# Hitting the 'Like' Button and Bridging the Social Capital:

## The Impact of Facebook Use on 'thin social trust' and levels of political tolerance

Bachelor Project Political Science
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*"In democratic countries the science of association is the mother science; the progress of all others depends on the progress of that one"* (De Tocqueville [1835] 2002, 492).

*"If men who live in democratic countries had neither the right nor the taste to unite in political goals, their independence would run great risks, but they could preserve their wealth and their enlightenment for a long time; whereas if they did not acquire the practice of associating with each other in ordinary life, civilization itself would be in peril. A people among whom particular persons lost the power of doing great things in isolation, without acquiring the ability to produce them in common, would soon return to barbarism"* (De Tocqueville [1835] 2002, 490).

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Facebook: endless online world of opportunities for joiners, spectators and critics

As of April 24 2012, the online social networking application Facebook announced that it had registered over 900 million active users worldwide, with more than half of this number using mobile devices.[1] Created in 2004 by Harvard student Mark Zuckerberg, the website, which initially was restricted to other Harvard students only, soon turned out to be a great success. The site rapidly grew out to be an immense global network where users can continuously stay in touch with friends, family and acquaintances anywhere in the world. Furthermore, it enables them to send invitations for events, to share pictures, articles and other sources of information and to unite with others who have common interests (politics or any other), backgrounds, beliefs and convictions into groups or other relevant pages. Needless to say, Facebook is tightly integrated into the daily media practices of its users: an average user in 2007 spent 20 minutes a day on the site, and two-thirds of the members log in at least once a day (Ellison et al 2007, 1144).

Facebook supporters would point at the infinite opportunities the website offers to its individual users: an extended and widened social life. On the other hand, critics have primarily focused on the negative effects of social network sites (SNSs)

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[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Facebook

such as privacy issues, the dangers of online identity construction and their impact on friendship articulation, on the unrealistic perception Facebook have on their online network friends. Moreover, SNSs are said to be influencing antisocial tendencies because of the nature of online interactions as a non-personal and indirect form of communication. Apart from societal criticisms, scholars and researchers alike have also examined the negative impact of SNSs on the individual users. For example, Gross and Acquisti (2005) have asserted that Facebook members may be putting themselves at risk both offline and online respectively through stalking and identity theft.[2] Other studies emphasized the dangers of online identity construction. Some found that SNSs led individuals to engage in role-play games and anti-normative behaviours in the online world (Zhao et al 2008, 1817). Other recent Facebook research revealed student perceptions of their own self-disclosure (Ellison et al 2007, 1145). In addition, users' misconceptions about the nature of their online audience as a result of Facebook use have frequently been studied.

### 1.2. Social interaction between Facebook users: groups

That type of scientific research has only zoomed in on the impact of SNSs on individual users' behaviour and conceptions. However, I specifically wish to draw attention to the effects and dynamics online social networks generate between and among members. Since SNSs, Facebook included, offer many opportunities to join and to set up all kinds of different online groups and to engage in all kinds of social ties, they can be considered as new forms of communal, civil and political bonding platforms on an online stage with an online input by individual members. Social scientific research that has focused on the impact of group memberships, associational activity and civil engagement in the 'real world' on people's behaviour patterns and orientations is overwhelming. More specifically, individuals who are closely tied and connected to all kinds of communal bonds (varying from hobby groups, church communities to political action groups) are said to acquire and develop networks, social norms, content feeling of interpersonal trust, respecting and acceptance of others and a general feeling of satisfaction, happiness and competence. In the mid-nineties, political scientist Robert Putnam offered a common framework for understanding these phenomena, "a framework that rests on the concept of *social*

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[2] Gross, R., and Acquisti, A. 2005. *Information revelation and privacy in online social networks.*

*capital*" (Putnam 1995, 67). The levels of social capital basically determine the extent individuals actually have the trust and willingness to cooperate with others.

When it is assumed that behaviour and orientations are learned and that social connections and civic engagement pervasively influence our public life (Putnam 1995, 67), the extent of one's social capital (that is, the skills, ideas and convictions that have been developed through associational activity) becomes of vital importance for the political world as well, making the topic of online group involvement very relevant for the society at large. In fact, Putnam argued that a society in which individuals have much social capital are far more likely to have a well-performing democratic responsive and representative government. These claims have indeed found much empirical evidence by Putnam himself (1995, 65, 66, 67, 68). Cigler and Joslyn (2002) have extended the impact of group membership and social capital further than its influence on citizens' political participation, trust and willingness to cooperate for mutual benefit. They empirically scrutinized the linkage of associational involvement and specifically citizens' political tolerance attitudes, because they emphasized that people's willingness to recognize and value the right of others is crucial in a democratic system. Their primary findings indicated that there is a strong positive relationship between the extensiveness of group membership and political tolerance. This adds to the social capital theory the notion that civil engagement is of great importance for the democratic system as a whole.

SNSs such as Facebook offer all kinds of opportunities for online users to join and to create infinite numbers of online groups, both politically orientated as any other subject that is of their interest. Some scholars have studied Facebook as a type of platform where members can unite and form groups freely. Because of this function, Facebook use has also been associated with a new means of acquiring, forming and maintaining social capital (Valenzuela et al 2009, Ellison et al 2007, Park et al 2009). In order to do so, they have attempted to alternatively conceptualize the notion of social capital to incorporate the effects of online groups memberships. Then they might rightfully claim that online interactions "may supplement or replace in-person interactions, mitigating any loss from time spent online" (Ellison et al 2007, 1146). In (re)defining social capital, I have noted that these scholars have examined whether the features that already had been outlined by Putnam, such as social networks, trust, civic engagement, political participation, life satisfaction etc. also correlate positively with the intensity of Facebook use (Valenzuela et al 2009, 876,

877, 878; Ellison et al 2007, 1145, 1146). In fact, many studies have been conducted to figure out the link between Facebook use and civic and political involvement based on the social capital theory (Park et al 2009, 729). However, they have omitted to explicitly treat citizens' political tolerance attitudes as a trait of social capital. Surprisingly, this has not undergone any empirical scrutiny yet. This scholarly knowledge gap still needs to be filled. Therefore I posit the following research question:

***What is the effect of new types of associational activity, in particular Facebook, on the users' political tolerance attitudes?***

In addition to the mentioned gap in the scientific knowledge, there is another reason why this posed question is valuable for the research that has focused on the relations between associational activity, social capital and political tolerance: it offers an opportunity to empirically verify some of the propositions that have already been made in the field. Firstly, it scrutinizes the assumption made by Ellsion et al (2007), Valenzuela et al (2009) and Park et al (2009) that group memberships and involvement in an online Facebook setting invoke similar effects as memberships in 'real world' associations according to Putnam's (1995) social capital theory. Moreover, it reviews Cigler and Joslyn's (2002) finding that group memberships have an impact on people's political tolerance attitudes.

