

participatory politics



New Media and Youth Political Action

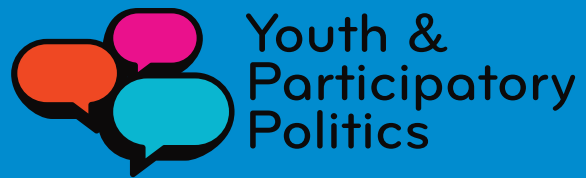
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About Us: *The YPPSP (Youth & Participatory Politics Survey Project) research team led by Cathy Cohen and Joseph Kahne is a project of the MacArthur Research Network on Youth & Participatory Politics (YPP). The YPP network is made up of eight scholars—Danielle Allen, Cathy Cohen, Howard Gardner, Joseph Kahne, Mimi Ito, Henry Jenkins, Elisabeth Soep, and Ethan Zuckerman—working at the intersection of youth public sphere engagement and digital media use. For more detail on YPP’s research projects see <http://ypp.dmlcentral.net/>. The YPP Network, funded under the MacArthur Foundation’s Digital Media and Learning Initiative, is also part of the DML Research Hub. For more on DML see <http://dmlcentral.net/>.*

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executive summary





Over a period of just three days in October 2011, 75,000 people signed a petition started by 22-year-old Molly Katchpole on Change.org to protest Bank of America's proposed \$5.00 debit card fee. Ultimately, over 300,000 people signed and more than 21,000 pledged to close their Bank of America accounts. The movement attracted national attention, and Bank of America reversed its decision to charge customers.

“We’re in the business of amplifying. We’re trying to change the balance of power between individuals and large organizations.”

—Ben Rattray, *thirty-one-year-old founder of Change.org*

In December 2011, Internet users and activists worked together to defeat the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA). Purportedly designed to thwart Internet copyright infringement and intellectual property theft, SOPA enjoyed strong bipartisan support in the House and Senate and was backed by powerful lobbying forces in Washington DC. But then hundreds of websites participated in a synchronized Internet blackout in protest of the legislation, complemented by blog posts, videos, and posts and discussions in forums on an array of websites, organized largely by youth. All of this sent a single message: the pending legislation would undermine Internet freedom and invite widespread censorship. Within days, Congress responded and the legislation was blocked. In the aftermath, the Pew Foundation found that young people under the age of thirty followed protests over SOPA more closely than news about the presidential election.

“I think it is an important moment in the Capitol. This is individual citizens rising up.”

— *Representative Zoe Lofgren (D-CA),
quoted in The New York Times*

On September 17, 2011, responding to a blog post and circulated e-mail calling for a peaceful protest and “occupation” of Wall Street by the Canadian-based magazine *Adbusters*, and inspired by international protests from Egypt to London, hundreds of mostly young people took to the streets surrounding the financial district in New York City. The protesters eventually set up a now-famous camp in nearby Zucotti Park. While the Occupy movement will be known for reinstating the topic of inequality back onto the national agenda, it was also successful in raising money. According to the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, the movement raised \$454,000 during its first month of activity largely “from some 8000 online donors and other supporters.” While Occupy encampments have been torn down and vibrant discussion of class warfare has faded, what does continue is the potential for people—in particular, young people—to organize independently of elites and elite institutions using new media and social media platforms. But the question remains: How important and long-lasting is the role that new media may play in the reorganization of young people’s lives and politics?

NEW DATA FOR UNDERSTANDING YOUNG PEOPLE'S POLITICS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The Occupy movement, stopping SOPA, and the power of six million users of Change.org are only three of many examples of how new media impact politics in America, especially as politics are practiced among young people. The Obama campaign’s use of social media in 2008 helped to produce record turnout, especially among young blacks and Latinos. In the 2012 elections, all those involved in campaigns are relying more heavily than ever before on social media. The intersection of youth, new media, and politics is not exclusively a U.S. story, however. As recent movements from Tunisia to Egypt to Russia indicate, the significance of new media’s impact on political expression is international in scope.

★★ *defining* ★★ participatory politics

The Youth and Participatory Politics study defines participatory politics as interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern. Importantly, these acts are not guided by deference to elites or formal institutions. Examples of participatory political acts include starting a new political group online, writing and disseminating a blog post about a political issue, forwarding a funny political video to one's social network, or participating in a poetry slam. Participatory political acts can:

- ★ reach large audiences and *mobilize networks*, often online, on behalf of a cause;
- ★ help *shape agendas* through *dialogue* with, and provide *feedback* to, political leaders (on- and offline); and
- ★ enable participants to exert *greater agency* through the *circulation* or forwarding of political information (e.g., links) as well as through the *production* of original content, such as a blog or letter to the editor.

Four factors make participatory politics especially important to those thinking about the future of American politics.

1. Participatory politics allow individuals to operate with greater independence in the political realm, circumventing traditional gatekeepers of information and influence, such as newspaper editors, political parties, and interest groups.
2. Participatory politics often facilitate a renegotiation of political power and control with the traditional political entities that are now searching for ways to

engage participants. Witness how newspapers and cable television stations now try to facilitate a controlled engagement with their audience through the use of social media.

3. Participatory politics as practiced online provide for greater creativity and voice, as participants produce original content using video, images, and text.
4. Participatory politics afford individuals the capability to reach a sizable audience and mobilize others through their social networks in an easy and inexpensive manner.

These practices are focused on expression and are peer based, interactive, and nonhierarchical, and they are not guided by deference to elite institutions. The pervasive presence of such practices in the lives of young people is creating an actual culture shift. The participatory skills, norms, and networks that develop when social media is used to socialize with friends or to engage with those who share one's interests can and are being transferred to the political realm.

To rigorously consider the impact of new media on the political and civic behavior of young people, The MacArthur Research Network on Youth and Participatory Politics (YPP) developed and fielded one of the first large-scale, nationally representative studies of new media and politics among young people. The two principal researchers for the survey component of the YPP, Cathy J. Cohen of the University of Chicago and Joseph Kahne of Mills College, oversaw a research team that surveyed nearly 3,000 respondents between the ages of 15 and 25 years of age. Unlike any prior study of youth and new media, this study included large numbers of black, Latino, and Asian American respondents, which allows for unique and powerful statistical comparisons across race with a focus on young people.

Until now there has been limited opportunity and data available to comprehensively explore the relationship between new media and the politics of young people. One of the few entities to engage in this type of rigorous analysis has been the Pew Internet and American Life Project. The YPP study expands on this field-leading work by including an extensive battery of items addressing participatory politics and adequate numbers of participants from different racial and ethnic groups, thus allowing for analysis of how different groups of young people were engaged with new media in the political realm.

The YPP study findings suggest that fundamental changes in political expectations and practices may be occurring—especially for youth. The analysis of the data collected reveals that youth are taking advantage of an expanded set of participatory practices in the political realm in ways that amplify their voice and sometimes their influence, thus increasing the ways young people participate in political life. The YPP researchers label this expanded set of opportunities and actions *participatory politics*.

The YPP study, summarized in this executive summary and presented in full in a longer report available online at <http://dmlcentral.net/resources/5058>, presents important new information about the different trajectories of new media uptake in the United States and its use in the political realm across different groups of young people. It measures the online participatory practices of young people in their social lives, as well as youth engagement with more traditional forms of social and political interaction.

While the topic of new media and youth politics has garnered lots of attention from pundits, politicians, and journalists,

these reports often focus on anecdotal or single-case examples of a protest mobilization where new media played an important role. To date, there has been limited opportunity and data available to explore the relationship between new media and the political action of young people in a more comprehensive manner. This new survey data provide a strong basis for five major findings, summarized as follows.

1. *Large proportions of young people across racial and ethnic groups have access to the Internet and use online social media regularly to stay connected to their family and friends and pursue interests and hobbies.*

Contrary to the traditional notion of a technological digital divide, the YPP study finds young people across racial and ethnic groups are connected online.

- Overwhelmingly, white (96 percent), black (94 percent), Latino (96 percent), and Asian American (98 percent) youth report having access to a computer that connects to the Internet.
- A majority or near-majority of white (51 percent), black (57 percent), Latino (49 percent), and Asian American (52 percent) youth report sending messages, sharing status updates and links, or chatting online daily.

Youth are very involved in friendship-driven and interest-driven activities online.

- 78 percent send messages, share status updates, or chat online on a weekly basis.
- 58 percent share links or forward information through social networks at least once a week.
- On a weekly basis, roughly one-third engage in particular interest-driven activities, such as posting, linking to, or forwarding information; giving help, advice, or suggestions to others; or posting comments online about someone else's media.
- About one in six engage in more active self-expression such as organizing an online group or discussion, starting a website, or creating original media to share online.
- Overall, 64 percent engage in at least one interest-driven activity in a given week, and 32 percent engage in three or more activities a week.

2. *Participatory politics are an important dimension of politics.*

- 41 percent of young people have engaged in at least one act of participatory politics, while 44 percent participate in other acts of politics.

★★ key data ★★

Participatory politics are an important dimension of politics:

- 41 percent of young people engage in at least one act of participatory politics, while 44 percent participate in other acts of politics.
- Specifically, 43 percent of white, 41 percent of black, 38 percent of Latino, and 36 percent of Asian American youth participated in at least one act of participatory politics during the prior 12 months.

Participatory politics are an addition to an individual's engagement rather than an alternative to other political activities:

- Youth who engaged in at least one act of participatory politics were almost twice as likely to report voting in 2010 as those who did not.
- A large proportion—37 percent of all young people—engages in both participatory and institutional politics.
- Among young people who engage in participatory politics, 90 percent of them either vote or engage in institutional politics.

Participatory politics are equitably distributed across different racial and ethnic groups:

- Contrary to the traditional notion of a technological digital divide, the YPP study finds that overwhelmingly, white (96 percent), black (94 percent), Latino (96 percent) and Asian American (98 percent) youth report having access to a computer that connects to the Internet.
- The difference in voting in 2008 between the group with the highest rate of turnout according to the U.S. Census Bureau—black youth (52%)—and the group with the lowest rate of turnout—Latino youth (27%)—is 25 percentage points.
- In contrast, the difference between the group with the highest rate of engaging in at least one act of participatory politics—whites (43 percent)—and the groups with the lowest rate of engaging in at least one act of participatory politics—

Asian Americans (36 percent)—is only 7 percentage points.

Taking into account participatory politics, institutional politics, and voting, black youth are the most likely to have participated in at least one form of these activities:

- Engagement is highest among black youth, with only 25 percent reporting no engagement in any form of political behavior, compared with 33 percent of whites, 40 percent of Asian Americans, and 43 percent of Latinos.

Youth get news through participatory channels but believe they would benefit from learning how to judge the credibility of what they find online:

- Youth now consume news through participatory channels. 45 percent of youth reported getting news at least once a week from family and friends via Twitter or Facebook feeds. This rivals the 49 percent who got news at least once in the past week from newspapers or magazines.
- Survey respondents were asked, “Do you think people like you and your friends would benefit from learning more about how to tell if news and information you find online is trustworthy?,” and 84 percent said “yes.”

- Specifically, 43 percent of white, 41 percent of black, 38 percent of Latino, and 36 percent of Asian American youth have participated in at least one act of participatory politics during the prior 12 months.

Participatory politics are better viewed as an addition to an individual’s engagement than as an alternative to other political activities.

- Youth who engaged in at least one act of participatory politics were almost twice as likely to report voting in 2010 as those who did not.
- A large proportion—37 percent of all young people—engages in *both* participatory and institutional politics.
- Among young people who engage in participatory politics, 90 percent of them either vote or take part in institutional politics.

Participatory politics, however, are different than merely taking institutional political activities (e.g., participating in a campaign) and moving them online. Allowing individuals to donate to a candidate online does not make the political act of donating money a participatory act. Today, online politics frequently resemble what we have traditionally seen in the political realm and often is not particularly participatory. YPP researchers are less interested in whether various political activities occur online or offline, but are interested, instead, in the participatory norms, values, and practices of political engagement.

3. Interest-driven online activities appear to lay a foundation for engagement in participatory politics through the development of “digital social capital.”

Those using new media to pursue interests and hobbies from sports to technology to gaming may be gaining knowledge, skills, and networks, that is, *digital social capital*, which makes engaging in participatory politics more likely.

- Youth who were highly involved in nonpolitical, interest-driven activities are more than *five times* as likely to engage in participatory politics and nearly *four times* as likely to participate in all political acts, compared with those infrequently involved in such activities.

Encompassed within this digital social capital is the important element of networks. While similar to networks of the past, which played a crucial role in politics and social movements, such as the civil rights movement, the YPP data suggest that the role and possibility of networks in a digital era are different in three key ways:

- Circulating materials to those we know as well as to those whom we have never met is much easier through social media.
- Social media affords the ability to circulate customized political expressions.
- The process of customization and creation of material allows for a freedom with regard to defining what actually counts as “politics.” Among friends, political information and political action may originate from a variety sources and are not strictly defined by political elites.

★

Participatory politics are a significant dimension of the political life of young people... giving them greater control, voice, and potentially influence over the issues that matter most in their lives.

As Henry Jenkins has written, online contexts may well be the bowling leagues of the twenty-first century. They provide a space of connection to others where trust is built and deliberation happens. Like the bowling league, online contexts can facilitate social exchange where collective identities can be built and mobilized for civic and political engagement.

4. New media has the potential to facilitate an equitable distribution of political participation among young people from different racial and ethnic groups.

Participatory politics are generally equitably distributed across different racial and ethnic groups.

- The difference in voting in 2008 between the group with the highest rate of turnout according to the U.S. Census Bureau—black youth (52%)—and the group with the lowest rate of turnout—Latino youth (27%)—is 25 percentage points.
- In contrast, the difference between the group with the highest rate of engaging in at least one act of participatory politics—whites (43 percent)—and the groups with the lowest rate of engaging in at least one act of participatory politics—Asian Americans at (36 percent)—is only 7 percentage points.

Taking into account participatory politics, institutional politics, and voting, black youth are the most likely to have participated in at least one form of these political activities, contradicting the common assumption that white youth are the most engaged in the political realm.

- Engagement is highest among black youth, with only 25 percent reporting no engagement in any form of political behavior, compared with 33 percent of whites, 40 percent of Asian Americans, and 43 percent of Latinos.

Black and Asian American youth are more likely to engage in friendship and interest-driven activity.

- On average black youth are more likely to engage in friendship-driven activity.
- Black and Asian American youth are significantly more likely to engage in interest-driven activity than are white and Latino youth.
- These differences hold up even when income is taken into account and controlled for.

The data on the distribution of political participation raise important questions about how the political landscape might change in the future, given both the growing influence of new media in the lives of young people and the changing demographics of the country. While youth of color are active online and engaged in friendship- and interest-driven activities as well as some forms of participatory politics, they will need infrastructure and interventions to leverage their proficiencies in the digital world to their benefit in the political realm.

5. Many youth get news through participatory channels but believe they would benefit from learning how to judge the credibility of what they find online.

- Youth now consume a great deal of news through participatory channels. Forty-five percent of youth reported getting news at least once a week from family and friends via Twitter or Facebook. In addition, 21 percent said they received news from blogs or YouTube posts devoted to political and social topics, and 22 percent reported getting news or information from an online community where people discuss a hobby, sport, or fandom.
- This rivals the 49 percent who reported receiving news at least once in the past week from newspapers or magazines.

Youth recognize the challenge of judging the credibility of the information they receive through these media.

- Survey respondents were asked, “Do you think people like you and your friends would benefit from learning more about how to tell if news and information you find online is trustworthy?,” and 84 percent said “yes.”

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS: REALIZING THE POTENTIAL OF PARTICIPATORY POLITICS

The analysis of data from the YPP study shows that participatory politics are worthy of substantial attention and that these practices present both risks and opportunities for the full, equitable, and productive engagement of youth in the political realm.

Participatory politics provide a substantial opportunity to reinvigorate both youth politics and political life in general. Forty-one percent of youth ages 15 to 25 engaged in at least one form of participatory politics. These acts of participatory politics occur at rates that parallel many institutionally based activities, such as contributing to a political party, attending a meeting or campaign event, wearing a campaign button, or signing a petition. Focusing on participatory politics, therefore, is important for anyone concerned about the politics of young people and, more broadly, about the future of politics in the United States and abroad.

