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CLOSING THE GAP?

Twitter as an instrument for connected representation

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Questions over the potential of the internet in opening up new opportunities for online campaigning and citizen engagement in the political process have been the focus of much research in political communication. Early studies into this phenomenon simply indicated that official online campaigns tended to replicate the one-way communicative patterns that we have become familiar with in offline campaigning; i.e. they offered few real opportunities for citizen engagement (Coleman, 2001; Gibson, Nixon & Ward, 2003; Jackson, 2007). The successful use of social media and the internet during the 2008 Obama U.S. Election Campaign, however, has seemed to breathe new life back into the debate. Findings suggest that social media are providing new opportunities for citizen engagement in politics (Smith, 2009).

Indeed, social media have increasingly become a prominent tool for parties and candidates to provide information, mobilize their base and connect to the public directly (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Lilleker & Jackson, 2010). As such, politicians avoid being dependent on traditional communication channels like news media, thus in some ways remaining in control over their political messages (Broersma & Graham, 2012). More positively, we can interpret this shift as a response to the growing disconnect between citizens and politicians. As Flickinger and Studlar (2007) maintain, in many Western democracies, traditional politics increasingly suffers from a decline in interest and participation. Coleman's (2005) survey, for example, found close to three-quarters of British citizens felt disconnected from parliament (cf. Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2011). Consequently, governments, parties and politicians have been increasingly

turning to social media as a means of closing the gap. As David Milliband, Labour Party leader, states on his blog: 'This blog is my attempt to help bridge the gap – the growing and potentially dangerous gap – between politicians and the public. It will show what I'm doing, what I'm thinking about, and what I've read, heard or seen for myself which has sparked interest or influenced my ideas' (op. cit. Coleman & Moss, 2008: 9).

Social media are considered by some scholars as a potentially effective means of improving the relationship between citizens and their representatives (cf. Coleman & Blumler 2009). This belief stems from the inherent nature of Web 2.0 technologies, which encourage actively contributing, collaborating, social networking and interacting. Citizens are no longer viewed as passive receivers of political information, but rather as actively engaging in political processes, thus altering the traditional relationship between political elites and citizens. With the rise of the digital media culture, we have seen a dramatic increase in the popularity of social media such as weblogs and wikis, and in social media applications and services such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. In response, politicians have slowly begun tapping into this bottom-up culture by increasingly adopting participatory approaches, particularly during election time. However, it has yet to be seen whether these new possibilities will result in changing trends in political engagement. To what extent are politicians adopting and harnessing the participatory potential of these online spaces?

We begin to address this question by investigating political candidates' use of one particular social media: Twitter. Twitter, a micro-blogging service and social networking site, has become one of the most popular forms of social media, and politicians are increasingly adopting it. However, studies on how politicians use Twitter are scant. Much of the empirical research focuses on the networks and patterns of interaction that emerge via an analysis of specific hashtags

(Burgess & Bruns, 2012; Larsson & Moe, 2011; Small, 2011) in which politicians are just one of the many actors. Studies that focus on how politicians behave are either based on a network analysis (Vergeer, Hermans & Sams, 2011), or focus on party leaders (Small, 2010) or sitting MPs/legislators (Golbeck, Grimes & Rogers, 2010; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011). What is missing is a more comprehensive investigation into how candidates, both incumbents and challengers, use Twitter during election time, especially focusing on the content of tweets.

In this chapter, we present a typology of the tweeting behaviour of candidates as a means of analysing the extent to which politicians are harnessing the potential of social media to actively interact with their constituents. Our research, which included content analysis of tweets (n = 13,637) from all the Conservative and Labour tweeting candidates during the 2010 U.K. General Election, focused on four aspects of tweets: type (normal post, interaction, retweet, retweet with comment); interaction (with, e.g. a politician, journalist, citizen); function (e.g. updating, promoting, advice giving, debating); and topic. Additionally, a qualitative reading on the use of personal tweets was carried out. By examining candidates' tweeting behaviour, we show that British politicians still mainly use Twitter as a unidirectional form of communication. They are neglecting the possibility this social network offers for, what we call, *connected representation*.