### 1.3. Societal relevance

In his 1995 article '*Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital*', Putnam observed an alarming trend of decreasing group involvement and engagement over the past few decades, "the lost opportunities for social capital development as a consequence, and the resulting isolation of citizens from each other as well as from their government" (Cigler and Joslyn 2002, 8). The most characterizing and "discomfiting bit of evidence of social disengagement in contemporary America" that Putnam observed was that, while more Americans practised America's number one public sport and hobby *bowling* more than ever, there have never been so little game plays in organized group settings as before. In fact, league bowling plummeted by 40 percent between 1980 and 1993 (Putnam 1995, 70). Although Putnam concentrated exclusively on the American case, he explicitly stated that these trends characterized

many contemporary democratic societies (Putnam 1995, 67). Logically, applying Cigler and Joslyn's findings, this would similarly affect citizens' people's tolerance levels in other western democracies.

However, these observations concerning the decline of social capital and its eroding impact on communal group life and associations have certainly not gone unchallenged (Cigler and Joslyn 2002, 8). Arguably the most serious critiques concentrate on the nature of group involvement in social capital development. Some scholars stress Putnam's overemphasis on formal organizations and his fail to understand "the rise of new forms of networking and civic participation" (Cigler and Joslyn 2002, 8). For instance, Skocpol (1999) asserted that Americans have merely changed their style of civic and political association to a sort of ad-hoc approach, and thus are not simply associating less compared to some decades ago. As he puts it: "a civic world once centered in locally rooted and nationally active membership associations is a relic, Today, Americans volunteer for causes and projects, but only rarely as on-going members" (Skocpol 1999, 66).

Citizens' willingness to recognize and value the rights of others in the political process stands at the core of the democratic 'ethos' (Cigler and Joslyn 2002, 9). "The more tolerant citizens are of the rights of others, the more secure are the rights of all, their own included; hence the special place of political tolerance in contemporary conceptions of democratic values and citizenship (Sniderman et al 1989, 25)." In other words, levels of citizens' political tolerance hugely affect the chances of the democratic systems and their decision-making processes to function properly. In my view, the concept of *political tolerance* is one step beyond other features of social capital such as networks and norms, because it touches the very heart of democracy. After all, it requires equal rights for all citizens in society and equal recognition of all to exercise these freely. Therefore a certain level of political tolerance of all members in society is needed.

When the outcome of this research indeed suggests that Facebook group involvement influences political tolerance attitudes of the individual members, these results may have significant implications for the stability and effectiveness of democratic systems. Precisely because of the magnitude of Facebook use worldwide (900 million members), and thus its opportunities for citizens to acquire and develop more social capital (political tolerance included) through a new type of online group involvement, the results of this paper become very relevant.

## 2. Literature review

The act of studying the relationship between group belonging and citizens' political sentiments, orientations and participation stands in a long tradition of diverse philosophers and scholars that have been fascinated by the invisible power of socialization. In this paper, I am particularly interested in describing the causal mechanisms that are present in online associational activity and political tolerance attitudes. Arguably, thinking about the linkage between forms of 'civil' group activity and citizens' political behaviour and sentiments was prompted due to the founding of the American nation in the 18$^{th}$ century. This country has always played a central role in people's theorizing about the links between democracy and civil society. This is in part because America stands in an entirely democratic tradition and because the country "has traditionally been considered unusually 'civic'" (Putnam 1995, 65). Therefore, this paper will cast a light on the efforts of philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville, who dedicated much of his work to this topic.

### 2.1. Starting from a philosophical perspective: the impact of individual citizens' involvement in associations on a successful democracy

In 1835, French aristocrat, philosopher and politician Alexis de Tocqueville travelled to the newly founded nation on the other side of the Atlantic: the United States of America. Amongst others, he wanted to examine the effects of, as he characterized it, the *democratic social state* on Americans' behaviour and sentiments. The American society, which was 'created' in 1776, was founded on principles of equality and freedom amongst all individuals. People were no longer bound to a certain social status, as had been the case in aristocratic societies in the 'old' world in Europe. Suddenly, possibilities and opportunities for Americans seemed infinite. De Tocqueville made an attempt in his extensive work *Democracy in America* to describe and explain the effects of these features of the democratic social state on political and civil life of Americans. Ever since its publication, De Tocqueville's work has generally been considered as a theoretical framework in systematic studies of the links and impact that a strong civil society (that is strongly associating citizens) has on the effectiveness of democracy (Putnam 1995, 65).

During his visit in America, the Frenchman noticed that "*Americans of all ages, all conditions, all minds, **constantly unite**. Not only do they have commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but they have a thousand other kinds: religious, moral, grave, futile, very general and very particular, immense and very small; Americans use associations to give fetes, to found seminaries, to build inns, to raise churches, to distribute books, to send missionaries to the antipodes; in this manner they create hospitals, prisons, schools. Finally, if it is a question of bringing to light a truth or developing a sentiment with the support of a great example, **they associate**[3]* (De Tocqueville [1835] 202, 489). De Tocqueville sought to explain why Americans made such great use of associations in the their civil life. This certainly was a fairly new phenomenon at the beginning of the 19th century. The answer was to be found in the nature of the democratic society the Americans life in. According to De Tocqueville, fixing common goals through the efforts of uniting citizens was born out of necessity. In 'old' aristocratic societies of the 18th and 19th century, "in the midst of a multitude of individuals who can do nothing by themselves", there was always a small group of a few very rich and powerful citizens determined by social status and ancestry (De Tocqueville [1835] 202, 490). They could pursue their personal goals in life individually because they had the resources to do so. Furthermore, in an aristocratic society there is no need for people to unite actively because they are already connected and kept together through social class. From birth on, people are destined to belong to these 'class associations'. De Tocqueville philosophized that in a state that is founded upon principles of equality and where origin cannot determine whether someone has more opportunities in society, interaction amongst them change dramatically. The opportunity to pursue life goals is no longer reserved for a powerful exclusive, prestigious and respectable group in society. Everyone is equally respected and ranked and no one is bound by his or her social status. On the contrary, this citizens' independency makes them individually weak and powerless. They can hardly undertake great enterprises by themselves, "and none of them can oblige those like themselves to lend them their cooperation. They therefore all fall into impotence if they do not learn to aid each other freely" (De Tocqueville [1835] 202, 490). Citizens, who have the desire to achieve a commercial, industrial or any other undertaking, have to utilize civil