Participatory politics are an important avenue to provide young people with a level of voice and control not often seen in the realm of institutional politics. As confidence in elected officials is at historic lows (13 percent said they approved of the job Congress was doing in a recent poll), participatory politics may provide a set of practices through which young people can communicate their political commitments and instincts directly to those most relevant in their lives—family and friends.

While self-expression through participatory politics does not guarantee that one will have influence, news reports over the past several years have been filled with examples of how participatory politics have influenced policy debates and changed governmental and corporate policies.

Almost every major campaign now employs strategies that aim to tap the potential of participatory politics. The attempt of conventional political campaigns to capture and exploit the power of participatory politics was evident in

2008 when then-candidate Obama and his supporters used new media to connect with and mobilize young voters. Despite common assumptions regarding a “digital divide,” the YPP study found that participatory political activities are more equitably distributed than voting. So these practices may provide a valuable access point for those who are hoping to amplify marginalized voices, especially those of youth of color, in a democratic system.



A turn to new media is not a turn away from offline activity. Rather, it is essential to recognize and highlight the integration of these two domains in the lives of young people.

Participatory politics clearly present risks as well as opportunities. While it is true that participatory politics are more equitably distributed than voting, some formidable inequalities and challenges still exist.

- Substantial portions of youth are far less likely than others to have voice and influence. Interventions aimed at leveraging the full potential of participatory politics cannot focus solely on schools, especially colleges, if all youth are to be included.
- The potential for misinformation has never been greater. Youth, to a degree never before seen, are inundated with information. At the same time, the vast majority (84 percent) reports that they and their peers would benefit from help judging the credibility of what they see online.
- Attending to participatory political activity may obscure the fact that youth political engagement is the exception and not the rule. While the YPP study has vivid examples of youth using digital media to meaningfully engage in varied forms of political and social change, it is clear from the study’s data and a substantial number of previous studies that most youth are not engaged in institutional or participatory politics.
- There is, finally, the risk that proponents of participatory politics, including youth themselves, will fail to focus on the distinction between voice and influence. YPP researchers do not want to undervalue the significance

of voice, especially for youth who are in the process of developing their political identities. At the same time, the YPP study recognizes that the promise of a democratic society is predicated on the belief that political actors have more than voice—they must also have influence.

IMPLICATIONS

When it comes to youth engagement with participatory politics, the presence of risks as well as opportunities makes clear the need for action in this fast-changing arena.

- Broadening the focus of policymakers, parents, the press, educators, scholars, funders, and other stakeholders to focus on participatory politics when engaging in their work is essential if we are to understand the current state of political life and act in ways that support the quality, quantity, and equality of political engagement.
- It is essential to identify priorities and create infrastructure and supports for individuals and organizations to more fully tap into the potential of these practices. Clearly, the digital era expands the need for media literacy. Youth must learn how to judge the credibility of online information and find divergent views on varied issues.
- Youth may benefit from supports in formal and informal educational settings that strengthen their ability and desire to produce media that is informed, persuasive, and distributed effectively.
- Organizations hoping to tap the full potential of this new domain will benefit from opportunities to learn about and reflect on the impact of varied strategies for leveraging the potential of participatory politics. A turn to new media is not a turn away from offline activity. Rather, it is essential to recognize and highlight the integration of these two domains in the lives of young people.
- Promoting broad and equitable access to the support and infrastructure youth need to move from voice to influence will be important in order for participatory politics to reach its full potential.

Participatory politics are a significant dimension of the political life of young people. The risks as well as the positive potential require careful attention. This is a unique and important moment. If stakeholders at multiple levels provide appropriate supports, participatory politics may provide valuable opportunities to engage young people in the political realm, giving them greater control, voice, and potentially influence over the issues that matter most in their lives.

introduction



In December 2011, Internet users and activists worked together to defeat the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA). The bill purportedly was designed to thwart Internet copyright infringement and intellectual property theft. Only weeks before its vote, the legislation enjoyed strong bipartisan support: SOPA in the House of Representatives and PIPA (the Protect IP Act) in the Senate. It was backed by powerful lobbying forces in Washington DC, including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Recording Industry of America, and the Motion Picture Association of America, which was led by former senator Christopher J. Dodd.¹ But in December 2011, hundreds of websites participated in a synchronized Internet blackout in protest of the legislation. Complemented by blog posts, videos, and online forums from an array of websites—including youth-oriented sites such as youthvoices.net, futuregenerationst.blog.com, and blackyouthproject.com,²—the widespread protest effort communicated a single message: that the pending legislation under consideration by Congress would undermine Internet freedom and invite widespread censorship. Within days, Congress responded and the legislation was blocked. Numerous individual lawmakers, including Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, a cosponsor of the original legislation, took to their Facebook and Twitter accounts to announce their opposition to the legislation.³ “I think it is an important moment in the Capitol,” Representative Zoe Lofgren, Democrat of California, told the New York Times. “This is individual citizens rising up.”⁴ In the aftermath, the Pew Foundation found that young people under the age of thirty followed protests over SOPA/PIPA more closely than news about the presidential election.⁵

In October 2011, twenty-two-year-old Molly Katchpole started a petition on Change.org to mobilize consumer outcry against Bank of America’s proposed \$5.00 debit card fee. By the third day, seventy-five thousand people had signed her petition. Ultimately, over three hundred thousand people signed the petition and more than twenty-one thousand pledged to close their Bank of America accounts. The movement attracted national attention, and consequently Bank of America reversed their decision to charge their customers.

Change.org, has six million users and launches ten thousand new petitions each month. Users have started successful petitions on Change.org to address fees by Verizon, compel Hershey to use fair-trade cocoa, and protest trying a twelve-year-old as an adult for the murder of his brother. Over the past year, Change.org has claimed eight hundred victories on issues related to human rights, education, animal cruelty, and criminal justice. “We’re in the business of amplifying,” says Ben Rattray, the thirty-one-year-old who started the site in 2007. “We’re trying to change the balance of power between individuals and large organizations.”⁶

Change.org is just one of many examples of new media’s impact on the politics of the country, especially as it is practiced among young people. While not every or even most of the petitions started on Change.org is as successful as Molly Katchpole’s, Change.org provides an opportunity for people to work together, voicing their concerns and mobilizing their networks with the hope of stimulating change. It is an example of how digital media provide new and often less costly opportunities for people to engage individually and collectively in the political process.

Another one of the largest and clearest examples of this is the Obama campaign’s use of social media in 2008 to reach and mobilize young people. That effort helped produce

record turnout, especially among young blacks and Latinos. However, the intersection of youth, new media, and politics is not exclusively an American story. As movements from Tunisia to Egypt detailed almost daily in news stories throughout 2011 indicate, the impact of new media is international in scope. The role of new media in protest movements happening throughout the world was such a prominent theme in the press that nearly every major magazine and paper carried at least one major article on the topic.⁷ For example, in their first issue of 2012, *Wired* magazine led with a cover story entitled, “#Riot: Self-Organized, Hyper-Networked Revolts—Coming to a City Near You.”⁸ Thus, anyone thinking about or concerned with youth and their political engagement must consider the role new media plays and promises to play in the future of both U.S. and global politics.

To rigorously consider the impact of new media on the political and civic behavior of young people, we developed and fielded one of the first large-scale, nationally representative studies of new media and politics that includes large samples of black, Latino, white, and Asian American youth. Our analysis reveals that youth are taking advantage of an expanded set of participatory practices in the political realm in ways that amplify their voice and sometimes their influence, thus increasing the ways young people participate in political life. We label this expanded set of opportunities and actions *participatory politics*.

PARTICIPATORY POLITICS

Participatory politics are acts that are interactive, peer-based, not guided by deference to elites or formal institutions, and meant to address issues of public concern.

Although participatory politics can be practiced offline, these acts are often facilitated through online platforms. Examples include starting a new political group online, writing and disseminating a blog about a political issue, forwarding a funny political video to one’s social network, or participating in a poetry slam. Participatory politics provide a way that individuals and groups can potentially exert both voice and influence. For example, they can:

- Reach large audiences and **mobilize** networks, often online, on behalf of a cause.
- Help **shape agendas** through **dialogue** with and **feedback** to political leaders (on- and offline).
- Influence exposure to news through **circulation** of information about a social or political issue at a meeting or through posting or forwarding links.

- Exert **greater agency** through the **production** of original content (online or off) such as a blog or letter to the editor.

There are at least four factors that make participatory politics especially interesting and important to those thinking about the future of American politics.

First, participatory politics allow individuals and groups to operate with greater independence in the political realm, circumventing traditional gatekeepers of information and influence such as newspaper editors, political parties, and interest groups. Of course, the ability to write letters to the editor has always existed, but the ease with which one can now blog or comment on an issue without oversight has vastly expanded opportunities for participatory politics. For example, although most people still get news from TV broadcasts and newspapers, the rise of new media use and the way it facilitates both circulation and production of content means that alternative narratives are now readily available to counter and/or agree with newscasts and editorials. Further, youth can now play a larger role in shaping what those in their networks see and read by sending a Tweet with a link to a story or posting something on their Facebook page. Often, those who do this also comment on the story they are sharing, helping frame how those in their communities consume this news. This type of independence is not only possible for individuals, it also is available to groups who often have greater capacity to communicate with and send links and information to their membership.

Second, in addition to circumventing traditional power, participatory politics often facilitate a renegotiation of political power and control with traditional political entities now searching for ways to engage and respond to participants.⁹ Today, most media outlets, from newspapers to cable television stations, try to boost engagement with their audience through the use of social media. In addition, traditional media outlets are often compelled to respond to and report on stories that originate or gain momentum in the blogosphere or through social media when those stories become viral. Moreover, protest movements can spread through networks, as they did during the global Occupy movement or the protests of the Susan G. Komen for the Cure’s decision to discontinue funding of Planned Parenthood, shifting both policies and the ways that topics are discussed.

Similarly, political parties and campaigns now seek to employ participatory politics to spread their message. In 2008,

for example, a great deal of participatory politics took place alongside the Obama campaign, including the distribution of Shepard Fairey’s iconic “Hope” poster in many modified versions. Importantly, even when political organizations try to foster such participatory activities on behalf of their own electoral ends, the individuals and groups engaged in participatory politics have greater independence than they would have as part of the bureaucratic campaign effort. In short, the draw of participatory politics means that major institutions, whether newspapers, political parties, or interest groups, now focus heavily on providing opportunities for online participation. In such instances, youth are afforded openings to help shape agendas through engagement, dialogue, circulation, and protest. Individuals and groups can mobilize in ways that enable them to “talk back” to elites and other institutional sources of political information and power, such as the press or elected officials.



The new and expanded opportunities for political engagement facilitated through new media and the culture of sharing and participation it cultivates are particularly relevant for youth, who generally are marginal players in formal institutions.

Third, participatory politics as practiced online provide for greater creativity and voice, as individuals and groups produce original content using video, images, and text. Consider, for example, how these participatory practices have altered the nature of a political speech. The significance of a speech used to end when the politician thanked the crowd and walked off the stage. It was then up to media elites to decide what to report.

Today, in many ways, it is *after* the speech that the impact of the event really begins. Participants can Tweet about the speech during and after the event or go home and blog about what was said, offering their own perspective and commentary. Individuals who were not present at the speech can view it on a platform like YouTube and react to

the content by leaving a public comment. These same individuals can choose to circulate the video to their network of friends and acquaintances using Facebook or Google+, adding commentary through text and images. And if they are especially interested, outraged, or committed to the issue or candidate, individuals can create their own personalized material for distribution and circulation, remixing or mashing up the original speech with additional images, music, and other enhancing features.

Fourth and finally, participatory politics also afford individuals the capability to reach a sizable audience and mobilize others through their social networks in an easier and less costly manner.¹⁰ If, in the past, one wanted to reach a sizable audience, one needed a political party, an organization, or a newspaper editor to provide a platform or microphone. Participatory politics enable youth to bypass these gatekeepers, mobilize informal networks, and share what they think or want to do with a sizable audience. The new and expanded opportunities for political engagement facilitated through new media and the culture of sharing and participation it cultivates are particularly relevant for youth, who generally are marginal players in formal institutions.

Participatory practices parallel various social and interest-based online activities with which youth are heavily engaged. Indeed, young people are able to share, create, and consume online, learning through their interactions with friends, family, and those with whom they share interests in the political realm. Daily, young people are creating their own political media and commentary and sharing it on Facebook. They are talking back to politicians through a post on a blog or in 140 characters on Twitter. They are circulating funny political videos as political commentary. And they are using sites like Foursquare to meet up with friends to participate in a demonstration or protest. In contrast to working through the established political bureaucracy, young people across the nation and the globe are using new digital media to express their thoughts about political issues, campaigns, and politicians to those they trust and with whom they have real sway—their friends, families, and expanded social networks. All of these actions allow young people to define or respond to issues in ways that resonate with them and their friends, shape their ideas, amplify their voices, and heighten their influence. Granted, the availability of such venues for expression and engagement does not guarantee that all young people will participate in equal measure. The digital divide in participatory politics is a subject we will address later in the report.

Having highlighted the importance of participatory politics, we should be clear that these changes will bring problems as well as opportunities. Participatory politics are already expanding access to information—and misinformation. Similarly, by linking to commonly used social practices, participatory politics hold out the possibility of broader and more equitable political participation, but these practices may be adopted primarily by those who have the best access to technology or by those who are already most engaged—reinforcing inequalities that already exist.¹¹ And, as many have noted,¹² it is not clear whether individuals and groups’ ability to choose from where and with whom they will circulate and receive information will expand exposure to diverse ideas or lead individuals or those who are part of informal groups to engage almost exclusively with views that align with those they already hold.

Given such points of uncertainty, it is vitally important to learn more about this new domain of activity and the ways it may be expanding opportunities for participation. In addition, this understanding is needed to guide the development of programs and digital infrastructure that support priorities such as new media literacy, platforms for production and distribution of youth perspectives, and credibility assessment so that all young people’s political engagement can reach its full potential.

NEW DATA FOR UNDERSTANDING YOUNG PEOPLE’S POLITICS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

While the topic of new media and youth politics has garnered lots of attention from pundits, politicians, and journalists, most often these reports have focused on anecdotal examples or a case-in-point of a protest mobilization where new media played an important role. Unfortunately, there has been limited opportunity and data available to comprehensively explore the relationship between new media and the politics of young people. One of the few entities to engage in this type of rigorous analysis has been the Pew Internet and American Life Project.¹³ Our study expands on this field-leading work by including an extensive battery of items addressing participatory politics and adequate numbers of participants from different racial and ethnic groups to allow rigorous analysis of how engagement with participatory politics varies across different groups.

Distinctively, we intentionally included large numbers of black, Latino, and Asian American respondents between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five in our sample of nearly three thousand so that we could more accurately explore how different groups of young people were engaged with new media in the political realm. Given the oversampling of specific groups, we weighted the sample so that it was nationally representative.¹⁴ Our questionnaire includes detailed measures of youth online participatory practices in their social lives as well as data on youth engagement with both institutional and participatory politics. As a result, we are able to explore how young people’s use of new digital media in the social realm relates to both institutional and new kinds of participatory activity in the political realm. This survey and the data collected provide us with a strong basis for addressing five broad and important questions.

1. Who is online and what are they doing?

• *Contrary to the traditional notion of a technological digital divide, young people across racial and ethnic differences have access to the Internet and regularly use online social media to stay connected to their family and friends and pursue interests and hobbies.* Overwhelmingly, white (96 percent), black (94 percent), Latino (96 percent) and Asian American (98 percent) youth report having access to a computer that connects to the Internet. Similarly, a majority or near majority of white (51 percent), black (57 percent), Latino (49 percent) and Asian American (52 percent) youth report sending messages, sharing status updates links, or chatting online daily.

2. How commonly do most youth use digital media to engage in participatory politics, and are participatory politics an important dimension of their political life?

• *Participatory politics are an important dimension of politics.* Over 40 percent of young people engage in at least one act of participatory politics. Specifically, 43 percent of white, 41 percent of black, 38 percent of Latino, and 36 percent of Asian American youth participated in at least one act of participatory politics during the prior twelve months. In addition, youth engage in participatory politics about as often as they do in other acts of politics.

