Universiteit Leiden

The Effects of Social Media During Elections?

Impact of participation in Social Networking Sites by voters on their decisions during the Dutch parliamentary elections in 2012

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Preface

During the long bumpy trip towards the end of my master studies I have learned more than political science alone. I have learned that there are many interesting people out there with even more interesting thoughts. I have learned that I only know a little bit and should doubt everything. I have also learned (again) that it requires a very strong character to stand by my side and that I owe a lot of attention and free time to my wife and my son. In addition I have learned that it takes two good friends to improve the calculations and grammar of this thesis. Finally, I have learned that older people circle their survey answers behind the question and that younger people do it in front of the question. This last observation makes me laugh because I know that you are now thinking about the way you would have circled your answer.

This trip has now come to an end and I am gratefull for all the support that I have received during my studies. I am sure I will use most of the things I have learned to my benefit. First of all spending some more time with my family and friends.

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Summary

The massive rise of (mobile) acces to Internet and the strong increase in the use of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) is omni present throughout the Dutch society. The information exchange that takes place through these media has allready influenced many forms of human decision-making and behaviour. With this thesis I have tried to investigate the impact of the use of Social Networking Sites by Dutch citizens on two different aspects of national political elections, electoral participation and moment of voting decision. First I argued that the increasing use of SNSs (people with accounts) and the higher activity levels on SNSs (frequency of account usage) could have a positive relationship with electoral participation. Second I argued that for the same reasons there could also be a positive relationship with a delayed voting decision on party and candidate, mainly induced by more doubt caused by more conflicting opinions on SNSs, but also by the influence of other characteristics of SNS information exchange.

Through a survey I generated a convenient sample of train travelers and of people allready on SNSs. I used the combined data (N=286) for quantitative analysis with SPSS in order to find the expected relationships. The dataset showed the high use of and activity levels on SNSs, mainly in the younger age categories. It also showed that a fair amount of SNS users remembered noticing political information, but remembered less of communicating about it. Unfortunately the sample did not result in sufficient feedback to fully answer all the questions about specific political communication activities. This meant I couldn't validate the relationship between increased use and activity with increased exposure to conflicting opinions. Also the results showed no significant relationship between an increased reliance on SNSs and increased electoral participation. Not for SNS use, nor for SNS activity.

SNS use showed a strong significant positive correlation with the delayed choice for a party and person. SNS activity showed a strong significant positive correlation with a delayed choice for a person only. But, in the presence of stronger influences with multiple control variables the significance of the correlation disappeared, while the coefficient still remained positive. Other political communication variables like traditional media and face-to-face discussions did not show significant relationships with delayed decisions.

Some of these results are interesting because they suggest that the use of SNSs has a certain impact on the decision making process of citizens during elections. A more extensive research may reveil the impact on a wider scale and must focus on specific causes of the impact, like content and specific political communication.

"....technological innovators may yet master the elusive social alchemy that will enable online behavior to produce real and enduring civic effects."
Thomas H. Sander and Robert D. Putnam (2010)

1. Introduction

The influence of the use of Social Networking Sites on people's behavior has recently become more visible than before. Incidents of collective action like the devastating "Project X" party on the 21st of September 2012 in the Dutch city of Haren, initiated by a post on Facebook, but also the cyber-collective social movements enhanced by Twitter and Facebook during the revolution in Egypt, where President Mubarak took the drastic decision to shut down the internet for five days (Ali 2011, Agarwal, Lim & Wigand 2012), are just a few examples of this influence. Within the world of social media, the domain of Social Networking Sites like Facebook, Twitter and Hyves, seems to be of enormous interest to a large and expanding group of citizens. In addition the growing interest in the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in enabling social network demands coincides with the growing importance of social networks in the world nowadays (van Dijk 2006: 21-23). The important change related to these developments is that some characteristics of information exchange through social networks have gained a different potential. This potential has been effectively used in the examples of collective action mentioned above. Also in the electoral domain we have seen examples of this enabling impact. The US presidential election campaign of Barack Obama in 2008 is a well-known example. His campaign team has been said to have used social media, including Social Networking Sites, very effectively to inform and attract voters, especially the younger generations (Sander and Putnam 2010).

These examples show the impact of actively using social media as an enabling medium for communication and affecting peoples behavior. While in the Obama case it was a campaign team, in the Egyptian case it was a group of revolutionaries and in the Haren case it was a wave among many individuals. In each case, the usage of Social Networking Sites had some sort of impact on the decisions of individuals and groups who decided to participate in the event (or not) and required those involved to

make choices during the process. The question remains whether this decision process and the outcome would have been different without the enabling effect of ICT and the benefits of Social Networking Sites? In other words, what was the impact of the use of Social Networking Sites on peoples decisions, and why?

Within the political domain it is important to monitor changes in information and communication flows during elections. It is important for the competing parties and candidates, but more important it is for the equality in society. In case some groups are becoming differently informed there are many risks at hand. Either a lack of information, an overkill of information or even misinformation and manipulation may enter the realm of information exchange. It is therefore important to find out what the impact of the use of SNSs is, or could be, on electoral decisions of citizens. This is especially interesting between the have's and the have not's of SNSs, or the active users and the inactive users.

With this research I will try to evaluate the impact of the explosive use of Social Networking Sites (from now on: SNSs) on the voting decisions of citizens by looking for effects between the range of users (voters). For this thesis I will focus on Dutch electorate and the national elections case of 2012. I will focus on two aspects within the decision making process of Dutch voters: the decision to participate in the elections (electoral participation), and the moment someone makes his or her voting choice (electoral doubt). Both aspects are important indicators for the health of the election process, although in different ways. The first indicates voter turnout, and thus the legitimacy of the elections. The second indicates that voters are either waiting on information they are lacking or that they are disturbed by the information they are receiving, thus indicating the importance of information flows during elections and maybe more. While this research does not intend to claim causal relations, it does try to show prognostics in the usage of SNSs and the two aspects of voting decisions.

Research question

An individual thought process of decision-making precedes the act of voting. Besides the politicians and political parties that compete for this vote, political scientists also have an enormous interest in this complex process. But although different parts of this puzzle have been solved, the silver bullet has not yet been found. In the words of Van Holsteyn and Den Ridder about the Dutch electoral decision process: 'everything

remains different'. They came to this conclusion after evaluating electoral decisions between 1989 and 2003. The addressed topics like turnout, the rise and fall of new parties and voters decisions. Fluctuations and marginal changes are present, and maybe constitute the bone the political challengers are competing for. How unpredictable the electoral process may seem, some understanding can be found in details.

Though electoral participation has declined since the abandonment of compulsory voting in 1970, it has stabilized around 80% for the last several (national) elections. Further there is not a clearly visible trend in increasing or declining voter turnout. These relatively minor turnout fluctuations, combined with the steady shifts that accompany almost every election, as well as the rise and fall of new parties, all indicate that the decision making process of voters is fluid and hard to understand. Voting remains, in line with Lijpharts' Presidential Address (1997), still one of the most essential legislative acts a person can contribute to democracy. Whether or not alternative forms of political participation can be pursued (Verba 2001, Wille 2011), the elections remain important. It is therefore necessary to evaluate what conditions, even details, have impact on turnout rates.

Another attribute of elections that has caused some concern in literature is the moment that people make their voting choice. Irwin and Van Holsteyn (2008) remarked a trend, consistent with the developments across a number of Western democracies, in the moment that Dutch voters make their choice. People seem to be making decisions for a party or person at a later stage in the campaign. This trend concurs, they argue, with the notion that "the bonds between voters and parties have weakened in many advanced democracies". Some argue this bond needs to be restored for the health of democracy (Mair 2006). It is therefore interesting to investigate which factors are related to this delayed decision.

Even though the thought process is difficult to analyze, some things are a constant factor in the decision making process of voters. One of the most important factor is that voters need information to vote. For instance, they need to know there are elections in the first place, and basic data as how, where and when to vote.

Equally important is that they need information about the different choice of available parties and persons when casting a vote. This may even be more important in these days than before. Several decades ago the Dutch political landscape was

pillarized or segmented, with clear distinctions between the social-economic and religious parties (Lijphart 1974 and 1990). Individual background, rather than information, played the most crucial part in voting decisions. In later stages the Dutch party system became more professionalized with the rise several smaller parties protecting the interests of certain groups in society (Krouwel 2004). Information about individual policies and viewpoints became more important. Nowadays some argue that parties have become so professionalized or cartelized that they "fail" to differentiate amongst each other, which has given side effects like the increased focus on personalities (Mair 2006 and Katz & Mair 2009). With this in mind, people may have a need for more or more useful information, whether it is for content and policy or personality and images. These examples make clear that information plays a crucial part in how voters decide, and maybe plays a larger role than before in the Netherlands.

But how do people receive information that they need in the electoral process? The old days that people were *only* getting informed by flyers, speeches, election programs, newspapers and TV are over. The rise of the Internet and developments in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT's) have changed the information landscape forever (Vesnic-Alujevic 2012). Further, this new media revolution (also known as the web 2.0) is still continuing. People are getting more and more connected through the Internet and seem to receive information in different ways than before, especially through the use of Social Networking Sites. SNSs have changed and added features to the information exchange process. I will clarify some of these characteristics.

First of all, through this medium people can share information faster and more widely. Since the last elections in the Netherlands in 2012 some TV programs use social media monitoring experts to generate fast insight into the 'public opinion' on SNSs during and just after campaign debates. They expect people to watch TV and use their Internet devices (mobile or fixed) at the same time. People share and express their feelings and opinions fast enough for TV media to use it as a polling technique. Besides that people with access to large social networks can reach many others in a very short period of time. Many institutions and organizations have connections to sites like Facebook and Twitter by which they can communicate.

Secondly, the SNS content has a personal touch. It can be either information someone has found or it can be a personal message someone has created (and often a combination of the two). This kind of information is referred to as "user generated content". The important characteristic is that people can generate and share information on their personal profiles, which may feel very private but are in fact sometimes very public. While some are very aware of this fact and intentionally use the medium as a pedestal to voice their opinions, others are more naïve and are sometimes surprised by the reach and consequences of their actions (see for instance the example of the project-X party in Haren, where an innocent and accidental public invitation to a birthday party caused the unwanted attendance at the party of thousands of others).

The third characteristic is that SNSs provide possibilities for increased two-way communication, due to their speed and reach as mentioned before. Most SNSs have the ability to chat of exchange messages. Often with the use of visual media and links to other information. This not only provides opportunities for more deliberation but also for clarification and justification.

A fourth important feature of SNSs is that the information that people receive often comes from people they have social ties with. It is not the unfamiliar broadcast medium that TV and radio often are. Older theories around social psychology have found out that the stronger the social tie, the more likely a person will believe the information is valid and maybe even true or convincing (Robinson 1976, Diani & McAdam 2003: 41-42). This effect has also been observed within SNSs (Parmellee & Blanchard 2012). This doesn't mean that information coming from people with non-existing or weak social ties is considered false or invalid. People just have more trust in persons they know or have a strong tie with, and believe or accept information more easily from a person they trust.

In addition to the changes that the Internet and SNSs have caused in the information exchange processes, the ICT developments have added to this as well. Not only is the internet (and SNSs) becoming more widely available/accessible, with new connections, free wifi and portable devices, but also the mobile phone business seems to have filled a need for some groups in society. With 3G and Wifi networks covering almost every corner of the Netherlands, and the rapid growth of the relatively cheap, Internet capable Smartphone market, nearly every citizen has the possibility to

increase his/her information position. Recent figures from the Dutch Statistical Bureau (CBS) show that more than halve of the Dutch population (between 12 and 75 years of age) uses mobile devices for Internet. In particular, use by younger generations shows a steep increase in 2012 but also the older generations are starting to use mobile Internet more and more.

These ICT developments mean at least one thing: more people can have access to information sources anytime, anyplace and anywhere. Also they appear to be doing so. According to the CBS around 67% of the mobile device users (this means around 5 million Dutch citizens) surfs the Internet every day using their mobile devices. While sending and receiving emails is the largest activity (74%), participation in SNSs (68%) is the second most popular daily activity on the device. Viewing online news and information gathering comes third (62%). All of these figures are on a rapid rise since last year and the years before, in all social classes and across other classifications (such as gender, race, education, income, urbanization). While older generations still show some hesitation, it is important to bear in mind that 96% of the population between 12 and 75 years old uses the Internet in one way or another.

If the expectation is that mobile internet use twill catch up and the number of accounts and the frequency of daily use of SNS will increase, what would be the impact of the changing information position on the decisions of voters? In the words of Van Holsteyn and Den Ridder will everything 'remain different'? Or can we observe shifts in new directions where the Dutch electorate has not gone before? In other words:

What is the impact of citizen participation in Social Networking Sites (SNSs) on electoral participation and voter uncertainty during the Dutch national elections in 2012?

The focus in this thesis is on voter decisions and how (much) the outcomes of certain decisions can be related to the use of SNSs. The decisions I expect to be affected by the participation in SNS are the decision to participate (electoral participation) and the moment someone has decided for a certain party or person (time of choice). You will read more about the 'how' and 'why' of this expectation in the next chapter. I will conceptualize citizen participation in SNSs by dividing it in use (accounts or no

accounts) and activity (usage frequency). From relevant theoretical literature about electoral decision-making and political communication, I will derive three hypotheses and elaborate how these were tested through a survey performed on Dutch voters, focusing on the parliamentary elections of 2012.

The aforementioned Internet, SNSs and ICT developments in the Netherlands are, in relative terms, one of the largest in the world. Combined with the recent elections the Netherlands make a perfect case for this research. If there is a noticeable relationship between SNS use and voting behavior this will be of interest to many. For instance campaign teams may wish to use this in their battle for votes. Also at a more abstract level, when society discusses issues such as political interest, knowledge and participation, developments in how this information is exchanged and how it is related to electoral decisions, are of interest in the realm of "political communication".

The Obama victory in 2008 has already shown the power of social media use during campaigning in a two-party majoritarian system. Even though its success was controlled more from the top than from grass roots, the Obama team effectively used the characteristics of the medium to raise more than 5 million dollar and received 70% of the votes in some cases (Carthy 2011: 69 and 91). Although much research has been done in the US, only some research has been done in Western European States and even less has been done in multi-party proportional representation electoral systems like the Netherlands (Spierings & Jacobs 2012: 3-4).

The more established political scientists call for exploration of new insights into 'how voters decide' (van Holsteyn 2006: 12). With this research I will try to add to that exploration by bringing into perspective new insights into the impact of increased exposure to political information through SNSs on voter decisions. I do not deny the role of the 'old media' and off-line social network communication. They are probably still present and the functions are still strong, but I believe that SNSs may have added, complemented or replaced some of these roles and functions. In other words SNSs may be an enabler for human communication, which features and characteristics have a potential impact on information exchange processes. I do not expect or intend to find the silver bullet, but I do hope to provide a small piece of a complex puzzle, even if it might be a blank piece that shows there is no noticeable impact at all.

2. Relationships between Social Networking Sites and electoral participation.

Information and electoral participation

The underlying motivation to participate in elections is a highly debated topic in the literature of political science. Some argue to make (or keep) it a compulsory act in order to rule out inequalities between social groups (Lijphart 1996), while others agree on the liberal idea of self-determination and intrinsic motivation (Verba 2001, Wille 2011). They all seem to agree it is essential for the foundations of democracy that people remain motivated to elect their political representatives. In the Netherlands, like in most democracies, the electoral participation is non-compulsory. Since the abolition of compulsory voting in 1970, the Dutch citizens have to make their own decision to participate. The most important factor that contributes to their motivation is information. Without information people would not have the knowledge, nor the persuasion (or the repulsion) for their motivation to vote. This information arrives in the minds of the people, through communication of all sorts. Verbal, aural and visual information messages by different sources establish a reference or knowledge that motivates people in their decision making process.

Participation can be related to the type of news content and the political knowledge of the receiver. In a recently performed Dutch experiment about the effect of information on voter turnout, Adriaansen et al. (2012) investigated the effect of two types of political news content on more and less knowledgeable voters[1]. In an experiment they used strategic news (strategies that actors pursue to win votes) and substantive news (political viewpoints and issues that actors try to solve). They concluded that any type of content increased the likelihood of voting. They also added new insight that this participatory effect was strongest among voters with low political knowledge and was present with all types of news content when they compared it to their control group that didn't receive this news. They indicated that

[1] Adriaansen et al. (2012) performed an experiment (n = 451) to test the effect of both strategic news (media content that reminds the voters about the strategies political actors pursue in order to win votes), substansive news (media content that remind voters about issues political actors try to solve and about their societal goals and viewpoints) and a mix of both on political cynicism, intention to vote and voter uncertainty of more knowledgeable and less knowlegdeable youth (18-25 years).

this finding was in contrast to results of earlier research that found demobilizing effects of strategic news on the less knowledgeable.

Political knowledge and education in general is seen as an influential factor on political activity and that education helps increasing the motivation to vote (Verba 2001). Adriaansen et al. note that political knowledge acts as a moderating factor on the influence that news has on electoral participation.

Their conclusion only partly reinforces the notion of increased likelihood of electoral participation because there are more attributes of news content that have several acclaimed influences on individual decision making processes during elections. Another Dutch study, for instance, investigated the role of news media content in explaining the decision of citizens who were voting for anti-immigrant parties (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart 2007). It concluded that the more prominent immigration issues were displayed in media (level of attention and saliency in national newspapers), the higher the aggregate share of vote intention for these parties became. While this research did not solely focus on electoral participation, it did highlight that the level of prominence of news content is another attribute of information to take into account.

Both studies show the importance of information and attributes of communication on electoral participation. The next section will focus more on the social factors of information exchange.

Three social communication factors that can contribute to electoral participation

In this paragraph I will elaborate on how and why SNSs can contribute to information flows that eventually motivate people to vote by enhancing certain already present private and public political communication factors. I will first discuss three factors that come out of the literature on electoral participation (group pressure, interpersonal discussions and communication strategies for collective action). These factors can foster a positive motivation (or increased persuasion) for electoral participation. Then I will elaborate more on the role of SNSs in these factors, its enhancing characteristics and what previous studies have found out about the relationship between Internet activities and political participation.

The first factor relates to the effect of group pressure. In the arena of electoral participation the electorate (or group of possible voters) can be divided into two sub-

groups: participants and non-participants. The group members probably don't directly feel that they belong to that group, but it can be highly expected that people share information about their "group"-choice, either before or after they placed themselves in that group. Around 80% of the Dutch electorate still votes, which makes participation the dominant attitude in the society as a whole.

In general people have opinions about voting and tend to talk about it with each other. This makes voting a kind of group act in which people can influence each other's decisions by exchanging personal and public information. Van de Eijk and Franklin argue that '*the act of voting is a social act that people perform because it is expected of them as members of a group that collectively benefits from as many possible of its members'* (2009: 6). They also argue that elections are all about group behavior, even though other views claim the only reason for participation (or abstention) is either to be a good citizen or to affirm a political belief or identity.

This view of individual adaptation and group identification is accepted in many fields of sociology and psychology, and has also been applied in a certain extent to the political domain (Ettin, Fidler & Cohen 1995). One of the basic approaches with this view is that the more people get informed of each other's opinion the more people can be attracted to the dominating attitude in the social group they belong to. Although relevant with the predictive nature of information and group pressure, this does not include the effects of information by peer-group pressure like family, friends and others relatives. It doesn't include the knowledge about what other (groups of) familiar persons have done or will do. These influences attribute to an even broader approach of political socialization and (social) group pressure effects. Amongst the political socialization agents that have the potential for generating powerful socializing effects are schools, media, family, peers and social groups (Barner-Barry & Rosenwein 1985). These agents are almost all related to social networks.