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[3] Clarification: the emphasis through the bold wording is not originally De Tocqueville's, but my own addition.

associations to do so. Implicitly. De Tocqueville's ventilated the idea that individuals consider groups as a means to pursue happiness rather than as a goal per se.

The effect noted by De Tocqueville of democratic social state on Americans' civil group behaviour does not stand on itself. The philosopher asserted that "a natural and perhaps necessary relation exists between the emergence of *civil* and *political* associations. Because of people's almost unavoidable search for others to associate with in order to achieve their personal goals, they get more and more familiarized with the idea and benefits of groups and associations. Logically, according to the De Tocqueville, "the more the number of these small common affairs increases, the more do men, even without their knowing it, acquire the ability to pursue great ones in common. *Civil associations therefore facilitate political associations (...)*" (De Tocqueville [1835] 2002, 496). People would not hesitate to take part in these politically orientated groups. They acquire certain skills as well as behaviour patterns and orientations, which are deemed essential for democratic polity. In this sense the Americans' propensity for civic association was the key to their unprecedented ability to make democracy work (Putnam 1995, 64). De Tocqueville theorized that associating citizens, both in political and civil settings, "learn to submit their will to that of all the others and to subordinate their particular efforts to the common action" (De Tocqueville [1835] 2002, 497). Ultimately, he thought of these skills as "habits of the heart", as notions, opinions and ideas which shape mental habits and the sum of moral and intellectual dispositions of people in democratic society.[4] High levels of interpersonal trust and a widespread feeling of political competence are examples of these acquired 'habits'.

These ideas have made De Tocqueville a major contributor of the explicit idea that group memberships and associational settings, both political and non-political, offer citizens orientations, which are crucial for democracy to function properly.

## 2.2. 'Habits of the heart' translated to the Putnam' social capital theory

'Neo-Tocquevillean' scholars have further explored the relationship between civic and political engagement and have therefore sought empirical evidence that citizens indeed develop 'habits of the heart' due to their associational activity. Research interest sparked by the work political scientist Robert Putnam (Cigler and

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[4] http://www.johnchristopherphd.com/Habits_of_the_Heart

Joslyn 2002, 7). He conceptualized De Tocqueville's 'habits of the heart' into the concept of *social capital*, which he defined as those traits of civic group belonging that create certain social norms, networks, trust and ideas which on the communal level may mobilize citizens effectively for collective action and facilitate coordination and cooperation for their mutual benefit (Putnam 1995, 67, Cigler and Joslyn 2002, 8). Putnam points at other social scientists who found much empirical evidence that the quality public life and the performance of social and economic institutions are indeed powerfully influenced by citizens' level of social capital (Putnam 1995, 66) They found much evidence that in the fields of economic development, "education, urban poverty, unemployment, the control of crime and drug abuse, and even health" successful outcomes are far more likely to be expected in civically engaged communities (Putnam 1995, 66).

Furthermore, this concept of social capital also powerfully "affects the performance of representative government" (66). In Putnam's famous scientific work '*Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (1993), he performed a quasi-experimental study of subnational governments in different regions of Italy. The American researcher revealed through a systemic inquiry that the quality of governance was determined by longstanding traditions of (presenting or absenting) civic engagement. Political participation and voter turnout, but also interest in media journals and newspaper reading were all strongly correlating with the existence of well-established civil associations and group memberships. It was suggested by historical analysis that all these networks "of organized reciprocity and civic solidarity, far from being an epiphenomenon of socioeconomic modernization, were a precondition for it" (Putnam 1995, 65). Hence, political deadlocks are prevented as a general sense of cooperation is encouraged by strong civic engagement.

Putnam made an attempt to clarify the mechanisms through which social connectedness produces all kinds of positive effects that have been described earlier, including more political engagement of citizens within cohesive communities. He therefore thought of the concept of *social capital*; "by analogy with notions of physical capital and human capital – tools and training that enhance individual productivity (Putnam 1995, 67). It should be noted that he presented the concept as a way to grasp all that occurs within strong social communities. Its core idea is therefore straightforward: "it is the resources (and skills) available to people through their social interaction" (Valenzuela et al 2009, 877). These enable them and make

them want to work with each other on common issues (Valenzuela et al 2009, 887). According to Lin (2001), social capital also allows for individuals to access information and opportunities due to their social interactions with others. For some scholars, individuals' well-being and quality of life is therefore a by-product of social capital (Valenzuela 2009, 877). Putnam implicitly stated that citizens would initially be involved in civic associations before they would involve themselves politically, making civil engagement a precondition for political action. It means that individuals, who are involved in non-politically orientated groups, acquire social capital which makes them wanting to be politically engaged.

