



News Platform Preference: Advancing the Effects of Age and Media Consumption on Political Participation

Ingrid Bachmann¹, Kelly Kaufhold¹, Seth C. Lewis², Homero Gil de Zúñiga¹

¹University of Texas at Austin, USA, ²University of Minnesota, USA

Abstract: This study compares the effects of consuming news preference online or offline on political participation. It also examines the variation in these effects between young and older adults. Given that young adults are disproportionately more intensive users of the Internet, Internet use may have varying effects on people's political participation by their age. Secondary analysis of Pew data found that people's preference for consuming news online versus offline explains a significant portion of variance of political participation, both online and offline. More importantly, the effects of online media preference were significantly stronger for young adults than for their older counterparts. These findings suggest that a preference for news online matters far more for younger adults than for older adults, and that the Internet may indeed be narrowing the participation gap between age groups.

Keywords: Age, online news, online political participation, voting

Introduction

The 2008 U.S. presidential election promised to make history in a number of ways: It included the most prominent female candidate (Hillary Clinton), the oldest candidate (John McCain), and the first African-American (Barack Obama) to top a major party's ticket and win (Dunne, 2008; Todd & Gawiser, 2009). Fuelled by the historic nature of the election, voter turnout among those 30-and-under was at its highest level in nearly 40 years (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement [CIRCLE], 2009). Nevertheless, research describes 21st Century young adults as less inclined than their parents or grandparents to read the newspaper, have an interest in public affairs, or participate politically and civically (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Halpern, 2005; Putnam, 2000). This reality is well-established in the literature, and this study does not dispute the evidence linking age with political participation and traditional news consumption. Rather, the focus of this paper is on the varied effects of Internet use on political participation by Americans of different ages. Previous scholars have found that age predicted differences in expressive political participation, but that a preference for news online and interacting online was even more predictive (Puig-i-Abril & Rojas, 2007).

How people access their news may also be important in shaping the extent to which citizens partake in political activities. We build on this notion and contrast the platforms people use to consume news, thus quantifying the role of citizens' news consumption predilection. That is, we are interested in the effects of people's *news platform preferences* on their political participation. These platform preferences refer to whether one prefers news online and/or offline, distinguishing those who prefer entirely traditional offline use of the newspaper and TV news from respondents who prefer online versions of both media. We are interested in how these preferences

influence political participation and civic engagement, both among all adults generally and young adults in particular.

Research has found that younger Americans participate less than older adults in behaviors traditionally associated with political engagement. Nevertheless, there is good reason to believe that young adults do indeed participate – although they may do it *differently* (Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Gil de Zuniga, Veenstra, Vraga, & Shah, 2010). Today's young adults are the most plugged-in age group (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008) and are faster to embrace online technology than older Americans, and yet at the same time they have been described as increasingly tuned-out (Mindich, 2005), languishing in civic malaise (Delli Carpini, 2000).

This study examines the following premise: that older adults prefer traditional media and are more engaged in public life; and that younger adults prefer online media but are still engaged politically, just differently. Our primary concern is exploring the effects of Internet news on political participation among adults of different ages. We examine the extent to which this participatory gap may be narrowing as young adults' preference for news on the Web contributes to their political engagement – just as older Americans' preference for traditional media contributes to theirs. In both cases, consuming news about public affairs remains at the center of the political socialization process. However, we argue that differences in news platform preference will likely help explain and predict the way adults of all ages engage in the democratic process.

Literature review

The argument presented in this paper relates to the relationships between age, political participation and news consumption, three variables that have been widely studied in the communication literature. This work illuminates the relationships that dwell between the points of this theoretical triangle, seeking to add new perspective on a large body of work that demonstrates the importance of news consumption and age on the political participation of American adults.

Age and politics

While the term *young adults* has been adorned with varying definitions, a wide number of scholarly research articles in medical, psychological and social science research (e.g., Helmert, Merzenich, & Bammann, 2001; Slutske, Jackson, & Sher, 2003; Wyllie, Zhang, & Casswell, 1998) have used age 30 as a demarcation between young and older; the same rubric appears regularly in studies of news consumption (Bressers & Bergen, 2002; Feldman, 2007; Lewis, 2008; Sweetser, 2006; Wattenberg, 2004).

The older a person is, the more likely she or he is to vote and participate in political activities (Putnam, 1995). In fact, stable voting behavior by age or prior behavior – which has been described as *inertia* – holds across the U.S. and Western Europe (Franklin & van der Eijk, 2004, p. 77; Goerres, 2007; Plutzer, 2002). Yet, inertia cuts both ways. Those who are voting laggards at 18 often delay the onset of voting; those who miss one election are more likely to miss another; yet, those who begin voting continue to do so (Plutzer, 2002). The same extends to strength of party loyalty, in which those born after World War II lacked their parents' partisan intensity – even as years went by (Abramson, 1979; Niemi & Jennings, 1991).

Regardless, voter turnout among young adults is half that of older Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002; Patterson, 2002). This general disregard for the quintessential privilege of democracy (Putnam, 2000) would suggest support for the conventional wisdom that young adults are simply less engaged than older Americans – with news, civic and political engagement (Eagles & Davidson, 2001). Indeed, youth (age) is a better predictor of disengagement than race, gender, geography and socio-economic status (Eagles & Davidson, 2001; Frisco, Muller, & Dodson, 2004).

In the 2006 national elections, voter turnout did increase among young adults from the previous mid-term election in 2002 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006), but there was still a significant gap by age. In 2006, 54% of Americans over 30 voted, compared to just 25% of those 18 to 29 (Lopez, Marcelo, & Kirby, 2007). This marked a continuation of a well-established relationship between age and voter turnout, and the trend appeared to continue in the historic 2008 U.S. general election – despite more young Blacks voting than in previous years (CIRCLE, 2009).

