Dual effects of the internet on political activism: Reinforcing and mobilizing

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ABSTRACT

By analyzing the Citizenship Involvement Democracy survey conducted on American citizens, this paper investigates categorical and demographic disparities between online and offline political participants and examines the two-sided effects (reinforcing and mobilizing) of the internet on political participation. The analysis presents three main findings. First, those who participate in online political activity do not differ categorically from those who conduct their political activity offline. Second, cross-group differences in how actively individuals participate in political activity make little distinction between offline and online modes. There is a trade-off between the generational gap in online political activity and the racial gap in offline political activity, but the gap in political participation between the socioeconomically advantaged and their counterparts appears in both online and offline political activities. Finally, the internet plays a dual role in mobilizing political participation by people who not normally politically involved, as well as reinforcing existing offline participation.

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1. Introduction

Is the internet a vital tool for promoting participatory democracy? Proponents for internet-driven democratization eulogize broader avenues for personal expressions, civic activities, and the extension of the public’s political role (Brants, 2005; Castells, 2008; Foot & Schneider, 2006; Gil De Zúñiga, Puig-ı-Abril, & Rojas, 2009; Kavanaugh, Kim, Perez-Quinones, Schmitz, & Isenhour, 2008; Rheingold, 1993, 2001; Valovic, 2000; Wang, 2007; Wilhelm, 2000; Winograd & Hais, 2008). The democratizing effects of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) may revitalize the public sphere—a space for deliberative democracy (Asif, 2008; Papacharissi, 2002, 2009; Robertson, Vatrapu, & Medina, 2010; van Os, Jankowski, & Wester, 2009). Unprecedented uses of the internet (and especially social media) by campaigns in the 2008 U.S. presidential election coincided with an apparent increase in attention and engagement by people who have historically been less involved in politics (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; Johnson & Perlmutter, 2010; Ricke, 2010; Small, 2009; Smith, 2009; Vitak et al., 2011). Opposition to this cyber-optimistic observation casts skepticism on the universal accessibility to Web-based technologies and brings to question, “Whose utopia is cyberspace?” (Moore, 1999). Academics have paid much attention to the democratic divide—the widening gap in online political participation—and have shed light on who utilizes tools for digital democracy (Hargittai, 2007a, b; Hargittai & Walejko, 2008; Mossberger, Tolbert, & McNeal, 2008; Mossberger, Tolbert, & Stansbury, 2003; Norris, 2001; van Dijk, 2005, 2006). Opportunities for online political participation primarily benefit elites with technological resources and motivation to take advantage of the resources (Tolbert & McNeal, 2003; Tolbert, Mossberger, & McNeal, 2002).

Given such considerations of digital democracy in the context of political participation, the internet can produce two different effects on political participation. Citizens who engage in political activity via offline modes are more likely to participate in online political activity. In addition, those who are not politically active offline could also use the internet for political involvement and participation. This paper aims to assess the ambivalent argument that the internet reinforces the existing pattern of offline political participation and/or mobilizes new participation by those who have abstained from participation offline. The paper examines the potential of the internet as a public space for political participation, raising two research questions: 1) How does the online-offline difference in participatory modes distinguish socioeconomic and demographic patterns of political participation? 2) How does the internet influence those who do and do not participate in offline political activity? By analyzing the data from the random-sample Citizen Involvement Democracy survey, conducted in the United States, this study investigates the categorical and demographic disparities between online and offline political participants, and tests the two-sided effects of the internet on political participation.

2. Theoretical and empirical backdrop of online political participation

This section explores previous literature that compares and contrasts online and offline political participation. Before reviewing the relevant literature, a conceptual definition of political participation needs to be discussed first. The definition most frequently used in recent academic research is Verba, Schlozman, and Brady’s (1995, p. 38): “Activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action—either directly
by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies. The authors also suggest several representative categories of American citizens’ modern political participation: voting in elections, working in campaigns, participating in community affairs, contacting public officials, making a donation to a party, helping form a political group, attending political meetings, and belonging to a political club. For both conceptual discussion and empirical examination of the democratic potential of the internet, this study adopts Verba et al. (1995) definition and categories of political participation.

