline</i>	<i>online only</i>	<i>total</i>	<i>contacted never before</i>
<i>- contacted previously</i>	not tested	not tested	not tested	male** education** low income**	male* education** high income** low income** <25yrs ^{a)} * 55-64yrs*	not tested	not tested		pol. part.** groups (pol.)**

Source: POC 2008, Abgeordnetenwatch user survey 2010/11.

Notes: Each cell in the matrix lists the politically relevant characteristics on which the group named on the left-hand side of the row is significantly different from the group named at the top of the column. Significance based on χ^2 -tests (applying Yates correction for continuity) and indicated by ** $p \leq 0.01$; * $p \leq 0.05$; (*) $p \leq 0.1$. Refer to Table 28 for actual extent of the biases.

The characteristic 'employed' includes self-employed. Political participation excludes contacting, for Abgeordnetenwatch users excludes use of the site.

^{a)} Expected case numbers of less than 5 hence χ^2 -tests are not applicable; if significance is provided this is based on Fisher's exact test.

Appendix C Data collection for the UK: online survey of WriteToThem users

Questionnaire

Simple survey questionnaire

Two weeks after a message is sent via WriteToThem.com, the user will receive the following email:

xxx weeks ago we sent your letter to 'recipient_name', your 'recipient_position'.

(For reference, there's a copy of your letter at the bottom of this email)

- If you HAVE had a reply (not just an acknowledgement), please click on the link below

- If you HAVE NOT had a reply, or you have only had an acknowledgement, please click on the link below:

Clicking on the link will open a web page in the user's browser which will then display another question:

Is this the first time you've ever contacted one of your political representatives, by any means? YES / NO

Extended survey questionnaire

This will be displayed to the user after answering the simple survey (see previous section) if it was not already answered in the past.

Thanks again! ... just a few more questions

We (i.e. the people from mySociety, the independent non-profit which runs this site) hate to bother you with this, but we need to know whether our site is used by a representative share of the population (we would not want to only serve one particular group exclusively). We know we ask some personal stuff but be assured:

- *The questions from here on are **completely anonymous**.*
- *We only record whether you've answered or not. So nobody (not even we) can know how YOU answered.*
- *This also means that we cannot connect your answers to whatever you do on our sites.*
- *Of course we would like you to answer all questions but you don't have to if you feel it's none of our business.*
- *These are all the questions. **We won't ask more**. So it should take only 7 minutes.*

*Your feedback will help us **make the site better** and help us tell more people about it.*

How did you find out about this site?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • from another mySociety site • from media such as newspapers, etc • from a search engine (e.g. Google or Yahoo) • recommendation by friends or colleagues • from a campaigning website • other (<i>please specify</i>) • can't remember
How likely is it that you would recommend this site to a friend or colleague? (assuming they would be interested in such a service)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • from 0 (<i>not at all likely</i>) to 10 (<i>extremely likely</i>) • <i>feel free to tell us why</i>
We're thinking of adding an option so that in the future you could choose whether you wanted your correspondence with your politician to be private, as it is now, or public. Would you ever use this option?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • yes • yes, but only if my name and email address would not be public • no

<p>You've said that your representative replied to your message. In what form did your representative reply? If you've got several replies to your message just indicate the format of the first real reply i.e. not just an acknowledgement that they got your message.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • email • letter • phone call • personal visit
<p>Were you satisfied with the response you got from your representative?^{a)}</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • <i>feel free to tell us why</i>
<p>Will you reply to the answer you got from your representative?^{a)}</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No
<p>Why did you contact your representative?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to express an opinion • to seek information • to seek help on a problem you have • for some other reason • don't know
<p>Which of these general topics best describes what your message to your representative was about?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • defence and foreign affairs • democracy & civil rights • environment • economic & finance • education • (un)employment • health • family • housing • law and order • planning • transport • welfare • youth • other • don't know
<p>Which of these categories best describes who was affected by the issue you raised in your message to your representative?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • only yourself or your family • only other people, but not yourself or your family • yourself and your family, as well as others like you • all people in the community • all people in the nation or all people in the world • don't know
<p>Which party does your representative belong to?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conservative • Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) • Green Party • Independent • Labour • Liberal Democrat • Plaid Cymru – the Party of Wales • Respect • Scottish National Party (SNP) • Sinn Féin • Social Democratic and Labour Party • Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) • UK Independence Party (UKIP) • Other • don't know