Social media and connected representation

Political communication has grown increasingly complex over the past decades. The changing relationship between politicians, journalists and citizens can be conceptualized as consisting of both a horizontal and a vertical dimension, in which the political elite and the traditional media work together but also compete with each other, and at the same time interact with the public (Brants & Voltmer, 2011). The vertical dimension is of particular interest in this chapter as it re-

fers to the relationship between the political elite and citizens. Brants and Voltmer argue that this relationship is going through a process of 'de-centralization'. They maintain that 'as citizens increasingly challenge the legitimacy and credibility of institutionalized politics […], they are turning away from "high politics" towards alternative or simply non-political spheres of communication' (2011: 8).

Indeed, we are witnessing the emergence of new relationships and new roles between politicians and citizens, resulting in new problems and challenges. One of the main challenges is to bridge the growing gap between politicians and citizens. Over the past several decades, there has been a growing rift between political institutions and those they serve, exhibited by declining voter turnout, decreased engagement in traditional political organizations, lower levels of public participation in civic life, and a collapse in political attachments (Coleman, 2005; Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Flickinger & Studlar, 2007). Moreover, citizens are increasingly turning away from political news in general as newspaper readership and television news viewership has been in decline (cf. OECD, 2010).

How do we explain these changes in behaviour? There are no doubts that multiple factors are at play, and there is no shortage of reasons offered by the literature. That said, one of the driving forces behind all this is a change in public attitude; citizens are distrusting and cynical of media and political institutions (Brants, 2012). Coleman (2005) empirically shows via a national survey that politicians in the U.K. are failing to build meaningful connections with their constituents; 70 per cent said they did not trust politicians. British citizens felt their MPs were too distant, invisible, alien, arrogant and partisan.

In response to this growing feeling of disconnect, Coleman (2005; Coleman & Blumler, 2009) coined the term 'direct representation' to prescribe a closer, more conversational relation-

ship between politicians and their constituents. He discusses the potential of online participatory media as a means of facilitating this type of relationship – a possible remedy for closing the gap between the two. As Coleman and Blumler (2009: 80) argue, social media offer 'citizens the prospect of representative closeness, mutuality, coherence and empathy, without expecting them to become full-time participating citizens'. However, contrary to Coleman, we feel that representation could never be direct and that this might also miss the essence of the transformation that social media currently establish in political communication. If we want to understand how social media are transforming political representation, the insight that politicians and their constituents are now united in a lasting network of mutual connections is – in our opinion – key. Therefore, we introduce the concept of connected representation.

In contrast to the traditional principal-agent model, social media such as Twitter make it possible for representation to be rooted in lasting connections between citizens and representatives; it creates a sense of closeness, visibility and continuity. Twitter is an open system; citizens can follow their candidates and vice versa without necessarily being forced into a reciprocal relationship, while non-followers can easily browse the network's content. There are arguably existing mechanisms of continuous representation such as MP surgeries offline, and email and e-democracy initiatives online already in place. However, Twitter makes the process more public, centralized and user-friendly for both politician and citizen. Regarding the latter, it requires fewer resources than many traditional mechanisms.

Twitter not only fosters continuity, but it also cultivates a two-way communicative process. As Coleman (2005) argues, representation requires a conversation, not just a consultation. Representatives need to find ways of tapping into the everyday political talk that takes place among the public (Graham, 2011). This requires the development of shared and trusted spaces

like Twitter where collaborative interaction between representatives and citizens can unfold and develop (without interference from the media). Such online spaces open up a new means by which citizens can hold candidates accountable for their actions; it may encourage an on-going obligation to account to, and hear accounts from, citizens. This could allow a candidate too to develop a sense of community by, for example, interacting, sharing information and requesting public input. However, the opportunities for direct communication all hinge on how candidates use Twitter. To what extent are politicians using Twitter to support a more open-ended, direct and conversational relationship with citizens?

The tweeting candidate

We address the above question by discussing our findings from an analysis of Conservative and Labour candidates' use of Twitter during the 2010 U.K. Election Campaign. First, we provide a brief overview of the volume and frequency of tweeting candidates. We then discuss how candidates used Twitter and introduce our typology of their tweeting behaviours. Finally, we explore the 'personal' in candidate tweets. Due to space restrictions, we have chosen to limit the variables discussed to a comparison between the two parties. Consequently, variables such as gender and incumbency are not addressed in this chapter (see Graham et al. 2012).

Who was using twitter?

As Table 1 indicates, 20 per cent of candidates twittered at least one tweet two weeks prior to the election with Labour producing slightly more tweeting candidates. These 254 candidates posted 13,637 tweets during this period (see Table 2). Not only were there more Labour candidates on Twitter, they also posted substantially more tweets, accounting for 62 per cent of tweets and av-

eraging 62 tweets per candidate in comparison 44 tweets for the Conservatives. However, averages are slightly misleading given the divergence in posting rates among candidates.

