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The Civic and Political Significance of Online Participatory Cultures among Youth Transitioning to Adulthood

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ABSTRACT. Much scholarship has examined how accessing news and other civic and politically oriented online activities can influence offline civic and political behaviors. Much less is known about the influence of nonpolitical online activity on civic and political practices. We found that youth engagement in some forms of nonpolitical online activity can serve as a gateway to participation in civic and political life, including volunteering, community problem solving, protest activities, and political voice. Unlike most prior work in this area that relies on convenience samples and cross-sectional data, we draw on two large panel studies, so we are able to control for prior levels of civic and political engagement. With such controls in place and with controls for a full range of demographic variables, we find that relationships between participation in nonpolitical online participatory cultures on the one hand and civic and political participation on the other remain statistically significant for both datasets. While politically driven online participation is clearly also worthy of attention, our findings indicate that it should not be seen as the only relevant bridge from online activity to civic and political engagement.

KEYWORDS. Civic and political engagement, digital media, participatory culture, new media, youth

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Much scholarship has examined how accessing news and other civic and politically oriented online activities can influence offline behaviors, such as voting and engagement with community issues (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; Bimber, 2003; Mossberger, Tolbert, & McNeal, 2008; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Xenos & Moy, 2007). Much less is known about the influence of nonpolitical online engagement on civic and political practices. Several qualitative studies indicate that the online participatory cultures that form around shared interests in hobbies, games, and aspects of popular culture may support civic and political life by developing an individual's civic skills, sense of agency, social networks, and appreciation of desirable norms for social interaction (Ito et al., 2009; Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison, & Weigel, 2007). Furthermore, the online discussion that takes place in relation to these activities may also expose individuals to divergent political views (Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009).

Others have proposed a less desirable relationship between nonpolitical online activity and civic and political outcomes. For example, a recent meta-analysis by Boulianne (2009) finds that once controls are in place for political interest, there is little relationship between Internet use and political behavior. Bauerlein (2008) argues that youth engagement with digital media has not improved youth knowledge of current affairs or related information. Consistent with this argument, Sherr (2005) ran an experiment that indicated that youth preferred youth-oriented Web sites, but learned less from them than from more traditional news sites. In addition, Prior (2007) found that the increased choice that cable TV and the Internet provide appears to widen the gap in political knowledge and engagement between those who are interested in politics and those with a stronger interest in entertainment. Thus, the enhanced ability to visit nonpolitical sites may function to distract youth from politically relevant content. Reinforcing concern regarding inequality, a recent Spanish study finds that Internet skills predict online political participation (Anduiza, Gallego, & Cantijoch, 2010), and Milner (2010) argues that Internet skills and

civic literacy skills often correlate with socioeconomic divides, drawing attention to the potential for online activity to enhance participatory inequality.

To date, most quantitative studies that have considered the relationship between nonpolitical online activity and civic and political engagement have been cross-sectional in nature and have relied on convenience samples. We believe that our study is the first broad-based quantitative panel study of the influences of nonpolitical online participatory cultures on youth civic and political engagement. We use two datasets: (a) a two-wave, purposive panel study of youth transitioning from high school to early adulthood and (b) a nationally representative panel study of 18–35-year-olds. The panel design enables us to control for prior levels of civic and political engagement and thus facilitates a stronger assessment of the causal impact of online participatory activities on varied forms of civic and political engagement than is possible with only cross-sectional data.

WHY FOCUS ON YOUTH?

When examining relationships between online participatory cultures and civic and political engagement, we decided to focus on youth and young adults. We believe that several factors make this focus desirable. First, youth and young adults are heavy users and early adopters of new media (Krueger, 2002). They frequently embrace the kind of participatory culture that can be facilitated by new media and are the most likely to use the Internet for entertainment and socializing: 43% of those aged 18–32 read blogs, 20% create blogs, and 67% use social networking sites (Jones & Fox, 2009). Moreover, when it comes to using new media in relation to civic and political issues, there appears to be a generational divide. While 37% of those aged 18–24 obtained campaign information from social networking sites in 2008 (more than those who did so from newspapers), only 4% aged 30–39 did so (Kohut, 2008). Interestingly, while inequality persists when it comes to some forms of online access and participation, in some important

respects, the digital divide among youth may be less pronounced than other important forms of inequality. For example, use of blogs and social networking sites for political purposes by those aged 18–24 appears to be much less strongly linked to socioeconomic status (SES) than are offline political activities (Smith, Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2009). Finally, focusing on youth also makes sense, because adolescence and early adulthood are times of lasting and significant civic and political identity development (Erikson, 1968; Jennings & Niemi, 1981; Smith, 1999). Indeed, during these years, young adults are highly impressionable, and there often is considerable fluctuation in their political orientations. This is followed by an enduring period of relative opinion stability (Jennings, 2007; Sears, 1990). As a result, the potential impact of new media on civic and political identity development is likely far greater in youth than it is on older adults.

THREE FORMS OF ONLINE PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

Online participatory cultures are contexts in which participants create and share with others, experienced participants help less experienced ones acquire knowledge and solve problems, and participants develop a sense of connection with one another and come to understand functional community norms (Jenkins et al., 2007). Individuals blog, start or join groups, participate in networks, share links, and regularly interact through new media. While the characterizations of many online activities are subject to debate, we refer to these practices as “participation” rather than as “engagement,” because we want to highlight a distinction between acts of consumption (reading the newspaper online, for example) and participation (where one blogs, for example, or interacts with others, often in a peer-to-peer context). Both consumption and participation might well be categorized as engagement. We posit that these practices can foster civic and political activity in a manner consistent with Verba, Schlozman, and Brady’s (1995) civic volunteerism model by promoting the motivation and capacity to act and by

increasing the likelihood of being recruited into action.

We examine three domains of online participatory culture: politics-driven, interest-driven, and friendship-driven. These cultures can provide young people with opportunities to discuss and gain information about political topics, thus motivating interest. They can create capacity for action by promoting civically relevant digital skills and norms for group interaction. Joining social networks may also facilitate recruitment into civic and political life.