Is your representative a man or a woman? ^a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • woman • man • don't know
You've said that this is not the first time you've contacted your representative. The last time you've contacted your representative, how did you approach him or her? ^{a b)}	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WriteToThem website • email • letter • phone call • in person • other (<i>please specify</i>)
Within the last twelve months: How often have you used WriteToThem.com to send a message to your representative(s)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • this is the first time in the last 12 months • about once with the last 12 months • 2 – 5 times within the last 12 months • 6 – 10 times within the last 12 months • more than 10 times within the last 12 months • no answer
How would you rate your ability to use the Internet?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellent • Good • Fair • Poor • Bad • don't know/can't say
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?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a political group (e.g. a party, an union, a civic organisation e.g. for human rights) • a community group (e.g. a charity, an initiative, a church, a sports club, a volunteer organisation) • both community as well as political group(s) • none of the above
Apart from your use of this website: Within the last twelve months have you taken part in any broadly political activity? (This includes for example demonstrations, signing a petition, contacting a politician, boycotting a product, donating money or displaying a campaign badge)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • yes, online • yes, offline • yes both online as well as offline • none of the above
How old are you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • less than 18 years old • 18-24 years old • 25-34 years old • 35-44 years old • 45-54 years old • 55-64 years old • 65-74 years old • 75 years and older
Could you please indicate your gender?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • female • male
What is the last type of educational institution (e.g. school, college or university) that you have attended or which type of educational institution are you attending now? ^{c)}	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Primary school or equivalent • Secondary school or equivalent • Special school or equivalent • Sixth form college or equivalent • Technical college or equivalent • Further Education College • Adult Community College • University or equivalent • other

Which of these descriptions best describes your current situation?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • working full time (30 hours a week or more) • working part time (8-29 hours a week) • retired • unemployed • permanently sick or disabled • in community or military service • undergraduate student • postgraduate student • in full time education (not degree or higher) • in part time education (not degree or higher) • doing housework, looking after children or other persons • none of the above
The incomes of households differ a lot in Britain today. Which figure best represents the total income of your household before tax?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • up to £12,500 • £12,501 to £25,000 • £25,001 to £37,500 • £37,501 to £50,000 • £50,001 to £75,000 • £75,001 to £100,000 • more than £100,000
To which one of these ethnic groups do you consider you belong?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ British ○ English ○ Welsh ○ Scottish ○ Irish ○ Other white • Mixed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ White and Black Caribbean ○ White and Black African ○ White and Asian ○ Other Mixed • Asian or Asian British <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Indian ○ Pakistani ○ Bangladeshi ○ Other Asian • Black or Black British <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Caribbean ○ African ○ Other Black • Chinese • any other ethnic group • don't know
Do you have a health problem or disability which prevents you from doing every day tasks at home, work or school or which limits the kind or amount of work you can do?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No
How would you describe the place where you live?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a big city • suburbs or outskirts of a big city • a town or small city • a country village • a farm or home in the countryside • other • don't know

Just before we let you go: We are interested in talking to some of you about your experiences in contacting your representative and using this website. Would you be up for this? This could be either by phone, email or in person but we would let you know the details in time and you could say no at any point. If so, would you please send a short email to Tobias Escher who is responsible for this survey? His email address is [EMAIL ADDRESS]. Your help is really appreciated!

Do you have any other comments (e.g. on the survey, on your usage, etc)?

Notes: Shaded areas indicate questions that were introduced to the original survey questionnaire at a later stage (March 2010). All questions also carried an option 'don't want to answer'.

^{a)} Only asked of users who indicated they got a reply. ^{b)} Only asked of those who indicated they have contacted a representative before. ^{c)} Previously education was surveyed via two questions about i) whether any qualification is held and ii) whether this or these are above or below degree level.

Review of data collection process

Response rate

The calculation of the response rates must rely on a couple of assumptions because for privacy reasons the actual number of invitations sent out was not recorded. The timeframe on the basis of which the response rate is calculated runs from 28 January 2009 until 12 July 2010, i.e. two weeks ahead of the survey timeframe as an invitation to the survey was emailed to users two weeks after they had used the site to send a message. This relies on the assumption that most people answer the survey rather soon after they have received the invitation – an assumption that seems justified given how response rates to the survey developed in relation to usage rates.

During this timeframe in total 128,466 people used the site to send at least one message to an MP. Of those a total of 15,537 or 12% of all users used the site more than once. These form a particular group because every time they used the site they had a 20% chance of receiving an invitation to the survey (if they had not answered the questionnaire before) as the technical effort to prevent multiple invites could not be justified and would also have had some privacy implications. As a result, repeat users had a higher probability of being invited which needs to be accounted for in the calculation of the number of people who received an invitation to the survey. This number consists of 22,586 one-time users, i.e. a fifth of the 112,929 one-time users, as well as 7,709 who were invited when repeatedly using the site, based on probabilities that increase with the number of uses of the site³⁹. Based on this

³⁹ For example it has to be assumed that basically all those using the site five times and more will have received at least one or possibly more invitations. Those using the site twice had a 40% chance of receiving an invitation.

assumption a total of 30,295 people will have been invited to the survey but this is an estimate because the invitations are based on probability sampling. What is more, people who already participated in the survey would not receive any further invitations. The resulting response rate of 45% that Table 30 reports can therefore be considered as a lower bound as it is in fact likely that fewer people received an invitation.