### 2.3. Social capital construct narrowed down

Because the concept of social capital comprises many mechanisms that are being stimulated through social connectedness, it has generally been rendered a very broad construct, making it hard to research in a scientific context. Some scholars have therefore attempted to narrow it down by clearly integrating "different dimensions of social capital into a coherent theoretical framework" (Valenzuela 2009, 877). Scheufele and Shah (2000) conducted an important effort by distinguishing between three domains of social capital: intrapersonal, interpersonal and behavioural. The first domain relates to individuals' life satisfaction. The second one refers to trust among individuals and generalized trust in others. The behavioural domain involves citizens' active participation in civic and political activities. Putnam particularly emphasized this last one. In addition to the interpersonal domain, Williams (1988) and Newton (1997) narrowed down the trust concept among further by distinguishing between 'thick' and 'thin' trust in social networks (Kavanaugh et al 2005, 120). They observed features of 'thick' trust in small face-to-face communities. It is generated by intense daily contact between people. "These tend to be socially homogeneous and exclusive communities, able to exercise social sanctions necessary to reinforce thick trust" (Kavanaugh et al 2005, 120). 'Thin' trust is different from 'thick' trust in a sense that it is less personal, based on indirect, secondary social relations and weak ties. These link members of different social groups to integrate them into a larger, more lose, social setting. Putnam has later characterized this a feature of 'bridging' social capital (as opposed to 'bonding social capital'). Importantly, according to Wellman (1992), weak ties are more likely to provide individuals with informational resources rather than actual support and exchange of confidences, but are also less likely to generate

'thick' trust amongst citizens. Both bridging and bonding capital are needed according to Putnam, as the former allows connections among otherwise disconnected groups or civic organizations. It facilitates the exchange of information between distinct groups, and helps to expedite the flow of ideas among groups (Kavanaugh et al 2005, 120). The latter "creates and continues the connections that keep individual community groups viable" (Kavanaugh et al 2005, 120).

## 2.4. Extending the effects of social capital's interpersonal domain: political tolerance

The previous chapter emphasized one aspect of social capital: social trust, or in other words, the interpersonal domain of social capital. This is an individuals' belief that "others will not knowingly or willingly harm" him or her (Valenzuela et al 2009, 878). I argue that this attitude is so important because it is the predecessor of tolerance. When people consider each other as trustworthy and reciprocal, willingness to respect each other's views and to compromise is enhanced (Cigler and Joslyn 2002, 9). Cigler and Joslyn (2002) have sought to find empirical evidence for this claim. They hypothesized that group membership – more specifically its extensiveness across a variety of different associational sectors, and the type of group affiliation – should be associated with variation in political tolerance attitudes. However, they do expect limitations of group involvement effects. They theorize that associational activity may, under certain circumstances, actually have a negative side when it comes to the development of trust, and, consequently, political tolerance. Examples they use are the American Nazi-party and the KKK. These obvious anti-democratic and strongly hierarchal groups will obviously not generate much bridging social trust.

Cigler and Joslyn also state that "more benign group experiences for many citizens may not be conductive to the development of political tolerance" (2002, 9-10). They see a decline in Putnam's 'bonding' social capital type as a threat to political tolerance attitudes. They observe towards 'checkbook' participation[5], fearing that group affiliation may actually be more of a 'sponsorship' type than of a 'membership' type. At the same time, they acknowledge that this sudden proliferation of groupings offers citizens the possibility to join "a wider cadre of groups than ever before" (Cigler and Joslyn 2002, 10). They argue that bridging social capital, that is, a

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[5] They meant a type of real associations that do not have engaged members. See Skocpol (1999), in the introduction.

cumulative pattern of an overlapping, yet diverse set of groups would "potentially have the effect of sensitizing one to the views of others and perhaps contributing to empathy for their positions", making individuals more politically tolerant (2002, 10). Lastly, Cigler and Joslyn assert that the positive effect of memberships should occur independent of the nature of the group. This implies that both politically and non-politically orientated groupings are of significance in generating more political tolerance. Logically, they even expect that a combination of these would only increase toleration levels more because of the above-mentioned sensitizing effect.

In the end, their statistical findings do offer considerable support for their hypothesis. Profoundly, their analysis suggests that tolerance grows with the number of memberships in different group types, thereby implying that multiple membership respondents experience a diverse array of people, ideas and organizational culture (Cigler and Joslyn 2002, 20). Generally, they find that the broader citizens' involvement in associations is, the more likely they develop tolerant attitudes. As of the mechanism that occur within groups, they affirm that individuals' at a micro-level experience a sense of both 'thick' trust within the specific groups and 'thin' trust amongst the different groups there are involved in. Implicitly, Cigler and Joslyn thereby make the claim that specifically high levels of 'thin' trust (inter-group trust) are required to generate more levels of political tolerance between different groups in society. After all, they clearly state that the more groups someone is involved in, the more likely he is to be tolerant. Overall, they re-emphasize the importance of associational activity for the larger democratic system, as it is being underpinned and sustained by high levels political tolerance (Cigler and Joslyn 2002, 20).

### 2.5. Broadening the nature of groups: incorporating the online world

In the scientific literature, concepts such as *group belonging, social connectedness civic engagement, associational activity and involvement* are used very frequently in relationship to micro-level mechanisms (which are brought together in the *social capital* construct) that generate political interest, participation and all kinds of citizens' orientations deemed essential for democratic polity. There are many criticisms and critiques that battle Putnam's (1995) observation that levels of social capital are declining. In doing so, they particularly stress that the construct which actually generates social capital according to Putnam, associations, is to narrowly defined. Some stress that he fails to understand the character of participation and

social networks in the modern world (Cigler and Joslyn 2002, 8). In understanding this 'new' character, the nature of interactions on the Internet has been subject to much examination. Using the typology of 'bridging' and 'bonding' social capital (weak ties through cumulated group experience vs. strong ties through strong single group involvement), "there is preliminary evidence that the Internet helps to increase the number of weak ties across social groups in communities with high penetration of the Internet" (Kavanaugh et al 2005, 120). This implies that the character is different in a sense that it only stimulates bridging social capital. On the contrary, Nie (2001) also argued that Internet use detracts from face-to-face time with others, which might diminish an individual's social capital (Ellison et al 2007, 1146). However, it seems generally accepted that online networks do generate some form of weak-tied bridging social capital, while they at the same time erode bonding social capital. This is because individuals can first of all join a wider spectrum groups that ever before (Cigler and Joslyn 2002, 10). Secondly, SNSs' technologies like photo sharing and group creating support online relationship building. On the other hand, Facebook for example is also characterized by a large share of permissiveness, making online participation more of a 'sponsorship' type than of 'membership'. This has commonly been associated with the notion of *slacktivism*, meaning that one is already an active user when he or she simply 'Likes' something on Facebook. Therefore a decrease in strong levels of bonding social capital is also to be expected amongst active Facebook users.

