

A narrowing digital divide: the impact of the Internet on youth political participation

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the effectiveness of the Internet as a tool for civic engagement among youth during the 2000, 2004, and 2008 US presidential elections. In this context, youth can be understood as the segment of the electorate comprised of individuals between the ages of 18 and 25 years. The authors apply concepts of the digital divide to address, hypothetically, the question of whether the Internet is the cure-all for political malaise among youth. As such, without the digital divide, would the Internet be able to resolve the issue of low political involvement among youth? This analysis concludes that the impact of the Internet on youth political participation has been demonstrated to be successful. The Internet has not only become a revolutionary and promising political communication medium and campaign tool, it is also a bulwark of democracy.

INTRODUCTION

This paper analyses the effectiveness of the Internet as a tool for civic engagement among youth during the 2000, 2004, and 2008 US Presidential Elections. In this context, youth can be understood as the segment of the electorate comprised of individuals between the ages of 18 and 25 years. The authors apply concepts of the digital divide hypothetically to address the question of whether the Internet is the cure-all for political malaise among youth. As such, without the digital divide, would the Internet be able to resolve the issue of low political involvement among youth? This paper begins with a rationale for conducting this analysis. The authors then proceed to describe the conceptual foundation rooted in the principles of the digital divide, which refers to the distinction between the information 'haves' and 'have-nots' – the gap between the computer literate and the computer illiterate (Belang r, 2009). In this section on the digital divide, the authors also address the matters of civic engagement, participation and mobilisation hypotheses, and their positive implications for the 'haves' (e-politics). This is followed by a section portraying the trends in youth civic (dis)engagement, specifically during the 2000-2004 US Presidential Elections and the 2008 US Presidential Elections. This paper ends with a discussion that also offers suggestions for future research.

1. RATIONALE FOR CONDUCTING THIS ANALYSIS

The rationale for conducting this analysis lies in the fact that the onset and popularisation of the Internet have provoked significant academic interest regarding the medium's potential to reinvigorate and democratise the political process (Harrison & Falvey, 2001). This analysis adds fresh, new insights on the concept of the digital divide by looking at how online political participation among youth voters may be an indication that the Internet divide is narrowing, and that it is succeeding as a mobilising tool. Enthusiasts have alluded to the possibility that the Internet could bring about better political and civic engagement, as well as direct democracy, with an unparalleled aptitude to appeal to young, marginalised, and minority citizens (Etzioni, 1997; Norris, 2001; Porter, 1997; Rheingold, 1993). By 2006, the Internet had indeed revolutionised the way electoral candidates conducted campaigns (Davis, Baumgartner, Francia & Morris, 2009). The 1996 and 2000 US presidential elections already started to witness the dramatic advent of the political use of the Internet. People were turning to the Internet in unprecedented numbers for political news, or policy research, and this increase was a significant correlate to the diffusion of the technology (Howard, 2003). Not surprisingly, with each subsequent election cycle, the proportion of political candidates who have incorporated the Web into their communication tactics has also steadily risen (Xenos & Bennett, 2007). It is even more remarkable that more than half of all voting-age Americans were online political users during the 2008 US Presidential Elections (Smith, 2009), and youth voter turnout was at a record high since 1992 (Kirby & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2009).

2. CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION

In order to understand the significance of this study as it relates to the social impact of the Internet, it is necessary to establish a conceptual foundation rooted in the principles of the digital divide, paying specific attention to the role of the divide in governmental and political processes. Furthermore, while voting is not entirely representative of civic engagement, it will be used as the primary indicator of political participation in this discourse. It is important to present what civic engagement entails, particularly by explaining the key concepts of political malaise, as well as the participation and mobilisation hypotheses – which point to the increasingly close interaction between the Internet and civic life.