A rich body of empirical studies on online transformation of spaces for political activity falls into three categories. The first category of existing research literature tackles a participation divide in online politics—the democratic divide—which refers to an apparent demographic inequality in political participation (Min, 2010; Norris, 2001). A great deal of research which reports on the democratic divide criticizes the cyber-optimistic viewpoint that the internet has strong political potentials to improve participatory egalization (Albrecht, 2006; Best & Krueger, 2005; Bimber, 2001, 2008, 2003; di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006; Gibson, Lusoli, & Ward, 2005; Hargittai, 2007b; Hindman, 2009; Livingstone, Bober, & Helvers, 2005; Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Norris, 2000, 2001; Putnam, 2000; Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2010; Sylvester & McGlynn, 2010; Wilhelm, 2000). Especially in American politics, the transformative potentials of the internet make little impact on “long-standing patterns of participatory inequality” (Schlozman et al., 2010) and “ascriptive hierarchy (historical ascription of participatory inequality)” (Smith, 1993). The socio-demographic pattern of political participation quite similar between online and offline modes because people with access to conventional resources (money, time, and knowledge) required for offline participation, proportionately have access to internet-specific resources (possession of computers, easy access to the internet, and relevant skills for Web usage). The socio-demographic pattern in online participation may reflect further egalization if political participation via the internet were more accessible (chiefly in terms of motivation and participatory competence) and if multiple avenues of accessibility were provided for those lacking resources (Nam & Stromer-Galley, in press).

Such socio-demographic markers as age, gender, race, income, and education help predict which will be likely to fall into the usual category of participants (or non-participants) in online/offline political participation, and how actively they participate in both or either mode (Boulianne, 2009). Web-based communication can facilitate young citizens’ political participation online. Shelley, Thrane and Shulman (2006) reported younger whites are more apt to be e-citizens. In the study of Jensen, Danziger and Venkatesh (2007), relatively affluent senior citizens are more active in offline civic engagement, but neither wealth nor age can predict online civic engagement. Analyzing representativeness of online political participation, Best and Krueger (2005), suggested predictors for online participation differ from predictors for offline participation.

A second category of research literature deals with an online public sphere. The democratic role of the internet as a public sphere is controversial because the internet can be either a new space to facilitate participation by people alienated from offline politics, or no more than a replication of offline power relations. While a cyber-skeptic stream of research discloses that the internet reproduces the existing pattern in face-to-face participation and even aggravates elite-dominated discussions (Jankowski & van Selm, 2000; Lunat, 2008; Moore, 1999; Papacharissi, 2002; Poster, 2001; Salter, 2004), some optimistic findings suggest that the internet has a potential to attract new voices and traditionally underrepresented groups into the public sphere (Barlow, 2008; Castells, 2008; Coleman, Lieber, Mendelson, & Kurpius, 2008; Davis, 2009; Norris, 2008; Papacharissi, 2009; Stromer-Galley, 2002, 2003). Empirical research on the permeation of ICTs into the public sphere (Dahlberg, 2001b, c; Dahlgren, 2000; Gerhards & Schäfer, 2010; Gimmel, 2001; Poor, 2005; Wilhelm, 2000) found that some virtual manifestations meet requirements of the Habermasian public sphere (i.e., equality, inclusiveness, and diversity) germane to “whose participation?” (Fraser, 1990; Habermas, 1989). Despite the internet’s potential to afford spaces for new participation, prior findings do not instantaneously guarantee the internet would be a fairer, more representative and egalitarian sphere than traditional constructs of the public sphere.

The internet seems to merely harbor an illusion of openness. Technological innovations may render participation in the public sphere technically more convenient, but do not hallmark active participation. The greatest benefits of ICT-driven democratization are afforded to individuals with higher socioeconomic status and younger citizens (Albrecht, 2006; Best & Krueger, 2005; Bloch & Bruce, 2011; di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006; DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001; DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001; Gibson et al., 2005; Grönlund, 2001; Hindman, 2009; Livingstone et al., 2005; Min, 2010; Mossberger et al., 2008, 2003; Sylvester & McGlynn, 2010). The internet has the potential to further extend the public sphere from face-to-face interaction to online interaction, but only some of the populace are able to tap into the opportunities of participation in an online public sphere (Papacharissi, 2002).