[Insert Table 1 & 2 about here]

As a means of providing more nuances, Table 3 provides the rate and distribution of tweets. As is shown, 40 per cent of candidates posted between 11-50 tweets, while 86 per cent posted less than 100 tweets during the two weeks prior to the election. The three most active candidates, posting 400 plus tweets, were Kerry McCarthy (Labour, 533), Tom Watson (Labour, 463) and Louise Mensch (Conservative, 422). Labour clearly had the most prolific tweeting candidates; 25 of the 37 candidates posting more than 100 tweets were from the Labour Party. Labour's use of Twitter is consistent with Vergeer, Hermans and Sams's (2011) findings, which suggest that members of progress and centre parties are more likely to adopt new media technology.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

Candidates' tweeting behaviour

To find out if politicians were seizing the opportunities of connected representation, we analysed if candidates were interacting with voters or simply broadcasting their messages. As Table 4 shows, 31 per cent of all tweets were in the form of interaction. There was a clear difference between the two parties. Conservative candidates tended to use Twitter mainly to broadcast; 82 per cent of tweets represented either a normal post, retweet or retweet with comment. Labour, on the

other hand, used Twitter substantially more often to interact with others, representing 38 per cent of their tweets. One might assume that the more candidates use Twitter, the more likely they are to build a network and therefore interact with others more frequently. This was the case for Labour; interaction was the most frequent tweet type for slightly less than two-thirds of their prolific tweeting candidates. However, for the Conservatives, this represented only two candidates: Michael Fabricant (132) and Charlotte Vere (203). The difference here may have something to do with Labour's push to use social media already back in early 2009 (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011). Consequently, Labour politicians were early adapters, allowing them more time to develop their use of Twitter.

[Insert Table 4 about here]

What topics were candidates tweeting about? As Figure 1 indicates, nearly three-quarters of tweets were about campaign and party affairs. This included campaigning activities (e.g. updates from campaign events, campaigning misconduct, polling, media coverage) and party affairs in general (e.g. coalition partners, leadership). Though we would expect campaign and party affairs to be a popular topic, the low level of policy talk is disappointing. It is this vacuum of policy talk which is seen by some to be one of the causes of distance and cynicism between politicians and citizens. Beyond this topic, there were some slight differences between parties. For both, economy and business was the next common topic, representing 4 and 6 per cent of Labour and Conservative tweets respectively. However, the remaining topics, which accounted for more than one per cent of the tweets each, varied between the two parties. For Labour, it was health and social welfare (3%), government (2.3%), civil and human rights (1.9%), infrastructure

(1.7%) and education (1.6%), while for the Conservatives, it was immigration (2.2%), health and social welfare (1.4%), EU (1.2%) and infrastructure (1%).

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

To refine the principal distinction between interacting and broadcasting, and to understand in more depth the tweeting behaviour of candidates, all 13,637 tweets were hand-coded using 14 coding categories for behaviour. Based upon these empirical findings, we present a typology of their tweeting behaviour in Table 5.

[Insert Table 5 about here]

The most frequent behaviour was updating, accounting for slightly more than a quarter of tweets. This included tweets where candidates posted an update from the campaign trail such as status or location updates and reports on campaign events, as the example below illustrates:

Good canvassing in Haslemere yesterday, visiting Frensham, Wrecclesham, Godalming & North Farnham today
Jeremy Hunt (@Jeremy_Hunt), Conservative, May 1st, 10:06

Updating was slightly more common among Conservative candidates, particularly among infrequent posters (posting less than 50 tweets).

Twitter conveniently allows candidates to post daily real-time updates in a virtual public space, which is difficult to do via traditional media outlets. Updating too potentially creates visibility for a candidate and possibly even fosters a sense of closeness between a candidate and the public. It may cultivate a sense of inclusion in the candidate's campaign activities, as though they are out there canvassing and knocking on doorsteps with them.