While our conceptualization of these three cultures distinguishes between three sets of practices, we do not assess the relationship between these practices and particular platforms, such as Facebook or Twitter. While there is no doubt that analysis of particular platforms might also yield valuable results, our focus reflects the fact that use of a given platform can be driven by varied priorities and purposes. One might use Twitter, for example, to socialize with others or to circulate a perspective on a political issue to a broad audience. Our goal is to focus attention on the priorities that drive participation. We assess the degree to which youth online activity is motivated by (a) a desire to engage with political issues (politics-driven), (b) interests that are not explicitly political (interest-driven), or (c) a desire to socialize with friends (friendship-driven). Since we did not collect data on the platforms used when youth engaged in varied participatory acts, other studies will be needed to assess whether some platforms are used differently by members of different age or racial groups and whether some platforms are particularly well or poorly suited for certain kinds of online participation (see, for example, Conroy, Feezell, & Guerrero, in press; Skoric & Kwan, 2011).

Politics-Driven Online Participation

Politics-driven participation ranges from reading the news online to more participatory practices, such as entering into online dialogues or blogging about a political issue. It is an increasingly prominent form of political engagement (Smith et al., 2009). It can also be viewed as an antecedent of various offline civic

and political behaviors. Studies indicate that politics-driven online participation can foster offline engagement by increasing individuals' political interest and thus their motivation to be involved, by developing civically relevant digital skills, and by placing participants in contexts where recruitment is more likely (Mossberger et al., 2008; Shah et al., 2005; Shah, McLeod, & Lee, 2009). Thus, there is some prior empirical justification for our first hypothesis:

H1: Politics-driven online participation will foster civic and political engagement.

Interest-Driven Online Participation

While much scholarship has examined politics-driven participation, little has focused on the civic and political significance of interest-driven online participation. These online activities enable youth to pursue interests in hobbies, popular culture, new technology, games, and sports (Ito et al., 2009; Jenkins et al., 2007). Rather than passively consuming content, participants produce online materials, generate ideas, provide feedback, and participate in online communities. Because these activities are driven by specialized interests, participants tend to interact with those beyond their immediate friendship networks (Gee & Hayes, 2010; Ito et al., 2009).

In conceptualizing the value of interest-driven opportunities, it is worth considering research on youth extracurricular activities. These offline, nonpolitical, interest-driven activities provide opportunities to develop civic skills and productive norms of behavior within organizations, agencies, and social networks. Panel studies indicate that extracurricular activities foster social capital and, later, civic and political engagement (McFarland & Thomas, 2006; Smith, 1999).

Interest-driven participation may well develop civically relevant skills, norms, and networks in a similar way. In interest-driven contexts, young people journal about topics of local concern, organize gaming clans, and remix and share music online. Free software makes it easier than ever for youth to practice video production, share their creations with others,

and receive feedback from other community members; this interaction may likely strengthen civically relevant digital and communication skills and thus bolster an individual's capacity for action. These participatory cultures may also promote youths' understandings of norms of community membership and recognition of the potential of collective undertakings (Jenkins et al., 2007). Moreover, Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009) found that 53% of adults encounter political topics when engaged in online chat rooms and message boards related to nonpolitical leisure activities, including hobby and fan sites. While that was a study of adults, we suspect that interest-driven participation among youth will also lead to unintended exposure to political topics and, as a result, may motivate engagement. Moreover, the border between nonpolitical interests and politics may be smaller than many suppose. Jenkins et al. (2011) found that youth engage in discussions of politics while engaged in "nonpolitical," interest-driven activities and are often motivated to become politically active online in order to support nonpolitical interests. In summary, interest-driven activities may function like Robert Putnam's (2000) voluntary associations. Though not focused on politics, these activities can result in bonding and bridging relationships, skills, agency, and valuable norms for group action, which in turn can facilitate other kinds of public participation, and so we offer our second hypothesis:

H2: Interest-driven participation will foster civic and political engagement.

Friendship-Driven Online Participation

Friendship-driven participation is the most common form of online participation. It centers on day-to-day interactions youth have with peers at school and in the neighborhood. Such online activity often takes place through social media, such as Facebook (Ito et al., 2009; Livingstone & Brake, 2009). However, civic and political topics are not the focus of most socializing among youth, and friendship-driven activities generally involve individuals who also interact with each other offline. Nevertheless,

friendship-driven participation might help youth develop relevant skills and promote civic or political engagement. Wyatt, Katz, and Kim (2000) found that personal conversations in public and private spaces often contain civic and political content; Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009) found that online socializing and flirting in chat rooms and message boards do, as well. Such exposure could activate engagement. Puig-i-Abril and Rojas (2007) found a clear positive relationship between online social interaction and expressive political engagement. In addition, Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007); Kittilson and Dalton (2011); and Valenzuela, Park, and Kee (2009) found positive relationships between friendship-driven activities such as Facebook use and civic and political engagement, as well as a connection to varied forms of social capital. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis on the effect of friendship-driven participation:

H3: Friendship-driven online participation will foster civic and political engagement.

In the analysis that follows, we analyze two sets of panel survey data we collected centered around the 2008 presidential election: the California Civic Survey (CCS) and the Mobilization, Change, and Political and Civic Engagement (MCPCE) Project.¹ While, as noted above, some have begun assessing these relationships, our ability to assess the impact of politics-, interest-, and friendship-driven practices simultaneously and our use of panel data both significantly strengthen our ability to assess these hypotheses.

STUDY 1: CALIFORNIA CIVIC SURVEY (CCS)

Data

In the springs of 2005, 2006, and 2007, we surveyed 5,505 juniors and seniors in high school. This cross-sectional survey was not initially designed as a panel study. Students came from 21 high schools in 21 different

school districts in California. The schools were selected to ensure a diverse range of demographic and academic characteristics. The sample includes schools that enroll mostly white students (19.0%), schools that enroll mostly students of color (42.9%), and schools that are racially mixed (38.1%). The percentages of students receiving a free or reduced-price lunch ranged from 0% to 92%. To minimize selection bias, we surveyed entire classes of juniors and seniors.

