

Facebook and local newspapers' effect on local politicians' popularity

**Eiri Elvestad and Marius Rohde Johannessen,
University College of Southeast Norway**

Institutt for økonomi, historie og samfunnsvitenskap – Universitetet i Sørøst-Norge

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Abstract

While there has been much research on how national politicians' popularity is related to their participation in both traditional and social media, less research has been undertaken in order to understand the role of media for local politicians. In this paper, we discuss how local politicians' appearance in local newspapers, on Facebook and how their network of Facebook 'friends' can be explanation factors of their popularity in Norwegian local elections. The sample consists of 605 local politicians from two municipalities who were on the list of party candidates in these two municipalities in the 2015 election. Our findings show that the local newspaper is more important for the local politicians' popularity than Facebook, but the politicians' use of Facebook and numbers of Facebook 'friends' show a significant positive correlation with the numbers of preference votes the politicians receive. The effect of Facebook 'friends' on local politicians' popularity shows the importance of connections, which again stresses the need for a greater awareness of the consequences of local politicians' social networks both offline and online in local political processes.

Keywords

Local democracy

Norway

Social capital

local politicians

local newspaper

social network

social media

Introduction

New media technology and social media are changing how politicians communicate with voters (Gibson 2009; Kruikemeier et al. 2016). Most studies have examined various social media channels used for election campaigning at the national level (Hong and Nadler 2012). However, we know less about how local politicians use social media, how traditional media works in a new media environment, and what impact this might have on the outcome of elections. In contrast to their colleagues in national parliaments, for most local politicians, political engagement is not a full-time job, but mostly something undertaken during their leisure time. Because of limited resources, local politicians who expect the effect of social media to be of importance seem to be more active in social media than others (Avery and Graham 2013; Bernhard and Dohle 2015). For local politicians, at least in the Nordic countries, local newspapers are still the main arena for meeting potential voters (Nielsen 2015; Wadbring and Bergstrøm 2015; Karlsen 2017). Visibility in local newspapers may therefore still be of great importance for local politicians' popularity. In Norway, voters seem to agree that social media are not the main information source in local elections (SSB, Statistisk Sentralbyrå (Statistics Norway) 2016). Social media may also play a different role at the local than at the national level. Voters who follow national politicians on social media are most often already convinced who to vote for before they start following the candidate (Spierings and Jacobs 2014). For local politicians, social media such as Facebook, are more than a place where a politician may market his/her candidacy. Facebook is where many

politicians meet their friends, family, neighbours, colleagues etc. and not primarily as a politician. Further, their composition of ‘friends’ on Facebook may express a kind of social capital. Showing off one’s social network and acquaintances is crucial in establishing the status of a ‘local influential’ (Merton 1949) in a local society.

Local preferential voting context offers a particularly interesting opportunity to study the ‘small scale’ interpersonal register of social media such as Facebook. In Norwegian municipal elections, preferential voting is optional. In addition to voting for the party list, voters may cast a personal additional vote to one or more of the local politicians on their party’s list, but they are not obliged to do so. During the last 30 years, there has been an increase in voters who use their opportunity to give certain politicians an extra vote in local elections in Norway (Bergh et al. 2010; Mjelde and Saglie 2017). In 1979, 26.4 per cent cast a preference vote (Christensen et al. 2010), and 42 per cent in 2015 (SSB 2016). Many representatives would have been elected anyway, as the voters mostly support highly ranked party candidates, but a considerable proportion also owe their seats to the preferential votes (Bergh et al. 2010).¹ In this study, we investigate the relation between local politicians’ popularity (measured by preference votes) and their visibility in local newspapers and on the most popular social media channel in Norway, Facebook. The main research question in this study is:

How can local politicians’ visibility in the local newspapers, use of Facebook and network of ‘friends’ on Facebook, explain their popularity among voters?

We use data about local politicians (characteristics and position in local politics), the numbers of preference votes they received, their visibility in local newspapers, Facebook usage and the

numbers of ‘friends’ they have on Facebook. The sample consists of 605 politicians who were on the different party lists² in two Norwegian municipalities in the 2015 local elections.

Preferential voting in local elections

The system of preferential voting makes it possible to influence who is elected without changing the party representation. Preferential voting is first and foremost a European phenomenon (Karvonen 2004).³ While the Nordic countries Finland, Denmark and Sweden have some kind of preferential voting at the parliamentary level, the Norwegian system only has preferential voting as an option in local and regional elections (Kvelland 2015).⁴ In local elections in Norway, voters are not obliged to cast a personal vote, but if they choose to do so they can vote for as many candidates as there are candidates on the list, and they are also allowed to cast a personal vote for a fixed number of candidates from other lists (Christensen et al. 2010). Further, voters are not allowed to vote for any individual candidate more than once, and it is not allowed to delete candidates on the list.⁵ The Norwegian system has been classified as a free list system and as a ‘relatively open’ system (Kolk 2007: 3). However, Christensen et al. (2010) stress that the degree of openness depends on how the local parties/lists choose to present their candidates. To counteract the effects of the preference votes, the political parties may (if desired) favour a limited number of their top candidates. Favoured candidates start out with what is called an ‘additional weight’ (in Norwegian: ‘forhåndskumulert’) from the party, which give them 25 per cent more votes than other candidates before preference votes from the voters are taken into consideration (Christensen et al. 2010).

