



Exploring Web 2.0 political engagement: Is new technology reducing the biases of political participation?☆



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ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship between political participation taking place on online social networking websites, defined as “cyber participation,” and turnout in the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election and the 2010 U.S. Midterm Election. The paper presents two studies, the first using data from the 2008 Pew Internet & American Life Project survey and the second using data from the 2010 Pew Internet & American Life Project. Each study is conducted in two parts. The first part identifies who is utilizing social networking websites as political participation tools. The second then examines the association between these forms of cyber participation and turnout in order to demonstrate that cyber participation has a positive effect on turnout. Findings suggest, 1) younger individuals are more likely to utilize cyber participation, 2) traditional predictors of participation are not correlated with cyber participation, and 3) people who engage in cyber participation are more likely to turnout to vote.

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1. Introduction

Are people who make comments about an election on social networking websites more likely to vote than those who do not, or are they just armchair pundits? Can Facebook supporters be counted on to turnout on Election Day? What about the people joining online political groups – are they no longer bowling alone but rather hanging out together in cyberspace?

The 2008 elections provided the first mainstream use of social media in federal campaigns. Media outlets discussed the significance of the number of *friends* candidates had, pundits compared social media strategies, and campaign staffers were actually encouraged to spend their time on

MySpace and Facebook in order to build a candidate’s “online image.” While a campaign without a social media presence would be labeled as “out of touch” with today’s Web 2.0 electorate, whereby people expect to be able to interact with content rather than just view static webpages, the actual payoffs from these activities have yet to be determined.

An increasing number of people are accessing the Internet not only to obtain political knowledge about campaigns and candidates, but to interact as part of the Web 2.0 political community. At present, it is not clear who is using the Internet for “cyber participation,” as an interactive tool, rather than as a modernization of traditional participation. Additionally, there exists little information on the effect of this cyber political participation on turnout.

This research seeks to determine the characteristics of people using online social networks for cyber participation as a first step in order to determine if the Web 2.0 environment is breaking down the traditional barriers of participation. Then it demonstrates that cyber participation as a unique form of political engagement is significantly

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related to turnout. In order to demonstrate robustness and remove doubts about potential election effects, the paper first examines data for the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election, and then repeats the analysis using a different sample for the 2010 U.S. Midterm Election and even more stringent controls. The use of dual data sets in subsequent years shows that results are not limited to a specific election, nor confined to the efforts of the 2008 Obama Campaign to focus on young and first time voters.

First, this research will show that cyber participation is not dependent on traditional socioeconomic factors in the way that traditional and online participation have been shown to be. Second, this research finds that respondents who engaged in cyber participation were more likely to report voting in subsequent elections. Taken together, this demonstrates that cyber participation may be an equalizer for those who traditionally do not participate.

2. The internet and electoral participation

The influence of the Internet on electoral participation is hardly a new subject to study, but there are still many unanswered questions (Tolbert and McNeal, 2003; Gibson et al., 2005; Best and Krueger, 2005; Bimber, 1998). The number of people with access to the Internet is greater than ever as computers have become part of our daily lives and economic thresholds of computer ownership and online access continue to decrease. While an increasing number of people are using the Internet as a source of news and information about politics, it is not clear who is using the Internet as a participatory tool, deliberative political forum or even what extent the Internet effects political knowledge (Gronlund, 2007).

In the field of electoral politics, scholars have failed to identify the difference between various means by which a person can engage politically using the Internet. Political communication scholars have done a better job; identifying that cyber participation is the involvement of actors within the Web 2.0 space. Web 2.0 applications are designed to facilitate interactive information sharing and collaboration as well as a means for political expression. This allows users to interact in contrast to websites where users are limited to passive viewing of information. The most recognizable form for Web 2.0 technology today is social networking websites such as Facebook. Cyber participation, therefore, has the best of both worlds; facilitating the sharing of views and opinions in a means similar to traditional participation while having the low cost and ease of access as online participation.

Younger individuals are more likely to be using the Internet, especially social networking sites such as Facebook, but this is an evolving demographic as seniors are the fastest growing demographic (Schroeder, 2009). Users of these sites are writing comments, joining interest groups and discussing politics in ways that were previously not measureable. This cyber political discourse may also lead to other forms of civic participation (Klofstad, 2007; Kobayashi et al., 2006). From student samples it has been shown that the predictors associated with traditional political participation are not the same as for engagement in

various political activities on Facebook (Carlisle and Patton, 2013).

More recent research suggests that engaging in political activity on Facebook can lead to engagement in offline political activity (Holt et al., 2013; Tang and Lee, 2013; Vitak et al., 2010). Tang and Lee (2013) find that students who have connections with public political actors and who were exposed to political information through Facebook were more likely to have participated in political activities, using a combined online and offline metric. Vitak et al. (2010) find that political activity on Facebook, including making posts about politics and engaging in political groups, is a significant predictor of general political participation. Holt et al. (2013) find that political social media use is associated with both increased political interest and offline political participation. All of these findings suggests that cyber participation has a real value but leave open the question of the relationship between cyber participation and turnout.

From prior research we know that SES model, based on components of socioeconomic status, such as education and income, does a good job at predicting political participation (Brady et al., 1995). But does the SES model correctly predict cyber participation? Carlisle and Patton (2013) would suggest that it should not. But perhaps their findings were due to using a student sample in regards to the 2008 elections, one in which younger people and minorities were particularly likely to engage in? In order to better answer this question, it is necessary to first define what is meant by cyber participation and how this differs from what most studies call “online participation.”

3. How to measure cyber political participation

The first step to understanding cyber participation is to define how it differs from online electoral participation. Despite the increasing amounts of research focusing on online participation, empirical analysis of cyber participation is quite rare. While it is useful to compare online and offline participation, it is more valuable to explore cyber participation as it is a new outlet rather than a modernized version of traditional participation.

Studies generally link aspects of Internet participation to similar modes of traditional participation. This includes reading campaign literature online, contacting an elective representative online, contributing to a campaign online, or signing a petition online (Best and Krueger, 2005; Smith et al., 2009). Based on using these metrics it is no surprise that findings suggest that online participation is similar to that of traditional offline participation.¹

However, cyber participation is different from online participation. Social networking sites provide a platform for people to discuss ideas, deliberate politics, and perhaps even for persuasion to take place. Within these networks there is the ability to create political communities that can

¹ “Contrary to the hopes of some advocates, the internet is not changing the socioeconomic character of civic engagement in America. Just as in offline civic life, the well to-do and well-educated are more likely than those less well-off to participate in online political activities such as emailing a government official, signing an online petition or making a political contribution.” (Smith et al., 2009).

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