

## Chapter 7

# Internet Use and Political Participation of American Youth: The Campaign of 2008

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter examines the relationship between the use of the Internet for campaign information and two dimensions of the political engagement of young adults. Drawing on data from a national survey of 18-24 year olds conducted online during the 2008 presidential campaign, it shows that the effect of Internet use for campaign information on political engagement among youth was marginal. While these young adults did take advantage of opportunities to participate on the Internet, reliance on the Internet for campaign information had no significant effect on knowledge about the campaign or more traditional types of political participation. Despite the promise the Internet holds for increasing political interest and participation, those youth who relied on the Internet as their primary source of campaign information did not seem any more inclined to participate in politics than others in their cohort.*

### INTRODUCTION

Research in political science has long noted the disparities in political participation between young adults and their older counterparts (Bauerlein, 2008; Mindich, 2005; Wattenberg, 2007). For example, while youth voter turnout increased in 2004 and 2008 (Curry, 2008), youth still consistently vote at lower rates than do other age groups (Baumgartner & Francia, 2008). Interestingly, during each election

cycle there are any number of stories claiming that the present election season will be the one in which youth will turn out in record numbers. In 2008 much of this speculation revolved around the role of the Internet in mobilizing youth to participate and vote (Lawrence, 2008; Malloy, 2008; Polantz, 2008; Simkins, 2008; Weisenmiller, 2008).

Is this too much to expect of a communications medium? Is the Internet a boon or bust for democracy? Historically, all advances in electronic communications technology have been accompanied by a fair amount of hyperbole regarding the

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effect, positive or negative, that they would have on democracy (Douglas, 1987). Having said this, the 2008 presidential campaign saw unprecedented amounts of Internet activity by citizens, organized groups, parties, and candidates alike.

In this paper I examine the relationship between the use of the Internet for campaign information and two dimensions of the political engagement of young adults during the 2008 presidential campaign. Employing a survey of 18-24 year olds, I show that the effects of reliance on the Internet as a primary source of campaign news and information on the political engagement of young adults was marginal. While youth did take advantage of the many opportunities the Internet affords to become involved in a presidential campaign, reliance on the Internet as the primary source of information about the campaign had no significant effect on their knowledge about the campaign or their participation in more traditional political activities. In other words, in spite of the promise the Internet holds for increasing political interest and participation among this chronically disengaged age group, those who rely on the Internet as their main source of news do not seem any more inclined to participate in politics than others in their cohort.

The research is important because the mass media is an important agent of political socialization (Chaffee, Ward, & Tipton, 1970) and has some effect on political mobilization (Newton, 1999; Eveland & Scheufele, 2000; Norris, 2000) and participation. However the present 18-24 age cohort has come of age in a media environment that is dramatically different than that of their elders. Simply put, unlike previous generations, these youth have array of convenient information choices to select from throughout the day. Understanding how they utilize these choices and the effects these choices have on their political engagement is critical, especially since political beliefs and habits formed in younger years tend to persist through adulthood (Sears, 1983).

In the following section I briefly review the literature on Internet use and political knowledge and participation. Following that I discuss the data and methodology of the study and present the findings. Finally, I discuss the implications of the results, suggesting fruitful avenues for future research.

## **REVIEW**

There have been any number of studies in the past decade examining the relationship between various measures of Internet access and/or exposure and political engagement (political knowledge, political efficacy, and participation; for excellent reviews, see Norris, 2001; Dimaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, Robinson, 2001).

This research typically takes one of two approaches. The first focuses on the idea that the Internet constitutes a virtual community. Some research in this tradition suggests that belonging to online communities (social networking sites, chat rooms, blogs) not only helps people gain political knowledge, but that this sense of community may encourage participation (Pasek, Kenski, Romer, & Jamison, 2006; Coleman, Lieber, Mendelson, & Kurpius, 2008). The negative view of this approach is that Internet use, like television, isolates people from each other. This lack of conventional, face-to-face interpersonal contact leads to a loss of a sense of community, which in turn might lead to a decrease in political participation (Putnam, 2000). For example, Davis (2005) found that the impersonal nature of online contact led to hyper-partisan electronic talk on online blogs, chat rooms, and discussion groups, making these venues “problematic as a public discussion forum” (Davis, 2005, 119). By extension, this would suggest a decrease in engagement by all but the most politically interested.

Most researchers take a resource-based approach to studying the effects of Internet use on

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