On a group-level, campaigns to recruit more immigrants or female politicians have had an effect on preference votes and representation in the local democracy (Bergh et al. 2010). In 2011, two contextual factors – the 22 July terrorist attack (where many youth politicians form

the labour party were killed) and a trial in which the voting age was lowered to 16 years in some municipalities, increased the number of young voters and preference votes for young politicians (Saglie et al. 2015). On an individual level, the candidate's stance on important issues and political experience influenced voters who gave preferential votes to local politicians (SSB 2016). Further, Christensen et al. (2010) show that voters and parties are very much in agreement as to the preferred ranking of the candidates. Candidates at the top of the list receive more personal votes than candidates at the bottom, and candidates given additional weight by the parties also get numerous personal votes. Younger candidates are less popular than older candidates, and female candidates receive fewer personal votes than men (Christensen et al. 2010). Finally, the importance of performance in the local media and of having a large network also seem to be important factors for the local candidates (SSB 2016).

The importance of performance in local media

While celebrity politicians who represent the political parties at the national level (parliamentary level) dominate the national media in both national and local election campaigns, the main arena for regional and local politicians is the local media (Skogerbø 2011). Despite decreasing readership, local newspapers still play an important role in providing local political information in the Nordic countries. Nielsen (2015) defines local newspapers as a *keystone medium* – the primary provider of local politics. Even though politicians regularly complain about the quality of local journalism, they still regard the local newspaper as fundamentally important in maintaining the flow of information and exchange of views in the local public sphere (Engan 2015). In the local election year 2015 in Norway, there were 228 newspapers (published in 187 different places), of which 191 offered news online (Høst 2016). Even though the numbers of local newspapers has remained stable during the last ten years, there has been a decrease in readership (Vaage 2016).⁶ In the local election

of 2015, more voters found television to be the most important medium for information about political issues.⁷ Local newspapers remain the most important source for voters concerning information about local politicians (Karlsen 2017). The first hypothesis in this study is:

H1: Local politicians who are more visible in the local newspapers receive more preference votes.

A national study from the Netherlands showed that politicians' use of social media (Twitter) was crucial for the number of preference votes a candidate receives (Spierings and Jacobs 2014). Is there reason to expect the same in a local context in Norway? First, Twitter-use is less common among Norwegians; Facebook is the dominating social medium of which 70 per cent of Norwegians used Facebook on an average day in 2015 (Vaage 2016). Enli and Skogerbø (2013) found that Facebook also was by far the most popular social medium for Norwegian politicians in the local election campaign of 2011. For many local politicians, social media is becoming normalized as it is incorporated into the daily routine. They use social media to receive information and to communicate with their neighbours, family, friends, etc. Merely having a social media account can also have a symbolic value, signalling to voters that a given candidate is modern or, conversely, that (s)he is not old-fashioned (Spiering and Jacobs 2014). Further, especially for young people, Facebook may have become an important source for information about politicians (Enjolras et al. 2013). We therefore expect local politicians who are on Facebook to be more visible and popular among voters.

H2: Local politicians, who are on Facebook, receive more preference votes than those not on Facebook.

Recent research shows that social media have a significant effect on preferential voting, in particular when candidates frequently update and use their accounts (Spierings and Jacobs 2014). We therefore expect the local politicians who frequently updated their Facebook account with political material to receive more preference votes than those who were less frequently political active on Facebook.

H3: Local politicians, who frequently share local election campaign content on Facebook, receive more preference votes than those who are not political active on Facebook.

Given the strong position of local newspapers, we expect that politician's performance in the local newspapers will have a stronger positive effect than their Facebook use. Larsson and Skogerbø's (2016) study of local politician's media use between elections, indicates that while media like Facebook and Twitter have gained considerable popularity among politicians, the bulk of respondents find traditional channels of communication more important. Both national and local newspapers are the primary source of information about the local election (SSB 2016).⁸ Moreover, Facebook has become an important information source for voters but only a minority find Facebook useful for information about the local political candidates (Karlsen 2017). The fourth hypothesis is therefore:

H4: The positive effect of being visible in the local newspaper is stronger than the effect of having a Facebook account and being active there.

On the national level, Karlsen and Enjolras (2016) find that candidates who gain influence in the social media (Twitter) are those who are able to create a synergy between traditional media channels and social media. Skogerbø and Krumsvik (2015) suggest that for local

politicians, social media is less important as a tool for setting the agenda in the local media; but still may be important as a channel in communicating directly with voters.

The importance of social network

Social media have increased the interest for network theories in the field of political communication although the idea of social network as a resource or a kind of competence is not new. In his early work, Robert K. Merton wrote about the 'local influentials' in society, who were influentials, and someone the other citizens turned to for help and advice because they knew many people in the local community (Merton 1949). An individual's social network is also expressed as social capital (Putnam 2000).⁹ On a personal level, the politician's social network in the local community, people they know and have a relation to, can be a useful resource. If many people know the local politicians, and know that he or she is a good person, a person to trust etc., their high social capital in the local community will most likely have an effect upon the citizen's willingness to vote for him or her. Sometimes there is even pressure from the social network on a person to become a council representative, while the person himself or herself may be more reluctant. There are several examples of individuals in local communities who have said yes to become a candidacy in order to 'fill up the bottom of the list' with no intention of being elected, who have received so many preference votes that they ended up as council representatives.

In a Norwegian survey, 57 per cent of the voters agreed that to know a local politician personally, mattered for their willingness to give a personal vote (SSB 2016). But how many people can a politician know personally? According to Dunbar's 'social brain hypothesis', the limit on the number of bilateral relationships of obligation and reciprocity is 150. There are at least two further circles outside this core network. The circle of 500 includes everyone who we would consider as acquaintances, and the outermost circle of 1500 includes everyone

whose face we can put a name to (see for instance Dunbar 2014). This implies cognitive constraints on the size of social networks that even the communication advantages of social media are unable to overcome. In a recent study, Dunbar (2016: 6) found that respondents who had unusually large networks did not increase their numbers of close friends. But, do the ‘friends’ on Facebook have to be close friends in order to be a useful resource for a local politician?