The social group pressure view of electoral participation implies that the more the non-voting people are positively informed by people who do vote, the former will follow the latter. The other way around is far less likely, though possible. For instance when strong opinion leaders in several social communities decide to quit participating and share this opinion with others. Again the chance of this happening is small, because in the wider picture they face a majority of opinion leaders who argue that participating is a good cause. This is only true when social networks are interlinked and people are influenced by the wider picture, and not solely by a negative source.

When social networks are not interlinked, the non-voter group is not (or maybe less) informed by the voter group. If this happens the non-voters can strengthen their believes of standing on the sideline.

There are also theories that contradict the views of group pressure and focus more on the individual decision making process with the egocentric approach (Acevedo 2004). In this approach people act not by predictions of group statistics but by own believes in personal relevance. This means that even if a person knows that most people will vote, he/she will still "*put a premium on his or her individual choice to act*" (Acevedo 2004: 118). There seems to be no agreement in which approach is more applicable, but this egocentrism may be a moderating factor in the presence of strong group effects.

In addition to the group pressure, a second communication factor can contribute to an increase in political participation: interpersonal discussions. Two elements in this factor are important to explain. First, it is about discussion, a two sided communication with sender(s) and receiver(s) and not only a single sided information-gathering act or broadcast. Second, the communication takes place between at least two individuals who give the communication a personal or subjective aspect.

Valenzuela et al. point out that "*only in the last decades researchers have accumulated strong empirical evidence showing how informal discussions spur political engagement*" (2012: 163). They relate this effect both to offline and online discussions that can take place "*among individuals who are related to one another in varying degrees of closeness and intimacy*" (2012: 169). In general there are two degrees: strong ties and weak ties. The first group is characterized by close relationships, trust and respect, while in the second group these feelings are non-existent. Valenzuela et al. argue that there is extensive evidence that both strong and weak ties matter for political engagement (2012:168).

Zang et al. concluded that many studies have found that in the offline world it is apparent that interpersonal discussions with those of similar and different viewpoints serve to stimulate political activity at many levels (2010). They also pointed out that interpersonal discussions both foster bonding effects (strengthening existing relationships within social groups) and bridging effects (getting in contact with diverse groups of people). In relation to SNSs they argue that when activity

levels are higher, more interpersonal discussion (with both diverse views and like minded views) will occur and that when these discussions contain political content, political activity levels may be increasing.

All toghether interpersonal discussions can be important for the way people think and act about information. During interpersonal discussions persons may relate to each other in different ways, which may or may not add a certain personal weight to the information that is brought across. The strength of personal ties and the level of agreement seem to play a role in the persuasion.

Besides group pressure and interpersonal discussions as leverages for increased likelihood of voting, there is a third possible driving force for electoral participation. This communication factor is related to strategic communication that enhances collective action or achieves a strategic goal. In addressing collective action theories in the contemporary media environment, Bimber, Flanagin & Stohl (2005: 379) argue that "*technologies help people to develop collective identities and identify a common complaint or concern, and this enhances the public expression of new kinds of private interests*". This quote inexplicitly reveals that SNSs make it possible for individuals and groups to cross the private domain and enter the public domain very easily and in a very short time. Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl wrote about positive effect of email strings during elections, as an example of Internet characteristics that enhanced the "collective action process" for attracting votes. In this example email strings can be seen as a predecessor of SNS messages, like tweets or posts. The example also shows that if people feel the necessity or the urge to influence other people to join them in the elections, then SNSs have the potential to assist on a large scale, collectively and individually. One person from home can quite easily become the initiator for a collective action process in his or her social network by the help of SNSs.

As more and more people and businesses become connected to and make use of SNSs, individual communication can also achieve strategic goals by itself without collective action. Although much easier when the sender of the information is a famous and influential person, but if an individual has news that is interesting or important enough and it uses SNSs to share this information it can more easily reach the right persons and create strategic effects, than without SNSs. A Professor of New Media at the New York University writes in his essay on "The Political Power of Social Media": "*As the communication landscape gets denser, more complex and*

more participatory, the networked population is gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action" (Shirky, 2011). Although mentioning several recent successful SNS enhanced strategic political achievements in the Philippines, Moldova and Iran, the author notes that wireless Internet coordination does not guarantee political success. He argues that the technological tool can be simply ineffective for the purpose or the tool can be used to counteract the goal that people want to achieve, either by other individuals or a repressive government.

This strategic communication factor assumes not so much that there are (more) people who are privately motivated to draw others to the ballot boxes, but it stresses the ease in which the private and public communication strategies can be intertwined. A person or persons who want(s) to motivate others, find in SNSs a new medium with new characteristics that can enhance collective action and achieve strategic goals. Since there are already several examples in the civil society of collective action initiated and enhanced by SNSs (like finding criminal offenders through Social Media), it is plausible that the same happens in the public or private domains of electoral participation. Only if people are motivated enough to use SNS in order to achieve their goal of drawing others to the elections. Still, as the example of Adriaansen showed, sometimes the pure fact of putting political information out there (strategic or substantive) can motivate voters.

The impact of the participation in SNSs on electoral participation.

Group behavior has a close relationship with Social Networking Sites. The information exchange that occurs in the virtual groups on SNSs is considered similar with the information exchange in real social groups, albeit much faster. SNSs have the potential to rapidly and extensively spread ideas, knowledge and influence (Papacharissi 2011: 12). The explanation of three mentioned factors already incorporated some of the enhancing elements of SNSs. This paragraph provides a deeper look inside the role of SNSs and electoral participation. First by looking at some previous studies about Internet and SNSs impact on the decision to participate in voting.

Until the Obama campaign and the explosive rise of SNSs most studies were only focusing on Internet use in general. Mossberger, Tolbert and McNeal (2008) investigated the impact of online communication on voter turnout in the US between

2000 and 2004. They found a positive relationship for three Internet activities, but only during the presidential campaigns: reading online news, sending/receiving candidate emails and participating in political chat rooms. The third activity showed the strongest correlation. Contrary to these findings are conclusions from numerous other research, as Van Dijk (2006: 106) points out in his work on causes and consequences of the digital revolution. The Internet is not drawing more people in the political process but it provides a platform for additional forms of political activity. Van Dijk claims the digitalization of democracy has (1) improved information retrieval and exchange, (2) supported public debate, deliberation and community formation and (3) enhanced participation in political decision-making by citizens.

These studies show different outcomes of Internet activities on several forms of political participation, but there are some similarities. With regard to political participation in general the studies show that people who are already interested in politics in the offline world are impacted (by internet use) because they are motivated to go online and search for political information and content while the people that are not interested in the offline world and go online do not search for this information.

This selective effect may be true in the realm of older Internet activities, where people consciously choose to read, listen to and watch political information when they want to and neglect the news when they are not interested. But SNSs bring something new to the table. They can cause the not interested people to be 'accidently informed' by their friends and followers. This can happen because there are multiple reasons why people use SNS and this can result in mixed information flows through the same medium. In SNSs all three old style internet activities, reading online news, sending/receiving candidate emails and participating in political chat rooms, are possible and also form a substantial part of the activities by its users (Zhang et al. 2009, Conroy, Feezell & Guerrero 2012). The uses & gratification theory in SNSs participation assumes goal oriented media use in order to satisfy certain needs for individual. Parmelee & Bichard (2012) have described this theory in regard to Twitter. These needs, they argue, cause five motives for social media use (although these needs are not necessarily the first step in the process): social utility, self-expression, info/guidance, entertainment and convenience. These motives cause people on SNSs to exchange information with large content (email or tweets), chat and share news or other information. Besides the parallel with the traditional online communication, the SNSs feature more and faster ways of posting, sharing or

gathering information. This assumes an even stronger chance for increased exposure to information with political content on SNSs and a higher likelihood for electoral participation.

Other studies have looked at the impact of SNS use on other forms of political participation and show mixed results. Zhang et al. concluded that '*the reliance on social networking sites is not significantly related to political participation, but that interpersonal discussion fosters political activity*' (2010: 75). Valenzuela et al. (2012) investigated both offline and online social networks (including SNSs) and looked for correlation between interpersonal deliberation and online political participation. They focused specifically on the effect of the size of the network, the strength of the social ties and the conflicting opinions on participation. Without investigating the impact of SNSs on voter turnout this research is interesting because it showed positive effect of both network size and weak-tie discussions on political participation. With increasing numbers of weak-tie network participants in interpersonal discussions the individuals are more inclined to participate in online political activities. New information from outside the "normal" social group attributes to this effect. This is interesting because with the growing numbers of SNSs participants the network sizes and the weak-tie relationships can be expected to grow alongside. While strong-tie discussions showed no effect on online political participation, discussions with conflicting opinions showed a negative effect. While the network size and the weak-tie are adding to the argument for the impact of SNSs on voter turnout, the effect of conflicting opinions is not. For the impact of SNS discussions on electoral participation the question remains whether people have more (or more effective) interpersonal discussion about politics with SNSs than without.

On the other hand, voters can also prevent each other from deciding not to vote. Though plausible, I expect a small chance that this will happen within SNSs, because they have the tendency to bridge gaps between groups and not to isolate social groups (Carthy 2011:69). This tendency has also been observed in off line social networks and their role in collective action: "*Cross-talk in and between social networks can cause mechanisms that contribute to recruitment, outreach or alliance building*" (Diani & McAdam 2003:46). SNSs have the characteristic to easily interlink different social groups by a couple of mouse clicks or viral (popular) messages and thus crossing borders with the opposite minded.

In Sweden, Twitter use among citizens was showing marginal impact on political activity and the researchers said they could not make claims whether or not the Twitter use had any effect on the election outcome (Larsson & Moe 2011). Their novel approach did not focus alone on campaign social media use, but incorporated also Twitter use of non-campaign related citizens. In addition, Dimitrova et al. (2011) found out after examining the effects of different forms of digital media that party websites and in particular social media showed both significant and positive effects on political participation of Swedish citizens during elections. Unfortunately they did not measure the effect on voter turnout but instead on activities like attending a political meeting or trying to convince others to vote for a specific party.

It seems inevitable that this whole SNS argument of affecting participation by group pressure, interpersonal discussion and political communication strategies rests on the assumption that people talk about politics on their respective accounts like Facebook, Twitter or Hyves. So when transferring this offline effect to the online world of SNSs we need to know if and how much people discuss politics among each other. A statistical research from the Dutch Bureau of Statistics (CBS 2012a) on ICT use in the Netherlands in 2011 showed that around 25% of the internet users[2] communicated politically oriented messages when going online. Considering the dispersion potential of messages through SNSs, it can be assumed that a large amount of this political oriented content has a wider reach than only within this 25%. How much more is hard to tell, but more scientific focus is being directed in the field of work of Social Network Analysis, especially for consumer marketing, political campaigning and defense security purposes (Brynielsson, Kaati & Svenson 2012).

At this moment no better official statistical figures are known for the Dutch SNS users, but the 2011 figures show that a fair amount on online discussions have the potential to stimulate political participation. While the general number of Dutch SNS users and activity levels increases every year, and a fair amount of users communicates information about politics on their respective sites, and most citizens take a positive stand with regard to the parliamentary elections, it can be expected that an increased exposure to SNSs predicts a higher chance of electoral participation. This theoretic background leads to my first hypotheses:

[2] Persons between 12-74 years old with internet use in the three months preceding the research.

H1: Higher participation levels on Social Networking Sites predict an increased likelihood of electoral participation.

Limitations in testing the hypotheses

The groups of SNS users (frequent or not) and non-users are self selected groups. People actively have to subscribe and decide to participate in order to use the media. This makes finding causal relations between SNS usage and electoral participation more or less problematic. Especially in a single case study like my research. It will be almost impossible to tell with a limited time series study if participation increases because of higher activity levels on SNSs. But it will still be possible and interesting to see the relation between different kinds of voter groups, their SNS usage and their electoral participation. All together the influences of primitive group processes, the positive correlation of the older internet activities and the mixed but promising results of earlier SNSs studies, give a plausible prospect between the increased exposure to political information on SNSs by people not interested in voting and electoral participation.

Unless people are only connected by SNSs to people with like-minded negative (non voter) ideas this impact will be positive because the majority of the electoral group has a positive view on voting. In order to test this hypotheses I will need to control as much as possible for variables which also predict higher participation levels, like off-line political interest and activity. The basic assumption for my first hypotheses is that for all citizens increased use of SNSs leads to increased exposure to political information that supports the willingness to participate during elections.

3. Relationships between Social Networking Sites and delayed voting choice.

Information, decision-making and time of choice

When the voter has finally made his or her decision to voluntarily participate in the elections another important decision-making process takes place: what party or person to vote for? Again, this is an individual decision making process in which information exchange plays a crucial role. Two separate, but intertwined, influences can be identified. The first is obviously related to the information exchange process about what party or candidate to choose for. The other is more related to the cognitive decision making process inside a persons head. I will discuss both in order to explain my argument that the Dutch voter has become more susceptible to doubt and to argue in the next section that an increased use of SNSs may predict a delayed voting decision.

In the field of political communication and mass communication research the information exchange during election campaigns is a highly debated subject which discusses both direct (i.e. mass media) and indirect (interpersonal) information exchange. The flow of information from a source through a influential person to other persons is called the two step-flow hypotheses of Lazersfeld et al. (1948) and incorporates many of the before mentioned interpersonal discussion elements. Before the age of digital media, Robinson (1976) reformulated the two step-flow hypotheses by adding that the direction and strength of influence depends on (a) whether people discuss political topics or not (discussants or non discussants) and (b) whether or not the discussants deliberate about the same topics that were originated by the source (otherwise the direct influence of the source can still be more powerful). Robinson added that interpersonal sources wield greater influence than direct (mass media or political) sources when they exchange information about the same topic. This makes it important whether or not people are confronted through indirect flows with the same political information as they receive through direct flows (i.e. TV, newspapers, radio). In other words the effect of information exchange on voting choice depends in a certain way on what kind of social network someone is situated. Networks that

rarely discuss political matters or make statements and share their political opinion seem more susceptible to the direct one-step flows (Robinson 1976: 316).

This theory highlights that social networks play an important role in the information exchange process. It tells us that the impact or strength of the information within networks is related to the amount and type of information, and the actors exchanging it. The indirect exchange also wields greater influence on individuals' information perception than direct exchange. If people are more involved in social networks, and specifically different networks with mixed opinions (heterogeneous) instead of same opinions (homogenous), chances are higher that interpersonal information exchange increases in size and perhaps also in strength.

The cognitive decision making process is the second influence on the voting choice. There are several theories, or models, which describe how the mind of the voter may work during the decision making process. Compared to the information exchange process the cognitive models focus more on the mental influences that impact an individual during his or her decision making process, like social perceptions or personal reasoning. In his inaugural speech at the Leiden University, the Dutch professor Van Holsteyn mentions three models and inexplicitly adds a fourth one while he describes to what extent they apply to the Dutch voter (2006). I will use them to highlight the different cognitive influences that may be present in the minds of Dutch voters, and how some individuals may be more susceptible for information than others.

The sociological model describes the voting choices by the social group that the voter belongs to. This approach was very applicable in the Dutch years of pillarisation, which were mainly dominated by religious segmentations and secondarily by socio-economic separations, but has lost its dominance over time due to the influences related to de-pillarisation (van Holsteyn 2006). Since the beginning of the 1970's, when the de-pillarisation began, less Dutch citizens voted along the cleavage lines of religion and social class. Other factors came into play and this model could only explain a quarter of the vote in 2002 (van Kessel 2011: 77).

The second model is the socio-psychological approach that is based on the individual connection between voter and political party. How voters decide, and indirectly when voters decide for parties or persons is based on the mechanisms of socialization, immunization and party identification as van der Eijk and Franklin point

out (2009: 49-56). They explain, in short, that individuals from their childhood on are socialized. During this period most norms, values, habits and preferences are formed. The main sources that contribute to this process are home, relatives, friends, classmates etc. In strong partisan groups these sources are influential and in weaker partisan groups the confirmation is less coherent. Once a voter reaches voting age and begins to participate in elections the immunization process begins. During this period the voter starts to identify with a party when choosing for it during elections. Both socialized party identification (from childhood) and peer group pressure (not from childhood) can cause this party affirmation to happen. After several elections voting on the same party the voter becomes virtually immune for new choices. Now the party identification begins and the voter filters out negative information (selective exposure), accepts only positive information (selective acceptance) and tends to forget conflicting information (selective retention). Still these mechanisms do not apply for every voter - some even argue this process is not completely applicable for the Dutch voter due to the history of pillarisation and segmented multi-party system (van Holsteyn & den Ridder 2005: 70). Van Holsteyn explains that in the years of pillarisation these sociological and social-psychological mechanisms could explain most of the voting choices, but they are less useful in the recent periods of rational voters, which is described as the next model.

The rational choice theory is the third model and assumes that voters calculate their individual benefits from the election outcome and base their decision on that. It is therefore also referred to as "the economical model" or the model of the "calculating voter". There are several alternative forms to this model that describe different rational reasoning's on which voters base their decisions (Lau & Redlawsk 2006). Less guided by social factors and more based on assumption of best outcome of economical advantage, utility or policy. Information about intentions of politicians and parties, and effects of coalitions and government become more important for the persons dominated by these kinds of reasoning. Van Holsteyn argues that this third model is present in the Netherlands, but also indicates that it is not (always) the main driver in the electoral decision making process.

While van Holsteyn did not mention a fourth model he did explain a collection of other (cognitive) reasons that do not fall inside the other three major categories. He argues for instance that "personality voting" – in which the voter is attracted to (or repelled by) a politician and party - could be a reason. In 2006 he stressed that there

was not yet any strong empirical proof for it and could therefore, at that time, not be applied to the Dutch situation. In 2010, with a different study, he showed by results of an experiment with DPES respondents that personalization in fact did exist in the Dutch case. Even though parties still had the upper hand, and personalization within parties was the dominant form, around 9% were pure person voters (Van Holsteyn & Andeweg 2010: 634-635). Another recent (international) study concluded a change in the Dutch TV and newspaper media attention to election campaigns of recent years (Kriesi 2011). It found a trend towards increasing personalization and increasing concentration of the public attention on a limited set of personalities that were not only the result of populist parties. Both recent studies make the presence of "personality voting" in the Netherlands more plausible than before.

Another type of voting behavior van Holsteyn mentions is "strategic voting". With this model, people do not vote on their preferred choice but on another one in order to prevent a far worse outcome of the election. They do not want their vote to be lost and want to make a difference. The strategic vote is therefore only applicable to one unique and specific context. This can change every election and makes the outcome harder to predict. The Dutch elections in 2002 are, according to van Holsteyn, a good example of other (unpredictable) influences. The year in which the populist LPF party, in a very short timeframe, attracted a large number of votes. Without going into dept about the specific reasoning for this decision making process, much of the literature speaks about "single issue" or "protest" voters as factors behind the electoral success (Belanger & Aarts, 2006).