2.1 The digital divide

As governments around the globe progressively establish e-government services, and as electoral candidates increasingly concentrate their efforts on online campaigning, apprehensions about the possible effects of the digital divide persist. The digital divide refers to the distinction between the information ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ – the gap between the computer literate and the computer illiterate (Belang r, 2009). Furthermore, a major component of the digital divide is the absence of access to computers and the Internet, which is commonly driven by demographic factors such as income, education, race and gender (Mossberger, 2009; Norris, 2001). Specifically, it can be argued that two major rifts exist: a physical (or technology) access divide and a cognitive divide (DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman & Robinson, 2001). In other words, the digital divide is a metaphor for a formidable dilemma of unequal access to new media technologies that is not likely to be resolved by absolute diffusion of Internet or related technologies (Jung, Qiu & Yong-Chan, 2001).

Recent literature has concentrated on the ‘second-level’ digital divide, one characterised by the disparity between skilled and unskilled users – which means that people have various levels of aptitude when it comes to doing a search on the Internet (Halavais, 2008) – and the ‘third-level’ digital divide, which encompasses the gap between the politically engaged and the politically indifferent (Cornfield, 2000; Hargittai, 2002). The main concern regarding the digital divide is that the information-poor may become further disadvantaged in societies in which basic computer skills are becoming necessary for social mobility, career and educational development, full access to social networks, and opportunities for civic engagement (Jung et al., 2001; Norris, 2001). Moreover, the Internet could also possibly reinforce the existing dilemma of unequal access to quality political information (Albrecht, 2006; Moore, 1987; Tichenor, Donohue & Olien, 1970).

2.2 Civic Engagement

According to Norris, Curtice, Sanders, Scammell & Semetko (1999), civic engagement encompasses three distinct facets: (1) political knowledge (what people learn about public affairs), (2) political trust (the public’s support for the political system and its actors), and (3) political participation (conventional and unconventional activities designed to influence government and the decision-making process). Yet, the current discussion of civic engagement

is centred primarily on citizens' involvement in extra-institutional groups, associations, informal initiatives, and a variety of efforts to produce change in matters that concern them (Jennings & Zeitner, 2003). For instance, Dahlberg (2007) offered a radical-democratic slant on civic engagement by focusing on the ways that the Internet facilitates the emergence and growing visibility of 'counter publics', representative groups, and interests that are absent from the mainstream public agenda. What often characterises this 'agonistic' public sphere is that it is driven by discursive struggle as opposed to a search for consensus (Bakardjieva, 2009).

The issue of political malaise is one that most comprehensively describes notions of disengagement as it pertains to political and civic involvement, and is one that ought not to be overlooked. An individual experiencing 'political malaise' lacks trust in the political system, expresses cynicism towards politics, and experiences both low political efficacy and high disapproval toward politics (Kaid, Johnston & Hale, 1989; McKinney, Spiker & Kaid, 1998). As mentioned earlier, the benefit in employing the concept of political malaise is its inclusiveness as a defining term that melds the various factors of alienation, apathy, cynicism, efficacy and disapprobation (Spiker, 2005). Pinkleton and Austin (1998) have linked the idea of political malaise, especially among youth, to a "spiral of disaffection", where people often isolate themselves from political information, thereby increasing cynical perceptions of government.

2.3 Participation and mobilisation hypotheses

Cyber-optimists consider digital technologies to be possibly the most important development in this era, ones that could probably invigorate the process of allowing more opportunities for citizen deliberation (Barber, 1999; Budge, 1997). At the centre of this lies the participation hypothesis, which implies that digital politics will influence public affairs either through the mobilisation of new groups or the strengthening of those who would participate in more traditional forms (Southwell, 1988). Furthermore, the mobilisation hypothesis asserts that the Internet may serve to enlighten, organise, and engage those who are currently marginalised from the political system – such as the younger generation (Norris, 2001). If these hypotheses are correct, it is expected that the abundant information made available through the Internet has the potential to enable the public to become more knowledgeable about public and political affairs, more articulate in communicating their views in a computer-mediated setting (e.g. email, blogs, forums), and more actively involved in community affairs (Schwartz, 1996).