While politicians in the Norwegian parliament have their own professionalized Facebook fan page with thousands of ‘likes’, we expect local politicians to be more like the ordinary Facebook users who have networks of ‘friends’ who they have met personally on at least one occasion. The ties to these ‘friends’ will vary, and while some of these are close friends who the politician meets face-to-face, others are just acquaintances from early school days or someone they met once at a meeting etc. Younger persons use Facebook in a more exploratory way to meet new people more so than the older generation (Brandtzæg et al. 2010). The strength of these ties will of course vary but we argue that there might be ‘strength in the weak ties’ (Granovetter 1973) of the local politicians. While bonding social capital refers to strong connections between tightly knit individuals in a group, such as a family or a political party, bridging social capital refers to the connection between different groups (Putnam 2000). Homophilous bonding (among actors who are similar) represents the strongest connection, while heterophilous bridging social capital (among actors who are dissimilar) generated from weaker ties, produces a more valuable by-product (Lin 2001; McPherson et al. 2001). For local politicians, many casual acquaintanceships can be useful for being a visible politician, but also to be perceived as a person with an extensive network of contacts. With a high number of ‘friends’ there is also a higher probability of having friends who are bridges to social groups or communities which are not the main social community of the local politician.

A third type of social capital, ‘maintained social capital’, refers to the ability to keep one’s connections even when physical proximity is removed (Ellison et al. 2007). The total social network of politicians is certainly not only the network shown in social media, but recent research shows its importance. Voters with local political candidates as Facebook ‘friends’ are more likely than others to give the politicians preference votes (Karlsen 2017). Our last hypothesis builds on the argument above, anticipating that politicians with a wide network of ‘friends’ on Facebook will have greater social capital in the local community, and we therefore expect them to be more popular among voters:

H5: Politicians who have many ‘friends’ on Facebook achieve more preference votes than those with fewer ‘friends’

Data and method

The sample in this study consisted of 605 politicians from two municipalities in Norway.¹⁰ By including two municipalities we increased the sample of local politicians and the variation in the sample. We also avoided collecting data from an untypical municipality, were for instance protest campaigns had a huge influence on the preferential voting (examples in Kvelland 2015). Both municipalities are medium-size cities in the southern Norway that have one daily local newspaper. The population in Municipality 1 is approximately 30,000 while Municipality 2 has a population around 80,000.¹¹ The politicians are individuals who were listed as candidates on the list of twelve different political parties and one independent list in 2015 (see Appendix Table A). 9 per cent of the politicians were given an additional 25 per cent vote by the party (in Norwegian ‘forhåndskumulert’, as previously explained).

We collected data about the politicians from three sources. First, we used information from the municipalities about the politicians on the electoral lists and the result of the local

elections. Second, we collected data about the politicians' visibility in the local newspaper (both online and print versions) in the period from 1 January to 14 September (the day of the election) in 2015. Third, we searched for the politicians on Facebook and assembled data about how many friends they have in their Facebook network, and whether they use Facebook for political campaigning, and if so, to what extent. We have Facebook data only from politicians who had a public/open Facebook profile. The Facebook data were collected the first week following the election.¹² All the data were transferred to a program file for statistical analysis, and anonymized.¹³

Dependent variable

The dependent variable is *the total number of preference votes by voters* (including votes from voters who voted for another political party) achieved by the politicians in the local election of 2015. The variable used in the regression analysis is a weighted variable accounting for different numbers of total votes and the number of politicians in the two municipalities: Municipality 1: 1.81; Municipality 2: 0.78. The variation or the distribution of the values on the preference vote variable is L-shaped, and we log-transform the variable (see Figure A in the appendix). When we use a log transformed dependent variable in the regression analysis, we must interpret the variation in percentages and not in numbers. The format for interpretation is that the dependent variable changes by $100 * (\text{coefficient})$ per cent for a one unit increase in the independent variable, if all other variables in the model are held constant.

Independent variables

The *size of the political party* is a variable showing the percentage of seats achieved by the political party the politician is representing received in 2015. Politicians from parties not

represented are assigned 0 on that variable. The political parties have two strategies to give a politician higher priority. We control for this effect in the analysis. Firstly, we control for whether the politician was placed on the top of the list and given an extra *priority vote on the list*.¹⁴ This is a dummy variable where 1=given priority vote and 0=not given a priority vote. Second, we use a variable measuring the *number on the list* showing where the politician was placed. This is a numeric variable commencing with 1 (bottom of the list). We also use a variable indicating whether the politician was a *representative in the city council in the period 2011–15 period*, given the value 1, otherwise 0.

Visibility in the local newspaper

In order to measure politician's visibility in local newspapers we counted the number of articles where the politicians were mentioned/interviewed, and how many letters to the editor he or she had written in both the printed and the online version of the local newspaper. In the analysis, we use an index variable including appearance in both the online and print version.

This variable does not distinguish between the size, content (news article or letter to the editor), or whether the article contains pictures. Does the politician have a *Facebook account?* (1=Yes, 0=No). We found the politician's Facebook account by searching for their names on Facebook. We used several variations of their names. Pictures were used to make sure we found the correct politician. To measure the politician's use of their *Facebook profile for political campaigning*, we registered political party posts held during the last month prior to the election: (1=5 posts or more; 0=fewer than 5 posts). The *number of Facebook friends* are stated in numbers. We use a log transformed variable of Facebook friends in the analyses (see Figure B in the appendix). The interpretation of this variable has to be treated the same way as the dependent variable (variance in percentage, not numbers).

