SOCIAL MEDIA: A SOLUTION TO DECLINING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN POLITICS?

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for a Master of Arts in Politics

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Abstract

New Zealand is no exception to the decline in political participation, particularly among youth, observed in nearly every developed democracy around the world. Attempts have been made to use social media to increase youth political engagement, so far with mixed results. This study, conducted in Dunedin, New Zealand, analyses how young people use social media and asks whether social media can be a solution to declining political participation amongst youth. A combination of quantitative and qualitative data is used in this mixed methods approach, with the findings confirming many of the themes emerging from recent studies that have moved beyond the initial hypothetical excitement about social media as a tool to increase political engagement. Overall, this study reveals that Dunedin youth see social media as a social rather than political tool. Therefore, social media is unlikely to make a difference to young people who are not already politically interested. Moreover, traditional media available online is the dominant source of political news for young people in this study. This suggests that we need to draw our attention to the use of social media by politicians and political parties, and how they can stimulate political interest in young people through their use of social media. Because the supply of political information (communication) influences demand (interest and knowledge about politics), effective communication with young people is critical to increasing youth engagement. These ‘supply-side factors’ have yet to receive adequate attention.
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Introduction

With over 80% of New Zealanders connected to the Internet, New Zealand is the 11th most connected nation on Earth.\(^1\) Social media\(^2\) has seen a rapid increase in use by New Zealanders, and this is likely to increase further. Shortly after the 2008 New Zealand general election, the newly elected Prime Minister Rt Hon John Key said, “while I can’t promise to read and reply to every comment that you make, your posts (on a range of websites including Facebook and YouTube) will be read by my staff and will contribute to our thinking.”\(^3\) The majority of New Zealand Members of Parliament (MPs) have at least one social media account\(^4\) on the most popular sites


\(^2\) Social media, also referred to as new media, citizen media, digital media, Internet media, and a multitude of other terms such as social networking, are collectively one of the most talked about topics today. Social media refers to websites and applications that enable users to create and share content, or to participate in social networking (interact with other website or application users). My research acknowledges that debate surrounding the terminology of new media exists. For example, Macnamara (2010) argues that the widely used term new media side-tracks debate and is inappropriate for several reasons: it is no longer an accurate term as online chat has existed for over 30 years, blogs started in 1994, online social networks have existed since 1997, Google’s 10th anniversary was celebrated in 2008, and podcasting turned 10 in 2010. The term will become increasingly problematic as newer developments occur. Besides, it categorises other media as ‘old media’ by default and ignores developments within newspapers, radio and television (TV). Although this study supports Macnamara’s (2010) opinion that “a broad view of media development is required” (p. 53), dispute regarding the terminology of new media distracts from the present research. For that reason the terms ‘social media’, ‘social networking’ and ‘new media’ and will be used broadly and interchangeably, referring to media distributed over digital networks such as the Internet.


\(^4\) New Zealand Parliamentarians and Online Social Media (14 February 2011). Retrieved from http://www.parliament.nz/en-nz/parl-support/research-papers/00PLSocRP11021/new-zealand-parliamentarians-and-online-social-media. According to the Auckland University of Technology (http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/research-institutes/icdc/projects/world-internet-project), Facebook has monopolised New Zealand’s online social networking landscape, with 96% of users citing Facebook as the site they used the most.
used by New Zealanders (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube). Social media helped shape the 2008 general election campaign, with Facebook being the most used social networking site by MPs, and it is likely to impact more upon future election campaigns. This use of online tools indicates that many political leaders recognise the potential for social media to provide a direct line of communication between the government and citizens. The New Zealand Parliament published a research paper in February 2011, acknowledging the potential impact social media has in the political arena.\(^5\) According to the paper, “while social media sites can help political parties connect with more people, it still requires motivation from voters” (p. 9). With the use of social media likely to increase in the future, there is considerable potential for MPs to engage with the public in an innovative fashion online.

New Zealand is similar to other countries in the Internet being a well-established part of daily business, political and social life; there were an estimated 2.8 million users in 2011 (Deos & Murchison, 2012). In New Zealand, 1.3 million homes had some form of Internet connection in 2012. Over 95% of people aged between 15 and 34 access the Internet; this is the group with the highest rate of recent online activity.\(^6\) In terms of Internet users accessing social networking, 90% of New Zealanders between 15 and 24 years old actively used social media in 2012. This confirms that young people in New Zealand are also the biggest users of social media in comparison to other age groups. New Zealanders use the Internet as a resource for news and information, and the 2008 general election was observed to be the first election in history where political parties used social media. Parties further integrated the use of social media in political campaigning in the more-recent 2011 election.

There is consensus among researchers about declining political participation, which has been observed in nearly every developed democracy around the world. Electoral participation in New Zealand has experienced a similar declining trend over the past fifty years, with concerns raised about the low levels of youth political engagement in particular. There have been many efforts to try to prevent the continuing decline in

\(^5\) Ibid.

youth participation, but they have met with limited success. For this reason, a growing number of governments worldwide have turned to social media as a possible solution to re-engage young people in politics.\(^7\) As the most active users of social media worldwide, young people aged between 18 and 24 are the so-called ‘Internet generation’\(^8\). However, existing research examined in this study demonstrates that the use of social media as an engagement tool is not as straightforward as might have been hoped.

The United States’ (US) 2008 election was dubbed the ‘social media election’ with candidates connecting with and engaging young Americans in fundamentally different ways to previous elections through the use of social media (Fraser & Dutta, 2008). This resulted in higher youth voter turnout compared to preceding elections.\(^9\) However, other studies in the US suggest that online social networks are not the most effective solution for youth disengagement from civic duty and democracy. This claim is evidenced by voter turnout among 18 to 24 year olds once again declining in the 2012 US presidential election, despite repeated social media efforts.\(^10\) In the United Kingdom (UK), young people were enthusiastic users of Facebook during the 2010 election, which research has linked to the highest turnout increase among 18 to 24 year olds compared with other age groups in that election. Moreover, social media appeared to offer political parties powerful new ways to engage voters, with young people getting much of their political news via online social media sources. Other

\(^7\) This new communication environment, driven largely by the growth in the Internet, is rapidly changing the economic, social and political landscape (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Newman, & Robinson, 2001). While these changes affect all age groups, they are particularly significant for youth, who are more quickly embracing new technology. Given the exponential growth in Internet use and the availability of political oriented sites, “it is natural to wonder whether this new form of communications might offer opportunities for increasing the civic engagement” (Carpini, 2010, p. 346).

\(^8\) For example, Livingstone and Helsper (2007), Tapscott (2000), and several documents including www.stats.govt.nz refer to youth as the ‘Internet generation’.

\(^9\) According to the Centre for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, retrieved from http://www.civicyouth.org/youth-turnout-at-least-49-22-23-million-under-30-voted/.

\(^10\) Although official turnout figures for the 2012 presidential election are yet to be confirmed, estimates such as http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2012/11/08/presidential-election-turnout-ticked-down-from-2008-estimate-shows/ suggest it was lower than previous elections.
research in the UK suggests that young people in fact still prefer traditional media sources such as newspapers (conveniently sourced online) rather than social media as sources of political information (Newman, 2010). Studies in the Netherlands found that politicians with higher social media engagement received more votes (Trilling & Schoenbach, 2013). But another study suggests that young people are only weakly interested in politics and have a low sense of civic duty to keep informed, and that complete political news avoiders are typically young (Tewksbury & Althaus, 2000). Furthermore, data obtained through a survey of the young Spanish population show that young people are mainly using the Internet in informal spaces, with social media seen as tools for socialisation and entertainment, not politics (Sánchez-Navarro & Aranda, 2012).

By producing mixed results in terms of whether online media are making a difference to levels of political knowledge, interest and participation, these existing case studies show that there is no overall agreement about the role social media can play to address declining youth participation. The editorial of the 2013 *European Journal of Communication* highlights that articles received in the past year have “moved beyond the more hypothetical excitement about the potential of the Internet and social media for enhanced communication and interaction between citizens, media and politics” (Golding, Sousa & van Zoonen, 2013, p. 3). This point demonstrates that the more case studies on the topic, the better – especially new research that provides up-to-date empirical evidence for the use of social media by young people for political purposes. By analysing how social media is used by young people to engage with political news, this study explores whether social media is engaging young people in Dunedin, New Zealand.11 Through the combination of quantitative and qualitative research, this

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11 This case study is conducted in Dunedin, at the University of Otago. There is particular concern about election turnout (both in national and local elections) in Dunedin, with students making up a significant portion of the entire population. There is also concern regarding turnout in the Otago University Students’ Association annual elections: in 2012, slightly less than 17% of students voted, despite the option of online voting (according to the University of Otago Annual Report (2012), 21,416 students were enrolled in 2012 and with 3,620 students voting (Otago University Students’ Association, 2012), only 16.9% of the total number of enrolled students voted).
study offers an original case study to inform the discussion on new media and its potential as a solution to youth disengagement.

Several key hypotheses about the role social media can play in re-engaging youth were derived from existing case studies around the world and tested in this study. To develop a deeper analysis and provide richer detail of the use of social media in engaging with political news, focus groups were used in an integrated design with quantitative data to supply data for various aspects of the overall research question.

This thesis is divided into four chapters. The first chapter establishes the context of this research by outlining the worldwide declining youth political participation and the attempts to address this decline. Social media is considered a possible solution to re-engage young people in politics because of its widespread use among youth. Its use as a strategy to address declining participation has focussed primarily on the demand side (focusing on the characteristics of the voter) and researchers are divided into two schools of thought on how social media might address the problem of low youth engagement: cyber-optimists and cyber-sceptics.

The second chapter discusses the qualitative and quantitative research methods used in this research. It explains the methods of sampling, questions asked, and methods of data analysis. Through the use of a convergent parallel design, different but complementary data on the same topic were obtained. This approach provided the opportunity to take advantage of the strengths of each approach (focus groups and survey), with both quantitative and qualitative the best methods for addressing this complex research topic.

The third chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of the qualitative and quantitative findings. Survey results are presented first through multiple figures, followed by the overarching focus group themes. Data from the focus groups and survey are mixed in the fourth chapter, in the overall interpretation of the findings. The final chapter, in consideration of the findings presented in the third chapter, argues that we are misplacing our attention on the role social media can play to engage citizens politically. Rather than blame youth apathy as a reason for disengagement, we need to ask how politicians and political parties can stimulate
youth involvement through social media. Instead of hoping that social media will politically engage young people, the use of social media by politicians and political parties needs to be more productive, engaging, and less superficial, to stimulate youth participation. Widespread use of the Internet clearly has the potential to influence the capacity of young people to gain information through a range of sources. But the information needs to stimulate involvement, and political leaders can play a key role in this.
Chapter One: Political Participation and Social Media

Faced with declining political participation, worldwide attempts have been made to use social media to increase youth political engagement. This chapter determines the context of this study through a review of existing literature outlining participation decline and the growth in social media use. Following the establishment of the context of this study, this chapter outlines several key hypotheses of the role social media can play to remedy participation decline. Finally, this chapter concludes with an outline of the present research including specific research questions based on these hypotheses.

Declining youth participation

Political participation refers to citizen activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action, and it covers a wide range of activities. According to many theorists, political participation is essential to democracy. For example, Macnamara (2011) argues that despite “differing views on forms and levels of political participation, there is a general agreement that citizen engagement and participation are desirable and even essential in all models of democracy” (p. 20). Political participation either affects the making or implementation of public policy or influences the selection of people who make these policies. Citizens can have an impact on public policy or the people who make them through a variety of ways in a democracy. For example, they can communicate their concerns and opinions by signing a petition or attending a protest, or they can affect policy indirectly by influencing electoral outcomes through voting in elections (Schlozman, 2011). These activities are often categorised as ‘conventional’ participation (such as voting, campaign contributions or working on a campaign) and ‘unconventional’ participation (such as boycotts and demonstrations).

Voting is considered the most basic means of political participation in any democracy. For many years, those who studied political participation and voter turnout in liberal democracies believed that levels of participation were largely satisfactory (Curtin,
2010). However, in the 21st century there has been a growing concern that the sense of trust in, and public engagement with, the political system and government has significantly declined, with studies of contemporary elections revealing a broad decline in turnout rates worldwide.

Much of the research focuses on the decline in conventional participation, namely voter turnout, which has been observed in nearly every developed democracy around the world (Gray & Caul, 2000). For example, data reveals that voter turnout has declined significantly in Canada, particularly over the past twenty years, falling to 59% in 2008 and only recovering slightly in 2011 to 61%.\(^\text{12}\) Similarly, voter turnout has consistently decreased in the United Kingdom from almost 85% in 1950 to 65% in 2010;\(^\text{13}\) in France from 69% in 1993 to 56% in 2012;\(^\text{14}\) in Italy from an average of 90% between 1946 and 1983, to 75% in 2013;\(^\text{15}\) and in Germany, where voter turnout peaked in 1972 at just over 91%, but dropped to 71% in 2009.\(^\text{16}\) In the US, although official turnout figures for the 2012 US presidential election are yet to be confirmed, it is also estimated that turnout was lower than in the previous two elections, though up from 2000.\(^\text{17}\) Finally, electoral participation in New Zealand has experienced a similar downward trend over the past fifty years. Falling from 98% in 1946 to 80% in 2008,\(^\text{18}\) voter turnout dropped to just fewer than 74% of eligible voters in the 2011 general election. The 2011 New Zealand general election was noted for its very low voter turnout, where New Zealand experienced the lowest turnout ever (Vowles,

\(^\text{14}\) The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance turnout data retrieved from http://www.idea.int/vt/country_view.cfm?CountryCode=FR.
\(^\text{15}\) http://www.idea.int/vt/country_view.cfm?CountryCode=IT
\(^\text{16}\) http://www.idea.int/vt/country_view.cfm?CountryCode=DE
\(^\text{18}\) http://www.idea.int/vt/country_view.cfm?id=171
Voter turnout in 2011 was also lower than that at recent elections in the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Italy, Greece, Sweden and Denmark. According to Vowles (2012), the pattern of change in turnout since 1946 in New Zealand is also of some concern, presenting a very consistent downward trend.

Research seeks to understand and explain the decline in electoral participation. Many scholars argue that voting in elections is the basis of democracy and citizenship, with high voter turnout generally seen as legitimising the current system of government (Macnamara, 2011; Dennis, 1970; Powell, 1982; Davidson, 2005; Schlozman, 2011). Low turnout can lead to unequal representation of the population, resulting in lower socioeconomic groups, younger people, and ethnic minorities who do not vote left underrepresented in parliament. International research also indicates that lower turnout has policy implications and, if turnout decline continues, it is likely to lead to increased social inequality in the longer term (Brady, 2003; Mueller & Stratmann, 2003).

The reasons for low turnout are difficult to identify. Several explanations have been offered, both on the supply side (supply of information through the media and politicians/political parties) and demand side (focusing on the characteristics of the voter, their level of interest and knowledge about politics and low demand for information). Explanations for declining turnout commonly emphasise the demand side of the problem rather than the supply side (Hay, 2007). The barriers to voting are thought to vary, depending on voters’ age and social, racial and economic groups: “younger people, for instance, are often too busy to be bothered, or feel they have little or no stake in the outcome of an election” (Schneider, 1996, p. 355). Schneider (1996) calls this the ‘barrier of inconvenience’. But widespread apathy among all age groups remains a significant determinant in deciding whether or not to vote. Education is another factor in voting trends, with more educated people more likely to vote.

The 2011 election experienced the lowest turnout in the country under the conditions of full adult suffrage (Vowles, 2012). Lower official turnout was recorded in the 1887 election, well before women attained voting rights.

According to Lassen (2004), “political participation is an instrument of representation and, therefore, unequal participation can distort the pattern of representation necessary for democratic responsiveness, leading to real effects on policy outcomes” (p. 103).
vote than those less educated (Schneider, 1996). Additionally, poverty has an adverse impact on voter turnout; for example, the unemployed are likely to feel they have nothing to lose by not voting.

New Zealand research confirms overseas findings that turnout is mainly determined by the characteristics of individual voters. In terms of the supply side of political information and politicians creating a demand for political participation, some “feel there are no politicians that really represent or listen to the people, but rather only leaders that have their own agendas” (McLeod, 2013). In an opinion piece published in *The Spectator*, Teel (2006) provides an example of the lacklustre (or complete lack of) response from mayoral candidates after her attempted contact with them, arguing, “if the candidates are not willing to respond to questions, why should the populace care either?” For politicians to positively increase voter turnout, they must encourage people to become involved in the democratic process in future elections.

According to Rosenstone and Hansen (1993), “the bottom line [is that] people participate in electoral politics because someone encourages or inspires them to take part” (p. 161). The very nature of elections motivates political leaders to mobilise the public to become involved, and parties give considerable thought to how they might best mobilise their supporters and sway the undecided. Ultimately, political parties’ efforts to mobilise have considerable effect: “when parties make the effort, the people they contact are far more likely to participate” (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993, p. 170). Moreover, these efforts have the largest effect on the probability that people who are otherwise least likely to turn out, actually will turn out to vote. Contact with political parties promotes participation by reshaping people’s attitudes and perceptions and enhances citizens’ beliefs in their own political efficacy.

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23 http://search.proquest.com/docview/270264141?accountid=14700
While the progressive decline in electoral participation by the general public is illustrated above, concerns have been raised regarding the low turnout of young voters in particular. A gap in voter turnout from this group may mean their concerns have little or no representation, and if the issues important to youth are not addressed, it can lead to disenfranchisement in the long run. The international literature on youth voter turnout establishes that the younger the voter is, the less likely they are to vote. For example, in the US turnout for those aged between 18 and 25 has generally remained 20% lower than voters over 30 years old (Kirby & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2009). Moreover, youth voting is on the decline overall: a study covering 15 Western European democracies found that voter turnout for those aged between 18 and 29 had steadily declined over the past fifty years (Ballington, 2002). In Britain, the youth voter turnout rate of 44% in 2010 is significantly lower than the overall turnout rate of 65% (Ipsos, 2010) and data from Canada reflects a similar trend, with youth turnout peaking at around 85% in 1974 and dropping to 60% in 2000 (Adsett, 2003). Additionally, trends recorded by an annual survey that has been conducted by the University of California, Los Angeles since the mid-1960s and involves 250,000 college freshmen each year, found that every significant indicator of political engagement has fallen by about half over the past 40 years (Galston, 2011).

