

**The Effects of Politically Motivated Internet Use on the Political
Engagement of Youth**

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The Effects of Politically Motivated Internet Use on the Political Engagement of Youth

Abstract

In this paper, I will explore the possibility of a causal relationship between time spent using the internet and the political engagement of youth. Specifically, I will study whether using the internet for political discussion or information gathering has a positive effect on a youth's likelihood to vote. The reasons for studying this link are numerous.

First of all, much of the existing literature regarding the political engagement of youth points to their pattern of neither watching nor reading the news in as regular a fashion as older cohorts as a key factor in judging them unable or unwilling to participate in the political process. These pieces of research, however, fail to include getting news from the internet – a major source of information for today's youth. Thus, it is important to learn whether or not youth who use the internet for information are more likely to vote than youth who do not, which would effectively make internet usage the young demographic's equivalent of reading the news.

Second of all, the internet is a widespread communication and community-building tool. Online communities can exist and include people that physical limitations would make impossible, such as a group of friends in different countries. Traditional metrics have looked at the decline of community spirit in younger cohorts by looking at group participation (such as involvement in bowling leagues) and political debate among friends, and have judged today's youth to be less involved in these two categories than previous cohorts in the time of their youth. (Putnam, *Bowling Alone*) However, if internet use translates into online community participation, then net use might also show some of the positive benefits that traditional community membership has on political participation.

Methodology

This paper draws on results from two separate studies. The first, the National Civic Engagement Study 1 (NCES 1), was conducted in 2002 and draws on a random telephone poll of 3000 participants for its data. Of these 3000, my paper utilizes only the respondents in the 18-25 years old range, in order to isolate the single variable of internet use vs. non internet use in the youth demographic. This limits the total batch of respondents to just under 1,000. The questions used off of this survey include those on annual family income, internet use in the week prior to the survey, how often the respondent votes if they are of legal age, and how often they plan to vote if they are not yet of legal age. It also examines the use of the internet specifically as a news source.

The second, the Tisch College National Civic and Political Engagement of Young People Survey, draws its data from email respondents established by the polling company hired to do the survey. The questions used from this survey determine how frequently the person polled participates in online discussions about politics and how likely they are to vote in 2008. This is examined to determine the aforementioned online community participation effect on political participation. I also use questions from this survey on whether or not the respondents voted in 2006 or 2007 if they were eligible, and whether or not they were contacted about anything political via social networking sites such as Myspace or Facebook prior to the 2006 election. This is just another means of determining online community participation, as social networks essentially amount to an internet “location” for community interaction with online friends.

Findings

In order to responsibly investigate the question of internet usage's impact on political participation, it is important to first investigate whether there was a direct, clear-cut link between socio-economic status and internet use. This is necessary because if such a link existed, it could well mean that any effect seemingly linked to internet use is actually just linked to family income, and thus is not

useful in furthering the body of knowledge on the voting tendencies of young people. Table 1, below, shows the cross tabulation of time spent on the internet by respondents as a factor of the respondents' household incomes:

Table 1: Hours spent online in the week prior to survey as a function of annual family income:

	Under \$20,000	\$20,000 to just under \$30,000	\$30,000 to just under \$40,000	\$40,000 to just under \$50,000	\$50,000 to just under \$64,000	\$65,000 to just under \$80,000	\$80,000 to just under \$100,000	Or over \$100,000?	Total:
No, did not use	38 27.3%	29 23.2%	23 20.7%	10 12.7%	10 12.2%	8 11.1%	3 6.7%	8 9.9%	129 17.3%
1 hour	12 8.6%	10 7.3%	9 8.1%	2 2.5%	2 2.4%	2 2.8%	2 4.4%	5 6.2%	44 5.9%
2 hours	16 11.5%	13 9.5%	11 9.9%	13 16.5%	9 11.0%	7 9.7%	2 4.4%	8 9.9%	79 10.6%
3 hours	9 6.5%	7 5.1%	9 8.1%	9 11.4%	11 13.4%	7 9.7%	3 6.7%	4 4.9%	59 7.9%
4 hours	9 6.5%	12 8.8%	4 3.6%	6 7.6%	6 7.3%	4 5.6%	2 4.4%	8 9.9%	51 6.8%
5 hours	9 6.5%	15 10.9%	15 13.5%	9 11.4%	10 12.2%	9 12.5%	3 6.7%	10 12.3%	80 10.7%
6 hours	3 2.2%	2 1.5%	2 1.8%	0 0.0%	7 8.5%	6 8.3%	2 4.4%	4 4.9%	26 2.5%
7 hours	33 23.7%	41 29.9%	27 24.3%	26 32.9%	26 31.7%	29 40.3%	26 57.8%	32 39.5%	240 32.2%
Does not use the internet	10 7.2%	8 5.8%	11 9.9%	4 5.1%	1 1.2%	0 0.0%	2 4.4%	2 2.5%	38 5.1%
Total	139 100.0%	137 100.0%	111 100.0%	79 100.0%	82 100.0%	72 100.0%	45 100.0%	81 100.0%	746 100.0%

Actual questions from NCES 1:

Net(rows): First, Do you use the Internet either from home, school or work? IF YES, Thinking back over the last week, how many of the 7 days did you use the Internet?