Table 30 WriteToThem online survey: response rate (2009/10)

invited to survey (estimate) <i>(people who emailed an MP – if they did answer the questionnaire previously which cannot be determined)</i>	30,295
cooperation rate <i>(people who submitted questionnaire)</i>	14,302 (48%)
completion rate <i>(defined as missed not more than four out of eleven essential variables⁴⁰)</i>	13,520 (95% completed; 52% fully completed)
response rate <i>(completed surveys from total people contacted)</i>	45% (13,520 / 30,295)

Source: mySociety user survey 2009/10

Notes: Only users who contacted MPs.

Of the questionnaires received, 95% provided sufficient data so that a total of 13,520 questionnaires could be included in the analysis. As none of the questions was compulsory there are a number of variables with a considerable share of missing values as the following table summarises for those variables included in the analysis:

⁴⁰ Essential variables were defined as the questions regarding gender, age, education, occupation, income, ethnicity, disability, political participation, group engagement, referrer to the site and likelihood of recommendation.

Table 31 WriteToThem online survey: missing responses by variable

variable	percentage of responses missing
income	27
education	8
disability	8
age	8
gender	3
occupation	3
engagement in groups	3
other political participation	3
found out about platform	1

Source: mySociety user survey 2009/10

Sample quality

The sampling suffered from a particular problem, as frequent users of the site had a higher probability to be included in the sample because each time they used the site they had a 20% chance of receiving an invitation. The main problem deriving from this is that more of the frequent users have been invited. Less of a problem is that some of them might have received multiple invitations; this applies only to a few people because most of the repeat users did not use the site more than five times. Based on strict random sampling of unique users only 25,693 people should have been invited but with the increased likelihood of invitation for repeated users, it can be estimated that a total of 30,295 people will have been invited, an oversampling of 4,602 people or 18% of the target sample size. However, the problem is mitigated by another sampling issue which is that repeat users had a greater likelihood of already having participated in the survey, as this had been running since June 2008, at this time inviting every user and not just a random sample. Subsequently, these frequent

users would not have received the invitation and hence would otherwise have been under-sampled. It can then be assumed that frequent users are not very much over-represented in the sample. This is supported by the fact that a full 45% of people in the sample state they contacted an MP for the very first time which compares well with the numbers available from the simple, two-question survey which has response rates exceeding 60% and which recorded similar rates of first-time contacters.

Appendix D UK population data

Estimating rates of first-time engagement in contacting representatives

What share of those people who contact a representative in any given year have never done so before, i.e. are engaging in this form of participation for the first time? It is possible to estimate the percentage based on the share of the population that has *ever* contacted a politician or government official. Over the years, the only way that people can drop out of this group of contacters is by dying, and the only way to join this group is by actually making contact for the first time. Depending on whether the rate of people that get recruited into contacting is lower, equal to or greater than the death rate, this group is either shrinking, staying constant or even growing.

Table 32 calculates three different scenarios in order to show how these considerations translate into actual numbers. The information about the share of the population that has ever contacted a representative is derived from Ofcom's research into Citizens' Digital Participation (Ofcom, 2009b). It enquires specifically into whether an MP, MEP or local councillor was contacted and distinguishes between contacts made ever – which 16% of the population claim – and contacts made within the last year which 7% of the population have done. The death rate in the UK is assumed to be at 0.9%⁴¹. For the moment, let us assume it is unrelated to age and hence impacts in the same way on the group of contacters.

For a first estimate one can assume that the share of this group of people on the overall population stays constant, and let us also assume that the take-up of

⁴¹ The World Bank Data: Death rate, crude (per 1,000 people): <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.CDRT.IN> [27.05.2011]

contacting (i.e. the rate of first-time contacters) is more or less the same each year. As a result, each year as many people need to contact a representative for the first time as people are dying in this group. Therefore each year 0.9% of the group of people that *ever* contacted a politician – who constitute 16% of the population – die. This translates into 0.15% of the total population and, in order to keep the overall share constant, would require another 0.15% of the population in this year to contact a politician for the first time. As I assumed that the overall share of people who have contacted a politician *in the last year* is 7%, the 0.15% constitutes a share of 2.3% in this group of annual contacters. So summarising scenario 1, assuming that engagement in contacting stays constant implies that just about 2% of all those people who engage in contacting in any given year have never done it before.

However, there are a number of assumptions in the calculation above that might not be met in reality. First, given that contacters tend to be older the death rate in the group of people who engage in contacting might actually be higher than the one in the population. Second, given the finding of this thesis that rates of contacting in the UK have slightly risen, the overall share of people who ever contacted a politician will not have been constant in recent years but indeed is likely to have been rising. This implies that the rate of first-time contacters needs to be higher than the death rate and this is what scenario 2 projects: it assumes a higher growth rate of 7% within the group of people who have ever contacted a politician. If the death rate remained stable at 0.9%, this would result in an overall growth of this group by 1% of the population every year. This would result in a first-timer rate of 18%. In other words, of all people who contact a politician within a given year, more than one in six would never have done so before, translating to more than 550,000 people each year.