The second most common behaviour was critiquing, representing 19 per cent of tweets. This typically included tweets in which a candidate criticized, challenged or contradicted another politician, party or organization. Much of this consisted of partisan attacks, as the two examples below illustrate:

GB: "I do know how to run the economy" - yeah, you know how to run it into the ground #leadersdebate
Louise Mensch (@louisebagshawe), April 29th, 21:34

Brown claims he brought down the basic rate of income tax. But he doubled income tax for the poorest workers. #leadersdebate
Eric Pickles (@EricPickles), April 29th, 22:00

Critiquing of this nature was much more prevalent among Conservatives than Labour. This finding reflects the fact that the Conservatives were the challenging party to power. Moreover, about a third of these attacks were in response to the televised Prime Ministerial Debates (the first of their kind in the U.K.). For many of the tweeting candidates, the debates sparked these types of partisan attacks, which were often quite superficial (e.g. attacks on style and performance); per-

haps the same type of partisan performances as seen in Westminster that often turn people off politics.

For Labour, these types of attacks were frequently directed at the news media. The example below typifies such attacks:

Wouldn't it be dreadful for the media if they had to report on issues and policies instead of speculating about a hung parliament?
Tom Harris (@TomHarrisMP), Labour, April 25th, 11:10

This is no surprise given that, with the exception of the *Mirror*, Labour faced a hostile press. For some candidates, Twitter became a platform for attacking the press. For example, Tom Watson posted a substantial number of tweets criticizing British news media.

Because it was so partisan, this behaviour seemed to offer little in the way of facilitating connected representation. As Coleman (2005: 12) argues, citizens 'want to join a conversation, not take part in a rhetorical version of *Gladiator*'. In this sense, Twitter became a playground for a one-way rhetorical sword fight. Many candidates complained about this behaviour, yet ironically, they were themselves doing it. Moreover, the nature of Twitter (i.e. the 140 character limit) seems to be more conducive to superficial attacks as opposed to substantial critical arguments on issues.

Promoting was another common behaviour identified by the analysis. This included tweets in which a candidate promoted him/herself, a fellow politician, the party or other organization. In addition to the typical party poster promotion, candidates frequently promoted the ability, skills or performance of themselves or their party leader:

Offers of support are flying in now, it seems the good people of Middlesbrough want a young vibrant MP who has a track record of delivering.
John Walsh (@JohnWalsh4MP), Conservatives, April 26th, 10:47

Who needs sleep when GB steps up with an outstanding speech - that's why he is leader, he's back! http://tinyurl.com/2d4v6mz #NECambsh
Peter Roberts (@Roberts4NECambs), Labour, May 4th, 2:02

Campaign promotion is a traditional broadcasting behaviour used during election time, and Twitter provides candidates with another communicative platform to promote themselves and their party. That said, unlike traditional media outlets, promotion via Twitter is free and direct.

Another behaviour identified under broadcasting was position taking, which accounted for 6 per cent of tweets. This included tweets in which a candidate posted his/her opinion, argument or the party position on a political issue, as the examples below illustrate:

Cons will empower local councils to make mini parks from green spaces, limit gravel extraction, set housing numbers and density
Michael Fabricant (@Mike_Fabricant), Conservatives, April 26th, 12:14

It was important to take action to prevent re-possessions http://tinyurl.com/2cmljg4
David Kidney (@davidkidney), Labour, April 22nd, 16:40

The second example represents a common trend under position taking. Candidates would often drop a link to their blog/website where a more detailed account of their position was located. The 140 character limit might explain why candidates did not post their positions on political issues as frequently as one might hope.

The final behaviour under broadcasting was disseminating information, which represented 3 per cent of tweets. This included tweets where a candidate provided news (typically by dropping links to new stories) or other factual information (e.g. government reports). One of the appealing characteristics of Twitter is that it allows a candidate to disseminate information directly (unmediated) to citizens. Ironically, when candidates did post information, it was predominately British newspaper articles.

The second group of behaviours and main indicator for connected representation was interacting. As mentioned above, it accounted for nearly a third of tweets. As Table 6 shows, when candidates did interact, it was largely with members of the public (citizens). There were two noteworthy differences. First, Labour candidates used Twitter substantially more often to interact with party activists. This finding is in line with the Labour Party's online campaign strategy, which emphasized using the internet to mobilize their base (Straw, 2010). Second, Labour candidates interacted more with lobbyists than Conservatives did. This partly has to do with the fact that Labour was in power since 1997; they had the power to create policies thus leading to closer relationships with lobbyists.

