Existing research in the area of political participation faces the challenge of interpreting data from different question wordings in different survey programs. In the most frequently used questions, response categories focus on whether the respondent has engaged in certain political activities during a given period or not. In the majority of cases, no information is available on the frequency of activities carried out by the individual confirming his/her participation. However, frequent participants might have other motives and backgrounds than occasional participants (cf. Saunders, 2014; Verhulst & Walgrave, 2009). Additionally, there is no information on whether people participate on a range of topics or whether they are engaged only on a single-issue. Considering the frequency of participation and taking into account single-issue vs. plurality participation might challenge previous results on intensity and range of political participation.

The proposed paper will examine the consequences of variation in surveying the amount of participation as measured a) by the established dichotomous response categories and b) by an additional frequency-measure. In order to assess the relevance of the identified differences in measurement, we apply common explanatory models and compare the structure in the determinants of political participation between different types of measurement.

We will design and run an online survey among participants of a non-commercial online access panel and with a sample of students and university members in Germany. The survey will be conducted in spring 2015. We will focus on the well-established measurement of participation as employed by the European Social Survey (ESS) and complement the items by a follow-up question for the participants on frequency and topic variety.

As several studies raise the issue of social desirability bias in reports of political participation (e.g. Holbrook & Krosnick, 2010; Persson & Solevid, 2014; Saunders, 2014), we will address this problem in our paper. Since item wording and response categories potentially give rise to biased reporting of participation, we will check for social desirability effects on our questions, making use of four experimental variations: We will apply an experimental variation concerning the response categories as proposed by Persson and Solevid (2014): one half of the sample will be surveyed with the traditional dichotomous scale, the other half will answer a “face-saving” type of response. To control for social desirability effects of the question introduction, we will include an alternative that presents a neutral stimulus beside the ESS
introduction already containing possible motives for participation – namely to “improve things” or “prevent things from going wrong”.

References:


Short abstract (for conference programme):
Considering the frequency of participation and taking into account single-issue vs. plurality participation might challenge previous reports and explanatory models of political participation (with yes/no answers for different forms of participation). This paper will be based on data from an online survey conducted in spring 2015. It will use a well-established measure of participation and complement the items by a follow-up question on frequency and topic variety. Since item wording and response categories potentially give rise to biased reporting of participation, we will check for social desirability effects, making use of four experimental variations.