To retain the possibility of a follow-up survey, in our initial survey we asked about students' willingness to be contacted in the future. To this, 23.8% consented ($n = 1,305$). Our follow-up survey was conducted after the 2008 election (December 2008–March 2009) and was administered to a total of 435 respondents. This represents a panel retention rate of 33.3% against the baseline sample and 7.9% against the initial pool of survey respondents.

We compared the initial survey responses of those who took the follow-up survey ($n = 435$) with the responses of those who did not ($n = 5,070$). Those who took the follow-up survey were more likely to be female (61% vs. 50%), have a higher grade point average (GPA; mean = 3.35 vs. 3.15), and be more politically interested (mean = 3.8 vs. 3.4) than those who did not. Significantly, those who took the follow-up survey were not different in terms of their new media practices, compared with those who did not take the follow-up survey. While, with the proper controls, we see no reason to believe that the differences between our T1 and T2 samples would bias the observed relationships between online participation and political engagement, as a safeguard, we are fortunate to have been able to conduct a similar analysis (Study 2) on a nationally representative dataset (described below).

Measurement

Three groups of variables were created from these panel data: (a) measures of new media participation, (b) measures of offline civic and political engagement (outcome variables), and (c) control variables (see Appendix A for descriptive statistics for these variables).

New Media Participation

Indicators of politics-driven, interest-driven, and friendship-driven online participation are listed in Table 1. Since politics-driven, interest-driven, and friendship-driven participation had not been measured simultaneously in any prior surveys, we used factor analytic techniques to test whether these three forms of online participation represent distinct factors. Following conventional eigenvalue-based criteria in exploratory factor analysis, we extracted factors whose eigenvalues are greater than 1. Using principal component factor estimation, we found that three factors had eigenvalues greater than 1 and that the fourth and all subsequent factors accounted for a relatively small amount of variance. Thus, we extracted three factors using a principal-axis factoring estimation, and we rotated this solution using a Promax (oblique) rotation procedure for clearer

interpretation. Table 1 shows the factor-pattern matrix from this rotated solution. Factor loadings were sorted by size to facilitate differentiation between variables. The factor loadings indicate three distinct factors. These three factors together explain 64.4% of the item variance.

Outcome Variables

We examined civic, political, and expressive forms of engagement to capture the multiple ways in which youth engage with public issues. Attending to a broad range of outcomes is especially important in light of evidence that young people—and perhaps young people of color in particular—are drawn to community-based forms of engagement more than to engagement in traditional civic and political life (Bennett, 2008; Dalton, 2008; Sanchez-Jankowski, 2002). Our indicators were modified versions of those used in prior research

TABLE 1. Correlations Between the Digital Media Use Items and the Common Factors (California Civic Survey Panel)

Items	Factors		
	Politics-driven participation	Interest-driven participation	Friendship-driven participation
Politics-driven online activities			
Used blogs or social networking sites to share or discuss perspectives on social and political issues	.94	-.02	-.03
Used e-mail to communicate with others who are working on a political or social issue	.80	.01	-.01
Used the Internet to get information about political or social issues	.54	.03	.11
Interest-driven online activities			
Used the Internet to organize an online group, discussion, or Web site	.03	.83	-.02
Used the Internet to organize social or recreational events (games, concerts, dances, competitions, etc.)	-.12	.70	.17
Given someone you don't know feedback for something they wrote or put online	.09	.69	-.10
Gone online to participate in a special-interest community, such as a fan site or a site where you talk with others about a hobby, sport, or special interest	.01	.58	-.04
I have been a leader in an online community	.07	.51	-.02
Friendship-driven online activities			
Used e-mail, text messaging, or instant messenger to communicate with friends or family	-.09	-.04	.62
Used blogs, diary, or social networking sites (like MySpace) to socialize with people (friends, family, or people you've met online)	.07	.06	.55
Principal component eigenvalue (before rotation)	1.22	4.18	1.05
Cronbach's α	.81	.80	.41

(e.g., Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Della Carpini, 2006).

“Civic engagement” was measured by asking how often respondents had (a) volunteered in their community, (b) raised money for a charitable cause, and (c) informally worked with someone or some group to solve a problem in their community. All three items were administered at T2 (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.73$); we administered the first two items at T1 (inter-item $r = 0.47$).

“Political action and expression” assessed how often respondents participated in (a) activities aimed at changing a policy or law at a local or national level; (b) a peaceful protest, march, or demonstration; and (c) a poetry slam, youth forum, musical performance, or other event where young people express their political views (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.66$ for T1; $\alpha = 0.69$ for T2).

“Campaign participation” was measured at T2 by asking how frequently respondents (a) tried to persuade anyone to vote for or against a political party or candidate; (b) wore political buttons, used bumper stickers, or placed signs in front of their house during a political campaign; and (c) contributed money to a candidate, political party, or organization that supported a candidate (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.61$).

“Voting” was assessed by asking whether respondents voted in the 2008 presidential election. At T1, because most of our respondents were not eligible to vote, we used intention to vote as a surrogate measure. As we will see, we found that an individual’s intention to vote, as expressed when the individual is a high school junior or senior, is a strong predictor of voting when that individual turns 18.

Control Variables

We employed controls to isolate effects stemming from factors that previously were found to relate to our outcome variables. These included sex, ethnic identity, and race (see Burns, Schlozman, & Verba, 2001), as well as parental political activity and political discussion between parents and youth (Niemi & Sobieszek, 1977). The parental involvement measure reflected the levels of civic and political talk occurring at home and the level of parents’ involvement in the community (inter-item $r = 0.45$).

In addition, we controlled for respondents’ GPAs and whether they were attending four-year colleges, since educational attainment is strongly related to voting, group membership, and civic and political involvement. To account for factors stemming from political orientation, we assessed political ideology, ranging from “very liberal” (1) to “very conservative” (5). We also created a measure of political interest and also one indicating the strength of political ideology. The latter was examined by folding over the political ideology measure and taking the absolute value, so our measure ranged from “middle of the road” (0) to “very liberal or very conservative” (2) (for related research, see Mutz & Martin, 2001).