Youth voter turnout rates in New Zealand are also comparatively low, with age observed as one of “the most theoretically salient social and demographic variables associated with turnout” (Vowles, 2012, p. 15). Non-voting was twice as likely among 18 to 24 year olds than the sample average of Election Study Data from the 1996 New Zealand general election (Vowles, 1998). These trends have continued and in 2005 it was estimated that only 60% of young people voted, compared to 77% of adults. In 2008, the size of the 18 to 29 year old electorate was slightly over 700,000 potential voters; one-fifth of the eligible voting population (Curtin, 2010). But, only 72% of 18 to 24 year olds were enrolled to vote compared to 90% of all adults. Overall turnout was just under 70% in the 2011 general election (the poorest turnout since the 1887 election), down 6 percentage points from 76% in 2008. The inquiry into the 2011 general election (2013) also notes the continuing trend of declining turnout by 18 to 24 year olds.
At a micro-level, turnout in the local elections in Dunedin where this study was conducted has sat at around 50% for the past three elections. The characteristics of a particular electorate are seen to have a significant impact on voter turnout, with higher voter turnout traditionally associated with older age groups (Department of Internal Affairs, 2011). Young people between 18 and 24 make up the largest age group in Dunedin, but have the lowest percentage of enrolment and turnout based on the total number of the eligible population for that group. Prior to a representation review in 2009 and the merge of a number of electoral wards into a single large ward in 2010, Dunedin’s Cargill ward (where most of the student population reside) had the lowest turnout in 2004 and 2007, by a considerable amount. In 2007, turnout was a mere 30%, compared with around 50% for the other wards (Dunedin City Council, 2007). Of the 14,956 electors in the Cargill ward, only 4,608 returned their local election voting papers in 2007. Similarly in 2004, the Cargill ward had the lowest turnout of 38% compared to between 55% and 60% across the other wards. In terms of student voter turnout in the Otago University Students’ Association elections, less than 20% of students vote in the annual executive elections: in 2012, slightly less than 17% of students voted, in 2011 turnout was 16%, and in 2009 and 2008, a mere 15% of eligible students voted.

Causes of declining youth participation

Evidence of youth voter decline is clear. But it is difficult to explain why young people may not be turning out to vote, with possible fault on both the demand side (demand for politics on the behalf of potential voters) as well as the supply of political information. On the demand side, which focuses on the characteristics of the voter,

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24 Voter turnout for the 2004 election was 55%, 47% in 2007, and 53% in 2010 (retrieved from http://www.localcouncils.govt.nz/lgip.nsf/wpg_url/Profiles-Councils-Dunedin-City-Council-E1). Voter turnout has declined from 67% in 1989 to the lowest turnout observed of 47% in 2007.

25 Enrolment statistics for the 2013 local elections show that of the 22,500 eligible 18 to 24 year old voters, 12,173 (54%) have enrolled. Overall, of the 102,410 eligible voters in Dunedin, 85% have enrolled to vote (http://www.elections.org.nz/research-statistics/enrolment-statistics-council?name=Dunedin+City).

26 These percentages were calculated based on the number of votes cast in each OUSA executive election (retrieved from http://www.ousa.org.nz/) as a percentage of eligible voters (retrieved from http://www.otago.ac.nz/about/quickstats.html#1).
statistics from the UCLA study show that only 33% of young people think that keeping up with politics is important, down from 60% in 1966; only 16% say they frequently discuss politics, down from 33% in 1966; and, not surprisingly, acquisition of political knowledge from traditional media sources has dropped, and as yet not enough young people are using the Internet to fill the role that newspapers and TV news once played as sources of civic information. Similarly, a study commissioned by Elections Canada showed that there is no single reason for declining turnout among young people, but the most important factors identified are: low levels of political interest and knowledge; a declining sense that voting is a civic duty; certain administrative difficulties; and limited contact with political parties and candidates (Davidson, 2005).

Numerous international studies indicate a strong relationship between age and turnout, concluding that young people in New Zealand and overseas can be described as politically apathetic and disinterested (Curtin, 2010). While political participation is not limited to voting in elections, voting is often argued to be the essential first step in the democratic process (Davidson, 2005; Schlozman, 2011). Evidence suggests that young people are not only less likely to vote, but are also less knowledgeable about politics and less likely to consume public affairs news content than older generations. Additionally, they are less trusting of their fellow citizens, less inclined to join social organisations and less likely to volunteer (Lee, Shah, & McLeod, 2012). Information deprivation and lacking confidence in the voting decision are also concerns among young voters in New Zealand (Curtin, 2010). Some young people have a strong desire for political participation but find it difficult to decide who to voter for, so not voting seems preferable to making a bad choice. And, according to Curtin (2010), political parties play a key role in attracting voters because it seems that “young voters [who] do not see political parties as appealing to them” (p. 564) are less likely to vote.

Furthermore, research suggests that attitudes to political participation are generally formed in early adulthood. According to this research, it has always been the case that young people are less likely to vote than older adults, but that as they grow older they will become more involved politically (Strate, Parrish, Elder, & Ford, 1989, and Conway, 2000; Converse & Niemi, 1971; Abramson, Aldrich, & Rohde, 1998, as cited in Highton & Wolfinger, 2001, p. 203). If the lifecycle explanations for
declining turnout are valid, then turnout will increase with age. However, the evidence is for a generational shift in turnout decline: data from the New Zealand Election Study supports a generational explanation for voter decline in that each successive cohort of young voters is less likely to be interested in politics than the previous generation (Vowles, 2004). Carpini (2010) agrees, stating “dramatic shifts later in life in the overall level of civic engagement of a particular generation are rare” (p. 345). It is important to look at youth participation because unless this trend stops, turnout will continue to decline and Curtin (2010) concludes that “such an outcome bodes ill for the maintenance of a strong and representative democratic policy” (p. 562).

Addressing the decline in youth participation: the role of social media

There have been many efforts to try to prevent the decline in youth participation. Working on the presumption that the fault lies with the young voter (i.e. the demand side), these include mass media campaigns to encourage voting prior to elections, large-scale mobile phone political engagement projects, public service announcements by celebrities, updated registration processes and Internet voting, to name a few. However, these efforts have been met with limited success, as discussed below, with youth turnout continuing to decline.

With the continuing decline in youth participation, many governments have turned to social media as a possible solution to engage young people in politics and to

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27 Following the continued youth turnout decline in the 2011 general election, the inquiry into the 2011 general election states that it is “particularly concerned to note not only a continuing trend of declining turnout by 18–24-year-olds, but also research now indicating a marked drop in the number of 24–29-year-olds who are voting. This supports evidence we received that 18-year-olds who did not vote in their first election do not establish a habit of voting, and continue not to vote in subsequent elections.”

28 In New Zealand, the majority of MPs have at least one online social media account on the most popular online social media sites used by New Zealanders. “Online social media can facilitate better engagement and communication between MPs and the general public” according to the New Zealand Parliament research paper (2011), retrieved from http://www.parliament.nz/en-nz/parl-support/research-papers/00PLSocRP11021/new-zealand-parliamentarians-and-online-social-media. In 2008, the Great New Zealand Vote Party was established to encourage young people to organise social events around going to the polls, but failed to gain the same (footnote continued on the following page)
overcome the apathy and lack of interest that are the obstacles to participation noted in previously cited studies. Social media have been used over the past decade as a strategy to address the democratic deficit by governments and political parties in a number of democratic states (Macnamara, 2011). Politicians and political parties faced with declining citizen engagement and participation in democratic politics, declining public knowledge and interest in politics, and declining citizens’ trust in politicians and representative institutions, have been leading initiatives to revitalise democracy through online engagement. These initiatives aim to facilitate communication between citizens and politicians/political parties, but communication seems to be from parties to voters, with limited interaction (it is one-way, top-down communication from parties to voters (Deos & Murchison, 2012)).

Social media growth and use

Online media use has grown exponentially and Iyengar and McGrady state, “the pace of the proliferation of information technology has astonished all observers” (p. 105). Internet use has reached astounding proportions in a remarkably short period of time (Davis, 1999), growing by over 500% since 2000, with 2.3 billion Internet users worldwide as at 31 December 2011 (World Statistics, 2012) – 33% of the world’s total population. Additionally, Facebook has become the leading social networking

momentum as Rock the Vote. The Orange Guy also featured on Bebo, and replicating methods adopted by Rock the Vote, voters could register to receive a text from the Orange Guy to remind them to vote (Curtin, 2010). Other worldwide examples include the YouCut initiative in the US, a social media hub where participants can suggest and vote on which government spending programmes should be cut from the federal budget (http://majorityleader.gov/YouCut/) and Rock the Vote, which promoted online voter registration technologies through social media (www.rocktheflyote.com/nvrd/assets/images/social-media-toolkit.pdf). Politicians in the US are extensively using social media to interact and inform its citizenry, with social networks like Twitter and Facebook used in presidential debates and forums for example. In the UK, Councils have started using Facebook and Twitter to engage local communities. Most politicians and many other world leaders are actively present in social media.

A democratic deficit refers to a situation with a lack of democratic accountability and control over the decision-making process. As discussed, this refers to declining citizen engagement and participation in democratic politics, declining public knowledge and interest in politics, and declining citizens’ trust in politicians and representative institutions (Macnamara, 2011, p. 18).
site, with 132.1 million active monthly users in 2008, and, according to the company’s own statistics, Facebook’s active membership passed 1 billion users on the 14th of September 2012 (Zuckerberg, 2012). It is important to note that the Internet is fundamentally different from traditional media in that a single individual can communicate with an audience as large as that of the giant, multinational corporation that produces a network television programme (Baran, 2007). However, online feedback is often immediate and direct, and therefore more similar to feedback in interpersonal communication than to feedback in mass communication, which is traditionally described as delayed. Potential benefits of social media include the ability for political parties to create a more personal connection with the public and to contribute to greater political knowledge among users, which is particularly significant for young people who are the greatest users of social media (Brewer & Cao, 2006; Young, 2004). But, despite the potential for immediate feedback, it is not automatic or guaranteed.

International social media research provides examples of “powerful new Internet tools” such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, and how, as a result of these tools, media production, distribution, and consumption of political news have changed. Social media is seen as crucial, in that it can help overcome this apathy. Transparency in communication promotes government accountability and public trust in government institutions, consequently engaging voters. Political parties have been cited as the most important institutions affecting political participation, with the media (particularly electronic media) playing “a crucial role in shaping voter interest in and attitudes about an election.” Social media was first identified as a significant factor in the 2000 US presidential election campaign; however, the 2004 US presidential election was the crucial turning point in the use of social media

32 According to Xenos and Moy (2007), many identified the 2004 elections as a “critical turning point for political communication via the Internet” (p. 704), because presidential candidates adopted innovative features such as interactive blogs and multimedia presentations. Most significantly, online politics reached a “mainstream” media audience, with around 37% of American adults getting political
(Macnamara, 2010). The 2008 Obama presidential campaign took the use of social media for political communication to new heights with reports of 46% of all Americans using the Internet to access news about the campaign, share their views and mobilise others (Smith & Rainie, 2008). According to Carter (2011), a candidate without a social media presence is now at a disadvantage in US presidential elections. Rice (2012) claims that social media allowed US voters to become more engaged and informed during the 2012 election campaign and that “it’s simply getting easier to find information.”

It is clear that the use of social media in the US is high, but regardless of the continuing increase in social media use, the estimated turnout in the 2012 US elections was lower than in the previous two elections. This perhaps suggests a shift from an optimistic to a more realistic view of the potential role social media can play in terms of political engagement.

But do young people use social media instead of, or in addition to, traditional media? Given the historical evidence that audiences replace older technologies with new media (because the new medium may do a better job of fulfilling consumer needs (Gaskins & Jerit, 2012)), it is logical to assume that the expansion of the Internet would come at the expense of traditional media such as newspapers and television as sources of political news. However, evidence for this hypothesis is uneven (Gaskins & Jerit, 2012). Several studies conclude that the Internet is replacing older media forms of communication (Dimmick, Chen, & Li, 2004; Stempel, Hargrove, & Bernt, 2000), a pattern driven largely by young people (De Waal, Shoenbach, & Lauf, 2005). On the other hand, several other studies have come to the opposite conclusion, finding little evidence for substitution (Tewksbury & Althaus, 2000), but rather evidence that the Internet supplements the use of traditional media outlets (Dutta-Bergman, 2004). In a recent study by Gaskins and Jerit (2012), a survey revealed that 55% of

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34 Data for their study came from the 2008 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (CCAP), an Internet survey administered by YouGov/Polimetrix (http://ccap.nuff.ox.ac.uk/?p=projects&sp=british). Although this survey analysed all age groups, with around 10,000 respondents, the results are of interest when discussing declining youth participation.
respondents used the Internet at least once in the past seven days to read about politics and nearly 50% of respondents used newspapers, television, or radio for the same amount of time since starting to use the Internet. Notably, those participants that reported using newspapers less frequently were not replacing a hardcopy newspaper with its online counterpart; they were using sites such as Yahoo or Google instead. In summary, the study suggests that replacement is not as widespread as some previous studies have indicated. Rather, the substantial segment of the population that is replacing traditional outlets with the Internet is doing so because of the perception that “the Internet better satisfies their needs when it comes to variety and convenience” (Gaskins & Jerit, 2012, p. 206). The implications of the use of social media in addition to traditional media sources are that people are possibly receiving more news than before. Even if young people are replacing traditional sources with those online, they may still have more news exposure than previously because online sources are easier to access.

Use of social media by politicians and political parties

Digital technology is likely to become an increasingly important tool for political campaigning. As politicians and political parties increase their use of social media for the supply of political information, the potential for young people to use this medium for political participation will increase too. Political parties in New Zealand now use the Internet for a variety of essential campaigning functions, with all parties represented in parliament, as well as many of the lesser known micro-parties, having their own websites (de Ronde, 2010). Party websites provide an opportunity for parties to communicate directly with their supporters and the broader public, and provide an outlet for information about the party, its political actors, and its positions on issues. Furthermore, the use of the Internet by political parties has evolved markedly in recent years with parties utilising multimedia, linking and interactive features of websites. Figures 1, 2 and 3 suggest that New Zealand’s parties are now taking digital campaigning more seriously, supplying regular Facebook updates and

35 This is also reflected by most New Zealand MPs actively using Facebook and many are active on Twitter, in addition to the use of YouTube where MPs present clips of speeches during debates in parliament or more casual video blogs where MPs talk (footnote is continued on the following page)
replying to user comments. While these developments are not exclusively addressed at young people, the impetus for these initiatives arises from the view that this is how young voters are likely to engage. The aim is to make it easier or more appealing for young people to contact politicians/political parties by removing the obstacles to youth engagement. The focus is on the nature of communication rather than the content.


Social media platforms such as Facebook are considered to promote more relaxed and colloquial types of interaction, with participation the key attribute. In Figure 1 we see the Green Party interacting with other Facebook users. According to research, this can contribute to greater political knowledge of social media participants, and to a more positive assessment of the politician/political party (Brewer & Cao, 2006). Figures 2 and 3 below also provide examples of politicians creating a more personal connection with the public. According to Brewer and Cao (2006), this allows parties to re-cast perceptions of themselves because interaction can create a more positive evaluation of the politician or political party, even if viewpoints are not closely aligned (Utz, 2009).

Figure 2. John Key’s Facebook posts during 2011 election. Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/johnkeypm?fref=ts.
Candidates in the 2008 US presidential election also continued a recent trend in political campaigning – using social media to interact with voters in fundamentally different ways than in previous elections (Vitak, Zube, Smock, Carr, Ellison, & Lampe, 2011). Social media, such as YouTube and Facebook, provided a highly visible environment for candidates to interact with voters and promote themselves and their platforms. Furthermore, these social network sites enabled users to interact with each other about political issues, with 65% of users aged 18 to 29 years engaged in at least one of five political activities during the 2008 campaign, including joining a political group or finding information about a candidate (Smith, 2009). Similarly, Effing, Hillegersberg and Huibers (2011) found that politicians with higher social media engagement received more votes within most parties in the Dutch national elections. A significant positive correlation was found between social media use and the number of votes in nine out of 16 parties (after excluding the first five candidates from every candidate list assuming these politicians would have easy access to mass
media). Again, provided the use of social media by candidates is well designed, it has the potential to significantly increase exposure, particularly to young people who are keen users of social media.

**Predicting the effect of social media use on youth participation**

Social media can impact on political participation because of the tools it provides: the capability to communicate and share information; collaborate on ideas; make requests and decisions; and the ability to mobilise networks can all be used to increase citizens’ awareness, engagement, and participation (Effing et al., 2011; Mäkinen, 2006; Lee & Kwak, 2012). Political engagement has been closely linked to social media use, but there are two schools of thought concerning how social media might address the problem of low youth political engagement. The two schools are cyber-optimists and cyber-sceptics.

Cyber-optimists see technology as a means of revitalising the public sphere because the Internet should enhance the ability of ordinary people to follow events and to participate in the political process (Iyengar & McGrady, 2010). Such optimists present highly positive and “even utopian views on the future of media and their implications in society,” claiming that new media will transform “social and civic engagement and [provide] new spaces for democracy, community building and identity construction” (Macnamara, 2010, p. 4). Furthermore, it is argued that the Internet is characterised by freedom and self-governance – two symbols of true democracy (Baran, 2007). Therefore it is no surprise that the Internet is often proclaimed as the best tool for increased democratic involvement and participation. The most common promises of the Internet include an increase in information readily available to the average citizen and more individual control over what information is received (Davis, 1999).

