deliberative aspects of democracy, as is the case for Iceland and what Kristínn was hinting at. Or political disinterest could simply mean that citizens are relatively satisfied with the status quo. For Friesland's press secretary Klug, this is a legitimate position to say 'I only participate in the elections because I feel that is my civil duty, but right now I would rather like to mow the lawn or lay on the couch and watch sport on TV instead of participating through *LiquidFriesland*'.[217]

8.4.3.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I illustrated how the concept of times of crisis and times of affluence are one way of interpreting different levels of participation in my research fields. While this interpretation has been heavily influenced by my research (fields and questions), the concept of times of crisis and of affluence is nevertheless transferable to other political participation frameworks. The key point here seems to be that the the more significantly their everyday life has been disrupted, more profound a citizen's personal (political) grievances, the easier it is for them to become engaged in or to deepen their engagement in politics. Or, from a top-down perspective: in order to mobilise affluent citizens with secure livelihoods, significantly more resources are required, and participation levels are more difficult to maintain.

8.5 The Role of Geographical Proximity in (Online) Political Participation

In this chapter, it will become clear that some modes of political participation appear better suited for influencing national or state levels and other modes appear better suited for influencing on the local municipal level. This connects well with the initial analysis of people's political participation repertoires as processes of negotiation, of mixing and matching (see chapter 8.4.1 Political Participation Repertoires Today).

At the national political level, people seem to prefer established modes of participation such as electoral voting, whereas at the local level, they appear to prefer other modes. A clear example of this is Hörður Torfason, the founder and main organiser of the Pots-and-Pans Revolution and of *Samtökin'78*, Iceland's national queer organisation. Aside from being a singer and songwriter, Hörður is also a political activist by profession. In chapter 8.4.1, Political Participation Repertoires Today, I cited Hörður's demand for compulsory voting. Somewhat surprisingly, he still admitted that

217 Cf. Sönke Klug, personal interview, 25 August 2015.

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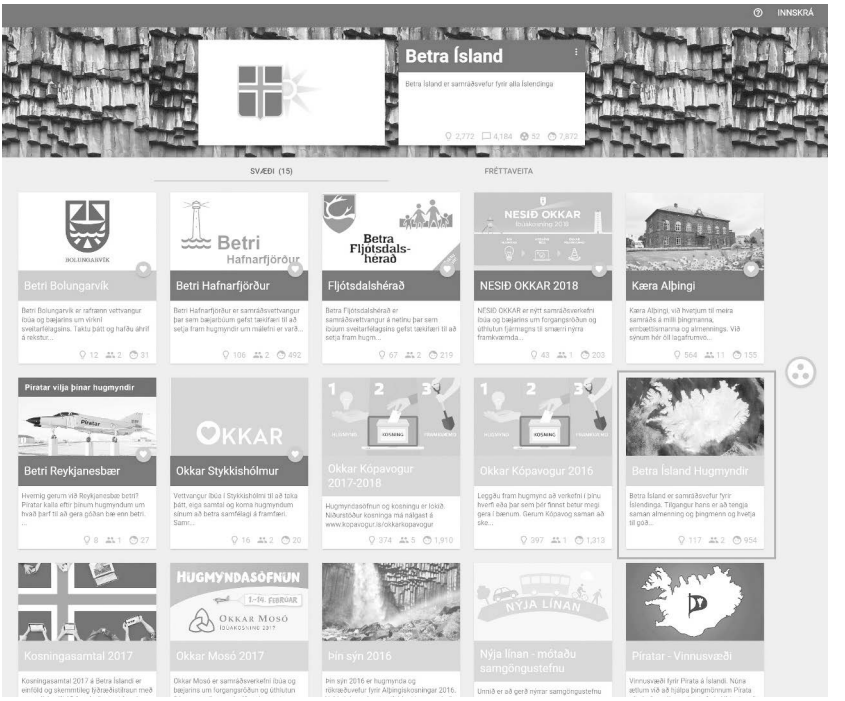
honestly, when the elections were coming up, I just went away. […] I didn't wanna be here. Because people have this tendency of filling papers and everything with filth about people and I don't like that. I don't like to read bad things about other people, I really don't. […] SO when elections are coming up, all these debates, I avoid it. I don't wanna fill myself with this rubbish. So, I stepped away.[218]

Fig. 15: Starting Page of Betra Ísland[219]



However, at the local level of politics, people seem to prefer more direct, participatory, and deliberative modes of political participation. As pointed out in chapter 2.3, another example for this preference are *Betri Reykjavík* and *Betri Hverfi*, the online participatory budgeting tool which enables participation only in the district in which one lives – so, at the micro level. Through it, participants can actively take part in shaping their immediate neighbourhood and surroundings, and thus contribute to improving the lives of family, friends and neighbours.