For the purpose of this project, special attention should be paid to the 'trust' feature of social capital as it follows from the literature that this is the predecessor of political tolerance. Using the typology of Williams and Newton, intensive Facebook is expected not to generate much thick trust, because this was only present in cohesive "socially homogeneous and exclusive face-to-face communities, able to exercise social sanctions necessary to reinforce thick trust" (Kavanaugh et al 2005, 120). On the contrary, Facebook use is associated with less personal, indirect and weak ties, able to integrate multiple individuals into a more loosely tied social network. Valenuela et al (2009) found that Facebook use correlated mildly but positively with social trust: users' social trust increased by 4.7 percentage point "when the index of Facebook use was varied from the lowest value to the highest value (890). Very active users are generally expected to develop more levels of 'thin' trust. This leads me to posit the first hypothesis:

**H1:** Extensive Facebook users with low levels of 'real world' group involvement are more likely to have higher levels of thin' trust than of 'thick' trust.

It follows logically from much of the literature that Facebook use is expected to exclusively add to members' bridging social capital. Putnam argued that one important feature of this type of capital is 'thin' trust. As has already mentioned, Cigler and Joslyn implicitly state that high levels of thin trust are required to generate an increase in political tolerance attitudes. this leads to the following hypothesis:

**H2:** Extensive Facebook users are more likely to have higher levels of political tolerance than moderate or non-users.

## 3. Methodology

In order to test both the hypotheses, in-depth semi-structured *qualitative* interviews have been used to obtain data. There are several reasons for this choice. In the first place, due to the subject of this paper, the concepts that are being used are rather vague. More specifically, there is no consensus among scholars as to how the scientific constructs *thick* and *thin trust* (and to a lesser extent, *political tolerance* as well) and *group involvement* should be validly measured. The latter for instance can be numerically rendered in order to get a grip on respondents' bridging social capital, but it is very difficult to quantitatively examine one's intensity of single group involvement.  Moreover, the exact method through which trust is generated by Facebook use is far from fully understood yet. Therefore, I believe that a semi-structured interview is a proper method because respondents can talk freely about their experiences and orientations on Facebook without being bound to narrow questions. The *probing* technique, using nondirective phrases or questions to encourage a respondent to elaborate on an answer (Babbie 2010[6]), can be of great use. This most likely will only add to the validity of the concepts examined as these can be tapped better as detailed illustrations can be given (Babbie 2010, 328).

Also, the semi-structured format offers me the opportunity to clarify questions about respondents' activities, experiences and sentiments which they unfold on SNSs.

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[6] Definition that is given by Babbie in the Glossary of his work *The Practice of Social Research* (2010)

Moreover, respondents who do not use SNSs can also elaborate freely as to why they refrain from Facebook use. Lastly, in-depth interviews are convenient because its *modus operandi* is very flexible (Babbie 2010, 320). If certain questions are not clear to respondents (which is to be expected due to the complexity of the concepts), the probing technique may 'push' respondents in the direction so I can obtain equally useful responses from all interviewees.

The obvious disadvantage of this research method is that much qualitative statistical analysis cannot be performed, making it hard to offer significant findings that may either falsify or evidence the hypotheses. Another downside of this method is that it affects the reliability of the outcomes. This is due to the fact that probing cause each interview to be unique (to a certain extent). The chances that a different interviewer would ask the exact same follow-up questions are very little. However, I argue that these two disadvantages are not dramatic because this research project mainly has an explorative character. There has been quite some scientific research that has focused on Facebook's relation to increased levels of social capital (Ellison et al 2007) and more specifically social trust, (Valenuela 2009, 889, 890). However, none of this has linked this to higher levels of political tolerance attitudes. Due to time constraints and limited numbers of respondents, I can only but offer a pre-test, a starting point and first insight that may be considered as an invitation to conduct further research.

In order to test the hypotheses properly, respondents' associational activity in the 'real world' has also been gauged. This is necessary because a respondent might be very engaged in all kinds of social groups, and not have a Facebook profile, making him or her still likely to score high on political tolerance levels and on both forms of trust. Without controlling for this, both the hypotheses would be improperly tested.

### 3.1. Sample and Variation across respondents' responses

To fulfil the goals of this project, I made use of the nonprobability purposive (judgmental) sampling method (Babbie 2010, 193) to select respondents for this research. Although the findings will not represent any meaningful population, different and sometimes even peculiar outcomes might then be uncovered. The respondents that have been selected were all, to my judgment, useful because their intensity of Facebook use varied significantly. In total, I conducted 17 interviews.

Those 17 recruited respondents were either friends, family or acquaintances. It was important to be at least acquainted with the entire sample because otherwise I would not have been able to recruit interviewees purposively. I primarily sought variance in their ('real world') associational activity and in their intensity of Facebook use. Thus in the end I interviewed four non-Facebook users, eleven moderate Facebook users, and two extensive users. Moreover, I attempted to seek variation in their levels of *thick* and *thin trust* and in their political tolerance attitudes.

### 3.2. Measurement of variables[7]

*Control variables 1 and 2: Age and level of education*

*Control variable 3: Intensity of associational activity*

Respondents were asked five questions about the extent of their involvement in all kinds of groups and associations 'in the real world'. Also, they were asked how much whether they considered those groups as personal, direct, exclusive and to what extent they feel they have trust in the members the specific groups.

*Independent variable 1: Intensity of Facebook use*

For measuring a respondent's intensity of Facebook use, I adopted the method developed by Ellison, Steinfeld and Lampe (2007). They created a scale to gauge user engagement in Facebook activities, based on number of 'friends', amounts of time spent on the network on a typical day (or week), level of agreement with several statements gauging users' emotional attachment to the site and the kind of activities that are being undertaken (active, passive, re-active). This method is appropriate and more valid because it takes into account the multi-functionality that Facebook has to offer. The more traditional approach for measuring media use only focuses on frequency and duration (Valenzuela et al 2009, 886).

*Independent variable 2: Intensity of Facebook Groups use*

Respondents were asked a few questions about Facebook groups: whether they are involved in any and what the nature is of these groups. They were also asked

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[7] See 'Appendix' for exact interview outline

to describe their participation in these groups. For example if they spend time reading and posting messages on the group profiles.