[Insert Table 6 about here]

The most common type of interaction was acknowledging (10% of tweets). This included tweets in which a candidate thanked, complimented or provided words of encouragement or success to another person(s) or organization. Thanking party activists and voters for their support was the dominant behaviour here, accounting for nearly three-quarters of these tweets. There were several candidates that we labelled as 'acknowledgers'. When interacting (particularly with the public), these candidates had the habit of repeatedly thanking or complimenting. Whether this was a public relations strategy or a sincere communicative practice, these candidates did give the impression that they were a 'nice person'.

Similar to critiquing, attacking/debating was another behaviour identified by the analysis, accounting for 7 per cent of tweets. When candidates attacked and debated, it was mostly with members of the opposing party or journalists. Moreover, as the example below reveals, the topics of these debates were mostly confined to campaign and party affairs:

@IainWhiteley31 Listen.... can you Lib Dems just please stop telling us who should lead our party? It's not your call. Thank you.
Kerry McCarthy (@KerryMP), Labour, April 27th, 1:49 AM

Similar to the example above, most of these exchanges lacked continuity; i.e. they were typically one-off interactions.

Though not as common as attacking, candidates did on occasion engage in debate. Charlotte Vere and Eric Joyce (Labour) are two good examples of 'debaters'. Charlotte Vere on numerous occasions engaged in lengthy debates with opposing politicians, while Eric Joyce spent many of his tweets on debating with the public. However, overall, debates on Twitter were far

from the Habermasian ideal. Not only did they lack continuity, they tended to be highly partisan (often ad hominem attacks) and focused mostly on party and campaign affairs. Extended debates on substantial issues were rare. Again, this might have something to do with 140 character restriction. Twitter seems not to be the ideal communicative space for debate. Indeed, many candidates hinted at this, as the example below shows:

@Leezi why don't you email me at sarahportsmouthnorth@googlemail.com and we can have a proper discussion about this?
Sarah McCarthy-Fry (@Smccarthyfry), Labour, May 3rd, 10:18

Another type of behaviour under interacting was mobilizing and organizing (3% of tweets). First, this included tweets where a candidate called for direct action, typically to sign a petition or to join the campaign team. Regarding the latter, unlike the Conservatives, Labour candidates on occasions used Twitter to mobilize their base, mainly to recruit volunteers for campaign activities. Again, the Labour Party's online communicative strategy is reflected to some extent in our dataset. Candidates too used Twitter to organize and direct campaign activities. Labour candidates Maryam Khan, Stella Creasy, Nick Bent and Andrew Gwynne were good examples of 'mobilizers/organizers'.

Overall, Twitter seemed to be an effective tool for mobilizing and organizing the party base. Moreover, similar to updating, such behaviour may also create a sense of closeness with the public; citizens are able to 'move behind the scenes' of organizing campaign activities.

Another behaviour identified under interacting was advice giving and helping (2% of tweets). This included tweets where a candidate recommended something, gave advice to another

person or helped someone in general. Much of the advice and help was concerning the election (e.g. postal ballots, voting districts, hustings). In one case, a British citizen living in Singapore requested help from Kerry McCarthy regarding his postal ballot. There were occasions when helping moved beyond issues concerning the election. Labour candidate Stella Creasy was active helping people in her community, as the example below illustrates:

Right- need work exp places in civil engineering, banking and with London underground. Who's going to help me help my boys?
@stellacreasy, April 23rd 21:47

Eric Joyce, for example, engaged in a lengthy conversation with a young aspiring journalist, providing him with tips, while Liz Kendall (Labour) on several occasions even gave advice on how to sew.

The final and least frequent behaviour was consulting, accounting for 1 per cent of tweets. This included tweets where a candidate requested public input on a specific political issue or on what mattered to his/her constituents more generally. Both Stella Creasy and David Kidney are excellent examples of using Twitter for consulting citizens. The latter thus gained insight from nurses on the recent changes to the NHS.

Overall, advice giving/helping and consulting are things that candidates have always done. However, Twitter makes these personal exchanges between candidate and constituent/citizen public. It allows candidates to create a sense of accessibility, thereby facilitating what Coleman and Blumler (2009) call 'mutuality'. It feels as though they are 'in touch' and just one

tweet away. However, given the infrequency of such behaviour, the potential benefits of mutuality via Twitter were largely missed.

