“I don’t like it and I think it’s useless, people discussing politics on Facebook”: Young Swedes’ understandings of social media use for political discussion

# Details

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## Sample

26 upper secondary school students aged 17 and 18 from a medium-sized city in Sweden.

## Implications For Policy Makers About

Other

## Other PolicyMaker Implication

Political social-media engagement of young people

## Implications For Stakeholders About

Researchers

# Abstract

Western democracies have seen a decrease in political participation, with young people singled out as the most problematic group. But young people are also the most avid users of online media. It has therefore been argued that online media could be used to evoke their interest in politics, and thus contribute to the reinvigoration of democratic citizenship. Using a mixed qualitative methods approach, this article takes a closer look at 26 young Swedes’ experiences and understandings of social media, especially Twitter and Facebook, as used for political discussions. Compared to the average Swedish 17 to 18-year-olds, the participants are relatively interested in civic and political questions. By focusing on this segment, the article mirrors the experiences of an understudied group – young people who are interested in politics but not engaged. The participants were skeptical about social media as used in relation to politics, and expressed doubts about their suitability and usefulness. Four themes were identified, where three have to do with perceived risks: for conflict, misunderstandings and deceit. The participants also expressed the idea of online political activities as being less authentic than their offline equivalents. The idea that young people want and expect something that political organizations cannot live up to is one of the most dominant discourses that characterize the discussion on youth political participation today. However, while some properties of social media fit well into what young people have been found to prefer, for the participants, negative traits seem to outweigh the positive ones, thus discouraging them from participating.

# Outcome

"...the young people in this study are less convinced of the suitability of social media for political discussions. In the analysis, four themes were identified, three of which have to do with perceived risks: of conflict, misunderstandings and deceit. There is also an idea of online activism and activities as being less authentic and valuable than their offline equivalents. Taken together, the themes make the participants disinclined to use social media for political discussions.... The idea that young people want and expect something that political organizations cannot (or will not) live up to is one of the most dominant discourses that characterize the discussion on youth political participation today. However, as this article has shown, it is not as simple as just creating spaces for political discussion on social media. Young people may be used to social media, and some of these media's characteristics involve what young people prefer in political online venues – as suggested in previous research. At the same time, other traits make them less suited for political discussion, to the extent that at least our participants choose to remain silent." (Author, in Discussion)