2.4. E-Politics: positive implications for the 'haves'

As suggested earlier, the Internet has the potential to bring to light endless possibilities for revolutionising otherwise archaic, ineffective, and unequal forms of governance and representation (Budge, 1997; Grossman, 1996). Based on this assertion, a self-reinforcing affirmation of positive expectations of increased citizen involvement and voting, and also of better information being made available to voters, should be apparent (Howard, 2003). The assumption that Internet technologies, such as blogs and social network sites (SNSs), are instrumental in democracy (Brants, Huizenga & van Meerten, 1996; Mele, 1999; Tsagarousianou, Tambini & Bryan, 1998) is rooted in the claim that these tools are able to moderate some of the more detrimental dimensions of modern political communication

(Albrecht, 2006). In essence, any tool that will counter the impact of nonreciprocal media will truly help democratise the political process. Schwartz (1996) and Rheingold (1993; 2002) argue that online communities and social networks can only augment the public sphere, particularly when they exist and thrive around bulletin boards for positive policy debate among citizens, mobilisation, and building social capital.

The Internet does in fact play an integral role in the progress towards better representation and civic engagement (Albrecht, 2006). Specifically, Internet-mediated politics tends to be more inclusive, by enabling access to more information, and providing unconstrained citizen access to the virtual public sphere, hence giving voters a voice in the wider political arena (Mitra, 2001). A necessary advantage of virtual involvement is the frequent absence of demographic profiles of users in discussions. Consequently, the Internet is able to strip such political forums of demographic prejudices and inhibitors of equal participation (Tambini, 1999).

3. TRENDS IN YOUTH CIVIC (DIS)ENGAGEMENT

The predicament of youth participation in American politics is no secret; low voter turnout rates for the 18-25-year cohort compared with the rest of the voting-age population, lie at the root of youth engagement concerns (Spiker, 2005). Since 1972, when 18-year-olds were first granted suffrage, voter turnout among the youth has vacillated, but for the most part it has declined (Levine & Lopez, 2002; McGregor, 2000), and research on political socialisation implies that participation rates (and political apathy) established during the early years of adulthood are often manifested as lifelong patterns (Crystal & Debell, 2002; Putnam, 2000).

Earlier research on civic knowledge, attitudes, and participation among American youth presented significant evidence of young people's detachment from civic life between the 1950s and early 2000s (Crozier, Huntington & Watakuni, 1975; Lipset & Schneider, 1987; Pharr & Putnam, 2000). Given these circumstances, it is important not to engage in a moral panic, overly generalise by accusing all youth of shunning civic life, or blame youth for more problematic issues regarding the civic disengagement of their elders (Bachen, Raphael, Lynn, McKee & Philippi, 2008). The dramatic increase in formal schooling of Americans, since World War II, has however not been accompanied by increased levels of political knowledge among students (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning Engagement, 2009; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Galston, 2001; Pew Research Center, 2004). In fact, according to Lopez et al. (2006), most American youth are uninformed when it comes to important aspects of politics, government, and current affairs. In line with these contentions, Lopez et al. (2006: 4) report that

53% of youth are unaware that only citizens can vote in federal elections; only 30% can correctly name at least one member of the President's Cabinet; and only 34% know that the United States has a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (compared with the 27% who know that France holds a seat).

Whereas the media have often been scapegoated for the increasing political acrimony of American adults (Bennett, Rhine, Flickinger & Bennett, 1999; Capella & Jamieson, 1996), and youth seem particularly beset by stoicism and low voter turnout (Bennett & Rademacher, 1997; Mann,

1999), many have been referring to the Internet as a means of possibly rejuvenating political engagement (Selnow, 1998). While online political involvement is, to some extent, common among all generations, youth are more likely than their elders to engage in the online political process (Bachen et al., 2008; Smith, 2009). Not only are 94% of youth Internet users by the time they reach the 12th grade, but they also begin to spend more time online, and discover more ways of utilising the Internet – including accessing news and political information (Lenhart, Madden & Hitlin, 2005). Furthermore, as American youth increasingly use the Internet for political purposes, they are cultivating the political habits and views that will shape them as older adults (Torney-Purta & Amadeo, 2003).