The personal in candidates' tweets

One way candidates can bridge the distance between themselves and citizens and create a sense of familiarity is to tweet about personal issues. British voters expressed a desire for a more accessible representative who resembles their electorate (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Coleman, 2005). Giving citizens a glimpse into a candidate's personal life might thus be a beneficial strategy to raise confidence and establish a closer relationship with the public. Adding a personal flavour to political comments might convey the impression that politicians are grounded in reality and know about people's concerns because they are 'just like us'.

In our dataset, 6 per cent of tweets were purely personal. This is in line with previous studies (Golbeck, Grimes & Rogers, 2010; Small, 2010). These tweets contained no direct political information; the topics discussed were mainly leisure, family and popular culture, which is similar to findings from Coleman and Moss's analysis of politicians' blogs (2008). For example, Conservative MP Louise Mensch twittered about her favourite sporting activity:

"Running. It's amazing. Try it."
@louisebagshawe, May 3rd, 21:50

This tweet triggered a series of interaction with followers who wanted to know the specifics of Mensche's running habits, and asked questions and advice on how to start running.

The personal too often became intermingled with the political. Two communicative patterns were identified. First, some tweets contained both a personal and a political function. In most cases, an update from the campaign trail was combined with personal information; for example, when a candidate twittered that he/she was going to bed after a long day of campaigning. Others found more original ways of integrating the personal with the political, as the example below illustrates:

"Two year old woke at five. Now she's asleep. Her candidate dad is not. Don't forget to vote Labour today." Tom Watson (@tom_watson), May 6th, 7:40

While this tweet can evoke intimate attachment to others who recognize this personal situation, it might also stimulate them to vote, and preferably for Labour.

Second, politicians used personal experiences to comment, to critique or to express their thoughts and feelings about particular political issues. These tweets mainly had a strategic purpose and were aimed to a lesser extent at establishing a relationship with citizens. Eric Joyce, for example, used an anecdote about his children to criticise the Liberal Democrats:

"My 8 year old twinnies; "When did the Liberals last win an election?" Me - "nearly 100 years ago." Them; "So, basically, they're rubbish"
@ericjoyce, May 1st, 21:56

Besides making fun of other parties, candidates also used their personal experiences to draw attention to more substantial issues:

"My aunty telling me how she couldn't work without child tax credits towards her twins"

@Maryam4BuryNth, May 2nd, 23:00

Here, Maryam Khan uses a life experience from one of her relatives to illustrate a societal issue and to convey the feeling that she has encounters with 'ordinary people' and has first hand knowledge of their problems (cf. Coleman & Moss, 2008).

Overall, the exposure of the personal in candidates' tweets was certainly not a dominant feature, but it still indicates a remarkable trend. Self-disclosure, showing empathy and emotional bonding are increasingly important in political communication in a postmodern democracy. They may be relevant strategies in attempting to bridge the gap between politicians and citizens (van Santen & van Zoonen, 2009; Coleman & Blumler, 2009).

Towards connected representation?

In theory, Twitter offers the opportunity for connected representation. It allows politicians to establish relationships with citizens and to engage with them in a permanent dialogue. Sharing political opinions and personal experiences, being attentive and responsive might not just be beneficial to the performance of individual politicians but also increase democratic engagement. By treating citizens not just as voters who have to be convinced and canvassed only during election time, but as fellow participants in public debate who can share valuable knowledge and experiences with those who represent them, a more participatory and conversational democracy could be established. While physical political engagement as shown by party memberships and attendance of political meetings is on the decline, political participation through virtual social net-

works might offer a solution for a waning democracy. We might thus enter a stage of reciprocal connected representation in which 'through dialogue, debate and argument, the public retains a degree of authority over representatives, even between elections' (Coleman, 2005: 9).

Our findings indicate that politicians have discovered Twitter as a tool to connect with citizens. One fifth of the Conservative and Labour candidates in the 2010 U.K. elections tweeted in the two weeks prior to the ballot. However, about 70 per cent of tweets were used for broadcasting political messages, mostly to update voters about the campaign, promote the parties or critique political opponents. This gives politicians more control over their messages because they are now able to bypass former intermediaries; while journalists can monitor tweets for a potential quote or gaffe they are no longer the traditional gatekeepers of political discourse (Broersma & Graham, 2012). While this seems to be a major advantage, they are still obeying the classic paradigm of one-way, 'broadcast-megaphone', communication. Interaction with citizens that profits from the participatory potential of Twitter is far scarcer. Only 19 per cent of the Conservative candidates' tweets were interactive by nature, while the Labour candidates applied this kind of tweeting behaviour more often: 38 per cent of their tweets. However, the large majority of these interactions related to organizing the campaign: candidates acknowledged their voters, requested information and mobilized help with canvassing. Only 6 and 11 per cent of Conservatives and Labour's tweets were used to enter a debate with voters, rival politicians, journalists or lobbyists.

