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Digitally Savvy Citizenship: The Role of Internet Skills and Engagement in Young Adults' Political Participation around the 2008 Presidential Election

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Digitally Savvy Citizenship: The Role of Internet Skills and Engagement in Young Adults' Political Participation around the 2008 Presidential Election

Eszter Hargittai and Aaron Shaw

Popular narratives assume that digital media play a central role mobilizing voters and especially young adults. Based on unique survey data of a diverse group of young adults from Spring, 2009, we consider the relationship between differentiated internet uses, and online and offline political engagement around the time of the 2008 U.S. presidential election. Thanks to our rich data set, we are able to consider both online and offline activities while taking into consideration more traditional measures. Our findings suggest that online forms of political engagement complement offline engagement. The pathways to young adults' political participation remain relatively stable. We also find an association between Internet skills, social network site usage and greater levels of engagement. These findings imply that although Internet usage alone is unlikely to transform existing patterns in political participation radically, it may facilitate the creation of new pathways for engagement.

Popular narratives following the 2008 U.S. presidential election portray digital media as playing a central role in mobilizing voters and especially young adults to

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engage in the political process (Miller, 2008; Stirland, 2008). Despite the ubiquity of such expansive claims about the role of the Internet in driving political engagement among young Americans (Fisher, 2008; Melber, 2008; Ruffini, 2008), we know little about how variations in young people's Internet experiences and skills may link to voting or other forms of online and offline political engagement.

Research has shown that more than ever, Americans utilize the Internet to access political information and engage in political activities (Foot & Schneider, 2002; Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Smith, 2009). In the context of the 2008 U.S. presidential election that produced elevated participation rates among young and historically disenfranchised subsets of the population (Godsay, Nover & Kirby, 2010; Kirby & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2009) we ask: Did the Internet reinforce existing patterns in political engagement or did it open up new avenues to participation? To what extent do Internet skills and online practices relate to engagement in comparison with established predictors?

We approach these questions using a broad, multi-dimensional concept of political engagement (Brady, 1999; Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2010; Smith, Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2009; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006). Within this framework, political engagement consists of multiple dimensions including cognitive engagement, political voice, and political participation. All of these dimensions constitute important indicators of engagement in political life, despite the fact that they do not necessarily entail equivalent levels of commitment, effort, or impact (Zukin et al. 2006, pp. 49–87). We look at whether or not respondents' demographic attributes, socioeconomic status (SES), Internet experience and skill, online political information practices, civic engagement, political knowledge and political interest relate to voting and other types of political action.

Existing survey data lack nuanced measures of online behavior that would enable us to examine these relationships. Our data allow us to test for associations between SES, political engagement, and a highly detailed set of measures about online practices and skills among a diverse cohort of first-year college students in the Chicago area. Given the characteristics of our sample, we cannot determine whether or not our findings are representative of broader national patterns. However, we can make conjectures about the relevance of online practices and skills for youth political engagement.

The Changing Face of Political and Civic Engagement Among Young Americans

Our research enters a wide-ranging debate on the character and extent of young American citizens' political engagement in a changing technological and media environment. Within this research, two key narratives have emerged: one focuses on the idea of *disaffected citizenship* and the other on patterns of *cultural displacement* (Loader, 2007, pp. 1–5). The narrative of disaffected citizenship argues that the

declining rates of youth participation in political and civic life as measured by indicators such as electoral participation and membership in associations indicate an alarming withdrawal from public life. By contrast, the narrative of cultural displacement underscores how young people's rejection of the modes of civic and political engagement favored by their parents and grandparents has been accompanied by the rise of new practices of public participation (Bennett, Wells, & Freelon, 2011; Bennett, Wells, & Rank 2009; Papacharissi, 2010; Weaver Lariscy, Tinkham, & Sweeter, 2011). Few studies fall exclusively into one or the other category of this schematic binary, but a brief elaboration of the two perspectives provides an effective introduction into the concepts and previous findings that frame our research questions.

On the disaffected citizenship side of the debate, Putnam's (2000) landmark study painted a picture of declining civic life in the United States and underscored the extent to which young Americans had not embraced their parents' and grandparents' willingness to participate in civic associations of various kinds. Putnam reported lower levels of political party and electoral participation among younger citizens in comparison with older cohorts and warned of an imminent threat to American democracy, culture, and civic life. He pointed to the rise of cable television and broadcast media as a partial cause of these trends, arguing that broadcast media consumption undermined deliberation in the public sphere and participation in civic life more generally. He drew no specific conclusions about the effects of the Internet, but underscored its potential to open up new avenues for collective action and associational activities.

Zukin and colleagues (2006) have used extensive survey evidence to re-contextualize the decline observed by Putnam. These authors find that Americans overall—and young Americans in particular—have not simply abandoned practices of political and civic participation, but have instead found new modes of engagement that earlier research had either overlooked or downplayed. Their analysis underscores the rise of novel forms of political action including participation in online communities such as social network sites to connect with like-minded peers around specific issues. These findings provide an example of the cultural displacement narrative, in which the erosion of electoral participation and civic associations does not herald the decline and fall of American democracy, but rather suggests a transmutation into a new, perhaps more digitally mediated form, which Bennett and colleagues (2009, 2011) call “actualizing citizenship” and through which Papacharissi (2010) defines characteristic modes of engagement in the networked “private sphere.”