218 Hörður Torfason, personal interview, Reykjavík, 24 June 2014.

219 The small black frame on the right side indicates the original Betra Ísland, while the other tiles lead to participatory budgeting sites of municipalities such as Stykkishólmur. Screenshot taken on 24 August 2018 at https://www.betraisland.is.

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The national version of *Betri Reykjavík*, *Betra Ísland*, is significantly less popular than the local platforms. In 2012, Dominique said she had not "gone into that [*Betra Ísland*]. I stayed to Reykjavík. It's something, it has to be something so close that the people really get involved with it/to touch you personally. And when you think of *Betra Ísland*, […] nothing has been really happening, it's been in between. So, I'm not sure it can work at a country's scale, I'm not sure."[220] The last idea was added in March 2019, so nothing new was added for over six months. However, several municipalities other than Reykjavík have used *Betra Ísland* as a platform to host their annual online participatory budgets, as Figure 15, 187, illustrates.

In Iceland, the preference for more direct, participatory, and deliberative modes of political participation on the local level can at least partially be attributed to the effects of the national crisis. The citizens' increased reversion to local communities and their immediate surroundings, as both spaces of action and reference areas in their daily lives, may also serve as an explanation for increased interest in participating in municipal decision-making processes. Generally, most of the interviewees felt that there had been a general increase in interest in their local area. Long-term political activist Jón Þór remarked that "people are more interested in their smaller neighbourhood than in the bigger Reykjavík area".[221] Moreover, Þórgnýr contemplates "that people that live in the same street or the same cluster of houses should be more active. I've been thinking a lot about this, but have never been active, to get the neighbours together and just take charge of our street a little bit and maybe send suggestions [to *Betri Reykjavík*, JTK] or stuff like that."[222] Einar thinks that this is exactly the way to get people motivated over the long term: they have to be involved with decision-making related to their immediate surroundings, their neighbourhood. By conducting the *Betri Hverfi* project, the municipality seems to be meeting exactly this need: "it [*Betri Hverfi*] was really to your close environments, to what in your, let's say, 500m or 200m radius, what is there the things you would like to see." [223]

According to the British economic geographer Peter Dicken, the size of a political unit is indeed relevant for citizens' levels of political engagement. Generally, "the key localizing force derives from the essential 'socialness' of human activities and the fact that such socialness is facilitated and enhanced by geographical proximity. Such untraded interdependencies are essentially socio-cultural" (as cited in van Deth, 'Politisches Interesse' 273).

220 Dominique Plédel Jónsson, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 17 July 2012.

221 Jón Þór Ólafsson, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 20 July 2012.

222 Þórgnýr Thoroddsen, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 20 July 2012.

223 Einar Magnússon, personal interview II, Reykjavík, 6 June 2014.

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> Auch ohne übertriebene Romantisierung des Lebens in kleinen Kommunen ist klar, dass die räumliche Nähe („geographical proximity“) vielerlei direkte soziale Kontakte ermöglicht: Man trifft sich beim Bäcker, kennt sich von der Schule, sieht sich im Verein und erfährt direkt von Familienglück und Trauerfällen. Wer so zusammenlebt, wird auch die kommunalpolitischen Probleme eher als gemeinsame nachbarschaftliche Aufgaben und Herausforderungen betrachten als dies in größeren Kommunen der Fall ist. (ibid.)

> Even without exaggeratedly romanticising life in small municipalities it is clear that geographical proximity enables all kinds of direct social contacts: you run into each other at the bakery, know each other from school, see each other in associations, as well as directly hear about domestic bliss and bereavement. Those who live together like this are also more likely to see problems relating to municipal politics as joint communal tasks and challenges than people living in bigger municipalities.

Indeed, the proximity factor also seems to be at play in online participation. The high degree of importance interviewees attribute to the local level becomes visible in their voting behaviour within *Betri Reykjavík*, as Guðrún's statement illustrates: "I see a topic...and I don't like it, but I don't not like it enough to oppose on it. Maybe that's something not in my neighbourhood and I don't care about it and I don't want it, and maybe if it would be close to my home, I would oppose to it. But I don't like to be against something."[224] In order to engage with an idea and to be willing to spend time and energy on it, "it has to be something so close that the people really get involved with it, it has to touch YOU personally."[225] Again, this stresses the local character of *Betri Reykjavík*, which is much more rooted in and intertwined with the everyday lives of citizens than *LiquidFriesland* is.