The young are not more resistant to voting, but they are more difficult to reach with political messages (Nickerson, 2006). Contemporary research has found that young adults are changing the forms of social organization and interaction – and thus citizenship norms – in American society and politics (Dalton, 2007). New media behaviors may well allow young adults to participate not only differently but also more fully.

Age and news consumption

Americans of different ages largely consume different media: Those born before 1946 generally prefer a newspaper; baby boomers born from 1946 through 1964 largely prefer television; and those born since 1965 are much more likely to go online for news and information (Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001). Young adults have been faster to embrace online technology than older Americans (Delli Carpini, 2000) and much more likely to use social networking sites (O’Neill, 2007; Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2009). Previous studies suggest they are still much less likely than older Americans to follow news, even online (Galston, 2004; Glasford, 2008). Yet, little research has been conducted to shed light on how the choice of one news medium over another when both are available (i.e., online versus offline) and how this might impact levels of political participation. We call these *news platform preferences*.

People normally consume different types of media indistinctly, whether it is traditional print or broadcast or via digital means. Arguably, the different preferences could help explain how much people engage in the democratic process and how they get involved in the political realm, even when controlling for different age groups.

The Internet has been shown to be a vehicle for increasing both information seeking and engagement with others, both of which have been shown to increase political participation (Shah et al., 2005; Shah et al., 2007). The traditional moderating role of *opinion leaders* (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955) is not diminished online (Liu, 2007). The diffusion of digital technology as a way to acquire and share information is ubiquitous among those under age 35 (Hardy & Scheufele, 2005), and this interpersonal activity moderates both the distribution and credibility of news among these early adopters of digital technology. Younger people have adopted ways of getting their news that are much different from those of their elders (Associated Press, 2008), and new technologies provide new or easier opportunities for young adults to participate politically and do so more effectively (Cho et al., 2009).

News consumption and political participation

It is well established that both news interest and consumption strongly correlate with political participation, especially voting behavior (Almond & Verba, 1963; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Habermas, 1979; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944; Putnam, 1995, 2000; Shah et al., 2005). Citizens who follow what happens in their community and keep up-to-date with public affairs tend to be more politically engaged than their peers who do not follow the news (McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999). Media consumption and the resources of information gathered by individuals also provide the basis for citizens to achieve a common goal and engage in collective action (Flanagin, Stohl, & Bimber, 2006; Shah & Gil de Zúñiga, 2008), while media consumption and discussion fosters interest in politics, as well as greater awareness of other viewpoints and options for involvement (Mutz, 2006).

But news consumption is different in a digital age. The Internet has multiplied both the amount and variety of content available, and citizens in general can take advantage of a growing number of options for finding information about politics and engaging in public affairs (Tewksbury, 2003, 2006). Thus, the information associated with political participation is no longer an expensive commodity (Bimber, 2000).

Younger Americans (those under 30) are more likely to seek information online in general and are half-again more likely to seek political information online. However, contemporary lifestyles and new technologies not only impact news consumption (Associated Press, 2008) but also result in new and meaningful opportunities to become engaged (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga, 2009; Xenos & Moy, 2007) and thus participate online through increased information-seeking and discussion. These pro-civic consequences are clear especially when addressing the expressive potential of the Internet (Shah, et al., 2005). Activities such as creating, posting, and forwarding political messages as well as consuming information in the blogosphere promote discussion and participation (Gil de Zúñiga, Puig-i-Abril, & Rojas, 2009).

Considering all this, it is reasonable to examine the role of age on Internet news consumption and user preferences. Young American adults who are engaged online may be comparably as well-informed as their older counterparts consuming traditional media, at least sharing issue salience across news platforms, traditional and online (Coleman & McCombs, 2007). Given that exposure to news has an important effect on people’s voting behavior, and that young Americans increasingly seek information online, those who prefer online news may become more politically interested and more politically involved as well.

News platform preference: Traditional versus online

It will come as no surprise that there has been a greater migration to the Internet for information since the late 1990s. Youth Internet use tends to be more dispositional than situational; teens and young adults live online,

often multi-tasking, and, aside from being focused on entertainment and socializing, they are not particularly driven toward specific knowledge or tasks (Iyengar & Jackman, 2003, p. 4). There is evidence that they will respond to political content designed specifically to attract youth interest (e.g., interactive, games, visual-intensive) (Iyengar & Jackman, 2003, p. 14). Yet, critics note that Internet use may contribute to Putnam's time displacement thesis – that is, those seeking entertainment online lack the time to follow news (Kraut et al., 1998).

Dahlgren (2005) discussed three potential outcomes from new media: the skeptical viewpoint, that Internet use contributes to the destabilization of the public sphere; a middle view that Internet communication complements and encourages traditional political participation; and an optimistic view, suggesting that the Internet actually creates new ways in which to participate. Proliferation of political dialogue online has blurred state borders, dramatically multiplied the diversity of voices involved in political discussion, and exponentially increased the multitude of channels (Bennett & Entman, 2001; Blumler & Gurevitch, 2000). Yet, Shah and others have found that the Internet can at least complement traditional media consumption as a source for political information, and can, at best, greatly contribute to increased surveillance, attention, and involvement online (Shah et al., 2001, 2005) and offline (Gil de Zúñiga, 2009).