D18(columns): So that we can group all answers, is your total annual family income before taxes:

On the one hand, this data does seem to allow the possibility that internet use is really just a cipher for socioeconomic status. There is a marked decrease in the percentage of respondents who had

not used the net in the past week as the family's reported yearly income rises. However, at least 90% of those polled in each income bracket responded that they do, in fact, use the internet. Thus, enough people have net access, rich or poor, for it to be a legitimate variable in its own right.

With that established, I first examine the potential of a link between general internet use, measured by number of hours spent using the internet in the week before the survey was issued, and political engagement. First, in table 2, I examine those who were eligible to vote at the time the time of the survey and look at their voting habits compared to their internet use. Most interesting here is the group of respondents who responded “Never” to the question “Can you tell me how often you vote in local and national elections?” 45.5% of respondents who did not use the internet at all responded this way, compared to 36.1% of respondents who had not used it in the past week and 29.6% of respondents who had used it for one hour. Thus, use of the internet may guide youth to be more likely to participate in the political system by voting.

Table 2: Frequency of voting in past elections as a function of weekly time spent online:

	Did not use last week	1 hour	2 hours	3 hours	4 hours	5 hours	6 hours	7 hours	Doesn't use net	Total
Always	22 22.7%	8 29.6%	9 20.5%	12 33.3%	4 12.1%	15 25.4%	11 57.9%	51 30.4%	10 30.3%	142 27.5%
Sometimes	27 27.8%	6 22.2%	20 45.5%	12 33.3%	14 42.4%	21 35.6%	5 26.3%	61 36.3%	6 18.2%	172 33.3%
Rarely	13 13.4%	5 18.5%	4 9.1%	5 13.9%	4 12.1%	8 13.6%	1 5.3%	19 11.3%	2 6.1%	61 11.8%
Never	35 36.1%	8 29.6%	11 25.0%	7 19.4%	11 33.3%	15 25.4%	2 10.5%	37 22.0%	15 45.5%	141 27.3%
Total	97 100%	27 100%	44 100%	36 100%	33 100%	59 100%	19 100%	168 100%	33 100%	516 100%

Actual questions from NCES 1:

vp3 (rows): We know that most people don't vote in all elections. Usually between one-quarter to one-half of those eligible actually come out to vote. Can you tell me how often you vote in local and national elections? Always, sometimes, rarely, or never?

Net (columns): First, Do you use the Internet either from home, school or work? IF YES, Thinking back over the last week, how many of the 7 days did you use the Internet?

Also of note is that all categories of positive response for “Hours used” have either the “Always” or the “Sometimes” response greater than the average for the total “Always” or “Sometimes” response. While this cannot be lauded as infallible proof that internet use increases voting chance, there is a clear upward trend in voting participation displayed here as time spent on the internet increases. Both the “Six hours in past week” and “Seven hours in past week” categories have greater than 65% of all respondents saying either that they sometimes or always vote, where the average across all categories is 60% and the percentage of non-net-users who always or sometimes vote is only 48.5%.

Secondly, Table 3 shows the responses of those respondents who were too young to have voted yet at the time of the survey. The patterns here are even more clear than those displayed in table 2. When respondents did not use the internet, 43.8% of them said that they would never vote, with 31.3% saying they would always vote and 12.5% replying they would sometimes vote and the same number saying they would rarely vote. Compare this to the group of respondents who used the internet 7 hours or more in the week prior to the survey, of whom 47.5% said they would always vote and 37.6% said they would sometimes vote, with only 7.1% saying they would never vote and 7.8% saying they would rarely vote. The general trend is consistent across the table, with an increase in time spent on the net seemingly translating into an increased likelihood of voting.