Accordingly, the Internet is viewed as a potential “vehicle for educating individuals, stimulating citizen participation, measuring public opinion, easing citizen access to government officials, offering a public forum, simplifying voter registration, and even facilitating actual voting” (Davis, 1999, p. 20). For example, in addition to its accessibility, “Facebook has many benefits from a research perspective as well”
(Goodman, Bastedo, LeDuc, & Pammett, 2011, p. 860) in that it allows respondents the opportunity to participate as many times and at any time of the day as they wish. In their study, Trilling and Schoenbach (2013) did not find that people’s tendency to expose themselves selectively to content closely matching their preferences would result in avoidance of general-interest news overviews in high-choice environments. Moreover, they argue that exposure to news on the Internet does not depend on age and younger people are as likely as older ones to use online news overviews.

There is a considerable body of research that supports cyber-optimism, but there are also those who argue that information technology is no solution for the small demand for political information.  

Furthermore, such sceptics believe that consumers will favour more engaging pursuits such as online shopping, dating or keeping in touch, thus discouraging consumers from devoting time to news programming (Iyengar & McGrady, 2010). These pessimistic, dystopian views of the Internet see nothing but dysfunctional outcomes of the Internet, focusing on problems in digital technology and a widening ‘digital divide’ (Macnamara, 2010).

36 For example, one study examining the relationship between Internet use and political participation among Australian young people, found that the relationship between participation and Internet usage seems to be one of reinforcement of existing political practices and persuasion, rather than one of mobilisation of new political actors (Vromen, 2007). Another study in the UK argues that there are many non-technical barriers to effective political engagement and as a result of the lack of political interest among youth, researchers take a cyber-sceptic stance (Griffin, Trevorrow, & Halpin, 2006).

37 Some researchers also argue that the Internet is anti-democratic. If democracy is the maximum possible public participation in decisions and in order to participate all citizens must have equal opportunities to be well informed, given the commercialisation of the Internet, people are only able to get what information they can individually afford (Gutstein, 1999). High-grade information is sold to users for an access fee whereas information of lesser quality is free, which has the potential to further widen the gap between rich and poor. According to Kenway (1996), the information revolution “points the way to dangerous economic and social polarisation and accelerating disenfranchisement of major sections of the population” (p. 229).

38 Norris (2001) argues that like previous historical transitions, the Internet brings problems as well as benefits, with the “explosive growth (of the Internet) spreading unevenly” (p. 365). The gap between those who have access to and use of the Internet is referred to as the ‘digital divide’ (Callison, 2004).
Moreover, the success of new technology as a democratic tool depends on the willingness of significant numbers of citizens to take advantage of these new tools to engage in meaningful political discourse and become well informed voters and more involved in civic life (Corrado & Firestone, 1996, as cited in Davis, 1999). The optimists presume that if only people can be exposed to political communication, they will become engaged; this assumes that the information is intrinsically appealing and just that it is currently not easy to access. If young people are not participating in politics because they are uninterested, why would the use of social media generate political interest? Davis (1999) argues that the scenario of an active and informed electorate that is gathering information and expressing opinions online is accurate for those individuals who are already politically interested and motivated – but for the majority who are less politically interested, this scenario is unlikely. Making information more readily available to more people and allowing the individual more control over that information does not necessarily produce well-informed and politically engaged citizens. Even those who choose to go online will do so for purposes other than politics as the Internet has work functions, personal communication advantages, and mere entertainment value. Additionally, as alluded to above, individuals may sample information selectively despite the infinite variety of information available, thus limiting their exposure to news or sources that they expect to find agreeable (Iyengar & McGrady, 2010).

Once given the chance, people might actually avoid all information that they are not personally interested in (Trilling & Schoenbach, 2013). Previously, television, newspaper, radio and magazines were spreading information about a wide range of issues to most citizens, whereas personal preferences have now become the main determinant of the content people are exposed to. Those who do not care about current affairs, politics and news can simply avoid it without any other media exposure. Following the news makes the most sense for those who actually believe that they can influence political decisions; therefore political efficacy is related to news use (Tewksbury, Hals, & Bibart, 2008).

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39 It is much harder to avoid news in traditional media. For example, the news hour is broadcast at the same time every day and is often sandwiched between two soap operas, therefore capturing an inadvertent audience.
However, it may be unproductive to divide responses to new media into optimistic and pessimistic camps (Goode, 2010). Chadwick (2009) emphasises that claims regarding the Internet’s potential to reshape democratic life have existed for around 20 years. They have advanced through several waves, from early enthusiasm to pessimistic reaction and, more recently, to more balanced and empirically driven approaches. It is evident that the popularity of and time spent with social networking sites is changing the way people spend their time online. Social networking is changing the way in which people share and interact in their daily lives (Newman, 2009) and it engages citizens not previously engaged (Macnamara, 2011). Furthermore, social networking websites have affected election campaigns in significant ways (by providing the opportunity for candidates to interact with voters and for users to interact with each other about political issues in fundamentally different ways), and major change is underway in terms of how public communication in political election campaigns is conducted in modern democratic societies (Macnamara, 2008). For example, social media have created benefits such as potential for candidate exposure at little or low cost, providing an outlet for lesser-known candidates to tell their message, and allowing campaigns to raise contributions and recruit volunteers online (Gueorguieva, 2008). The breakthrough of the Internet in the 2008 US Presidential campaign was confirmed in a study by Smith (2009), in which he claims that 74% of Internet users went online to get news and information about the election. These powerful new Internet tools also change mainstream media coverage of news, as discussed in a study conducted by Newman (2009). For example, journalists are beginning to embrace social media tools such as Twitter, blogs and Facebook. And, despite social media not replacing journalism, they are creating an important extra layer of information and diverse opinion.

**Empirical research – social media and youth participation**

As outlined earlier, young people are the so-called ‘Internet generation’ (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011) with 18 to 24 year olds being the most active users of social media (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). For example, the average level of Internet use throughout the European Union was 60%, but 88% for those aged 16 to 24 (Eurostat, 2007). Similarly, in the United States, younger people also belong to the
group of heaviest Internet users, with 90% of young people using the Internet compared to 73% of the remaining adult population (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2008). In addition, evidence suggests that the 18 to 24 year old group also uses a wide range of techniques in terms of their use of social media during an election, including sharing content, discussing issues with friends, and joining Facebook groups or visiting fan pages of political parties (Newman, 2010).

In terms of youth voter decline, some attempts have been made to use social media to improve youth voter turnout, both worldwide and in New Zealand. For example, Rock the Vote in the US aims to engage young people and help them register to vote. In the UK, a “youth parliament” gives young citizens the opportunity to work with local city councils to conduct various community projects. In New Zealand, the Electoral Commission sent text (SMS) messages to voters in 2008 reminding them to vote on election day, which increased turnout by almost 5% for those who received the text message (Catt & Northcote, 2009).

It is evident that much research has written on how and what governments, political parties and politicians are doing in terms of using social media. But little research has been done on the intended targets of all these efforts and the impact that social network site activity has on the political behaviour of young people (Vitak et al., 2011). Internet use does not affect all groups in society similarly; rather, “its effects depend on a complex combination of personal and social characteristics, usage patterns, and the specific content and context of the medium” (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011, p. 452). However, by facilitating access to political information and providing tools and new avenues for political mobilisation, many believe digital media offer new possibilities for political activism among young people (Lee, Shah, & McLeod, 2012). If efforts such as Rock the Vote in the US do make a difference to the political participation of social network site users, they may be one way to engage young

40 http://www.rockthevote.com/
41 http://www.ukyouthparliament.org.uk/
people who are often portrayed as apathetic toward politics. Alternatively, Facebook may merely be encouraging feel-good participation that has little real-world impact. Therefore, a difficult question to answer is whether the use of social media has increased youth participation, and so far the evidence has been mixed, as demonstrated below.

Firstly, the results of several studies suggest that social media increase political engagement and contribute to higher turnout. For example, a Market and Opinion Research International study focusing on how Britain voted in 2010, provides evidence for the highest turnout increase amongst 18 to 24 year olds, where voter turnout increased by 7 percentage points from 2005, compared with other groups.42 This group is most active in its use of social media (Lenhart et al., 2010). A study conducted by Newman (2010) revealed that almost all of more than two hundred 18 to 24 year olds surveyed after the 2010 UK election used Facebook during the election campaign and 18% used Twitter (which is consistent with other data that shows Twitter users to be older). Furthermore, it demonstrated that one in four young people posted election related comments through social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter in the 2010 UK election.

Therefore, frequent social media use among young people can act as a leveller in terms of motivating political participation (Holt, Shehata, Strömbäck, & Ljungberg, 2013). There is evidence of a general pattern that political interest and participation increase with age, in addition to clear differences between younger and older groups of citizens in terms of attention to political news in traditional news media and of using social media for political purposes. Importantly, however, Holt et al., (2013) demonstrate that both attention to political news in traditional media and use of social media for political purposes have positive effects on interest in politics and offline political participation. Despite young people paying less attention to political news in traditional media compared to older people, they are more frequent users of social

42 Ipsos MORI. How Britain voted in 2012. Retrieved from http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/poll.aspx?oItemId=2613&view=wide. I note here, however, that this does not provide evidence that social media use causes the increased turnout.
media for political purposes. This “may compensate for their lower levels of attention to political news in traditional news media” (Holt et al., 2013. P. 32).

Boulianne (2011) also argues that online news can stimulate political interest in people with little prior interest. She argues that online news sources seem to have a stronger effect on political interest; this contrasts with the assumption that political interest leads to media use in existing research (p. 158). According to Boulianne (2011), existing literature assumes that interest is a precursor and necessary condition of political engagement. But with Internet connections now much more common than newspaper subscriptions, online news could reach those people who are only marginally interested or not at all interested in politics, including youth. Online news can stimulate political interest because of the differences in the effort and attention required to use these news sources, their information-sharing capabilities, and their diversity of content. Boulianne (2011) finds that online news sources stimulated political interest and transformed people into engaged citizens to a greater degree than for those already interested in politics (p. 157).

Social media appears to offer political parties and mainstream media organisations powerful new ways to engage voters, as demonstrated by Newman (2010) who conducted research in the UK to determine how social and digital media affected politics and journalism. The study included 30 interviews with journalists, political advisers and social media experts, and suggests that social software helped political parties organise their activists more efficiently, that newspapers and broadcasters have normalised their use of social media as source material, and that young people got much of their political news via online social media sources. Therefore social media was complementing and enriching more traditional forms of media (Newman, 2010).

Yet many studies argue that social media is unlikely to improve youth political participation. An online survey conducted for the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism in 2010 provides evidence that television was the dominant source of political information in the 2010 UK election and online news sites were the most important source of election news for 18 to 24 year-olds, ahead of television and newspapers. This evidence for the preferred use of traditional media online rather than social media as sources of political information is extended by Ward and Lusoli
(2005), who demonstrate that relatively small numbers of people are going online for electoral information, with only 15% looking for information online and 3% using it as their major source of information.43 A survey of over 3,500 18 to 24 year-olds found little evidence to suggest that social networking websites have facilitated significantly greater political knowledge, engagement, or participation (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010). Users of these sites are no more knowledgeable about politics than their counterparts, and their political participation seems to be limited to Internet activity. Furthermore, online participation largely reinforces traditional participatory divides in that the profile of those going online were predominantly well-educated, male, middle class, politically interested and consumers of a large amount of news from a range of media sources (Schifferes, Lusoli, & Ward, 2009).

Valenzuela, Park and Kee (2009) conducted a study examining whether Facebook is related to attitudes and behaviours that enhance individuals’ social capital. The study found a positive relationship between intensity of Facebook use and students’ life satisfaction, social trust and civic engagement among the 2,603 college students surveyed. This eases the concerns of those who fear that Facebook has mostly negative effects on young adults. However, the significant associations between Facebook and social capital were small, suggesting that online social networks are not the most effective solution for youth disengagement from civic duty and democracy (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009).

For young people, the standard use of social media is personal and social, not political (Sánchez-Navarro & Aranda, 2012). Data obtained by Sánchez-Navarro and Aranda (2012) demonstrate that both Internet availability and time devoted to the Internet gradually increases with age. Moreover, most teenagers learn to use the Internet in informal contexts, often on their own, and for them it is a leisure space, which is clearly separated from formal and daily educational contexts. Qualitative data from various discussion groups combined with quantitative data obtained through a survey of the Spanish population between 12 and 18 years old show that young people are mainly using the Internet in informal spaces. Ninety percent of teenagers have one or

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43 I note here that this research was conducted nearly a decade ago, so it should be viewed with some caution.
more instant messaging accounts, such as Messenger and Skype, which are the main tools for socialisation and entertainment. The main uses of social networks in general are to talk to friends (80% of the users) and to find out what the contacts in their friends list are doing and talking about (67%). Similarly, Trilling and Schoenbach (2013) found that complete news avoiders are typically younger than those obtaining a daily news overview of what is going on in the world. Younger people also prefer entertainment, are only weakly interested in politics and have a low sense of civic duty to keep informed.

It may be that young people use social media to actually avoid politics because Internet-based news gives readers more control over story selection and provides fewer cues about news story importance, compared to traditional newspapers (Tewksbury & Althaus, 2000). As summarised by Howe (2005), “people today have a wealth of options about what to view and read. They can, if so inclined, easily avoid political news altogether.” As a result, readers of online news are likely to gain less information about national, international and political events than print paper readers would. Tewksbury and Althaus (2000) compared the effects of exposure to print and online versions of the New York Times, and found that online readers read fewer political news stories and were less likely to recall events that occurred during the exposure period. It is evident that online news websites provide readers with more flexibility in story selection, suggesting that audiences of online news sites may acquire less information about public affairs and events than those of traditional news sources (Tewksbury & Althaus, 2000).

Moreover, the Pew Internet & American Life Project (2008) found that “politically-active Internet users are moving away from news sites with no point of view to sites that match their political views, and this especially true among younger voters.” The

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45 The standardised format of traditional newspapers creates a hierarchical arrangement of stories, directing reader attention to those articles that editors consider important and leaving mass audiences with similar ideas of the importance of issues and events. Online news sites provide far less direction to their readers, with news largely organised by category (Tewksbury & Althaus, 2000).
study found that 33% of online political users get online political information from sites sharing their point of view. However, the biggest change between elections was for online political users aged 18 to 24 years; in 2004, 22% said that most of the sites they visited shared their political views as compared with nearly twice as many (43%) in 2008.

However, recent studies on selective exposure indicate that although an individual’s interests do indeed lead to exposure to sources that closely match their preferences, people remain curious about the world outside (Garrett, 2009; Stroud, 2008; Kobayashi & Ikeda, 2009). It seems that, for young people who strongly prefer entertainment to information, the Internet still provides a news overview, possibly because receiving a news overview can be easily integrated into general Internet surfing sessions (Trilling & Schoenbach, 2013). Based on a large-scale survey representative of the Dutch population, Trilling and Schoenbach (2013) suggest that most citizens still get an overview of what is going on in the world, rather than becoming ‘information hermits’ only interested in their personal hobbies, as widely feared. The Netherlands is one of the countries with the highest Internet penetration, and as one of the oldest democracies it provides a good case study for this topic. The Netherlands offers twelve national newspapers every day and all communities are served by at least one local newspaper; three public television stations and three private stations broadcast news and current affairs programmes daily; and there are six national public radio stations and numerous commercial and regional stations all carrying news. Results of the study demonstrate that only 11% of people use no information channel at all for finding out what is going in a typical week, so total news avoidance seems not to be too widespread. Passing the threshold to get news overviews seems to be easier online for those who strongly prefer entertainment. Still, the extent to which people in a high-choice media environment really avoid general-interest news sources instead concentrating on the one main topic they are interested in, remains unclear.

47 Ninety percent of the population aged over 16 years has access to the Internet and 77% of the total population uses a broadband connection. This is compared to the USA where 74% of adults use the Internet and 60% have a broadband connection (Lööf & Seybert, 2009).
A study conducted by the Australian Centre for Public Communication (2008) also highlights the large number of spoofs and parodies in the 2007 Australian federal election, as well as other malicious comments posted on open sites such as YouTube, which often outnumbered political communication. This finding raises questions about the nature of the public sphere today, which requires further research. It is either indicative of the failure of media to provide an effective public sphere, or alternatively, that spoofs and parodies are a legitimate part of the public sphere, allowing people to express their views in whatever language or form they choose. However, it is clear that a great deal of content produced by individuals in other than journalistic format falls outside Habermas’ (2006) description of the public sphere where “mediated political communication is carried on by an elite” (p. 416). Macnamara (2008) argues that one possible solution to the problem is to widen the notion of what is acceptable and legitimate in terms of participation in the public sphere. Alternatively, both spoofs and parodies can be seen as stimulating political interest (especially for youth), representing a “hybrid mode of political discourse enabled by the new media environment,” thus becoming a central “node in the national, mediated political conversation” (Baym, 2007, pp. 93-94).

To summarise these findings, some research has found that social media will increase political engagement among youth. Firstly, frequent social media use among young people can act as a leveller in terms of motivating political participation because young people are more frequent users of social media for political purposes, and this compensates for lower levels of attention to political news in traditional media. Secondly, online news can stimulate political interest in people with little prior interest. Overall, social media is complementing and enriching more traditional forms of media, with young people getting their political news through online social media sources. However, other research finds little evidence that social networking websites facilitate greater political knowledge, engagement or participation. Traditional media sources remain the dominant sources of political information, with relatively few people going online for electoral information. For young people, social media is a social, not political, tool. Moreover, low levels of political interest among young people results in a preference for entertainment news, and even for individuals getting political news online, much of this information is from sites sharing their point of view.
**My Study**

This chapter has shown that there is agreement among researchers that participation is desirable but that it is declining, especially among young people. However, there is less agreement about the role social media can play to address this declining participation among young people, as existing studies are producing mixed results as to whether online media are making a difference to levels of political knowledge, interest and participation.