Finally, we included a measure of video game play, since other studies have found that playing video games may be related to civic outcomes and is correlated with other forms of new media participation (Kahne, Middaugh, & Evans, 2008).

Analytic Strategy

To take a full advantage of our panel data, we used lagged-dependent variable regression analysis that included prior values of the outcome variable as independent controls. The lagged-dependent variable model predicts the level of a given outcome at T2 while controlling for its value at T1. It provides unbiased estimates of the effects of digital media participation on civic and political engagement by adjusting any initial differences in the outcome variables that might exist between individuals who were already active in high school and those who were not (Finkel, 1995; Halaby, 2004). Moreover, simulation studies confirmed that in most situations, the lagged-dependent variable approach produces estimates superior to any available alternative approaches (Keele & Kelly, 2006). We did not have a T1 value for campaign participation, so we could not include a lagged-outcome variable to predict this outcome.

Results

Our research question and hypotheses concerned the relationships of three different types of new media participation (politics-driven,

interest-driven, and friendship-driven) with varied civic and political outcomes. To estimate unique contributions of each type of online participatory culture to civic and/or political engagement, all the variables representing these three types of new media participation were entered together in the regression equations. The lagged values of each outcome variable were entered as an additional control.

As shown in Table 2, the first and clearest finding is that the lagged outcome variables that were measured at T1 were strong and consistent predictors of the outcome variable at T2 for all outcomes in both datasets ($p < .001$). How active one was at T1 was a solid predictor of how active one would be at T2. The strength and consistency of these relationships underscores the need for panel designs

so that one can control for the sizable relationship between prior and present commitments and activities.

The analysis also indicates that differing forms of online activity are associated with growth in different civic and political outcomes. We obtained only mixed support for our hypothesis that politics-driven online participation would foster civic and political engagement (see Table 2). Even with a wide range of controls and inclusion of a lagged value of the outcome variable, we observed that politics-driven participation was associated with increased levels of political action and expression ($\beta = 0.38, p < .001$) and with increased campaign participation ($\beta = 0.42, p < .001$). However, politics-driven participation was found to be unassociated with civic engagement and voting rates.

TABLE 2. Results of Regression Models Predicting Civic and Political Outcomes with Lagged Controls (California Civic Survey Panel)

	Civic participation ^a	Political action and expression ^a	Campaign participation ^a	Voting in 2008 ^b
Control variables				
Female sex	.00	.02	.06	.12
GPA in high school	.06	-.02	.00	.10
Parental involvement	.13*	.03	.03	.08
Conservatism	-.01	-.03	-.05	-.08
Strength of political ideology	-.01	.03	.11*	.04
College student	.08	.02	-.02	.17**
Race				
African American	-.06	-.04	-.12**	-.04
Hispanic	-.05	.05	-.03	.06
Asian	-.08	.04	-.08	-.05
Political interest	-.03	.03	.14**	.24***
Frequency of video gaming	-.08	-.11*	-.09*	.00
Lagged values of outcomes				
Civic participation, T1	.28***	—	—	—
Political action and expression, T1	—	.22***	—	—
Voting intention, T1	—	—	—	.28***
New media participation				
Politics-driven participation	.10	.38***	.42***	.03
Interest-driven participation	.19**	.13*	.12*	-.02
Friendship-driven participation:				
Use of e-mail/messaging	.08	.00	.00	.12*
Use of social media	.08	.00	.01	-.06
R^2 (%)	31.6	36.4	37.8	21.2 ^c
N	321	321	423	417

Note. GPA, grade point average; T1, initial baseline survey.

^aStandardized ordinary least squares regression coefficients.

^bStandardized logistic regression estimates.

^cMcFadden's pseudo R^2 .

* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$.

Our results provided relatively strong support for our second hypothesis that interest-driven online participation would foster civic and political engagement. In contrast to politics-driven participation, interest-driven participation was related to a boost in civic engagement ($\beta = 0.19, p < .01$). In addition, interest-driven participation was also related to political action and expression ($\beta = 0.13, p < .05$) and campaign participation ($\beta = 0.12, p < .05$). While related to these forms of activity, interest-driven participation failed to predict voting.

Finally, we observed very little support for our hypothesis that friendship-driven participation would promote civic or political engagement. Indeed, our two measures of friendship-driven participation appeared to be less consequential than interest-driven and politics-driven participation. The use of blogs and social media to communicate with family and friends was unrelated to all civic and political outcomes. Friendship-driven use of e-mail and messaging was also unrelated to our measures of civic engagement, political action and expression, and campaign participation. Interestingly, friendship-driven use of e-mail and messaging was the only online practice we found to be related to voting ($\beta = 0.12, p < .05$).

STUDY 2: MOBILIZATION, CHANGE, AND POLITICAL AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT (MCPCE) PROJECT

Although the CCS study employed a panel design, it was based on a nonprobability sample of high school students residing in California. To provide more robust tests of our hypotheses, we analyzed additional panel data collected from a nationally representative sample of young adults.

Data

This second study was conducted as part of the MCPCE Project at the University of Chicago. Prior to administration of the third wave of this panel survey, we were given the opportunity to add items to the survey so that we could assess the generalizability and consistency

of our findings from the CCS. The MCPCE Project was a nationally representative survey, and data were collected via a sophisticated Web survey protocol administered by Knowledge Networks. Knowledge Networks recruited panel respondents using random digit dialing (RDD) and provided them with access to the Internet and hardware if needed. Unlike most online surveys, which cover only individuals with Internet access, the MCPCE panel was not limited to current Web users or computer owners.

Our analysis drew on the first and third waves of the MCPCE Project. The first wave was conducted just prior to the 2008 election (October 17–November 3, 2008) and included 3,181 completed responses, with a completion rate of 56.9%. The third wave was administered roughly a year later (November 24, 2009–January 19, 2010) and collected 1,938 completed responses, which represent a panel retention rate of 60.9% against the first wave. Because we are primarily interested in new media participation among young adults, we limited our analysis to the panel respondents ages 18–35 ($n = 586$).