3. What factors make engagement in participatory politics more likely?

- *Interest-driven online activities appear to lay a foundation for engagement in participatory politics.* To varying degrees, youth use new media to pursue their interests in hobbies, sports, gaming and other areas. Those engaged in these interest-driven activities appear to be gaining knowledge, skills, and networks, or what we call *digital social capital*, which increases their levels of political activity. In particular, youth who were highly involved in nonpolitical, interest-driven activities are more than *five times* as likely to engage in participatory politics and nearly *four times* as likely to participate in all political acts as those infrequently involved in such activities.

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Youth who were highly involved in nonpolitical, interest-driven activities are more than *five times* as likely to engage in participatory politics and nearly *four times* as likely to participate in all political acts as those infrequently involved in such activities.

4. Does new media create the foundation for an equitable distribution of political participation among young people, providing opportunities for voice and influence among those young people with less political power?

- *Participatory politics is generally equitably distributed across different racial and ethnic groups.* For example, the difference in voting in 2008 between the group with the highest rate of turnout according to the U.S. Census Bureau—black youth (52%)—and the group with the lowest rate of turnout—Latino youth (27%)—is 25 percentage points.¹⁵ In contrast, the difference between the group with the highest rate of engaging in at least one act of participatory politics—whites (43 percent)—and the group with the lowest rate of engaging in at least one act of participatory politics—Asian Americans (36 percent)—is only seven percentage points. More-

over, engagement in participatory politics is generally evenly spread across white, black and Asian American youth, with Latino youth less likely to participate in this domain.

5. Do participatory politics influence the news and information that youth encounter?

- *Many youth get news through participatory channels and believe they would benefit from learning how to judge the credibility of what they find online.* Youth now consume a great deal of news through participatory channels. For example, 45 percent reported getting news at least once a week via Twitter or Facebook from family and friends. At the same time, youth recognize the challenge of judging the credibility of the information they receive through these media. When survey respondents were asked, “Do you think people like you and your friends would benefit from learning more about how to tell if news and information you find online is trustworthy?,” 84 percent said, “yes.”

We want to be clear. The data we present throughout this report are not meant to suggest that participatory politics have displaced political acts such as voting or working on a campaign, acts that are tied to the state or other institutions. Those actions still occur and still matter. What we mean to highlight and explore is the substantial degree to which opportunities for participation have expanded thereby providing additional and important mechanisms for political voice and influence, especially among young people. Moreover, contrary to expectations driven by conventional rhetoric regarding a digital divide, we find young people across different racial and ethnic groups engage much more equitably in participatory politics than in voting.

For some young people, engagement in participatory politics may be driven by dissatisfaction and alienation from traditional political institutions. Others may simply be taking advantage of a new and exciting means of expression and action. Whatever their draw, young people’s engagement in such participatory political acts provides a new avenue for voice. And when an issue sparks mass engagement, it can create collective efforts that challenge the power and control held by major institutions of politics, government, business, and the press. Money and power still matter, of course, but participatory politics provides new opportunities for voice. It is not yet clear how often and under what circumstances these practices will be influential.

section 1



Who is Online and What are They Doing?

When trying to understand the factors that promote participatory politics, we believe it is important to start with the fact that young people today are connected to their friends and family through new media. As demonstrated in table 1, **young people are a very digitally connected generation.** The vast majority (96 percent) of young people have home access to a computer that connects to the Internet. Eighty-one percent own a personal computer, and roughly half own handheld devices (55 percent) or gaming devices (48 percent) that connect to the Internet as well.

table 1. Access to Digital Technology

| Type of technology | % Own | Average days of use in last week |
|---|-------|----------------------------------|
| A desktop or laptop computer | 81 | 5.6 |
| A handheld device (including smartphones) that connects to the Internet | 55 | 3.4 |
| A gaming device that connects to the Internet | 48 | 1.8 |
| Do you have access to a computer that connects to the Internet at home? (% Yes) | 96 | |

Our data and the research of others also indicate that **youth are very involved in friendship-driven and interest-driven activities online.**¹⁶ The data in figure 1 show that the vast majority of youth use social networks to communicate with their friends and family on a regular basis (friendship-driven activities). Seventy-eight percent send messages, share status updates, or chat online, and 58 percent share links or forward information through social networks at least once a week. A smaller percentage of young people regularly use new media to engage in hobbies and interests (interest-driven activities; figure 2). On a weekly basis, roughly one-third of youth engage in particular interest-driven activities, such as posting, linking to, or forwarding information; giving help, advice, or suggestions to others; or posting comments online about someone else's media. About one in six young people do more demanding activities like organizing an online group, discussion, or website, or creating original media to share online. Overall, 64 percent do at least one interest-driven activity in a given week, and 32 percent engage in three or more activities a week.

figure 1. Friendship-Driven Participation

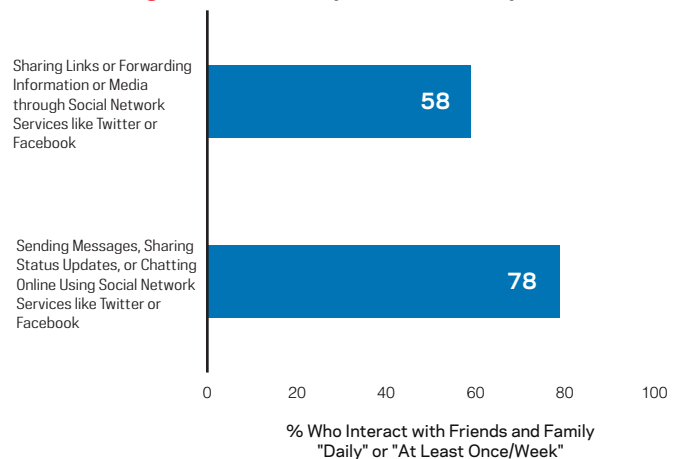
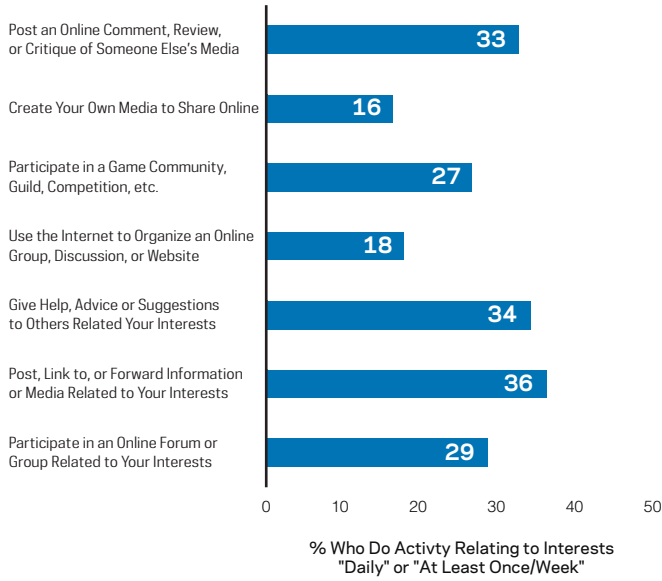


figure 2. Interest-Driven Participation



These interest-driven activities warrant special attention, because, in many ways, they parallel the practices of participatory politics. As Henry Jenkins's and Mimi Ito's research teams have detailed, in the process of communicating with friends and pursuing interests online, young people develop what Jenkins calls a participatory culture.¹⁷ These online participatory cultures are the contexts in which participants practice creating and sharing ideas and material with others. Experienced participants help less experienced ones acquire knowledge and solve problems. Generally, participants develop a sense of connection with one another and come to develop and understand functional community norms.¹⁸

These practices are peer based, focused on expression, interactive, nonhierarchical, and not guided by deference to elite driven institutions. And though not confined to digital platforms, the practices enabled by new digital media appear to have made participatory cultures more common. It is, however, the pervasive presence of such practices in the lives of young people (as evident in the data presented in table 1 and figures 1 and 2) that make it a culture shift. Specifically, Jenkins and others¹⁹ suggest that the participatory skills, norms, and networks that develop when social media is used to socialize with friends or to engage with those who share one's interests can and are being transferred to the political realm.

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Young people's repeated participation in these online spaces or cultures may shape their expectations about how communication and interaction should happen in other spheres of life, including the political domain.

Thus, young people's repeated participation in these online spaces or cultures may shape their expectations about how communication and interaction should happen in other spheres of life, including the political domain. And because of the shared commonalities that undergird these relationships, participants may be more likely than those involved in the traditional political infrastructure to produce and circulate information that resonates with others in the network, moving their friends and family to engage in politics, even temporarily. Moreover, because the network is often rooted in a context outside the political realm, most often conversing about and sharing information focused on popular culture or personal interactions, the boundaries of what counts as political information, discourse, and acts of politics are blurred—if not completely ignored.



section 2



How Commonly do Most Youth use Digital Media to Engage in Participatory Politics, and is it an Important Dimension of Their Political Life?

table 2. Participatory Political Activities

| | % |
|---|----|
| Started or joined a political group on a social network site (like MySpace or Facebook) | 11 |
| Forwarded or posted someone else's political commentary or news related to a political campaign, candidate or issue | 17 |
| Contributed your own article, opinion piece, picture, or video about a political campaign, candidate or issue to an online news site | 6 |
| Forwarded or circulated funny videos or cartoons or circulated something artistic that related to a political candidate, campaign or political issues | 20 |
| Commented on a news story or blog about a political campaign, candidate, or issue | 16 |
| Written an e-mail or written a blog about a political campaign, candidate, or issue | 7 |
| Taken part in a protest, demonstration, or sit-in | 6 |
| Participated in a boycott, | 9 |
| Engaged in "boycotting" | 11 |
| Participated in an event where young people express their political views (such as a poetry slam, musical event, etc.) | 7 |
| Been active in or joined a group that has worked to address social or political issues | 10 |

as noted previously, surveys have only scratched the surface when it comes to participatory practices. Often, analysts lump together activities ranging from information search over the Internet to political contributions donated online to new participatory forms of engagement under the broad category of "online politics." While many of the expanded opportunities for participatory politics are enabled by the new digital media, we do not believe that being online is, on its own, what makes these practices worthy of attention. As a means of tracking what we believe is an important dimension of political activity among young people, we included eleven indicators of participatory politics (shown in table 2) and eleven indicators of institutional politics (shown in tables 3, 4, and 5). While clearly not a complete list of possible activities, we believe they do provide solid indications of the degree to which individuals take part in varied activities.

The indicators listed in table 2 suggest that the level of engagement with participatory politics varies depending on the act. So while 20 percent of young people indicate they have circulated funny videos or cartoons or something artistic related to a political candidate, campaign, or issue, a smaller percentage of young people (6 percent) contributed their own article, opinion piece, picture, or video about a candidate, campaign, or issue to an online news site. As researchers have documented over the years, political acts which take more time, energy, and initiative tend to have lower participation rates, whether participatory or institutional. That said, it is important to note that the rates of participation in the domain of participatory politics are roughly equivalent to rates of participation through institutional politics performed off- and online, except voting (as seen in tables 3, 4, and 5).

table 3. Voting and Intention to Vote among Young People

| | % |
|--|----------|
| Did you vote in the election last November? (All youth ages 18 - 25) (citizens ages 18 - 25) | 45 49 |
| Once I am 18, I expect I will vote regularly. (Ages 15-17 who "strongly agree") | 35 |

table 4. Offline "Institutional" Political Activities

| | % |
|--|----|
| Raised or donating money through offline methods (check, donations at an event, etc.) | 3 |
| Signed a paper petition | 16 |
| Attended a meeting, rally, speech, or dinner | 9 |
| Worked on a campaign | 5 |
| Wore a campaign button, put a campaign sticker on their car, or displayed a sign | 16 |

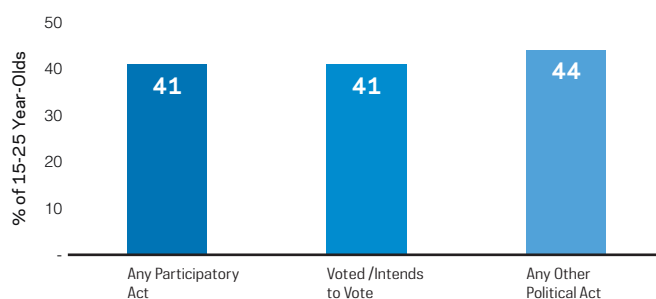
table 5. Online "Institutional" Political Activities

| | % |
|--|----|
| Raised or donated money online (via website, Facebook, text, etc.) | 3 |
| Signed an e-mail, Facebook, or other online petition | 16 |
| Expressed support through a social network site such as Facebook, IM, or Twitter (e.g., "liking" or becoming a fan) | 28 |
| Signed up to receive information from candidates or campaigns via e-mail or text | 8 |

Not only are young people engaging in individual acts of participatory politics at rates comparable to their engagement in more institutional acts, but the domain of participatory politics is a substantial component of young people's current political lives. As shown in figure 3, 41 percent of youth reported that they took part in at least one act of participatory politics, compared with 44 percent who took part in at least one act of institutional politics, and the 41 percent who reported voting (or, in the case of those not yet eighteen, who reported intending to vote in the future).^{*} The data make it clear that participatory politics represent an important portion of youth political activity as it is practiced today. Thus, if we ignore emerging forms of participatory politics, we will miss a key element of overall political activity.

**The voting data we report here are problematic and are significantly higher than actual voting rates as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau. These numbers should be viewed with caution. But the general point, that participatory politics is a substantial component of overall political participation still holds.*

figure 3. Level of Political Participation by Type of Activity



One might imagine that forms of participatory politics are viewed as an alternative to traditional political activity by young people and might come at the expense of such engagement. The data we collected indicate that participatory politics are better viewed as an *addition* to an individual's engagement rather than an alternative to other political activities. Youth who engage in participatory politics are far more likely than others to engage in institutional politics, as well. For example, youth who engaged in at least one act of participatory politics were almost twice as likely to report voting in 2010 as those who did not. Similarly, while only 4 percent of young people engage exclusively in participatory politics, 37 percent of young people engage in both participatory and institutional politics (figure 4).

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figure 4. Type of Political Activity among Young People

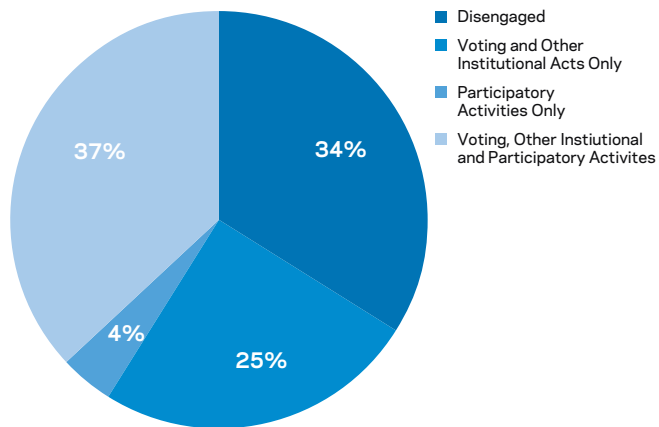
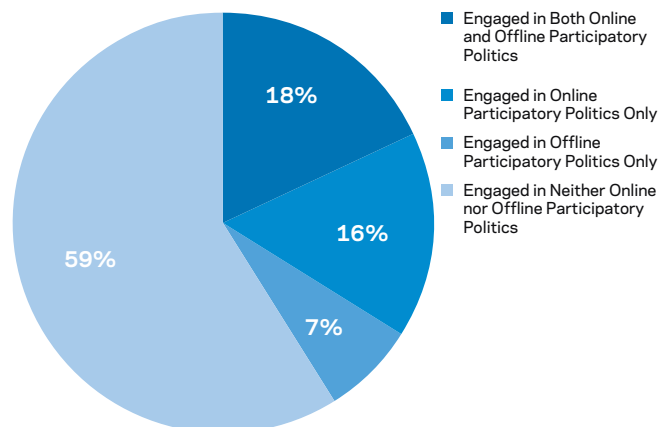


figure 5. Online and Offline Participatory Politics



Finally, we believe it is important to remember that while new media seem central to much of the participatory politics practiced by young people, participatory politics can be practiced offline. The New England town meeting or grassroots organizing, for example, embody these practices. These are spaces where peer-to-peer exchange of information and ideas are prized and there is far less reliance on bureaucratic structures. Quite often what we find is the use of both online and offline participatory practices by groups and individuals. We should be clear, however, that although participatory politics can be practiced offline, we are most interested in those acts that occur online, since these actions engage over one-third of young people, as is evident in figure 5.