Table 3: Frequency of future voting as a factor of weekly time spent online:

	Did not use last week	1 hour	2 hours	3 hours	4 hours	5 hours	6 hours	7 hours	Doesn't use net	Total
Always	24 35.8%	15 44.1%	25 42.4%	15 40.5%	14 38.9%	15 50.0%	6 42.9%	67 47.5%	5 31.3%	186 27.5%
Sometimes	25 37.3%	15 44.1%	26 44.1%	15 40.5%	17 47.2%	9 30.0%	4 28.6%	53 37.6%	2 12.5%	166 33.3%
Rarely	7 10.4%	1 2.9%	3 5.1%	5 13.5%	2 5.6%	2 6.7%	4 28.6%	11 7.8%	2 12.5%	37 11.8%
Never	11 16.4%	3 8.8%	5 8.5%	2 5.4%	3 8.3%	4 13.3%	0 0.0%	10 7.1%	7 43.8%	45 27.3%
Total	67 100%	34 100%	59 100%	37 100%	36 100%	30 100%	14 100%	141 100%	16 100%	434 100%

Actual questions from NCES 1:

VP3a (rows): We know that most people don't vote in all elections. Usually between one-quarter to one-half of those eligible actually come out to vote. As an adult, how often do you think you will vote in local and national elections?
Always, sometimes, rarely or never?

Net (columns): First, Do you use the Internet either from home, school or work? IF YES, Thinking back over the last week, how many of the 7 days did you use the Internet?

However, this data must be taken with a grain of salt. Because respondents were too young to have actually voted, they were being asked hypothetically what their voting patterns would be in the future. While this table is ample evidence that time spent on the internet may increase the chance that any given youth will state that they will always vote in the future, and likewise may decrease the chance that any given youth will state that they will never vote in the future, it is not actually proof that they will follow up and act in the manner they state. Still, the strength of the correlation between the two activities demonstrated in the data adds at least some weight to the overall hypothesis that online activity may increase propensity for political participation.

In order to more specifically isolate online political engagement, I then examine the effect of reading internet news on voting activity. This is an easier concept to relate to traditional research on political participation than “hours spent online”; the number of days on which news was read online is a clear-cut analog to the oft-recorded “number of days on which a person has read the newspaper”. For the sake of this analysis, I assume that there is no substantive difference in news content between the print medium and the online medium because they are both advertising-driven mediums targeting the general American populace.

Table 4: Frequency of voting in past elections as a function of reading news online:

	Did not do	1 day	Couple	Few	4 days	5 days	6 days	Every-day	Total
Always	62 23.8%	11 24.4%	10 24.0%	14 34.1%	10 38.5%	10 29.4%	3 33.3%	21 35.0%	141 27.4%
Sometimes	79 30.4%	15 33.3%	16 40.0%	13 31.7%	11 42.3%	16 47.1%	3 33.3%	19 31.7%	172 33.4%
Rarely	33 12.7%	5 11.1%	4 10.0%	7 17.1%	2 7.7%	2 5.9%	1 11.1%	7 11.7%	61 11.8%
Never	86 33.1%	14 31.1%	10 24.0%	7 17.1%	3 11.5%	6 17.6%	2 22.2%	13 21.7%	141 27.4%
Total	260 100.0%	45 100.0%	40 100.0%	41 100.0%	26 100.0%	34 100.0%	9 100.0%	60 100.0%	515 100.0%

Actual questions from NCES 1:

vp3 (rows): We know that most people don't vote in all elections. Usually between one-quarter to one-half of those eligible actually come out to vote. Can you tell me how often you vote in local and national elections? Always, sometimes, rarely, or never?

mi7e(columns): I'm going to read you some ways that people get news and information. Over the past seven days, please tell me on how many days you have done each of the following.... E. Read news on the Internet

A nuanced analysis is necessary to interpret this set of results. The pattern seems to be as follows: Those who do not read the news online are the least likely to vote, followed by those who read the news online everyday, followed by those who read a moderate amount of online news. This is demonstrated in every category as days where news was read increases – 33.1% of those who did not read the news online never vote, compared to 11.5% for those who had read it four days a week and back up to 21.7% for those who had read it every day. Similarly, respondents who had not read the news were only 23.8% likely to respond that they always voted, which trended up regularly to 38.5% likely if they read news four days a week, and then trailed off to lower numbers with increased reading.

Why might this be? If reading news online amounts to absorbing information about current events, this then indicates that the uninformed are least likely to vote, as is already well documented in the literature of political science. However, perhaps those who read the news online every day are subjected to an “information overload”, wherein they realize that the sheer volume of events in the world is large enough that their personal output cannot effect everything in the world. This in turn

would lead to a decreased sense of internal efficacy, which would invariably lead to a decrease in political participation.