We also control for *gender*, *age* and from which of the two *municipalities* the politicians are from.

Results

Preference votes cast by voters

The numbers of preference votes for individual candidates varied from zero to more than 3000. The politicians in the larger municipality in this sample, not surprisingly, got more preference votes than politicians from the smaller municipality. The politician who received most preference votes (more than 3000) received more than 2000 votes more than the next politician on the list. The average number of votes in Municipality 1 was 34 personal votes, while the average in Municipality 2 was 71 votes (62 votes if we exclude the outlier – the top-politician).

Fifteen per cent ($N=92$) of these politicians were elected to represent their party in the 2015–19 election period; 44 per cent were also representatives in the city council during the previous electoral period (2011–15). In this sample, 53 politicians were given an additional weight by their party; 23 in Municipality 1, and 30 in Municipality 2. The numbers of politicians who were given additional weight on the list varied between 1 and 4 in Municipality 1, and between 0 and 6 in Municipality 2. In this sample, the larger parties leave more candidate selection in the hands of the voters because they achieved more seats in the council than the numbers of politicians with additional weight. Thus, voters supporting these parties have more to say in the candidate selection process compared to those voting on other party lists.

Visibility in the local newspaper, Facebook use and 'friends' on Facebook

The municipalities in this study each have one daily (weekday) local newspaper presenting news both online and in printed form. Most readers are subscribers, but it is possible to buy the newspapers in grocery stores and elsewhere. Table 1 shows the politicians total performance in the printed or online versions of the paper. Visibility includes news articles where the politicians are sources or are mentioned, and letters to the editor written by the politician or where the politician has been mentioned in the period 1 January to 14 September 2015.

Insert Table 1 about here

Table 1 shows that a total of 51% of the local politicians had been mentioned in the local newspaper at least once in this period. 9% were mentioned more than fifteen times, 9% were mentioned between six and fifteen times; 18% were mentioned two to five times and 15% were mentioned only once. Further, we see that more politicians were mentioned in the printed version of the newspaper; 49% of the local politicians had been mentioned in the printed version but only 31% in the online version.¹⁵

To collect data about Facebook use and numbers of ‘friends’, we visited politician’s Facebook accounts during the four weeks following Election Day. Table 2 shows local politician’s participation on Facebook.

Insert Table 2 about here

Table 2 shows that 72 per cent ($N=428$) of the politicians had a Facebook account we could find when we searched for them by name on Facebook. Younger politicians,¹⁶ females and politicians from larger parties and who are given priority on the party list, more frequently

have a searchable Facebook account. Younger Facebook users are more skilled in their Facebook usage, and seem to be more aware of social privacy issues (Brandtzæg et al. 2010). Younger politicians in this sample reserve the content on their Facebook more often for their ‘friends’¹⁷ although seldom show how many ‘friends’ they have.¹⁸ For those who were on Facebook, both the activity, numbers of ‘friends’ and whether they had organized the Facebook account as an open page or not varied between the politicians. 74 per cent of politicians with a Facebook account showed the numbers of ‘friends’ on their profile. These varied between seven and almost 5000 friends. The mean number of friends was 574 and the median value in the sample was 398 friends.

Only 2% of the politicians had a ‘politician fan page’ only fronting themselves as politicians. 27% of those with an open Facebook account had posted content related to the political campaign (political party advertising, etc.). 18% of the politicians with an open Facebook account had posted more than five posts concerning or relevant to the election campaign during the month prior to the election. Looking at the whole sample (including those without a searchable Facebook account) only 11% of the politicians made active use of Facebook for promoting their political party in the local election campaign 2015. This conforms with earlier studies which have shown that local politicians do not give social media high priority (Bernard and Dohle 2015). We also find that there is a big difference between local politicians with additional weight and the rest. Among the latter, 61% were active and posted more than five political party posts during the last month prior to the election, while only 8% of those without additional weight did the same. The large and dominant parties in Norwegian politics are equipped with more resources and well-organized election campaign machineries that used all types of campaigning tools during the election. The small parties have fewer resources and fewer options for attracting attention as their positions are less decisive in the local power-play (Skogerbø and Krumsvik 2015). This can explain why we

found that 17% of the local politicians from the largest parties and only 7% of those from the minor parties were very active on Facebook during the election campaign.

Insert Table 3 about here

Table 3 shows linear regression models with preference votes as the dependent variable. Model 1 shows a simple model with only gender, age and municipality as the independent variables. The Adjusted R-square tells us that 3.8 per cent of the variance in the number of preference votes can be explained by these variables. The correlation between the gender of the politician and how many preference votes the politician received is not significant. The election survey showed a tendency whereby a higher share of younger voters gave politicians preference votes (SSB 2016).¹⁹ Voters' preferences for local politicians representing their age group might be the reason why in Model 1 we find that older politicians achieve a lower share of preference votes than young and middle-aged voters.

In Model 2, we include the variables measuring the politician's position in their political party and the size of the party the politician is representing. These variables improve the explanation power of the model from 3.8 per cent to 61.6 per cent, showing a strong positive correlation between the size of the political party and preference votes. The larger the political party, the more preference votes the politicians of that party get. Furthermore, we find that politicians who were given additional weight and politicians who are listed near the top of the election list, get more preference votes. The effect of whether the politician 'represented the party in the election period 2011–2015' was also significant.