The existence of a gap between older Americans and their younger counterparts is not at issue here. Rather, this study employs a novel analysis to answer the critical questions within this debate: Is the age divide a crack or a crevasse, and is it widening or narrowing? As traditional media use predicts traditional political participation, does a preference for online media also predict political participation? Internet use for information has long been shown to influence participation both online and offline (Bimber, 1999; Gil de Zúñiga et al, 2009), and age has been shown to moderate the relationship between Internet use and participation, especially offline (Quintelier & Vissers, 2008). Meanwhile, we recognize that what people actually *do* online matters as well (Shah, et al., 2005; De Vreese, 2007). Likewise, news consumption matters. We expect that online media preference in general will have an impact on the online political participation of people of all ages, but we also expect to find this effect to be much stronger in younger people. Accordingly, the present study hypothesizes:

- H1A. Online news platform preference will positively predict young adults' online political participation.*
- H1B. Additionally, this effect will be stronger for young people who prefer online news than for their older counterparts with the same preference.*
- H2A. Online news platform preference will positively predict young adults' turnout.*
- H2B. Additionally, this effect will be stronger for young people who prefer online news than for their older counterparts with the same preference.*

Methods

Data

The analyses conducted in this manuscript use data gathered by the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Pew), via telephone interviews – landlines and cell phones – between November 8 and December 4, 2006, among a sample of 2,562 adults (18 and older). The final response rate was 25.7%; the margin of error was $\pm 2.1\%$ for the total sample and $\pm 2.7\%$ for results based on Internet users (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2008). Pew's results are weighted to compensate for non-response and to match national parameters for sex, age, education, and race, all of which are U.S. census definitions.¹ For this particular study, the final subsample included up to 5,721 valid cases.²

The dataset focuses on the use of the Internet as a primary source of information about the November 2006 mid-term election. The results revealed that 15% of all American adults say the Internet was the place where they got most of their campaign news during the election, up from 7% in the mid-term election of 2002. The post-election survey also found that the 2006 race produced a notable class of what Pew calls "campaigning Internet users"; 25% used the Internet for news about the campaign and 10% used it for communication about politics.

¹Further details about the sample can be found at <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2007/Election-2006-Online.aspx>

²The Pew data included answers from people with Internet access. Given that this is a secondary analysis of that data collection, the overall sample included the same number of respondents (N = 2,562). Our analysis reports the weighted results from those participants who responded the questions relevant to test the hypotheses, thus resulting in up to 5,721 valid cases.

Measures

Our analysis focused on the differences between young and older adults on measures of (1) news platform preference, (2) offline political participation (voting), and (3) online political participation. Thus, for our initial analysis, we created two data sets, one for young adults (ages 18 to 29) and one for older respondents (30 and older).

Control Variables. The traditional demographic variables were used as controls. We divided the respondents into two groups: those ages 18-29, or young (22%; $n = 1,238$) and those 30 and older (78%; $n = 4,483$). The regression models also included gender (52% female, the reference group); level of education (evaluated with a 4-point scale: less than high school, high school graduate, some college/vocational training incomplete, college/vocational training graduate; the median was some college); income (measured on a 8-point scale in which the median was \$30,000–\$40,000); and ethnicity (73% White, the reference group).

Independent Variables. Our analysis focused on whether people preferred their information from either online or offline versions of both TV news and newspapers. Drawing from respondents' reports about their news consumption, two items asked whether they had watched TV news or read a newspaper the previous day online or in their traditional, offline platform. We computed two variables to assess these preferences. *Offline platform preference* is a dummy-coded variable that includes all of those respondents who reported consuming news on an offline platform the day before (no = 0, yes = 1; young people sample: $M = 0.40$, $SD = 0.49$; older people sample: $M = 0.69$, $SD = 0.46$; combined sample: $M = 0.62$, $SD = 0.48$). Likewise, responses about a preference for an online platform for the consumption of TV news and newspapers were dummy-coded into *online platform preference* (young people sample: $M = 0.05$, $SD = 0.23$; older people sample: $M = 0.07$, $SD = 0.25$; combined sample: $M = 0.07$, $SD = 0.25$). Those who reported not consuming news the day before scored a 0 in both variables, and those who reported using both online and offline platform where assigned a 1 in both cases, thus preventing us from excluding people who might use offline platforms for one medium but online for the other. Considering that only a few cases were exclusively online consumers for both newspaper and TV, this operationalization also allowed us to contrast both preferences without dropping cases.

Dependent Variables. Our primary concern was with respondents' political participation. We used four dependent variables to explore that: three of them related to online political participation and one dealing with offline political participation (i.e., voting).

The notion of *online political participation* refers to non-traditional participation through online communication and involvement, and was measured through several items asking respondents whether or not they (1) contributed money online to a candidate running for public office; (2) posted their own political commentary or writing to an online news group, Web site or blog; (3) forwarded or posted someone else's political commentary or writing; (4) created and posted their own political audio or video recordings, and (5) forwarded or posted someone else's political audio or video recordings. All of them were dummy-coded (no = 0, yes = 1). Item 1 was relabeled as *contributing money online* ($M = 0.02$, $SD = 0.12$); another variable, *creating online political content*, combined items 2 and 4 into a dummy-coded variable that measured those who created some kind of political content (no = 0, yes = 1; inter-item correlation = .125; $M = 0.03$, $SD = 0.17$). A third variable, labeled *forwarding online political content*, combined items 3 and 5 into another dichotomized variable measuring whether respondents had forwarded any kind of political content (no = 0, yes = 1; inter-item correlation = .423; $M = 0.05$, $SD = 0.22$). All of these items were asked of respondents who reported being Internet users, and thus missing-system cases were people who did not use the Internet and could not engage on any of these activities. As such, these cases were assigned a value of zero, meaning they did not do any of these online activities.