While this is the most plausible explanation, further research would be necessary to see if this bears out in other media as well. For instance, watching televised news daily would likely give the same amount of information – would this pattern be seen there, too? Would this pattern be born out with a larger sample size, or with respondents that included all age ranges? These are questions which should all be addressed at some point in the future to gain a more complete picture of how gaining information affects youth voting.

Despite this somewhat ambiguous overview, however, one important point remains clear: reading the news online irrefutably increases youth voting participation. There is a marked decrease in respondents who report never voting as long as they read the news online more than once a week. Likewise, there is a clear rise in the percentage of voters who say they will sometimes vote in correlation with increased online news reading. These two trends indicate that online news reading helps to increase political participation in youth, though it is by no means a silver bullet or a cure-all.

Table 5: Frequency of future voting as a function of reading news online:

	Did not do	1 day	Couple	Few	4 days	5 days	6 days	Every-day	Total
Always	80 39.3%	22 40.7%	30 50.0%	12 37.5%	8 34.8%	4 36.4%	5 45.5%	23 56.1%	184 42.4%
Sometimes	73 36.1%	24 44.4%	22 36.7%	14 43.8%	12 52.2%	6 54.5%	4 36.4%	11 26.8%	166 38.2%
Rarely	19 9.4%	5 9.3%	2 3.3%	3 9.4%	2 8.7%	0 .0%	1 9.1%	5 12.2%	37 8.5%
Never	30 14.9%	3 5.6%	6 10.0%	3 9.4%	1 4.3%	1 9.1%	1 9.1%	2 4.9%	47 10.8%
Total	202 100.0%	54 100.0%	60 100.0%	32 100.0%	23 100.0%	11 100.0%	11 100.0%	41 100.0%	434 100.0%

Actual questions from NCES 1:

VP3a (rows): We know that most people don't vote in all elections. Usually between one-quarter to one-half of those eligible actually come out to vote. As an adult, how often do you think you will vote in local and national elections? Always, sometimes, rarely or never?

mi7e(columns): I'm going to read you some ways that people get news and information. Over the past seven days, please tell me on how many days you have done each of the following... E. Read news on the Internet

This table shows a clear and enlightening trend: as the number of days on which the news is read increases, so too increases the likelihood of youth to vote. Keep in mind that this again is the data for youth who were too young at the time of the survey to have voted before – so they are reporting their hypothetical future voting tendencies. 39.6% of those who had not read online news in the week preceding the survey stated that they always vote, whereas 56.1% of those who had read the news online everyday said that they always vote. Likewise, 14.9% of those who had not read the news online said that they never vote, compared to only 4.9% of those who had read it every day.

The pattern is not absolutely clear-cut, though – there is some odd variation in the increase of voting likelihood with days spent with news. For instance, 50% those who had read the news 2 of the past 7 days said they always vote, but only around 35% of people who read the news three, four, or five days a week said they always vote.

Why this segment of respondents responded that they sometimes vote rather than that they always vote is a bit of a mystery – but may be explained by the response wording. While the argument could be made that the fluctuations in Table 5 mirror the pattern of Table 4, this is unlikely to be the case due to the results of those who read the news everyday in Table 5. Whereas the everyday news readers in Table 4 demonstrated a marked decrease in political participation from those who had read the news only four days, in Table 5 the everyday readers have the highest percentage of respondents who will always vote, and the lowest percentage of those who will never vote. The question wording is a far more likely candidate for the variation in “always” voting seen in the “few”, “four”, and “five” day reading categories for the following reason:

Given the choices of “Always, sometimes, rarely,” or “never” to the question, those who can think of at least one time where they would elect not to vote would likely have to choose “sometimes”. However, mainstream online news such as cnn.com, nytimes.com, or bbc.co.uk generally has little to

do with local politics, and much more to do with state, federal, and international politics. Thus, online news reading probably has much less of an effect on voting in local elections than it does on voting in state or federal elections – but those who vote only at state and federal levels would fall under “sometimes” instead of “always”, skewing the trend here.

Essentially, to do a truly accurate assessment of news-reading's effect on voting, it would be necessary to gather future data with an additional “almost always” category on frequency of voting between “sometimes” and “always”, or qualifying the voting question to count only state and federal elections. This is not to say that local elections are less important - merely that online news-reading probably has a greatly diminished impact on youths' willingness to turn out for them compared to its impact on turnout for state or national elections.