Therefore the aim of my study is to examine the role social media plays in addressing declining political participation among youth in New Zealand. I test a number of key hypotheses derived from existing research. In answering a number of research questions based on these hypotheses, this research will provide an example of how social media is used by young people to engage with political news in New Zealand. These questions range from general engagement to the specific role of social media in political engagement:

- Who uses social media? How much? Is it supplementing or substituting traditional media?
- Does political interest determine the use of social media for political purposes?
- Is social media used by young people for direct contact with politicians/political parties?
- Do young people restrict their use of social media to social rather than political purposes?
- Is social media used by young people to reinforce existing political beliefs?
- Do young people prefer to discuss politics with others online or in person?

There is an absence of analysis of these themes in existing studies; therefore this research will provide an important piece to the extremely large jigsaw puzzle of social media and political participation. The aim of this research is to inform the discussion on new media and its potential as a solution to youth disengagement by looking to see where evidence from New Zealand fits into this debate.
Chapter Two: Research Methodology

This chapter discusses the qualitative and quantitative research methods used in this research. It explains the methods of sampling, questions asked, and methods of data analysis.

Existing studies that have sought to explain low youth political participation have been both quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative methods predominate in the study of youth participation, with surveys using statistical analysis widely used. For example, Vitak et al., (2011) analysed Facebook users’ political participation in the 2008 US election through a survey of 683 undergraduates. The OLS regression found that political activity on Facebook is a significant predictor of other forms of participation. Another study using data from a web survey of 2,603 college students conducted by Valenzuela et al., (2009) found a positive relationship between intensity of Facebook use and students’ social trust, civic engagement and political participation.

Studies using qualitative methods have grown in number, with researchers increasingly using focus groups and interviews in their study of political participation. In their study exploring the concept of citizenship, Lall and Win (2013) used focus groups of young people and in-depth interviews with political leaders to conclude that the act of voting was not linked to the concept of citizenship in Myanmar. Another example is Newman’s (2010) analysis of how social media affected journalism in the 2010 UK election; drawing on interviews he concludes that newspapers and broadcasters have normalised their use of social media as source material of political news.

Researchers today are mixing methods as they seek the best design to address complex social problems (Bronstein & Kovacs, 2013). Menon and Cowger (2010) outline three advantages of integrating qualitative and quantitative methods, including that it gives increased validity due to the triangulation of methods, provides an opportunity to take advantage of the strengths of each approach, and that it is a
holistic approach to research (p. 612). Because I developed numerous research questions, I felt that using both quantitative and qualitative methods (mixed methods) best addresses the complex research question of how social media is used by young people to engage with political news and whether social media is engaging youth in New Zealand. In order to develop a deeper analysis and provide richer detail of the use of social media to engage with political news, focus groups were used in an integrated design with quantitative data to inform various aspects of the overall research question. Quantitative data obtained through a survey of 374 participants aged 18 to 24 years and 167 participants aged over 35 years provides a general context to position this discussion. Ten focus groups were used to provide a deeper understanding of the participants’ perspectives, which the results of the survey could not offer.

**Mixed methods research**

A mixed methods approach using both qualitative and quantitative research provides a more in-depth analysis of problems, which is otherwise difficult to achieve with a single method (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Qualitative research and quantitative research provide different perspectives, with the limitations of one method offset by the strengths of the other method. For example, the voices of participants are not directly heard in quantitative research but on the other hand, the ability to generalise the results is absent in qualitative research. Thus, the combination of strengths of a qualitative approach makes up for the weaknesses of a quantitative approach and vice versa.

The use of mixed methods research as a distinct approach dates back to the late 1980s, where researchers began to integrate data and moved beyond quantitative and qualitative methods as separate strands in a study. A number of factors have contributed to the evolution of mixed methods research, including increasingly complex research problems and the need for multiple forms of evidence to document and inform research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). According to Bronstein and Kovacs (2013), mixed methods are used “when the purpose of the research dictates it” (p. 355) and are useful when there is a need to both explore and explain, and when
either qualitative or quantitative methods alone seems inadequate for the complexity of a research question.

There are several examples of the use of mixed methods for the study of political participation in papers cited earlier in this research. Newman (2010) combined interviews with journalists with a survey of the media consumption of 18 to 24 year-olds in the UK 2010 election. Thirty interviews were conducted and the survey had 219 respondents. Rather than generating statistically significant results, the survey was used to indicate trends in social media use. Feezel, Conroy and Guerro (2009) employ a multi-method design, incorporating content analysis of political group Facebook pages and a survey of 455 university undergraduates, to assess the quality of online political group discussion and effects of online group membership on political engagement. This was measured through political knowledge and political participation surrounding the 2008 US election. The researchers used OLS and 2SLS multivariate regression analyses. Sánchez-Navarro & Aranda (2012) also adopted a mixed methods approach in their analysis of the use of social networking sites by Spanish teenagers by combining focus groups with quantitative data obtained through a survey. Just over 2000 participants were interviewed in a telephone survey and 10 focus groups were conducted, with eight participants in each group. In the results and discussion section of their paper, the authors use percentages to describe the survey results.

*Convergent parallel design*

The level of interaction, namely an independent level of interaction, between the quantitative and qualitative strands exists in this research. Research questions, data collection, and data analysis were kept separate throughout the research process and the two strands were only mixed when drawing conclusions of the study, as discussed in the following results chapter. The two methods had an equal priority, with both playing an equally important role in addressing the research questions. This was

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48 I first analysed the results of both methods separately (calculating percentages for the survey and detecting themes for the focus groups) but combined the two sets of results when answering the general and specific research questions in the results chapter.
important because each research method played an important but different role: the focus groups were used to find out why young people use social media whereas the survey confirmed who uses social media for political purposes and demonstrated a contrast between young and old.

Furthermore, the timing of this mixed methods approach is classified as concurrent, with both quantitative and qualitative research implemented during a single phase of the research study, as demonstrated in Figure 4. Timing refers to the relationship between the qualitative and quantitative strands within the study and relates to both the timing of data collection and the order in which the results from the two sets of data are analysed (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The point of interface (the point within the process of research where quantitative and qualitative strands are mixed (Morse & Niehaus, 2009)) was during interpretation, following data collection and analysis. As demonstrated in the discussion chapter, this mixing of strands during interpretation involved drawing conclusions and inferences to reflect the combination of results from both strands of the study. For example, in this research the survey identified that most young people accessed online news sites on a daily basis (63%) and rated it as a very important source for political news (66% of young people rated online news sites as “very important”). But it was in the focus groups that participants were asked to explain their preference for news sites as sources of political news, with widespread reasons including convenience and accessibility. Another example is that most survey participants indicated at least a moderate or above level of political interest. In the focus groups, participants explained that they were actually only interested when something big happens, and that interest in an issue was a determinant in seeking out political information. Important strengths of this approach are the ability to maximise the information provided by each technique (one does not depend on the results of the other) and a shorter data collection period compared to the sequential data collection approaches.

Decisions of levels of integration, priority and timing of the two research methods, and mixing of the results, were made to best answer the research question, and resulted in a convergent parallel design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). As outlined above, concurrent timing in data collection was applied to implement the quantitative and qualitative strands during the same phase of the research process. Methods were
equally prioritised and both strands were kept independent during analysis (survey data was analysed quantitatively and the focus groups were analysed qualitatively) and then mixed during the overall interpretation. A parallel convergent design was used because it provides a more complete understanding of a topic and it typically clarifies and builds on results of the other research method.

Figure 4. The convergent parallel design. Taken from Creswell and Plano Clark (2011).

Other major mixed methods designs were considered as potential research designs in this project but were rejected as either inappropriate or unfeasible for this research question. These included: an explanatory design, where methods are implemented sequentially and there is a need to explain quantitative results. Quantitative data is collected and analysed first, followed by qualitative data collection and analysis that builds on quantitative data; an exploratory design, which starts with qualitative data collection and analysis followed by quantitative data collection, and is used to test qualitative exploratory findings; and an embedded design, using supporting data before, during or after the main data collection, and where there is a need for exploration prior to an experimental trial or the need for follow-up explanations after.

Existing research indicated the areas of interest and was used to help structure the survey and focus group design. In this research there was no need for focus groups to explain the results derived from the survey, or for the survey to test the qualitative
data. There was also no need for prior research, because the main research questions originated from existing studies. Additionally, the other methods are more time consuming and, due to limited research time, it was appropriate to choose a mixed methods approach where data collection occurred concurrently.

The convergent design, which was selected in preference to the other designs discussed above, is the best-known and most common approach to mixed methods research across disciplines (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The purpose of this design is to “obtain different but complementary data on the same topic” (Morse, 1991, p. 122) and to bring together the varying strengths of quantitative and qualitative methods. Although greatly increasing the work involved in a project, the long-term gains of a mixed methods are “immeasurable” (Morse, 1991, p. 122). The convergent design allows quantitative results to be contrasted with qualitative findings for validation, in order to illustrate quantitative results with qualitative findings, and to blend results to develop a more complete understanding (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Pragmatism was used as an umbrella paradigm to this research, which is well suited for merging the two approaches into a larger understanding. Instead of trying to mix different paradigms, pragmatism allows for a more flexible method, as it is a practical approach to a problem that merges the two approaches into a larger understanding. Pragmatism can be considered a bridge between paradigm and methodology, with many mixed methods researchers drawing associations between mixed methodology and pragmatism. Ultimately, pragmatism results in a problem solving, action-oriented inquiry process.
Quantitative research – survey

Surveys are a widely used research technique, with the distinguishing features being the structured form of data and the method of analysis (de Vaus, 2002). Quantitative survey research is well suited to providing factual and descriptive information, allowing for systematic comparison between cases. In this research I used a cross-sectional survey design in survey research and collected measures from groups of people at a single point in time to compare the extent to which the groups differ.

The intent of quantitative research is to select a large number of individuals who represent a segment of the population (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) with the fundamental goal to be able to generalise and say something about a wider population (de Vaus, 2002). The survey was designed to gather information on social media use in general and specific uses of social media in politics: (a) interest and social media use, (b) supplementation and substitution of traditional media, (c) social media use for direct contact with politicians/political parties, (d) social media as a social or political tool, (e) social media use to reinforce existing political beliefs, and (f) political discussion with others.

In the survey, participants were asked to rate sources for political news, how often certain sites are visited daily, how much time is spent online, and what the most important factors were in deciding how to vote in the 2011 general election (see Appendix 1 for a copy of the survey).

Survey administration

The survey was piloted in an undergraduate lecture at the University of Otago, with around 100 student respondents who were similar to those in the final survey completing the survey. Participation in the survey was voluntary. An information sheet was available to participants and individuals signed a consent form attached to the survey.
In total, 541 surveys were completed between August and October 2012. Participants aged 18 to 24 years old completed 374 surveys and the remaining 167 surveys were completed by those aged over 35 years. The aim was to gain a representative sample, so participants were selected randomly at a range of locations in Dunedin, and had the option of completing the survey on paper or online. At varying times of the day, I asked people for their voluntary participation in the survey. Regular locations included: the University of Otago Campus, New World and Countdown supermarkets, main thoroughfare in Dunedin (George Street), and the open public space outside the Otago Museum. Other locations included asking attendees at the New Zealand Political Studies Association conference in Wellington 2012, families and supporters at weekly Dunedin football matches, and friends of work colleagues at the university gym. In addition to this face-to-face recruitment of participants, I created a Facebook event where my own Facebook friends could invite others to participate in the online version of the survey. In total, 93 young people and 26 aged over 35 years completed the survey online.

Limitations of survey data

Potential issues in survey design were comprehensively considered. For example, issues related to question design, such as the formatting of response options, question wording and question order, were well thought out. Nonetheless, there are some inevitable shortcomings of using a survey as a research method. First, there was considerable difficulty in recruiting participants – I was not able to offer any financial incentives to complete the survey and more people declined to complete the survey than those who agreed to complete it. Providing an online option proved worthwhile, as it was more practical for many participants to complete the survey at a time suitable to them. Second, conducting the survey was very labour intensive to administer (especially the case for recruiting participants aged over 35 years as many people declined to complete the survey), and expensive in terms of reproducing a large number of copies. Although administering the survey online can overcome some of these costs, I found recruiting older participants difficult in both response options. The original goal was to have the same number of completed surveys for both groups of participants; however in the end it was not possible to achieve this target.
Additionally, participants were unable to explain or provide more detail to their survey answers. In an attempt to mitigate this weakness, two open-ended questions were included in the survey (the first to allow participants to expand on social media use and the second to explain their preference for political discussion online or in person). For this reason, focus groups were used in the research design, with one aim being to probe for reasons and more in-depth answers to similar questions asked in the survey.

**Qualitative research – focus groups**

Qualitative research techniques were used to explain what matters to young people and what prevents them from turning out to vote. Focus groups provided an opportunity to probe the reasons for underlying values and attitudes of young people. Qualitative research provides a certain kind of data which captures the information needed to better understand the ways in which young people think about and perform politics in their daily lives. For example, information revealed by qualitative studies in New Zealand indicate that young voters may be difficult to mobilise because they do not feel politics is relevant to their lives and that voting will not make a difference (Curtin, 2010). This has resulted in non-partisan, youth-specific strategies to improve voter turnout worldwide and in New Zealand.

Five focus groups were conducted during and immediately following the New Zealand general election in November 2011. Five further focus groups were conducted in a non-election year (2012) to better understand the first set, and to determine any differences between them due to the possible stimulating effect surrounding a national election. Around 150 pages of transcripts were collected over the course of these two separate periods of data collection.

Focus groups are defined as a research technique that collects data through group interaction (Morgan, 1996) and an examination of the combination of focus groups with other research methods demonstrates a frequent pairing with the use of surveys. The purpose of using focus groups is to collect rich, detailed data, with participants often providing insights into attitudes and beliefs that underlie behaviour, thus providing context and perspective that enables experiences to be understood more
holistically (Carey & Asbury, 2012). As a research method, focus groups offer an understanding of a wide range of views that people have about a specific issue, as well as how they interact and discuss the issue (Liamputtong, 2011). Given the breadth of the use of focus groups and group interaction, they have found uses in many fields of study (Morgan, 1996).

These interactions in a group discussion are the source of data, with the researcher playing an active role in creating the discussion for data collection purposes (Morgan, 1996). The interaction presents constructive data on the extent of consensus and diversity among participants. This ability to observe the extent and nature of the range or consensus of participants’ agreement and disagreement is a unique strength of focus groups (Morgan, 1996). Additionally, as the researcher I had the ability to ask participants directly for comparisons between individual participants’ experiences and views, rather than accumulating individual data in an attempt to hypothesise about whether or why participants’ views differed. Moreover, focus groups are efficient and allow for vast amounts of data in a relatively short period of time, with discussions providing direct evidence about both similarities and differences in participants’ opinions (Morgan, 1997).

The conceptual framework that informs the focus group method is a social constructivist approach. People construct meaning by thinking about their experiences through the interpretation of their environment, including people, in a dynamic process (Carey & Asbury, 2012). Constructivism is therefore a particularly effective tool for exploring the beliefs or attitudes of an individual or group towards a particular event or phenomenon (Schwandt, 2007).

In a focus group, participants are not individuals who act in isolation; therefore the focus group in itself is a social context where individuals make collective sense, negotiate meanings and elaborate their identities during social interaction with others (Wilkinson, 2004, as cited in Liamputtong, 2011). While similar in nature, focus groups differ from interviews in that participants are talking to each other, rather than one-on-one with the researcher, resulting in more naturalistic discourse (Albrecht, Johnson, & Walther, 1993). This ‘natural’ data provides an opportunity to understand how views are constructed, expressed, defended, and at times modified, during
conversations with others. Focus groups were also the preferred method of qualitative data collection as the topic is compatible with group interaction; social media is not used in isolation, but rather people are likely to discuss information and share content online with others. Group interaction is both the strength and the potential limitation of focus groups (Carey & Asbury, 2012). In addition to making meaning of experiences independently, members participate within a social context and are therefore also affected by the evolving group chemistry.

*Focus group questions*  

As outlined earlier, a combination of qualitative and quantitative data provides an in-depth analysis of problems, providing different perspectives, and with the limitations of one method offset by the strengths of the other. Common themes were examined across both methods, with the focus groups providing detailed data of participants’ attitudes and beliefs of these themes.

Key themes were deduced from existing research and these were used to address the research question. It was important to clearly identify key research themes to guide discussion in focus groups prior to commencing data collection. This consequently allowed for the comparison between those conducted in 2011 and those conducted in 2012. These themes provided some structure for the session and included the following:

Social media use in general:

1. Sources of political information: traditional/new media sources
   a. Key specific sources and reasons for this preference
2. Amount of political information participants came across
   a. Usefulness of information
   b. Amount read/ignored
3. Reasons for use of some sources but not others

Specific uses of social media in politics:

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*49 For a more detailed list of questions used as a guide for focus group discussions, see Appendix 3.*
4. Political discussion with others: online vs. in person
5. Contact with politicians/political parties
   a. Actively follow politicians/political parties on Twitter/Facebook

Focus group participant selection

A purposive sampling method was adopted in selecting focus group participants by using a combination of volunteer and snowball sampling. Random sampling is rarely used in focus group research and can in fact be a real disadvantage, as participants randomly selected may not interact well enough to generate meaningful discussions (Liamputtong, 2011). Purposive sampling is used when the researcher is interested in exploring the attitudes and beliefs in a particular group (Flick, 2002); in this case, those aged 18 to 24 years. Focus group participants were predominantly students. With students making up around 17% of Dunedin’s total population and students often at the forefront of important political and social change movements, it is important to understand students’ perspectives of social media as a source for political news and political engagement. Participants were recruited through Facebook messaging, email and face-to-face contact, with the researcher advantaged by snowball sampling friend groups (Gamson, 1992). Peer groups are more likely to discuss certain issues, including politics, more freely than strangers.