Finally, *voting* measures traditional political participation – i.e., casting a vote. It was based on a Pew item asking respondents whether they had voted in the November 2006 election. The variable was dummy-coded (no = 0, yes = 1). Voter turnout was as follows: young people, 36%; older people, 69%; combined sample, 62%.

To test both hypotheses, we first split the sample in two age groups and ran correlations between platform preference and our dependent variables. Additionally, to test the greater impact of online news platform preference among young people, we ran several regressions in a combined sample of young people and their older counterparts, with demographics as a control in the first block and the interaction between platform preference and age in the second block.

Results

The news platform preferences were clearly different dimensions, as consuming news in either platform was not significantly correlated for young adults ($r_s = .050, p = .080$), but it became barely significant for their older counterparts ($r_s = .031, p = .040$). The correlation was significant for the overall combined sample ($r_s = .040, p < .001$).

Further, as Table 1 shows, young adults' preference for online news was positively and significantly correlated with the three dimensions of online political participation: contributing money online ($r_s = .202, p < .001$), creating online political content ($r_s = .209, p < .001$), and forwarding online political content ($r_s = .203, p < .001$), thus supporting *H1A*.

Table 1
Nonparametric Correlations Among Variables

News platform preference	Young ($n = 1,238$)	Older ($n = 4,483$)	Young-older correlations difference (z-score)
Online			
Contributing money	.202***	.109***	2.96**
Creating online political content	.209***	.100***	3.47***
Forwarding online political content	.203***	.160***	1.38
Voting	.191***	.046**	4.57***
Offline			
Contributing money	.138***	.030*	3.38***
Creating online political content	.059*	.054***	0.16
Forwarding online political content	.148***	.055***	2.92**
Voting	.101***	.186***	2.70**

Note: Cell entries in columns 1 and 2 are Spearman's rank order coefficients (r_s).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

For older people, while the correlations were also positive, they were not as strong and a comparison of each pair of nonparametric correlations between both age groups as standardized scores shows that most of these differences are statistically significant, despite having the same direction (see column 3 on Table 1). Thus, the comparison of the actual correlations between online platform preference and contributing money in young and older people ($z = 2.96, p = .003$) shows that the difference in the strength of the correlations between the groups is indeed statistically significant. However, the comparison regarding online preference and forwarding online political was not statistically significant, and thus *H1B* was only partially supported.

As predicted by *H2A*, young adults' online news platform preference was also correlated with voting ($r_s = .191, p < .001$), despite young adults having a lower voter turnout (36%) than older Americans (69%). For older people, while the correlation was also positive, it revealed a much more nuanced relationship ($r_s = .046, p = .002$). Just like with online participation, the difference in strength of correlations between voting and online platform preference in young and older people ($z = 5.57, p < .001$) were statistically significant, in the predicted direction, supporting *H2B*.

Additionally, offline news platform preference was also correlated with all four dependent variables, thus reinforcing the positive impact of news consumption on political participation, whether online or offline.

The logistic regressions used to further test the hypotheses – in a combined sample of young people and their older counterparts – showed that indeed online news platform preference predicted participatory behaviors for both younger and older groups.

Table 2 shows that for young people the impact of preferring news online predicts their financial contribution to a campaign online to a larger extent than those who prefer a more traditional media platform ($B = 1.64, \text{Wald } \chi^2 = 5.56, p = .018, \text{Nagelkerke } R^2 = 21\%$), whereas the interaction of younger age and offline news preference was not significant. When considering the impact of the other demographic variables alone, only education ($B = 0.42, \text{Wald } \chi^2 = 6.76, p = .009$) and income ($B = 0.52, \text{Wald } \chi^2 = 31.42, p < .001$) were important predictors. Being young alone did not have a statistically significant effect. Arguably, those who have the means – financial and otherwise – to donate money online to a campaign will do so (for an illustration, see Figure 1). That is, offline

news platform preference has no impact on contributing money online for both age groups whereas online news platform preference has a positive effect, and this effect is larger for the younger age group.

Table 2
Moderation by Age Predicting Contributing Money Online

Variable	B	S.E.	Wald χ^2	df	p	Exp(B)
Gender (female)	-0.22	0.25	0.80	1	.371	0.80
Education	0.42	0.16	6.76	1	.009	1.52
Race (White)	-0.03	0.30	0.01	1	.927	0.97
Income	0.52	0.09	31.42	1	< .001	1.67
Age (young people)	-16.42	1749.66	0.00	1	.995	0.00
Offline news platform preference	0.27	0.32	0.73	1	.394	1.31
Online news platform preference	0.96	0.29	10.65	1	.001	2.61
Offline preference \times young people (interaction)	17.17	1479.66	0.00	1	.991	0.00
Online preference \times young people (interaction)	1.64	0.69	5.56	1	.018	5.13
Constant	-8.74	0.78	126.74	1	< .001	0.00

Note. $N = 4,617$ (weighted cases). Nagelkerke $R^2 = 21\%$.

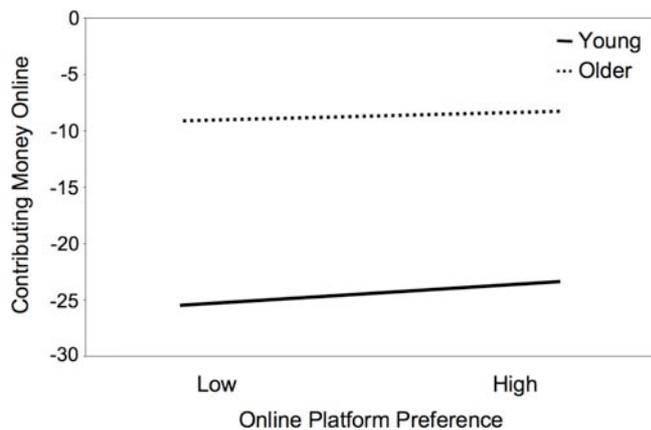


Figure 1. Moderation by age predicting contributing money online.