A third category of online political participation research involves empirical examination of the mobilization hypothesis—ultimately equalizing political participation by boosting online participation among online non-participants—and the reinforcement hypothesis—reinforcing offline activism further, normalizing the established distribution of political activism, and mirroring the reality of “politics as usual” (Margolis & Resnick, 2000). The former postulates that the internet would inform, organize, and engage those who are currently inactive and marginalized from the existing political system (MacDonald & Tolbert, 2008; Norris, 2000, 2001; Ward, Gibson, & Rusoli, 2003). In contrast, the latter posits that online resources would be utilized primarily for political participation by those who are already active and well-connected via traditional channels (Best & Krueger, 2005; Delli Carpini, 2000). Recent works testing the two conflicting theses are inclined toward the reinforcement effect. As online political participation imitates the established pattern of participation (Chen & Lee, 2008; Krueger, 2002, 2006), the internet does not play a pivotal role in transforming stratified patterns of political participation (di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006; Park & Perry, 2008). Online avenues for political participation reinforce and sometimes exacerbate the existing social inequalities in offline political participation by marginalizing those from lower socioeconomic groups. Gibson et al. (2005) warned that digital democracy is an “over-vaulted hype” with the rise of the normalization effect, and the internet is “neither an agent of glorious revolution nor apocalypse now, but a bolster for the status quo.”

The literature review up to this point discussed theoretical and empirical backgrounds of recent core arguments. First, the cumulative research on the democratic divide presented the finding that the internet, failing to fundamentally remedy offline participatory inequality, demonstrates a demographics-determined gap in online political activity. Second, the overall evaluation of prior studies on an online public sphere found that technological potentials to attract new people to deliberative democracy are being harnessed to some extent, but are still controversial regarding inclusiveness and equality of participation. Third, the mainstream literature leans toward validating the reinforcement thesis. This paper investigates those major claims from the three streams of the literature by examining whether the democratic divide distinguishes between online and offline modes for political activity, whether online political participation is categorically more inclusive than offline political participation, and whether the internet reinforces offline political participation or mobilizes online participation of traditionally politically uninvolved people.
3. Measurements and empirical strategies

This study employs the data from the Citizen Involvement Democracy survey. To compare between online and offline political participation, the study considers the subset of the population with internet access. With that consideration, the data used in the study (N = 497) is extracted from the original random-sampled data (N = 1,001). Table 1 exhibits the sample distribution and the descriptive statistics of variables, some of which are recoded or reordered for analytic convenience.

### 3.1. Measurements

#### 3.1.1. Demographic variables

Demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the sample include age, gender, race, and the level of income and education. Grounded on Howes and Strauss' (1991, 2000) pioneering work in generation division and Jones and Fox' (2009) separation of the baby boomers into older and younger cohorts, age is organized into six categories according to an individual's birth year: GI Generation (before 1937), Silent Generation (born between 1937 and 1945), Old Boomer or Leading Boomer (1946–1954), Young Boomer or Trailing Boomer (1955–1964), Generation X (1965–1976), and Generation Y (after 1976). While this age grouping is used for the contingency tabulation, the regression analysis adopts age in years for better linear estimation. Annual household income falls into four brackets: $30,000 or less, $30,001–$50,000, $50,001–$75,000, and more than $75,000. Education is also grouped into four levels: high school graduate, some college level, college graduate or higher, and graduate or higher.

#### 3.1.2. Internet use

Internet use has seven response options valued between 0 and 6: 0) No access at home/work (26%), 1) Less than once a month (17%), 2) Once a month (19%), 3) Several times a month (7%), 4) Once a week (4%), 5) Several times a week (13%), and 6) Every day (30%).