*Dependent variable 1: Social trust (thick and thin)*

A popular measure of social trust is Rosenberg's (1956) 'Faith in People scale'. It is a series of two forced-choice statements: "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you cannot be too careful in dealing with people". Strictly speaking, trust is thereby conceptualized as a dichotomy. However, the semi-structured in-depth interview format offers the opportunity for respondents to give, after some *probing*, to give more fine-grained judgements. The fact that this creates non-numerical responses is not problematic because analysis will be performed qualitatively. Generally, it gives a solid common overview of a respondent's level of social trust.

A more serious challenge actually comes from the fact that the concept *trust* in this paper is conceptualized as a twofold split between *thick* and *thin trust*. Thin trust is expected to develop through Facebook contact. Therefore, specific questions were added about how respondents trust their Facebook contacts their and to what extent they trust their online Facebook contacts differently from their contacts in the 'real world in groups. In addition, a question was asked as to whether respondents consider online friends as a supplement or as a substitution for 'real world' interaction.

*Dependent variable 2: political tolerance attitudes*

One of the first empirical studies of tolerance was conducted in the US by Samuel Stouffer. In his 1955 scientific work "*Communism, Conformity and Civil Liberties*", Stouffer attempted to measure public attitudes toward "communism and the extent to which Americans were prepared to extend procedural rights to communists and suspected communists" (Sullivan et al 1979, 782). As a result, the conclusions of the study primarily cast a light upon tolerance of communists, and not upon general tolerance more broadly understood. In fact, an absolute majority (11 out of 15) of the survey items used to measure political tolerance listed communists or suspected communists as points of reference. In other words, Stouffer basically 'controlled' the content of these items. The danger of this method is that it potentially may 'contaminate' measurement of tolerance levels with respondents' political beliefs (Sullivan et al 1979, 785). At the outset, political tolerance obviously presumes

opposition or disagreement towards an act or idea. It is, therefore, pointless to ask a respondent whether he or she tolerates a person or doctrine that is not opposed in the first place. Hence, in Stouffer's survey design, it could have been the case that a respondent appeared very tolerant because he agrees on granting communists all civil rights. Meanwhile, he might as well be very intolerant towards another group not mentioned in a survey. If only the content of the survey allowed for him to indicate a different 'least-liked' group, the measurement of political tolerance would be much more accurate and valid. In this sense, political tolerance should be considered as conceptually 'content-free'. "One is tolerant to the extent one is prepared to extend freedoms to those whose ideas one rejects, whatever these might be" (Sullivan et al 1979, 784)

The above-mentioned shift in the way tolerance was presumed to be accurately conceptualized was fuelled by Sullivan, Piereson and Marcus' 1979 article "*An Alternative Conceptualization of Political Tolerance: Illusory Increases 1950s-1970s*". They redid Stouffer's survey almost thirty years later, with the one exception that they used the 'content-free' format that they created themselves. Unlike other American research on this topic, they actually found little changes in levels of tolerance attitudes between the 1950s and the 1970s.

For the purposes of this study, I will also use the content-free format to be sure to gauge respondents' political tolerance attitudes instead of their own political beliefs. I believe that this format is most valid in measuring political tolerance, since it does not 'force' respondents to give tolerance opinions about pre-selected groups in society. Instead, it gives respondents a free choice. In addition, in-depth interview format presents the interview with the advantage of, passively, helping respondents to figure out the group that they consider 'least-liked'. Unlike Stouffer (1955) or Cigler and Joslyn (2002), I have refrained from using a content-controlled measure of political tolerance. They made use of "five non-conformist groups".

 First the following general question was asked: "if you must select a group in society whose ideas you consider condemnable and bad, maybe even dangerous to society, which would that be?" This answer gave an impression of the respondents' 'least-liked group' (or in other words: the group he or she is opposed the most). Accordingly, a seven-point dichotomous scale gauged the respondents' political tolerance levels in relation their least-liked group. All the questions were related to civil liberties issues:

*Do you think it would be problematic if:*

a.  *A member of your least-liked group would be a colleague, member of your fitness club etc.?*

b.  *A member of your least-liked group would be your manager or superior?*

c.  *A member of your least-liked group would be teaching your son or daughter?*

d.  *A member of your least-liked group would be demonstrating in your neighbourhood?*

e.  *A member of your least-liked group would openly announce their political views in the media?*

f.  *A member of your least-liked group would be represented in parliament?*

g.  *A member of you least-liked group would be part of the government?*

## 4.  Results and Analysis

The primary task was to discover whether extensive Facebook (group) use generates more feelings of thin trust among respondents, and as a result, higher levels of political tolerance. To achieve this goal, respondents also talked about their 'real world' associational activity. 6 interviewees indicated that they have about 2 groups they are really involved in: friend groups, family, colleagues. Two respondent indicated that he did not feel involved in anything and another only said he felt involved in rather broad loose groups: the 'social –democratic community, intellectual community and the Dutch gay community. They described their weak-tied involvement as a form affinity. Two respondents do not have a Facebook account. None of the respondents said they were heavily involved in many associations.

Special attention should be paid to the social trust concept. I assert that respondents' answers to question 20 ("*To what extent do you consider the activities you undertake with your Facebook friends as a supplement or as a substitute for your 'real world' social contacts?*") are of crucial importance in gauging their levels of bridging capital. I assume that Facebook, as a broad social network site, is an ultimate way for people to engage in low-tied, impersonal, indirect, non-exclusive interaction. This may lead to levels of bridging social capital, if they substitute their social contact in the 'real world' for online social network interaction. However, if they view their

online contact merely as a supplement, as an addition of their already existing offline social interaction, the impact of Facebook as device to develop new loose-tied connections has been undone. Therefore, the answer is presented prominently.