Such a growth rate seems unlikely because it would lead to the rapid expansion of this group, for which I have no empirical indications, so scenario 3 projects only a 4% growth per year which might mitigate for a higher death rate or, if this stays at 0.9% would yield a growth of the group of people who ever contacted a politician of 0.5% of the population. This would require 10% of all contacters each year to be first-timers.

Table 32 People who contacted a politician or government official in the last year: estimation of annual share of people who contact for the first time, UK (2009)

	share of population	population aged 16+ (thousands)	share on group of people who ever contacted
British population aged 16+ years	100%	48,490	
of those, contacted a representative:			
- ever	16.4%	7,952	
- within last year	6.5% (A)	3,152	39.6%
annual death rate	0.9%	436	0.9%
decline (by death) in group of people who ever contacted a representative	0.15%	72	0.9%
<i>scenario 1 – constant share on population</i>			
first-time contacters in population	0.15% (B)	72	0.9%
share of first-time contacters on group of annual contacters			2.3%^{a)}
<i>scenario 2 – annual rise of share by 1%</i>			
first-time contacters in population	1.15% (B)	557	7%
share of first-time contacters on group of annual contacters			17.7%^{a)}
<i>scenario 3 – annual rise of share by 0.5%</i>			
first-time contacters in population	0.66% (B)	318	4%
share of first-time contacters on group of annual contacters			10.1%^{a)}

Source: Ofcom (2009a; 2009b); Office for National Statistics (2010a; 2010b)

Notes: ^{a)} This is the result of dividing the annual growth rate (B) by the annual participation rate (A).

Size of UK population**Table 33** Estimates of number of people (thousands) living in Britain (2008 – 2010)

year	total population	population aged 16+	population aged 15+	population aged 14+	source
2008	59,623	48,490	49,228	49,952	(Office for National Statistics, 2010a)
2009	60,003	48,836	49,564	50,273	(Office for National Statistics, 2010b)
2010	60,462	49,236	49,948	50,654	(Office for National Statistics, 2011)

Appendix E Data collection for Germany: online survey of Abgeordnetenwatch users

Questionnaire

As a charitable project we are interested in getting to know what groups of people use our site and why, as well as how they assess the representatives' replies to their questions. Therefore we kindly invite you to take some time to fill in our survey. Your responses will help us to better understand in what respects Abgeordnetenwatch is already successful and where there is still room for improvement.

We are conducting this survey in collaboration with Tobias Escher ([LINK TO HOMPAGE]) of the University of Oxford who will be analysing the data for his PhD thesis. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact Tobias Escher directly by email ([EMAIL ADDRESS]).

You can be assured:

- All answers are completely anonymous. It will not be possible to connect your responses to the survey questionnaire with the question you have posted on Abgeordnetenwatch and this is not our intention, in any case.
- The data collected is only analysed by Abgeordnetenwatch and Tobias Escher and will not be passed on to any third party.
- You do not need to answer all questions.
- Answering the questionnaire will take a maximum of 5 to 10 minutes.

We will report the results of this research on the Abgeordnetenwatch website as well as in academic publications. Not least we hope that in this way more citizens will get to know about Abgeordnetenwatch.

A note on data protection

This survey is anonymous. We will not know your email address, your name, or the question you have put to your representative. Also your IP address will not be stored with your responses.

re representatives' response to question	
Were you satisfied with the response you got from your representative?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • yes • no
Could you let us know in a few words why you were satisfied or dissatisfied with the response?	
Did the response of the representative relate to your question?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • yes • no, the response was obviously a standard reply that is also given to other questions • no, but the response was individually crafted
Would you like to reply to the response you got from the representative?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • yes • no
re your most recent question to a representative on Abgeordnetenwatch	
Why did you write to the representative?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to express an opinion • to seek information • to seek help on a problem • don't know • for any other reason, _____
To which one of these general topic categories did your question relate?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (un)employment • planning • education • democracy & civil rights • family