#### 3.1.3. Of political activity

The measure sums up binary responses to 11 yes/no questions so that its value ends up ranging from 0 to 11 (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.80$). The questions are "During the last 12 months, have you ever?": 1) contacted a politician or a local government official (21%), 2) worked in a political party or action group (8%), 3) worked for the campaign of a candidate for office (9%), 4) worked in another political organization or association (5%), 5) wore or displayed a campaign badge/sticker (23%), 6) signed a petition (35%), 7) took part in a lawful public demonstration (6%), 8) boycotted certain products (18%), 9) deliberately bought certain products for political, ethical or environmental reasons (23%), 10) donated money to a political organization or group (21%), and 11) participated in protest activities (1%). Half (47%) of the sample answered that they have not participated in any of the listed activities. Since the 12-point ordinal variable is skewed toward inactivity, the variable is re-categorized as active (18%), moderate (35%), and inactive (47%) for categorical comparison by cross-tabulation. Along with the three-group categorization, the dichotomous transformation (active vs. inactive) of the variable is used to create an interactive dummy.

#### 3.1.4. Online political activity

The original dataset provides three binary variables of online political activity. Only eight percent of respondents have participated in online political activity. A slightly higher percentage have shared online political information (14%) and visited political websites (17%). The sum of these three binary variables creates a four-battery item anchored from 0 to 3 (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.74$).

#### 3.1.5. Civics

This study adopts three civic attitudinal variables. The first is Civic Involvement measured by the Organization Involvement Index of the original data, which comprises indicators of membership, participation, donation, and voluntary work. Its value is ordinal: inactive (40%), passive (23%), active (17%), and super-active (20%). Civic Virtue and Civic Duty are also included as independent variables. Both are common components extracted by factor analysis (Z-score). Civic Duty refers to an individual's responsibility to report crime, obey the law, serve in the military, serve on a jury, and vote in elections. Civic Virtue, on the other hand, implies the related responsibility of supporting the less-privileged, forming opinions, being active in political activities, and participating in voluntary groups.

#### 3.1.6. Political interest

This variable is measured by the response to a single question: “How interested would you say you are in politics?” Answers are assigned points from 0 to 3: 0) Not at all (12%), 1) Not very (20%), 2) Somewhat (49%), and 3) Very (19%).

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2 The Citizen Involvement Democracy project of Georgetown University conducted the U.S.-based national survey by door-to-door interviews in 2005. The survey includes various questions about multiple concepts related to democracy and citizenship: for example, political participation, political/social citizenship, political ideology, civic activity, social capital, social network, and trust.

3 Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha$) is a statistic for internal consistency estimate of reliability among multiple question items (Cronbach, 1951). Its possible fraction value ranges between 0 (not reliable) and 1 (highly reliable). In social sciences, a rule of thumb usually applies 0.7 as a criterion for cutoff.
3.1.7. Political efficacy of the internet

Respondents were asked five questions about political efficacy of the internet. The efficacy variables are measured on an ordinal scale: 0) Not at all, 1) Only a little, 2) Some, and 3) A lot. The questions are “How much has the internet helped you?" 1) interact with people or groups who share your political views (M = 1.74, SD = 0.96); 2) interact with people of a different race from yours (M = 1.95, SD = 1.05); 3) interact with people of different ages or generations (M = 2.32, SD = 1.34); 4) interact with people from other countries (M = 1.82, SD = 1.03); and 5) become more involved with groups and organizations you already belong to (M = 1.94, SD = 1.06). The internet efficacy indicator is formulated based on an average of those five responses (Cronbach’s α = 0.83).

3.2 Methods

To examine the difference in the socio-demographic pattern and in a set of significant predictors of political participation between online and offline modes, this study uses three methodologies: analysis of variance (ANOVA), contingency tabulation, and multivariate regression. The result of ANOVA on all five socio-demographic characteristics displays the cross-group mean difference of political activeness in both online and offline modes. The purpose of cross-contingency between online and offline activities is to reveal the categorical difference between online and offline activists.