In Model 3, we include also the local politician's performance in the local newspaper (both online and print). The adjusted R-square tells us that 67.4 per cent of the variation in preference votes can be explained by this model. Politicians who are mentioned more

frequently in local newspapers also acquire more preference votes. Politicians who have been in the local newspaper just once are not getting more personal votes than those who have never been in the newspaper. Where a politician has been mentioned at least twice in the local newspapers, the numbers of preference votes increases. These findings give support to H1. However, when we included visibility in the local newspaper, the effect of council representation (which was significant in Model 2) disappears and the effect of gender is now significant. Council representation should be interpreted to be an antecedent variable informing us that incumbent council representatives are more often in local newspapers. Our finding of a significant gender effect in Model 3, tells us that the female politicians receive a lower share of the preference votes than their male colleagues, which can be interpreted as a consequence of female local politicians' lower visibility in the local newspapers in our sample.

In Model 4, we finally include also Facebook use as an independent variable. The explanatory power of the model increases, and we find a significant positive correlation between whether the politician has a Facebook account or not on the dependent variable. This indicates that the politicians with a Facebook account acquire more preference votes than those without such an account, which support H2. But, as we also observe, the explanatory power of the local newspaper is strongest.

In Model 5, the sample is limited to those who have an open Facebook account where the number of friends is available on their Facebook profile. This model shows a significant positive correlation between politicians who used Facebook actively for political campaigning during the last month prior to the election and numbers of preference votes. The significant positive effect political activity on Facebook gives support to H3. Further, the correlation between Facebook 'friends' and numbers of preference votes is also positive and even stronger. The more friends the politicians have on Facebook, the more preference votes they

receive. The unstandardized B-coefficient²⁰ tells us that if the politician increases the number of Facebook friends by 57, it will increase the number of preference votes by 1. This gives support to H5.

To sum up, the models in Table 3 show us that the politicians' position in the party and the relative size of the political party they represent, explain most of the variance in the variable 'preference votes by the voters'. Further, we find that the local newspapers are still very important for the popularity of the politicians. Facebook use by politicians can also explain some of the variance in preference votes between the politicians. Among those politicians who have an open Facebook account, there is also a positive correlation between whether the politician used Facebook for active political campaigning and how many friends they had. Facebook use and Facebook 'friends' explain some of the variation in personal votes, but performance in local newspapers has the strongest effect. This gives support to H4.

Discussion

In the Norwegian local election in 2015, 42 per cent of voters changed the ballot by employing a preference vote, or where they list candidates from other lists (SSB 2016). In this study, we analysed how politicians' visibility in local newspapers, their use of Facebook and network of 'friends' on Facebook are some of the factors accounting for their popularity among the voters. The main finding is that local newspapers have consolidated their position as the keystone medium (Nielsen 2015). We find a strong correlation between the number of times the politician had been exposed in the local newspaper (print or online) and the number of preference votes. This confirms a survey among voters from 2015 which found the candidate's performance in the local newspaper to be of most importance for information about the local politicians (Karlsen 2017). The top candidates and the candidates from the largest political parties dominated the local newspapers, and they also received most

preference votes, but there are some gender differences. Recent research has shown an underrepresentation of female local politicians, also among the top politicians, in local newspapers (Elvestad 2009). This study highlights how, controlled for the above characteristics, the female local politicians' lower share of the preference votes compared with their male colleagues can be related to their lower visibility in the local newspapers. While Twitter was hardly used by any of the local politicians in this sample, and those who were on Twitter did not employ this actively in the election campaign, 72 per cent of local politicians had a searchable Facebook account. Visibility in the local newspapers had a stronger effect than social media use, but we found significant correlations between Facebook use, numbers of 'friends' on Facebook and preference votes. The politicians who had a searchable Facebook profile, those who used Facebook actively in the political campaign and local politicians with more 'friends' on Facebook received more preference votes than others.

Compared to professional politicians in the national parliament (Larsson and Kalsnes 2014), local politician's Facebook use is rarely organized as a tool for political campaigning. Only 11 per cent of the local politicians in our sample used Facebook actively in the election campaign. One explanation can be that the local politicians do not expect extensive communication through social media to have an effect on their voters (cf. Bernhard and Dohle 2015), and that they expect visibility in the local newspapers to be more useful. For instance, we found that highly profiled (older) local politicians did not use social media at all but were frequently in the local newspaper. Furthermore, a large part of local candidates on the party lists had only agreed to be placed at the lower end of the list to support the political party, but they had no intention of being elected. For this group the motivation for highlighting themselves in the election campaign is very low.

Despite the strong position of the local newspapers, and although the data does not allow us to speak of causal effects in a definitive manner, our findings support the small scale

interpersonal potential of social media in local democracies. Karlsen (2017) found that voters with local political candidates as ‘friends’ on Facebook are more likely to give politicians preference votes, and our findings show that politicians with more Facebook ‘friends’ receive more preference votes. Further, individuals follow national and local politicians on social media for different reasons. While national politicians have followers who already are convinced to vote for them (Spierings and Jacobs 2014), the local politicians relations to their ‘friends’ are somewhat different. For most local politicians in our sample, Facebook is first and foremost a place where they meet friends, family, colleagues and acquaintances from their local society, and also with persons from outside the municipality where they reside. This study has some limitations regarding the analysis of the importance of the local politicians’ network. We do not know more about the network of Facebook ‘friends’ in this study than the numbers of ‘friends’. All their ‘friends’ on Facebook most certainly do not live in their local municipality, and therefore all their Facebook friends are not potential voters. Neither do we know the characteristics of their ‘friends’. The politician’s list of ‘friends’ on Facebook is obviously not a satisfactory indication of the local politician’s total social network (cf. Karlsen 2017). We nevertheless argue that our finding whereby numbers of ‘friends’ on Facebook is positively correlated with numbers of preference votes is an interesting finding providing a better understanding of how the social media network is important. 37 per cent of the politicians had more than 500 ‘friends’ on Facebook, although most of them can only be defined as acquaintances (Dunbar 2014). But as Granovetter (1973) argued, there can be ‘strength in the weak ties’. Facebook users have reported more contact with several different groups of people because of Facebook (Brandtzæg et al. 2010). Local politician with a large network of acquaintances in their local community who is what Merton (1949) described as ‘local influentials’.