Focus group composition and environment

In terms of the number of participants, a relatively small number of participants were selected to provide in-depth information (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Each focus group comprised between five and seven participants and was held in a seminar room. In total, there were 65 participants in the 10 focus groups conducted. Of these 65 participants only six were politics students (less than 10% of the total number of focus group participants).

50 In total, there were 65 participants in the 10 focus groups conducted. Of these 65 participants only six were politics students (less than 10% of the total number of focus group participants).

51 According to the University of Otago Quick Statistics website, the most recent figure of full-time students is 19,568 in 2011 (http://www.otago.ac.nz/about/quickstats.html). Dunedin’s total population is 118,683 according to Statistics New Zealand (http://www.stats.govt.nz/Census/2006CensusHomePage/QuickStats/AboutAPlace/SnapShot.aspx?id=2000071). As a percentage of Dunedin’s total population, students make up 16.5%.
at the University of Otago or in student flats. According to Morgan (1996), the rule of thumb is that most projects involve between four and six focus groups. The justification for this range is that data becomes saturated with little new information emerging after the first few focus groups. Consequently, I conducted five focus groups during the election and another five approximately six months later, with the number of groups consistent with qualitative research method literature.

I was also aware that a “productive group discussion is enhanced by both the physical location and the internal environment of the venue” (Liamputtong, 2011, p. 57) and that the venue should provide a comfortable and informal environment that is conducive to a productive discussion (Hennick, 2007). Additionally, one practical aspect of the venue choice was accessibility to the participants. Six focus groups were held in a seminar room at the University of Otago, and the remaining four were held in student flats. For participants living further away or for those focus groups conducted in the evenings, student flats were a more appropriate location than the seminar rooms on campus. Compensation for the time that the participants gave was crucial (Krueger, 1994). Therefore as the researcher, I provided refreshments to them during each focus group. The average duration of these focus groups was one hour, and discussion was recorded using a voice recorder.

**Role of the focus group moderator**

As the group facilitator, I was aware of factors that can affect participation both on the social and individual levels. For example, on the social level, issues of social dominance can inhibit participation (Carey & Asbury, 2012) and individual factors that can affect participation include commitment to publicly expressed opinion, affiliation need, concern for being evaluated, and need for social comparison (Hastie, 1986, as cited in Carey & Asbury, 2012).

I began all focus groups with a detailed introduction about the present research, ethics approval\(^{52}\) and the process of focus groups. This helped to establish rapport and trust,

\(^{52}\) This thesis was approved by the Human Ethics Committee and obtained Category B ethics approval. Participants signed consent forms prior to focus group and survey completion.
which ultimately enhanced the quality of the group interaction, and subsequently the quality of the data. For an icebreaker I asked participants to introduce themselves, and next I asked about their general political interest. The icebreaker question opened the discussion, after which members felt more comfortable with speaking in a group environment.

From there, the focus group was left to develop into an unstructured conversation as participants discussed the topics with each other. As the moderator, I determined appropriate topics to probe further and to engage other participants when an individual made an interesting comment. According to Carey and Asbury (2012), probes are “essential to obtain data that are the most meaningful” (pp. 52-53) and are used during a session to seek further information where lack of agreement between verbal and nonverbal communications and inconsistent comments occur. Examples of the probing and follow-up questions included the following:

Probing questions:

Moderator: “Would you say that you get most of your political information from traditional media sources, like TV, radio, or newspapers, or more from online sources?”
Participant: “Pretty much only online now, just websites.”
Moderator: “So you don’t watch TV or...”
Participant: “Nah, never.”
Moderator: “Newspaper?”
Participant: “I’d read most of it online.”

Or

Moderator: “So why would you say those particular sources that you’ve just mentioned?”
Participant 1: “Yeah, well, stuffj.co.nz’s like our most updated website, so it’s quite convenient. I guess it has a bit of everything.”
Participant 2: “Yeah, it’s collaborated approach and it’s pick and choose from all the major news sites, so you can get, if you're on a time frame, you can get your gist of
what’s going on in New Zealand politics and then, if you want to go further, you can follow the link to the actual articles.”

Participant 3: “Sometimes it’s easier to read on stuff ‘cause they write in laymen’s terms.”

Moderator: “So stuff[.co.nz]’s quite accessible, is it quite convenient, I guess if you have 10 minutes to spare you can just go on and have a look?”

Participant 1: “Yeah.”

Moderator: “Easy to navigate?”

Participant 2: “Yeah, it’s easy to navigate, and the thing I like about stuff[.co.nz] is that you get like the top headlines of the day and stuff.”

Participant 3: “Yeah, most of the time I only read those.”

Moderator: “And would you agree?”

Participant 4: “Yeah, it’s just the accessibility.”

Follow-up questions:

I used follow-up questions to clarify ambiguous answers or to summarise discussions. Follow-up questions differ to probing questions in that I used them to make sure I understood exactly what ideas participants were trying to convey, rather than probing for more information. For example:

Participant: “Like people linking it on Facebook or linking it on a forum or something like that, so it’s not necessarily that you go on stuff[.co.nz] and read it.”

Moderator: “So you actually find stuff[.co.nz] articles on a different source?”

Participant: “Yeah.”

Or

Moderator: “So just to summarise, it seems like you guys come across quite a lot of political information in your daily lives?” *Agreement among group.

Prior research indicated that group members “must feel that they are respected and that they are valued as experts in their experiences” (Carey & Asbury, 2012, p. 29); a situation enhanced by the group facilitator of the focus group. In a few focus groups,
dominant participants were noticeable (particularly those highly politically interested) and I ensured the involvement of all participants by directly asking less dominant participants for their opinion. Once involved, these participants felt much more comfortable discussing their opinion and the focus group provided in-depth data of participants’ attitudes towards the use of social media as a political tool.

In addition to the concern that select participants may dominate focus group discussion, the fear of the ‘bandwagon’ effect (participants agreeing with overall discussion as a result of group interaction) is noted in some literature (Carey & Asbury, 2012). I did not sense that bandwagonning was happening during the focus groups. Without directly challenging group members when asking for more information, I followed up specific details to explore comments in more depth when I felt this situation was occurring. Similar to the bandwagon effect, potential limitations to participation in focus groups may include the results of self-censoring or conforming. Again, as the facilitator I realised when this was occurring and explored select participants’ views further. For example:

Moderator: “So how useful have you found the information that you do see?”
Participant 1: “Most of it is pretty distorted or wrong.” *Agreement among group.
Moderator (directed at participant 2): “What about you, do you think the information you see is useful?”
Participant 2: “Um, yeah. Like it gives you the basic outline of what the issues are.”

In the example above, it was important to capture the views of a less prominent participant, who actually had a different opinion to other group members.

Limitations

Careful planning and monitoring largely addressed all the criticisms unique to the focus group method, namely limited data quality and difficulty of data analysis (Carey & Asbury, 2012). However, as with the survey, there were several difficulties in conducting focus groups, most notably that they were extremely labour intensive – each focus group was of approximately one-hour duration and transcribing each recording took several hours. The process of conducting and transcribing all 10 focus
groups covered a large portion of the research period. Additionally, it was hard to recruit participants, especially because I was unable to provide them with financial compensation for their time. Providing food and drinks as an incentive for participation, and the use of snowball sampling, reduced this downside.

**Data analysis**

As discussed above, data analysis consisted of separately analysing the qualitative and quantitative data by using analytic approaches that were best suited to each approach. Results were then interpreted, based on how the combined results best answer the research question. A detailed discussion of the results appears in the following chapter.

The survey was coded and entered into Microsoft Excel. Following this process, I used summary statistics to determine percentages for each survey question across the age two groups (18 to 24 and over 35 years). To determine if there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups, a Chi-Square test was carried out. The results were analysed and graphed using Microsoft Excel. Differences in proportions were considered statistically significant if $p<0.05$. Open-ended questions were analysed separately, with responses separated based on question number and age of participant. Repetition of key words was used to identify common themes. Older participants gave 25 responses, while the younger group gave 210 in total, with answers ranging between and two and 40 words.

I identified repetition and confirmation of key concepts to determine themes in the focus groups. As outlined above, a basic question structure was necessary to ensure

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53 See Appendix 2 for a copy of the survey coding sheet.
54 Participants under 18 or between 25 and 34 years old were excluded from the results of this survey. The survey compares young participants to those aged over 35.
55 Two open-ended questions were included in the survey. First, participants who indicated they were politically active through social media in question eight were asked to expand on this activity and provide a more detailed example of their activity. Second, participants were asked to explain their preference for either online or in person political discussion with others if they indicated a preference in question ten.
the ability to compare between focus groups, acting both as a filter for important data and a template of what the possible themes could be. After transcription, responses to the themed questions were coded, and repeated or similar answers and comments across focus groups were identified as key themes.

*Integration phase*

Strategies to address potential issues in data collection and data analysis specific to mixed methods research were used to strengthen the results of both qualitative and quantitative methods. Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) outline potential validity threats when merging data in convergent designs, and suggest several strategies for minimising these threats. For example, they advise using separate data collection procedures to minimise potential bias through one data collection on the other; addressing the same question in both qualitative and quantitative data collection to ensure both types of data address the same topic; and drawing samples from the same population to make data comparable.

As outlined above, separate data collection procedures were used in the quantitative research and qualitative research of this project. The same overall research question was addressed in both data collection procedures by following the same general and specific research questions outlined earlier:

- Who uses social media? How much? Is it supplementing or substituting traditional media?
- Does political interest determine the use of social media for political purposes?

**Specific uses of social media in politics by youth:**

- Is social media used by young people for direct contact with politicians/political parties?
- Do young people restrict their use of social media to social rather than political purposes?
- Is social media used by young people to reinforce existing political beliefs?
- Do young people prefer to discuss politics with others online or in person?

Survey questions and the general guideline questions used in the focus groups were derived from these research questions.

I was unable to draw from the same sample in the focus groups because the two sets were conducted across separate academic years and consequently the student population had changed by the time I conducted groups in 2012. I also found it challenging to have such huge data sets for both research methods, but a clear investigation into mixed methods approaches prior to data collection provided me with valuable guidance. For example, in terms of data analysis, Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) suggest finding quotes that match statistical results to minimise making illogical comparisons between the two results, and to present both sets of results equally to prevent more weight put on one form of data than the other. This data analysis is clearly demonstrated in the subsequent results chapter. Two examples to illustrate the use of this method are:

(a) Eighty percent of young people surveyed indicated that they click on political links posted by friends online; nearly 60% discussed political events with others through social media; slightly over 40% visited fan pages of political parties or politicians; and around 30% shared political content online.

Focus group participants elaborated on this increased use of social media for political purposes:

"I reckon more and more stuff I look at is posts by people to articles on Facebook."

"If someone else links something on Facebook that looks interesting, then I’ll read it."

(b) Participants were regular users of mainstream news sources, with nearly 70% accessing online news sites daily, suggesting that while young voters are embracing online technology, they are largely relying on established websites rather than social
media sources to access political information. Participants felt that online news sources were easier to use, cheaper, and that it was easier to seek out further information if desired. Responses included:

“I’d be more likely to research it if I was online ‘cause I’d be on the Internet at the time whereas if I was watching the news I’d be like ‘oh that’s interesting’ but then do something else and maybe even forget.”

“I think it’s easier. I go to dinner with my dad every Sunday and often I’ll have come across something online and I can bring it up straight away and say ‘read this’ and ‘what do you think about it’ and that sort of thing. You know, it’s so much easier to talk to someone about it. The only way you can talk to someone about something you’ve read in a newspaper is if they’ve read it too.”

“You can avoid stupid news online. You see the links and go ‘I’m not going to look at that.’

Full transcripts of the focus groups are available on request for re-analysis.
Chapter Three: Results

As discussed in the previous methodology chapter, data analysis of the quantitative and qualitative research was initially kept separate to ensure that the use of analytic approaches were the best suited to each research method. In this chapter I will present the findings from the survey and focus groups separately to demonstrate how social media is used by young people to engage with political news in New Zealand. I will move on to a more detailed discussion of the integrated results and implications of these findings in the next chapter.

Survey results

Overall, 374 young people and 167 people over 35 years old completed the survey. Table 1 shows the number of male and female participants in each group.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18 to 24 years</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>374</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 35 years</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Firstly, participants were asked to rate their political interest. Figure 5 demonstrates the range of political interests across both groups. Data is presented as a percentage of the total number of survey participants for the two groups. There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of political interest between the two groups. Interestingly, if grouped together, young people indicating some political interest (moderately and highly politically interested or political junkies) make up 77% of the total respondents. It seems that young people are not less interested in politics compared to older participants.

Figure 5. Political interest of youth compared to those aged over 35 years.
Participants were then asked whether they felt like they came across a lot of political information in their daily lives. Again, results in Figure 6 are presented as a percentage of the total number of participants across the two groups. Younger participants are more likely to feel like they do not come across any political information compared to older participants; a statistically significant difference ($p<0.05$).\(^{56}\)

*Figure 6.* Percentage of participants across both groups who felt they did/did not come across a lot of political information in their daily lives.

\(^{56}\) $p=0.012$
It was important to find out whether the information participants did come across was largely online or offline. Figure 7 demonstrates that younger participants are more likely to come across information online compared to older participants, and conversely, that older participants are more likely to come across political information offline than their younger counterparts. Slightly more than three-quarters of young people come across political information online, compared with less than half of older people; and 47% of those aged over 35 come across political information offline, compared with 22% of young people. These differences are statistically significant.  

Figure 7. Participants coming across political information online vs. offline.

57 Besides indicating whether political information was largely obtained online or offline, participants could also tick “I don’t come across any political information” if they felt the other two options did not apply to them. Only 3% of young people feel they do not come across any political information compared with slightly more than 8% of older participants.

58 $p=7.6\times10^{-12}$
Figures 8 and 9 show how young and older people rated several sources for political news. Participants selected one of three ratings for each source. Of particular interest are the differences in ratings between the two age groups of online news sites, newspapers and social media. Slightly more than two-thirds of young people rated online news sites as a very important source for political information, compared with just over half of those aged over 35. There is also a statistical significant difference between the two groups’ ratings of newspapers: 70% of older participants rated newspapers as a very important source for political news compared with fewer than 40% of young participants. Lastly, it is interesting to note the participants’ rating of social media as an “unimportant” source for political news: 27% of young and 73% of older participants rated social media as unimportant.

**Figure 8.** Ratings of sources for political news for participants 18 to 24.

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59 See Appendix 1, question 5.

60 The difference between the two groups is significant ($p=0.0126$).

61 $p=5.64\times10^{-11}$

62 Again, this difference is statistically significant ($p=1.74\times10^{-23}$).
Figure 9. Ratings of participants aged over 35 years.
Figure 10 shows how many hours that participants are spending online daily. Older participants are much more likely to spend only up to an hour online daily compared to younger participants. The majority of young people are spending between two and three hours online daily (56%), with slightly less than 30% spending between four and five hours online. When comparing the two groups, 93% of young participants are spending more than two hours online each day compared with only 57% of those aged over 35.

The difference between the two groups spending up to an hour online daily is statistically significant ($p=7.07\times10^{-23}$).

Figure 10. Hours spent online daily.

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63 The difference between the two groups spending up to an hour online daily is statistically significant ($p=7.07\times10^{-23}$).
Figures 11 and 12 show the access rate of Facebook, Twitter, online news sites and political blogs across the two groups. Instantly noticeable is the percentage of young people accessing Facebook daily compared to those aged over 35. Nearly all young people surveyed access Facebook daily, compared to one-third of older people. Both groups are similar in their limited use of Twitter and political blogs, and around 60% of respondents in both groups access online news sites daily.

![Diagram showing access rate of social media and news sites](image)

*Figure 11. Young participants’ access of social media, online news sites and political blogs.*

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64 The difference between the two groups’ access of Facebook is statistically significant ($p=2.97\times10^{-55}$).
Figure 12. Older participants’ access of social media, online news sites and political blogs.
Participants were asked to expand on specifically how they used social media. Results are presented in Figure 13. Younger participants are much more active in terms of their social media use for political purposes: more than half click on political links from friends, nearly 40% discuss political events with others online, one-third visit fan pages of politicians/political parties, and around 20% share political content online or join political groups other than political parties. Older participants are less likely to use social media for political purposes: one-third click on political links from friends, around 17% share political content online or discuss political events with others, and only 10% join political groups or visit fan pages of political parties/politicians.

![Figure 13. Political activity using social media.](image-url)
Figure 14 presents the frequency of political discussion with others. Participants subsequently indicated their preference for political discussion with others online or in person. The results for both groups were similar: younger and older participants prefer to discuss politics with others in person. Seventy-one percent of young and 75% of older participants indicated this preference. In terms of online political discussion, 21% of young and 19% of older participants indicated this preference.

![Frequency of political discussion with others](image)

*Figure 14. Frequency of political discussion with others.*

Lastly, Figure 15 presents the most important factors in helping people decide how to vote in the 2011 general election. Notably, 21% of young people surveyed did not vote in the previous election, compared with only one participant in the older group.\(^65\) For young people, there was more of a range of factors in deciding how to vote

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\(^65\) Because the survey was conducted in 2012 (nearly one year after the 2011 general election), it is likely that some young people surveyed were under 18 during the election, so would have been ineligible to vote. In hindsight, it would have been valuable to include a 14th option in question 10 (see Appendix 1), where respondents could indicate if they were under 18 during the previous election and therefore could not vote, rather than choosing not to vote. However, considering existing research on lower youth turnout rates, this percentage is worth noting.
compared to older participants. Nearly half of all older participants surveyed specified “other” reasons influencing their voting choice. Frequent comments included:

*Long-term pattern in voting*

*Knowledge of the platforms/political ideologies of parties*

*Pre-existing political views*

*Track record of the politician’s party*

*Pre-existing political views*

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**Figure 15. Factors in helping voting decisions.**

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66 Question 10 actually asked participants to number their top three most important factors in deciding how to vote (see Appendix 1). Feedback after piloting the survey indicated that participants found it too difficult to select just one option from this list. By allowing participants to rate the sources, I was able to identify the most important factor without directly asking for it. Figure 15 only includes the most important factor.
Also interesting is that leaflets and posters distributed by politicians/political parties and social media coverage of the election hardly feature as a factor in deciding how to vote across both groups.