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • health • youth • law and order • welfare • environment • transport • defence and foreign affairs • economic & finance • housing • other • don't know
Which of these categories best describes who was affected by the issue you raised in your question to the representative?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • only yourself or your family • only other people, but not yourself or your family • yourself and your family, as well as others like you • all people in the community • all people in the nation or all people in the world • don't know
Is the representative you have most recently contacted on Abgeordnetenwatch your constituency MP?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • yes • no • don't know
Was the representative you have contacted directly elected (i.e. with first vote) or via the party list (i.e. with second vote)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • directly elected • elected via list • don't know
questions about use and assessment of Abgeordnetenwatch as well as about further activities	
Before you used Abgeordnetenwatch to pose a question, have you ever contacted one of your representatives, by any means?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • yes • no
[if answer to previous question was yes] This time, you used Abgeordnetenwatch, but how did you approach your representative last time?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • via Abgeordnetenwatch • via email • via letter • via telephone • in person • other, _____
Within the last twelve months, how often have you used Abgeordnetenwatch to put a question to your representative?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • this is the first time in the last 12 months • once within the last 12 months • 2 – 5 times within the last 12 months • 6 – 10 times within the last 12 months • more than 10 times within the last 12 months
How did you find out about Abgeordnetenwatch?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • from media such as newspapers, etc • from a search engine (e.g. Google or Yahoo) • recommendation by friends or colleagues • from another website • I cannot remember • in another way, _____
How likely is it that you would recommend Abgeordnetenwatch to a friend or colleague? (assuming they would be interested in such a service). Possible values range from 0 (not at all likely) to 10 (extremely likely)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • from 0 (not at all likely) to 10 (extremely likely) • no answer
Could you maybe tell us, briefly, why you gave the site this rating in the previous question?	

On Abgeordnetenwatch all questions and answers are publicly visible. Is this publicity important to you or would you sometimes rather like to use Abgeordnetenwatch to communicate with representatives without this communication being visible to everybody?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • all communication should be public (as is the case at the moment) • it should be possible to also have private communication • all communication should be private
Apart from your use of Abgeordnetenwatch, within the last twelve months have you been politically active? (This includes for example taking part in demonstrations, signing a petition, contacting a politician, boycotting a product, donating money or displaying a campaign badge)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • yes, online (i.e. on the Internet) • yes, offline (i.e. not on the Internet) • yes, both online and offline • no
In the last twelve months have you been involved with any of the following groups?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a political party or group (e.g. a union, an environmental or human rights group) • any other organisation (e.g. an association, a church, initiative) • political as well as other group(s) • no involvement with groups
some anonymous information about you	
How would you rate your ability to use the Internet?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • excellent • good • fair • poor • bad • don't know / can't say
How old are you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • less than 18 years old • 18-24 years old • 25-34 years old • 35-44 years old • 45-54 years old • 55-64 years old • 65-74 years old • 75 years and older
You are	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • female • male
What is the highest general education degree that you hold?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • still in school • no school-leaving qualification • secondary general school certificate • intermediate school certificate • higher education entrance qualification for the non-university sector • general higher education entrance qualification • other
Do you hold a degree from a university, a university of applied sciences or an engineering school (e.g. Bachelor, Master, Magister, Diploma, state exam or PhD)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • yes • no

What is your current occupation? Please select the category that fits best with your current situation (within the last seven days)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in paid work • in school / education • unemployed • permanently sick or disabled • retired • in community or military service • doing housework, looking after children or other persons • other
What is the monthly total net income that is available to your household?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • up to €1.100 per month (net) • between €1.100 and €2.250 per month (net) • between €2.250 and €3.200 per month (net) • between €3.200 and €4.600 per month (net) • between €4.600 and €5.900 per month (net) • more than €5.900 per month (net)
Do you belong to an ethnic group that is in the minority in Germany?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • yes • no • don't know
Are you hampered in your daily activities in any way by any longstanding illness, or disability, infirmity or mental health problem?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • yes • no
How could the area where you live be described best? As ...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a big city • suburbs or outskirts of a big city • a town or small city • a country village • a farm or home in the countryside • don't know

completion of survey

Before you finish this questionnaire by clicking on the 'Submit' button, there is one more request: There are limits to what we can establish about your individual experiences in communicating via Abgeordnetenwatch, and more generally when contacting representatives, on the basis of such a standardised questionnaire. However, for us it is for example important to know what you liked, whether you achieved what you wanted and how Abgeordnetenwatch could be of even more help to you in the future. For this reason we would like to discuss some of these issues in more detail in a 30 minute telephone interview (alternatively via email). Of course, all the information you provide would only be used in anonymised form.

If you would like to volunteer yourself for this please send a short email to Tobias Escher who is responsible for this survey. This is necessary as due to the anonymity of this survey we do not know your email address. His email address is [EMAIL ADDRESS] (If you click on the link your email application should launch automatically).

We really appreciate your help!

Do you have any other comments or suggestions (e.g. on the survey, on your usage, etc)?

This was the last question. Please do not forget to submit the questionnaire by clicking the button below. Thank you very much!

Notes: Grey shaded rows indicate the start and the title of a new screen. All questions also carried an option 'no answer'.

Review of data collection process

Response rate

During the fieldwork period MPs received a total of 9,290 questions of which by 28 September 2011 7,059 (76%) had been answered. However, only those people who received an answer within these 14 months were invited to the survey, therefore the sample includes users who received answers to questions posed prior 15 July 2010 and will lack those who received answers to questions posed at the end of the survey timeframe. In total, 7,664 answers were received to questions asked by 4,029 different contacters.