Unlike the CCS, the MCPCE Project was a nationally representative survey and included an oversampling of African American, Latino, and Asian respondents. This makes it a particularly valuable complement to the CCS study, as it is a more diverse and nationally representative sample.² In addition, the MCPCE had a measure of campaign participation at T1, which the CCS did not, so this survey strengthens our understanding of the relationships between new media participation and that outcome.

Measurement

We employed survey items in an analysis of the MCPCE data that aligned with those used when we analyzed the CCS data (see Appendix B for descriptive statistics).

New Media Participation

We assessed politics-driven participation with three yes/no items asking whether the respondents had (a) written or forwarded an e-mail,

signed an e-mail petition, or posted a comment to a blog about a political issue, candidate, elected official, or political party; (b) written a blog about a political issue, candidate, elected official, or political party; or (c) e-mailed the editor of a newspaper, a television station, a magazine, or a Web site manager about a political issue, candidate, political party, or elected official. We counted the number of “yes” responses to these three questions to construct a summary measurement of politics-driven participation (Kuder–Richardson formula 20 [KR-20] = 0.55).

We used the same measures in the MCPCE study to assess interest-driven participation as those used in the CCS study (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.70$). Both interest-driven and politics-driven participation were assessed in the third wave of the MCPCE Project. Because of space constraints, we were not able to assess friendship-driven participation in the MCPCE Project. Exploratory-factor analysis indicated that the items of online participation formed two distinct factors that, together, explained 54.1% of the variance.

Outcome Variables

Of the four outcome variables we employed in the CCS study, two were available in the MCPCE study: civic engagement and campaign participation. “Civic engagement” was measured by two items asking whether respondents had volunteered and if they had worked with community members on a community issue or problem (inter-item $r = 0.38$ for the first wave; $r = 0.44$ for the third wave). “Campaign participation” was assessed with three items: (a) contributing money to a candidate, political party, or cause; (b) volunteering for a party, cause, or elected official; and (c) going to political meetings, rallies, speeches, or dinners in support of a particular candidate, political party, or elected official (KR-20 = 0.69 for the first wave; KR-20 = 0.74 for the third wave).

Control Variables

Similar to the CCS study, we controlled for sex, income, race, education (i.e., highest degree received), political ideology (conservatism), and

strength of partisanship. We included Internet access at home as an additional control.

Results

Similar to the CCS data analysis, we used lagged-dependent variable regression models to examine the effects of new media participation on civic and political engagement. Our findings are largely consistent with those from the CCS analysis. As summarized in Table 3, the lagged-outcome variables that were measured in the first wave were strong and consistent predictors of the corresponding outcome variables in the third wave. Also paralleling results from the CCS data, politics-driven participation was significantly associated with campaign participation ($\beta = 0.49$, $p < .001$) but not with civic engagement.

TABLE 3. Results of Ordered Logistic Regression Models Predicting Civic and Campaign Participation (Mobilization, Change, and Political and Civic Engagement Panel)

	Civic participation ^a	Campaign participation ^a
Control variables		
Age	.05	-.14**
Female sex	.06	-.13**
Education	.08	.03
Household income	.03	-.05
Race		
African American	.04	.12**
Hispanic	.05	.12**
Asian	-.00	-.01
Conservatism	.21***	-.13**
Strength of partisanship	-.02	-.02
Internet access at home	-.06	-.06
Lagged values of outcomes		
Civic participation, T1	.50***	–
Campaign participation, T1	–	.24**
New media participation		
Politics-driven participation	.05	.49***
Interest-driven participation	.16**	.09
R^2 (%)	38.2	52.6
N	530	531

Note. Data are standardized ordinary least squares regression coefficients, unless otherwise indicated. Outcome variables were measured in 2009. T1, initial baseline survey, conducted in 2008.

^aStandardized ordinary least squares regression coefficients.

* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$.

More importantly, interest-driven participation was a robust predictor of increased civic engagement ($\beta = 0.16, p < .001$), but it did not have a statistically significant relationship with campaign participation. These findings parallel those from the CCS data, which reinforces our confidence in the results. Indeed, the sizes of the standardized regression coefficients were quite similar (.19 and .16 for civic engagement, and .12 and .09 for campaign participation, respectively). The one difference is that the relationship between interest-driven participation and campaign participation was statistically significant in the CCS data but not in the MCPCE data. We place more confidence in the findings regarding campaign participation from the MCPCE data, because we were able to include a lagged value of campaign participation in that regression but not in the CCS analysis of campaign participation.

Thus, in each case there was mixed support for our hypotheses that online participation would foster civic and political engagement. Interest-driven participation was associated with more civic engagement but not political engagement, and politics-driven online participation was associated with more political engagement but not civic engagement.

DISCUSSION

Some pundits still make broad claims about the impact of the Internet on society. Most scholars who study the relationship between the Internet and democracy, however, focus on identifying consequential distinctions between varied forms of online activity. This study contributes to that dialogue. First, it identifies survey measures that distinguish between three forms of online participatory culture: politics-driven, interest-driven, and friendship-driven participation. It then considers how these forms of participation relate to varied forms of civic and political activity. Overall, our results strongly suggest that the nature of online participation matters and that different kinds of online participation are associated with different kinds of civic and political activity, such as volunteering, political expression, and voting.

The Importance of Politics-Driven Participation

Findings from this study are consistent with our hypothesis indicating that politics-driven online participation promotes other forms of civic and political engagement. The fact that our study employed two large panels deepens our confidence in these relationships. Indeed, politics-driven online participation appears to be an important bridge to some forms of civic and political engagement—it is associated with higher levels of offline political action and expression as well as campaign participation, even with controls in place for prior levels of those activities. Moreover, more and more civic and political life occurs online. Core political practices such as reading the news, contributing to campaigns, signing petitions, sharing perspectives, mobilizing others, and being recruited by others to act now often occur over online platforms (Cohen et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2009). Thus, politically driven online participation is an important form of participation in its own right.