Similarly, as Table 3 shows, the influence of online news platform preference on creating online political content is much greater for young adults than it is for older Americans ($B = 1.30$, Wald $\chi^2 = 8.35$, $p = .001$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = 12\%$, see also Figure 2). Offline news platform preference also has a positive effect, but it does not differ between the age groups. Conversely, the creation of this type of content, while increasingly popular, is not equally distributed in the population, which is reflected in the other significant predictors of this behavior: education ($B = 0.23$, Wald $\chi^2 = 5.71$, $p = .017$), gender ($B = -0.38$, Wald $\chi^2 = 4.78$, $p = .029$), race ($B = -0.61$, Wald $\chi^2 = 11.49$, $p = .001$), and age ($B = 1.41$, Wald $\chi^2 = 18.67$, $p < .001$).

Table 3
Moderation by Age Predicting Creating Online Political Content

Variable	B	S.E.	Wald χ^2	df	p	Exp(B)
Gender (female)	-0.38	0.17	4.78	1	.029	0.68
Education	0.23	0.10	5.72	1	.017	1.26
Race (White)	-0.61	0.18	11.49	1	.001	0.54
Income	0.00	0.04	0.00	1	.957	1.00
Age (young people)	1.41	0.33	18.67	1	< .001	4.09
Offline news platform preference	0.73	0.29	6.34	1	.012	2.08
Online news platform preference	0.90	0.29	9.58	1	.002	2.47
Offline preference \times young people (interaction)	-0.14	0.38	0.14	1	.706	0.87
Online preference \times young people (interaction)	1.30	0.45	8.35	1	.004	3.66
Constant	-4.48	0.39	132.89	1	< .001	0.01

Note. $N = 4,617$ (weighted cases). Nagelkerke $R^2 = 12\%$.

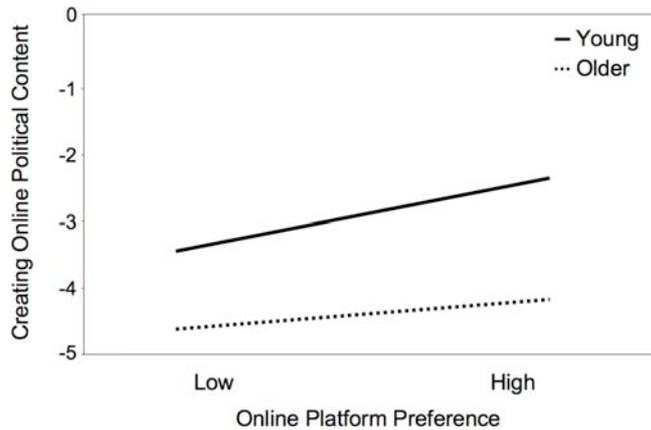


Figure 2. Moderation by age in prediction of creating online political content.

Interestingly, as Table 4 shows, only the influence of online platform preference is positive and significant when it came to forwarding online political content. The effect of offline news platform preference is insignificant. The differences in these effects between the young and old ones do not reach significance (e.g., for online news platform preference, $B = 0.73$, Wald $\chi^2 = 2.91$, $p = .088$).

Table 4
Moderation by Age Predicting Forwarding Online Political Content

Variable	B	S.E.	Wald χ^2	df	p	Exp(B)
Gender (female)	0.08	0.13	0.31	1	.576	1.08
Education	0.68	0.09	63.53	1	< .001	1.98
Race (White)	-0.09	0.16	0.30	1	.584	0.92
Income	0.10	0.04	6.57	1	.010	1.10
Age (young people)	-0.50	0.32	2.54	1	.111	0.61
Offline news platform preference	0.28	0.17	2.69	1	.101	1.32
Online news platform preference	1.15	0.18	41.91	1	< .001	3.17
Offline preference \times young people (interaction)	0.64	0.38	2.89	1	.089	1.89
Online preference \times young people (interaction)	0.73	0.44	2.91	1	.088	2.08
Constant	-5.67	0.33	287.94	1	< .001	0.00

Note. $N = 4,617$ (weighted cases). Nagelkerke $R^2 = 15\%$.

Table 5
Moderation by Age Predicting Voting

Variable	B	S.E.	Wald χ^2	df	p	Exp(B)
Gender (female)	-0.03	0.07	0.14	1	.706	0.97
Education	0.51	0.04	176.27	1	< .001	1.66
Race (White)	0.29	0.08	14.37	1	< .001	1.33
Income	0.03	0.02	3.25	1	.072	1.03
Age (young people)	-0.98	0.11	77.78	1	< .001	0.38
Offline news platform preference	0.72	0.08	84.31	1	< .001	2.05
Online news platform preference	-0.18	0.15	1.32	1	.250	0.84
Offline preference \times young people (interaction)	-0.40	0.16	6.02	1	.014	0.67
Online preference \times young people (interaction)	1.51	0.40	14.03	1	< .001	4.51
Constant	-1.33	0.13	110.32	1	< .001	0.26

Note. $N = 4,617$ (weighted cases). Nagelkerke $R^2 = 20\%$.

