2010-04-01

The New User: Revisiting the Digital Divide

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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 participants are largely skill- and interest-based, not demographic. I also present a personal typology of Internet behavior and find significant skill and interest differences between different types of online participants. 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 concern that it is uniquely neutral in political affairs. Though many are sanguine about the potential of the Internet to increase and improve political participation in America (Wellman, Hage, 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 (Nisbet 2002). 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, striking a concern for all democratic theorists.

Unfortunately, however, the vast majority of such studies go no farther than to consider patterns of access and obstacles to Internet access, a question of fading importance as easy access becomes increasingly universal in the United States (Kinter 2002). Some researchers have examined additional features of the digital divide (Schleufte and Nisbet 2002), such as individual acquisition of requisite technical skills (Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 2008) and the extensive online presence of traditional offline media sources (Hindman 2009), but in the end these arguments almost invariably return to questions of unequal access.

I contend that in order to better understand the enduring presence and influence of a digital divide in American politics we must more closely examine the nature of current political behavior. Though many Americans may have originally gone online in the late twentieth century simply to view the websites of major political candidates or media outlets, current online political behavior—thanks to the presence of social media, blogs, and multimedia sites such as YouTube—is far more likely to include individual content generation. This project therefore seeks to build on previous efforts to create a more nuanced, behaviorally based typology of Internet use and its effect on traditional political participation. I contend that as the nature of online political behavior changes so too will the digital divide as new online political acts enter new groups to become involved. If, therefore, we wish to understand the nature of current political behavior, we must first understand its nature of not only to questions of access, but of behavior as well.

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.

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, but 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. Some types of online users are listed, with example behaviors for each.

Data for this project comes from an innovative, new survey of 2008 campaign donors conducted by David B. Magleby, Jay Goodfriend, and other researchers at Brigham Young University. The survey was conducted in two waves as respondents provided information either online or in person or by mail. Though contributors at all levels of donation were involved in the study, 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 comparable 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-participant (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 across groups, allow us to determine whether individuals who participate in politics online are significantly different in a host of ways from both non-participants and individuals who participate only offline. Although many of the demographic differences, however, fell away when considered using regression analysis. Controlling for such demographic differences in Tables Three and Four, only limited differences retain their statistical significance. Unsurprisingly, an individual’s Internet usage ability is consistently a significant feature of the political behavior of online participants, but the median age of all types of online participants when compared to any other group, is that of the most similar to the mass public and therefore provide the most comparable results.

Of most note, though, are the self-confidence and civic skill differences between groups. The political behavior of online participants is consistently significantly higher for almost all groups of online participants. Of most note, though, are the self-confidence and civic skill differences between groups. The political behavior of online participants is consistently significantly higher for almost all groups of online participants.

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 demanding way prior to completing the survey, and although I took care to mitigate this effect by restricting my analysis to only small donors, this study 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 inflate some of the participation scores 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.

BIBLIOGRAPHY