Twitter has thus without a doubt enlarged the reach of political communication, allowing politicians to connect with an interested group of following voters and target them directly. They use tweets to broadcast information about the campaign and informing citizens about their political views, sometimes spiced with a personal flavour. However, we should not overestimate the potential of Twitter in this respect; being visible in mass media outlets like television and news-

papers – even through a cited tweet – still generates much more publicity than being present on Twitter. For many politicians, the interplay between social media and traditional mass media outlets explains their presence on Twitter (Broersma & Graham, 2012). Furthermore, our data suggest that they still hardly harness the participatory potential of Twitter. It is still very uncommon that politicians engage in discussions or conversations with citizens, let alone that these exchanges are constructive and open-ended, or that representatives demonstrate the ability to listen and to be accountable. Evidence of 'representative closeness, mutuality, coherence and empathy' (Coleman & Blumler, 2009: 80) is relatively uncommon among British candidates. Such findings are not too surprising given that such behaviour among politicians is also scarce offline.

Our sample of two weeks before the general election might obscure the situation. It could be possible that the number of tweeting politicians and tweets (temporary) rises before the ballot and these 'newcomers' might only use Twitter in a traditional broadcasting manner, as opposed to politicians that have been active for a while and have developed a network. The overrepresentation of Labour in both the number of tweets and the level of interaction seems to indicate that this party's organized early adaption of social media allows its candidates to be more communicative. Moreover, it might be that an election campaign triggers broadcasting of political messages and campaign updates, while politicians on Twitter might be more responsive to their followers and interacting with them in 'off peak' periods. More longitudinal and internationally comparative research of the content of politician's tweets thus seems necessary.[1]

Our findings, however, indicate that a small seed towards connected representation has been planted. There were a handful of candidates who used Twitter to connect with the public. Labour MP Stella Creasy, for example, used Twitter predominately to interact with her constituents by mobilizing, helping and consulting them. These candidates tapped into the potential

Twitter offers for creating a closer and more connected relationship with citizens. The extent to which this type of practice will grow and spread among politicians at large, however, remains to be seen.

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TABLE 1**:** Number of tweeting candidates

Party	Number tweeting candidates	Number of candidates	Percentage tweeting candidates
Labour	136	631	21.6
Conservatives	118	631	18.7
Total	254	1262	20.1

TABLE 2: Number of tweets

Party	Number of tweets	Percentage of total tweets	M	SD
Conservatives	5168	37.9	43.80	61.77
Labour	8469	62.1	62.27	87.77
Total	13637	100	53.69	77.20

TABLE 3: Rate and distribution of tweets

	Tweet rate			Tweet distribution		
Tweets	Participant frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent	Posting total	Percent	Cumulative percent
1	14	5.5	5.5	14	0.1	0.1
2-10	58	22.9	28.4	337	2.5	2.6
11-50	102	40.2	68.6	2707	19.8	22.4
51-100	43	16.9	85.5	3118	22.8	45.2
101-200	23	9.1	94.6	3103	22.8	68.0
201-400	11	4.3	98.9	2940	21.6	89.6
>400	3	1.1	100	1418	10.4	100
Total	254			13637		

TABLE 4: Type of tweets posted

Tweet type	Percentage of tweets		
	Conservative	Labour	Total
Normal post	64.0	47.4	53.7
Interaction	18.5	37.8	30.5
Retweet	16.5	12.1	13.8
Retweet with comment	1.0	2.7	2.0

TABLE 5: Candidates' tweeting behaviour in percentages

Broadcasting				Interacting			
Behaviour	Percentage of Tweets			Behaviour	Percentage of Tweets		
	Conservatives	Labour	Total		Conservatives	Labour	Total
Updating	30.0	24.9	26.9	Acknowledging	7.1	11.0	9.5
Critiquing	26.1	15.2	19.1	Attacking/Debating	5.2	7.9	6.8
Promoting	15.8	17.7	17.0	Organizing/Mobilizing	1.7	2.8	2.7
Position taking	5.1	6.9	6.1	Advice giving/Helping	0.5	2.6	1.8
Information dissemi-nating	2.5	3.5	3.1	Consulting	0.4	1.8	1.2

TABLE 6: Who are candidates interacting with?