Table 34 Abgeordnetenwatch online survey: response rate (2010/11)

invited to survey <i>(people who had put a question to an MP and – during the fieldwork period – received an answer to this question)</i>	4,029 ^{a)}
cooperation rate <i>(people who submitted questionnaire)</i>	737 (18%)
completion rate <i>(defined as missed not more than four out of eleven essential variables⁴²)</i>	668 (91% completed; 37% fully completed)
response rate <i>(completed surveys from total people contacted)</i>	17% (668 / 4,029)

Source: Abgeordnetenwatch user survey 2010/11

Notes: Only users who contacted MPs. ^{a)} 1,220 people (i.e. 30% of all users during the fieldwork period) were invited more than once because they used the site repeatedly during the fieldwork period. Half of these received the invitation two times, the other half more often than that.

⁴² Essential variables were defined as the questions regarding gender, age, education, occupation, income, ethnicity, disability, political participation, group engagement, referrer to the site and likelihood of recommendation.

Of the questionnaires received, 90% provided sufficient data so that a total of 668 questionnaires could be included in the sample. In order to increase participation, none of the questions in the questionnaire was compulsory and the following table reports the share of missing values for the variables included in the analysis.

Table 35 Abgeordnetenwatch online survey: missing responses by variable

variable	percentage of responses missing
income	26
found out about platform	17
contacted directly elected representative or list cand.	14
occupation	10
disability	8
education	8
engagement in groups	5
other political participation	3
gender	1
age	0.4

Source: Abgeordnetenwatch user survey 2010/11

Sample quality

There are a number of issues that could potentially impair the representativeness of the sample for the target population, i.e. all those who contacted an MP via Abgeordnetenwatch during the fieldwork period.

The first issue is the possible *under-coverage* error because due to the chosen sampling strategy those users who did not receive an answer to their question were not invited to the survey. At most 20% of the target population could be affected by this issue

but the actual share is going to be smaller. As one indication⁴³, of all 4,698 people who posed questions to MPs in the fieldwork period 3,758 (80%) received an answer during this period. But overall the answer rate is higher given that this calculation does not consider the answers received after the end of the fieldwork period. What is more, as I have shown, more than a third of contacters are frequent users of the site and as a consequence the sample will also contain users who have at some point asked a question on which they did not receive an answer. Altogether this implies that the share of contacters affected by this issue is smaller than 20%.

However, their absence only poses a problem if these would constitute a special group of contacters that are not represented by those who have received an answer. While those who have not received an answer would surely be less satisfied with the site, otherwise there is little reason to believe that they differ in their characteristics from those who received an answer. Hypothetically it is possible that some socio-economic groups of users will be systematically disadvantaged by MPs. However, it is very unlikely that this is directly based on social status given that there are few markers available to an MP to enable them to recognize the particular socioeconomic circumstances of a contacter. There are also only minor variations in the response rate of MPs according to question topic (as determined by the classification assigned by the contacters themselves), excluding the possibility that some socio-economic groups are under-represented in the sample because their preferred topics are less

⁴³ Note that this are just approximations of the actual figures as the sample focused not on those who asked questions during the fieldwork period but on those who received answers during this time, hence also people who posed questions before the fieldwork period.

often answered by representatives. Altogether, I expect no significant bias in the sample due to the lack of contacters who received no response.

The second issue is the sampling error because of the repeated invitations to frequent users which could lead to their over-representation in the sample. 1,220 people (i.e. 30% of all users during the fieldwork period) received the invitation more than once as they posed more than one question and were invited with every answer they received. The impact of this issue is mitigated by another sampling issue which advantages the participation of first-time users of Abgeordnetenwatch. This is because I decided against a random sampling because of the low number of questions asked on Abgeordnetenwatch (in comparison to WriteToThem) and the expected low response rate due to the invitation strategy. However, assuming that most people who feel inclined to participate in the survey would do so the first time they get an invitation, this would tend to bias the sample towards first-timers.

How does this issue influence the sample? An analysis of the sample shows that 42% say they have used the site more than once within the last twelve months. There is no directly comparable data available but of all 4,698 people who posed questions to MPs in the sampling frame (note that this number is higher than the number who received an answer during the sampling timeframe), 34% asked at least a second question during the 14 month survey timeframe (no matter to what kind of representative). This should be a lower bound for the share of frequent users, given that this limits usage to the 14 month fieldwork period and not to the prior twelve months for every individual user's usage of the site, which would cover a longer period and would be comparable to the responses to the survey question. So, if there is any effect at all, returning users are only slightly over-represented in the sample.

Finally, as a third issue the low response rate could make the sample more susceptible to differential response behaviour by different demographic groups. The only clear indicator available to test this is the gender of contacters which can be deduced from the name of the contacter displayed on the site. Using a dictionary of names (Michael, 2008) more than 98% of the 4,029 contacters could be automatically classified and of those 19.5% were female (19.5%) and 80.5% were men. In contrast, in the sample, 16.4% were female (108) and 83.6% were male (551) which means that men are slightly more over-represented in the sample even though the difference gets only significant at the 0.1 level ($\chi^2=3.58$, $p=0.059$).