At the same time, these findings signal a need for caution. Politics-driven participation may help to promote campaign participation and varied forms of political action and expression, but it is not associated with all civic or political outcomes. Once other forms of online activity and lagged values of outcome variables are included, politics-driven participation does not appear to influence either civic engagement or voting. In addition, it seems quite plausible that politics-driven online participation is a product of campaign work, to at least as great a degree as it activates engagement with civic and political life. Thus, while politics-driven online participation is clearly worthy of attention, these findings indicate that it should not be seen as the only relevant bridge from online activity to civic and political engagement.

The Importance of Interest-Driven Participation

Our findings are also consistent with our hypothesis that interest-driven participation promotes civic and political engagement. Indeed, given that most prior studies of nonpolitical

online activity have not focused specifically on interest-driven activities, we view the strong relationships that we found to be our most significant finding. Our analysis suggests that involvement in online, nonpolitical, interest-driven activities serves as a gateway to important aspects of civic and, at times, political, life, including volunteering, engagement in community problem solving, protest activities, and political voice. At times, this bridge is due to individuals acting civically or politically in support of their particular “nonpolitical” interest (e.g., when online fan networks mobilize in support of a favorite TV show or character). Indeed, the distinction between interest-driven and politics-driven actions, while analytically valuable, may not always be as clean as one might like. Interest-driven activities often motivate or involve civic or political activity tied to that interest. In other cases, the link may be less direct. Drawing on the civic volunteerism model, we propose that through online nonpolitical participatory activities, individuals develop capacities for action and learn about issues they find compelling. Their participation in these networked communities may also facilitate their recruitment into civic and political life. As we discuss below, studies that further conceptualize and test these or alternative propositions are needed.

What’s clear is that these relationships are robust. Statistically significant findings remain for both datasets, even with controls for prior levels of civic and political engagement and a full range of demographic variables. In addition, given the significance of politics-driven online participation for varied forms of activity, we view the strong connection between interest-driven participation and higher levels of politics-driven online activity as particularly important. In fact, in the regression predicting online political engagement, at T2, the standardized beta for interest-driven activity (.42) was greater than the lagged value at T1 of online politics-driven participation (.33).

The significance of nonpolitical, interest-driven online activity also leads us to argue that those studying new media’s influence on civic and political engagement among youth and young adults must broaden their focus

and attend to nonpolitical, interest-driven online participation. Currently, many studies of the Internet and political engagement focus either solely on politics-driven forms of online participation or they group forms of nonpolitical engagement together under a heading such as “use of social media.” While such studies can teach us a great deal, they also likely miss much that matters.

The Importance of Friendship-Driven Participation

The importance of disaggregating varied forms of nonpolitical online participation becomes all the more clear in light of our findings regarding friendship-driven online participation. We hypothesized that these activities would also promote civic and political engagement. Our findings were inconsistent with that hypothesis. Specifically, once we controlled for prior levels of our different outcomes and political interest and included a measure of interest-driven online participation, we did not find statistically significant relationships between either indicator of friendship-driven participation and our measures of civic or political engagement, with the exception of voting (use of e-mail and messaging was related to voting [$\beta = 0.12$], but using social media to socialize was not).

Due to the newness and prevalence of social networking among youth and young adults, and because of the importance of social networks in civic and political life, some have posited that social networking might support civic and political engagement (Ellison et al., 2007; Kittilson & Dalton, 2011; Valenzuela et al., 2009). However, these studies were cross-sectional, did not control for political interest, and did not distinguish between friendship- and interest-driven social networking. For example, Valenzuela et al. (2009) measure the intensity of Facebook group use in a way that does not distinguish between whether one is primarily socializing with friends or is engaging with those one does not necessarily know but who have common interests.

We found no relationships between friendship-driven use of blogs or social networking sites and any civic or political

practice. Friendship-driven use of e-mail and messaging was related to voting. However, it was not related to civic activity, political action or expression, campaign activity, or politics-driven online activity. Indeed, we do not see evidence that friendship-driven activity holds much promise as a support for civic and political life. Moreover, the fact that interest-driven activities are much more strongly and consistently related to civic and political outcomes, while friendship-driven activities are not, highlights the need to distinguish between these two forms of online activity. We suspect that studies focusing on use of social media, for example, may obscure important distinctions between the factors driving engagement with social media (i.e., friendship-driven, interest-driven, or politics-driven uses) and thus cloud interpretation of findings regarding the relationships between varied forms of participation using social media and civic and political life.

A difficulty associated with assessing such relationships should also be noted, however. Participation in online social networks and e-mail is now ubiquitous. Thus, our inability to find relationships may have resulted from a lack of variation. In addition, our measure of this concept was confined to two items, and the impact of friendship-driven participation was assessed in only one of the two studies. This limits our confidence in these findings. Studies that better tap variations in the friendship-driven practices of youth will aid in the examination of this issue.

Connecting Online Participatory Culture with Civic and Political Life

Taken as a whole, these findings also highlight the need for a deeper understanding of the reasons for relationships between online activity and the civic and political sphere. Clearly, there are many ways politics-driven online participation and political information more generally can activate civic and political interest and engagement (see, e.g., Mossberger et al., 2008). In addition, drawing on work by Jenkins et al. (2007) and Ito et al. (2009), we have proposed that online nonpolitical participatory

activities can promote civic outcomes by teaching skills, developing dispositions, and fostering an appreciation of the potential of collective action. This idea is also in keeping with a growing body of research that draws focus on a range of mediating factors (e.g., knowledge, reflection, efficacy, and cognitive complexity), thus channeling influences from various online activities onto civic and political engagement (e.g., Cho, Shah, McLeod, McLeod, Scholl, & Gotlieb, 2008; Jung, Kim, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2011). Studies that further conceptualize and test these propositions are needed.