While the kind of geographical proximity described by van Deth clearly exists for users of *Betri Reykjavík*, it does so only superfluously for the users of *LiquidFriesland*, as the district is not the local frame of reference for citizens, the municipality is. *LiquidFriesland*'s catchment area is mostly rural, with 98.000 people living scattered about an area of about 608 square kilometres, including the East Friesian Island of Wangerooge. The district is at the politically intermediate level, a level which seems almost harder to grasp than the national level, at least concerning its jurisdiction and responsibilities. Indeed, interlocutor Peter Lamprecht makes clear that the local level is that at which one can most easily understand the politics: people in Varel know about what is going on in Varel, and the people in Jever are hopefully informed about what is happening in Jever. But beyond that,

224 Guðrún Sigurðardóttir, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 9 July 2012.

225 Dominique Plédel Jónsson, personal interview I, Reykjavík, 17 July 2012.

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it becomes relatively unclear for many citizens whether the district, municipal, or state government is responsible for a certain issue.[226]

As discussed in detail in chapter 2.1, a common reason for the council rejecting suggestions and ideas put through *LiquidFriesland* was that they were outside the district's jurisdiction. As such, it comes as little surprise that users like Christa Hoffmann demanded local versions of *LiquidFriesland*. For Hoffmann, the topics that the district is responsible for are not those which are directly relevant to the population, and she is convinced that many more citizens would participate if a tool like *LiquidFriesland* was made available at the municipal level.[227]

It is not only their "expertise" in their neighbourhoods which encourages citizens to participate, but also the ease they have imagining how and what could be changed there. The impression that their engagement could also benefit others in their neighbourhood – family, friends, neighbours, the community – appears to help mobilise and motivate them. My research has shown that people are especially interested and more likely to participate when an issue or topic directly affects the daily lives of themselves, or those close to them. For example, parents like Guðmundur Kristjánsson or Anna Wagner-Becker are often interested in issues related to day-care and schooling; people that bike to work daily, like Per and Einar, support the improvement of bike path networks; and fearing losses in sales, small retailers like Karin Schmidt and Wolfgang Müller protest the planned construction of a shopping centre in their town. On a national level, many Icelanders became active in protesting against the government and the financial system after the financial crash of 2008–09, because they were facing large debts, unemployment, and the loss of their savings and even their homes. In every single interview about their interest in certain civic or political issues, participants pointed out directly or indirectly how those issues were relevant in their daily lives.

Conversely, users found it hard to engage in discussion (on the online platforms) about topics that did not personally affect them (anymore). For instance, Ursula Thoms's children have left school and are now at university, so she found it difficult to take part in a debate about school restructuring.[228] In online participation, people are able to contribute to discussions on topics directly related to their daily lives in their immediate surroundings. This is in stark contrast to traditional electoral participation, where citizens only role is to vote on general policy directions every four or five years.

In the end, the preference for the local level as the frame for online participation tools featured heavily in participants' accounts. On the basis of this observa-

226 Cf. Peter Lamprecht, personal interview, Jever, 16 September 2013.

227 Christa Hoffmann, focus group, Varel, 9 September 2014.

228 Cf. Ursula Thoms, personal interview, Varel, 9 October 2013.

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tion, three things in particular become clear. First, the preference for the local level stresses geographical proximity as the base of general sociality. For participants, their immediate surroundings, their neighbourhood, their quarter is their frame of reference and of action. Second, the preference for the local level shows how inseparably interwoven the online and offline layers of everyday life are. Users are active in and for their immediate living surroundings by online and offline means: they are not either online or offline, nor are they either active in virtual life or real life – they are both. This evidence yet again refutes claims that political participation by online means is somehow, per definition, inferior to political participation in the *real world*, as terms like clicktivism or slacktivism have come to suggest. Third, the preference for the local level as the frame of direct, participatory, online modes of political participation is one explanation for the *varying* success of *Betri Reykjavík* and *LiquidFriesland*; that is, the registration of as many citizens as possible and the vivid usage of the tools, as well as the establishment of the tools both in political participation repertoires of citizens and in decision-making processes.

8.6 Conclusion

This chapter started out by providing an overview of the most common modes of political participation amongst participants, contextualising these modes both within participants' participation repertories and within their everyday lives. It became apparent that participants mix-and-match modes, based on a modes perceived political efficacy and their own political objectives.

I then outlined three perspectives that emerged from the data to explain (online) political participation. First, I looked at (online) participation tools as a continuum, ranging from enabling participation to simulating it. Whether (potential) users see an online tool as enabling them to have a real voice and influence in decision-making processes, or whether they see it as only simulating participation and the ideas they put forward have little relevance in the political process and the quality of life for citizens in a municipality has far-reaching consequences. For many (potential) users, *LiquidFriesland* appears to have simply been added onto the political process without any principal and permanent changes being made. Moreover, from my interviews and impressions, it seems as if it was primarily introduced in order to prove the innovativeness, modernity, and readiness for the future of the current administration, and particularly Landrat Sven Ambrosy, as the agent of change.

Second, the concept of times of crisis and affluence proves helpful in explaining multi-layered differences in political participation in Iceland and Germany. The financial crisis in Iceland appeared to be a fundamental disruption of the quo-

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