Participatory politics are different than merely taking institutional political activities and moving them online. Allowing individuals to donate to a candidate online does not make the political act of donating money a participatory act. Today, online politics frequently resemble what we have traditionally seen in the political realm and often are not necessarily participatory. We are less interested in whether various political activities occur online or offline; rather, we are interested in the participatory norms, values, and practices of political engagement.



section 3



What Factors Make Engagement in Participatory Politics More Likely?

When it comes to understanding how participatory politics work, the vast networks that form the context for participatory cultures are of great relevance. Indeed, fundamental to the idea of participatory politics is the recognition of people as social beings, embedded in friendship, interest, and identity-based networks. These networks are available for not only sharing information, but also calls for mobilization, the sharing of skills that help navigate politics, and in some cases, facilitating political and civic participation at reduced costs through technological advances. These networks are a component of the social resources that can be mobilized individually or collectively in the political realm to advance one's interests.

In some cases, these networks become a temporary political resource when young people find an issue, candidate, or campaign that motivates them to act. For example, we all have a friend who tries to mobilize their social network for what they perceive to be a worthy political cause by sending e-mails or text messages that encourage us to act. For these reasons we regard the norms, networks, and skills that develop in online friendship- and interest-driven contexts as a kind of **digital social capital** with the **latent capacity** for mobilization when a relevant situation arises. As Henry

Jenkins has written, online contexts may well be the bowling leagues of the twenty-first century.²⁰ They provide a space of connection to others where trust is built and deliberation happens. Thus, like the bowling league, online contexts can facilitate social exchange where collective identities can be built and mobilized for civic and political engagement.

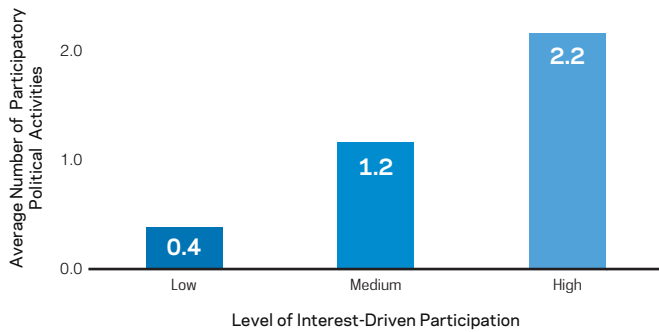
Given the potential for interest-driven activity to provide information, skills, and networks for political mobilization, it is not surprising that interest-driven engagement in particular seems to be related to the pursuit of participatory politics. Specifically, our data suggest that **interest-driven participation is strongly associated with higher levels of participatory politics, especially online participatory politics, even after controlling for other factors**, such as education, gender, and race or ethnicity. Young people

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Young people who are most involved in interest-driven activities are also much more engaged in political activity.

who are most involved in interest-driven activities are also much more engaged in political activity. As seen in figure 6, those with high levels of non-political interest-driven participation are more than five times as likely to engage in participatory politics as those with low levels of non-political interest-driven activities (2.2 participatory acts vs. 0.4 participatory acts). Similarly, those with high levels of non-political interest-driven activity were nearly four times as involved in politics overall as those with low levels of activity (4.5 political acts vs. 1.2 political acts).

figure 6. Political Activity by Interest-Driven Participation



Note: The differences across categories of interest-driven participation are statistically significant.

Because interest-driven participation is associated with other factors that influence political participation, such as education level and political interest, we used a statistical technique to control for the impact of other factors when assessing the relationship between interest-driven activity and engagement in participatory politics. Our analysis of the data shows that interest-driven participation has a positive and statistically significant effect on participatory political activity, both online and offline, even after accounting for demographic, socioeconomic, and attitudinal characteristics (such as political interest and political efficacy). Indeed, engagement in interest-driven activity is the single largest predictor of those we considered when determining whether someone would engage in participatory political activity.

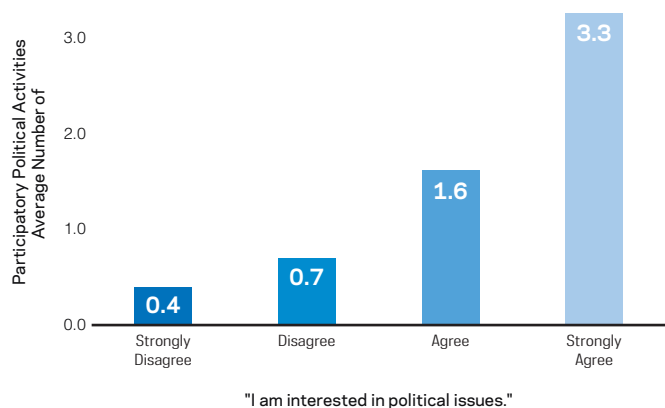
There are numerous reasons why interest-driven activities facilitate political engagement. Individuals who are part of interest-driven groups that form around shared interests in hobbies, games, and aspects of popular culture, for example, often come from a broader range of political perspectives, skills, and experiences than one encounters in one's family or even in one's local community. Interaction with a diverse group can expose one to a range of opinions and attitudes, stimulating thought and deliberation around issues. In addition, interest-driven groups are frequently characterized by a participatory culture where, as noted earlier, participants become part of networks and develop skills and orientations towards participation that may well advance their civic and political engagement. Consistent with this pattern, scholars have long observed that participation in offline extracurricular activities (which are also interest driven and frequently characterized by a participatory culture) promote civic engagement later on.²¹

In contrast to the significance of interest-driven activities, we find that **friendship-driven participation does not have a similar significant effect on participatory political activity once we control for other factors.** Specifically, those who are most involved in friendship-driven activities are more likely to participate in politics than those who interact less often with friends and family online. However, when the effects of other factors, especially interest-driven participation, are controlled for, friendship-driven participation does not appear to have an independent effect. We suspect that while friendship-driven networks can be used as a political resource, most often they reinforce existing ties of family, work, and school and that friendship-driven participation less frequently broadens one's focus beyond personal concerns, requires new skills, or expands one's networks.

POLITICAL INTEREST AND POLITICAL EFFICACY

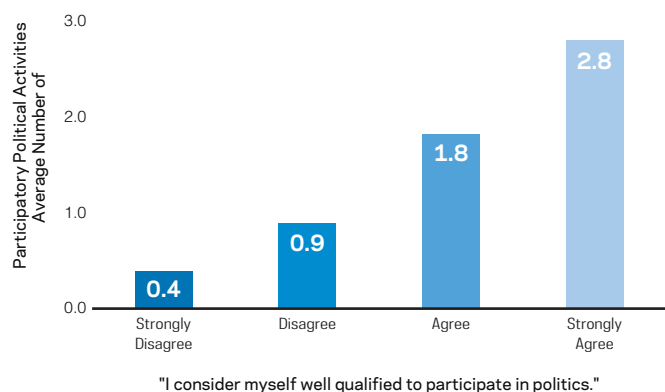
In addition to the relationship between interest-driven activities and participatory politics, our regression analysis also indicates that higher levels of political interest and political efficacy are positively related to engagement in all forms of politics including participatory politics. Those individuals who express the most political interest and political efficacy are about 8 times more likely to engage in participatory politics, online and offline, than those who feel the least interested or efficacious (figures 7 and 8). On average, people who agreed strongly that they were "interested in political issues" engaged in 3.3 participatory political activities per week, while those who strongly disagreed engaged in only 0.4 activities. Similarly, average involvement in participatory acts increased from 0.4 activities among those youth who felt least "qualified to participate in politics" to 2.8 among those with the strongest sense of political efficacy. Because our survey data capture one point in time, they do not permit us to assess the extent to which interest and efficacy cause participatory activity or the degree to which participatory activity cause political interest and a sense of efficacy. We suspect that, as is the case with other forms of political activity, causality flows in both directions.²²

figure 7. Average Participatory Political Activity



Note: The differences across categories of political interest are statistically significant.

figure 8. Average Participatory Political Activity by Political Efficacy



Note: The differences across categories of political efficacy are statistically significant.

REIMAGINING THE ROLE OF NETWORKS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Finally, we want to be clear that we recognize the long-standing significance of networks in politics. The mobilization of strong and weak networks is known to have played a critical role, for example, in many social movements, including the Civil Rights Movement. But we want to suggest that the role and possibility of networks in a digital era is different than the way networks operated in the past. First is the ease, in large part through the use of social media, of circulating materials not only to those we know personally, but also to those whom we have never met. While in the past our attempts at outreach through our networks were often bound by physical constraints—to those in our church, in our class, or on our block whom we see occasionally—today through e-mail and platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Tumblr, LinkedIn and Twitter, participants have the opportunity to engage with, or at least send information to, a much larger group of people.

Second is the ability of participants to circulate customized expressions of their preferences. While in the past one may have passed on a magazine article or letter to others in their network, today there is a greater ease in creating new, altering old, and disseminating all sorts of content for our networks. Moreover, we are not limited to just the circulation of content, we can also use our networks to create, for example, new groups in support of, or opposition to an issue, candidate, or policy. Third, the process of customization and creation also allows for a freedom with regard to defining what counts as politics. Thus, among friends, political information and political action is not strictly defined by political elites and may come from popular culture and the field of entertainment, as well as the political infrastructure.

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But we want to suggest that the role and possibility of networks in a digital era is different than the way networks operated in the past.

While the possible impact of digital networks is important, it is not clear if a participatory culture or politics will lead to the type of sustained and expansive mobilization of networks needed to constitute something like a social movement. We could imagine scenarios where individuals are content to “challenge” oppression through the circulation of materials to their network or by turning their twitter photo a certain color in solidarity with designated struggles. It is also not improbable that individuals will be organized through their digital networks to participate in mobilizations like the Occupy movement, but that the deep ties needed to engage in such mobilization over the long haul, those highlighted by social movement scholars and journalists such as Malcolm Gladwell, might be missing. Thus, despite all of the possibility embedded in the use of new media to mobilize networks into the political realm, we are not arguing that participatory politics are already substantially changing the political landscape. As noted earlier, the data suggest that the possibility of fundamental change and impact still remains just that—a possibility. However, it is a possibility that has the potential to restructure major divisions in society, including the digital divide.

section 4



Does New Media have the Potential to Facilitate an Equitable Distribution of Political Participation Among Young People from Different Racial and Ethnic Groups?

Numerous studies have discussed how race and ethnicity map onto an online digital divide.²³ Early writing in this area focused largely on the inequality in access that existed, in particular between white youth and youth of color. Reports explored differences in rates of ownership of computers that connected to the Internet between different racial and ethnic groups, believing that whites were advantaged in ownership and access to the web.²⁴ New data have revealed that anxiety about varying rates of ownership and therefore access to the Internet between racial and ethnic groups of young people is less needed today than it was when these earlier studies were published. Specifically, with the advances in technology and the resulting proliferation of both computers and mobile devices able to access the Internet, it is now rare that a young person does not own some device that can access the Internet.

For example, data in table 6 indicate that the differences in access to digital technology between racial and ethnic groups of young people is limited with nearly all young people in our study having some means of accessing the Internet. The data indicate that white and Asian American youth are more likely to own a desktop or laptop computer, while black and Latino youth are more likely to own a handheld device that connects to the Internet. We are not suggesting that accessing the Internet through a computer is the same as using a handheld device, however, as mobile technology improves, the differences in speed and scope are getting smaller. In general, the range of devices for accessing the Internet has expanded rapidly, from smart phones to e-readers to gaming devices, and young people seem to be making use of their expanded choices. That said, our data also indicate that nearly all young people have access to a computer that connects to the Internet. Strikingly, nearly 95 percent of all youth across racial and ethnic groups report having access to a computer that connects to the Internet. Thus, the traditional understanding of the digital divide that centered solely on whether one had “access” to the Internet seems to be a thing of the past.

table 6. Access to Digital Technology by Race/Ethnicity

| | Respondent, % | | | |
|---|---------------|-------|----------------|--------|
| | White | Black | Asian American | Latino |
| Own a desktop or laptop computer | 84 | 72 | 95 | 74 |
| Own a cell phone, without Internet access | 61 | 60 | 74 | 61 |
| Own a handheld device that connects to the Internet | 51 | 64 | 57 | 58 |
| Own a gaming device that connects to the Internet | 47 | 51 | 43 | 50 |
| Have access to computer that connects to Internet | 96 | 94 | 98 | 96 |

Note: All differences between groups are statistically significant except for the items measuring access to gaming devices and to a computer that connects to the Internet.

Concern over a digital divide today is increasingly rooted in differences regarding the mode or speed of connection available to young people as they access the Internet. In fact, very public and political battles have been waged to protect net neutrality and pursue universal broadband Internet service for greater numbers of the population.²⁵ Proponents of the expansion of broadband access argue that it allows for a faster, more reliable connection, compared with a dial-up modem. Furthermore, they suggest that broadband access is differentially distributed, with those in more affluent, urban, and educated households having greater access. The differential racial and ethnic group access to broadband has also been an element—if not the defining one—of the newly conceptualized digital divide today. Concern about the variations in broadband access continues to be justified, but there is heartening data regarding the reduction in the broadband gap. A 2010 Pew Internet study found that black households are one of the few demographic groups where broadband adoption continues to grow substantially. So while there still exists an eleven-percentage-point gap in the number of white households (67 percent) compared with black households (56 percent) with broadband access, that gap is smaller than the nineteen-percentage-point gap that existed as recently as 2009.²⁶ Of course, broadband access in general must continue to be an issue of concern when 33 percent of whites and 44 percent of blacks do not have a broadband connection to the Internet.

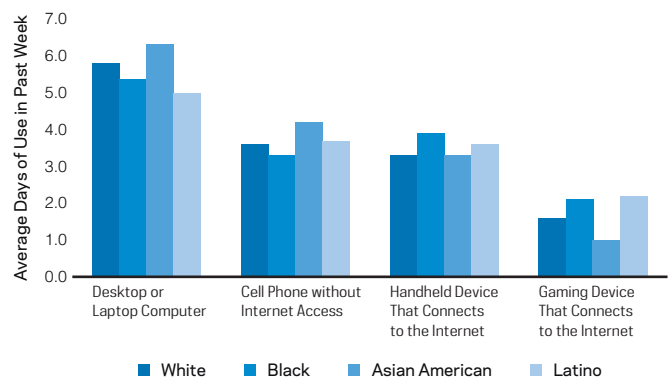
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While our data underscore the trend toward increasing equality in terms of access, they also highlight the significant differences in how young people from different racial and ethnic groups make of use of digital technology.

While our survey does not allow us to weigh in directly on the broadband debate, we do have data on the differences in the use of digital technology across racial and ethnic groups of young people. The data in figure 9 show that

Asian American and white youth use a desktop or laptop computer more frequently than do black and Latino youth, a finding consistent with their greater rates of ownership of a desktop or laptop computer. On the other hand, Latino and black youth use gaming devices that connect to the Internet more often than do white and Asian American youth. Interestingly, while black youth report using a hand-held device, such as a cell phone, that connects to the Internet more often than other youth, the differences between the groups are not statistically significant in our sample. Other researchers have found that blacks and Latinos are statistically more likely to use their smartphones to access the Internet.²⁷

figure 9. Use of Digital Technology by Race/Ethnicity



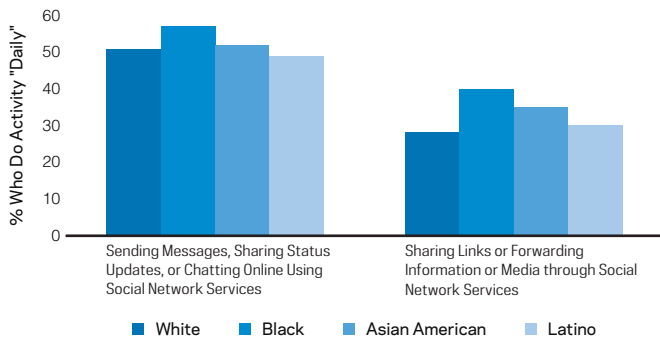
Note: All differences across groups are statistically significant except for the items measuring use of cell phones and use of handheld devices that connect to the Internet.