To test the validity of the reinforcement and mobilization theses, the study uses two techniques for ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. First, online political activity is regressed on an interactive variable (multiplication of the offline activity dummy and the internet use intensity). If the reinforcing and/or mobilizing effects are statistically valid, including the interaction term would make a difference in the slope of the internet use variable between offline activists and inactivists. The second technique is to divide the sample into three groups—offline inactive, offline moderately active, and offline active—to test the impact of reinforcement and mobilization for separate samples. If the frequency to use the internet has a positive impact on online political activeness of those who are politically inactive offline, the mobilization hypothesis would obtain the validity. On the contrary, if the internet use positively influences the degree of online political participation by those who already participate in offline political activity, the reinforcement thesis turns out to be validated.

4. Examining the political roles of the internet

4.1. Participatory equality and inclusiveness

This section examines whether the internet substantially raises the level of inclusiveness in political participation and whether the pattern of participatory inequality existing in offline politics recurs in online political activity. Table 2 presents the mean difference among demographic groups in online and offline political activities. As expected, the better-educated and affluent are more likely to participate in online and offline political activities than their counterparts with fewer educational and financial resources. The minimal difference between online and offline patterns confirms the conventional finding that those who are interested in and actively participate in politics are likely to be better-educated and relatively more affluent. The ANOVA results found the association between socioeconomic advantage and political participation to be powerful and durable. The internet acts on political participation as a “weapon of the strong” (Schlozman et al., 2010) and a “social leveler rather than social equalizer” (Krueger, 2002). Democratic potentials of ICTs for equalization in political participation do not contribute to ameliorating participatory inequality. The internet is not “a circuit breaker disrupting the association between socioeconomic advantage and political participation” (Schlozman et al., 2010).

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cross-group mean differences in political activity.</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Online political activity</td>
<td>Offline political activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Generation Y</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation X</td>
<td>1.46</td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Boomers</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>0.44</td>
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<tr>
<td>Old Boomers</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silent Generation</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GI Generation</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F statistics</td>
<td>F = 1.17</td>
<td>F = 4.05*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F statistics</td>
<td>F = 3.04</td>
<td>F = 1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>0.41</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-Caucasian</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F statistics</td>
<td>F = 6.28*</td>
<td>F = 2.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>High school incomplete</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>High school graduate</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college level</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College graduate or higher</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F statistics</td>
<td>F = 27.57*</td>
<td>F = 37.35*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>$30,000 or less</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>0.24</td>
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<tr>
<td>$30,001 - $50,000</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>0.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50,001 - $75,000</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>0.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$75,000 +</td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F statistics</td>
<td>F = 9.84*</td>
<td>F = 13.60*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < 0.05.

Participatory inequality manifested by SES and demographics demonstrates the presence of the democratic divide—differences among socioeconomic classes and demographic segments in the realization of digital citizenship (Mossberger et al., 2008, 2003). The pattern in the participatory divide does not distinguish online modes from offline modes. The participation divide found in offline politics still apparently exists in online modes.

Still, age and race distinguish online political activity from offline political activity. While a racial gap appears offline, the online mode of political participation reveals a significant difference among six cohorts. To cyber utopianism, this finding does not sound pleasant. There is a tradeoff between racial equalization and generational equalization in online and offline political activities.

Political participation through online modes is substantially associated with offline political participation (See Table 3: r = 0.55). Political activities in both modes are reciprocal to each other rather than mutually exclusive. The general assumption that offline political activists are also politically active online does not provide a sufficient answer to whether those who are politically active online are categorically different from offline political activists. Therefore, the cross-tabulation between online and offline political activities merits analytic attention. In Table 4, those who are inactive offline are equally inactive in online politics. On the other hand, two thirds of those who actively participate in offline politics are committed to online political activity. Seventy percent of online political

Table 3

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[1] Online political activity</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>[2] Offline political activity</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>[3] Internet use</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>[4] Civic involvement</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>[5] Civic duty</td>
<td>–0.01</td>
<td>–0.01</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>[6] Civic virtue</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>–0.03</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>[7] Political interest</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>[8] Internet efficacy</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>–0.04</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
activists are also offline political activists. This contingency tabulation leads to rejection of the optimistic belief that technological advantages offered by ICTs successfully attract those who have been alienated from the existing offline sphere. The moderately high correlation coefficient corresponds to the implication behind this contingency table. Online and offline political activities reciprocally strengthen each other, and thus, online political activists are not categorically much different from offline political activists. In summary, since the increase in political participation derives from the same social factions who are already active, a possible consequence is simply the replication of existing political inequalities (Norris, 2001; Schlozman et al., 2010).