3.1 The 2000-2004 US Presidential Elections

The 2004 election was marked by unparalleled and innovative use of the Internet, and young voters were unexpectedly engaged in the political process (Xenos & Bennett, 2007). The 2004 election witnessed a youth voter turnout that had not been witnessed since Bill Clinton was first elected in 1992 (Lopez, Kirby & Sagoff, 2005). Although it would be unreasonable, if not wrong, to credit the proliferation of the online political environment with the rise in youth turnout, there is no doubt that as young people moved through the media environment of the campaigns to the polls, many sought political information from sources such as candidate, party, and other organisational websites (Xenos & Bennett, 2007). As a matter of fact, an estimated 28% of 18-25-year-olds received most of their campaign information via the Internet in 2004, making them the age group most reliant on new media for political information about the election (Pew Research Center, 2004).

The effects of age-related inequalities in political participation for the democratic process are evident (Xenos & Bennett, 2007). During both the 2000 and the 2004 US Presidential Elections, there was a remarkable disconnect between the electoral and the youth engagement spheres because of candidates' reluctance both directly to target and communicate with younger segments of the electorate (Bystrom & Dimitrova, 2007; Hochman, 2001). Specifically, Delli Carpini (2000: 344) noted that "most of the formal institutions of public life either ignore young adults and the issues that matter to them or are ill equipped to attract young adults and provide them with meaningful opportunities to participate". In other words, this process of neglecting younger voters (online or off) is probably largely attributable to professional campaign and public relations practitioners' disregard for young voters as a result of their characteristically low voting rate (compared with that of the seniors) (Xenos & Bennett, 2007). Spiker (2005) adequately sums this up by stating that elected officials and also electoral candidates cater to the preferences of voters and not to those of non-voters.

3.2 The 2008 US Presidential Elections

While political usage of the Internet has been consistently rising over the past decade, the online political environment was qualitatively different in 2008 than was the case in the preceding election cycles (Smith, 2009). This is attributable to the fact that many of the newer social media components of the campaign process had become more mainstream by 2008, and the majority of voting-age Americans were active political online users (Greengard, 2009).

Actually, more than half (55%) of all voting-age Americans were online political users during the 2008 US Presidential Elections (Smith, 2009), and youth voter participation had been at a record high (48.5%) since 1992 (Kirby & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2009). Citizen politics was clearly a major force at play in 2008, and the Internet – its social networks, websites, and bloggers – helped drive the upsurge in political participation (Patterson, 2008).

Blogging is, in fact, a significant area of relevance in discourse about ways in which the Internet is revolutionising commonly held definitions of civic engagement. Bloggers are often referred to as the Fifth Estate (Cooper, 2006). The First Estate refers to the clergy, the Second Estate to the nobility, the Third Estate to commoners, and the Fourth Estate to the press or mainstream media (Jack & Tsatsoulin, 2002). Bloggers can provide an added level of transparency and diverse perspectives to the process of reporting; they are changing the way that political news and information are accessed (Kenner Muir, 2008). This correlates with the fact that, in 2008, politically active Internet users began to seek out online sources – such as blogs, chat rooms, social networking sites (SNSs), and political websites – that matched their political perspectives, while moving away from news sites that were politically neutral (Marcelo, Lopez, Kennedy & Barr, 2008). According to Smith (2009), 33% of political users now claim that they obtained political information from sites that shared their points of view. This was accompanied by a 7% decrease in non-partisan information-seeking, between the 2004 and the 2008 election cycles (Smith, 2009).

Throughout the duration of the 2008 presidential campaign, Obama’s political team used information technology in a way that ultimately reshaped the election process and the means by which candidates interacted with voters (Panagopoulos, 2007). In fact, this political team took the leading role in engaging online political activism (Smith, 2009). To further illustrate, the Obama campaign team amassed email addresses that were then used to build a database of more than 13 million people; they turned to SNSs such as Facebook (see Figure 1 below) to round up followers and disseminate information, and “they posted videos on the campaign Web site Barack-Obama.com as well as on YouTube” (Greengard, 2009: 16).