Despite the increased access to the Internet gained by black and Latino youth through the use of mobile technology, issues of inequality still remain when it comes to digital media. For example, there are substantial differences in what one can do using a cell phone, compared with a computer, on the Internet. It can be difficult to write a term paper or complete a job application using a smart phone.²⁸ Others have also openly worried that young blacks and Latinos may be using their increased access to the Internet more for “entertainment than empowerment.”²⁹ Recent data suggesting that blacks are more likely to participate on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook underlie the concern that young blacks and Latinos may be spending most of their time online consuming content and engaging in largely social activities centered on popular culture instead of creating content or pursuing political activities.³⁰ This dichotomy challenges our understanding of participatory politics, where young people use the skills learned from friendship and interest-driven activities in the political realm in new and innovative ways. Thus, the stark division

between social play and politics is not one upheld in our conception of participatory politics.

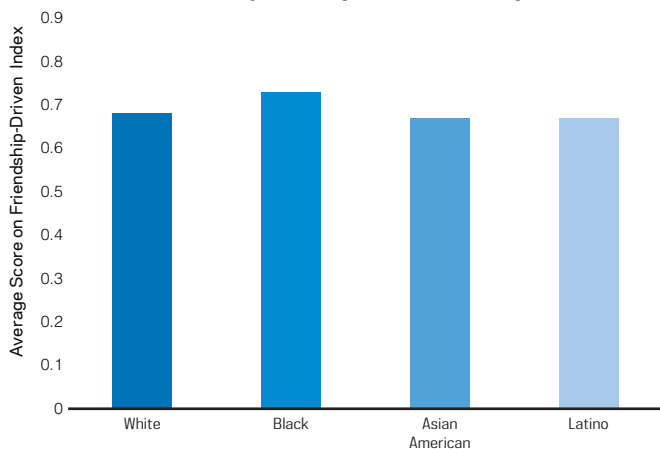
While our data underscore the trend toward increasing equality in terms of access, they also highlight the significant differences in how young people from different racial and ethnic groups make use of digital technology. For example, the data in figure 10 indicate that black youth are statistically more likely to engage daily in friendship-driven activities such as sharing links or forwarding information or media through social network services than are young people from other racial and ethnic groups. Black youth are also more likely than young Latinos, whites and Asian Americans to send messages, share status updates, or chat online via social network services daily, although the differences between groups are not statistically significant.

figure 10. Friendship-Driven Participation by Race/Ethnicity



Note: The differences across groups are statistically significant for the item about sharing links or forwarding information, but not for the item about sending messages, sharing status updates, or chatting online.

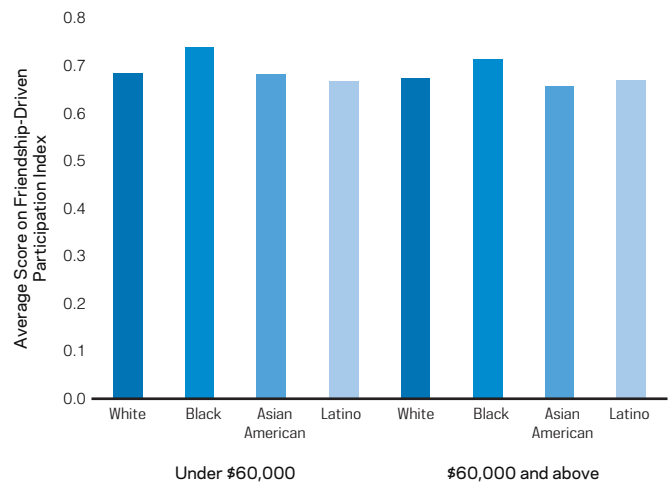
figure 11. Average Score on Friendship-Driven Participation by Race/Ethnicity



Note: The differences in means between blacks and both whites and Latinos are both statistically significant, though the difference between blacks and Asian Americans is not.

On average, black youth are significantly more likely than white and Latino youth to engage in friendship-driven activity (figure 11). This difference varies somewhat when we take into account and control for income (figure 12). If we use \$60,000 as our dividing line, we find that black youth are significantly more likely than white, Latino and Asian American youth to engage in friendship-driven activities when household income is below \$60,000. This difference does not hold up statistically for black youth when household income is above \$60,000.

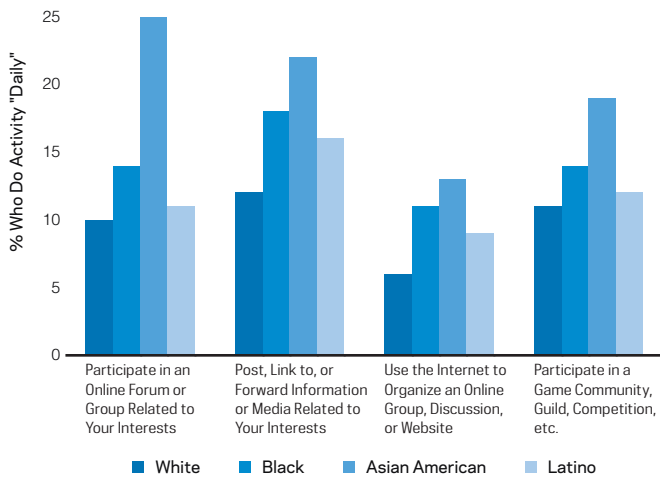
figure 12. Friendship-Driven Participation by Race/Ethnicity and Household Income



Note: The difference in means between blacks and other groups is statistically significant for households making less than \$60,000, but not for households making \$60,000 or more.

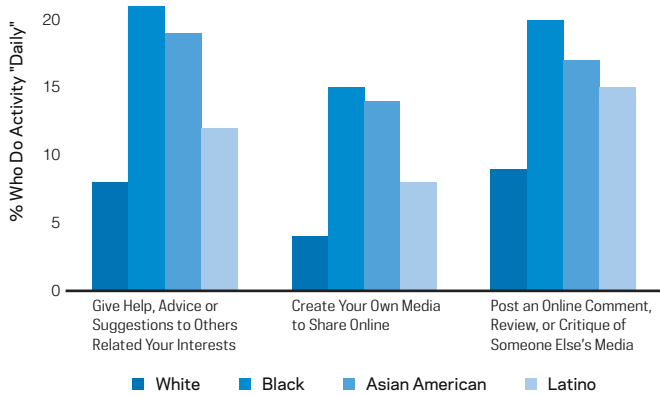
When we turn our attention to interest-driven activities, we find a similar statistically significant pattern of more engagement among Asian American and black youth. Specifically, on every indicator of interest-driven activity in figures 13A and B, black and Asian youth are significantly more likely to engage daily in such behaviors. Asian youth are more likely to participate in an online forum or group; post, link to, or forward information or media; organize an online group; or participate in a game community, guild, or competition. Black youth are more likely to give help, advice, or suggestions; create their own media to share online; or post an comment, review, or critique of someone else's media. Furthermore, on average black and Asian American youth are significantly more likely to engage in interest-driven activity (figure 14).

figure 13. Interest-Driven Participation by Race/Ethnicity



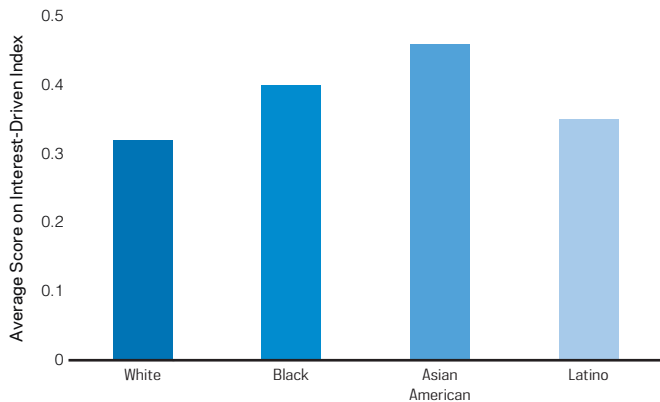
Note: The differences across groups are statistically significant for all items.

figure 13B. Interest-Driven Participation by Race/Ethnicity



Note: The differences across groups are statistically significant for all items.

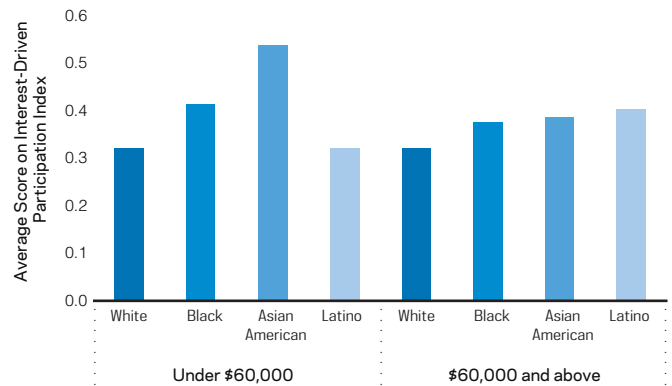
figure 14. Average Score on Interest-Driven Participation by Race/Ethnicity



Note: The difference in means across groups is statistically significant.

Again, when we take note of income we find that it does not have an effect on interest-driven participation. Specifically, African American and Asian American youth engage in more interest-driven activity than do whites, even after we account for income. Interestingly, on both sides of our dividing line of \$60,000, white youth are the least likely to be engaged in interest-driven activity (figure 15). Although Latino youth appear to be more engaged among those who report family incomes of \$60,000 and above, the differences are not statistically significant.

figure 15. Interest-Driven Participation by Race/Ethnicity and Household Income



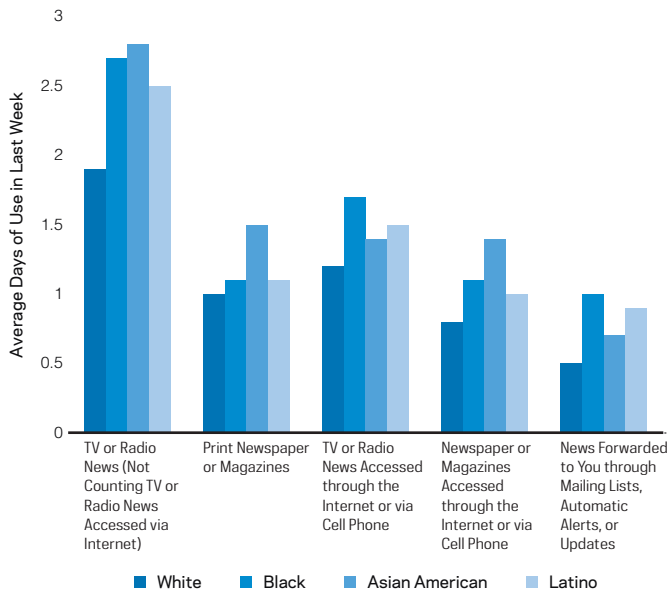
Note: The differences in means across groups are statistically significant for both households making less than \$60,000 and for households making \$60,000 or more.

Given the positive relationship between interest-driven participation and institutional and participatory politics, these findings complicate our understanding of what black and Latino youth are doing with their increased access to the Internet. It seems that some of these young people are using their Internet access to engage in interest-driven activities that serve as pathways to political engagement and that extend beyond mere entertainment consumption or “wasting time” online.

In contrast to worries about young people of color not having access to digital technology, we might be witnessing a new form of the digital divide where black and Asian American youth in particular participate more regularly than whites or Latinos in interest- and friendship-driven activities. And while a finding of “more” online engagement among black and Asian American youth is interesting and important, as noted above we are concerned with the degree to which such patterns of online engagement in the social and interest domains carry over into the political realm.

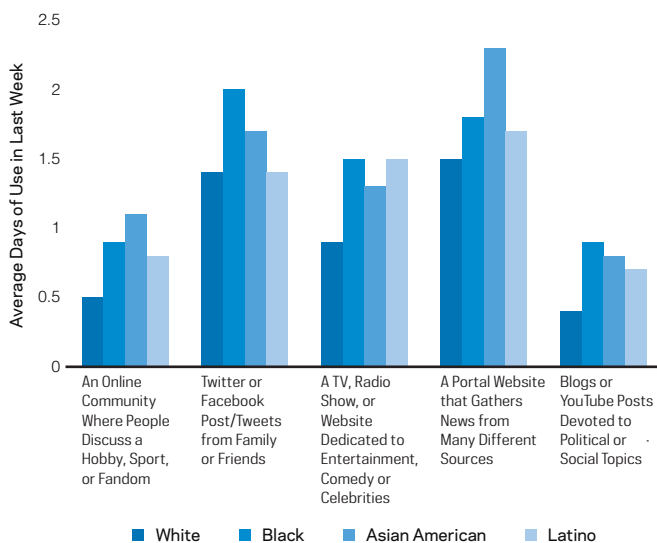
We begin our examination of the patterns of participatory politics across race and ethnicity by first looking at news consumption. Interestingly, the pattern of black or Asian American youth being the most highly engaged emerges again. Among the ten items we used to assess how often youth look for and read news about politics, black and Asian American youth are more likely to seek out political news on every item (figure 16A-B).

figure 16A. Political News Consumption by Race/Ethnicity



Note: All differences across racial and ethnic groups are statistically significant except for the item measuring print newspaper readership.

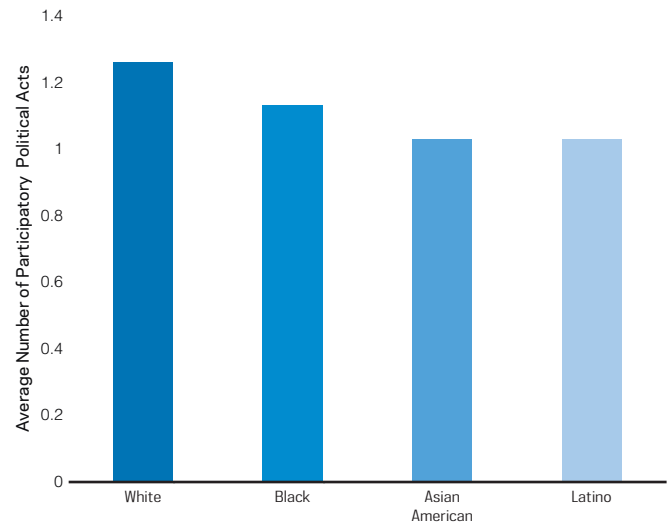
figure 16 B. Political News Consumption by Race/Ethnicity



Note: All differences across racial and ethnic groups are statistically significant for all items.

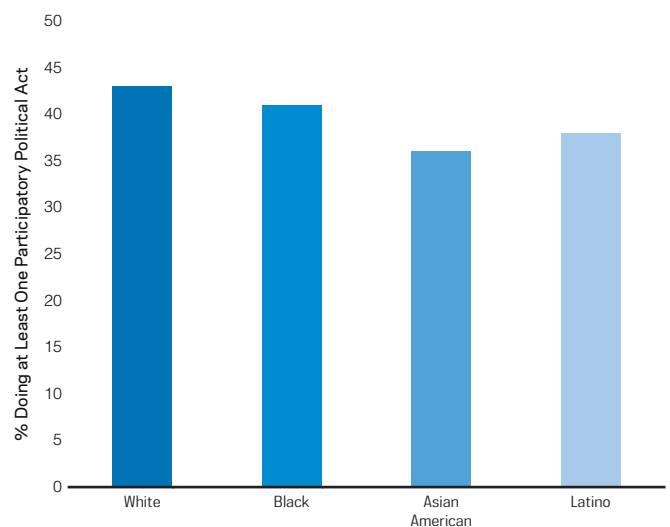
When we venture into the more explicitly political realm and examine rates of participation for both online and offline participatory politics, patterns of engagement among different racial and ethnic groups are far less clear. As detailed in figure 17, on average, white youth appear to be more likely to engage in slightly more participatory political acts. Similarly, the data in figure 18 indicate that when considering all acts of participatory politics, those online and offline, white youth are more likely to participate in at least one act. Interestingly, these differences are not statistically significant so we cannot be sure that any variation in engagement in participatory politics actually exists across racial and ethnic groups of young people.

figure 17. Mean Number of Participatory Political Acts by Race/Ethnicity



Note: The differences in means across racial and ethnic groups are not statistically significant.