Summarising the findings in relation to sample bias, there are indications of a slight over-representation of men and frequent users in the sample which are much smaller than might be expected given the low response rate. Surveying only those contacters who received an answer should yield valid data because those contacters who did *not* receive an answer constitute only a minority and there are no indications that their socio-economic profile differs from that of 'successful' contacters.

Appendix F German population data

Comparison of POC wave 2008 and 2009

The major motivation for relying primarily on data from the POC wave in 2008 has been to have a larger sample available than would have been possible with the more limited data collected in 2009. In addition, the 2008 data is also of better quality in terms of representing the population:

1. All the respondents in 2009 are also included in the 2008 survey of the POC. Considering only those who answered again in 2009 would mean simply omitting all people not accepting a re-survey which clearly means a structural bias.
2. Most of the underlying distributions of the demographic variables can be expected to remain fairly stable from 2008 to 2009. Gender will not change, and education, income and age only marginally. Some greater changes could occur for the occupational variables (e.g. as people might move in and out of employment) but here I would argue that the annual fluctuations will be a minor issue compared to any change induced by the structural non-response of people who drop out from the panel from 2008 to 2009 without a proper replacement. A χ^2 -comparison of the unweighted data for 2008 and 2009 shows that indeed gender and education show no significant differences. Age shows significant differences ($p < 0.5$) with a bias towards older respondents (45+ years) and both income and occupation show changes significant at the 0.1 level. However, all these are clearly related to structural non-response as in 2009 those who respond are on a higher income and more often retired, i.e. are those more likely to respond and not drop out of the panel.

3. The political variables (i.e. political participation and contacting in particular as well as work in political groups) all show absolutely non-significant changes between 2008 and 2009, i.e. the structure of political participation has not changed in these years.

In total, this means using the 2008 data is a methodologically preferable choice. It offers the better quality data set because it does not systematically omit data from people with a low probability to participate in panels and a comparison also shows that the only significant differences in those two datasets are induced by the structured non-response error. So an analysis of contacting patterns should not be negatively influenced by this choice.

At the same time, this choice has increased the time lag to the data collected on Abgeordnetenwatch in 2010 and 2011. Clearly this is not ideal but as argued above, as far as the population demographics go, most of the variables that are of concern in my analysis will have remained fairly stable between 2008 and 2011 (e.g. gender, education – because this excludes students), and some will have only changed slightly, such as age and income.

Size of German population

Table 36 Estimates of number of people (thousands) living in Germany (2008 – 2010)

year	total population	population aged 16+	population aged 15+	population aged 14+	source
2008	82,002	70,041	70,863	71,652	(Statistisches Bundesamt, 2012)
2009	81,802	69,989	70,779	71,559	<i>as above</i>
2010	81,751	70,029	70,810	71,615	<i>as above</i>

Appendix G Considering ethical issues of research

The most important ethical concern is the protection of the human participants – i.e. those people from whom data is collected in this study – from any harm. To ensure this, two issues needed careful attention: obtaining informed consent as well as ensuring anonymity and confidentiality of the participating subjects (Eynon and Schroeder, 2008; Yin, 2009: 73).

There are two different types of data for this research. The first type of data derives from surveys collected by other research teams and on which secondary analysis is performed (see Appendix H). All these surveys are established research endeavours whose conformity with the highest ethical guidelines have already been established and that provide data only in anonymised form. Therefore no ethical issues arise from the use of this data (Central University Research Ethics Committee, 2012). The second type of data is Internet surveys on contact facilitation sites, carried out by this author. The following sections discuss the general approach in meeting ethical guidelines for this type of data.

Obtaining informed consent

Informed consent means that the subject should actively agree to be part of the study in the full knowledge of what this entails and to what use the data will be put and under what conditions (Ess and AoIR ethics working group, 2002: 6; Central University Research Ethics Committee, 2012). In order to address this the following steps were taken. For the Internet survey on Abgeordnetenwatch a page preceding the survey clearly set out who was carrying out this research, for what purpose the information was collected, that all information was collected anonymously and that the data would not be shared with anyone outside Abgeordnetenwatch or the

researcher (see Appendix E). It was then the free decision of the users to participate in the survey.

The Internet survey on WriteToThem was originally initiated as an evaluation effort by the site operator UK Citizens Online Democracy/mySociety which was contracted to the author. Therefore the data has been collected on behalf of mySociety. The information preceding the survey (see Appendix C) did not exclude any specific use of the data provided by the respondents, and informed potential respondents that their answers would be used for improving the site and publicising purposes. Decisions about to whom this data is made available lie therefore completely with mySociety, which kindly agreed to allow the author to extend the survey and make the data available for analysis in this doctoral research. All the data is completely anonymous. There is no personal data available and participants cannot be identified – neither by mySociety nor by the researcher.