However, this moderating effect of age was indeed found in the influence of online news platform preference on voting. Table 5 shows that people's preference for news online predicts the likelihood to cast a vote for younger people much more than for older ones ($B = 1.51$, Wald $\chi^2 = 14.03$, $p < .001$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = 20\%$, see Figure 3 for illustration). The preference for offline news platforms is positively related to casting a vote among the older ones, but it is significantly smaller among the younger ones (difference between the age groups, $B = -0.40$, Wald $\chi^2 = 6.02$, $p = .014$, see also Figure 3). That is the more offline news are consumed the higher the likelihood of

casting a vote, but this effect is much stronger for the older ones. Regardless of the platform preference, older adults will always reflect a higher political commitment when it comes to casting their votes. Nevertheless, the gap narrows when subjects showed a preference for the online news platform. Other important predictors were education ($B = 0.51$, Wald $\chi^2 = 176.27$, $p < .001$) and race ($B = 0.29$, Wald $\chi^2 = 14.37$, $p < .001$), a finding in line with past research. Interestingly, the impact of income only approached significance ($B = 0.03$, Wald $\chi^2 = 3.25$, $p = .072$).

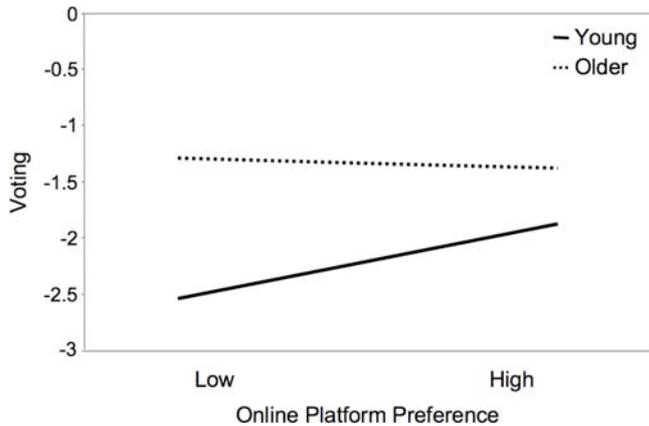


Figure 3. Moderation by age in prediction of voting.

Discussion

This study creates a new perspective by which to observe the effects of media consumption on political participation. Given that young adults are disproportionately more intensive users of the Internet and that older citizens still prefer to acquire their information via traditional media, we tested whether these media preferences had varying effects on people's political participation by their age. Our results lend support to the notion that people who prefer consuming news online will tend to be more politically active, both online and offline. The one exception was for older adults when it comes to casting their votes. More importantly, for three out of four forms of political participation the effects of online media preference were significantly stronger for young adults than for their older counterparts.

The decline in traditional political participation – i.e., voter turnout – has long been observed among young adults in American society, those aged 18 to 29. However, the role of platform preference has been far from conclusive. Moreover, scholars have proposed pessimistic views about the effects of new communication technologies on the political participation of young adults (Delli Carpini, 2000). That is, they may use digital media at a higher rate than older counterparts, but that does not necessarily translate into a more-informed and better-engaged citizenry (Eagles & Davidson, 2001).

This paper shows that people's preference for online media contributed to political participation both online and offline, but the effects of online media preference were found to be significantly stronger for young people than for their older counterparts. As the study theorized, the preference for a particular media platform has a strong positive effect on people's political participation, especially for younger adults. A possible explanation resides in the intersection of this digital media use preference and the informational gain provided by a highly interactive medium such as the Internet. Interactivity empowers the news consumer to choose what they want to know and when, and this news selectivity aids comprehension and learning, which in turn may increase participation.

Online news platform preference was found to positively predict both voting and three dimensions of online political participation among young adults, supporting *H1A* and *H2A*. Our analyses lead us to conclude that this variation in media preference predicts political participation in different ways. Thus, a preference for online media matters – and the younger citizens are, the more it matters.

It is not a novel claim that media consumption online and offline is important for a more robust democratic process and engaged citizenship. Other scholars have shown that, in general, individuals who pursue news, either online or offline, tend to participate more (for a more detailed explanation, see Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2009). The genuine contribution of this paper resides in the exclusive empirical clarification of how preference for online news consumption is particularly relevant for young Americans.

For the young population, whether and how much they prefer online news media may be key factors influencing their political engagement. This is important because, although it is well established that younger people have a tendency to acquire information via digital media rather than through more traditional channels, it was not clear whether that preference helped them engage in politics. Our findings suggest that it does. Thus, preferring digital media not only predicts online political participation, but also it does so to a larger degree for the young. However, it is important to note that, with respect to voting, preferring digital media is only predictive for young but not older adults.

With this in mind, the present study has a number of limitations. As an analysis of secondary data, we have adapted items that may not have been originally intended for a given study – namely, our news platform preference variables have to do with a self-reported choice, which is intrinsically a perception of media use and preference rather than an unobtrusive measure of media consumption. In addition, our independent variables only included newspapers and TV news. A richer array of media source types – such as radio, blogs, social networks, and others – ideally should be included in such an index. It is plausible to think that as more measures are included when establishing news platform preference indexes, more robust findings may be obtained. This is another suggestion for future research.

Another caveat lies within the timing of this study's data collection, coming shortly before the 2008 presidential election. The 2008 election yielded a record voter turnout among young people. This fact, coupled with the ongoing and fast-paced development in digital media, provide a compelling case for a more up-to-date analysis and examination. Therefore, more recent data should help to further clarify relationships between young and older voters and their news platform preference.

But perhaps the major and unsolvable limitation of this study relates to the data collection itself. Because this study was based on secondary analysis, some of the questions we wished to include in our measure were impossible to assess. Similarly, the data represent the reflection of a unique snapshot in time of American adults, for it is cross-sectional data. Panel data would offer a better look at the causal role of age in platform preference and participation because researchers could rule out generational effect (the older one gets, the more one participates) of political engagement.