The results of the survey clearly show significant differences between young and older participants in terms of the time spent online, the frequency of their use of Facebook, and their ratings of different sources of political news. Younger people are spending more time online and are also coming across political information while online, compared to those over 35, who are online less and are more likely to come across political information offline. But they are also similar in that both age groups indicated some level of political interest, gave similar importance ratings for television and leaflets and posters as sources of political news, in their (non) use of Twitter and political blogs, and in their frequency of political discussion with others, preferably in person.
Focus group results

I used a basic question structure across all focus groups to filter important data and to allow for comparisons between groups. After reading the focus group transcripts, responses were coded and repeated or similar answers/comments across the focus groups were identified as key themes. Seven overarching themes were identified:

1. **Political information is largely obtained from traditional media sources online.**

When asked about online versus offline sources of political information, focus group participants largely agreed that they “pretty much get [political information] exclusively online.” When probed further as to specific sources of political news online, participants accessed a wide range of traditional media online, such as online news websites and TV clips. Examples included: watching news clips online, reading online New Zealand newspapers including stuff.co.nz and New Zealand Herald, and overseas newspapers including the Guardian and New York Times. For example:

“I don’t watch the news, don’t listen to the radio, the only time I watch stuff is if I’ve heard about it from some else, or someone else links to it.”

Moderator: “And you watch it online?”

“Yeah then I watch it online, or I get a Radio New Zealand podcast thing.”

And another example from a different focus group:

Moderator: “What would you say are your main specific sources? You’ve all mentioned online sources but what would be the key websites you visit?”

“Mainly stuff[.co.nz] and NZ Herald.”

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67 Stuff.co.nz is a New Zealand website with 4.9 million unique browsers, and hosts the websites for Fairfax’s New Zealand newspapers (including The Dominion Post, The Press and The Sunday Star-Times).
Moderator: “Do you go onto those websites on a daily basis?”

“Yes, I read them every day.”

“Yes, same.”

2. Ease, convenience and accessibility of information.

For young people, retrieving political news comes down to accessibility and ease of information, with participants using information sources that are the most convenient. This was an obvious theme right from the first focus group; participants constantly referred to the convenience of online sources and more specifically, the fact that online news sites were user-friendly with a wide range of information in one place. The following comments reflect the widespread attitude of young people in the focus groups:

“Yes it’s collaborated approach and it’s pick and choose from all the major news sites, so you can get, if you’re on a time frame, you can get your gist of what’s going on New Zealand politics.”

“You can go to one place that, it’s got entertainment, it’s got style, it’s got wellbeing, it’s got the news, it’s got the national news, it’s got the world news; it’s got everything in one place.”

“I think it’s also convenient ‘cause you’re on your laptop so often during the day ... so I’ll check on stuff[.co.nz] *agreement among group* it’s like the go-to page.”

“If you do actually look for political stuff and it’s like, really jargoney; as students we don’t feel like we have a lot of political knowledge, so it feels like it just sort of goes over your head a bit. [Stuff.co.nz]’s easy to understand.”
One participant also made the point that online sources “provide a more convenient forum. Before we could vote you probably had the six o’clock news and the daily newspaper, but now you’ve got 24-hour accessibility and a wide array of information.”

3. Reinforcement of existing viewpoints.

Information sources were chosen if they reinforced existing political views rather than challenged them. Moreover, participants would access pages of people through Facebook if “it’s someone really interesting and shares the same views as [them], then [they would] always check it out.”

“I think a lot of the stuff of what I read kind of reinforces what I already think.”

“You’ve probably got more of a choice of opinions when you’re looking on the Internet ‘cause you can find different opinions about the same issue, whereas if you’re reading a newspaper you’d just have one.”

“A newspaper … won’t necessarily be neutral down the middle, it still could be either one of the two opinions on the issue, but you still don’t really get to choose as much, whereas on the Internet you could only read things that reinforce your beliefs or get stuff from a political party of one persuasion.”

“I already had a set view, so most of what I took notice of was from that party.”

Moderator: “So would you say that generally what you saw reinforced your existing views?”

“I think so.”
4. Preference for personal rather than online conversations.

Participants “definitely” preferred to have conversations in person, with conversations offline likely to be more controlled.

“People think they can say anything [online] and nobody knows who they are and they don’t have to own up to what they say. It can get out of hand sometimes.”

“I don’t think I’d ever engage in a debate online. I wouldn’t argue with someone in a public forum where others could read it ’cause I’m not confident enough in any of my views or knowledge to be able to do that.”

“I think it’s quite hard to have a meaningful dialogue (online) *agreement among group* and people are probably a bit less inhibited, so I don’t really like that as a way to discuss stuff.”

“Yeah, there’s an inability to convey subtleties and emotion and you can’t really discuss long things on a Facebook comment chain.”

5. Interest is a key pre-determinant and results in paying attention, seeking out information and following up stories.

All focus groups began with a discussion of individuals’ political interest and I asked participants to explain their levels of political interest. Individuals “pretty interested in politics” would “take notice of daily headlines and stuff” whereas people “not overly politically minded” “don’t generally tend to go out of [their] way to find [political information] and just tend to let it happen and don’t have much input.”

“I study it so it’s a natural interest for me. I’ve always followed politics and things like that for as long as I can remember.”

“I know nothing about politics and I don’t care about politics either.”
“I don’t really care, like day-to-day, what’s happening. If it impedes me in any way then I’ll start to care, otherwise I just let it go.”

“I never really know what’s going on to be honest but I’m interested to a certain extent if I know that it’s going to affect me in any way. But yeah, I’m not the type that reads political news every day.”

“Mine’s (political interest) medium. I like to know what I’m voting for but I don’t get into in depth discussions about it.”

“I go out of my way to find information about the parties and I often get into long-winded discussions about it. And my family, especially my dad, is very into as well.”

6. Facebook is a ‘social’ not a ‘political’ tool.

Facebook is valued for its social interaction and young people want to keep politics separated from their social life.

“Facebook is more about connecting with friends. I don’t really use it to talk about issues and stuff like that, and I don’t use it as a resource to look up information so it doesn’t seem like the first port of call for information and politics.”

“Yeah, I find it a bit strange when politicians update their Facebook status. I know it’s becoming more professional now but in my mind set, Facebook is still a place for friends.”

“I use Facebook to connect with friends.”

“I don’t see Facebook as a political type news thing; I prefer to go to the TV to watch the 6 o’clock news or the newspaper or online somewhere else other than Facebook.”
Moreover, participants were cautious of becoming Facebook friends with politicians and would only do so “for the image it portrays:”

“It’s my personality. I think when you like something [on Facebook] it’s because you’re creating a bit of an image for yourself aren’t you?”

“As soon as you put something on Facebook it does define you.”

Once a page had been ‘liked’, peers would see this activity upon logging into their own Facebook accounts, as demonstrated by Figure 16:

![Figure 16. Example of Facebook friends ‘liking’ a page.](image)

One participant acknowledged that she had “no diversity at all” in terms of contact with politicians through social media. She went on to say, “I often find that if you subscribe to someone or even like someone just to keep information up it seems to confuse some people because it’s like you're supporting it because you’re subscribed.”

Overall, young people feel that politicians’ use of social media is largely superficial and would “skip [over] most of it”:

“John Key’s [Facebook posts] are just mainly pictures of him doing stuff.”
“Given that he’s the PM though he seems to post more generic stuff. I find that from Roger Douglas you get more studies and things, I guess he’s trying to more argue points. Well, he’s not an MP anymore but…”

“I suppose [other MPs] have the luxury more, whereas John’s talking to the masses so keeping it simple.”

7. Elections do motivate people to seek out information they would not ordinarily look for.

Participants in the focus groups conducted in 2011 felt election information “was everywhere” but acknowledged that exposure to this information was dependent on whether you were busy or not. Participants “actively sought out some things that interested [them],” accessing news sites “more than [they] would usually.” Moreover, participants were more likely to discuss politics with others during the election:

“I have been talking to my friends a lot more about it, like I voted in the last election, it was the first time I could vote, and I just sort of voted for what seemed good at the time, but I didn’t really put any thought into what I was doing at the time, I didn’t care about it enough almost.”

There was also greater engagement with political news during the election and participants in the 2011 focus groups did come across and engage with more information than those in the 2012. Several participants cited the election link at stuff.co.nz as a tool for political information and again, participants generally felt there was “more political information out there” during elections. This included information on news sites, billboards and leaflets, and Facebook posts by politicians/political parties.

Participants in the focus groups conducted in 2012 also acknowledged that the amount of information available varied:
“I reckon it changes quite a lot based on what’s going on at the time, like there’ll be periods where I’ll come across absolutely no political information whatsoever and like heaps ‘round elections.”

This chapter has presented the quantitative results from the survey and the qualitative results from the focus groups. Data analysis was kept separate to ensure the use of appropriate analytic approaches for each research method. The following chapter brings the results together and discusses how they address my overarching question of whether social media are a solution to declining youth in engagement in politics.
Chapter Four: Discussion

The discussion of the integrated results is structured around the research questions that are based on a number of key hypotheses on the role social media play to politically engage young people. These research questions are:

- Does political interest determine the use of social media for political purposes?
- Who uses social media? How much? Is it supplementing or substituting traditional media?
- Is social media used by young people for direct contact with politicians/political parties?
- Do young people restrict their use of social media to social rather than political purposes?
- Is social media used by young people to reinforce existing political beliefs?
- Do young people prefer to discuss politics with others online or in person?

I will now move on to this discussion, focusing primarily on youth but drawing comparisons with survey participants aged over 35 years. It seems that for individuals with some political interest, social media could stimulate political involvement. However, due to the ineffective supply of political information, politicians and political parties are failing to mobilise young people. Social media does offer fresh opportunities for contributing to greater political knowledge, but many political elites are using the tools as a broadcasting mechanism rather than as a way to engage youth.

Political interest and social media use

The focus group participants demonstrated a variety of political interests ranging from participants that “know nothing about politics” and “don’t care about politics either” to those that are “well informed politically” and have “always followed politics for as long as [they] can remember.” The survey results paint a similar picture, with
respondents’ political interests ranging from those not interested in politics (4.3%) to those describing themselves as political junkies (7.8%). Interestingly, however, 31% of young people surveyed indicated a high level of political interest. Overall, two-thirds described themselves as moderately or highly interested in politics – a finding that challenges existing research portraying young people as politically disinterested.

Notably, several focus group participants stated that they are only politically interested if an issue affects them in some way. For example, one participant explained that she remained uninterested in day-to-day politics, but when something began to impact on her life, she would “start to care.” Survey participants gave a corresponding response, with nearly 20% describing their political interest as “only when something big happens.” Moreover, for young people it seems that relevant topics generated interest to seek further information. One focus group participant gave the example of a relevant youth issue being student loans, stating that “if there’s something about student loans, then [he’ll] read it.” Another gave the example of browsing a newspaper, saying that he was unlikely to “seek [information] out but if it’s something that ticks [his] interest in the Herald, or on the front page of the ODT, [he] might skim read it.” This suggests that the problem of declining political engagement lies with the supply side – young people have the potential to become engaged, but the stimulus has to be there.

Enquiring about participants’ political interest was the starting point for both the survey and focus groups, as low levels of political interest are often cited as a reason for low levels of youth political engagement. Overall, it seems that interest is a key determinant and results in paying attention, seeking out information and following up stories. For example, participants that were identified as having low levels of political interest or individuals moderately interested in politics were unlikely to “go and research [something] or see it on the news and then read up afterwards,” and did not “follow stuff all the time.” For example, participant responses included:

“Yeah, a lot of the time it just doesn’t really interest me enough to investigate it further.”

“I suppose if something kind of seems relevant to me then I’ll read it.”
Similarly, survey respondents who rated their political interest as “not interested at all” or “only when something big happens,” did not come across much political information and were unlikely to use social media as a political tool. Eighty-three percent of those politically apathetic felt like they did not come across a lot of political information in their daily lives. Nobody in this group was politically active through social media and 50% did not vote in the 2011 general election. Seventy percent of respondents who were “only interested when something big happens” felt like they do not come across a lot of political information and 16% did not vote in the previous election. For this group of young people, however, a difference in the use of social media for political purposes is apparent, with 60% clicking on political links from friends and 30% visiting fan pages of political parties/politicians.

There is an even bigger difference in social media use for political purposes for those with greater political interest. Nearly one half of young survey participants that indicated a moderate political interest are discussing political events with others through social media and 20% are sharing political content online. Almost 60% of highly interested respondents rated social media as a very important tool for political information, 70% discuss politics online, and one half visit fan pages of politicians and political parties through social media. And, unsurprisingly, “political junkies” were even more active in their use of social media, with nearly everyone sharing content, discussing politics and clicking on links online.

However, it seems that elections do motivate people to seek out information they would not ordinarily look for, even for those indicating low levels of political interest.

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68 See survey Question 7.
69 I note here that participants were not asked whether they were eligible to vote (of voting age) in the 2011 election and considering the young people surveyed were between 18 and 24, it is likely that some participants were under 18 during the previous election (one year prior to data collection). However, as political interest increased, gradually fewer participants indicated that they did not vote in the election, with nearly all “political junkies” voting in the 2011 general election. As mentioned, 50% of politically apathetic youth did not vote in 2011, around 10% of youth describing themselves as somewhat or highly politically interest did not vote, but nearly all “political junkies” voted.
“I think coming up to the election, I generally spend more time actively looking into politics and stuff, but for the other two-and-a-half years or whatever in between times it’s just if someone does link something. It’s more random.”

“Only around the elections would you go looking for political news I reckon.”

Moreover, participants in the focus groups that were conducted during the election largely came across and engaged with more information than those in the 2012 focus groups. Participants in the focus groups conducted during the 2011 general election found “a lot of [election] sources coming through Facebook,” and the election link at stuff.co.nz was cited as a valuable and frequently used source of information about the election. Results indicate that many participants clicked on political links posted by friends online, but the focus group and survey evidence also suggests that political engagement is unlikely to go any further than this. Despite the majority of survey respondents indicating that they click on political links from friends, less than one third discussed political events with others or joined political groups other than political parties, and hardly any organised political events.

Overall, these results indicate that social media is unlikely to make a difference to young people who are not politically interested. The use of social media is greater for individuals who are highly interested in politics, but it seems these people are already politically engaged anyway: most voted in the 2011 election, they are often discussing politics with others, and are extremely active in the use of social media for political purposes. For individuals in between, social media could stimulate involvement, which suggests that the onus is with the politicians/political parties to provide the stimulus.

70 This research found that during an election there is a greater use of social media among youth, but this is to be expected. Focus group discussions also indicated that there is an increased use of traditional media (television and newspapers) during elections. It would be interesting for future research to quantitatively compare the use of traditional media by young people during an election and in a non-election year, and compare that to the use of social media by the same group.
Social media use in politics

The results of this study also indicate a similar trend to previous research discussed in the literature review that suggests young people are now more frequent users of social media for political purposes than in the past (for example, Holt et al., 2013). Nearly all the young people surveyed are accessing Facebook daily, and overall they are fairly politically active in terms of their social media use. When compared to those aged over 35, the survey results demonstrate that 18 to 24 year olds are spending more time online daily than older respondents: 56% are online 2 to 3 hours daily compared with 40% of those aged over 35, who spend only up to an hour online. Furthermore, nearly all young people access Facebook daily, compared with slightly less than one third of those aged over 35 – a finding consistent with existing research.

Overall, those aged over 35 do access Facebook less frequently, with only 32% logging on daily and just over 43% never accessing Facebook. For both younger and older participants it is evident that those using Facebook either access it daily or weekly (over 95% of respondents), with participants unlikely to access Facebook monthly or less than monthly. I note here that Twitter use was much lower for both groups, with two-thirds of young people and three-quarters of those aged over 35 never using Twitter. Focus group comments included:

“I refuse to use Twitter *laughter*, I waste enough time having a Facebook page, I’m not gonna double that up for a pointless... Yeah, I just see absolutely no point to it.”

“I haven’t got on to the Twitter wave; I find Facebook is enough of an invasion of my privacy.”

There are also clear differences between younger and older groups of citizens in terms of using social media for political purposes. Slightly more than half of all young people surveyed indicate that they click on political links posted by friends online; nearly 40% discuss political events with others through social media; 30% visit fan pages of political parties or politicians; and around 22% share political content online.
Focus group participants elaborated on this increased use of social media for political purposes:

“I reckon more and more stuff I look at is posts by people to articles on Facebook.”

“If someone else links something on Facebook that looks interesting, then I’ll read it.”

Survey participants were asked to expand specifically on how they use social media, generating around 200 responses. Most respondents indicated that they were Facebook friends with or following politicians as a result of liking individual Facebook pages. Responses were therefore subdivided into three categories: (1) Follow, but did not specify who, (2) Follow John Key, and (3) Follow other specified. Overall, respondents were likely to follow/be friends with major politicians and political parties, with many participants being friends with party leaders or liking party pages on Facebook. Following John Key on Facebook was a common response (nearly 20%), with several respondents following other New Zealand political leaders such as Metiria Turei and Russel Norman, politicians such as David Shearer, and other political figures such as Helen Clark and Barack Obama. Other responses included liking political parties such as Labour and National, the ‘Young Nats’, ‘Greenpeace’ and ‘Generation Zero’ on Facebook. One half of the 200 responses generated followed politicians or political parties online but did not specify whom.

