The New User: Revisiting the Digital Divide

David S. Lassen

David Magleby
david_magleby@byu.edu

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ABSTRACT

Though many scholars and commentators are optimistic about the influence of the Internet on American political culture, some decry the presence of a "digital divide" wherein individuals of higher socioeconomic status have greater access to online political tools. I argue that this is an unnecessarily limited view of online political behavior and that analyses of online political engagement should go beyond questions of access to include considerations of individual preference. Using the results from a new survey of 2008 campaign donors, I find that differences between online and offline political participators are largely skill- and interest-based, not structural. I also present a personal typology of Internet behavior and find significant skill and interest differences between different types of online participators. This suggests that future research on the extent of online political engagement should be broader than simple questions of access and should include classifications of personal preference as well.

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

As the Internet has become an increasingly powerful political tool, many have voiced concerns that it is unevenly wielded in political affairs. Though many are sanguine about the potential of the Internet to increase and improve political participation in America (Wollman, Hause, Witte, and Hampton 2001), many have also expressed concern about the presence of a "digital divide," or asymmetrical patterns of Internet access that disproportionately favor individuals with a higher socioeconomic status (Nunes 2004). Presumably, these wealthier, better educated individuals are more likely to own sophisticated computers and have ready access to high-speed Internet connections, thus making online political participation easier. To be sure, current work on this subject strongly indicates that distinct socioeconomic differences exist between individuals who access the Internet and those who do not, which is a striking concern for all democratic theorists.

Unfortunately, however, the vast majority of such studies go no further than to consider patterns of and obstacles to Internet access. The question of whether individuals who do not have access to the Internet are significantly different with respect to political behavior is far more likely to include individual socio-economic factors online and offline. Those who lack access to the Internet are more likely to be of lower socioeconomic status, and research has shown that political preferences and activities are also strongly influenced by this status. Thus, the "digital divide" may have significant negative implications for democratic processes and outcomes.

One of the most studied dimensions of the digital divide is the "political divide," or asymmetrical patterns of Internet access that disproportionately favor individuals who participate in politics online. This divide may have originated in the late twentieth century simply to view political news and current events. As shown in Table One, I classify Internet users not by the type of political activities they engage in, but rather by the type of political activities they engage in. The typology has two dimensions: Publicity (the level to which others may know of a behavior) and Content Generation (the level to which the user participates in creating content during the behavior). I considered online social networking activities content generating activities because the ultimate result of such behavior is the creation of an online persona. I then examined Internet use in the context of other demographic variables such as race, age, and party identification. I also used a hard copy of an identical questionnaire. Though respondents at all levels of access were included in the survey, I will only use responses from individuals who contributed $500 or less to a given candidate during the campaign. These individuals are likely to be the most similar to the mass public and therefore provide the most meaningful results.

Using survey questions drafted by both myself and others, I identified respondents based on their online participation in politics (holding aside their donation behavior) as a non-participator (individuals who did not report online political participation beyond their donation behavior), Opinion Leader, Covert, Distributor, or Observer (see Table One). Based on this classification, I then compared the demographic and political characteristics of each group using both t-tests and probit regression models. Tables Two, Three, and Four present the results of my analysis.

DISCUSSION

Results from my analysis largely confirm my hypotheses, but provide important caveats for future research. Comparison of mean scores reported here suggests that questions of personal preference should be included in survey questions and that these scores are consistently lower for all types of online participators when compared to other groups. These findings confirm my hypothesis that the Internet usage ability is consistently a significant feature of individual political behavior, and that this variable is consistently significantly higher for almost all groups of online participators.

Of most note, though, are the self-confidence and civic skill differences between groups. Much of my work has been focused on the psychological demanding act of politically displaying personal political preference seems to discourage all but the most confident and experienced political actor. This confirms my hypothesis that individuals who participate in online political behavior cannot be considered as one monolithic block, especially at one desire to increase online participators. Before concluding, two study limitations must be mentioned here. First, all study respondents examined here, as campaign donors, had participated in politics in at least one campaign prior to completing the survey, and although I found ways to mitigate this effect by restricting my analysis to only small donors, this analysis should be defined as a study of political elites and not the mass public. Second, Barack Obama’s 2008 campaign heavily encouraged online political participation which may artificially influence some of the participation trends reported here. Nonetheless, I find a significant and clear divide between individuals who participate in politics online and those who do not. This divide, however, goes beyond simple questions of access and suggests that questions of personal preference should be included in future research.

HYPOTHESES

H1: Significant demographic and civic skill differences will exist between individuals who participate in politics online and those who do not.

H2: Significant demographic and civic skill differences will exist between individuals who participate in different types of online political acts as defined by my methodology.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Research Design and Methodology

My methodology begins with the development of a typology of Internet use. As shown in Table One, I classify Internet users by the level of access or amount of time they spend on the Internet, and by the type of political activities they engage in. My typology has two dimensions: Publicity (the level to which others may know of a behavior) and Content Generation (the level to which the user participates in creating content during the behavior). I considered online social networking activities content generating activities because the ultimate result of such behavior is the creation of an online persona. Four types of Internet users are listed, with example behaviors for each.