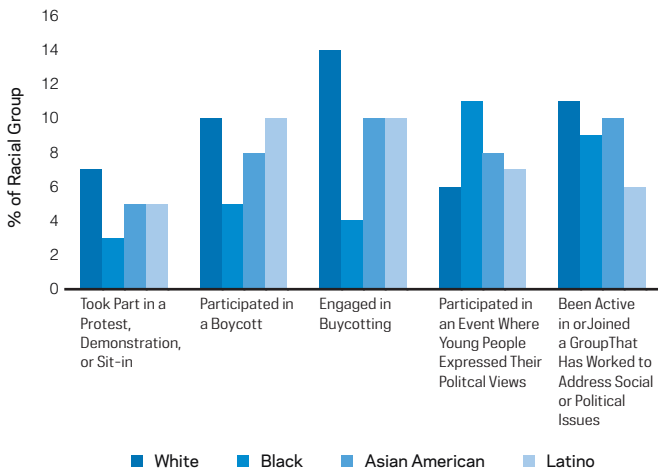
figure 18. At Least One Participatory Political Act by Race/Ethnicity



Note: The differences across racial and ethnic groups are not statistically significant.

While white youth are active participants in the realm of participatory politics, they seem to be more engaged in those acts of participatory politics conducted primarily offline (figure 19). Specifically, white youth are either equally or more likely to do such activities as participate in a boycott or buycott, join or be active in a group working to address social or political issues, take part in a protest, start or join a political group online, or forward or circulate funny videos or cartoons. Other than starting or joining a political group online and forwarding and circulating a funny video or cartoon, most of these activities are conducted offline.

figure 19. Offline Participatory Politics by Race/Ethnicity

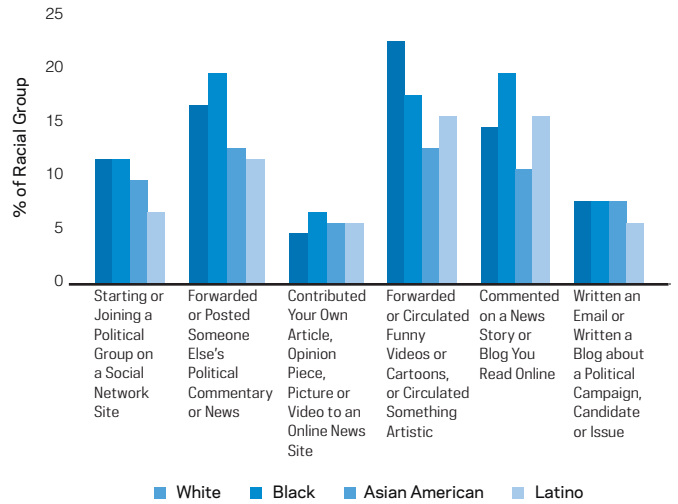


Note: The differences across groups are statistically significant for all items except the one measuring participation in an event where young people expressed their political views.

In contrast, black youth generally participate at rates equal to or slightly higher than other groups in various online acts of participatory politics, such as starting or joining a political group on a social network site; forwarding or posting someone else’s political commentary; contributing their own article, opinion piece, picture, or video; commenting on a news story or blog read online; or participating in an event where young people express their political views (figure 20). Only the differences for starting or joining a political group online or participating in an event where young people express their political views are statistically significant across different racial and ethnic groups. The participation of Asian American and Latino youth varied across our indicators of participatory politics, although their general levels of engagement were not that far behind those of black and white youth. Finally, we should also note that income was shown to have no effect on the summary measures of participatory politics (online and offline) for blacks, Asian Americans, and whites. There was a small negative relationship between income and participatory

politics in general and offline participatory activity for Latinos. As their income increased their likelihood of participating in any form of participatory politics and specifically offline participatory politics decreased slightly.

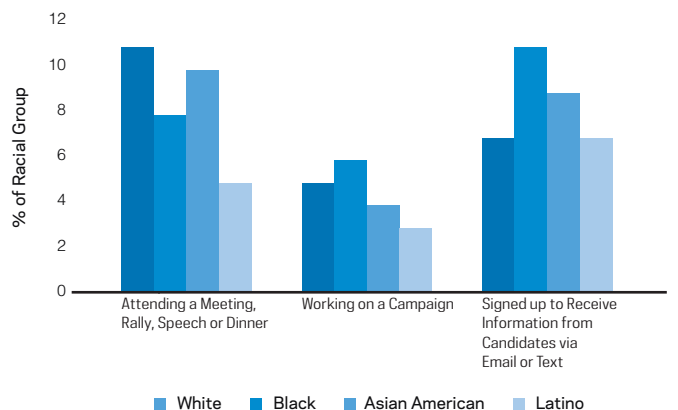
figure 20. Online Participatory Political Acts by Race/Ethnicity



Note: The differences across racial and ethnic groups are statistically significant for the items measuring starting or joining a political group online and forwarding or circulating videos.

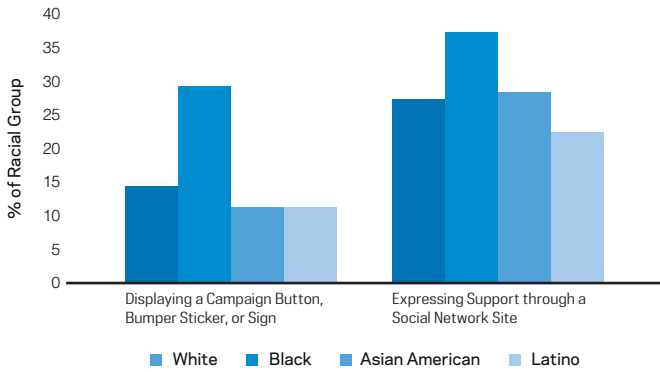
When examining other acts of political engagement, we find again that participation is largely evenly distributed across racial and ethnic groups. The data suggest that while engagement in institutional politics are generally spread evenly across racial and ethnic groups, black youth are more likely to participate in electoral-related activities such as voting, wearing a campaign button or sticker, or using a social networking site to express support for a candidate, campaign, or political issue (in figures 21A-C and 22).

figure 21A. Other Acts of Political Engagement by Race/Ethnicity



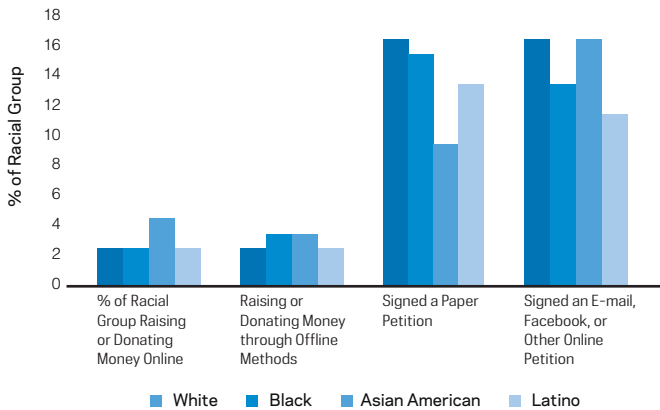
Note: The differences across racial and ethnic groups are statistically significant for the item measuring attending a meeting, rally, speech, or dinner.

figure 21B. Other Political Acts by Race/Ethnicity



Note: The differences across racial and ethnic groups are statistically significant for both items.

figure 21C. Other Political Acts by Race/Ethnicity

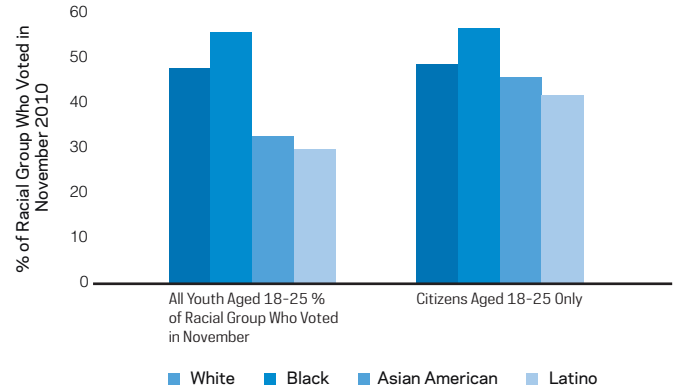


Note: The differences across racial and ethnic groups are statistically significant for entire population of 18-25 year-olds, but not for citizens aged 18-25.

Our data on voting in figure 22 corresponds with data from the U.S. Census Bureau documenting a steady increase in the voter turnout of black youth since 2000, culminating in record turnouts in 2008. In fact, in the 2008 presidential election, rates of black youth turnout were at their highest levels for any racial or ethnic group of eighteen-to-twenty-four-year-olds since eighteen-year-olds received the right to vote in 1971.³¹ The voting rates of Latino and Asian American youth were significantly lower. Again, our own research and data from the U.S. Census Bureau suggests that citizenship status is a significant reason for the lower voting rates among these groups of young people.

At the same time, we suggest caution when considering the specific voting rates from our survey. The voting data from our survey are based on self-reports and significantly over state the actual rates of voting among young people. It is possible our respondents were reporting their voting in 2008 and 2010. We suggest that care be used in reviewing these numbers.

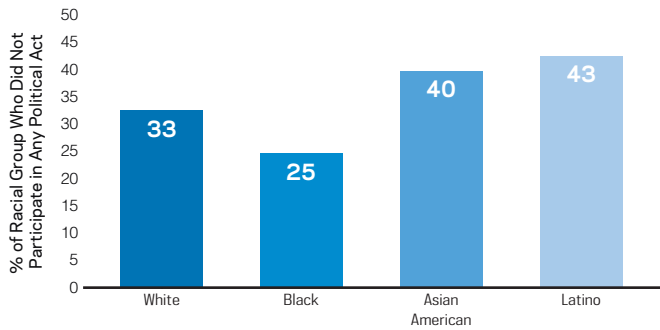
figure 22. Voting by Race, Ethnicity, and Citizenship Status



Note: The differences across racial and ethnic groups are statistically significant for entire population of 18-25 year-olds, but not for citizens aged 18-25.

Finally, we turn our attention to those young people who are disengaged from the political process. As we might expect given the preceding text, black youth are the least disengaged group of young people we surveyed. When we take into account participatory politics, institutional politics, and voting, black youth are the most likely to have participated in at least one form of these political activities. This is a finding that contradicts the beliefs of many who assume that white youth are the most engaged in the political realm. In reality, Latino youth seem to be the least active and most disengaged. They were usually the least likely to engage in individual acts of participatory political activity or institutional forms of politics and were the least likely to vote. Again, some of the differences in engagement stem from factors such as citizenship status, education, and income. These are topics we will explore more fully in future analysis of both our quantitative and qualitative data. In fact, some of our qualitative data suggest that Latino youth may be more engaged in informal civic activities directed at bettering their neighborhoods and communities. That said, we still find the differences in engagement striking (figure 23). Disengagement is lowest among black youth with only 25 percent reporting no engagement in any form of political behavior, compared with 33 percent of whites, 40 percent of Asian Americans, and 43 percent of Latinos.

figure 23. Political Disengagement by Race/Ethnicity



Note: The differences across racial and ethnic groups are statistically significant.

The data presented in this section raise important questions about the nature of our current political landscape and how it might change in the future given the growing influence of new media in the lives of young people and the changing demographics of the country. For example, surprising to some is the finding that black and Asian American youth seem to be leading the way in terms of using online platforms to engage in friendship- and interest-driven activities, as well as some acts of online participatory politics. We make note of this trend not to diminish the fact that white youth on average engage in equal or slightly more acts of participatory politics, especially offline forms. Nor do we want to suggest that the majority of black and Asian American youth are engaged in interest-driven activities or participatory politics.³² We point to the presence of black and Asian American youth in online friendship-driven, interest-driven, and limited participatory political activities because of the potential it presents for their increased engagement in politics. If participatory politics can be harnessed to be a mechanism through which young people can gain access to and control over their politics, then we might expect that young blacks and Asian Americans, whose voices have often been marginalized and silenced, will have much to gain from these new forms of expressions and political activity. We are not equating, however, access to voice and expression with political power and influence. Circulating a funny video or cartoon is not the same as circulating a petition for the recall of an elected official. However, political commentary, even in the form of a cartoon, can help raise consciousness and mobilize individuals toward more formal and recognized institutional politics. Thus, we believe both the circulation of a funny video and the circulation of a political petition to be important and often complementary acts in the political domain.

The question still remains, however, whether youth of color, in particular black and Asian American youth, can leverage their digital skills and participatory norms into viable participatory politics around the issues that matter in their lives. Specifically, what type of political infrastructure or resources will be necessary to help all young people, proficient in the digital world, leverage that knowledge in the political domain to advance their political commitments? Can the expansion of politics through new media, in particular participatory politics, be facilitated through more civics education and digital literacy classes in schools and community groups? We raise the issue of the infrastructure and resources needed for the expansion of political voice and influence because even before there was attention to new media and participatory politics scholars identified a civic opportunity gap between white and youth of color. Two members of our research team, Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh, in earlier research found that school systems actually exacerbate racial and class differences in political and civic participation among young people by “providing more opportunities to learn about politics to higher income students, white students, and academically successful students.”³³ Thus, addressing the question of what type of infrastructure will be needed to act as a bridge between Internet access and political influence and where that infrastructure will be located—schools and communities—has to be at the top of our agenda if we are to make use of the potential of participatory politics.

Finally, we recognize that speculating about the changing nature of American politics in light of participatory politics is beyond what our data can fully support. We pose these broader comments and questions about the role of race in the realm of participatory politics—and American politics more generally—because we believe that such issues must be a central part of any research agenda on youth and politics, especially as we try to assess the impact of new media on our politics. What will it take to facilitate the full participation of young people, especially young people of color, into our democracy? Do new media and participatory politics offer us a chance to expand the political lives of young people, especially those whose voices are marginal through institutional politics? And are we prepared to hear from and respond to new or often silenced members of our political community?

If, for example, black youth continue to vote at higher rates than other groups of young people, and if they continue to be among those more likely to engage in friendship- and interest-driven activities as well as online participatory politics, might this mean that the voices of young blacks and the issues important to them become a central part of what is perceived as the “youth political agenda”? Currently, the politics of young people is most often associated with the actions and attitudes of young whites. Might the country’s changing demographics, participatory culture, and technology produce conditions that open up the political realm, even ever so slightly, allowing young people of color to gain some political voice and possibly political power? While our data point to the potential of young people of color, especially black and Asian American youth, to be active in the interest-driven and political realm, changes of this sort will only be realized through the infusion of resources that provide a bridge to democratic participation. Latino youth who appear to be most disengaged across a number of political domains deserve special attention and resources to aid their sustained engagement in the political realm. All young people, however, will need some support and scaffolding to help them leverage their dominance of new media into political opportunity and power.



Might the country’s changing demographics, participatory culture, and technology produce conditions that open up the political realm, even ever so slightly, allowing young people of color to gain some political voice and possibly political power?

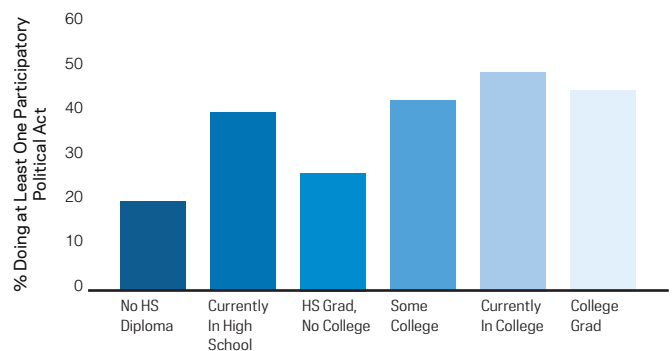
EDUCATION AND INEQUALITY

If there is one factor that repeatedly has been shown to impact political participation, it is education. The benefit one receives from additional formal education, especially college, in the political realm is a well-established fact. Edu-

cation can provide the needed skills, knowledge, and networks necessary to navigate politics. Individuals who have more formal education might be better equipped to evaluate information on candidates or understand and respond to requirements for registering to vote. Similarly, those in school might be embedded in networks where the norm and expectation is that one engages in politics. Those in these same networks might discuss politics and candidates regularly, lowering the cost of acquiring political information. In general, there are both direct and indirect resources that one gains through education that can be used to lower the cost of political participation.