All above-mentioned models can be found throughout the Dutch electorate. The Netherlands, just as many other (proportional or majoritarian) political systems, have seen a decline in 'cleavage' politics, and partisan or social/economic group voting (Van Der Eijk and Franklin 2009: 95-98). With party memberships in the Netherlands steadily decreasing, the strong party identifications are becoming even less present. Figures in the DANS 2010 data guide of the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies (DPES) show an increase of people who have never been party member from 79,1% in 1971 to 83,3% in 2002. Also the amount of party members is decreasing from 11.7% in 1971 to 4.9% in 2006. In addition, when looking at the reasons for party choice in the DPES figures, the answer 'party identification, adherence, membership' showed a drop from the beginning of 1980, a rise between 1998 and 2003 and a drop

again in 2006. Van Holsteyn & Den Ridder point out that party identification in the DPES is described also a level of party adherence, making it more applicable for the Dutch electorate than the more American view of being a long time supporter or not (2005: 70-71). With that description, on a scale from not attracted to convinced adherent, a Dutch person can have a strong level of party identification even when it votes for that party for the first time. Interesting to see though, is that again this level of party identification is (1) significantly fluctuating between 1998 and 2006 and (2) also shows weaker levels of identification for the younger generation. These decreasing party memberships and recent drops in party identification and fluctuating party adherences cause an increasing part of the electorate to look for other information than they used to filter in benefit for their partisan believes[3].

The strength by which Dutch voters were bound to a choice for a long time has declined and it can be expected that this trend has continued while other irregular cognitive influences have increased in strength. This means that the aggregate of the electorate has become more volatile and there is an increased availability of voters during elections (van Holsteyn & Andeweg 2010, van Kessel 2011). More voters are "floating" between elections and chances are higher that in every election a fair amount of voters have not yet made up their minds. Implicitly this development has increased the level of rethinking their alternatives opening up to new choices. Hence, rational decision making, strategic thoughts and maybe even personality influences have gained ground in Dutch voting behavior. These changes have given rise to protest voting, issue voting and strategic voting. But more important it has caused voters to be more susceptible for doubt. This "floating" makes some individuals more vulnerable to new socialization and immunization influences. One of these influences is social group membership, which can be found in offline and online social networks. The voters also become more dependent on information about politics, parties and political leaders to base their decision on. Whether they are looking for information to make a calculating vote, a strategic vote, a single issue vote or a personality vote, the information that they need can influence their decision making process and can be related to a delayed decision if it causes doubt.

[3] It is not clear if this trend continued in the elections from 2010 and 2012.

There are more causes for voting choice (and doubt) of which some claim that they can be of great influence. In their structure of causal relations Van der Eijk & Franklin (2009: 115) point out more specific causal relationships between voting choice and (1) candidate evaluations, (2) attitudes on group benefits, (3) attitudes on domestic policy, (4) attitude on foreign policy and (5) assessment of party competence. In addition the campaign effects of candidates, campaign issues and general goodness/badness of times stand on the beginning of the causality, but next to group memberships and party identification. Issue votes, protest votes, strategic or tactical votes are all alternative outcomes of the decision making process from the 'correct' vote, which is seen by Lau & Redlawsk (2006) as the vote that would have been made under conditions of full information. The cognitive decision making mechanisms indicate an important implication for the time some voters need to make up their minds. Younger generations or first time voters, and swing voters are susceptible for doubt in party choice. They need more information than voters with strong party identifications.

The impact of the participation in SNSs on the time of voting choice.

What does this all have to do with SNSs and the time a voter makes his or her decision? On SNSs information is not only found but also given from different social groups and individuals. The more an individual is exposed to SNSs, the more (diverse) information he or she will receive and the more doubt it can cause. Following the two step-flow hypotheses the information from traditional media sources can be compared or in conflict with information experienced on SNSs. This can cause doubt, especially with persons vulnerable for it. This vulnerability may be more present with young voters, first time voters and swing voters because of the earlier mentioned weakened party identification in these groups. Because the information exchange about elections and political preferences by nature of the process always shows a peak in the period leading up to the elections, we can assume the same thing happens on SNSs. It is therefore plausible to assume that undecided voters wait until later moments to decide because they (1) are doubting their choices because of new and important and conflicting information and (2) they want to wait until they have received all the information from their social groups surrounding them, even the conflicting ones.

I expect that the characteristics of SNSs, concerning usage and the ways that political oriented information is communicated, cause voters to be more exposed to diverse views about the elections. This point has been made before by other research which also included that this effect can come both from people with whom they have strong ties and from people with whom they have weak or non existing ties (Zhang et al. 2010, Conroy Feezell & Guerrero 2012, Dimitrova et al. 2011). I expect this increased exposure to diverse views to predict more doubt and later voting choices.

I have three reasons for believing this expectation also predicts a later moment of voting choice. The first reason is the amount of (wanted and unwanted) information about diverse views increases throughout the election period because of the characteristics of SNSs. The second reason is that emphasis is added to already existing doubt or latent doubt the way people post or share information on SNSs. The third reason is that at any time during the election period (and often at the end) these diverse views come around and are noticed by the regular use of SNSs. For instance, person A would never have looked for the effects of tax reduction plans of his preferred party because he believed in the party. He also never paid attention to it on the news or talked about it with his friends, because everyone around him voted another party. But now three of his close friends share a post of a non-related friend who has calculated the tax reduction effects on their economic situation. The three friends added negative messages to the post, and suggested to vote for a different party. Person A came across these posts when he was checking his SNS on a daily base and started to look into the critique. Then he started to doubt. In my opinion this process of doubt was caused by (1) the extra amount of negative information; (2) the negative emphasis added by related ties; (3) the daily (sometimes unwanted) confrontation with this information.

While diverse views may have a stronger impact on some voters, like-minded views or neutral views may have an impact on the delay of the vote as well because it can relate to, for instance, an overload of information. People who are not using SNSs, or using it to a lesser account, have fewer means to be confronted by the combination of these three factors. They either read, listen to or watch the news (maybe even daily) but no emphasis is added at that moment. The chance that people are confronted with diverse views about the elections on a daily base when not being on social media sites is also smaller. In other words, their decision making process is

less disturbed by conflicting information. Except, probably, when someone is already very active in the political domain and deliberates on a frequent basis.

For all people SNSs provide a much larger platform for political information exchange than the off line world. Depending on which phase the voter is (socialization, isolation or party identification) he or she will use the before mentioned filters to a certain extent, in order to collect, interpret and store information. But the larger the amount of information and the more often diverse information comes from strong related ties, the more likely it will be that a voter starts to struggle with his or her voting decision. This, I think, not only accounts for the 'correct' voter, but also for all the other reasons why people vote for a certain party or person (i.e. issue vote, protest vote, strategic vote). This theoretic background leads me to my next hypotheses:

H2a: The more a voter participates in SNSs the more likely he/she will be exposed to diverse political views; and
H2b: Higher participation levels on SNSs predict an increased likelihood of delayed voting choice.

Causality or prospective values?

Time of voting can also be affected by other causes, which forces me again to be very careful in predicting any causality based on theory. I will refer to two previous studies in order to explain this restriction.

First the earlier mentioned study of Irwin and Van Holsteyn (2008). When looking at figures from past elections they noticed a consistent pattern of late deciding voters? This trend of late decisions in the last days of the election (from 29% in 2002 to 33% in 2006) and on the last day of the election (from 9% in 2002 to 12% in 2006) was rising in small steps. This occurred before the introduction of SNSs, which indicates that there may be other reasons for the voters to doubt and delay their decision. They questioned what information are the voters waiting for and performed an experiment. Irwin and Van Holsteyn argued that voters rely more and more on what other voters will do and how this will impact events after elections. They based their theory on the rational choice model. They assessed that voters become more calculating about their personal (economic) interest and wait until the polls give them enough information about possible (governmental) outcomes. By deciding at a late

time voters want to influence their future for maximum benefit, or minimum negative effects. This strategic (economic) voting causes late decisions and swing-voters. By performing experiments with voters in a test situation they demonstrated that voters who are already doubting react differently to the hypothetical coalition outcomes than voters who have made their choice long time before. With this experiment they made it plausible that Dutch voters are becoming more economically driven, cognitive decision makers. Basically the experiment showed that voters are influenced by specific information that is structurally related to the evolution of the election process. This information becomes clearer and gains a higher confidence level in the later stages of the elections. Their conclusion, in my opinion, does not oppose my suggested prognostic relation between more and diverse electoral information on SNSs and the time of vote. On the contrary, it may even be amplifying the cognitive delaying effect by adding more doubt through more and more disturbing information.

The second example is the earlier mentioned Dutch experiment by Adriaansen et al. (2012). In this study they suggested that substantive news (which, in my opinion, can also be interpreted as substantive information from likeminded or opposite minded people on SNSs) makes the more knowledgeable more conscious about the differences between parties. With this experiment they showed that also (newspaper) media could have an effect on the voter hesitation. It must therefore not be neglected as a control variable.

Because of these other (experimental) findings I have to be very careful in suggesting any causal relations between increased SNS use and time of vote. I still can expect to find causal relations between SNS activity and exposure to more diverse views. And in addition I can expect to find prognostic value in comparing SNS activity levels and the time of choice.

Limitations in testing the hypotheses.

There are some limitations that need to be addressed. I have to take into account that a large amount of the electorate still has a strong form of party identification and will probably not be affected and other (cognitive) influences may be present which cause some voters to make later decisions. Also high or low political engagement and knowledge can determine somebody's sensitivity to outside influences as earlier studies have showed (Bimber 2001, Valentino, Hutchins & Williams 2004). In some

groups of voters the relationship can therefore not be clearly visible or be separated from other influences. Control variables are needed to check for these effects.

Unless people are only connected by SNSs to people with like-minded ideas the impact will be positive because of my assumption that SNS usage (and its characteristics) cause people to be exposed to more and more diverse views. But observing more political information on SNSs related to information from traditional sources could also generate a form of doubt. Following Robinsons' theory this effect is only stronger than the original (media) source when interpersonal sources and traditional (mass media) sources are compared or are in conflict. The strength of the relationships of both media and SNS effects can only be measured by a qualitative content analysis of both information flows. This will not be done in my thesis. Within the limited timeframe and resources this research will only pursue a quantitative statistical survey analysis, which limits the external validity in respect to the strength of content of information.

4. Research Design and Methodology

Operational design and method of data collection

In order to receive research data I have performed a survey (appendix C). Due to the limited time and resources available I used a convenience sample to retrieve enough data for statistical analysis. The survey questions were administered to train travelers on a specific trajectory between January 25th and February 3rd 2013. In addition during the same time period the survey was distributed through Facebook and Twitter by posting the link to the web-based survey and asking people to complete the questions and repost/retweet the link. Both methods generated a sample with a variety of voters, non-voters, early voters, late voters and voting choices during the Dutch national election campaign of 2012. The survey included questions to retrieve information about the respondents SNS usage and habits, and to incorporate control variables. The reason I also performed a train survey was to get a group of non-social media users, which I would have missed if I had only done the survey online through social media.

The survey questions were distributed, filled in and collected to all passengers during the train ride on a single track between Breda and Rotterdam. This method will have to take bias and external validity into account. The results of the train survey may be biased by the fact that train travelers may not represent the complete Dutch society in general, especially when conducting the survey at a specific time and specific track. By varying between the time of day and different dates (weekdays and weekend) I tried to minimize the travel related bias and retrieve the best possible externally valid sample. The track bias itself was not controlled for. The online survey was available 24/7 and through my own Facebook and Twitter I asked people to spread the link to their followers and to complete the survey. The bias in this method is related to the social groups that I am connected with.

Case study

For this research I decided to perform a single case study by focusing on the Dutch elections in 2012. Besides the reason of convenience, I took my home country and the latest election because the explosive growth in SNS and ICT combined with the

interesting democratic institutionalization with a plural society, multiparty system, relatively high voter turnout but declining party identification.

SNS use and activity in the Netherlands is high and rising. According to a commercial social media trend watching site[4], Facebook is the most popular social networking site with 6,5 million active members (of which 66% logs in daily) and 8,7 million unique Dutch visitors each month, followed by Hyves with 4,4 million active members (of which 20% logs in daily) and 5,3 million unique Dutch visitors each month and as fourth there is the micro blog Twitter who accounts for 1,3 million active members (of which 10% logs in daily) and 4,1 million unique Dutch visitors each month. LinkedIn places third but is more considered a work related (social) networking site. According to the same website stats the amount of unique visitors each month on Hyves is steadily decreasing from around 9 million in 2010 to 5 million in 2012 while Facebook and Twitter are still steadily increasing in unique visitors. This may show that the popularity of Facebook and Twitter is stronger than Hyves. The website announced that, based on a three month period research, the Dutch Twitter users are the most active ones in the world with 33% of the accounts posting at least one message in that period. Japan ranked second (30%) and the US fourth (28%). Although not scientifically proven these figures give an interesting view about the expanding omnipresence of social media around the Dutch citizens. The most active social media users according to age groups do show an interesting division where the younger generation is not the peak in users (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Most active Social Media users according to age groups

Age	15-19	20-39	40-64	65-79	>80
Most active Social media users	7%	32%	43%	13%	5%

Source: http://www.marketingfacts.nl/berichten/de-laatste-social-media-cijfers-van-nederland (checked on 12-11-2012)

Besides the SNSs and ICT reason the second reason is that the Dutch political system is an interesting case with relatively unexplored area's the impact of these new developments on voting behavior. Most studies have focused on the US and few on countries with proportional representation.

[4] Source: http://www.marketingfacts.nl/berichten/de-laatste-social-media-cijfers-van-nederland (checked on 12-11-2012)

Dependent variables

Within the concept of electoral behavior I focused on the before mentioned two dependent variables: electoral participation and time of choice.

Electoral participation consists of a bivariate decision, with either positive participation or absence (blank votes are considered a lost vote but still attribute to participation).

Time of choice is the (by the voter perceived) moment of his or her voting decision. I use five periods in defining this moment: long beforehand, a few months before, last weeks before election, last days before election and on the election day.

The voting choice is actually a twofold decision on a party and a person on the list. Van Holsteyn & Andeweg (2010) tried to disentangle the reasons for party vote from the reasons for person vote because they argue that many studies remain unclear in the concepts of personalization. They claimed that one of the main causes of this confusion is that personality and party choices are interrelated, and they worked out an experiment to split the two. In their experiment they found that less nine percent of the voters put person above party. They also found relationships between some of their control variables that can be of interest for this study. Education, party identification, political knowledge and time of vote had a weak but significant negative relationship with personalization. While they discuss the mixed results in existing studies about the first three (some have found positive relationships as well), the correlation with time of vote stands on its own. The closer to the election a voter makes his or her decision the more it is based on a personality vote. Van Holsteyn & Andeweg did not question the reason for this, nor did they claim any previous studies to this phenomenon.

I will disentangle the vote decision in party and person. Besides the conceptual reason mentioned before, another reason for this are indications that the Dutch public (media) is focusing more on persons during elections (Kriesi 2010). The same might happen on or resonate within SNSs. Two things can happen. Either both decisions are made at a later time, or the person choice is delayed when the voter needs more information about the candidate list. Asking two separate questions disentangles the person from the party and provides another chance in the debate of personalization. In case decisions for persons are made at a significantly later moment it may indicate an increasing influence of intra party personalization influences.

Independent variables.

Within the concept of SNS participation I focus on two variables: amount of accounts and activity. The first variable is the one between the users and the non users. The second variable is the one between the activity levels of the users. While a user can be connected to several activity levels, a non user can only be connected to one (not active). This restricts me from combining them into one activity level. Therefore I will treat them as two separate independent variables.

SNS use (accounts or no accounts) consists of five options: none, one, two, three and four or more. For the data analysis I have merged the amount of accounts into two groups, disregarding the influence of having more or less accounts. The extra information of multiple accounts in the dataset could be used for other purposes if required.

SNS activity is described by frequency of login with five levels: less than once a month, monthly, weekly, daily, several times a day. The usage is not further specified.

SNS discussion with opposite minded people and like-minded people are the independent variable for H2a.

Type of accounts are added as an extra independent variable in the survey, because I want to check which accounts the individual uses in order to reveal any differences between the type of accounts and the impact. This variable has no direct relation to the hypotheses but may be valuable for further analysis. I offered a choice between the three most used SNSs in the Netherlands: Facebook, Hyves and Twitter. Also an option for 'other account' was given.

Control variables.

Control variables are needed to compensate for several effects. Besides **demographic components** (sex, age, income and education), I also controlled for **offline political interest** (not interested, moderately interested and very interested), **offline political activity** (not active, sleeping party member, active party member, political candidate), **offline political deliberation activity** (never deliberate, sometimes deliberate, often deliberate) **level of party identification** (vote for same party all the time, have been switching once before, have been switching more than once), **level of party adherence** (no party attraction, feel attracted to a party, adheres a party, strongly adheres a party) and **other online and offline media use** (watching TV debates,

reading newspapers, going online for political information). In order to control for **face-to-face political discussion** I asked the amount of offline deliberation with other people, like-minded people and opposite minded people. **Electoral participation in previous elections** can also be used to control for very active voters and less active voters.

The impact of the use of SNSs on the party choice?

The most important variable of voting decisions is off course the choice itself. The voters choice is the most difficult to investigate because of its 'black box' characteristics that every party or political leader is trying to understand. More than twenty political parties participated in the elections of 2012. The voting choice is a single vote, which must also be used to indicate a choice for the preferred political candidate. Both of these variations cause many challenges to investigate relationships between SNSs and voting choice. Some research has indicated that a positive relationship can exist (Sander & Putnam 2010, Carty 2011, Gibson & McAlister), and was even marginally present during the Dutch elections in 2010 (Spierings & Jacobs 2012). But much more data is required to find relationships and I was unable to collect this with my survey method. Still, I will add **voting choice** as a control variable[5] instead.

Limitations in research method

Previous researchers examining media influence during elections have indicated it is relatively easy to measure direct effects (like amount of time exposed to a candidate on TV or newspaper) but it is very hard to measure indirect effects, like overall exposure when talking about it with friends (Hoppman et al. 2010). I cannot compensate completely in this research for the off line influences people simply don't remember (i.e. street talk or family discussions). Neither can I compensate completely for other external non-social media or non-demographic influences like not being able to vote or "random" voting. I used control questions in order to filter out some of these influences.

[5] The control method will be to compare the distribution of choices with the actual results and to run a relational check with the SNS participation and party choice in order to rule out any extreme relationships between certain SNS user groups and certain parties. For instance: if all survey participants indicate that they voted for the PvdA, than I need to incorporate that in my findings and conclusions.

It would have been best if I could have measured the social media activity of people in my survey, but I did not have access to their accounts. Only direct questioning gave the most clear cut answer, within the given possibilities. The downside of this method is that the observations are perceived judgments of voters. They may not have recalled other influences on their voting behavior and may be biased by wishful thinking when recalling information, which is a known restriction in these kinds of research methods (Levine 2007). Also the few months that have past between the survey and the election will probably have blurred memory of the participants.

Method of data analyses

In this single case study, the unit of measurement is the individual person. The levels of measurement are either nominal (social media use or not, voting yes or no) or ordinal (higher or lower activity, earlier or later voting decision). The Pearson chi-square test will be used for univariate impact analysis of the independent variables on the decision to participate and time of vote. Multivariate analyses are performed with bivariate logistic regression. In my survey I had to put in answer options for people who had forgotten or simply didn't know their answer to a question. This was the case for some questions related to the dependent, independent and control variables. The "I don't know-answer" has been put as a last option in the list for all applicable questions (see appendix C). The benefit of this was that it generated an overview in the sample of people who knew for sure and didn't need to guess or skip the question. The downside was that for some questions many respondents choose this option, which (1) limits the statistical value of the data and (2) requires additional steps in the computer based statistical analyses program SPSS after adding this option to the statistics. The first problem limits the external validity of the analysis. The second problem can limit the internal validity. If not corrected the SPSS program uses the value in the correlation and logistic regression calculation which may affected the direction and significance level of the outcome.