Ultimately, those of different ages embrace different media. Those born between 1945 and 1964 largely prefer television, just as their predecessors generally opted for the newspaper. Those entering adulthood now have embraced digital media to such an extent that they are now contributing to the wider reconfiguration of media production and consumption in an increasingly networked and socially connected media environment (Jenkins, 2006). In that line, this study has advanced our understanding of the effects of both age and media use on political participation. A preference for digital media will reinvigorate people's involvement in the democratic process. More importantly, news platform preference matters far more for younger adults than for older adults, which may contribute to narrowing the participation gap between age groups.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Pew) for making their data available, and acknowledge that Pew bears no responsibility for the conclusions reached based on our analyses of the data.

References

- Abramson, P. R. (1979). Developing party identification: A further examination of life-cycle, generational, and period effects. *American Journal of Political Science*, 23, 78–96.
- Adler, P. S., & Kwon, S. W. (2002). Social capital: Prospects for a new concept. *Academy of Management Review*, 27, 17–40.
- Almond, G. A., & Verba, S. (1963). *The civic culture*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Associated Press (2008). A new model for news: Studying the deep structure of young-adult news consumption. A research report from The Associated Press and the Context-Based Research Group.
- Bennett, W. L., & Entman, R. (Eds.). (2001). *Mediated politics in the future of democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Berelson, B., Lazarsfeld, P., & McPhee, W. (1954). *Voting*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL
- Bimber, B. (1999). The Internet and citizen communication with government: Does the medium matter? *Political Communication*, 16, 409–428.
- Bimber, B. (2000). The study of information technology and civic engagement. *Political Communication*, 17, 329–333.
- Blumler, J., & Gurevitch, M. (2000). Rethinking the study of political communication. In J. Curran & M. Gurevitch (Eds.), *Mass media and society* (3rd ed., pp. 155–172). London: Arnold.
- Bressers, B., & Bergen, L. (2002). Few university students reading newspapers online. *Newspaper Research Journal*, 23(2/3), 32–45.
- Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, CIRCLE (2009). *Youth voting report*. Retrieved from http://www.civicyouth.org/?page_id=241
- Cho, J., Shah, D. V., McLeod, J. M., McLeod, D. M., Scholl, R. M., & Gotlieb, M.R. (2009). Campaigns, reflection, and deliberation: Advancing an O-S-R-O-R model of communication effects. *Communication Theory*, 19, 66–88.
- Coleman, R., & McCombs, M. (2007). The young and agenda-less? Exploring age-related differences in agenda setting on the youngest generation, Baby Boomers, and the civic generation. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 84, 495–508.
- Dahlgren, P. (2005). The Internet, public spheres, and political communication: Dispersion and deliberation. *Political Communication*, 22, 147–162.
- Dalton, R. (2007). *The good citizen: How a younger generation is reshaping American politics*. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press.
- De Vreese, C. H. (2007). Digital renaissance: Young consumer and citizen? *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 611, 207–216.
- Delli Carpini, M. X. (2000). Gen.com: Youth, civic engagement and the new information environment. *Political Communication*, 17, 341–349.
- Dunne, M. (2008). Black and White unite? The Clinton-Obama campaigns in historical perspective. *Political Quarterly*, 79, 354–365.
- Eagles, M., & Davidson, R. (2001). Civic education, political socialization, and political mobilization: Can “Kids Voting, USA” diminish inequalities in voter participation? *Journal of Geography*, 100(6), 233–242.
- Feldman, L. (2007). The news about comedy: The Daily Show, and evolving notions of journalism. *Journalism*, 8, 406–427.
- Flanagin, A. J., Stohl, C., & Bimber, B. (2006). Modeling the structure of collective action. *Communication Monographs*, 73, 29–54.
- Franklin, M. N., & van der Eijk, C. (2004). *Voter turnout and the dynamics of electoral competition in established democracies since 1945*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Frisco, M. L., Muller, C., & Dodson, K. (2004). Participation in voluntary youth-serving associations and early adult voting behavior. *Social Science Quarterly*, 85, 660–676.
- Galston, W. A. (2004). Civic education and political participation. *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 37, 263–266.
- Gil de Zúñiga, H. (2009). Blogs, journalism and political participation. In Z. Papacharissi (Ed.), *Journalism and citizenship: New agendas* (pp. 108–123). New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