Results also demonstrate that participants largely ignore extreme political views of parties they followed on Facebook. And, more generally, despite many respondents following politicians or political parties on Twitter or being Facebook friends with them, they acknowledged that they largely skip over any information posted by them.

71 If participants indicated they were active in terms of their use of social media for political purposes in question 7, they were asked to expand on this activity in an open-ended question. The examples of “I follow John Key on Twitter” and “I organised a political protest on Facebook” were given to indicate what types of responses were being sought. See appendix 1 for a copy of the survey.

72 Close to 30% of respondents were friends with/followed other specified politicians or political leaders.
(whether extreme or not). For example, one participant stated that she “didn’t really read any of the stuff they posted” after reading the headline posted and realising she was already informed about the issue from watching the news or reading about it online.

The results of the survey and focus groups support the view in existing studies that young people are now more frequent users of social media for political purposes; if becoming friends with or liking politicians/political parties on Facebook is an indicator of this trend. However, it seems that any information posted by these political figures was for the most part, avoided. Again, it seems that interest in the topic of the Facebook post is a determinant for reading the information, but also that the supply of the information (the way in which politicians use social media) influences political interest. If Facebook posts are uninformative, superficial and unconstructive, then people are unlikely to view the information.

**Is social media use supplementing or substituting traditional media?**

When asked about sources of political news, most focus group participants agreed that political information was obtained from online sources. After emphasising that political news was obtained “pretty much only online now,” participants were prompted about their use of traditional media sources but reinforced that political news was obtained “exclusively online.” Most young people spend between 2 and 5 hours online daily,\(^{73}\) so it is unsurprising that 72% of young respondents indicated that any political information they came across was online.

However, it is evident that participants in the focus groups and survey in this study are regular users of mainstream news sources, with nearly 70% accessing online news sites daily. This suggests that while young voters are embracing online technology, they largely rely on established websites rather than social media sources to access

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\(^{73}\) Survey results indicate that 56% of young people are spending 2-3 hours online daily and 27% are spending 4-5 hours online daily.
political information.\textsuperscript{74} Participants felt that online news sources are easier to use, cheaper, and that it is easier to seek out further information if desired, compared to traditional offline media sources. Focus group responses included:

“I’d be more likely to research it if I was online ‘cause I’d be on the Internet at the time whereas if I was watching the news I’d be like ‘oh that’s interesting’ but then do something else and maybe even forget.”

“I think it’s easier. I go to dinner with my dad every Sunday and often I’ll have come across something online and I can bring it up straight away and say ‘read this’ and ‘what do you think about it’ and that sort of thing. You know, it’s so much easier to talk to someone about it. The only way you can talk to someone about something you’ve read in a newspaper is if they’ve read it too.”

“You can avoid stupid news online. You see the links and go ‘I’m not going to look at that.’”

Existing literature illustrates the proliferation of online media use (Iyengar & McGrady, 2010; Davis, 1999; Internet World Statistics, 2012), and many proclaim that the Internet is the best tool for increased democratic involvement and participation. It is logical to assume that the expansion of the Internet would come at the expense of traditional media and, considering three-quarters of survey respondents in this research come across political information online, it is easy to draw misleading conclusions. However, it seems to be more complex: as expected, online media is the primary source of political information for young people. However, traditional media sources, including television, remained important sources of political information.

\textsuperscript{74} There are differences between social media and traditional media online as sources of political information: social media users either publicly sign up to newsfeeds or may inadvertently see news content posted by friends in their network; online newspapers are much like hard-copy newspapers (but with opportunities to present breaking news in a more timely manner and some interactive features) and readers do not have to publicly sign up.
Survey participants were asked to rate traditional and online sources of political information. Young people rated both online news sites and television as very important sources of political information: 66% and 52% respectively. Newspapers, social media and radio were all rated as moderately important, and leaflets and posters were considered unimportant. Despite spending a great deal of time online, traditional online and offline media were the dominant sources of political news for young people, rather than social media.

In terms of focus group discussions, a small number of focus group participants watch TV news but said they come across political news “when the TV happened to be on” or “watch the news sometimes if [they are] at home at the right time.” This links in with another finding that participants were passive receivers of political information, both in its traditional and online forms. One participant had “stuff.co.nz” as [her] homepage” and if she was “putting off study and had an hour gap between classes [she’d] spend that hour on stuff.co.nz/ ‘cause there’s no point doing work.” As a result, any political information participants came across was a result of “just sort of browsing.”

Similarly, reasons for the preference for online sources compared with traditional sources included convenience; for example, young participants are unlikely to own a car and therefore unlikely to listen to the radio:

“I don’t drive very often so I don’t listen to the radio much. That was the only time I used to listen to it when I was driving, but now I don’t have a car.”

For young people, it ultimately comes down to accessibility and ease of information: you use what is most convenient. Stuff.co.nz was cited by many participants as a website visited daily, with one participant summarising that “if you're on a timeframe you can get your gist of what’s going on in New Zealand politics” and that “its collaborated approach and its pick and choose from all the major news sites” makes it

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75 Participants were asked to rate ‘online news sites’, ‘television’, ‘newspapers’, ‘social media’, ‘radio’, ‘leaflets’, ‘posters’ and ‘direct contact with politicians/political parties’ as either unimportant, moderately important or very important.
an attractive source of information. Furthermore, with the Internet “you’ve got 24 hour accessibility and an array of information” and the ability “to be doing three different things at the same time rather than going out and buying three different papers just to read the one story that you wanna read.” Participant responses included:

“It's more about the ease of finding things.”

You could either “flick through the newspaper to find everything about one party, [or] you put in a keyword search and it gives you every article.”

Moreover, most participants live in student flats and do not receive the daily paper, are unlikely to watch the daily news as they are busy during that time and they do not drive much, so are unlikely to listen to the radio often. However, when they go back home, their parents have a paper delivered, watch the TV news at dinnertime and play the radio in the car, so participants were exposed to traditional media forms.

“…here we don’t get the newspapers. At home we have four TVs, so at home I’d get a lot more from traditional.”

“I think it’s just ‘cause it’s easy to get to and it’s just kinda got a run-down of everything.”

“If you actually look for political stuff and it’s like, really jargoney; as students we don’t feel like we have a lot of political knowledge so it feels like it just sort of goes over your head a bit.”

Existing studies provide mixed results as to whether the Internet is replacing older media forms. For example, Dimmick et al., (2004), Stempel et al., (2000), and De Waal et al., (2005) argue that that the Internet is replacing older media forms, a process essentially driven by young people. Others find little evidence for substitution and conclude that the Internet supplements the use of traditional media (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000; Dutta-Bergman, 2004; Gaskins & Jerit, 2012). As mentioned
above, participants largely obtain political information from online sources; however, the interesting thing is that mostly traditional media sources are accessed online.

“[I] don’t watch the news, the only time I watch stuff is if I’ve heard about it from someone else or someone else links to it.”

“stuff.co.nz and NZHerald… yeah I read them every day.”

Several participants highlighted that news websites accessed online give only a broad outline of issues and if “you want to learn more you’ve gotta hunt out the truth” and “just watching the news, you're not really going to get a great deal of depth.” Similarly, one participant found stuff.co.nz “pretty superficial” and another claimed that because “everything’s just kind of summarised, it doesn’t really do the issues justice, so important details can be overlooked.”

The results of this research do not indicate the substitution of traditional media by Internet use. As mentioned, participants still rated traditional media as important sources of political information and online newspapers are accessed daily by most survey respondents. The use of social media seems to be supplementing traditional media as a source of political information; people actively using social media are exposed to another source of political information.

*Is social media used by young people for direct contact with politicians/political parties?*

Participants were unenthusiastic about politicians’ use of social media, claiming that “all they do is whinge about other politicians [and] don’t actually say anything constructive.” Participants also indicated that politicians are likely to increase their use of social media only “around election time” and even then, participants are unlikely to find politicians’ Facebook posts very “insightful.” Rather than being overly informative Facebook posts, participants claimed posts are largely superficial; for example:
“John Key’s [Facebook posts] are just mainly pictures of him doing stuff though.”

Furthermore, many participants are unlikely to have direct contact with politicians and political parties, other than seeing a few political adverts on Facebook, with one participant claiming that:

“It’s just kind of hard, like as kids I don’t think we’re immersed enough in the politics thing. It actually influences us a lot more than we think and that’s why we find it a little bit difficult to read and we don’t wanna look at it ‘cause we don’t understand it.”

This finding is inconsistent with existing literature which found that political parties are using social media to interact with voters in fundamentally different ways than in previous elections (Vitak et al., 2011), and that these powerful new ways to engage voters (Newman, 2010) should impact on voter turnout. It seems that the content of politicians’ social media updates are unlikely to inspire political engagement.

**Do young people restrict their use of social media to social rather than political purposes?**

It seems that Facebook76 is a social tool rather than a political tool, and participants are cautious of becoming Facebook friends with politicians and would only do so “for the image it portrays.” As outlined earlier, the standard use of social media is personal and social, not political, and for young people the Internet is a leisure space that is clearly separated from formal contexts. This finding is consistent with existing research. For example Sánchez-Navarro and Aranda (2012) found that young people are high users of social media, using it for social purposes and entertainment. The principle use of social media for young people is to talk to friends and to find out what their contacts are doing. Facebook is valued for its social interaction and not

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76 It is important to note that Facebook is not all social media. However, it is the most frequently used social media in New Zealand (http://www.parliament.nz/en-nz/parl-support/research-papers/00PLSocRP11021/new-zealand-parliamentarians-and-online-social-media) and dominated focus group discussion of social media.
seen as a forum for political discussion. Focus group participants agreed that Facebook “is still a place for friends” and that for students; politics is unlikely to be a number one priority. Other participants agreed, with Facebook being “more about connecting with friends” and not a “resource to look up information, so it doesn’t seem like the first port of call for information and politics.” Several participants were also cautious of others’ political views on Facebook and were wary of influencing friendships as a consequence of publicly ‘liking’ a particular political group.

“I'm not particularly active in terms of presenting my points of view over the Internet. I do not want to alienate friends and relatives, especially on Facebook, who do not share my views.”

**Is social media used to reinforce existing political beliefs?**

Many participants acknowledged that information sources were chosen if they reinforced existing political views rather than challenged them. It seems easier to avoid things you do not like online, and participants would not open links to articles that did not seem interesting. For example, one participant said that:

“A lot of the stuff of what I read kind of reinforces what I already think ‘cause even the fact that I go on the Guardian quite a lot, like it’s blatantly quite a left-wing newspaper. And yeah, the bloggers will like rip out people I don’t like, and so yeah I think I probably am. Like it’s not useful in the sense that I'm just reinforcing my own opinion, like I probably don’t get exposed to things I don’t like very often.”

Offline, participants were exposed to different viewpoints, even if this meant skimming over the politics section of a newspaper or passively listening to the news on TV. For example:

“A newspaper, it might be, it won’t necessarily be neutral down the middle, it still could be either one of the two opinions on the issue but you still don’t really get to choose as much, whereas on the Internet you could only read things that reinforce your beliefs.”
This finding is consistent with existing literature which emphasises that not enough young people are using the Internet to fill the role newspapers and TV news once played as sources of civic education (Galston, 2011). For example, prior to the proliferation of online media, people were subjected to varying information while reading the newspaper or listening to the radio or TV news. Because focus group participants were especially likely to read information that reinforces existing political beliefs *online*, they are unlikely to be exposed to information that challenges these existing viewpoints, as they previously were offline.

**Do young people prefer to discuss politics with others online or in person?**

Despite a great deal of time spent online, participants would rather discuss politics with others in person, although many stated they were happy to follow discussions online:

“People think they can say anything [online] and they don’t have to own up to what they say. It can get out of hand sometimes, manners kind of go out the door.”

Survey results indicate that both young and older groups preferred to discuss politics in person, with three quarters in both groups indicating this preference.\(^77\) Again, participants were asked to explain this preference. Responses were divided into two themes: preference for face-to-face discussion, and reasons for disliking online political discussion. Similar to the focus group discussions, survey participants preferred face-to-face political discussion “as there is less chance it will turn to ridiculous name calling” and participants find it “more in-depth and dynamic.” It was also noted that “in person is better as it is often easier to explain fully and people are less offensive” and that it is easier to gauge the emotions of the other person, meaning “it is less likely to get out of hand.” In terms of disliking online discussion,

\(^77\) Of those aged 18 to 24, 50% rarely discussed politics and nearly 45% discussed politics often. Of those aged over 35, slightly more than 40% discussed politics rarely and over 55% discussed politics often.
participants argued that it is easy to offend others online and discussion is “likely to get extremist” with “unreasoned views when people can just type.”

**Future research**

Because much existing research focuses on Britain and the US, further studies need to focus on a more diverse range of countries to provide a sense of the general trends and patterns in social media use for political purposes by young people. This study was limited to providing a ‘snapshot’ of social media use in New Zealand. Future research should explore specific details arising from the results of this study, which I was unable to investigate due to the limited scope of the research. For example, it would be useful to investigate the extent of political news avoidance by young people. The results of this study seem to align with sceptical views in existing literature that making more information more readily available to more people and allowing the individual more control over that information does not necessarily produce more informed and more politically engaged citizens. Also, this research did not specifically investigate the impact that social media use by politicians has on the political behaviour of young people. The results indicate it is largely insignificant, but further research is required to verify this finding and provide an explanation for this view. It is possible that it is connected to two other findings of this study: that social media remains a social tool, and that social media is used to reinforce existing political beliefs. With a reluctance amid youth to become Facebook friends with a range of politicians for social and political reasons, the ability for politicians to utilise social media as a tool to increase political engagement may be hampered from the outset. It would also be beneficial to conduct another study during an election campaign to again compare results in order to determine any changes on both the supply and demand side of political information.

This chapter has established that ultimately, social media is unlikely to make a difference to young people who are not already politically interested. However, for individuals with some political interest, social media could stimulate involvement, but the onus seems to be on politicians and political parties to provide the stimulus. It is clear that young people are now more frequent users of social media for political purposes. However, if politicians’ Facebook posts are uninformative and superficial,
they are likely to be ignored. Importantly, the results of this research do not indicate the substitution of traditional media by Internet use, with social media use seeming to supplement traditional media as a source of political information. However, Facebook is seen as a social tool and the standard use of social media remains personal, not political. People are cautious of their public use of social media for political purposes, preferring to keep their political views private. Interestingly, and perhaps unsurprisingly, this research demonstrates that people are more likely to read information that reinforces existing political beliefs online, than they would in traditional media sources. Lastly, participants in this research had a definite preference for political discussion in person, rather than online.
Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that young people are indeed fairly politically interested, come across a great deal of political information in their daily lives (largely online), are spending several hours online daily, and are active users of social media – even for political purposes. So why is social media not making a difference to the low levels of political engagement among young people?

The review of existing literature in the first chapter provided a detailed argument as to why social media use could lead to the increase in youth political participation. Young people between 18 and 24 are the most active group in their use of social media (Lenhart et al., 2010). Close to 85%\(^78\) of young people are users of social networking sites in America, a statistic that echoes worldwide figures. Moreover, Facebook is the leading social networking site worldwide, with 1 billion members in 2012. Likewise in New Zealand, 85% of young people are accessing social networking\(^79\) and Facebook is the preferred social media site among youth. Given the exponential growth in both the use of these sites and the availability of news and political-oriented sites, it is natural to wonder whether this new form of communication might offer opportunities for increasing the political participation of young people. Even with little research into the impact of social media activity on political behaviour (Vitak et al., 2011), existing research argues that social media may be a way to politically engage young people because young people are now more frequent users of social media for political purposes (Holt et al., 2013).

Social media are easy and convenient for young people to use. As a result, young people are now receiving more political news through social media than through


traditional media sources (Brewer & Cao, 2006; Young, 2004; Davis, 1999). There is an increase in information readily available to individuals, and people are able to access sites as many times and at any time of the day they wish (Trilling & Schoenbach, 2013). Young people are also likely to come across political news even if they are not politically interested; just surfing the Internet or social media sites will inadvertently expose them to political news. Moreover, the personal nature of social media will appeal to young people and get them politically engaged.

The findings from this research demonstrate that young people in Dunedin, New Zealand are clearly using social media extensively and do see it as easy to use and accessible. Youth are spending numerous hours online daily and are accessing social media regularly, with nearly all survey participants accessing Facebook daily. The frequent use of social media for political purposes observed in this study initially seems to verify the optimistic views of the role of the Internet discussed earlier. As expected, young people routinely use social media and rely heavily on online media as their primary source of political news. Unsurprisingly, participants felt that online news sources were easier to use, cheaper, and that it was easier to seek out further information if desired.

But, just as with the use of traditional media, interest was a prerequisite for searching out political information; people did not appear to be exposed to political information ‘accidentally’ – they would ignore or filter out political news in some way. This finding is consistent with existing literature that indicates that not enough young people are using the Internet to fill the role that newspapers and TV news once played as sources of civic education (Galston, 2011).

Intuitively, it seems social media should be engaging young people in politics; so why is this not the case? The fundamental problem seems to be that young people are not interested if they do not think something is relevant to them. The prerequisite for political activity online is interest in the issue, and whether it impacts on their lives in some way; simply becoming ‘friends’ with the Prime Minister is not going to change this. As Klandermans (2004) suggests, the political movements that supply what potential voters demand, gain more support than movements that do not.
Young people who have little political interest are also much less likely to use social media as a political tool in comparison to their politically interested peers. I also found that as political interest increases, so does the use of social media for political purposes, and that social media is unlikely to make a difference to young people who are not already politically interested. Focus group discussions provided several examples of politically disinterested young people scrolling past and ignoring the minimal political posts on their personal Facebook newsfeeds. Young people with lower levels of political interest are spending the same amount of time online daily, but are engaging in non-political activities with their time. In contrast, politically interested youth have many politically interested friends on Facebook who regularly post politics-related information, and they surf the Internet and come across a range of political information. Only those with higher levels of political interest are accessing, for example, political blogs, and they are politically active in terms of their use of social media. This finding is consistent with literature, suggesting that once given the chance, people might actually avoid all information that they are not personally interested in (Trilling & Schoenbach, 2013). Most young people come across political information as a by-product of their daily browsing, with very few participants actively seeking out information; those who do search for further information have a prior interest in politics. Therefore, making information more readily available to more people and allowing the individual more control over that information does not necessarily produce well-informed and politically engaged citizens. The success of social media as a democratic tool strongly depends on the willingness of individuals to use it to become well-informed voters and more involved in civic life.