	Percentage of interaction tweets		
	Conservatives	Labour	Total
Public	63.6	53.8	56.0
Politician/Candidate	17.0	17.7	17.5
Journalist/Media	12.0	11.7	11.8
Party Activist	2.5	7.4	6.2
Lobbyist	2.5	6.0	5.2
Expert	0.8	1.5	1.3
Industry	1.1	0.8	1.0
Celebrity	0.5	1.0	0.9
Authority	0.0	0.1	0.1

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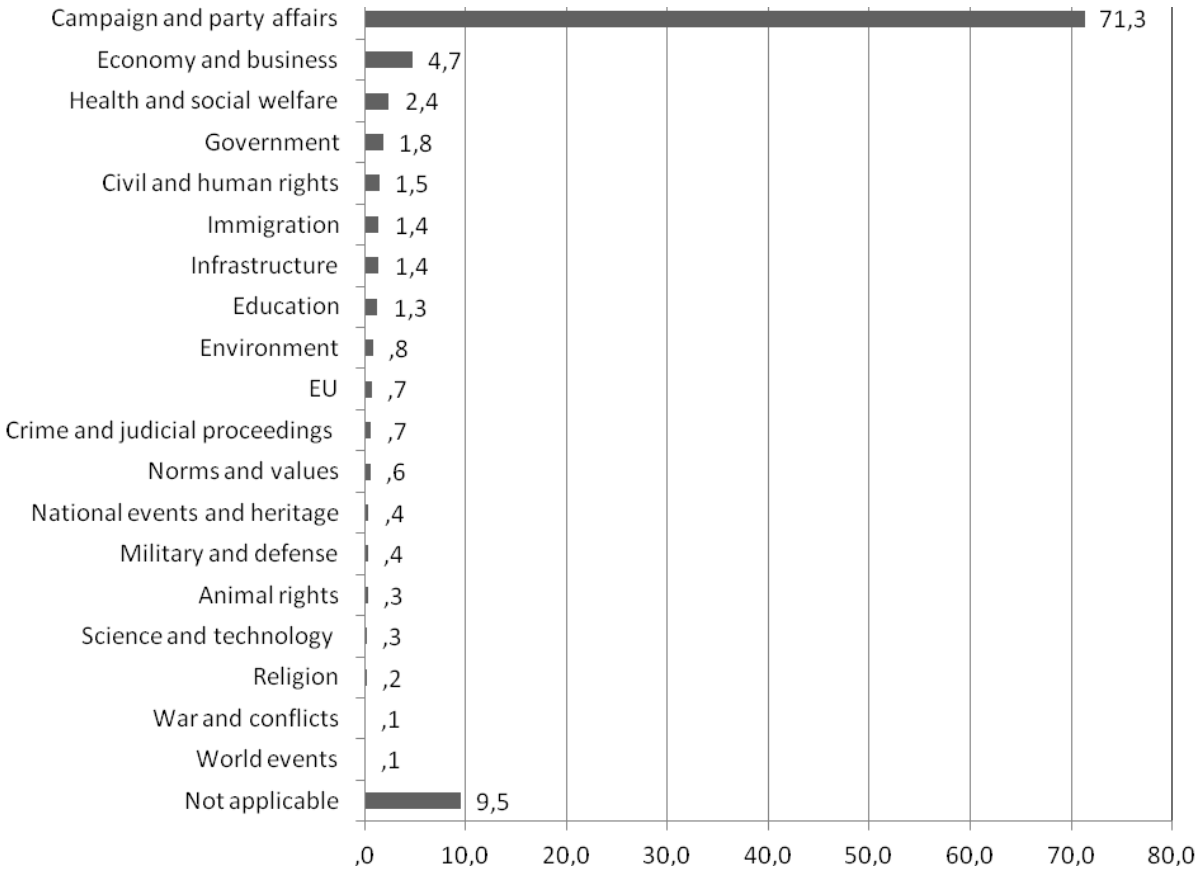
FIGURE 1: Topic of candidates' tweets



Notes

1. This chapter is based on a larger comparative project. In subsequent papers, we will compare the use of Twitter by British politicians with that of their Dutch colleagues. Our first results indicate that Dutch politicians are more interactive and responsive than in the U.K. case (cf. Broersma & Graham, 2012)