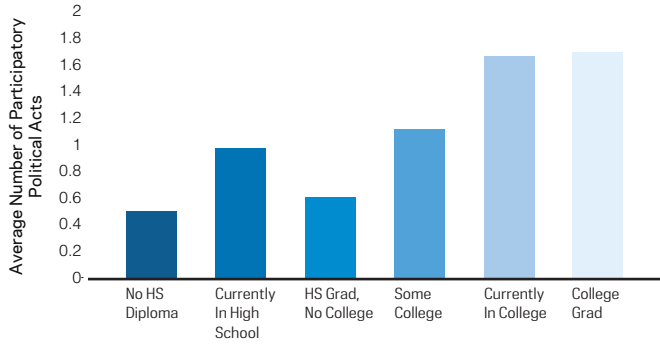
Figures 24 and 25 show data that confirm that education has a strong positive relationship with participatory political activity. Participation is highest among those who are currently in college (50 percent participated in at least one activity and 27 percent participated in at least three) or have a college degree (46 percent did at least one activity and 28 percent did three or more). At the other extreme, participation is very low among those who left school without attending college (27 percent of high school graduates who have not attended college and 21 percent of those who left high school without receiving a diploma did at least one activity).

figure 24. Participatory Political Activity by Level of Education



Note: The differences across levels of education are statistically significant.

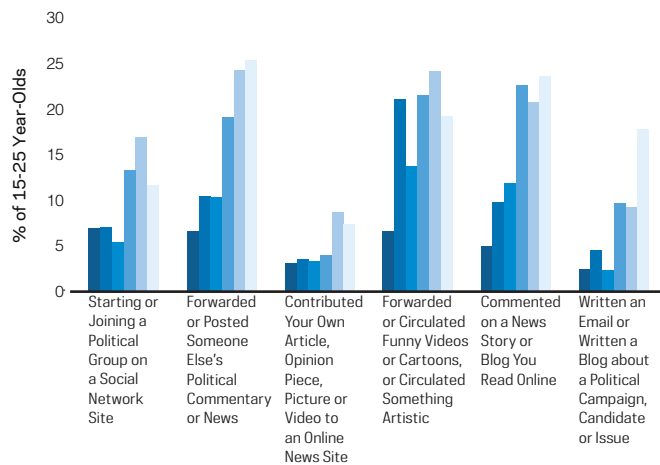
figure 25. Average Number of Participatory Acts by Level of Education



Note: The differences across levels of education are statistically significant.

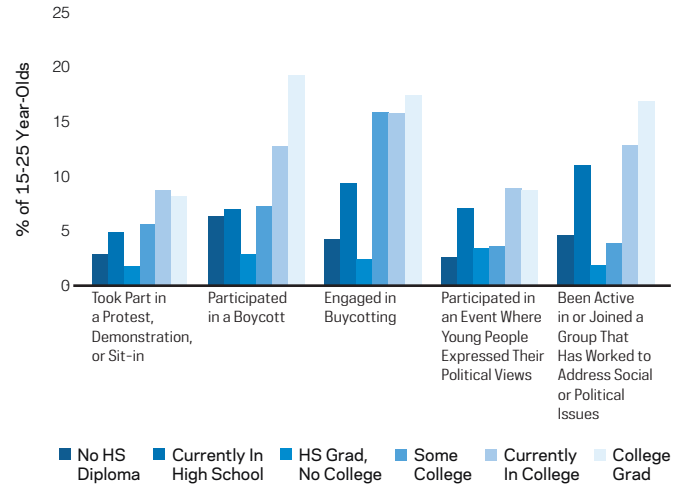
The impact of education on the propensity to engage in participatory politics is evident more directly when we explore the distribution of such activity across educational groups. Those with some form of college education are more likely to engage in each of the eleven indicators of participatory politics (figures 26 and 27).

figure 26. Online Participatory Politics by Level of Education



Note: The differences among the various educational groups are all statistically significant except for the indicator measuring whether one has contributed their own article, opinion piece, picture or video.

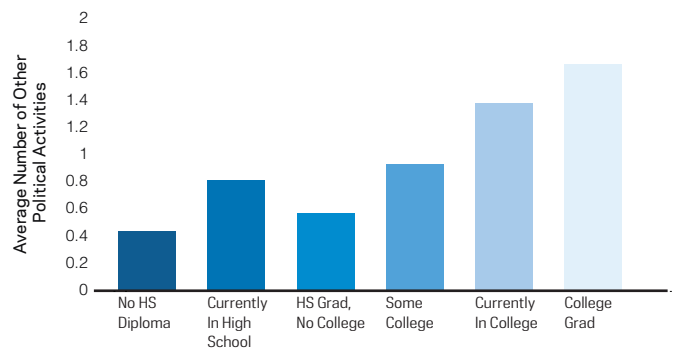
figure 27. Offline Participatory Political Activity by Level of Education



Note: The differences among the various educational groups are all statistically significant except for the indicators measuring whether one has taken part in a protest, demonstration, or sit-in and whether one has participated in an event where young people express their political views.

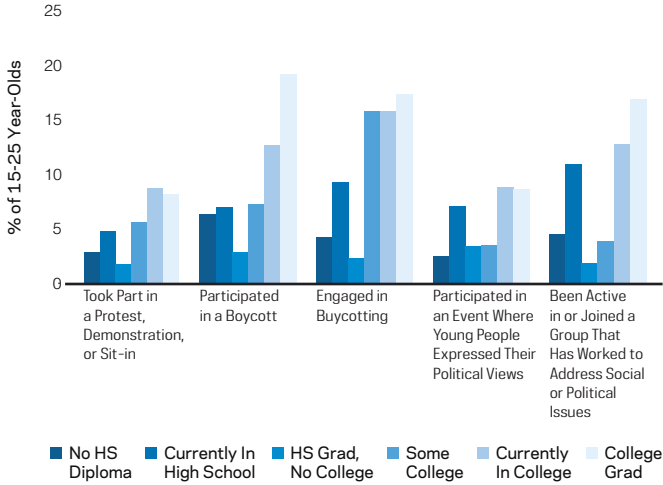
The inequalities in involvement in participatory politics across the different education categories are quite dramatic but are visible in other forms of political participation, too, as seen in figure 28. On average, those with college experience are much more likely to engage in politics. Those in college or college graduates are more likely to participate in nearly every form of politics presented in figures 29A-C).

figure 28. Average Number of Other Political Acts by Level of Education



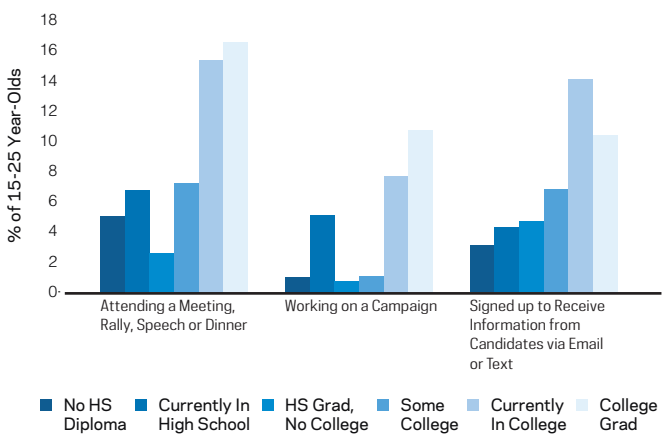
Note: The differences across levels of education are statistically significant.

figure 29A. Other Political Activity by Level of Education



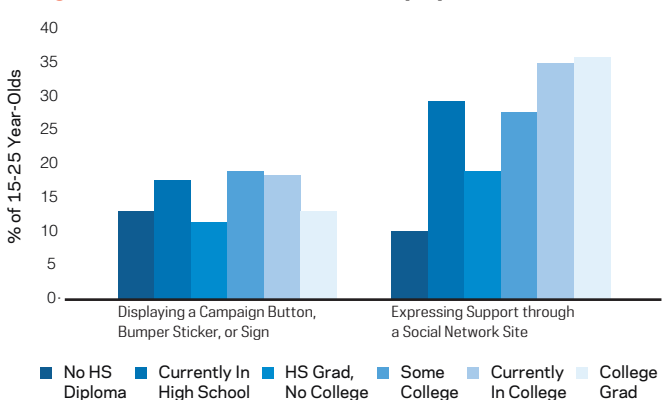
Note: The differences across levels of education are statistically significant.

figure 29B. Other Political Activity by Level of Education



Note: The differences across levels of education are statistically significant.

figure 28C. Other Political Activity by Level of Education



Note: The differences across levels of education are statistically significant only for the item measuring expressing support through a social network site.

Finally, we should note that while we do not report the specific findings for each racial and ethnic group, the relationship between education and participatory politics holds and is especially strong for whites, blacks, and Latinos, even when accounting for other factors. In OLS and Logit regression analyses, two varying measures of education—enrollment status (in school) and educational attainment—were found to be consistently significant predictors of political activity. For example, controlling for age, gender, income, and citizenship, both enrollment and educational attainment were found to be positive and significantly related to participatory politics for all white, black, and Latino respondents.³⁴



section 5



Do Participatory Politics Influence the Amount and Diversity of News and Information that Youth Encounter?

There is substantial evidence that reading, watching, discussing, and otherwise engaging with news that concerns societal issues are highly associated with the degree to which one is informed about and participates in civic and political life.³⁵ Thus, if youth find engagement with news through participatory channels attractive, and if this increases their overall engagement with the news, these practices might foster a positive change in both their overall level of civic and political activity and the quality of that activity, since they would potentially be better informed. Countering this hypothesis, however, concerns have been raised that the diminished role of formal institutions and gatekeepers in vetting the information that circulates through participatory channels may create problems regarding the credibility and accuracy of that information. In addition, some have been concerned that those consuming, circulating, and producing news through participatory channels may be part of echo chambers, interacting primarily with those who share

the same views, and may be less likely to encounter divergent views.³⁶ Others argue the opposite: that participatory networks and norms will actually make it more likely that individuals are exposed to a range of perspectives.³⁷ In this section, we consider evidence from our survey that speaks to these issues.

MANY YOUTH GET THEIR NEWS THROUGH PARTICIPATORY CHANNELS

The significance of participatory politics becomes apparent if one considers the consumption of news tied to political or social issues. While the most common source of news for youth continues to be TV and radio, with 72 percent of young people saying they watched or listened to these sources (online or offline) at least once in the prior week, it turns out that many youth get news through participatory channels, as well. Specifically, we found that 45 percent of youth reported getting news at least once in the past week via Twitter or Facebook from family and friends. This frequency rivals the 49 percent who got news at least once in the past week from newspapers or magazines. In addition, 21 percent said they received news from blogs or YouTube posts devoted to political and social topics, and 22 percent reported getting news or information from an online community where people discuss a hobby, sport, or fandom (see figure 30). A majority of youth (53 percent) said they got news from at least one of these participatory channels in the past week. In short, while a relatively small group of youth circulates news or produce blogs about current events, it appears that many youth get news through these kinds of participatory channels.

figure 30. Young People's Sources of News

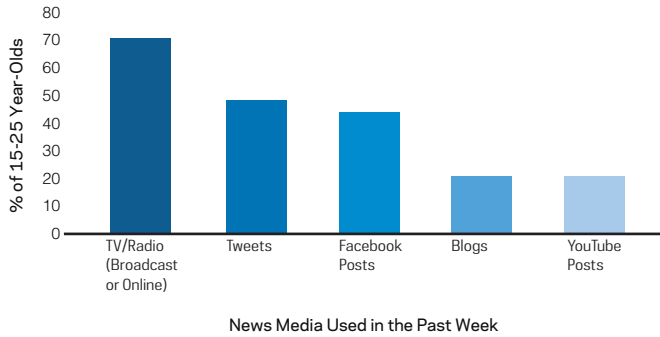
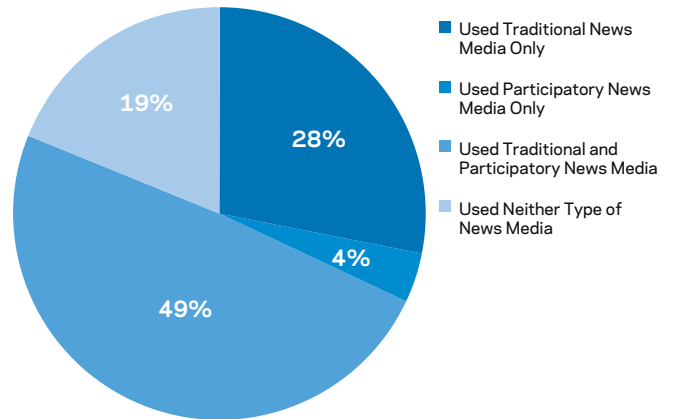


figure 31. Types of Media Consumption



Participatory channels are supplementing but not supplanting traditional broadcast structures. The lack of gatekeepers and vetting of the information that circulates via the Web has led to concerns that many youth may be getting their information exclusively or primarily through participatory channels. We did not find that to be the case. For the vast majority of youth, participatory channels supplement their news diet. Ninety-two percent of youth who received news through a participatory channel also consumed news through traditional media outlets. Only 4 percent of young people got news through a participatory channel without also using some traditional media. This finding may help allay fears that youth have replaced broadcast news with news from Facebook and Twitter. Moreover, some of the news that comes through participatory channels was originally broadcast (the circulation of a newspaper article or op-ed, for example). Indeed, it seems as though participatory channels are supplementing more traditional broadcast sources. Figure 31 indicates that many young people have diverse news diets—roughly half (49 percent) consumed news from both a traditional and a participatory channel in the previous week. A smaller but still substantial portion of the youth population (28 percent) is exposed to news through traditional channels but not through participatory channels. Of perhaps greater concern, 19 percent of youth did not report any exposure to news in the previous week.

Youth who consume, circulate, and produce media are exposed to views that diverge from their own more often than those who do not. Exposure to divergent perspectives has been found to foster individuals' knowledge, ability to consider the perspectives of others, consideration of the rationales put forward by others, and tolerance for those with differing views³⁸. One concern regarding the increased readership of blogs and other forms of participatory media is that they may function to narrow the range of views to which their audience is exposed. Similarly, some have worried that those who circulate or produce media on societal issues may become part of echo chambers where they produce and are exposed mainly to views that align with their own. Our study could not fully test these propositions



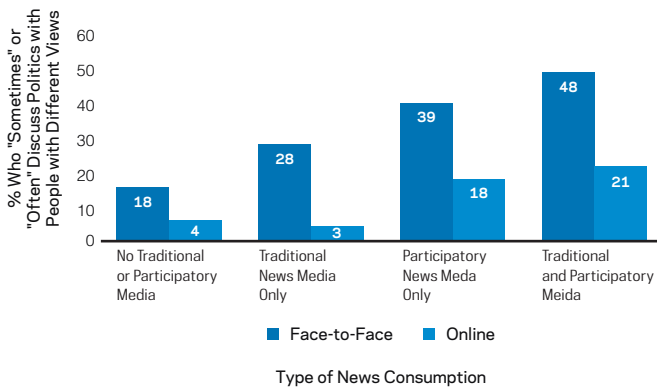
or whether traditional or participatory channels exposed consumers to more diverse viewpoints. However, we could test whether those who produce, circulate, and consume news and perspectives on societal issues through participatory channels are exposed to divergent views more or less often than others.

★

We did not find that those who engage in participatory online activities are limiting their exposure to those with whom they agree.

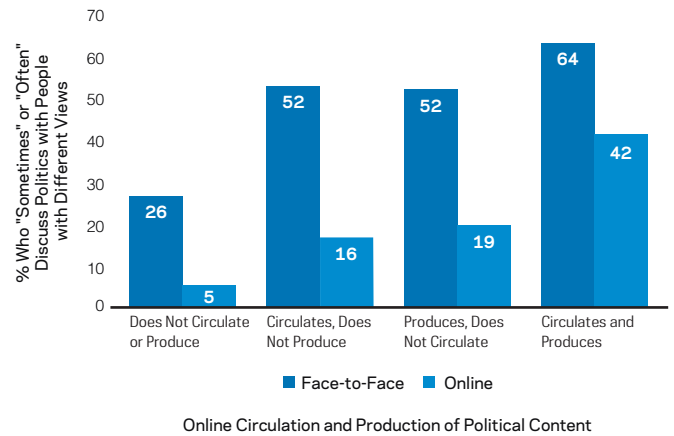
As detailed in figure 32, those who consumed participatory news media (whether instead of or in addition to traditional media) reported greater exposure to divergent views than those who only consumed traditional media. Similarly, those who circulate and produce the news are much more likely to report exposure to divergent views than those who do neither of those two activities (see figure 33). Thus, we did not find that those who engage in participatory online activities are limiting their exposure to those with whom they agree. Of course, it is still very important to learn more about how and when these diverse views are engaged.

figure 32. Are Consumers of Participatory News Media Exposed to Different Political Views?



