Getting connected: The effects of online political communication on citizens' political involvement

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ENGLISH SUMMARY

This dissertation examines to what extent the Internet influences citizens' involvement in politics. It is well known that a lot of excitement about the consequences of the Internet exists. Scholars often agree that the Internet offers various political opportunities. Citizens can communicate directly with parties and politicians without the interference of journalists (e.g., via Twitter and Facebook). In addition, the Internet added numerous ways for citizens to participate in politics. Citizens can for instance email questions to politicians, sign e-petitions or become a member of the party using an online registration form. Also politicians and parties adopted the Internet. Incorporating online communication strategies during election times is standard practice for most parties and candidates.

However, some scholars are less optimistic about the Internet and warn that people who are already politically engaged mainly use the Internet for political purposes. In others words, those scholars fear that the Internet will only engage those citizens who are already interested in politics. The Internet will in that case not reform, but rather normalize or strengthen existing patterns of political participation.

This thesis contributes to this debate and examines the political implications of the Internet. This dissertation focuses both on election times and non-election times. In addition, different research methods will be used – longitudinal survey research, content analyses and experimental studies. Three main conclusions are drawn from this research.

Not many people are politically active online, but some activities are more popular than others.

The first chapter of this dissertation shows that not many people are politically active online. Internet use for political purposes is in general low, but some activities are more popular than others. For instance, this dissertation shows that three percent of the Dutch citizens follow a politician on Twitter (in 2010). Yet, filling out a Voting Advice Application (e.g., VoteMatch) is very popular. In 2010, almost one out of four citizens filled out a VAA, and in 2012, one out of three citizens. In addition, fifteen percent of the Dutch citizens visited a party website and reading comments under political online news is also very popular.

Furthermore, this dissertation shows that the citizens who are politically active online are often already interested in politics. Additionally, the results of the dissertation point out that younger citizen are more likely to use the Internet for political purposes. This is an interesting and hopeful finding. It has often been argued and demonstrated that younger citizens are generally not interested and involved in politics. So the Internet might, in the end, play an important role in engaging younger citizens into politics.

The Internet can have positive effects on citizens' political involvement.

Secondly, the study shows that the use of online media by politicians and parties has a positive effect on citizens' involvement in politics. In other words, Internet can have positive consequences. For instance, this dissertations shows that political candidates who used Twitter during the 2010 Dutch national elections received more preference votes that candidates who did not. This dissertation also found that citizens who use an online Vote Advice Application are more likely to vote. These effects are compared to offline media such as television small. But that does not mean that, for instance, VAA's are not important. Even a small effect can make a difference.

Also the communication strategies used in online political communication have an effect.

Thirdly, also the communication strategies used in online political communication have an effect on citizens' political involvement. Previous literature shows that online campaigning differs from traditional campaigning; it is interactive and personal. Politicians and parties use various online platforms to start a dialogue with citizens without the interference of journalists. But also citizens can ask questions directly to political actors. This makes online campaigning more interactive. In addition, online communication is personal. Many politicians have their own Twitter account, Facebook page or website. Because of this, the communication is more focused on the individual politician than the party they represent. Besides, online platforms are often used to send out personal messages about politicians' private life. Online campaigning is therefore very personal.

Research presented in this dissertation shows that if political parties use an interactive communication style, citizens feel more politically involved. For instance, when a politician communicates interactively on Twitter, citizens are more likely to vote for this politician. Additionally, a personal approach also matters. A personal communication style (when the focus is on the politician and not on the party) has a positive effect on citizens' involvement in politics. Personal and interactive communication makes citizens feel close to politics. So, in short, when politicians themselves start an online dialogue, citizens feel more involved with politics.

Taken together, the results of this thesis show that few people are politically active online. However, this dissertation also found that *certain forms of online political communication and certain online communication styles* have a small and positive effect on citizens' political involvement. Based on the research presented in this dissertation, I want to point out that the question – to what extent does the Internet contributed to democracy? – is therefore too generic. Instead, future researchers should ask more specific questions about Internet's consequences. Such specific questions should provide more insight into the political consequences of the Internet. For instance, which online platforms do matter and for which people? Are the positive effects stable over time? These specific questions are important because this dissertation shows that the Internet can, in the end, have a positive impact.