Some of the responses resulted in a variation between 0 and 15% of "I don't know" answers. I kept the responses for the statistical analysis to show them in the graphics but I dropped the "I don't know" responses for the correlation and logistic regression calculations.

5. Survey results

The sample

The survey resulted in 300 responses (245 train and 55 online). 4 were removed because of underage respondents who were not yet allowed to vote. In addition 14 respondents with foreign nationalities were identified of which 10 were removed because they were not allowed to vote. The results of the other 4 indicated that they had been allowed to vote, possibly due to a dual nationality. This resulted in a N of 286. The statistical results can be found in appendix A.

The sample resulted in an overrepresentation of the age category of 18-30 years old. Also the group of highly educated persons was much larger than the other two groups (around 78%), which could have been the result of the survey question that put average primary school (HAVO) and bachelor studies (HBO) in the answer for higher education levels. There also was an underrepresentation of lower educated people (around 3%), which can be problematic in order to conclude something about this group in general. The amount of persons with lower income levels is also somewhat higher than the middle and higher income levels. Other than that the control variables showed no remarkable deviations from what could be expected from this survey method. It appeared that the sample, collected one a single track during daytime on a weekend day and a midweek day, mainly represents the younger, higher educated people with low income. Looking at the party choices the sample was in some cases (PVDA and VVD) very representative for the 2012 electoral outcome but in other cases (D66, PVV) it was not. All parties in parliament are represented in the sample. Overall the internal validity of this sample can be assessed to be higher than the external validity.

Voting behaviour.

The survey resulted in a representative sample for turnout rate. Around 88% indicated to have voted in the 2012 elections and around 12% said to have abstained (N=285). This (survey based) turnout rate is 10-15% higher than the turnout rates of the last decades in the Netherlands, but is often seen in Dutch election studies (Schmeets 2010). It is common to find higher claimed turnout rates in surveys than actual participation due to social desirability (Tourengeau & Yan 2007), in which the

respondent wants to please the interviewer or his/her social surrounding, or due to a combination of that with memory problems (Schmeets 2010). The focus for this research is on the people who were willing to cast a vote, but also the reason for non-voting was checked. The survey presented a question for the respondents to indicate why they had not turned out to vote (N=41). While some people indicated they forgot to vote (10%) or had other reasons for not voting (43%), almost 40% indicated they could not make a choice (21%) or did not want to vote (18%). Later on I will get back to this last group of unwilling and/or undecided persons.

SNS use and activity.

The SNS use in this sample is very high, even higher than the results of the recent CBS study mentioned earlier. Figure 2 shows that 71% of the respondents uses one or more SNSs. This was to be expected by the nature of the data collection method (almost a fifth of the responses come from the online Facebook and Twitter survey). Within this group over two third uses his or her online social network at least once a day or more (figure 3). These numbers are high, and may be the result of the high amount of young and online very active people. Even then these figures prove a continuation of the trend mentioned by the CBS.

Figure 2. SNS use.

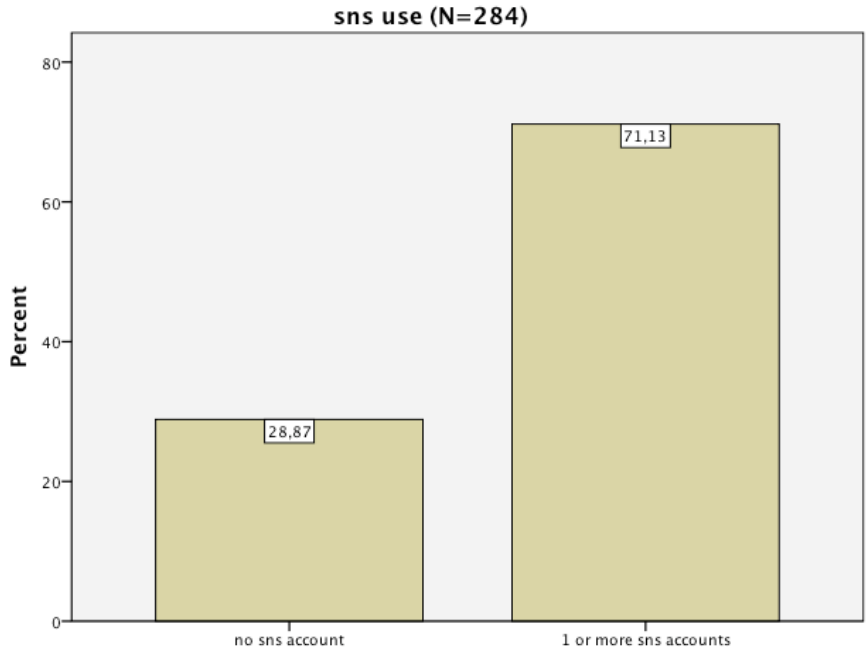
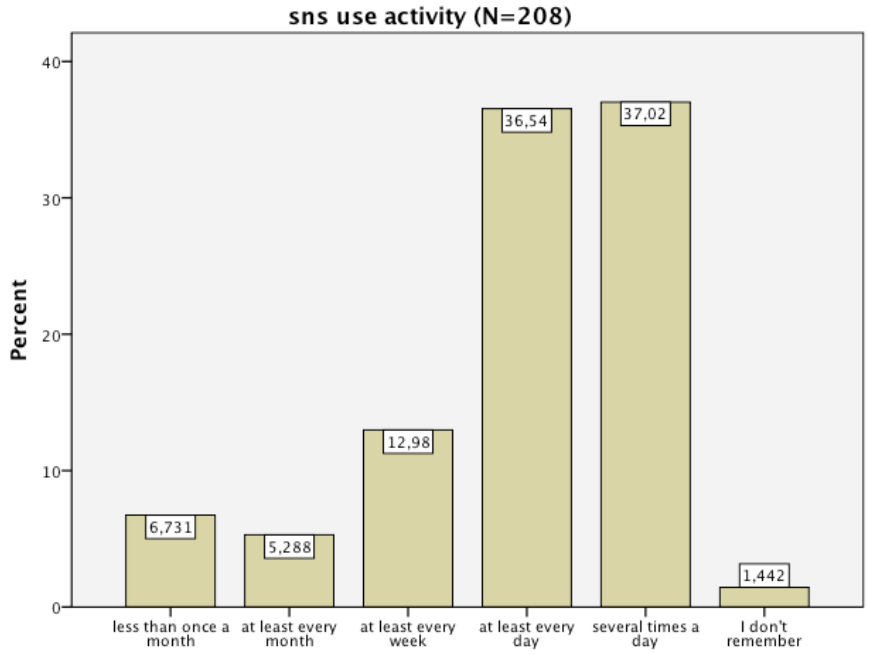


Figure 3. SNS activity



As expected, we see that the younger generations are far more active users of social media than the older generations. Not only the younger generations (age 18-43) are using SNSs more than the older generations (44 and older), but they are also using it more frequently. Also when the age categories are measured relatively to the usage categories (figures 4 and 5). The more frequent use could coincide with the increased use of mobile devices for logging in to SNS but unfortunately that was not asked in the survey. The percentage of users in the age category between 18-30 that go online on their SNS at least once a day is 46%, compared to 20% (31-43), 5% (44-56), 1% (57-69) and 0% (70-82, 83-95). Compared to the earlier mentioned user activity according to unofficial Internet websites, these figures show an even stronger usage by younger generations or, to put it differently, a still weaker usage by older generations. Concerning the amount of SNS that are used, most people in all age categories indicated to use one or two sites of which Facebook was far out the most used SNS. Around 62% from the whole sample, including persons with no SNS account[6], indicated they used Facebook more than any other and around 9% indicated to use Twitter, Hyves or another SNS more frequently. The main conclusion to be drawn about SNS use and activity from this survey is that the younger generations are

[6] It is possible to visit SNSs without having an account. The social network options are very limited and communication is not possible.

more active users of SNSs than older generations and that Facebook is the most used SNS.

For further data analysis, I will focus more on the age difference in order to exploit significant differences. The question remains whether younger generations are relying more and more on information through SNSs than on other information exchange processes like traditional media and face-to-face discussions. Although this is not my research question it can be a very important development when this change is (1) indeed taking place and (2) when this changing information exchange process leads to different electoral behaviour. I will not be able to generate sufficient reliable data to test these hypotheses but I will focus more in the influence of age during my further analysis.

Figure 4. Percentage of SNS use per age category.

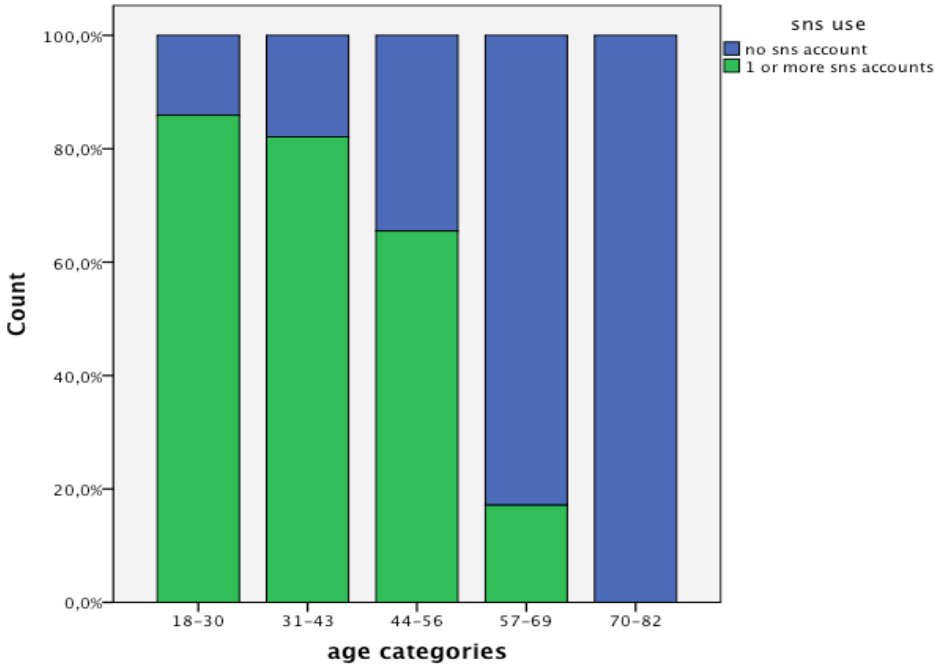
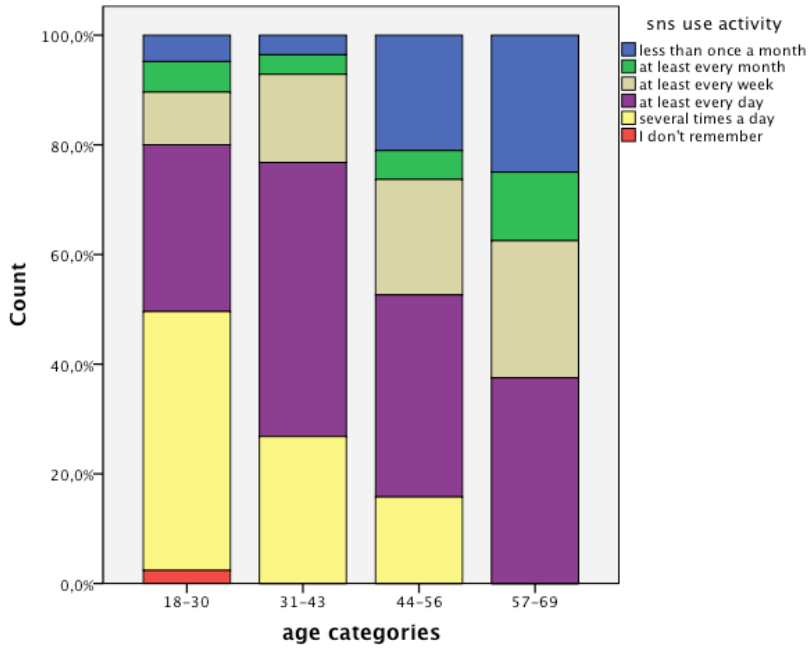


Figure 5. SNS activity per age category.

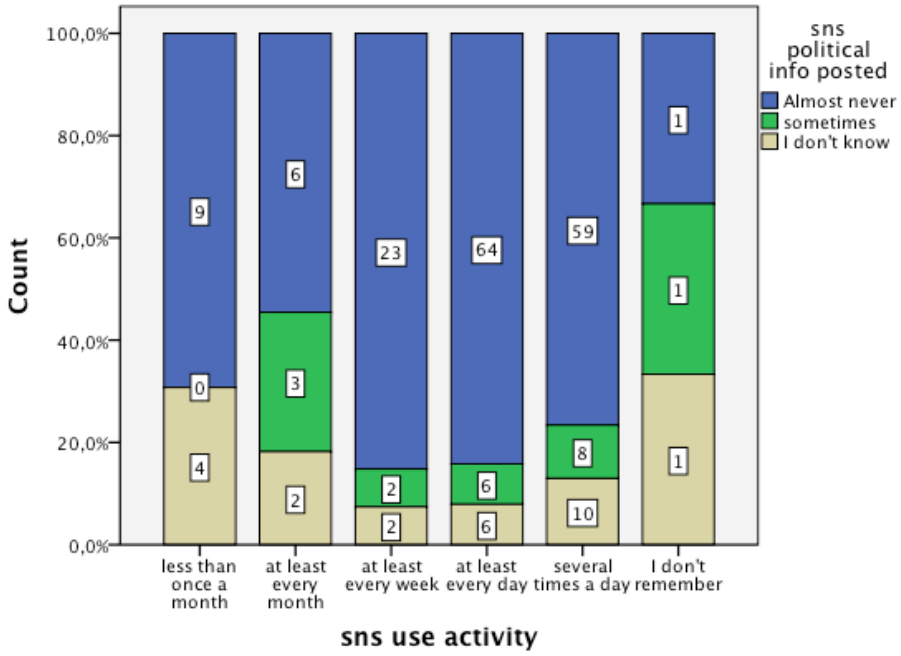


The next step is the analysis of the frequency of political information that people remembered having received or exchanged through their SNSs. This frequency was only indicated by people who said they used at least one SNS and who said they were active users (at least once a month). Unfortunately most people indicated they either didn't know their frequency levels about SNS political information exchange or they indicated to remember a frequency level of less than once a month. Which is almost never. In order to cope with this result, the answers were merged from five into two categories. The answer "less than once a month" became the category "almost never"; the answer I don't know remained the same and the other options became the category "sometimes" (at least once a month or more). This regrouping of variables insures a higher amount of respondents in fewer ordinal categories and makes statistical analysis more valid but less precise. The following variables were regrouped:

- Frequency of political information posted on SNSs
- Frequency of political information noticed on SNSs
- Frequency of political discussion with opposite minded on SNSs
- Frequency of political discussion with like minded on SNSs
- Frequency of political discussion with close ties on SNSs
- Frequency of political discussion with not close ties on SNSs

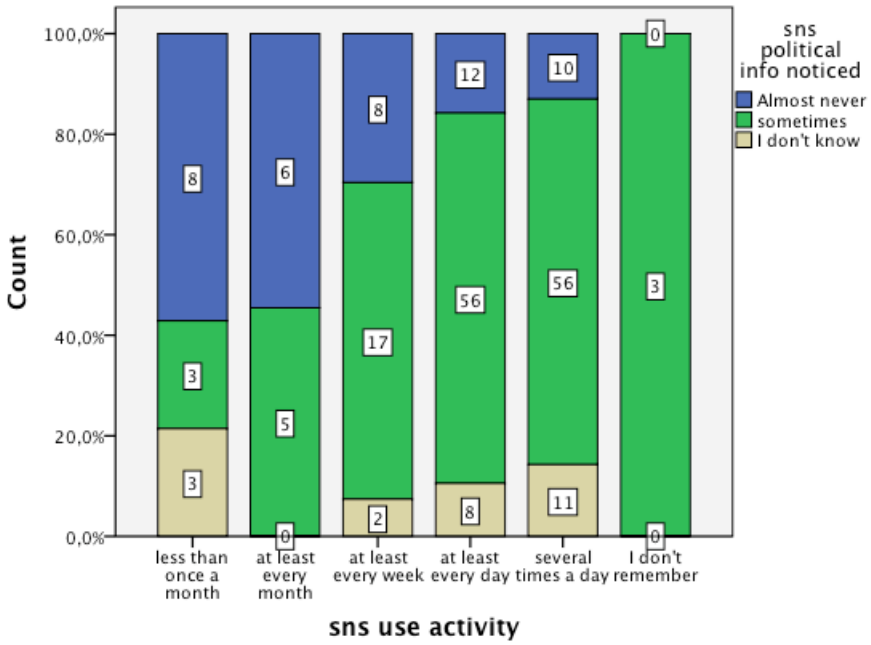
Many people indicated that they almost never post political information on their SNSs (figure 6)[7] [8]. This either means that they really didn't do this or they forgot and this research method (survey questions and elapsed time) was insufficient to retrieve accurate answers. On the other hand, more people indicated they noticed political information on their SNSs (figure 7)[9]. When both variables are combined with SNS usage activity we do not see a trend in the frequency of politically oriented posts but we do see a positive trend with the frequency of politically oriented information noticed in more active user groups. This trend supports the notion that the more active a citizen uses SNSs, the more frequent he or she will be exposed to politically oriented information on SNSs. The limitations of this research method surface with in figure 6 and 7. Remark the inconsistency in the answers of three respondents who said they "didn't remember" their SNS activity level. They still remembered the frequency level of political info posted and noticed. Even though it is a small percentage of the sample, it raises questions about the retrospective nature of the survey. Unfortunately this cannot be changed.

Figure 6. Levels of political information posted on SNSs compared with SNS activity.



[7] The white numbers in this and the following figures are the amount of cases as an indication for the internal validity.
[8] Notice the inconsistent answer of at least three respondents in figure 6 who indicated they didn't remember their activity level but did recall how often they posted information.
[9] Again three persons with inconsistent answers.

Figure 7. Levels of political information noticed on SNSs compared with SNS activity.



Traditional media.

How about traditional media use? In case younger generations make more use of SNSs and the older generation does not, the information reception through traditional media like TV, newspapers, radio and perhaps regular Internet can also be of a different magnitude for different age categories. Earlier studies concluded already an imbalance between age categories in both social media use and traditional media use for political purposes, and argued that social media functions as a leveller for offline political interest and participation (Holt et al. 2013). This imbalance appears to return in my results, although the survey only asked questions about the *observation* of political information instead of *use*. When comparing observation levels and age categories we see that generally speaking between the age categories the younger generations indicates to have noticed political information through traditional media to a lesser extend than older age categories (see: appendix B).

The overall level of observing politically oriented information through traditional media still appears to be high. This seems to occur more often through newspaper than through TV and radio. The level of observing politically oriented information through SNS is slightly lower than traditional media, but as high as the level of Internet. I must add that this comparison with SNS observation is not completely equivalent because of different measurements in the survey answers (two categories instead of three and different answer phrases).

Face-to-face discussions.

The other important process to investigate in relationship with political communication and age is the face-to-face discussion. They are of a different nature and of different influence on people's behaviour than information exchange through traditional media. Sometimes they can be a generated around topics people deem important and come up with themselves but sometimes they can be caused as second-order effects by information exchange through traditional or new media sources (i.e.: talking about the news). When we explore the graphics of face-to-face discussions with peers, like-minded and not like-minded in they same way as we have explored the traditional media graphics, we do not see a clear shifting trend in frequency of political information exchange between the age categories. In other words, all age categories more or less experience political information through face-to-face discussions and there is no relationship with younger or older categories.