Furthermore, young people do not see social media as a political tool – it is used for social reasons. Facebook, for example, is valued for its social interaction and not seen as a forum for political discussion. Moreover, people were cautious of publicly ‘liking’ a particular political group and would carefully choose pages to ‘like’ for the image it portrayed. In terms of what disinterest looks like, the public exposure of Facebook likes could be a barrier to political participation. People are still invisible on traditional media online and can access articles confidentially; it will remain private, even when people read certain political articles through news websites that align with their political image. The absence of ‘hidden likes’ that only appear on your timeline
is a major obstacle to Facebook as a political tool, because we do not like to disclose our political views to others.

Similar to existing studies demonstrating that the Internet is a leisure space for youth that is clearly separated from formal and educational contexts (Sánchez-Navarro and Aranda, 2012), this study found that social media is not used as a research tool in the sense that participants did not use it to find political information. Facebook is valued for its social interaction and young people want to keep politics separated from their social life; therefore they prefer not to use it to discuss politics openly with others. Moreover, young people feel that politicians’ use of social media is largely superficial and would skip over most of it.

While social media does have personal characteristics, young people simply did not seem to use it to engage with politics because it is public and they either lack confidence or wish to keep their preferences private. Traditional media online is the primary source of political information, rather than social media, and it was rated as a very important source of political news. This indicates that social media is not replacing traditional media forms, as has been previously suggested (Dimmick et al., 2004; Stempel et al., 2000; De Waal et al., 2005). If replacement were in fact a widespread phenomenon, we would expect to see a higher importance rating for social media as a source for political news and much lower ratings for television, newspapers, radio, and online news sites.

Existing research also suggests that frequent use of social media for political purposes may compensate for lower levels of attention to political news in traditional news media and can therefore act as a leveller in terms of motivating political participation (Holt et al., 2013). Conducting focus groups provided an opportunity to analyse survey findings in more detail, and it became obvious that despite the surprisingly frequent use of social media for political purposes, the use of social media remained largely consistent with existing political beliefs and essentially superficial, as

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80 See Figure 13 for survey participants’ political activity using social media. Slightly more than 50% of young people click on political links posted by friends on Facebook, 38% discuss political events with others, nearly 30% visit fan pages of political parties/politicians, and around 20% shared political content online and joined political groups other than political parties.
mentioned above. For example, participants became friends with or liked politicians on Facebook that shared their existing political beliefs, but even then would skip over any posts by them.

The review of existing literature also demonstrated that digital technology has become an increasingly important tool for political campaigning. Political parties in New Zealand are also using the interactive features of websites and interacting with voters in fundamentally different ways from previous elections. The 2008 general election was seen as the first New Zealand election when political parties used ‘new’ media such as social networking sites and online videos (Deos & Murchison) and parties further integrated the use of social media, especially Facebook, into their campaigning tools in the 2011 election. Limited contact with political parties and candidates has been cited as a reason for declining voter turnout (Davidson, 2005) so these powerful new ways to engage voters (Newman, 2010) should positively impact voter turnout.

However, while social media represent a revolution in communication, this is not the same as revolutionising political participation, involvement or interest. The buzz around social media presumes that people would become involved in politics if they were simply connected. But rather than being a communication failure, the evidence from this study suggests it is an interest failing and a privacy issue. The results indicate that social media is unlikely to facilitate significantly greater political knowledge as a result of direct contact with politicians. Many young people are friends with or follow politicians/political parties through social media. However, participants revealed that they largely skipped over any information posted by them and generally considered politicians’ use of social media to be unconstructive and mostly superficial. Ultimately, it seems that politicians and political parties do not use social media in a way to foster interactivity or personalisation – they use it in a top-down fashion.  

Social media has the potential to be a great tool for political communication, especially to young people, so the problem seems to be with the

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81 In their content analysis of the five parties’ Facebook pages during the 2011 New Zealand election, Deos and Murchison (2012) also found this; all but the Green Party had limited interaction with the most prevalent type of material shared by parties on Facebook involving impersonal links to strategic campaign and policy documents. Therefore the researchers concluded that New Zealand political parties do not use their Facebook pages for direct interaction with potential voters.
message (supply of political information) to create a demand for politics among youth. As outlined in the first chapter, youth make up around one-fifth of the eligible voting population in New Zealand, but only around 60% vote in general elections. Despite the significantly larger proportion of young people compared to over 65 year olds, politicians engage more with older voters than younger voters. Curtin (2010) therefore questions whether youth disinterest “is not solely a result of political apathy, but also a lack of attention by the political parties to issues of concern to young voters?” (p. 560). Turnout might increase “if there were more activity by political parties in local communities to mobilise people to vote” (Vowles, 2012, p. 23) but so far, political parties are failing to mobilise young people.

Hay (2007) argues that supply-side factors (the appeals that the parties make to potential voters) “are only important in so far as they influence demand” (p. 60). And in order to influence demand, they must be perceived by potential voters as relevant. Classifying declining political participation as a demand-side phenomenon is “a convenient message for politicians” (Hay, 2007, p. 154), absolving them of all responsibility. However, it is necessary to challenge such views because there are a variety of potentially plausible supply-side factors, for which politicians and political parties might be responsible. Ultimately, supply influences demand (Hay, 2007), and although the attitudes and perceptions of potential voters must be considered in explaining declining political participation, the personalisation and interactivity that social media offers, can have a positive effect on citizens’ political involvement (Kruikemeier, van Noort, Vliegenthart, & de Vreese, 2013).

For political elites (including politicians), social media offers fresh opportunities for creating new networks, reaching new audiences and targeting particular audiences, and contributing to greater political knowledge in social media participants. If part of the reason that youth tend to avoid politics is the inability of the political elite to effectively reach them, social media provides opportunities for increasing their ability to do so. However, while some MPs are using social media for useful interaction with the public, many are using the tools as broadcasting mechanisms rather than as a way to engage with constituents; effective use of online social media requires more than a profile and occasional updates. Effective use of social media heavily depends on how its use is designed, and an effort is needed to actively engage with the online
community through dialogue and feedback, rather than simply making announcements through social media that are similar to media releases.

It is quite clear that Facebook is seen as a social tool by youth, but I would argue that actually, this has much to do with the quality of political information available through social media. If politicians or political groups utilised social media in a relevant and appealing way,\textsuperscript{82} it could become a valued source of information, especially for those not seeking out information from other sources. According to the New Zealand parliament research paper \textit{New Zealand Parliamentarians and Online Social Media},\textsuperscript{83} “access to online social media is likely to increase in the future, and along with this, its political use.” This means that democratic institutions ought to redesign their political communication in order to be appropriate for the interests and discourse of contemporary youth culture. For the effective use of social media tools, MPs need to remember that a high number of friends and followers are not necessarily useful if active engagement is limited. Ultimately they need to consider what stimulates \textit{real} engagement. Because “we should not assume that all non-participants are apathetic or disinterested” (Hay, 2007, p. 74) and “the involvement of young people in the electoral process is important in maintaining a healthy and vibrant democracy” (Curtin, 2010, p. 568), supply side factors need to receive adequate attention. The temporary reversal of New Zealand’s turnout decline over the period from 1975 to 1984 indicates that the process can be halted (Vowles, 2012), and political participation can be significantly affected by effective efforts to mobilise participation on the part of politicians and political parties (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993).

\textsuperscript{82} It is important to note that this research did not analyse how social media use by politicians should be changed and improved to inspire youth interest. As outlined above, based on the results of this study, politicians should rethink how they use social media, and possibly accept that there are limitations to what social media can achieve in terms of stimulating interest. Again, if young people are saying that they skip over social media posts because the information contained in them is superficial, then it seems that what politicians are saying has the potential to stimulate interest (provided it is more appealing). The ways in which social media use by politicians can be improved requires further research.

Appendix 1: Survey

How is social media used to engage with political news in New Zealand?

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

Survey / Focus groups

Thank you for showing an interest in this project. Please read this information sheet carefully before deciding whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate I thank you. If you decide not to take part there will be no disadvantage to you and I thank you for considering my request.

What is the aim of the project?
This project is being undertaken as part of the requirements for a Master of Arts in Politics at the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand.

The aim of the project is to provide a snapshot of the way social media was used by young people to engage with political news during the 2011 New Zealand general election and in a non-election year, and to compare the use of social media by young people with those aged over 24.

What types of participants are being sought?
Participants with a range of political interest are being sought for this study. Participants will be recruited in person and through email, Facebook and word of mouth.

What will participants be asked to do?

Survey
Should you agree to take part in this project, you will be asked to complete a survey individually of approximately 10-minute duration.

Focus group
Should you agree to take part in this project, you will be asked to participate in a group discussion of approximately 1-hour duration.

Please be aware that you may decide not to take part in the project without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

What data or information will be collected and what use will be made of it?
The results of the project will be submitted as an MA thesis which will be available in the University of Otago Library (Dunedin, New Zealand), and may be published as academic articles. Every attempt will be made to preserve your anonymity. You are
most welcome to request a copy of the results of the project by contacting Juana Diesing (juana.diesing@hotmail.com).

The data collected will be securely stored in such a way that only those mentioned below will be able to gain access to it. At the end of the project any personal information will be destroyed immediately except that, as required by the University's research policy, any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for five years, after which it will be destroyed.

**Can participants change their mind and withdraw from the project?**
You may withdraw from participation in the project at any time and without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

**What if participants have any questions?**
If you have any questions about our project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either:

Student researcher: Juana Diesing       and/or       Supervisors: Janine Hayward/
Department of Politics                      Chris Rudd
Email: juana.diesing@hotmail.com             Department of Politics
Tel: 0274284257                                Email:  
                                              janine.hayward@otago.ac.nz
                                              chris.rudd@otago.ac.nz
                                              Tel: 03 4798666/03 4798664

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Department of Politics, University of Otago. If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the research you may contact the Committee through the Human Ethics Committee Administrator (ph 03 479-8256). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated and you will be informed of the outcome.
CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

I have read the Information Sheet concerning this project and understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I know that:

1. My participation in the project is entirely voluntary;

2. I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without any disadvantage;

3. Personal identifying information will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project but any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for at least five years;

4. I may decline to answer any particular question(s) and/or may withdraw from the project without any disadvantage of any kind;

5. The results of the project will be submitted as an MA thesis and will be available in the University of Otago Library (Dunedin, New Zealand). They may be published as academic articles; and

6. I will remain anonymous in the final research project and only the researcher and their supervisors will be privy to my identity regarding the concerned information.

Name of participant: ………………………………………………………………………

………………………………………………………………..                  …………………

(Signature of participant)                                  (Date)
1. On the following scale, please circle where you would describe your general political interest:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not interested at all</th>
<th>Only interested when something big happens</th>
<th>Moderately interested</th>
<th>Highly interested</th>
<th>Political junkie</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please tick (☑) the answer that is applicable:

2. Do you feel like you come across a lot of political information in your daily life?

☐ Yes  ☐ No

3. Is the information that you do come across mostly online or offline?

☐ Online  ☐ Offline  ☐ I don’t come across any political information

4. How would you rate the following sources for political news?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Unimportant</th>
<th>Moderately Important</th>
<th>Very Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online news Sites</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaflets</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posters</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. How much time do you spend online daily?

☐ 0-1 hour  ☐ 2-3 hours  ☐ 4-5 hours  ☐ 6+ hours
6. How often do you read/access the following:

Facebook
☐ Never ☐ Less than monthly ☐ Monthly ☐ Weekly ☐ Daily

Twitter
☐ Never ☐ Less than monthly ☐ Monthly ☐ Weekly ☐ Daily

Online news sites
☐ Never ☐ Less than monthly ☐ Monthly ☐ Weekly ☐ Daily

Political blogs
☐ Never ☐ Less than monthly ☐ Monthly ☐ Weekly ☐ Daily

Please tick (☑) the answers that are applicable (you can tick more than one box)

7. In terms of your use of social media do you:

☐ Share political content online
☐ Discuss political events with others
☐ Click on political links from friends
☐ Join political groups other than political parties
☐ Visit fan pages of political parties/politicians
☐ Organise a political event/s

If you ticked any of the boxes above, please expand on your activity e.g. *I follow John Key on Twitter* or *I organised a political protest on Facebook.*

8. Do you discuss politics with others?

☐ Never (please skip to question 11) ☐ Rarely ☐ Often

9. If you answered ‘Rarely’ or ‘Often’, is your discussion most likely to be online or in person?

☐ Online ☐ In person ☐ Both
If you have a preference for discussing politics either online or in person, please explain why:


10. If you voted in the 2011 New Zealand General Election what were the most important factors in helping you decide how to vote? Please number your top three sources in the box provided: 1 = most important, 2 = second, 3 = third most important.

☐ the televised leader’s debates
☐ Newspaper coverage of the election
☐ TV news coverage of the election
☐ Online news coverage of the election
☐ Family discussions about the election
☐ Social Media coverage of the election
☐ discussions with friends about the election
☐ Leaflets distributed by politicians/political parties
☐ Posters distributed by politicians/political parties
☐ Political party websites
☐ Radio coverage of the election
☐ Other: please specify

☐ I did not vote in the 2011 General Election
Please tick (☑) the applicable box:

11. Are you?
☐ Male ☐ Female

12. Are you aged?
☐ under 18 ☐ 18-24 ☐ 25-34 ☐ 35 +

Thank you very much for completing this survey
Appendix 2: Survey coding sheet

1. On the following scale, please circle where you would describe your general political interest:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not interested at all</th>
<th>Only interested when something big happens</th>
<th>Moderately interested</th>
<th>Highly interested</th>
<th>Political junkie</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please tick (☑) the answer that is applicable:

2. Do you feel like you come across a lot of political information in your daily life?

1 Yes  2 No

3. Is the information that you do come across mostly online or offline?

1 Online  2 Offline  3 I don’t come across any political information

4. How would you rate the following sources for political news?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>1 unimportant</th>
<th>2 moderately important</th>
<th>3 very important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online news Sites</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaflets</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posters</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct contact with politicians/ political parties</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. How much time do you spend online daily?

1 0-1 hour  
2 2-3 hours  
3 4-5 hours  
4 6+ hours

6. How often do you read/access the following:

Facebook
1 Never  
2 Less than monthly  
3 Monthly  
4 Weekly  
5 Daily

Twitter
1 Never  
2 Less than monthly  
3 Monthly  
4 Weekly  
5 Daily

Online news sites
1 Never  
2 Less than monthly  
3 Monthly  
4 Weekly  
5 Daily

Political blogs
1 Never  
2 Less than monthly  
3 Monthly  
4 Weekly  
5 Daily

Please tick (☑) the answers that are applicable (you can tick more than one box)

7. In terms of your use of social media do you:

☐ Share political content online  
☐ Discuss political events with others  
☐ Click on political links from friends  
☐ Join political groups other than political parties  
☐ Visit fan pages of political parties/politicians  
☐ Organise a political event/s

If you ticked any of the boxes above, please expand on your activity e.g. *I follow John Key on Twitter* or *I organised a political protest on Facebook."

8. Do you discuss politics with others?

1 Never *(please skip to question 11)*  
2 Rarely  
3 Often
9. If you answered ‘Rarely’ or ‘Often’, is your discussion most likely to be online or in person?

1 Online  
2 In person  
3 Both

If you have a preference for discussing politics either online or in person, please explain why:

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

10. If you voted in the 2011 New Zealand General Election what were the most important factors in helping you decide how to vote? Please number your top three sources in the box provided: 1 = most important, 2 = second, 3 = third most important.

1 the televised leader’s debates
2 Newspaper coverage of the election
3 TV news coverage of the election
4 Online news coverage of the election
5 Family discussions about the election
6 Social Media coverage of the election
7 discussions with friends about the election
8 Leaflets distributed by politicians/political parties
9 Posters distributed by politicians/political parties
10 Political party websites
11 Radio coverage of the election
12 Other: please specify

__________________________________________________________________________

(13 I did not vote in the 2011 General Election)
Please tick (☑) the applicable box:

11. Are you?

1 Male  2 Female

12. Are you aged?

☐ under 18  ☐ 18-24  ☐ 25-34  ☐ 35 +

(Answers for two sample groups entered on separate sheets, all others excluded)
Appendix 3: Focus group questions

1. General interest → what makes you not/highly interested?

2. Getting political information from traditional media sources (TV, radio etc.) or online? Rely on both?

3. What are your main specific sources of information (E.g. Facebook, stuff.co.nz, tv3 news etc.)?

4. Why those particular sources? What are your main reasons for the preference? (E.g. more accessible, more informative etc.)

5. Do you feel like you come across a lot of political information?

6. Deliberate?

7. Did you read most of it or ignore it?

8. How useful have you found information?

9. More likely to search for further information if you find political news online rather than in traditional media?

10. Why do you use some social media and some websites but not others?

11. Actively follow politicians on Twitter/Facebook?

12. Bias etc. Does it make a difference if it’s traditional media vs. online media?

13. Do you discuss politics with others much? In person or online? Preference?
14. What information do you see directly from politicians/parties?

15. Have you had any direct contact with politicians/parties? informative?


(Eds.), *Kicking the tyres: The New Zealand general election and electoral referendum of 2011* (pp. 234-246). Wellington: Victoria University Press.