Note: The differences across types of news consumption are statistically significant for both face-to-face and online discussion.

figure 33. Are the Circulators and Production of Online Political Content Exposed to Different Political Views?



Note: The differences across types of news consumption are statistically significant for both face-to-face and online discussion.

YOUTH NEED SUPPORT FOR JUDGING THE CREDIBILITY OF ONLINE INFORMATION.

Finally, as many have noted, the vast amount of online information and the uncertain status of gatekeepers create many challenges for youth and adults alike when it comes to judging the credibility of online information. Although these issues are only beginning to be studied, a recent survey in England and Wales³⁹ found that many youth “do not apply fact-checks to the information they find” and “are unable to recognize bias and propaganda and will not go to a varied number of sources.” Studies of adults reached similar findings.⁴⁰ The youth we surveyed recognized these challenges. When asked on our survey whether “people like you and your friends would benefit from learning more about how to tell if news and information you find online is trustworthy?,” 84 percent said, “yes.”

conclusions & implications



Realizing the Potential of Participatory Politics

In April 2010, Michelle Ryan Lauto, an eighteen-year-old who hopes to be an actress, sent a message to six hundred Facebook friends. She proposed that high school students stage a walkout to protest budget cuts in New Jersey's schools. She asked her network to pass on the message; hundreds of individuals replied. Some responses were insulting, saying the idea was stupid. In response, she disabled the message function on her Facebook page. Ultimately, eighteen thousand students from all across the state accepted the invitation, leading to one of the largest grassroots demonstrations New Jersey has seen in the past decade. Before this, Ms. Lauto had only used Facebook to keep in touch with friends and to let them know about her performances.⁴¹

We expect that few will have the luck of Ms. Lauto and mobilize eighteen thousand young people with what seems like the click of a switch on a Facebook page. But our analysis leads us to conclude that participatory politics are worthy of substantial attention and that these practices present both risks and opportunities which we recount. In this section, we also identify some implications for action for those desiring to support the full, equitable, and productive engagement of youth in the political realm.

Participatory politics provide a substantial opportunity to reinvigorate both youth politics and political life in general. Forty-one percent of youth aged fifteen to twenty-five have engaged in at least one form of participatory

politics. Moreover, these acts of participatory politics occur at rates that parallel many institutionally based activities, such as contributing to a political party, attending a meeting or campaign event, wearing a campaign button, or signing a petition. As a result, focusing on participatory politics is important for anyone concerned about the politics of young people and, more broadly, about the future of politics in the United States and abroad.

Indeed, youth are using the digital skills and practices that are pervasive in their social lives to broaden their repertoire of political activity. The strong association we saw between nonpolitical, interest-driven activity and participatory politics indicates that the skills, participatory norms, and extensive networks that result from widespread engagement with new digital media are fostering forms of digital social capital. Rather than viewing interest-driven practices as distractions or a waste of time, those seeking to promote youth engagement, be they youth organizations, schools, or other concerned parties, must recognize their value and potential. Engagement in online interest-driven participatory cultures may provide a valuable new pathway through which youth develop as engaged members of our political community.

In addition, participatory politics are providing young people with a level of voice and control not often seen in the realm of institutional politics. The opportunity to voice one's opinions and believe that what one says matters, if not to politicians then to one's networks of friends and families, is often a necessary first step if an individual is to remain engaged over time. It appears that participatory politics provide voice and belief that one matters, important contributions in and of themselves. Moreover, in an era where confidence in elected officials is at historic lows (only 13 percent said they approved of the job Congress was doing in a recent poll⁴²), participatory politics provides a set of practices through which young people can communicate

their political commitments and instincts directly to those most relevant in their lives—their family and friends. For example, we found that participatory culture is now a prominent factor when it comes to circulating information on societal issues that matter to young people. Indeed, youth report that Facebook posts and Tweets on Twitter from family and friends are among their most common sources for news, information, and perspectives.

Moreover, news reports over the past several years have been filled with examples of youth and adults engaging in participatory politics in ways that have influenced consequential policy debates and, in many cases, in ways that have supported changed governmental and corporate policies. These examples range in scale from the Arab Spring to protests over SOPA to any number of smaller-scale and often local actions that did not attract national or international attention. Some of these efforts, like Kony 2012, had enormous distribution (their video has had more than 100 million views on YouTube and Vimeo⁴³) and influenced both public discourse and the media agenda, but had debatable accuracy and impact when assessed by traditional standards. Moreover, these efforts were not tied to a particular ideology. They included, for example, ways that youth mobilized for Obama in 2008, for the Dream Act in 2010, and for Ron Paul and libertarian causes in 2012⁴⁴. Indeed, it is now clear that almost every major campaign employs strategies that aim to tap the potential of participatory politics.⁴⁵

Finally—and contrary to many widely circulated expectations regarding a digital divide—we found that participatory political activities are more equitably distributed than voting. Young people of color, in particular black and Asian American youth, are using their digital acumen to leverage their voices and sometimes influence others through online participatory politics. These practices may provide a valuable access point for those who are hoping to amplify marginalized voices in our democratic system.

Participatory politics clearly presents risks as well as opportunities. While it is true that participatory politics are more equitably distributed than voting, some formidable inequalities still exist. For example, on many of our measures of participatory politics and of political engagement more generally, Latinos and Asian Americans lagged behind whites and blacks. Forty-three percent of Latinos and 40 percent of Asian Americans said that they did not participate in any of the political activities we asked about, while this was true of only 33 percent of whites and

25 percent of blacks. In addition, as with most forms of young people’s political activity, those who are in school and who have attained higher education are much more involved. College graduates participated in almost three times as many acts of participatory politics in the past year (1.7) as did high school graduates (0.6). This presents two kinds of challenges. First, and most obviously, it means that substantial portions of youth are far less likely to have voice and influence. In addition, it means that interventions aimed at leveraging the full potential of participatory politics cannot focus solely on schools and, especially, cannot focus solely on colleges, even if those are institutional locations where reaching and mobilizing young people may appear to be most efficient.

A second risk relates to the very real potential for misinformation. The new digital media enable individuals to circumvent traditional gatekeepers of information and knowledge (broadcast networks, policy experts, governmental organizations) and connect directly with others who share their interests. Youth, to a degree never before seen, are clearly information rich. At the same time, the vast majority (84 percent) report that they and their peers would benefit from help judging the credibility of all that they can access. It remains to be seen whether this expanded access to information will lead youth to become better informed.

A third risk concerns ways that attending to participatory political activity may obscure the fact that youth engagement in particular political acts are the exception and not the rule. One need only review the data we have presented to see that most young people are infrequently engaged in politics, whether on- or offline. Other than voting in presidential elections, no forms of political participation are common. While we have vivid examples of youth using digital media to meaningfully engage in varied forms of political and social change, it is clear from our data and a substantial number of previous studies that most youth are not engaged in institutional or participatory politics. One should not assume that the new digital media or the alternative paradigm of participatory politics will organically expand youth political engagement.

Finally, there is a risk that proponents of participatory politics, including youth themselves, will fail to focus on the distinction between voice and influence. We should be clear: we do not want to undervalue the significance of voice, especially for youth who are in the process of developing their political identities. At the same time, we recognize that the promise of a democratic society is

predicated on the belief that political actors have more than voice. They must also have influence. As Henry Milner has argued, “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.”⁴⁶

Fortunately, as reported earlier (see figure 4), we do not see evidence that those who engage in participatory politics are “turning their backs” on institutional politics. Data from our survey indicate that youth who engage in participatory politics are much more likely to also engage in institutional political activities such as voting than are those who do not engage in participatory acts. Still, because many forms of participatory politics focus on communication, it may be that they do more to promote voice than influence.

IMPLICATIONS

When it comes to youth engagement with participatory politics, the prevalence of risks as well as opportunities make the need for action all the more clear. It is with this hope that we outline several priorities. First, broadening the focus of policymakers, parents, the press, educators, scholars, funders, and other stakeholders to include participatory politics when engaging in their work is essential if we are to understand the current state of political life and act in ways that support the quality, quantity, and equality of political engagement. Moreover, as noted earlier, overall levels of youth political engagement are lower than many desire and participatory politics provide youth with opportunities for voice and agency that are rarely granted within formal political institutions. Thus, while recognizing the prevalence and significance of participatory politics is a key first step, it is also essential that stakeholders work to identify ways that infrastructure, policies, and educational programs can support individuals and organizations so that all youth can more fully tap the potential of these practices. And while the data presented in this report do not enable assessment of particular strategies, there are leverage points for policymakers, parents, media designers, educators, and others who can help promote more of what is desired and less of what is problematic. For example, it is clear that the digital era expands the need for media literacies. Youth must learn how to judge the credibility of online information and how to find divergent views on varied issues. In addition, while we can probably assume that youth will learn to use many aspects of their cell phones without formal instruction, they may well benefit from supports and programs in formal and

informal educational settings that strengthen their ability and desire to produce media that is informed, persuasive, and distributed effectively.⁴⁷

It also seems likely that organizations hoping to tap the full potential of this new domain will benefit from opportunities to learn about and reflect on the impact of varied strategies for leveraging the potential of participatory politics. Designers and intermediary organizations may also benefit from considering ways that new kinds of digital infrastructure may support desired practices ranging from enabling dialog across difference, assessments of the credibility of information, media production, and mobilizing others. In saying this, we are not suggesting that a turn to new media is a turn away from offline activity. Rather, we are highlighting how essential it is to recognize the integration of these two domains in the lives of young people. For example, it is clear that black and Asian American youth are proficient in friendship and interest-driven engagement. What may be needed is offline interventions to help them apply their digital skills in the political realm.

Finally, as noted above, some of the ways youth engage with participatory politics may foster more voice than influence. Indeed, the knowledge, skills, resources, and networks that will enable youth to be listened to by those with the power to advance their priorities may not be adequately or equitably distributed. Promoting broad and equitable access to the support, training, and infrastructure needed to move from voice to influence will be important in order for participatory politics to reach its full potential.

In short, participatory politics are an important dimension of political life. They enable individuals to mobilize others, help shape agendas, and exert greater agency through the circulation and production of content. Through participatory politics, youth can tap into their networks and reach large audiences. Importantly, these participatory activities take place with greater independence from formal civic and political institutions.

How often, how equitably, and how well the potential of participatory politics will be realized is still far from clear. This is a unique and important moment. If stakeholders at multiple levels work hard to provide appropriate supports, participatory politics may provide valuable opportunities to engage young people in the political realm, giving them greater control, voice, and hopefully influence over the issues that matter most in their lives.

appendix a

The Youth Participatory Politics Survey Sample

The 2011 Youth Participatory Politics survey was conducted by Knowledge Networks (KN) on behalf of Mills College. The survey was administered through online and telephone modes from February 9, 2011 to July 14, 2011. Both modes were administered in English- and Spanish-language versions. The median online respondent completed the survey in 35 minutes, and the median telephone interview lasted 44 minutes.

The target population for the survey comprised young people between fifteen and twenty-five years of age living in the United States from four ethnic/racial groups: non-Hispanic whites, non-Hispanic blacks, non-Hispanic Asians, and Hispanics (of any race). The sample of this population was drawn from two sources: Knowledge Networks' (KN) probability-based internet panel⁴⁸ and an address-based sample (ABS). The KN panel was used to draw a direct sample of persons aged eighteen to twenty-five from the four racial/ethnic groups, as well as to draw a sample of parents with offspring between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five. From the latter group, the parent was asked to identify the race and ethnicity of each person aged 15-25 in the household, and if any individuals belonged to the target population,

one eligible household member was selected into the sample. All individuals initially sampled from the KN panel, whether directly or through a parent, were administered the survey online from February 10 and June 24, 2011. The screener was completed by 65 percent of sampled KN panel respondents and of these respondents who qualified for the main survey, 95 percent completed the survey (see table 1). These online surveys were supplemented by 284 phone interviews obtained between June 9 and July 14, 2011 from an additional sample drawn from KN's internet panel. Fifty percent of those sampled completed the screener, and of those who qualified for the main survey, the completion rate was 42 percent.

In order to be able to make meaningful comparison across racial and ethnic groups, the study also included oversamples of African Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanics. Because of the difficulty in reaching members of these target populations, particularly minors, the Internet sample was supplemented by an address-based sample, to whom the survey was administered either through the Internet or by telephone. The sample frame was drawn from the U.S. Postal Service's Delivery Sequence File, which was combined with additional database sources to over-sample households believed to contain members of the targeted racial/ethnic and age groups. Surnames in the address database, along with additional information about the household, were processed to identify households believed to contain Asian and Hispanic individuals. Population statistics were used to target census blocks with relatively large African American populations, again in combination with other racial/ethnic flags in the database. Additionally, an "everybody else" sampling stratum was identified to ensure that the balance of the population had a non-zero, if minuscule, probability of selection.

The resulting sample was sent a letter (in both English and Spanish) that invited eligible household members to participate in the survey, providing them with a web address for the survey and a unique password. Non-responding households were sent a follow-up invitation after about a week. Two weeks after that, professional interviewers attempted to contact the remaining non-responders by telephone to administer the screener and main survey. As seen in table 1, completed screeners were obtained for 14 percent of the sampled addresses, and among those individuals who were identified as eligible 47 percent completed the main survey. The first survey was completed online on February 9, 2011, the first telephone interview was administered on February 16, and the final survey from the ABS sample was completed on May 23. Altogether, 462 individuals selected through the ABS completed the survey online and 392 took the survey over the phone, as noted in table 2.

table 1. Response Rates by Sampling Frame

| | KN Panel Online Survey | Address-Based Sample | KN Panel Phone Supplement |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------|
| N sampled for screen | 4,203 | 58,977 | 2,913 |
| N complete screen | 2,724 | 8,088 | 1,446 |
| Screener survey completion rate | 64.8 percent | 13.7 percent | 49.6 percent |
| N qualified for main survey | 1,881 | 1,824 | 670 |
| N complete main survey | 1,782 | 854 | 284 |
| Main survey completion rate | 94.7 percent | 46.8 percent | 42.4 percent |

Because the sampling design deviated from a simple random sample of the population, particularly in its oversampling of minority groups, the raw data are not a representative sample of young people in the US. To correct for these known sources of deviation from an equal probability selection design and for patterns of non-response, statistical weighting adjustments were calculated. Data from the Current Population Survey were used as the benchmark in constructing post-stratification weights for gender, age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, education, household income, region, metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas, and citizenship status (for Hispanics and Asians only). Once these weights are applied, our sample should be representa-

tive of the population of 15-25 year-olds in the United States who identify as white, black, Asian, or Hispanic. All figures presented in this report have been weighted to be representative of this population.

table 2. Race of Respondent by Sample Source and Completion Mode

| Source Direct Mode | KN Panel Parents | | KN Panel Sample | | Address-Based | | Total |
|-----------------------|------------------|-------|-----------------|-------|---------------|-------|-------|
| | Online | Phone | Online | Phone | Online | Phone | |
| White | 491 | 118 | 242 | 29 | 0 | 0 | 880 |
| Black | 163 | 28 | 213 | 0 | 128 | 142 | 674 |
| Asian | 72 | 0 | 30 | 0 | 259 | 213 | 574 |
| Hispanic | 267 | 84 | 304 | 25 | 75 | 37 | 792 |
| Total | 993 | 230 | 789 | 54 | 462 | 392 | 2,920 |

For results based on the whole sample, the maximum margin of error due to random sampling error is plus or minus 3 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level. Thus for inferences to the overall population of 15-25 year-olds, we expect that if our sampling procedures were repeated 20 times, a statistic estimated from the samples would fall within 3 percentage points either side of the “true” population parameter 19 times. For inferences to specific racial or ethnic groups, the confidence intervals are wider. This reflects both the smaller sample size when looking at particular groups and to the sampling techniques used to obtain the address-based sample of minority groups, especially Asian youth (a relatively small group in the overall population). The 95 percent confidence interval is plus or minus 4 percentage points for whites, 5 percentage points for Latinos, 6 percentage points for blacks, and 11 percentage points for Asians. Thus particular caution needs to be taken in drawing inferences about the latter group, and the tests of statistical significance presented in this report account for this uncertainty.

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