Deeper analysis of the relationships: correlation and logistic regression.

When looking at the correlation with age we see, as expected from the figures above, that the SNS use (-0.531, $p< 0.01$) and the SNS activity (-0.300, $p<0.01$) both have a negative and highly significant relationships. The only significant correlation of SNS use with other control variables is the exposure to political information on the Internet (0,406; $p< 0,01$). This indicates an obvious positive relationship between noticing political information on the Internet and using more SNSs. Being more active on SNSs does not have this significant correlation with Internet exposure to political information (0.001, $p=0.984$). This may indicate that people do not use SNS as much as Internet or people are exposed more to political information on the Internet than on SNSs. Notice that by "internet" in the survey I clearly distinguished the question from SNS use, which by nature is also Internet.

Besides with age, SNS usage activity showed significant correlation with two other variables: income level (-0.172, $p<0.05$) and political info noticed on SNSs (0.291, $p<0.01$). The first doesn't concern my research question, but the last is more interesting. It means that the more active a user is on SNS, the more he/she is confronted with political information on SNS. A significant correlation between Internet exposure to political information and SNS exposure to political information is absent (-0.022, $p=0.748$). This suggests that persons notice the information on one of

the two media sources or they are separate groups of persons (internet users and SNS users). This last possibility may be related again to the age category bias, by which younger voters rely more on SNS and older voters more on "traditional" Internet.

Hypotheses 1 (H1) stated that **"higher participation levels on Social Networking Sites predict an increased likelihood of electoral participation".** In the two figures below (figure 8 and 9) both SNS use and activity are combined with electoral participation. According to my theoretic analysis I expected the respondents who participated in the election to show higher levels of SNS use and activity and lower levels for the non-voters. The results in both figures show otherwise.

A further look into the reasons for non voting (which was one of the supporting questions in the survey) shows that the group of non voting respondents, who said they did not want to vote or could not make a choice, did not have extremely low or high SNS user and activity levels (figure 10 and 11). The citizens with a negative or not interested attitude towards electoral participation would most likely have given the answer that they did not want to vote. In turn I expected SNS levels to be low in this (rather small) group of respondents. We do see that the percentage of non-SNS users is higher in this group than in other groups but due to the low amount of respondents I cannot draw valid conclusions out of this. Also when looking at SNS activity we don't see this division in the same group.

Figure 8. Relative SNS use and electoral participation.

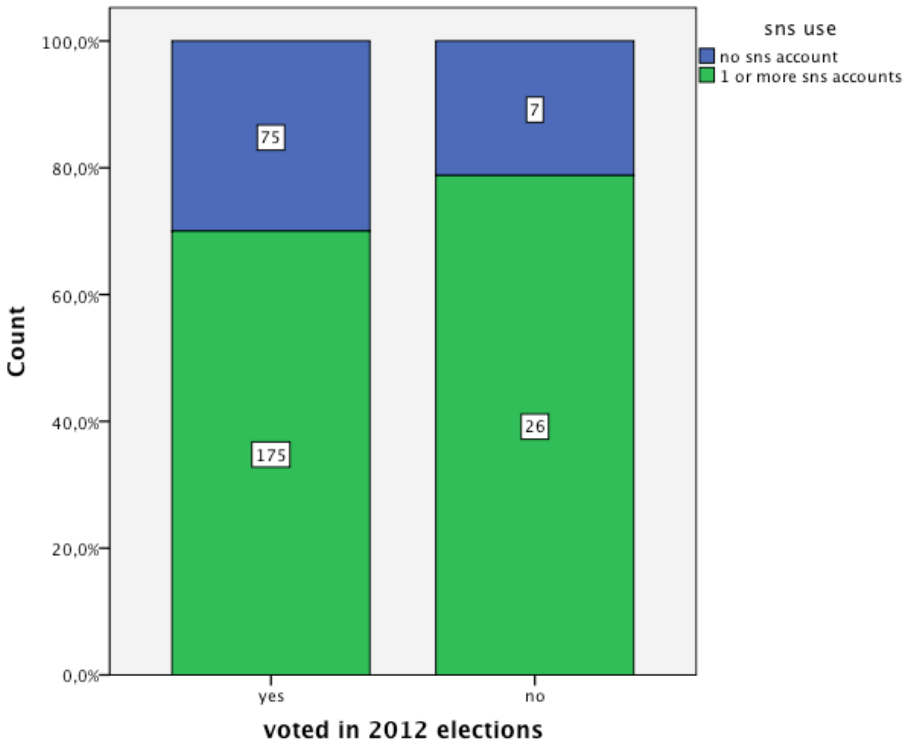


Figure 9. Relative SNS activity and electoral participation.

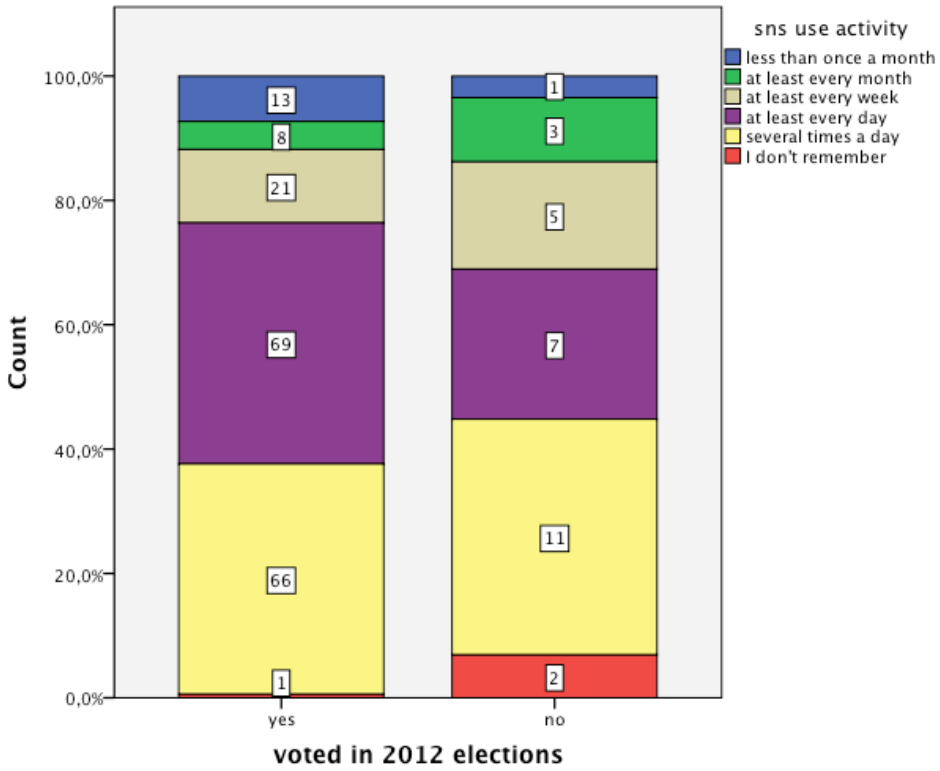


Figure 10. Relative SNS use and abstention reason.

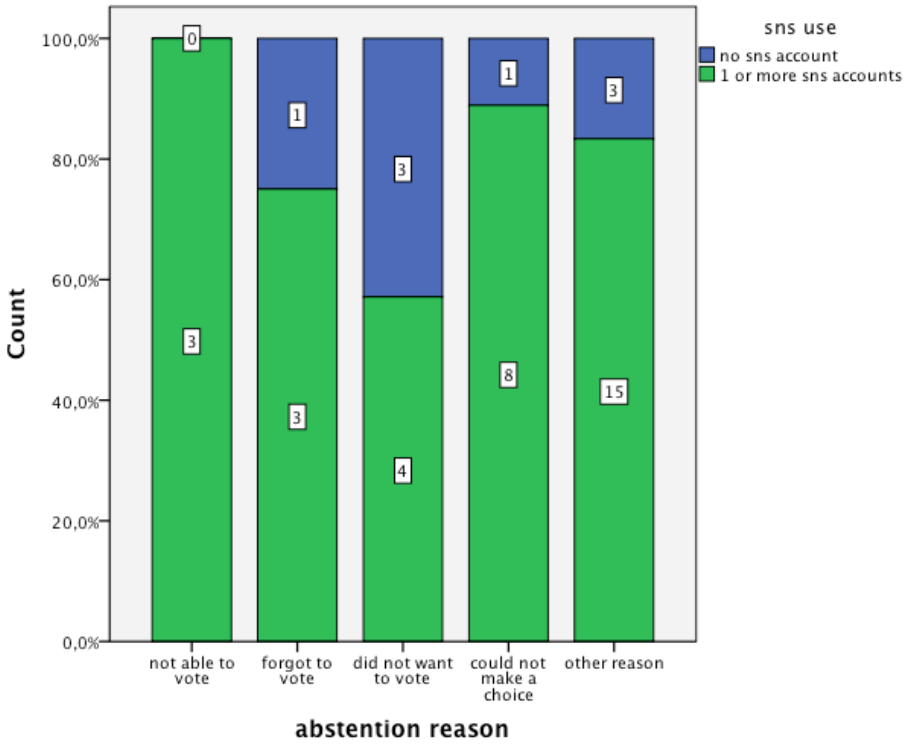
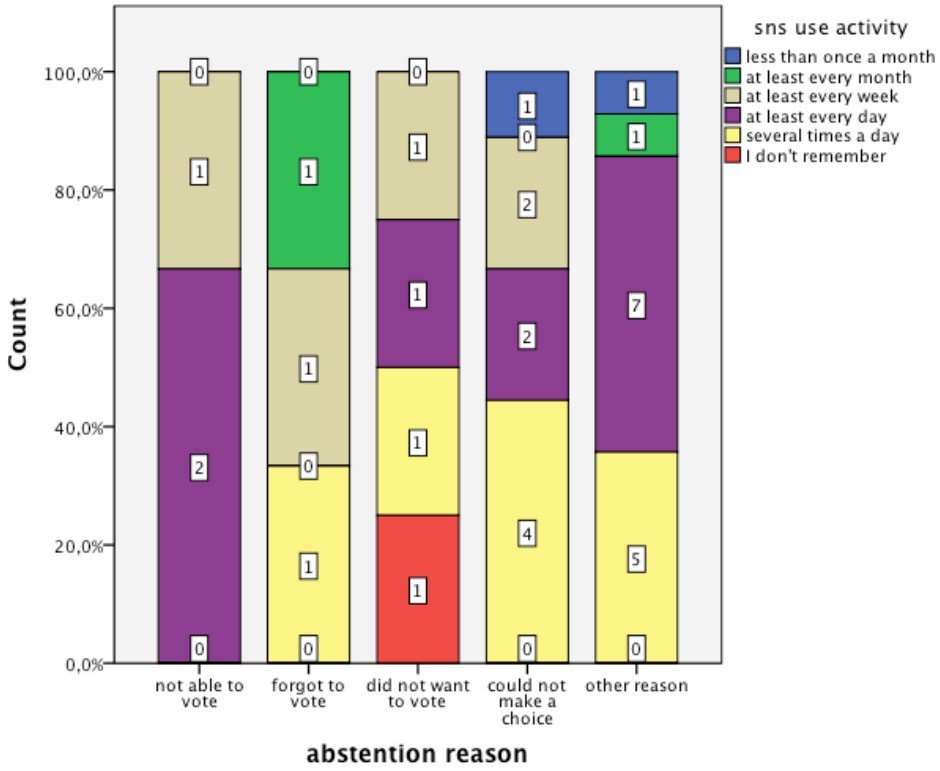


Figure 11. Relative SNS activity and abstention reason.



The correlation statistics did not show any promising results. The relationships between SNS use and participation (-0.062, p=0.279), and SNS activity and participation (-0.024, p=0.737) showed no significant correlation or strong direction in this sample.

Looking at the relationship of control variables with electoral participation we see that education (0.152, p=0.010), age (0.150, p=0.012), participation in past elections (0.655, p=0.000), party adherence (0.186, p=0.002) and political interest (0.219, p=0.000) are significantly related with the decision to vote. From the control variables related to political communication only newspaper reading (0.164, p=0.006) and face-to-face discussions with peers (0.145, p=0.015) showed a significant relationship.

The control variables related to political discussions on SNSs showed some interesting results, although with a generally small number of respondents who actually indicated to communicate about politics. The following activities were significantly related to non-voting: posting political information on SNSs (0.178, p=0.010), having political discussions with like-minded (0.145, p=0.037) and having political discussions with not close ties (0.173, p=0.012). It is hard to draw conclusions when only around 10% (~20 respondents) in the SNS user group indicated to communicate political information (post or discuss). But we do not see a negative significant correlation with the opposite questions (noticing political information, discussions with not like minded and with close ties. A careful conclusion can be drawn that there are certain aspects of political communication behaviour on SNS that correlate with not voting. While higher activity levels as I have conceptualized do not correlate, there may be more specific aspects of the activities that do relate to electoral participation. And maybe even abstention from participation as my initial results indicate.

The basic descriptive and correlation statistics show no relationship so the more stringent logistic regression model will not show anything different for the dependent variable. The conclusions about the control variables make it worthwhile to still run such an analysis to give a fuller view of the relationships. Looking at the logistic regression analysis in figure 12 below, we see as expected that there is no relationship between any activity on SNSs (use/usage) and electoral participation. We do see the expected influences of the control variables related to electoral voting behaviour.

Previous participation predicts a higher likelihood to participate in the next elections. Strange enough the other control variables that showed significant relationships in the correlation analysis did not give a significant relationship in the logistic regression. This may come through the many control variables used in the regression analysis (enter method), but it may also just not be that much of influence in the presence of other variables. On a side note, the most significant SNS control variable was the SNS discussion with like minded (sig.: 0,070) which is almost considered significant. Strange enough the direction of the relationship is opposite from the correlation analysis. This may indicate the weak base of the small n related to these SNS control variables.

This brings me to the conclusion that H1 is not supported by these results. I must add that a larger number of non-voting respondents and SNS respondents could have given this research a different result.

Figure 12. Logistic regression of electoral participation with control variables.

Variable	***B***	***S.E.***
Sex	,751	,847
Age	,483	,622
Income	-,221	,721
Education	-,341	,753
Electoral participaton in past elections	2,926**	,582
Political interest	-1,159	,823
Offline political activity	-,057	,464
TV exposure	1,505	,803
Radio exposure	1,211	,697
Paper exposure	-,349	.661
Internet exposure	-.950	,797
Political discussion exposure	,018	,796
Political discussion with like minded	-,221	,310
Political discussion with opposite minded	,024	,376
Political info posted on SNSs	,041	,241
Political info noticed on SNSs	-,354	,341
SNSs discussions with like minded	-1,051	,579
SNSs discussions with opposite minded	,127	,435
SNSs discussions with close ties	,408	,476

SNSs discussions with not close ties	,272	,313
SNS use	-1,107	2,261
SNS activity	,720	,456
Constant	-9,725	6,240
Chi-square: 98,464		

* significant (0.01<p<0.05) ** significant (p<0.01)

Hypotheses H2a stated that **"the more active a voter uses SNSs the more likely he/she will be exposed to diverse political views"**. In order to test this hypotheses two questions were asked about the frequency of political discussions with like minded people and, on the other hand, not like minded people. Combined with the independed variable of SNS usage activity a prediction could be made about the exposure to diverse political views. With this method I assumed that more discussions with like minded relate to less exposure to diverse political views and the opposite for more discussions with not like-minded. The percentage of people who said they discussed political matters with like-minded people on their SNSs was around 8% (N=208). The occasional discussions with not like-minded people on SNSs occurred with the same number of people. Although this number of respondents is very low and maybe too low to test H2a, I still carried out a bivariate correlation check. This resulted in no significant relationship for either of the dependent variables (SNS discussion with like minded: 0.009, p=0.892, SNS discussion with opposite minded: 0.016, p=0.814). The correlation between the two variables itself was strong and highly significant (0.854, p<0.01), meaning that probably the same people gave the same answer to both questions. This in turn suggests that their answers were not significantly differentiated by any other variable. Further analysis on the prediction of exposure to more diverse views with this dataset will not result in more knowledge about impact of SNS use. This does not necessarily mean that people with higher SNS activity levels will not be exposed to more diverse views on SNS, but these results do not indicate another conclusion. Therefore H2a cannot be supported.

Hypotheses 2b stated that **"higher activity levels on SNSs predict an increased likelihood of delayed voting choice".** I concluded earlier that H2a, which includes one of the arguments why I think people will be more in doubt when their SNS activity levels are higher, could not be supported. This does not necessarily imply that

H2b cannot be supported. First there are other possible mechanisms that I explained which can relate to more doubt, for example the indirect effects in the two step-flow model. Second I argued that (1) people do not perfectly recollect their SNSs content after several months and (2) people are often seeing political information on their SNS without consiously noticing it. Through this cognitive process, which is used in commercials to a large extent, the political information from friends and followers could have an effect without the respondents' knowledge. Because of these uncertainties I treated the SNS use and activity as a black box in which politically oriented information may or may not be present.

H2b is tested by a question in the survey about the moment the respondent decided on the party before casting a vote in the 2012 elections. In addition the same question was asked for the person that the respondent had chosen for. The answers were set up in order to get an idea of the time of decision within days, weeks, months or longer before casting a vote. The results are represented below in figures 13 and 14.

Figure 13. Time of party vote decision.