If the trend of a decreasing audience for local newspapers (Vaage 2016) continue, it implies that local politicians need other arenas in order to be visible to the voters. A democratic problem is that the networks people form tend to be with people who have similar characteristics, they are exclusionary and unevenly distributed (McPherson et al. 2001). More research is needed to understand how this will affect the political processes of local democracy. Since our study only includes two medium-size Norwegian municipalities with one daily local newspaper, more studies are also needed to further understand the ‘small scale’ potential of social media such as Facebook in smaller and bigger municipalities with stronger or weaker ties between the local citizens within different local media environments.

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Contributor details

Eiri Elvestad is an associate professor in sociology at the University College of Southeast Norway. Her research interests include media sociology, political communication, local media and local democracy, news exposure in new media environments, trust in media and comparative studies. She has published in several journals including *European Journal of Communication*, *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, *Nordicom Review* and *European Sociological Review*.

Marius Rohde Johannessen is associate professor in information systems at the University College of Southeast Norway. He received his Ph.D. on social media use in eParticipation from the University of Agder in 2013, and has a background from the media industry. His research interests are on eParticipation and eGovernment, with emphasis on understanding

how government can apply new media technologies to improve communication with citizens.

His work has been published in Information Systems and eGovernment journals and conferences such as *Communications of the AIS* and the *International Journal of Public Information Systems*.

Contact:

Department of Economics, History and Social Science, University College of Southeast

Norway, Postboks 235, 3603 Kongsberg, Norway.

E-mail: eiri.elvestad@usn.no

E-mail: Marius.Johannessen@usn.no

Tables

Table 1: Politicians participating in the local newspaper. Percentage.

	More than 15 times	6–15 times	2–5 times	Once	Never	Total
Politicians name in a news story or a letter in the printed version of the local newspaper	6	9	14	20	51	100 (604)
Times in the online version of the newspaper	3	6	11	11	69	100 (604)

Times in online and printed version total	9	9	18	15	49	100 (603)
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Table 2: Facebook participation among the politicians. Percentage.

	Yes	No	Total (N)
Does the politician have a searchable Facebook account?	72	28	100 (602)
<i>Politicians with a searchable Facebook account:</i>			
Are the numbers of friends available on the open profile?	74	26	100 (428)
Are the content/postings closed for the public/others than friends?	44	56	100 (427)
Private content posted on Facebook?	36	64	100 (408)
Has the politician used Facebook for election campaigning?	27	73	100 (414)
Posted more than five political party postings the last month before the election?	16	84	100 (427)
Numbers of friends	Median:398 friends Max: 4994 friends		

	Min: 7 friends (N=318)
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Table 3: Local politicians' participation in local newspaper (online and print), political active on Facebook, Facebook friends and preference votes. Standardized Beta Coefficients.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5^a
Gender (1=male and 0=female)	-0.059	-0.037	-0.046 ¹	-0.036	-0.043
Age					
31–40 years	-0.016	-0.020	-0.048 ¹	-0.037	-0.051
41–50 years	-0.045	-0.067	-0.032 ¹	-0.071 ¹	-0.065
51–60 years	-0.158 ²	-0.103 ²	-0.078 ¹	-0.119 ²	-0.140 ²
61 and older (reference group=18–30)	-0.234 ²	-0.199 ²	-0.218 ²	-0.193 ²	-0.142 ²
Municipality1=1 Municipality2=0	0.028	-0.069 ²	-0.082 ²	-0.082 ²	-0.051

Council representative 2011–15 (Yes=1)	-	0.131 ²	0.048	0.043	0.050
Number on the election list	-	-0.338 ²	-0.274 ²	-0.276 ²	-0.252 ²
Prioritized by the party (additional weight) Yes=1 No=0	-	0.265 ²	0.185 ²	0.188 ²	0.210 ²
Size of the political party the politician represent	-	0.629 ²	0.560 ²	0.558 ²	0.507 ²
Participation in the local newspaper (print and online) 1 time 2–5 times 6–15 times 16 times→ (0 times are reference group)	-	-	0.003 0.159 ² 0.184 ² 0.257 ²	0.006 0.148 ² 0.180 ² 0.244 ²	0.020 0.131 ² 0.171 ² 0.234 ²
Facebook account=1 (if not=0)	-	-	-	0.074 ²	-

Used Facebook actively for election campaigning (Active=1. Not active=0)	-	-	-	-	0.091 ²
Friends on Facebook (Logtransformed)	-	-	-	-	0.105 ²
Adjusted R-square	0.038	0.616	0.674	0.679	0.723
N=	604	604	602	600	316

Note: ^aThis model includes only politicians who are on Facebook and where the numbers of friends are available information on the profile.