Figure 1. The Barack Obama Facebook page
Source: (Facebook)

Given their participation and user statistics these online channels are important. Facebook, one of the most prominent social networking sites, has more than 69 million active users; YouTube, the popular online video-sharing site, is estimated to have nearly 60 million users (Phi Kappa Phi, 2008).

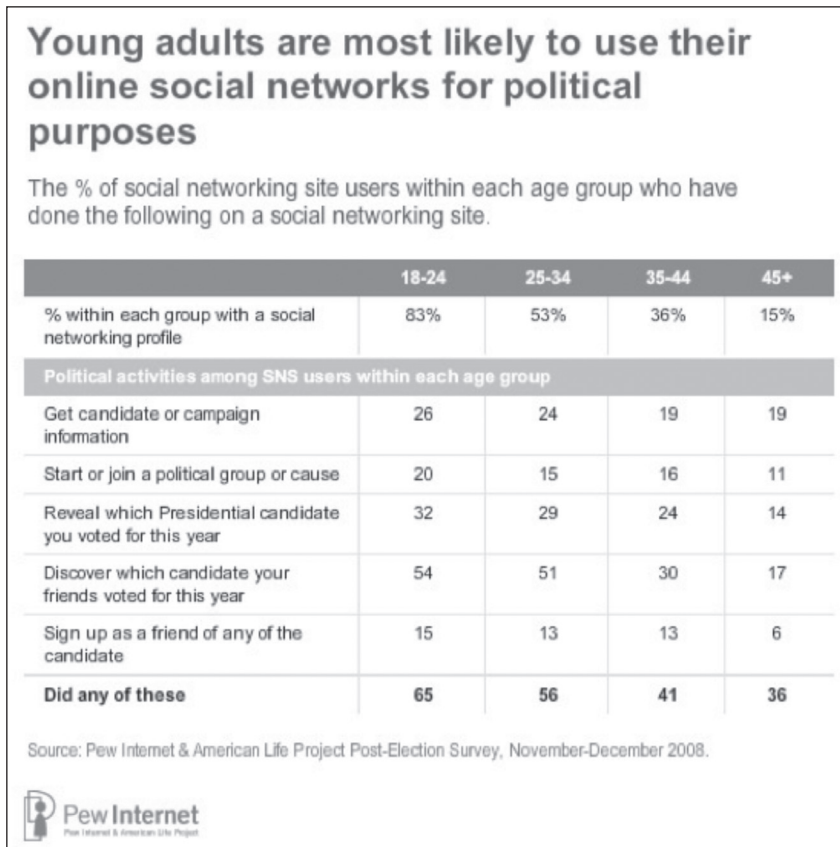


Figure 2
Source: (Smith, 2009)

In addition, in 2008, more than half (52%) of online social network users (the majority of whom are young voters – see Figure 2 above) used these sites for political information or to participate in some aspect of the campaign (Smith, 2009). These numbers clearly prove that young voters are linked via virtual networks in a way that can help bolster the process of reinvigorating youth engagement. In short, the approach used in the Obama campaign was one that made the best use of advancements in communications and Internet technology, and served to reinforce other mobilising efforts targeted at young people (Marcelo et al., 2008).

Leaving aside the influence of the Internet, the marked increase in youth electoral participation in 2008 was also the result of many non-technological contextual factors. Evidence suggests that young voters were more attentive during the 2008 election cycle than they had been in any preceding elections (Rock the Vote, 2007). Specifically, some of the issues that were most important to young voters included education, the Iraq War, jobs and the economy, health care, and the environment (particularly global warming) (Marcelo et al., 2008). Hence, at any rate, an election that is heavily centred on these concerns of young voters is likely to attract the attention of the younger segment of the electorate. Furthermore, younger voters finally felt a sense of inclusion, as at this point campaign strategists had already recognised the importance of targeting a commonly disregarded demographic in order to sway the outcome of the elections (Greengard, 2009).

4. DISCUSSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The digital divide may be slowly narrowing the gap between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' worldwide (Kenner Muir, 2008) but, as this analysis has demonstrated, it greatly narrowed the divide among US youth during the 2000, 2004, and 2008 US Presidential Elections. Beyond doubt, the Internet represents a tool for civic engagement among youth (Davis et al., 2009; Greengard, 2009; Herrnson, Stokes-Brown & Hindman, 2007; Tomlinson, 2005), even if that means that political campaigns have to target Facebook and YouTube in order to recruit voters (recall the 2008 Obama campaign). As public access to the Internet has surpassed 70% of the US population, the medium has taken on a very central role in campaign tactics (Panagopoulos, 2007), and young voters have been among those who are most attentive to the growing realm of online politics (Xenos & Bennett, 2007).

Given the historical trends in youth-voter turnout, the Internet has served as a significant mobilising tool (Xenos & Bennett, 2007). Previous research on youth attitudes revealed that, compared with prior generations, today's youth are more disinterested in politics (Galston, 2004), more unlikely to convey trust in their fellow citizens (Lopez et al., 2006), and more disinclined to perceive citizenship as involving duties (such as voting or donating money) and not simply entailing rights (Kurtz, Rosenthal & Zukin, 2003). However, the coincidence of remarkably high youth-voter turnouts with record online political activism in 2008, together with the proliferation of the political use of new Internet technologies that are mostly employed by youth, is indicative of significant change. Such change is affected, in part, by campaign strategists' acknowledgment of the value of the younger segment of the electorate, and by developing measures that seek to engage them (Greengard, 2009). This directly correlates with the fact that youth, like any other demographic group using the Internet, engage with particular parts of the Web rather than the medium in its entirety (Xenos & Bennett, 2007). Hence, according to Lupia and Philpot (2005: 1134), young people's political interests, and ultimately their participation, can be positively affected by Internet sources that provide "important information effectively and efficiently". In other words, if used in a manner that appeals to, rather than alienates youth, the Internet can alleviate most of the symptoms of political malaise (Spiker, 2005; Xenos & Bennett, 2007).

It is necessary to emphasise that the effectiveness of the Internet's use in politics extends far beyond issues of equal access. In order to normalise the debate on the extent to which e-politics is beneficial (or not), it is crucial to underscore the inanimate and fundamentally neutral nature of the Internet (or any other medium for that matter) (Turkle, 1995). This translates into the fact that, while political information may be more efficiently disseminated and policy debate may be more widespread and people may be more mobilised, the Internet by itself does not 'make' voters more erudite or more likely to participate (Brundidge & Rice, 2009). Ultimately, the Internet and other new media technologies are not agents of sociopolitical change; rather, they are structures through which such changes can be either channelled or challenged (Howard, 2003).

For future research, it might prove interesting to continue examining the ability of the Internet to enhance civic participation. Since its infancy, the Internet has generated curiosity, debates, and dreams about its potential role in the fortification of democracy for all (Bakardjieva, 2009). As such, scholars can take into consideration a detailed demographic dissection of youth participation in uncovering the motivating factors among people who could benefit from this 'democracy for all', such as marginalised ethnic groups. Put another way: In what ways will the Internet support new forms of addressing public issues and being involved in civic activities that develop to the level of the everyday lives of marginalised ethnic groups? This trend is already happening in certain parts of the United States (e.g., Minnesota, Nevada). For example, the Minnesota Senate has just released a new website that allows citizens from all walks of life – as long as they are Minnesota residents – to provide input regarding specific issues that the state is facing. Thanks to a new web-based suggestion, a few Minnesota residents have already provided suggestions related to marginalised groups (Engaging Citizens Online, 2009).

Another subject worthy of scholarly investigation is the participation of worldwide voices in online deliberation regarding the American political process. Such research should not only seek to establish whether global citizens are engaging with Americans in political discussions but also to discuss the significance and relevance of foreign opinions.

No matter what approach is adopted to improve civic engagement, the impact of the Internet on youth political participation has been shown to be successful. It is the authors' hope that readers now have a better understanding of how revolutionary and promising the Internet has become as a political communication medium, a campaign tool, and a bulwark of democracy.

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