The most important findings are presented in the following table:

*Table 1. Answer overviews*

| Resp.<br>+<br>Age | Levels of 'real world'<br>Associational activity | Intensity of Facebook use<br>and specific online groups | Social trust:<br>supplement<br>or<br>substitute | Political tolerance attitudes score |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1<br><br>61 | 2 very cohesive: family and theatre community<br>2 other: liberal democrats, Amnesty International | 150 friends<br>checks 3 times a day<br>passive and reactive<br>both social themes and any another subject<br>No groups joined | Supplement only | 3 |
| 2<br><br>27 | No cohesive groups<br>Other loose tied: social-democrats, intellectual, gay community | 250 friends<br>checks once daily<br>passive and reactive<br>both social themes and any other subject<br>No groups joined | Supplement only | 3 |
| 3<br><br>24 | Indicated no group involvement whatsoever | 320 friends<br>checks 10 times a day<br>active, re-active and passive<br>primarily entertainment subjects<br>No groups joined | both | 0 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *4* *20* | 2 only very cohesive groups: student association and friends group | 300 friends active primarily entertainment subjects 2 groups joined | Supplement | 2 |
| *5* *26* | 4 very cohesive groups: friends, family, student fraternity, student association 2 lose tied: Leiden University community, GreenLeft political party | No Facebook profile | n/a | 5 |
| *6* *30* | 1 cohesive group: friends group 2 loose tied: Dutch Reformed Church, Dutch Labour Party (PvdA) | 130 friends checks 30 times a day Very active user Only jokes/entertainment No groups joined | Supplement | 7 |
| *7* *56* | 1 cohesive group: family 4 very loose tied: Women's movement, human rights' organizations, work, liberal parties | 50 friends checks once a day reactive and passive user entertainment use only, and "to see what others undertake" | Primarily substitute | 6 |
| *8* *23* | 2 cohesive groups: friends and student fraternity no loose tied | No Facebook profile | n/a | 5 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *9*<br>*61* | 1 cohesive group: local Bridge club<br>1 loose tied: Joint Works Council | 150 friends<br>checks daily<br>reactive and passive user<br>Spotify<br>Entertainment and to stay in touch with family far away<br>No FB group use | Supplement, for those contacts close | 6 |
| *10*<br><br>*81* | No cohesive groups, Family Only individual contact | No Facebook profile | n/a | 2 |
| *11*<br><br>*20* | 3 cohesive group: student fraternity, student association, study club<br>1 loose tied: "Amsterdam community" | 300 friends<br>checks twice a day<br>active, reactive and passive<br>Entertainment and friend events<br>Group use: fraternity FB group | Supplement | 4 |
| *12*<br><br>*21* | 1 cohesive group: friends<br>loose tied: colleagues | 200 friends<br>checks once a week<br>active and passive<br>Entertainment and chat<br>No group use | Supplement | 5 |
| *13*<br><br>*23* | 3 cohesive groups: student fraternity, student association, friend group<br>2 loose tied: student club, student house | Does not know how many friends<br>Almost never checks<br>No group use | Supplement | 5 |
| *14*<br><br>*27* | 2 cohesive groups: student rowing club, friend club<br>2 loose tied: student house, psychology department | 200 friends<br>checks once every three weeks or so<br>No group use | Both (Substitute for 'real world' | 2 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Leiden University | Exclusively to keep in touch with international contacts | contact with international contacts) | |
| *15* *34* | 2 cohesive groups: theatre group and friends 1 loose tied: colleagues | 120 friends Entertainment Active, passive and reactive Group use: theatre group | Supplement | 6 |
| *16* *26* | 1 cohesive group: friends 3 loose tied: colleagues, theatre club, gym | 250 friends Entertainment only Jokes Active, passive and reactive No group use | Supplement | 6 |
| *17* *66* | Family and close friends Loose tied: books club, travel friends, colleagues | No Facebook profile | n/a | 5 |

The most important finding is that all thirteen respondents who have Facebook profiles unanimously believe that Facebook's main purpose is to add to already existing offline social contact. No one views it as a means to extend social connections. Most respondents even clearly stated that they only wish to add 'Facebook friends' that they already know well. This leads me to think that Facebook does not generate higher levels of bridging social capital for these respondents. In the literature, bridging social capital has been associated with 'thin' trust. It then logically follows from the outcomes that Facebook does not increase the levels of thin trust for these respondents because they do not acquire more bridging social capital. However, considering the current quantity of the data, I am not in the position to therefore reject the first hypothesis completely. Due to the unrepresentative nature of the date, it is not sound to do so.

The second hypothesis touched the main object of this study. The outcomes suggested no logical significant relationship between Facebook use and political tolerance attitudes whatsoever. But with the presented findings one conclusion may be rightfully drawn. Cigler and Joslyn presumed that more bridging social capital stimulates political tolerance, because, as has been discussed extensively, this leads to inter-group contact and exposure to more different ideas and thoughts, which makes one more tolerant. My outcome suggests that Facebook does not generate more bridging social capital. Therefore, Facebook is likely not to add to political tolerance attitudes. On the basis of this logic, the second hypothesis should be rejected. However, my data are not strong enough to do so.

## 5. Discussion

On the basis of the findings, both hypotheses do not seem to hold true. However, the outcomes are not very decisive nor very significant, in a sense that they were taken from a non-representative group of respondents. This clearly affected the potential of the collected data. This was an expected result, because of the low-response rate in-depth interview format and the used sampling method. Obviously, it is clear weakness of this study. It might have been convenient to not only interview more respondents, but also to create more variance, for example in education levels, Facebook group use and number of Friends.

However, due to the in-depth interview format, some very useful insights have indeed been discovered. It seems that the use of Facebook is strongly associated with maintaining and solidifying existing social offline relationships. However, it seems that Facebook does not really add to bridging social capital because my interviewees do not really use the 'Facebook Groups' option and barely create and join groups based around common interests. Weak ties are thereby not stimulated. My results contradict Ellison and others' (2007) results that Facebook does add to bridging social capital. How is this possible? This might have been partially caused by the non-representative respondent recruitment method. However, the results are not only diverging. There are, in fact, completely contradictory. An explanation might be that Ellison et al (2007) only interviewed undergraduate students. My interviewees varied a lot more on age. This leads me to think that age does make an important difference.

Youngsters appear to view SNSs as a means to only but increase (weak-tied) social interactions. Older respondents merely seek Facebook contact to solidify social contact. A possible explanation is that older people do not really 'belong to the social network generation', because they did not grow up with it. They therefore do not feel the urge to intensify social interactions because they generally already have a solid quantity of (primarily bonding) social capital. I believe that is the major contribution this work has offered.