One issue in online surveys is that it is difficult to judge the competency of potential participants for informed consent. However, participants for this survey are selected based on their use of these *political* websites and usage of such websites should constitute a sufficient filter given that the sites appeal to the type of people who must have some basic understanding of who an elected official is. What is more, due to the nature of the websites (contacting political representatives) participation of those under 18 years of age is unlikely, and any children using such a site will be competent to give consent (Central University Research Ethics Committee, 2012). Not least, this research poses no risk to the participants.

Ensuring anonymity and confidentiality

Ensuring that the data collected is anonymous is an important part of protecting human participants. Anonymisation aims to make it impossible to identify the participant based on the data provided. A related issue is confidentiality, that is, that participants can be certain that any data provided and any interaction with the researcher will not be disclosed to third parties. If data is truly anonymous this should not be an issue so the main significance lies squarely with making sure data is anonymous.

For the two online surveys the guiding principle was to collect only as much data as is necessary (RESPECT Project, 2004). No identifying information such as name, email address or IP address was collected, only information regarding socio-demographic attributes such as gender or general attributes of the representative contacted (gender, party). Anonymity was further ensured by making no single question of the questionnaires compulsory so that participants could decline to answer anything they deemed inappropriate. Also the content of the communication between citizen and representative was not known to the researcher, only a general category provided by the participant.

In effect, for none of the data collected does the author know who has provided it. However, ensuring that a dataset contains no personal information is not enough as it might contain information about an individual that enables identification by cross referencing it with other sources of data (Eynon and Schroeder, 2008: 34). This is not an issue for the data from WriteToThem as there is no registration on the site and messages which are sent are not stored. This completely rules out any possibility of tracing individual people from the data provided in the survey. Conversely, the public

nature of Abgeordnetenwatch where the email content and the name of the user (though no other information) is publicly visible for anyone on the site introduces a number of challenges to maintaining anonymity which require special mitigation strategies. It was decided not to collect data on gender or party of the representative contacted as this could have aided finding the participant on the website. Besides, this dataset will not be shared with any third party beyond the site operators. Even though the data does not contain any personal information it is held on password protected servers in password protected databases. Local copies of the data are not available without a password either.

Appendix H Third party datasets used in this research

Throughout my research I was able to rely on a wealth of data collected by other researchers to whom I am greatly indebted. In detail, I have analysed the following datasets to varying degrees:

ALLBUS (German General Social Survey) 1980 – 2008. GESIS: Cologne and Mannheim, ZA4572. Dataset Version 1/00/00 (2010-06-16)⁴⁴

Audit of Political Engagement 2003 – 2010. Hansard Society; Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor]; Study number: 33351⁴⁵

British Social Attitudes 1983 – 2009. National Centre for Social Research; Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor]; Study number: 33168⁴⁶

Citizenship Survey, 2001 – 2010, Home Office, Department for Communities and Local Government and Ipsos MORI, National Centre for Social Research; Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor]; Study number: 33347⁴⁷

Devolution, Elected Representatives and Constituency Representation in Scotland and Wales, 2000-2005. Russel M and Bradbury JP. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive. Study Number: 5443⁴⁸

⁴⁴ <http://www.gesis.org/en/allbus/study-profiles/cumulation-1980-2008/> [03.05.2012]

⁴⁵ <http://www.esds.ac.uk/search/indexSearch.asp?ct=xmlSn&q1=33351> [03.05.2012]

⁴⁶ <http://www.esds.ac.uk/search/indexSearch.asp?ct=xmlSn&q1=33168> [03.05.2012]

⁴⁷ <http://www.esds.ac.uk/search/indexSearch.asp?ct=xmlSn&q1=33347> [03.05.2012]

⁴⁸ <http://www.esds.ac.uk/findingData/snDescription.asp?sn=5443> [03.05.2012]

European Social Survey 2002/03 – 2008/09. Norwegian Social Science Data Services, Norway – Data Archive and distributor of ESS data.⁴⁹ Dataset edition 4 of Round 4.

Oxford Internet Survey 2007 & 2009. Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford⁵⁰

Participation in Political Organisations in the United Kingdom and the Internet, 2001-2003 – Public Opinion Survey. Gibson R, Ward S, Lusoli W, NOP World; Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive, March 2005. SN: 5094⁵¹

Politische Online Kommunikation 2002 – 2009. TU Ilmenau, Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf, Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft⁵²

⁴⁹ <http://ess.nsd.uib.no/> [03.05.2012]

⁵⁰ <http://microsites.oii.ox.ac.uk/oxis/> [03.05.2012]

⁵¹ <http://www.esds.ac.uk/findingData/snDescription.asp?sn=5094> [03.05.2012]

⁵² <http://www.tu-ilmenau.de/empk/forschung-research/politische-kommunikation/politische-online-kommunikation/> [03.05.2012]

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