In undertaking this work, it will also be valuable to consider changes that may be occurring in youth and young adults' priorities regarding civic and political life. Specifically, as noted earlier, scholars have begun to document a new emphasis in youth politics and have argued that the affordances of new media may be a meaningful factor facilitating change. Youth and young adults appear to grant greater significance to political expression and enact it in ways that differ from earlier generations—placing less emphasis, for example, on influencing actions of elected officials and the state and more emphasis on lifestyle politics, influencing business practices through boycotts and buycotts, and expressive acts tied to popular culture (Bennett, 2008; Dalton, 2008; Zukin et al., 2006).

These kinds of dynamics may help us to understand some of the relationships we have observed. For example, the fact that politics-driven online participation was not related to civic participation may reflect a service/politics split whereby youth often view volunteerism and charity work as an alternative to politics (Walker, 2000), and, as a result, their interest in one domain does not lead to activity in the other. Similarly, the lack of relationship between interest-driven and politics-driven activity and voting may reflect the fact that voting is prompted by many factors and, for many, by a sense of duty (Campbell, 2006). Bennett (2008) argues that many youth distinguish between actualizing citizenship (which emphasizes expressive acts) and dutiful citizenship (which emphasizes more traditional and institutionalized activity such as voting). It may well be that many forms of interest-driven

and politics-driven participation align with the ideals of the actualizing citizen, but not with the dutiful citizen.

Indeed, many scholars have found that youth often doubt the efficacy and attractiveness of formal political life and often are oriented toward nongovernmental, informal, and small-scale responses to societal issues (Delgado & Staples, 2007; Ginwright, 2009). Scholars also find that culturally oriented and consumer-based protest often occur online and that they often occur in ways that differ from what social movement models would predict (Earl & Kimport, 2009).

The desirability of such changes, if they are occurring, seems likely to be mixed. On the one hand, they may well provide mechanisms for engagement, leadership, audience, and mobilization that traditional institutions rarely grant to youth. On the other, voicing a different perspective, Milner (2010) has argued that “Generations that turn their backs on politics in favor of individual expression will continue to find their priorities at the top of society’s wish list—and at the bottom of the ‘to do’ list” (p. 5). It is important that future work examines whether and when these new forms of expression and action augment or undermine youth civic and political influence.

Such a shift in politics does not require new media, but the affordances of new media seem likely to make changes, such as the emphasis on expressive politics, easier to enact and may also orient youth toward valuing this form and focus of civic and political life. Indeed, while the content is generally different, many nonpolitical, interest-driven practices, such as organizing online groups, providing leadership for group efforts, and participating in group discussions tied to particular interests, parallel the kinds of practices that are employed in these new forms of civic and political activity.

In addition, part of what makes understanding the developmental and educative potential of interest-driven and politics-driven online activities so important is that such studies may help us to understand the contexts in which the development of democratic habits, commitments, and skills currently occurs.

There is a long tradition in the United States of viewing democratic development as largely a product of life within geographically proximate local communities. As Tocqueville observed in *Democracy in America*:

The strength of free peoples resides in the local community. Local institutions are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they put it within the people’s reach; they teach people to appreciate its peaceful enjoyment and accustom them to make use of it. Without local institutions a nation may give itself a free government, but it has not got the spirit of liberty. (Tocqueville, 2000, p. 49)

The notion that geographic proximity and face-to-face interactions are vital for motivating participation and for developing democratic habits and skills has been a mainstay of theoretical and empirical work on democracy and what supports it. New media, however, may be modifying the significance of geography in this regard. For example, Schragger (2001) suggested that high levels of mobility, shifting geographic boundaries, and competing factions within communities require new criteria for defining local communities with an emphasis on defining community by shared interests rather than geographic proximity. Similarly, Delli Carpini (2000) concluded that the Internet is creating communities that are more interest based than geographically based (see Middaugh & Kahne, 2009, for a review discussing the significance of online localism for youth). Findings from this study appear consistent with that logic.

Limitations

While we believe that our study has many strengths, clearly it also has limitations. One limitation of this work is its reliance on self-reports; it would be ideal to collect data on actual online activity. In addition, while controls for prior levels of civic and political activity are helpful, being able to better control for prior levels of online activity so that we could use cross-lagged models would further strengthen our ability to make causal claims. That several

of the outcome measures had factor loadings below 0.7 is also worth noting. The items used were common indicators (see, e.g., Zukin et al., 2006), but because of space constraints on the survey, some measures were composed of relatively few items, and this may have contributed to the low factor loadings. These loadings may also reflect the fact that the scales were additive measures of broad categories of activity. Engaging in one activity did not imply having been involved in any of the other activities. Still, in future studies, it would clearly be valuable to include more items in these scales. Similarly, our measures of politics-driven and friendship-driven participation could be strengthened by adding more items, and especially by adding items that attend to participatory dimensions of engagement and forms of engagement that were not prevalent among youth at the time the survey was designed. For example, were we designing the survey today we would ask about whether individuals use Twitter to circulate perspectives on politics to those in one's social network.

A potential concern regarding our use of a lagged-dependent variable is also important to note. Conceptually, our use of a lagged-dependent variable reflects the belief that the beneficial effects of new media participation (such as the development of civically relevant digital capacities) are not immediate but are instead realized over time. The first-wave surveys of the CCS were conducted over a three-year period, from 2005 to 2007, and the second-wave surveys were conducted immediately after the 2008 election, so there were different time lags. To see whether the length of the lag mattered, we added a variable indicating the time interval between the two waves to the regression models we used to predict civic and political outcomes. The variable tied to the time of the lag was insignificant, and including it did not affect the significance of other independent variables. Thus, while our model indicates that a lagged effect does occur, we do not have evidence that a lag of a particular length is more or less advantageous.

Despite these limitations, that our analysis yielded consistent results across both panel datasets, even with a wide range of relevant

controls, gives us greater confidence in the strength of the relationships between three forms of online participation and offline youth activism, as does the fact that the MCPCE Project is both nationally representative and contains a sizable oversampling of African American, Latino, and Asian youth.