No effects on political tolerance attitudes could have been evidenced. It may be relevant to therefore redo this project with young college students only because it has been empirically evidenced that they do engage in new weak-tied social interaction on Facebook and that they do have increased levels of bridging social capital. According to my literature study, this most likely increases thin trust and thereby toleration levels. More scientific study is definitely necessary in order to unravel the 'social secrets' which occur in the world of online social network sites.

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## Appendix

*Interview questions format **(English version)***

*Control variables 1 and 2*

1. What is you age?
2. What is your level of education?

*Control variable 3: Intensity of associational activity*

3. Could you offer an overview of all the groups you are currently involved in?
4. To what extent do you feel you are engaged in these groups?
5. To what extent do you feel you trust members of the groups you named?
6. To what extent do you have the idea that you overall trust in others has increased as a result of your personal social interactions?

*Independent variables 1: Intensity of Facebook use*

7. Do you have a Facebook account or any other SNS profile?
8. About how many 'Facebook friends' do you have?
9. How often do you use Facebook?
10. What kinds of activities do you undertake on Facebook (active/passive/re-active)?
11. What kinds of subjects do you talk about/discuss?
12. To what extent do you feel out of touch when you haven't logged onto Facebook for a considerable amount of time?
13. To what extent do you feel that you are part of the Facebook community?
14. To what extent would you feel sorry if Facebook would shut down?

*Independent variable 2: Intensity of Facebook Groups use*

15. On a typical day you log on, about how much time do you spend reading and posting (combined) messages on the profiles of online groups you have joined on Facebook?
16. To what extent do you spend time reading the profiles of online groups you have joined on a typical day you log on?

17. To what extent do you spend time posting messages in online groups you have joined?

18. To what extent do you spend time posting new discussion topics in online groups you have joined?

*Dependent variable 1: Social trust (thick and thin)*

19. To what extent would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you cannot be too careful in dealing with people?

20. To what extent do you consider the activities you undertake with your Facebook friends as a supplement or as a substitute for your 'real world' social contacts? *Probing likely to occur*

21. Do you think Facebook contact can be sufficient for developing a certain level of trust?

*Dependent variable 2: political tolerance attitudes*

They may always be people in society whose ideas and convictions are considered to be bad or condemnable.

22. If you must select a group ideas whose ideas and convictions you consider to be bad or condemnable (or even dangerous), which group would that be?

23. Could you elaborate on your choice?

24. Do you think it would be problematic if:

    h. A member of your least-liked group would be a colleague, member of your fitness club etc.?

    i. A member of your least-liked group would be your manager or superior?

    j.  A member of your least-liked group would be teaching your son or daughter?

    k. A member of your least-liked group would be demonstrating in your neighbourhood?

    l.  A member of your least-liked group would openly announce their political views in the media?

    m. A member of your least-liked group would be represented in parliament?

    n. A member of you least-liked group would be part of the government?

25. How often do you get in touch with members of your least-liked group?

*Dutch Version*

1. Wat is uw leeftijd?
2. Wat is uw opleidingsniveau?

3. Kunt u een overzicht geven van alle groepen en verenigingen waar in betrokken bent?
4. In hoeverre voelt zich betrokken in deze groepen?
5. In hoeverre heeft het gevoel dat u de leden van de verschillende groepen kunt vertrouwen?
6. In hoeverre heeft u het gevoel dat uw algemeen vertrouwen in anderen is toegenomen door uw eigen persoonlijk contact met mensen?

7. Heeft u een Facebookaccount of een profiel bij een andere sociale networksite?
8. Hoeveel 'Facebookvrienden' heeft u?
9. Hoe vaak gebruikt u Facebook?
10. Wat voor soort activiteiten onderneemt u op Facebook?
11. Over welk soort onderwerpen heeft u het zoal op Facebook?
12. In hoeverre voelt u zich onbetrokken als u langere tijd niet heeft ingelogd op Facebook?
13. In hoeverre voelt u zich onderdeel van de 'Facebook gemeenschap'
14. In hoeverre zou u het spijtig vinden als Facebook niet meer zou bestaan?

15. Op een normale dag (week, maand), hoeveel tijd besteedt u in het algemeen aan het lezen en posten van berichten op profielen van online Facebook groepen waar u lid van bent?
16. In hoeverre besteedt u tijd aan het lezen van profielen van andere leden van de andere Facebook groepen waar u lid van bent?
17. In hoeverre besteedt u tijd aan het posten van berichten op de online groepen 'wall'?

18. In hoeverre besteedt u tijd aan het posten van nieuwe (discussie)onderwerpen op de online groepen 'wall'?

19. In hoeverre zou u willen zeggen dat over het algemeen de meeste mensen kunnen worden vertrouwd, of juist dat u niet voorzichtig genoeg kan zijn in de omgang met mensen?

20. In hoeverre beschouwt u de activiteiten die u onderneemt met uw 'Facebookvrienden' als een toevoeging of als een vervanging voor uw sociale contacten in de 'echte wereld'?

21. Vindt u dat Facebookcontact voldoende kan zijn voor het ontwikkelen van een zeker niveau van vertrouwen in anderen?

Er zullen waarschijnlijk altijd mensen (en groepen) in de samenleving zijn wiens politieke ideeën of overtuigingen door anderen worden beschouwd als slecht, abject of zelfs als gevaarlijk.

22. Als u een groep zou moeten aanwijzen wiens ideeën of overtuigingen u beschouwt als slecht, abject of zelfs gevaarlijk, welke zou dat dan zijn?

23. Kunt u vertellen waarom?

24. Zou u het problematisch vinden als:
    a. Een lid van uw 'least-liked group' een collega van u zou zijn, of lid van uw hobbyclub, (sportvereniging) etc.?
    b. Een lid van uw 'least-liked group' uw manager of leidinggevende zou zijn?
    c. Een lid van uw 'least-liked group' uw zoon of dochter les zou geven?
    d. Een lid van uw 'least-liked group' zou demonstreren in uw wijk?
    e. Een lid van uw 'least-liked group' openlijk zijn of haar politieke opvattingen zou presenteren in de nieuwsmedia of elders in het openbaar?
    f. Een lid van uw 'least-liked group' zou zijn gerepresenteerd in het parlement?
    g. Een lid van uw 'least-liked group' deel zou uitmaken van het kabinet?