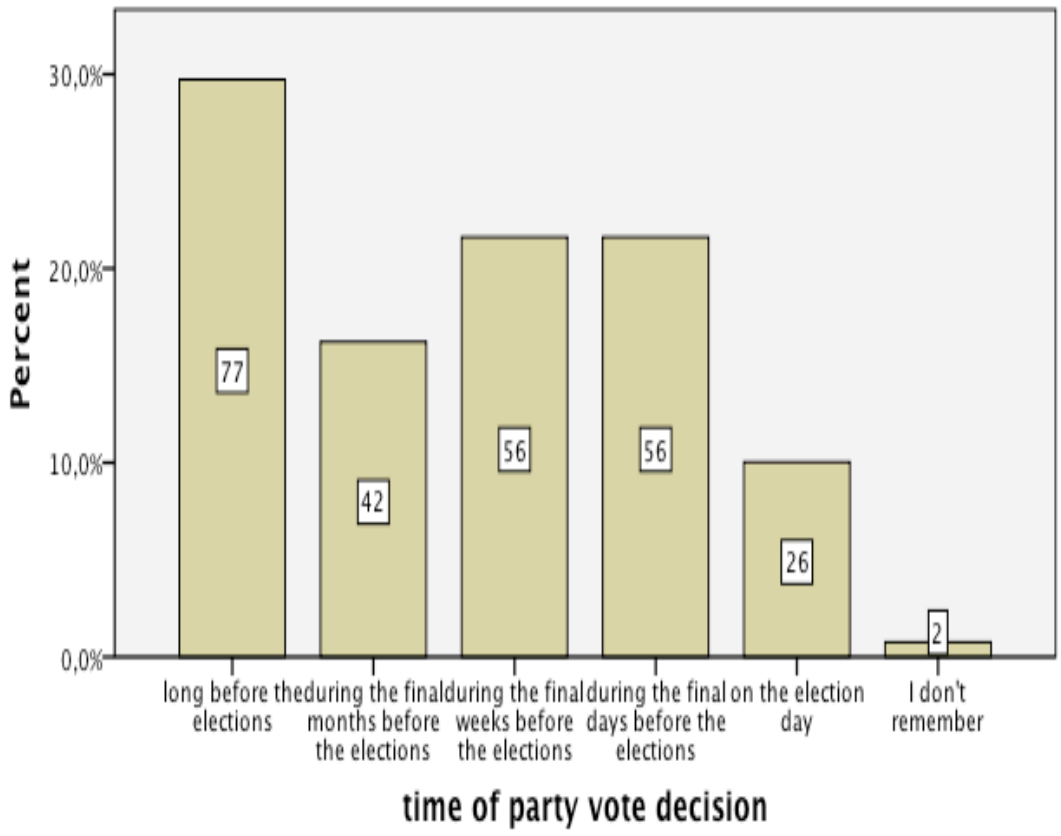
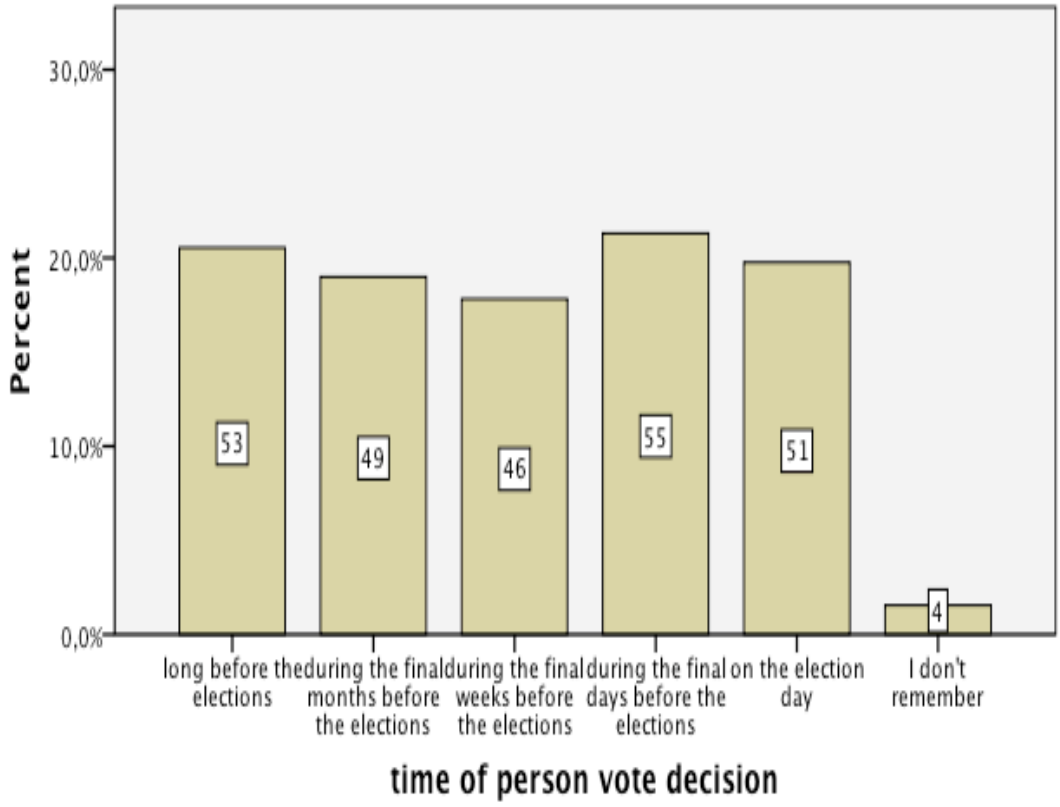


Figure 14. Time of person choice decision.



The moments of party vote decisions show a division that was already observed in earlier elections (Irwin and Van Holsteyn 2008). Almost 30% of the people who indicate they had made up their minds long before the elections, and 10% who say they decided on the last day. The rest is almost evenly divided in between. To put it differently, when we assume the election campaign takes several weeks the (cumulative) percentage of people who decide during this campaign is 53%. The amount of people who didn't know their decision point anymore was low (1%).

The correlation matrix (figure 15) shows the relationships between SNS use, SNS activity and both time of party and person decision. The results are particularly interesting and important because they indicate a positive and significant relationship between SNS use and time of party vote decision. SNS activity too has a positive and significant relationship with time of person vote decision but falls just short of being significant with time of party vote decision.

Figure 15. Correlation matrix time of party and person decision with SNS use and activity levels.

	Time of party vote decision			Time of person vote decision		
	N	Pearsons Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)	N	Pearsons Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)
SNS use	257	0.176**	0.005	256	0.268**	0.000
SNS activity	184	0.144	0.052	185	0.224**	0.002

* significant (0.01<p<0.05) ** significant (p<0.01)

The moments of the person vote decision show two shifts when compared with the party vote decision. While around 10% less people make up their minds long before the campaign, nearly an extra 10% delays his/her decision to the last day of the election campaign. The first shift is probably caused by the fact that long before the elections people simply don't know yet who will be on the list. The second shift, on the other hand, is nearly a double figure of the moment of party choice. This may be an indication of more doubt about persons than parties. The relationship between personalization and doubt is supported by the previous mentioned research to Dutch elections (Van Holsteyn & Andeweg 2010). In this case it may just be a result of the fact that people wait until they are in the boot to make they decision. In that way it was not a matter of doubt, but more of knowledge or even laziness to check the candidate list. In order to find out what the relationship between SNS use and time of person vote we have to look at the correlation figures. The survey data shows that this relationship is positive and highly significant (0.268, sig.<0.01). This is the same for SNS usage activity (0.245, sig.<0.01). While it doesn't say anything about the direction of causality, it does provide an extra insight in the debate about personalization. The study of Kriesi (2010) noticed the trend towards personalization in traditional media. The public seems to like the focus on persons, but may also be affected by it in terms of doubt. Maybe the same happens within SNSs. Maybe there becomes more, and more intense, information exchange about personalities through the use of SNSs. Unfortunately with this data set it was impossible to find out whether or not this resulted in more doubt and delayed vote decisions. But the research did show a strong relationship between SNS use and activity with delayed decisions on a candidate.

While SNS use and SNS usage activity had no significant impact on electoral participation they both show significant correlation figures with time of party vote and person vote decision. All are positive and three are highly significant. Only the relationship between SNS usage activity and time of party vote decision showed a lower significance level. When looking only at bivariate correlation H2b is supported for both SNS use and activity, with the remark that the SNS usage just falls short of being significant.

In order to determine whether this effect is predominantly related to SNS use and activity we have to look at the relationship in the presence of the control variables. It is expected that demographic variables (sex, age, education and income), political attitude variables (party adherence, political interest and political activity), off line political discussion variables (face to face discussions with peers, like minded and opposite minded) and media usage variables (TV, paper, radio and internet exposure) could weaken the effect.

I used four models to run the ordered logistic regression analysis. All models contained the main control variables. Models A and B have the time of party choice as dependent variable while models C and D focus the time of person choice. Model A uses as key independent variable the SNS use, while model B contains SNS activity. The same applies to model C and D. The models were run one by one and the respondents who answered “I don’t know” were dropped for the relevant time of decision question. The models can be used to see not only the strength of the relationship of the dependent variables but also check their changes between the different models. The results are presented in table below (figure 16)

Figure 16. Logistic regression analysis (4 models).

	Party choice				*Person choice*			
	Model A (SNS use)		*Model B (SNS activity)*		*Model C (SNS use)*		*Model D (SNS activity)*	
	N=175		*N=175*		*N=174*		*N=174*	
	B	*S.E.*	*B*	*S.E.*	*B*	*S.E.*	*B*	*S.E.*
Sex	,966*	,409	,961*	,409	,758	,413	,775	,415
Age	-,235	,305	-2,17	,306	-,519	,326	-,477	,328
Income	-,868*	,392	-,808*	,389	-,096	,402	-,057	,394
Education	-,527	,500	-,515	,496	-,169	,471	-,174	,475
Electoral participaton	,341	,362	,324	,360	-,388	,324	-,365	,326
Political interest	-,092	,376	-,121	,379	,527	,391	,519	,392
Offline political activity	-,505*	,241	-,465	,240	-,225	,222	-,220	,224
Electoral behavior	,778*	,317	,769*	,318	,600	,319	,575	,322
TV exposure	-,713	,397	-,707	,397	-1,192**	,403	-1,183**	,406
Radio exposure	,164	,298	,185	,302	,195	,302	,226	,302
Paper exposure	,028	,376	,024	,376	,002	,386	-,001	,390
Internet exposure	,668	,382	,674	,382	,596	,403	,575	,400
Political disc. exposure	-,605	,361	-,601	,363	-,854*	,373	-,845*	,374
Political disc. with like minded	,004	,227	-,029	,222	,181	,229	,180	,225
Political disc. with opposite minded	-,019	,246	-,002	,244	,019	,249	,003	,248
Political info posted on SNSs	,134	,189	,156	,195	,353	,202	,390	,206
Political info noticed on SNSs	,023	,154	-,021	,160	-,191	,162	-,246	,170
SNSs disc. with like minded	-,031	,317	-,072	,325	-,297	,333	-,351	,343
SNSs disc. with opposite minded	,156	,254	,186	,259	,354	,321	,383	,326
SNSs disc. with close ties	,032	,299	,079	,308	-,293	,297	-,230	,307
SNSs disc. with not close ties	-,047	,255	-,083	,259	-,039	,284	-,061	,288
SNS use	,636	,994			,196	,985		
SNS activity			,177	,176			,205	,185
Constant	1,120	3,223	1,619	2,807	3,092	3,210	2,592	2,808
Chi-square:	51,045		51,653		40,252		41,428	

Contrary to the finding in bivariate correlation, the logistic regression results show no significant relationship between either SNS use or SNS activity with both time of party choice and person choice. The coefficients for the key independent variables do

remain positive but move in an unexpected direction. This is specifically true for model A and C where party choice was run with SNS use as the key independent variable. The coefficient moves to a third of the strength when related to person choice. Still increased SNS use and usage relates to delayed decisions, but these results cannot confirm the significance of it.

This means that in the presence of the mentioned control variables the SNS use and/or activity does not prove to be strong predictors by themselves. There are other, stronger, predictors for the respondents in this sample. Therefore H2b is not supported by this deeper analysis.

6. Conclusions

Social Networking Sites are becoming more and more widely used as a new medium for posting, finding and sharing information. The means for going online and using social networks with high speeds and far reaches are more and more available through SNS successes and ICT improvements. These innovative developments are predominantly welcomed by the younger generations, while older generations are (maybe) still lagging behind. In the information exchange process necessary for an election campaign, traditional media and off-line discussions still take an important position. In a recent study in Sweden researchers have shown that for younger generations the use of SNSs function as a leveller in terms of motivating political participation (Holt et al. 2013). I have argued that the information exchange characteristics of SNSs are different than characteristics of information exchange through traditional media or regular face-to-face discussions. Not only the scope of online social networks is larger and probably with more differing opinions but also the political information reaches people in a different way. Messages information and opinions can come across several times a day, by friends, relatives or unknown persons.

With this research I focussed on the prospective value of SNS use and activity on electoral participation and doubt. Aided by the characteristics of SNS, influences like group pressure, interpersonal communication and collective action-like processes may cause the dominant opinion to reach the otherwise non-participant.
I expected higher usage and activity levels on SNSs to predict a higher likelihood for voting in the 2012 Dutch elections (H1). The same SNS characteristics could influence the information exchange during elections by complicating the decision making process of, predominantly, volatile voters. I expected the higher levels of SNS use and activity to predict a higher likelihood for a delayed decision for a party and person (H2b). The main reason for doubt I expected to be generated by at least more discussion with opposite minded people on SNSs (H2a), while I did not exclude other effects of SNS information flows on time of decision.

By performing an internet based survey through SNSs and an off line survey on a train track in the Netherlands I tried to get a useful and representative sample of mixed SNS users. Although the survey method and survey questions posed many unwanted bias and limitations that restricts external validation, it proved useful for

further analysis to test the hypotheses (N=286). The sample resulted in an overrepresentation of highly educated younger Dutch citizens with low incomes (students or job starters). Still other (control) variables seemed more representative. The turnout rate in the sample was slightly higher than the turnout in the 2012 elections. Also the time of choice for person and party did not show significant changes from previous measurements (although the time of person choice has not often been measured).

The survey was analysed by SPSS and showed some interesting results. First the amount of people using SNSs is high and shows a rising trend when comparing the figures with last years CBS numbers. In addition most people seem to be using their sites on a daily base, or even more often. This is the first step for SNSs to be influential. There is, unfortunately, an age bias in the sample that is strengthened by the already higher SNS usage and activity levels of younger generations.

Second while most people don't seem to use the medium for expressing or sharing political information, the do observe politically orientated content on their SNSs a lot more often. Respondents even indicated to have observed political information on SNSs almost at the same level as they did on traditional media. This development is the second step for SNSs to be influential in political communication. I expected much more diverse results from the respondents in respect to their political information exchange characteristics on SNSs but unfortunately the survey resulted in very low numbers of active discussants with like minded, opposite minded, close ties and not close ties. With these low numbers I was not able to support H2a, which stated that the more active a voter uses SNSs the more likely he/she will be exposed to diverse political views. It also appeared that the people who did in fact mention they discussed with opposite minded, also seemed to discuss as much with like-minded. Positive and significant correlation between the both groups leads to that conclusion. This supports the notion of a too small sample and the ineffective time and questioning by the survey.

Third, the electoral participation was not related to either being a user of social media or being an active user. While the SNS use and activity do not discriminate, besides the age effect, between different social demographic groups, or between different levels of political engagement and activity, they do not appear to predict increased likelihood for casting a vote or not. At least this sample could not find any

valid proof of it, despite the positive trend in observing political information when being more active on a SNS. The reason may be that there is no group pressure effect through SNSs, by which the dominant opinion ("most people vote") convinces the otherwise absent citizens to participate. Another reason may be that the information exchange about politics on SNSs does not motivate the otherwise absent citizens. Or there are other, stronger, influences present which determine the outcome and in fact the turnout. Logistic regression analysis showed that the more significant relationships with electoral participation appear to be electoral participation in past elections, and electoral voting behaviour in past elections. With these findings H1 was not supported with this research.

Fourth, both time of party choice and time of person choice had significant positive relationships with SNS use and activity. Only the relationship between SNS activity and time of party vote decision showed a lower significance level. In the presence of stronger influences with the control variables in the logistic regression analysis the significance of the correlation disappears. The coefficient remains positive. With these results H2b was therefore not completely supported because SNS use and activity cannot be strongly related to a delayed voting choice. Still there remains a highly significant positive relationship that is particularly interesting for further research that could concentrate more on the specific reasons why the relationship exists.

Fifth, an interesting difference between the decision points of both choices was that the moment for person choice shifted with about 10% to a later stage in the election campaign than the moment for party choice. The coefficients for SNS relationship with person decisions were both stronger and had a higher significance level that the party decisions. This may indicate that people have more doubt about the person than the party. It may also indicate a cognitive decision making process by which people first decide for the party and then, maybe even in the ballot boot, for a person.

With this research I tried to find an answer to the question what the impact is of the increased exposure to politically oriented content when participating in Social Networking Sites (SNSs), on electoral participation and voter uncertainty in the Netherlands. While some of the results were promising indicators for a positive relation of increased SNS use and activity with electoral participation and time of

choice, this research did not find any strong prospective values to qualify this impact. Neither did I find a strong negative relationship that would have indicated a different kind of impact, which I had not foreseen. Other forms of political communication did not show the strong significancy levels with delayed voting decisions as the SNS use and activity levels did. This may be indicating a stronger impact of SNSs than now shown in the results. Still there were some minor indications concerning specific SNS activities that relate to a negative impact with participation but due to the weak internal validity of the research sample I could not draw strong conclusions about it.

Some of the results may be caused by the limitations related to the research method and relatively small sample, others by the stronger influences of control variables. The prospective value of traditional media and face-to-face discussions did not show up as a strong predictor for electoral participation or doubt. In fact when it showed a correlation it showed a negative one. In this respect SNS show a larger impact than traditional forms of political information exchange. This helps my assumption that SNS do have an influence in the domain of (electoral) political communication. Will it keep on gaining ground, will it act as a leveller or will it over time diminish? These are questions to be answered by future research. A focus on content and specific information exchange will benefit in extracting the impact on the electoral behaviour of voters.

7. Literature

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Appendix A. Survey statistics

sex

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	male	125	43,7	43,9	43,9
	female	160	55,9	56,1	100,0
	Total	285	99,7	100,0	
Missing	0	1	,3		
Total		286	100,0		

age categories

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	18-30	143	50,0	50,4	50,4
	31-43	67	23,4	23,6	73,9
	44-56	29	10,1	10,2	84,2
	57-69	35	12,2	12,3	96,5
	70-82	9	3,1	3,2	99,6
	83-95	1	,3	,4	100,0
	Total	284	99,3	100,0	
Missing	0	2	,7		
Total		286	100,0		

education level

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	low	10	3,5	3,5	3,5
	average	51	17,8	18,0	21,6
	high	222	77,6	78,4	100,0
	Total	283	99,0	100,0	
Missing	0	3	1,0		
Total		286	100,0		

income level

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	<30.000	141	49,3	51,6	51,6
	30.000-70.000	113	39,5	41,4	93,0
	>70.000	19	6,6	7,0	100,0
	Total	273	95,5	100,0	
Missing	0	13	4,5		
Total		286	100,0		

voted in 2012 elections

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	yes	252	88,1	88,4	88,4
	no	33	11,5	11,6	100,0
	Total	285	99,7	100,0	
Missing	0	1	,3		
Total		286	100,0		

party choice 2012

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	CDA	9	3,1	3,5	3,5
	Christen Unie	1	,3	,4	3,9
	D66	53	18,5	20,9	24,8
	GroenLinks	19	6,6	7,5	32,3
	PvdA	72	25,2	28,3	60,6
	PVV	9	3,1	3,5	64,2
	SGP	1	,3	,4	64,6
	SP	27	9,4	10,6	75,2
	VVD	55	19,2	21,7	96,9
	Partij van de Dieren	4	1,4	1,6	98,4
	50PLUS	1	,3	,4	98,8
	Partij van de Toekomst	1	,3	,4	99,2
	Piratenpartij	1	,3	,4	99,6
	Partij voor Mens en Spirit	1	,3	,4	100,0
	Total	254	88,8	100,0	
Missing	0	32	11,2		
Total		286	100,0		

electoral participation in past elections

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	always	188	65,7	66,0	66,0
	almost always	52	18,2	18,2	84,2
	sometimes	26	9,1	9,1	93,3
	never	19	6,6	6,7	100,0
	Total	285	99,7	100,0	
Missing	0	1	,3		
Total		286	100,0		

abstention reason

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	not able to vote	3	1,0	7,3	7,3
	forgot to vote	4	1,4	9,8	17,1
	did not want to vote	7	2,4	17,1	34,1
	could not make a choice	9	3,1	22,0	56,1
	other reason	18	6,3	43,9	100,0
	Total	41	14,3	100,0	
Missing	0	245	85,7		
Total		286	100,0		

political interest

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	not interested in politics	29	10,1	10,2	10,2
	avaragely interested in politics	186	65,0	65,7	76,0
	strongly interested in politics	62	21,7	21,9	97,9
	I don't remember	6	2,1	2,1	100,0
	Total	283	99,0	100,0	
Missing	0	3	1,0		
Total		286	100,0		

off-line political activism

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	not active	224	78,3	78,9	78,9
	a little active	33	11,5	11,6	90,5
	active	10	3,5	3,5	94,0
	very active	4	1,4	1,4	95,4
	I don't remember	13	4,5	4,6	100,0
	Total	284	99,3	100,0	
Missing	0	2	,7		
Total		286	100,0		