²sign. 0.01-level

¹sign. 0.05-level

Appendix

Table A: Politicians descriptions. *N*=605.

Municipality	M1: 38.8% M2: 61.2%
Gender	Male: 57.4% Female: 42.6%
Age	18–85 years Mean: 51.37

	Sd: 15.05
Political party	<p>Labour party: 16.5%</p> <p>Conservative Party: 14.5%</p> <p>Liberal Party: 10.7%</p> <p>Centre Party: 9.6%</p> <p>The Urban Environment Party¹: 7.9%</p> <p>Progress Party: 7.8%</p> <p>Red Party: 7.8%</p> <p>Socialist Left Party: 7.6%</p> <p>Green Party: 6.3%</p> <p>Christian Democratic Party¹: 6.1%</p> <p>Pensioners' Party¹: 2.5%</p> <p>Coastal Party¹: 1.5%</p> <p>The Christian Party¹: 1.2%</p> <p>(¹Coded as 'Other parties' in the analysis)</p>
Representatives in the city council 2011–15	<p>Yes: 10.4 %</p> <p>No: 89.6 %</p>

Elected representatives for the period 2015–19	Yes: 15.2 % No: 84.8 %
Prioritized by the party/‘Additional weight’	Yes: 8.8% No: 91.2%

Figure A: The logarithmic function of the dependent variable Preference votes. Weighted.

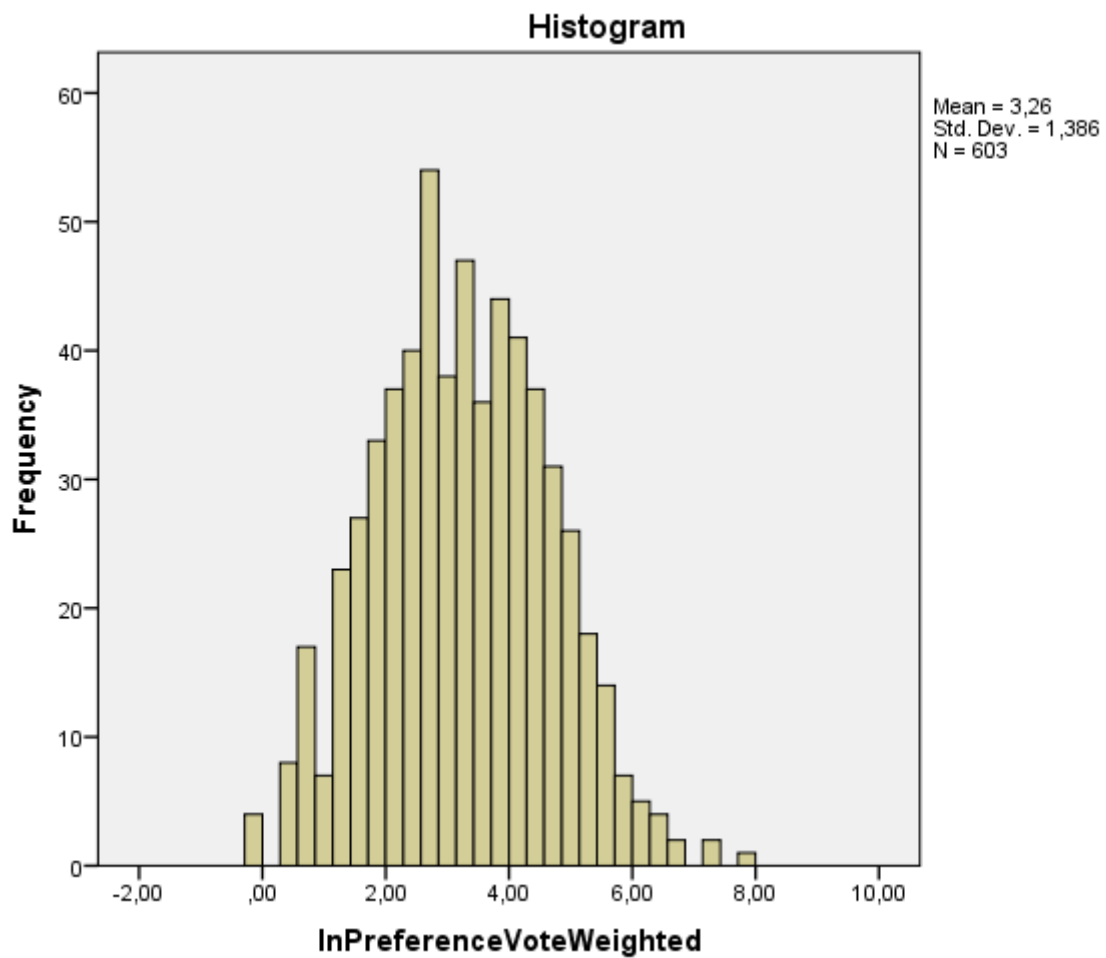
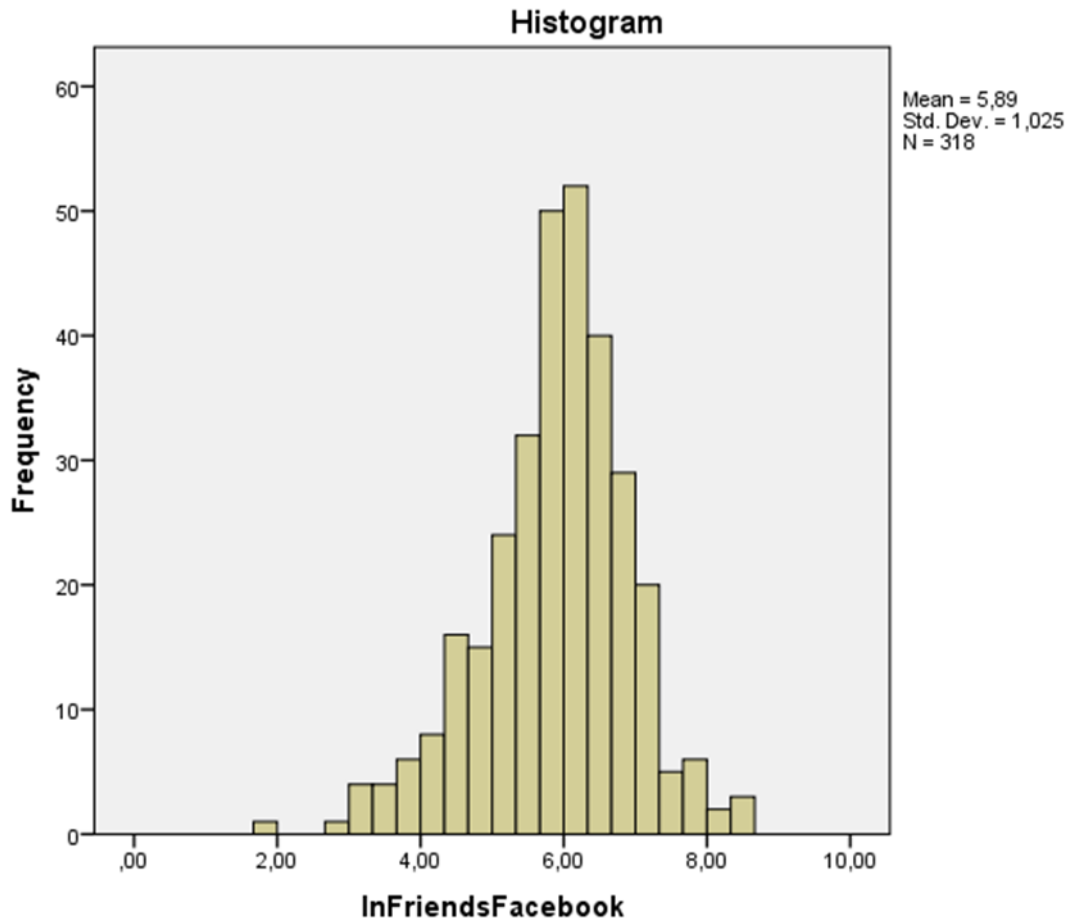