4.2. Predicting the degree of online and offline political activities

The regressions in Table 5 test two causal directions. The results bolster the reciprocal relationship between online and offline political participation. The two regressions show differences in a set of significant predictors between online and offline political activities. The impact of age on political activities distinguishes between online and offline modes. While the degree of internet use positively affects the level of activeness in online political activity, internet use intensity has a negative impact on offline political activity. Another notable difference in strong predictors appears in civic attitudinal variables. Civic involvement and civic virtue are significant only in the model to predict offline activity. The relationship between generation, civiness, and political activity supplies a compelling explanation for this. Senior citizens likely have higher levels of civiness and more frequently participate in political activities than their younger counterparts (Putnam, 2000). Opposing this tripartite positive relationship in offline political activity, the negative impact of aging on online political activity offsets the positive relationship between civiness and political activity. In addition, both political efficacy of the internet and personal interests in politics are consistently strong predictors for the level of political activeness, whether a venue for political activity is online or offline.

4.3. Internet effects: reinforcement vs. mobilization

Testing the validity of the reinforcement hypothesis and the mobilization hypothesis, this section examines the effect of the internet on political participation in two ways. The first model in Table 6 regresses online political activity on the multiplicative variable between the dummy of offline political activity and internet use intensity. The degree of activeness in online political activity rises proportionately with the frequency of internet use. Importantly, the positive coefficient on the multiplicative variable indicates a greater impact of internet use on reinforcement than on mobilization because its positive sign amplifies the linear effect of the internet use in the offline active sample over the offline inactive sample.

The other three models distinguish coefficients across different categories of respondents in terms of level of offline political activeness. The whole sample is divided into three groups: offline inactive, offline moderately active, and offline active. Though the three values of the coefficient for internet use are all positive, its magnitude in the offline inactive subsample is larger than that in the moderate and active sample. The magnitude of the slope coefficients predictably decreases from offline inactive to moderately active to super active. When the offline moderately active group is set as a comparison category, the
The internet on political participation.

An opposing argument is valid: proportionately to the frequency of internet use, of all citizens tend to participate in online politics, given the general increase in internet usage. An opposing argument is also valid; proportionate to the frequency of internet use, offline political activism boosts online political participation.

5. General discussions

This empirical analysis presents the following three implicative findings about equality in political participation and dual effects of the internet on political participation.

Finding 1. The internet, to some limited extent, can contribute to improving equality and inclusiveness of political participation.

Technological properties of the internet may have a democratic potential to promote participatory equality and inclusiveness (Bimber, 2000, 2001; Dahlberg, 2001a, b; Dahlgren, 2000; Lunat, 2008; Poor, 2005; Rheingold, 2001; Stromer-Galley, 2002, 2003; Wilhelm, 2000). This study delivers two contrasting (but not necessarily conflicting) conclusions. The contingency tabulation revealed that online and offline participants are not categorically much different from one another, and thus, the internet enhances political activeness of existing participants rather than attracting new participants. This is consistent with the two-way causal relationship between online and offline political activities. The finding challenges the optimistic argument that the internet facilitates participation by those who have been excluded from the existing political participatory activities (Best & Krueger, 2005; Boulianne, 2009; Browning, 1996; DiMaggio et al., 2001; Kim, 2006; Krueger, 2002, 2006; Livingstone et al., 2005; Locke, 1999; Stromer-Galley, 2002, 2003). Even though the internet can provide e-citizens with an equal opportunity to participate in online politics, it is mostly those who already participate in politics offline, who enjoy the additional opportunity offered by the internet. This study does not suggest any evidence of striking improvement in an absolute level of participatory equality and inclusiveness. The cross-group difference in online and offline political participation revealed the existence of participatory inequality made by socioeconomic and generational disparities. Given the reality of dominant participation by better-educated and more affluent individuals, the contribution of the internet to enhancing participatory equality is not significant.