electoral voting behavior

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	never voted for another party	77	26,9	27,8	27,8
	voted for another party before	131	45,8	47,3	75,1
	voted for other parties several times	59	20,6	21,3	96,4
	I don't remember	10	3,5	3,6	100,0
	Total	277	96,9	100,0	
Missing	0	9	3,1		
Total		286	100,0		

party adherence

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	not adherent and not attracted	73	25,5	25,7	25,7
	attracted but not adherent	178	62,2	62,7	88,4
	adherent	25	8,7	8,8	97,2
	strongly adherent	8	2,8	2,8	100,0
	Total	284	99,3	100,0	
Missing	0	2	,7		
Total		286	100,0		

time of party vote decision

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	long before the elections	77	26,9	29,7	29,7
	during the final months before the elections	42	14,7	16,2	45,9
	during the final weeks before the elections	56	19,6	21,6	67,6
	during the final days before the elections	56	19,6	21,6	89,2
	on the election day	26	9,1	10,0	99,2
	I don't remember	2	,7	,8	100,0
	Total	259	90,6	100,0	
Missing	0	26	9,1		
	System	1	,3		
	Total	27	9,4		
Total		286	100,0		

time of party choice

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Long before the election campaign	119	41,6	45,9	45,9
	During the election campaign	138	48,3	53,3	99,2
	I don't know	2	,7	,8	100,0
	Total	259	90,6	100,0	
Missing	System	27	9,4		
Total		286	100,0		

time of person vote decision

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	long before the elections	53	18,5	20,5	20,5
	during the final months before the elections	49	17,1	19,0	39,5
	during the final weeks before the elections	46	16,1	17,8	57,4
	during the final days before the elections	55	19,2	21,3	78,7
	on the election day	51	17,8	19,8	98,4
	I don't remember	4	1,4	1,6	100,0
	Total	258	90,2	100,0	
Missing	0	28	9,8		
Total		286	100,0		

time of person choice

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Long before the election campaign	102	35,7	39,5	39,5
	During the election campaign	152	53,1	58,9	98,4
	I don't know	4	1,4	1,6	100,0
	Total	258	90,2	100,0	
Missing	System	28	9,8		
Total		286	100,0		

tv exposure to political info

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	never	10	3,5	3,5	3,5
	sometimes	151	52,8	52,8	56,3
	often	123	43,0	43,0	99,3
	I don't remember	2	,7	,7	100,0
	Total	286	100,0	100,0	

radio exposure to political info

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	never	54	18,9	19,1	19,1
	sometimes	133	46,5	47,0	66,1
	often	90	31,5	31,8	97,9
	I don't remember	6	2,1	2,1	100,0
	Total	283	99,0	100,0	
Missing	0	3	1,0		
Total		286	100,0		

paper exposure to political info

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	never	16	5,6	5,7	5,7
	sometimes	113	39,5	40,1	45,7
	often	153	53,5	54,3	100,0
	Total	282	98,6	100,0	
Missing	0	3	1,0		
	System	1	,3		
	Total	4	1,4		
Total		286	100,0		

internet exposure to political info

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	never	74	25,9	26,3	26,3
	sometimes	165	57,7	58,7	85,1
	often	40	14,0	14,2	99,3
	I don't remember	2	,7	,7	100,0
	Total	281	98,3	100,0	
Missing	0	3	1,0		
	System	2	,7		
	Total	5	1,7		
Total		286	100,0		

face-to-face political discussion with peers

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	never	24	8,4	8,5	8,5
	sometimes	168	58,7	59,4	67,8
	often	89	31,1	31,4	99,3
	I don't remember	2	,7	,7	100,0
	Total	283	99,0	100,0	
Missing	0	3	1,0		
Total		286	100,0		

face-to-face political discussion with like minded

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	less than once a month	85	29,7	30,1	30,1
	at least every month	76	26,6	27,0	57,1
	at least every week	82	28,7	29,1	86,2
	at least every day	9	3,1	3,2	89,4
	several times a day	1	,3	,4	89,7
	I don't remember	29	10,1	10,3	100,0
	Total	282	98,6	100,0	
Missing	0	4	1,4		
Total		286	100,0		

face-to-face political dicussion with not like minded

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	less than once a month	91	31,8	32,3	32,3
	at least every month	77	26,9	27,3	59,6
	at least every week	77	26,9	27,3	86,9
	at least every day	11	3,8	3,9	90,8
	I don't remember	26	9,1	9,2	100,0
	Total	282	98,6	100,0	
Missing	0	4	1,4		
Total		286	100,0		

sns use

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	no sns account	82	28,7	28,9	28,9
	1 or more sns accounts	202	70,6	71,1	100,0
	Total	284	99,3	100,0	
Missing	System	2	,7		
Total		286	100,0		

sns use activity

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	less than once a month	14	4,9	6,7	6,7
	at least every month	11	3,8	5,3	12,0
	at least every week	27	9,4	13,0	25,0
	at least every day	76	26,6	36,5	61,5
	several times a day	77	26,9	37,0	98,6
	I don't remember	3	1,0	1,4	100,0
	Total	208	72,7	100,0	
Missing	0	78	27,3		
Total		286	100,0		

sns usage activity

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Low frequency users	14	4,9	6,7	6,7
	Medium frequency users	38	13,3	18,3	25,0
	High frequency users	153	53,5	73,6	98,6
	I don't know	3	1,0	1,4	100,0
	Total	208	72,7	100,0	
Missing	System	78	27,3		
Total		286	100,0		

most used sns

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	none	83	29,0	29,9	29,9
	facebook	171	59,8	61,5	91,4
	twitter	12	4,2	4,3	95,7
	hyves	4	1,4	1,4	97,1
	other	8	2,8	2,9	100,0
	Total	278	97,2	100,0	
Missing	0	8	2,8		
Total		286	100,0		

sns political info posted

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Almost never	163	57,0	78,4	78,4
	sometimes	20	7,0	9,6	88,0
	I don't know	25	8,7	12,0	100,0
	Total	208	72,7	100,0	
Missing	System	78	27,3		
Total		286	100,0		

sns political info noticed

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Almost never	44	15,4	21,2	21,2
	sometimes	140	49,0	67,3	88,5
	I don't know	24	8,4	11,5	100,0
	Total	208	72,7	100,0	
Missing	System	78	27,3		
Total		286	100,0		

sns discussion with like minded

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Almost never	169	59,1	81,3	81,3
	sometimes	17	5,9	8,2	89,4
	I don't know	22	7,7	10,6	100,0
	Total	208	72,7	100,0	
Missing	System	78	27,3		
Total		286	100,0		

sns discussion with opposite minded

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Almost never	162	56,6	77,9	77,9
	sometimes	17	5,9	8,2	86,1
	I don't know	29	10,1	13,9	100,0
	Total	208	72,7	100,0	
Missing	System	78	27,3		
Total		286	100,0		

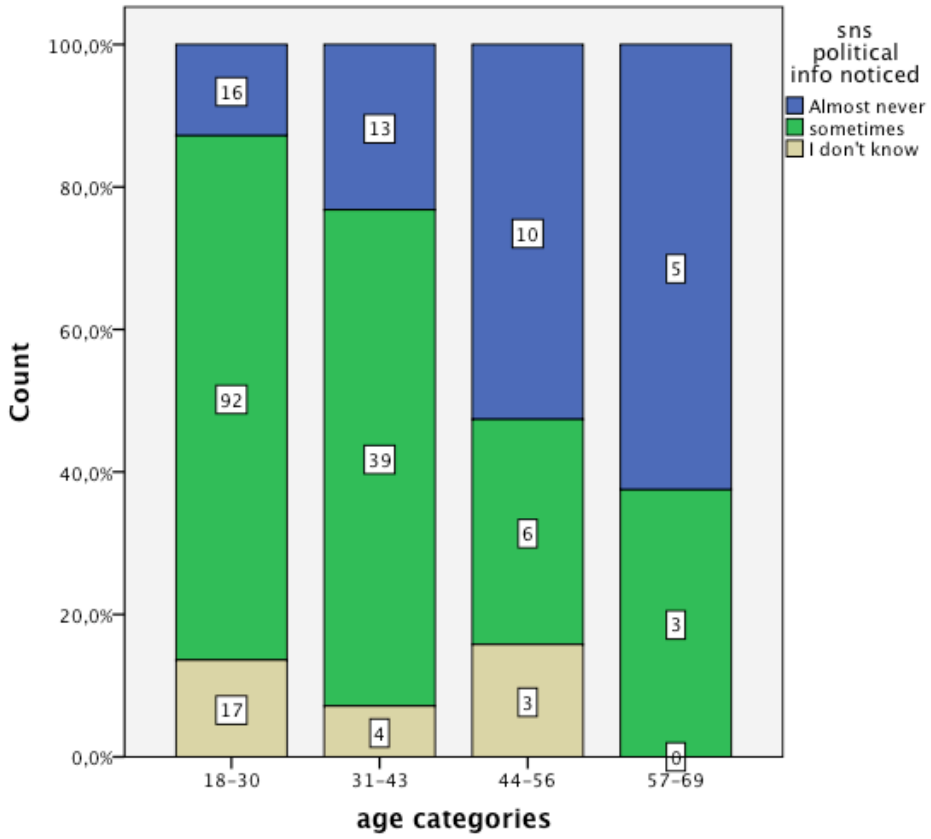
sns discussion with close ties

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Almost never	164	57,3	78,8	78,8
	sometimes	20	7,0	9,6	88,5
	I don't know	24	8,4	11,5	100,0
	Total	208	72,7	100,0	
Missing	System	78	27,3		
Total		286	100,0		

sns discussion with not-close ties

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Almost never	164	57,3	78,8	78,8
	sometimes	16	5,6	7,7	86,5
	I don't know	28	9,8	13,5	100,0
	Total	208	72,7	100,0	
Missing	System	78	27,3		
Total		286	100,0		

Appendix B. Graphic charts


sns political info noticed
Almost never
sometimes
I don't know
Count
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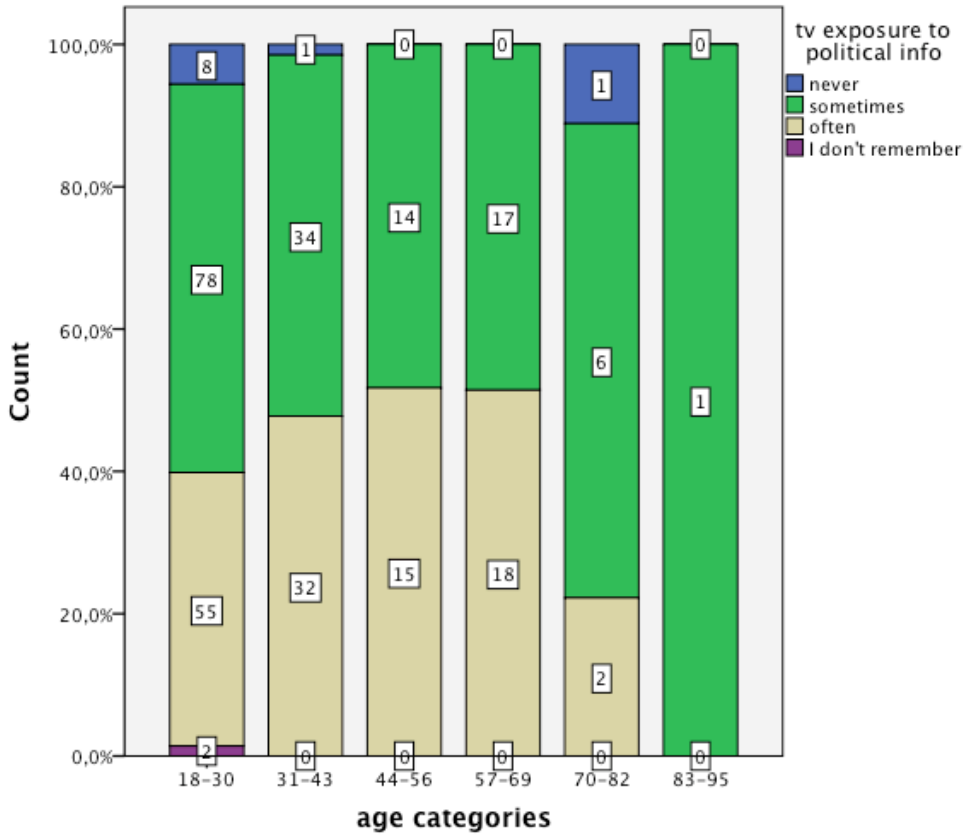
80,0%
60,0%
40,0%
20,0%
0,0%
16
13
10
5
92
39
6
3
17
4
3
0
18-30
31-43
44-56
57-69
age categories


tv exposure to political info
never
sometimes
often
I don't remember
Count
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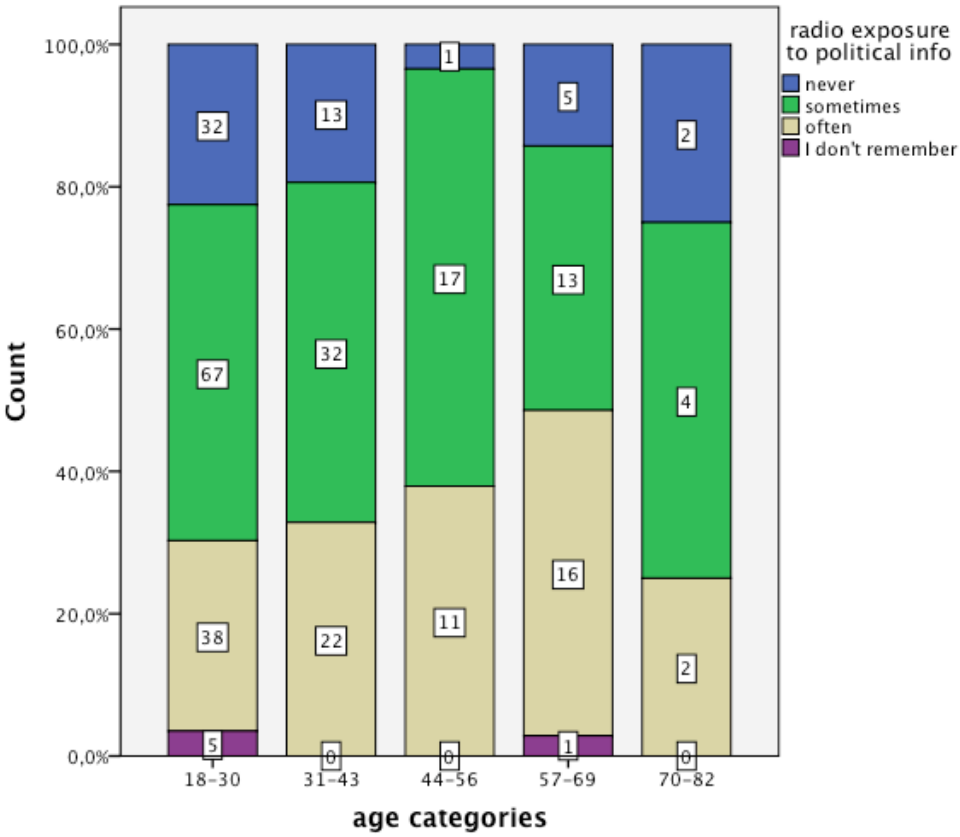
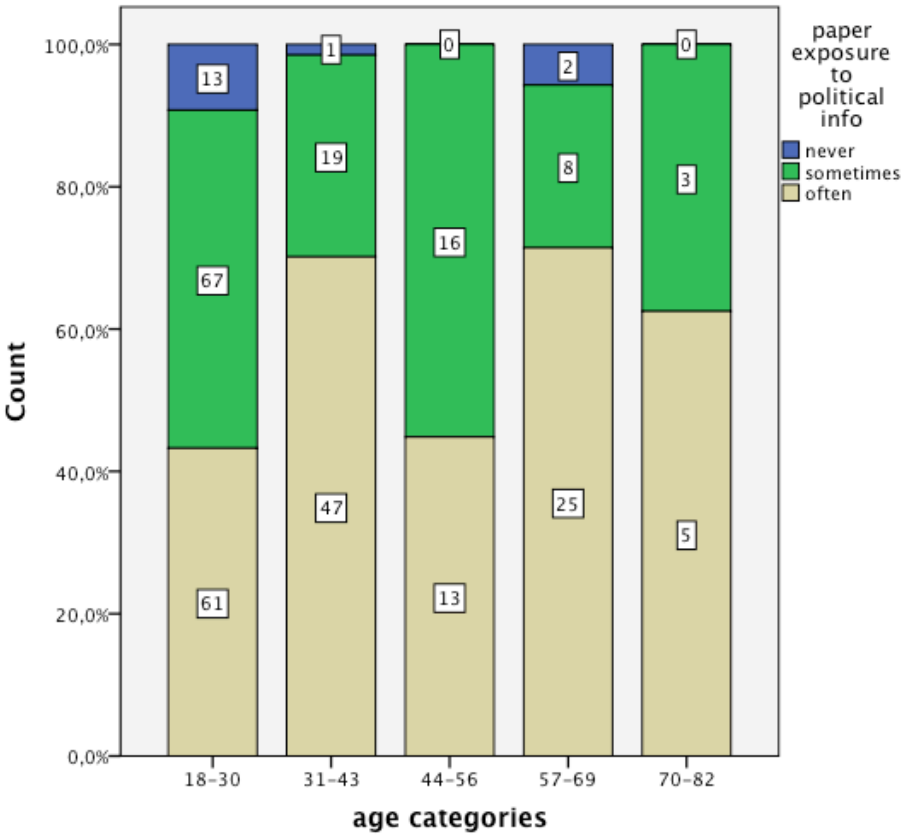
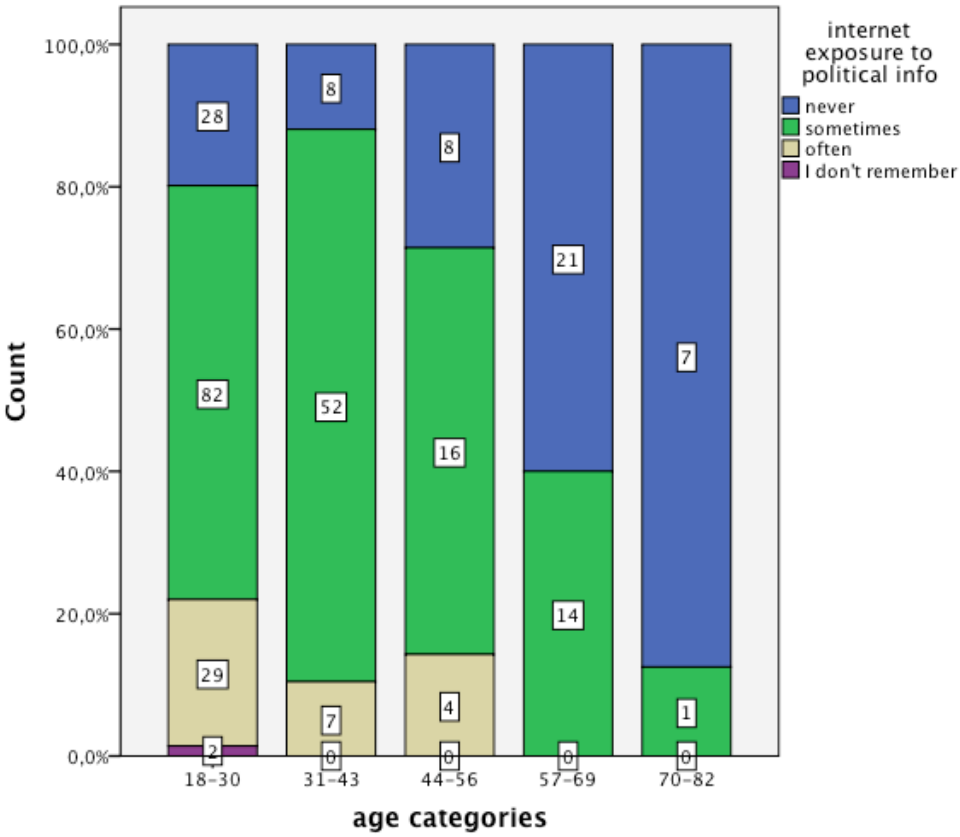
80,0%
60,0%
40,0%
20,0%
0,0%
8
1
0
0
1
0
78
34
14
17
6
1
55
32
15
18
2
0
2
0
0
0
0
0
18-30
31-43
44-56
57-69
70-82
83-95
age categories


radio exposure to political info
never
sometimes
often
I don't remember
Count
100,0%
80,0%
60,0%
40,0%
20,0%
0,0%
32
67
38
5
13
32
22
0
1
17
11
0
5
13
16
1
2
4
2
0
18-30
31-43
44-56
57-69
70-82
age categories


paper exposure to political info
never
sometimes
often
Count
100,0%
80,0%
60,0%
40,0%
20,0%
0,0%
13
67
61
1
19
47
0
16
13
2
8
25
0
3
5
18-30
31-43
44-56
57-69
70-82
age categories



Appendix C Survey.