Future Work: Assessing the Quality and Equality of Participatory Practices

While this study examined ways in which online activity relates to the quantity of civic and political life, it is important to also examine ways that digital media might influence the quality and equality of activity. For example, given that online participation may influence the extent to which youth participate civically and politically, examining the demographic distributions of these online participatory practices is clearly important. An interesting finding in this regard is that Hispanics and African Americans in the CCS sample were more likely than whites to take part in politics-driven online activities (see Table 3). We are cautious when interpreting these data, however, since the sample of various groups is not necessarily representative, and the number of African Americans in the sample is relatively small. In a separate fact sheet (Lee & Kahne, 2010) that used data from the MCPCE Project, we analyzed interest-driven participation of youth and found that, overall, African American youth had the highest rates of interest-driven participation. Future work should examine the demographic distribution of such practices in greater detail and also consider whether online participation may play differing roles for differing demographic groups, when it comes to civic and political life.

In addition, from a normative standpoint, it is important to consider how forms of online participation relate to the quality as well as the quantity of civic and political life. For instance, the Internet provides unprecedented access to both information and misinformation. We have more to learn about the quality of news and information youth encounter online and whether varied sources provide appropriate depth or context (see Patterson, 2000; Prior, 2003).

In addition, while the Internet makes it easier than ever for individuals to hear diverse perspectives (Rheingold, 2000), it can also facilitate exposure, primarily to those who share one's ideological perspective (Sunstein, 2007). The importance of such issues is heightened by perceptions of increased partisanship online and off, by research indicating that individuals tend to form like-minded groups (Mutz, 2006), and by data indicating greater geographic clustering of like-minded citizens (Bishop, 2009). Our survey addressed some of these concerns by asking whether, when online, youth were exposed to views on societal issues that aligned with their own as well as whether they were exposed to views on societal issues that were different than the views they held. We found that many youth reported not being exposed to any perspectives on societal issues (Kahne, Middaugh, Lee, & Feezell, 2012). However, among those who reported exposure to others' views, the vast majority reported exposure both to views that aligned with their own and to those that did not. In addition, the volume of politics-driven and interest-driven participation was positively associated with exposure to diverse perspectives. In contrast, online friendship-driven participation had no effect on exposure to either kind of perspective. While this tells us something about the views to which one is exposed, it does not tell us about the quality of cross-cutting interaction. Assessing the quality of such interaction should be a priority of future work.

Participation in interest-driven and politics-driven online activities appears to provide generative contexts for civic and political development, roles traditionally played by geographically proximate communities. While those interacting in interest-driven and politics-driven spaces may also encounter one another offline, it is notable that online activities appear to prompt both online and offline civic and political engagement. It also seems clear that the nature of online and offline activities matters. Different forms of online participation are associated with differing forms of civic and political life. Fine-grained studies are needed to deepen our understandings of the ways in which these online participatory communities can create locations and mechanisms that shape the

developing civic and political behaviors of youth and young adults.

NOTES

1. Although the CCS survey dataset used in this study is not available to the general public, the authors will provide access for scholars who are interested in verifying and replicating the analysis reported in the current study. Interested readers can request data by contacting the first author. The MCPCE dataset is available at <http://www.2008andbeyond.com/>.

2. Because of this oversampling, we weighted the sample in the subsequent analysis to adjust sex, race, education, and family income.

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APPENDIX A. Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables (California Civic Survey Panel)

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
Outcome variables					
Civic participation, T2	2.45	0.80	1.00	4.00	435
Civic participation, T1	2.62	0.55	1.00	3.00	326
Political action and expression, T2	1.55	0.68	1.00	4.00	434
Political action and expression, T1	1.59	0.61	1.00	3.00	326
Campaign participation, T2	2.02	0.71	1.00	4.00	435
Voting in 2008, T2	0.68	0.47	0.00	1.00	430
Voting intention, T1	4.38	1.01	1.00	5.00	428
New media participation					
Friendship-driven participation					
Use of e-mail/messaging	5.70	0.81	1.00	6.00	435
Use of social media	4.87	1.52	1.00	6.00	435
Interest-driven online participation					
Politics-driven online participation	1.52	1.20	0.00	5.00	435
Politics-driven online participation	3.08	1.41	1.00	6.00	436
Control variables					
Female sex	0.62	0.49	0.00	1.00	435
GPA in high school	3.85	0.67	2.00	5.00	428
Parental involvement	3.19	1.12	1.00	5.00	434
Conservatism	2.81	1.08	1.00	5.00	422
Strength of political ideology	0.85	0.70	0.00	2.00	422
College student	0.86	0.35	0.00	1.00	435
Race					
African American	0.03	0.18	0.00	1.00	435
Asian	0.27	0.44	0.00	1.00	435
Hispanic	0.27	0.44	0.00	1.00	435
Political interest	3.91	1.04	1.00	5.00	435
Frequency of video gaming	3.29	1.83	1.00	6.00	435

Note. GPA = grade point average; T1 = initial baseline survey; T2 = follow-up survey.

APPENDIX B. Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables (Mobilization, Change,
and Political and Civic Engagement Panel)

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	N
Outcome variables					
Civic participation, T2	0.45	0.69	0.00	2.00	557
Civic participation, T1	0.42	0.66	0.00	2.00	561
Campaign participation, T2	0.16	0.56	0.00	3.00	561
Political action and expression, T1	0.25	0.66	0.00	3.00	561
New media participation					
Interest-driven online participation	0.68	0.87	0.00	5.00	556
Politics-driven online participation	0.27	0.60	0.00	3.00	557
Control variables					
Age	28.44	4.76	18.00	35.00	561
Female sex	0.64	0.48	0.00	1.00	561
Education	10.51	1.96	2.00	14.00	561
Household income	11.04	4.20	1.00	19.00	561
Race					
African American	0.20	0.40	0.00	1.00	561
Hispanic	0.40	0.49	0.00	1.00	561
Asian	0.11	0.32	0.00	1.00	561
Conservatism	3.78	1.44	1.00	7.00	536
Strength of partisanship	1.88	0.92	0.00	3.00	541
Internet access at home	0.80	0.40	0.00	1.00	561

Note. T1 = wave 1 survey; T2 = wave 3 survey.