Nevertheless, the result from regressions mitigates skepticism findings on certain points. Offline inactive people generally tend to be inactive online, but their likelihood to participate in online politics rises significantly if they use the internet more frequently. An increase in the number of frequent internet users would ultimately lead the internet to attract categorically different people to online spaces for political activity.

Finding 2. The internet not only reinforces the existing pattern of offline political participation, but also mobilizes a new pattern for online political participation.

This study simultaneously accepts two established hypotheses. The result of the analysis does not make the simple evidence that the reinforcement effect outweighs the mobilization effect, or vice versa. Considerable research has chiefly come to a one-sided conclusion to bolster the validity of the one hypothesis over the other (Best & Krueger, 2005; di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006; Gibson et al., 2005; Jensen et al., 2007), but this study nullifies a monolithic contrast between optimistic and skeptic expectations. When both effects of the internet are valid, the internet extends the existing offline
participatory modes to online modes and facilitates participation of newcomers in online political spaces. The dual effects are generally more advantageous for participatory democracy than for superiority of one argument over the other because the diversity in participants (who participates?) and participatory modes (how do they participate?) is maximized when the internet generates both effects. However, the analysis on cross-sectional data is not complete because a true understanding would require further research to trace a trend changing over time. The finding of this study needs to be revisited by longitudinal studies in the future.

**Finding 3. Strong predictors for online political activity differ from those for offline political activity.**

Despite the substantial correlation between online and offline activities, significant and strong predictors differ between the online model and the offline one. Political interests and political efficacy of the internet are commonly vital predictors. Both variables considerably explain the variation in the level of political activeness. Meanwhile, the effect of socio-demographics on the dependent variables differentiates predictors for online political activity from those for offline political activity. Caucasians are more likely to participate actively in offline activity than non-Caucasians; however, the racial difference is not a significant predictor for online political activity. The effect of age is also different between the online model and the offline one: young citizens tend to participate in online political activity more actively than do their elders. Civic attitudes make another difference in a set of strong predictors for political activity. Civic attitudes determine offline political participation, but do not significantly affect online political activity. In short, age, race, and civicness make a distinction in the models estimating offline and online political activities.

6. Concluding remarks

This paper presented answers to research questions addressed in the introduction. First, those who participate in online political activity are not categorically different from those who are politically active offline. The internet has not enhanced representation in political participation. Second, there is little difference between online and offline modes regarding the stratification of political participation according to socio-economic and demographic conditions. Differences in political participation appear across demographic segments in terms of age and race; there is a tradeoff between a generational gap in online political activity and a racial gap in offline political activity. Since the internet fails to ameliorate the well-known participatory deficit among the socioeconomically disadvantaged, the democratic divide on the internet remains broad in its expanse. Finally, frequent use of the internet contributes to mobilizing new participation by offline inactive people, as well as reinforcing continuous participation by offline active people. Offline inactive participants would actively involve themselves in online political activity proportionate to frequent use of the internet.

Accordingly, the assessment of political potentials of the internet is not lopsided toward any extreme side on the continuum of enthusiasm and pessimism for participatory democracy mediated via ICTs. Given the validation of both reinforcing and mobilizing effects of the internet on political participation, utilizing full democratic potentials of the internet may still be possible in some aspects, and to some extent. With the reinforcement effect, offline activists become active online, and thus, their participatory channels become more diverse as they move between offline and online tools. With the mobilization effect, offline inactivists also involve themselves online, thereby increasing the diversity in participants. The tentative conclusion of this paper holds a somewhat hopeful prediction on internet effects, and simultaneously, a skeptic prediction of the longstanding socioeconomic and demographic fixation of participatory inequality. This study is like a snapshot capturing the status of online political participation, and thus leaves room for future empirical studies that will demonstrate the way in which participation patterns and the internet effects change over time.

**References**