Most interesting of all, however, is the data from the Tisch College survey, which indicates that young people are much more likely to say that they “definitely will vote” when they spend any amount of time participating in an online political discussion. Table 6 shows the comparison between amount of time spent discussing politics online with how likely the respondents report they are to vote in 2008:

Table 6: Likelihood of voting in 2008 as a function of time spent discussing politics online:

	None	10 hours or less	11-25 hours	26-60 hours	61-120 hours	More than 120 hours	Total
Definitely will vote	270 61.1%	182 86.7%	93 89.4%	71 88.8%	28 87.5%	48 88.9%	692 75.1%
Probably will vote	63 14.3%	13 6.2%	6 5.8%	6 7.5%	0 .0%	4 7.4%	92 10.0%
50-50 chance of voting	53 12.0%	10 4.8%	4 3.8%	2 2.5%	4 12.5%	1 1.9%	74 8.0%
Probably will not voter	22 5.0%	3 1.4%	1 1.0%	0 .0%	0 .0%	0 .0%	26 2.8%
Definitely will not vote	34 7.7%	2 1.0%	0 .0%	1 1.3%	0 .0%	1 1.9%	38 4.1%
Total	442 100.0%	210 100.0%	104 100.0%	80 100.0%	32 100.0%	54 100.0%	922 100.0%

Actual questions from Tisch College survey:

vote2008(rows): How likely is it that you will vote in the general election for president next year?

wsb88_polwebsite(columns): How many hours were you involved with this organization or program in the last twelve months: Participated in online political discussions or visited a politically oriented website

Table 6 shows a drastic increase in the percentage of respondents who say they “definitely will vote” when respondents participate in political discussion online in any form and any amount. At the same time, there's no real evidence that increasing the amount of time which one spends discussing online exacerbates this trend – the numbers for all amounts of time remain relatively constant. The important question to follow this up with, then is to ask whether they are discussing politics online because they've already decided they want to vote, or whether their drive to vote is ignited by online discussion. Still, it seems a fairly easy requirement from an educational standpoint to require a student to make one post about politics to a school-moderated discussion forum each week, for example, for a civics class. For those interested in studying youth voting patterns in order to attempt to increase youth

turnout, this particular finding could be extremely helpful in creating voting-encouraging systems.

Finally, one more very interesting internet trend remains: youth who were contacted about a political issue via the internet were much more likely to have voted in 2006 or 2007 than youth who had not been contacted online. This is illustrated in Table 7.

Table 7: '06-'07 voting turnout as a function of contact through the internet:

	Yes, was contacted	No, wasn't contacted	Not Sure	Total
No, didn't vote in 2006 or 2007	46 20.9%	100 39.8%	11 36.7%	157 31.3%
Yes, voted in 2006 or 2007	174 79.1%	151 60.2%	19 63.3%	344 68.7%
Total	220 100.0%	251 100.0%	30 100.0%	501 100.0%

Actual questions from the Tisch College survey:

year(rows): Please describe the last (year) you voted:

contactinternet: Before the 2006 congressional elections, did any campaign or organization, including student organization, contact you to talk about the elections Over the internet or via email

The fact that those who were not sure of being contacted and those who were not contacted look much the same in their voting patterns, while those who recall being contacted were twenty percent more likely to have voted, demonstrates a significant effect of internet communication on voting turnout. Whether these people were contacted by official campaigns of candidates or by friends, neighbors, and family is unknown, as is whether they were contacted by email or by some other online means such as social networks or reading a post on a forum by a campaigner; but the stark difference between the two categories suggests that this may be a very potent and inexpensive means of turning out youth.

Conclusion

There is much to learn still about how the internet affects the voting patterns of the 18-25 year old cohort, but this paper demonstrates that there is significant promise in the internet as a tool for

engaging the frequently neglected young demographic in the political process.

First, it shows that the vast majority of young people do use the internet in some fashion or another, regardless of income level. This is good because it serves as an equalizing factor in the traditional feedback loop of money yielding education yielding efficacy yielding participation. Additionally, that the internet affects such a wide swath of today's youth means that any positive effects the net has on voting will be supplied to a large majority of the current young generation.

Secondly, it clearly establishes a positive link between online news reading and electoral participation. This shows that, while Wattenberg was correct in showing that a decrease in news-reading leads to a decrease in voting, he was incorrect in assuming that only newspaper reading plays into informing citizens and increasing their likelihood of voting.

Finally, and perhaps most applicably, my analysis shows a clear link between discussion of politics online and participation in the political system. For those looking for a new way to attempt to get youth to join the political system in light of community service requirements not being the silver bullet they were purported to be, this could be a great area for further research. If, in fact, a single post per week to a forum is all that is required to get an additional 20% of youth to vote, as was suggested by the data from the Tisch survey, then a relatively simple, low-cost solution to low participation levels is at hand.