- Gil de Zúñiga, H., Puig-i-Abril, E., & Rojas, H. (2009). Weblogs, traditional sources online & political participation: An assessment of how the Internet is changing the political environment. *New Media & Society*, 11, 553–574.
- Gil de Zúñiga, H., & Valenzuela, S. (2009). Disentangling facebookers: A snapshot of social network site users in the United States. In D. Wittkower (Ed.), *Facebook and philosophy* (pp. 7–14). Chicago: Open Court Publishing.
- Gil de Zúñiga, H., Veenstra, A., Vraga, E., & Shah, D. V. (2010). Digital democracy: Re-imagining pathways to political participation. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 7, 36–51.
- Glasford, D. E. (2008). Predicting voting behavior of young adults: The importance of information, motivation and behavioral skills. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 38, 2648–2672.
- Goerres, A. (2007). Why are older people more likely to vote? The impact of ageing turnout in Europe. *British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, 9, 90–121.
- Habermas, J. (1979). *Communication and the evolution of society*. Boston: Beacon.
- Halpern, D. (2005). *Social capital*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hardy, B. W., & Scheufele, D. A. (2005). Examining differential gains from Internet use: Comparing the moderating role of talk and online interactions. *Journal of Communication*, 55, 71–84.
- Hargittai, E., & Hinnant, A. (2008). Digital inequality: Differences in young adults' use of the Internet. *Communication Research*, 35, 602–621.
- Helmert, U., Merzenich, H., & Bammann, K. (2001). The association between educational attainment chronic diseases, and cardiovascular disease risk factors in young adults aged 18 to 29 years: results of the Federal Health Survey 1998. *Sozial- und Präventivmedizin*, 46, 320–328.
- Iyengar, S., & Jackman, S. (2003, November). Technology and politics: Incentives for youth participation. Paper presented at the International Conference on Civic Education Research, New Orleans, November 16–18.
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York: New York University Press.
- Katz, E., & Lazarsfeld, P. (1955). *Personal influence: The part played by people in the flow of mass communication*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press of Glencoe.
- Kraut, R., Patterson, M., Lundmark, V., Kiesler, S., Mukopadhyay, T., & Scherlis, W. (1998). Internet paradox: A social technology that reduces social involvement and psychological well-being? *American Psychologist*, 53, 1017–1031.
- Lazarsfeld, P. F., Berelson, B., & Gaudet, H. (1944). *The people's choice: How the voter makes up his mind in a presidential election*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Lewis, S. C. (2008). Where young adults intend to get news in five years. *Newspaper Research Journal*, 29(4), 36–52.
- Liu, F. C. S. (2007). Constrained opinion leader influence in an electoral campaign season: Revisiting the two-step flow theory with multi-agent simulation. *Advances in Complex Systems*, 10, 233–250.
- Lopez, M., Marcelo, K., & Kirby, E. (2007). *Youth voter turnout increases in 2006*. The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. Retrieved from http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS07_2006MidtermCPS.pdf
- McLeod, J. M., Scheufele, D. A., & Moy, P. (1999). Community, communication, and participation: The role of mass media and interpersonal discussion in local political participation. *Political Communication*, 16, 315–336.
- Mindich, D. (2005). *Tuned out: Why Americans under 40 don't follow the news*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Mutz, D. C. (2006). *Hearing the other side: Deliberative versus participatory democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nickerson, D. (2006). Hunting the elusive young voter. *Journal of Political Marketing*, 5(3), 47–69.
- Niemi, R. G., & Jennings, M. K. (1991). Issues and inheritance in the formation of party identification. *American Journal of Political Science*, 35, 970–988.
- O’Neill, B. (2007, June). Indifferent or just different? The political and civic engagement of young people in Canada. Paper presented at the Canadian Policy Research Networks.
- Patterson, T. (2002). The vanishing voter: Why are the voting booths so empty? *National Civic Review*, 91, 367–377.
- Pew Internet and American Life Project (2008). *Our mission*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/About-Us/Our-Mission.aspx>
- Plutzer, E. (2002). Becoming a habitual voter: Inertia, resources, and growth in youth adulthood. *American Political Science Review*, 96, 41–56.
- Puig-i-Abril, E., & Rojas, H. (2007). Being early on the curve: Online practices and expressive political participation. *International Journal of Internet Science*, 2(1), 28–44.
- Putnam, R. (1995). Bowling alone: America’s declining social capital. *Journal of Democracy*, 6, 65–78.
- Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Quintelier, E., & Vissers, S. (2008). The effect of Internet use on political participation: An analysis of survey results for 16-year-olds in Belgium. *Social Science Computer Review*, 26, 411–427.
- Shah, D. V., Cho, J., Eveland, W. P., & Kwak, N. (2005). Information and expression in a digital age: Modeling Internet effects on civic participation. *Communication Research*, 32, 531–565.
- Shah, D. V., & Gil de Zúñiga, H. (2008). Social capital. In P. J. Lavrakas (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of survey research methods* (pp. 454–455). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Shah, D. V., Kwak, N., & Holbert, R. L. (2001). “Connecting” and “disconnecting” with civic life: Patterns of Internet use and the production of social capital. *Political Communication*, 18, 141–162.
- Shah, D. V., Cho, J., Nah, S., Gotlieb, M. R., Hwang, H., Lee, N. J., Scholl, R. M., & McLeod, D. M. (2007). Campaign ads, online messaging, and participation: Extending the communication and mediation model. *Journal of Communication*, 57, 676–703.
- Slutske, W. S., Jackson, K. M., & Sher, K. J. (2003). The natural history of problem gambling from age 18–29. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 112, 263–274.
- Sweetser, K. D. (2006). Stealth soapboxes: Political information efficacy, cynicism and uses of celebrity weblogs among readers. *New Media & Society*, 10, 67–91.
- Tewksbury, D. (2003). What do Americans really want to know? Tracking the behavior of news readers on the Internet. *Journal of Communication*, 53, 694–710.
- Tewksbury, D. (2006). Exposure to the newer media in a presidential primary campaign. *Political Communication*, 23, 313–332.
- Todd, C., & Gawiser, S. (2009). *How Barack Obama won: A state-by-state guide to the historical 2008 presidential election*. New York: Random House.
- U.S. Census Bureau (2002). Reported rates of voting and registration by selected characteristics. *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2002*. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/p20-552.pdf>

U.S. Census Bureau (2006). Voter turnout up 7 million in 2006, released July 1, 2008. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/voting/cb08-102.html>

Wattenberg, M. P. (2004). The changing presidential media environment. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 34, 557–572.

Wyllie, A., Zhang, J. F., & Casswell, S. (1998). Positive responses to televised beer advertisements associated with drinking and problems reported by 18 to 29-year-olds. *Addiction*, 93, 749–760.

Xenos, M., & Moy, P. (2007). Direct and differential effects of the Internet on political and civic engagement. *Journal of Communication*, 57, 704–718.