Figure B: The logarithmic function of the independent variable Facebook friends.



Notes

¹ In 2007, a quarter of the candidates owe their seat to voters who gave them preference votes.

² List of names of political candidates representing the political party.

³ Similar to Norway, Iceland does not open up for preferential votes in the national parliamentary elections (Karvonen 2004; Kvelland 2015).

⁴ Preferential voting has been possible in Norway since 1896. Only Switzerland and Luxemburg have similar arrangements (NOU 2001:13 2001; Kvelland 2015).

⁵ This option was annulled prior to the 2003 local elections.

⁶ In 2015, only 42 per cent of the population read printed newspapers daily, but if we include online newspapers, this amounted to 72 per cent (Vaage 2016).

⁷ For municipalities with fewer than 60,000 inhabitants, the difference between TV and local newspapers was not significant (Karlsen 2017).

⁸ 65 and 63% respectively believe the two newspaper types are important. 61% state television as their main source of information. A similar proportion benefit from discussions with family, friends and work colleagues. Social media comes last. Facebook is mentioned only by 22% (SSB, Statistisk Sentralbyrå/Statistics Norway 2016).

⁹ According to Putnam (2000), the concept of social capital was introduced as early as 1916, but the widespread use of the term ‘social capital’ is relatively recent (Kadushin 2012: 163).

¹⁰ City/Municipality 1: 235 politicians and City/Municipality 2: 370 politicians.

¹¹ Municipal 1: 59 per cent of the population voted in the 2015-election. Municipal 2: 54 per cent of the population voted in the 2015-election.

¹² There is a danger that some politicians immediately after the election removed all their posts related to the political campaign, but our findings did not give us any reason to suspect that to be a problem. Politicians with an open profile showed old posts.

¹³ This study is reported to the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD).

¹⁴ In Norwegian: ‘forhåndskumulert’.

¹⁵ Eleven politicians appeared only in the online version, while 125 politicians were only in the printed version.

¹⁶ 83% of politicians between 18 and 30 years had a searchable Facebook account, 82% of those between 31 and 40, 77% of those between 41 and 50 years, 78% of those between 51–60 years and 53% of the politicians older 60 years had a searchable Facebook account.

¹⁷ Facebook content closed for others than ‘friends’ in different age groups: 18–30 years: 58%, 31–40 years:48%, 41–50 years: 43%, 51–60 years: 41%, 61 and older: 40%.

¹⁸ There was no significant correlation between females and politicians from bigger parties and political position and whether they were open about the numbers of friends or not.

¹⁹ Of voters aged 18–19, 57%, and 55% of the voters aged 20–24 years gave personal votes to at least one politician; 50% aged 25–44, 41% of voters aged 45–66 group, and 34% aged 67–79 did the same. Only 5% of those aged 80 and above gave personal votes (SSB, Statistisk Sentralbyrå/Statistics Norway 2016).

²⁰ The unstandardized B-coefficient of Facebook friends in Model 5 is 0.140 and we can conclude that a 1 per cent increase in the number of Facebook friends would yield a 0.140 per cent increase on the preference vote variable.