(English version)
Social Media and the national elections of 2012

Hello! These are 32 *anonymous questions* about the Dutch national elections of September 2012 and your Social Media usage (like Facebook, Twitter and Hyves) for a research of my *academic study*. It does not matter whether or not you participated during the elections. It does not matter either whether or not you used Social Media. It takes a maximum of a *few minutes*. You can only answer/circle one answer for every question. Thank you very much!

1. **What is your gender?**
   a. Male

b. Female

2. **What is your nationality?**
    a. Dutch
    b. Foreign

3. **What is your age?**
    a. <18
    b. 18-30
    c. 31-43
    d. 44-56
    e. 57-69
    f. 70-82
    g. 83-95

4. **How often do you vote during national elections?**
    a. Always
    b. Most of the time
    c. Sometimes
    d. Never

5. **Did you vote during the last national elections in September 2012?**
    a. Yes
    b. No
    c. I made a blank vote
    d. I don't know

6. **In case you voted in 2012, what party did you vote for?**
    a. CDA
    b. Christen Unie
    c. D66
    d. GroenLinks
    e. PvdA
    f. PVV
    g. SGP
    h. SP
    i. VVD
    j. Partij voor de Dieren
    k. 50PLUS
    l. Democratisch Politiek Keerpunt
    m. Liberaal Democratische Partij
    n. Nederland Lokaal
    o. Libertarische Partij
    p. Anti Europa Partij
    q. SOPN
    r. Partij van de Toekomst

s. Politieke Partij NXD
t. Piratenpartij
u. Partij voor Mens en Spirit

7. In case you didn't vote in 2012, what was your reason?
a. Not able to vote
b. Forgot to vote
c. Did not want to vote
d. Could not make a choice
e. None of the above

8. In case you voted in 2012, why did you vote for that party?
a. Best idealistic policy
b. Best election program
c. Best leader
d. Best outcome for government
e. I did not want another party to win
f. None of the above

9. How do you consider your level of political interest for the period before the elections of 2012?
a. Not interested in politics
b. Moderately interested in politics
c. Strongly interested in politics
d. I don't no

10. How do you consider your level of off-line political activity for a party (partymembership, donations, visting partymeetings, campaigning, etc) in the period before the elections of 2012?
a. I was off-line not active at all
b. I was off-line a little active
c. I was off-line active
d. I was off-lne very active
e. I don't know

11. In case you voted in 2012, at what moment did you make your decision to vote for that party?
a. Long beforehand
b. During the last months before the elections
c. During the last weeks before the elections
d. During the last days of the elections
e. On the election day
f. I don't know

12. How stable do you consider your voting choice when thinking about previous elections?

a. I have never voted for another party
b. I have switched my choice once
c. I have switched my choice several times
d. I don't know

13. How would you describe your party adherence?

a. I am not adherent, nor attracted to a party
b. I feel attracted to a party
c. I am adherent to a party
d. I am strongly adherent to a party

14. In case you voted in 2012, at what moment did you make your decision to vote for that person?

a. Long beforehand
b. During the last months before the elections
c. During the last weeks before the elections
d. During the last days of the elections
e. On the election day
f. I don't know

15. On average, how much did you see political content on TV (i.e. news items, debates, talkshows, party commercials etc) before the elections in 2012?

a. Never
b. Sometimes
c. Often
d. I don't know

16. On average, how much did you hear political information on the radio (i.e. debates, party commercials, campaign news, political talkshows etc) before the elections in 2012?

a. Never
b. Sometimes
c. Often
d. I don't know

17. On average, how much did you read political information in newspapers and/or magazines (i.e. news articles, opinion articles, party commercials etc) before the elections in 2012?

a. Never
b. Sometimes
c. Often
d. I don't know

18. On average, how much did you use the internet (not through Social Networking Sites but more like checking partywebsites, using the

voteguider or participating in blogs or chatrooms to ask questions) for political information purposes before the elections in 2012?

a. Never
b. Sometimes
c. Often
d. I don't know

19. **On average, how much did you deliberate face-to-face about politics with friends, family or co-workers before the elections in 2012?**
    a. Never
    b. Sometimes
    c. Often
    d. I don't know

20. **On average during these face-to-face discussions, how much did you deliberate with like minded people about politics?**
    a. Less than once a month
    b. At least every month
    c. At least every week
    d. At least every day
    e. More than once a day
    f. I don't know

21. **On average during these face-to-face discussions, how much did you deliberate with opposite minded people about politics?**
    a. Less than once a month
    b. At least every month
    c. At least every week
    d. At least every day
    e. More than once a day
    f. I don't know

22. **What is your highest achieved educational level?**
    a. Low (None/Mavo/LBO)
    b. Medium (Havo/MBO)
    c. High (VWO/University/HBO)

23. **What is your average income (bruto)**
    a. Low (<30.000 euro)
    b. Average (30.000-70.000 euro)
    c. High (>70.000 euro)

Pay attention! The next questions concern your activity on Social Networking Sites (like Facebook, Twitter and Hyves). In case you were not active on Social Networking Sites before or during the elections of 2012 you do not need to

continue with the survey. In case you did use Social Networking Sites, please continue with the next questions.

24. **How much Social Networking Sites were you active on before the elections of 2012?**
    a. None
    b. One
    c. Two
    d. Three
    e. Four or more

25. **Which Social Networking Site did you use the most before the elections of 2012?**
    a. None
    b. Facebook
    c. Twitter
    d. Hyves
    e. Other

26. **On average in total, how much did you use your Social Networking Sites before the elections in 2012?**
    a. Less than once a month
    b. At least every month
    c. At least every week
    d. At least every day
    e. More than once a day
    f. I don't know

27. **On average, how much did you notice friends/followers posting political party preferences or dislikes on your Social Networking Sites?**
    a. Less than once a month
    b. At least every month
    c. At least every week
    d. At least every day
    e. More than once a day
    f. I don't know

28. **On average, how much did you post your political party preferences or dislikes on Social Networking Sites?**
    a. Less than once a month
    b. At least every month
    c. At least every week
    d. At least every day
    e. More than once a day
    f. I don't know

29. **On average, how much did you deliberate with like minded people about politics on Social Networking Sites?**
    a. Less than once a month
    b. At least every month
    c. At least every week
    d. At least every day
    e. More than once a day
    f. I don't know

30. **On average, how much did you deliberate with opposite minded people about politics on Social Networking Sites?**
    a. Less than once a month
    b. At least every month
    c. At least every week
    d. At least every day
    e. More than once a day
    f. I don't know

31. **On average, how much did you deliberate with close related ties about politics on Social Networking Sites?**
    a. Less than once a month
    b. At least every month
    c. At least every week
    d. At least every day
    e. More than once a day
    f. I don't know

32. **On average, how much did you deliberate with weak or non related ties about politics on Social Networking Sites?**
    a. Less than once a month
    b. At least every month
    c. At least every week
    d. At least every day
    e. More than once a day
    f. I don't know

(Dutch version)

Sociale Media en de Tweede Kamer verkiezingen van 2012

Hallo! Dit zijn *32 annonieme vragen* over de Tweede Kamer verkiezingen van September 2012 en je gebruik van Sociale Media (zoals Facebook, Twitter en Hyves) voor een onderzoek van mijn *universitaire studie.* Het maakt niet uit of je meegedaan hebt aan de verkiezingen of niet. Het maakt ook niet uit of je wel/niet gebruik maakt van Sociale Media. Het kost maximaal een *paar minuten*. Je kunt slechts 1 antwoord aankruisen/omcirkelen per vraag. Alvast bedankt!

Je mag de enquête na het invullen laten liggen. Ik haal hem straks weer op. Succes!

1. **Wat is je geslacht?**
   a. Man
   b. Vrouw

2. **Wat is je nationaliteit?**
   a. Nederlands
   b. Anders

3. **In welke leeftijdscategorie val je?**
   a. <18
   b. 18-30
   c. 31-43
   d. 44-56
   e. 57-69
   f. 70-82
   g. 83-95

4. **Hoe vaak heb je in het verleden gestemd tijdens Tweede Kamer verkiezingen?**
   a. Altijd
   b. Bijna altijd
   c. Soms
   d. Nooit

5. **Heb je gestemd tijdens de afgelopen Tweede Kamer verkiezingen in 2012?**
   a. Ja
   b. Nee
   c. Ik heb blanco gestemd
   d. Ik weet het niet meer

6. **Indien je hebt gestemd in 2012, op welke partij heb je gestemd?**
    a. CDA
    b. Christen Unie
    c. D66
    d. GroenLinks
    e. PvdA
    f. PVV
    g. SGP
    h. SP
    i. VVD
    j. Partij voor de Dieren
    k. 50PLUS
    l. Democratisch Politiek Keerpunt
    m. Liberaal Democratische Partij
    n. Nederland Lokaal
    o. Libertarische Partij
    p. Anti Europa Partij
    q. SOPN
    r. Partij van de Toekomst
    s. Politieke Partij NXD
    t. Piratenpartij
    u. Partij voor Mens en Spirit

7. **Indien je niet hebt gestemd in 2012, wat was de reden?**
    a. Niet in staat om te stemmen
    b. Vergeten om te stemmen
    c. Wilde niet stemmen
    d. Kon geen keuze maken
    e. Anders

8. **Indien je wel gestemd hebt, waarom heb je in 2012 voor deze partij gestemd?**
    a. Beste ideologie
    b. Beste verkiezingsprogramma
    c. Beste leider
    d. Beste uitkomst voor de regering
    e. Ik wilde niet dat een andere partij won
    f. Geen van bovenstaande redenen

9. **Hoe zou jij je politieke interesse niveau omschrijven voor de periode van de verkiezingen in 2012?**
    a. Ik was niet geinteresseerd in politiek
    b. Ik was gemiddeld geinteresseerd in politiek
    c. Ik was sterk geinteresseerd in politiek
    d. Ik weet het niet meer

10. **Hoe zou jij je off-line politieke activisme (partijlidmaatschap, donaties, bezoek partijbijeenkomsten, campagnevoeren, etc) voor een partij omschrijven voor de periode van de verkiezingen in 2012?**
    a. Ik was off-line niet politiek actief
    b. Ik was off-line een beetje actief
    c. Ik was off-line actief
    d. Ik was off-line zeer actief
    e. Ik weet het niet meer

11. **Indien je hebt gestemd in 2012, op welk moment heb je besloten om op die partij te stemmen?**
    a. Lang voor de verkiezingen
    b. Tijdens de laatste maanden voor de verkiezingen
    c. Tijdens de laatste weken voor de verkiezingen
    d. Tijdens de laatste dagen voor de verkiezingen
    e. Op de verkiezingsdag zelf
    f. Ik weet het niet meer

12. **Hoe zou jij je stemgedrag omschrijven voor eerdere Tweede Kamer verkiezingen?**
    a. Ik heb nog nooit voor een andere partij gestemd
    b. Ik heb ooit voor een ander partij gestemd
    c. Ik heb mijn partijkeuze meerdere keren veranderd
    d. Ik weet het niet meer

13. **Hoe verbonden voel jij je met een politieke partij?**
    a. Ik voel me niet verbonden en niet aangetrokken tot een partij
    b. Ik voel me aangetrokken maar niet verbonden tot een partij
    c. Ik voel me verbonden met een partij
    d. Ik voel me sterk verbonden met een partij

14. **Indien je hebt gestemd in 2012, op welk moment heb je besloten om op die persoon te stemmen?**
    a. Lang voor de verkiezingen
    b. Tijdens de laatste maanden voor de verkiezingen
    c. Tijdens de laatste weken voor de verkiezingen
    d. Tijdens de laatste dagen voor de verkiezingen
    e. Op de verkiezingsdag zelf
    f. Ik weet het niet meer

15. **Hoe vaak heb jij gemiddeld op de televisie programma's of programma items gezien die te maken hadden met politiek (zoals debatten, talkshows, campagne reclame, etc), in de periode voor de verkiezingen van 2012?**

a. Nooit
b. Soms
c. Vaak
d. Ik weet het niet meer

16. **Hoe vaak heb jij gemiddeld op de radio programma's of programma items gehoord die te maken hadden met politiek (zoals debatten, talkshows, campagne reclame, etc.), in de periode voor de verkiezingen van 2012?**
    a. Nooit
    b. Soms
    c. Vaak
    d. Ik weet het niet meer

17. **Hoe vaak heb jij gemiddeld in kranten of tijdschriften artikelen gelezen die te maken hadden met politiek (zoals nieuwsberichten, opinieartikelen, campagne reclame, etc.), in de periode voor de verkiezingen van 2012?**
    a. Nooit
    b. Soms
    c. Vaak
    d. Ik weet het niet meer

18. **Hoe vaak gebruikte jij gemiddeld websites, blogs, stemwijzers of andere online informatie bronnen (niet zijnde Sociale Media) die te maken hadden met politiek in de periode voor de verkiezingen van 2012?**
    a. Nooit
    b. Soms
    c. Vaak
    d. Ik weet het niet meer

19. **Hoe vaak discussieerde jij gemiddeld face-to-face met familie, vrienden, kennissen of collega's over politiek in de periode voor de verkiezingen van 2012?**
    a. Nooit
    b. Soms
    c. Vaak
    d. Ik weet het niet meer

20. **Hoe vaak heb jij gemiddeld face-to-face gediscussieerd over politiek met personen die er hetzelfde over dachten als jij, in de periode voor de verkiezingen van 2012?**
    a. Minder dan een keer per maand
    b. Tenminste elke maand
    c. Tenminste elke week

d. Tenminste elke dag
e. Meerdere keren per dag
f. Ik weet het niet meer

21. Hoe vaak heb jij gemiddeld face-to-face gediscussieerd over politiek met personen er NIET hetzelfde over dachten als jij, in de periode voor de verkiezingen van 2012?

a. Minder dan een keer per maand
b. Tenminste elke maand
c. Tenminste elke week
d. Tenminste elke dag
e. Meerdere keren per dag
f. Ik weet het niet meer

22. Wat is je opleidingsniveau?

a. Lager (Basisonderwijs, LBO, LTS)
b. Middelbaar (MAVO, MBO, MTS, etc)
c. Hoog (HAVO/VWO/HBO/HTS/Universiteit)

23. Wat is ongeveer je bruto inkomensniveau per jaar?

a. <30.000 euro
b. 30.000-70.000 euro
c. >70.000 euro

Let op! De volgende vragen hebben allemaal betrekking op je gebruik van Sociale Netwerk Sites (zoals Facebook, Twitter en Hyves). Indien je voor en/of tijdens de verkiezingen van 2012 niet actief was op een Sociale Netwerk Site dan hoef je de enquête niet verder in te vullen en kun je stoppen. Je mag de enquête laten liggen. Ik kom hem zo ophalen. Indien je in 2012 wel gebruikt maakte van Sociale Netwerk Sites, dan kun je doorgaan met de volgende vragen.

24. Op hoeveel Sociale Netwerk Sites (zoals Facebook, Twitter of Hyves) was je actief in de periode voor de verkiezingen van 2012?

a. Geen
b. 1
c. 2
d. 3
e. 4 of meer

25. Welke Sociale Netwerk Site gebruikte jij het meest in de periode voor de verkiezingen van 2012?

a. Geen
b. Facebook
c. Twitter
d. Hyves

e. Anders

26. Hoe vaak ging je gemiddeld online op je Sociale Netwerk Sites in de periode voor de verkiezingen van 2012?
   a. Minder dan een keer per maand
   b. Tenminste elke maand
   c. Tenminste elke week
   d. Tenminste elke dag
   e. Meerdere keren per dag
   f. Ik weet het niet meer

27. Hoe vaak merkte jij gemiddeld dat vrienden/volgers politieke informatie, voorkeuren of afkeuren posten op Sociale Netwerk Sites, in de periode voor de verkiezingen van 2012?
   a. Minder dan een keer per maand
   b. Tenminste elke maand
   c. Tenminste elke week
   d. Tenminste elke dag
   e. Meerdere keren per dag
   f. Ik weet het niet meer

28. Hoe vaak heb jij zelf gemiddeld politieke informatie, voorkeuren of afkeuren gepost op je Sociale Netwerk Sites, in de periode voor de verkiezingen van 2012?
   a. Minder dan een keer per maand
   b. Tenminste elke maand
   c. Tenminste elke week
   d. Tenminste elke dag
   e. Meerdere keren per dag
   f. Ik weet het niet meer

29. Hoe vaak heb jij gemiddeld op je Sociale Netwerk Sites gediscussieerd over politiek met personen die er hetzelfde over dachten als jij, in de periode voor de verkiezingen van 2012?
   a. Minder dan een keer per maand
   b. Tenminste elke maand
   c. Tenminste elke week
   d. Tenminste elke dag
   e. Meerdere keren per dag
   f. Ik weet het niet meer

30. Hoe vaak heb jij gemiddeld op je Sociale Netwerk Sites gediscussieerd over politiek met personen er NIET hetzelfde over dachten als jij, in de periode voor de verkiezingen van 2012?
   a. Minder dan een keer per maand
   b. Tenminste elke maand

c. Tenminste elke week
d. Tenminste elke dag
e. Meerdere keren per dag
f. Ik weet het niet meer

31. **Hoe vaak heb jij gemiddeld op je Sociale Netwerk Sites gediscussieerd over politiek met personen die dicht bij je staan (zoals familie of goede vrienden), in de periode voor de verkiezingen van 2012?**
    a. Minder dan een keer per maand
    b. Tenminste elke maand
    c. Tenminste elke week
    d. Tenminste elke dag
    e. Meerdere keren per dag
    f. Ik weet het niet meer

32. **Hoe vaak heb jij gemiddeld op je Sociale Netwerk Sites gediscussieerd over politiek met personen die NIET dicht bij je staan (zoals bekenden en kennissen en onbekenden), in de periode voor de verkiezingen van 2012?**
    a. Minder dan een keer per maand
    b. Tenminste elke maand
    c. Tenminste elke week
    d. Tenminste elke dag
    e. Meerdere keren per dag
    f. Ik weet het niet meer

Je bent klaar!

Bedankt voor het invullen. Je mag de enquête laten liggen. Ik kom hem zo ophalen.