The above examples of the disaffected citizenship and cultural displacement narratives illustrate that the definition and operationalization of the concept of political engagement matters for the resulting analysis. Typically, the disaffected citizenship account relies on a relatively narrow set of indicators of political participation, such as voting in elections; donating to, or volunteering for parties and candidates; and communicating directly with political representatives (Putnam, 2000, 31–47). Research has argued that these indicators of “dutiful citizenship” have a generational

aspect (Bennett et al., 2009, 2011; Weaver Lariscy et al., 2011; Zukin et al., 2006). In contrast, the cultural displacement account necessarily requires a more expansive approach, incorporating a wider range of activities representing a multidimensional civic and political life (Zukin et al., 2006, pp. 49–87). In other words, youth political engagement varies greatly depending on how it is measured, and the decision to include one or another variable implies, to some extent, the acceptance of one or the other analytical paradigm.

While we do not have an *a priori* preference for either the disaffected citizenship or the cultural displacement narrative, we prefer the multidimensional approach to political engagement favored by adherents of the latter perspective. In this regard, we agree with previous research arguing that both the disaffected citizenship and cultural displacement narratives seem to contain a grain of truth (Bennett et al., 2009, 2011; Papacharissi, 2010). A broader definition of participation and engagement can incorporate a fuller range of activities that individuals may perceive, in some way or another, as political. This approach allows us to capture shifts in the nature of civic life as they happen and to compare our findings more rigorously to other research employing different approaches to the same questions.

We adopt the broad definition of political participation provided by Verba (1995) and colleagues as, “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” (p. 38). This definition encompasses both electoral and non-electoral forms of participation such as attention to political issues, the public expression of ideas (voice), and a diverse range of political actions (Brady, 1999).

The Internet and Youth Political Engagement

The increasing spread of information and communication technologies has led to questions about and research on how time spent online may be related to youth political engagement. Of particular interest has been the potential of the Internet for increasing youth political participation given that members of this age group are most likely to be online and spend more time on the Web and using social media tools than other cohorts (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickhur, 2010). In this literature, an early emphasis on tests of potential *instrumental effects* of Internet usage on political engagement outcomes has largely given way to approaches analyzing the interdependence of online and offline engagement practices with other socioeconomic and attitudinal factors (Bimber, 2001, 2003; Xenos & Moy, 2007).

Analyses of the relationship between the Internet and political engagement have evolved alongside research documenting the decline of civic associationism and political participation among younger Americans (Fisher, 2006; Putnam, 2000; Skocpol, 2003). A study of Americans’ social networks (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Brashears, 2006, 2009) argued that the rise of the Internet may have been responsible for

increasing social isolation on a national level, but was refuted by findings that Internet use, and especially the use of social network sites (SNS), associates strongly with more diverse networks, enhanced community engagement, and heightened public activity overall (Hampton, 2011; Hampton, Lee, & Her, 2011; Hampton, Sessions, Her, & Rainie, 2009). A meta-analysis of related research found little evidence to support the claim that the Internet had reduced civic engagement overall, and some indication that it may have had slight positive effects under certain conditions (Boulianne, 2009).

With regard to political communication and participation, no strong consensus has emerged as to whether or not the Internet alters political engagement, in part because it appears that the effects of Internet usage are mediated by a number of intervening factors such as existing social inequalities (Schlozman et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2009). Vroman (2007) found that SES and demographic factors predict political participation better than Internet use. Another study suggested that while Internet use may affect political knowledge and information seeking directly, more “concrete” forms of engagement such as voting, attending rallies, or talking about politics are contingent on education level, attention to, and interest in politics (Xenos & Moy, 2007). Experimental research conducted specifically with young respondents suggests that exposure to political information online has differential effects depending on prior interest and engagement levels (Xenos & Kyoung, 2008).

Other studies suggest that news media consumption and interactive communication may promote political participation among young people (Bachmann, Kaufhold, Lewis, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2010; Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; Bennett et al., 2009, 2011; Esser & de Vreese, 2007; Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011; Hampton, 2011; Kim & Kim, 2007). Some studies have focused specifically on the relationship of political practices and social network site uses (e.g., Ancu & Cozma, 2009), and have had mixed results about whether young SNS users are more or less likely to engage politically than users of other forms of media (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; Vitak et al., 2011; Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, & Bichard, 2010). Socioeconomic factors do appear to play a moderating role in the relationship between SNS usage and political activity (Pasek, more, & Romer, 2009).

Earlier studies have underscored the importance of demographic, socioeconomic, and political attention-related variables, all of which appear to moderate the relationship of Internet use and political engagement among young Americans. Additionally, some research suggests that Web-use skills may also be related to various forms of Internet usage (Correa, 2010; Hargittai, 2010; Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; Wasserman & Richmond-Abbott, 2005). Those with more Internet skills are more likely to engage in a diverse set of online activities than those with less know-how even when holding other factors such as demographic and socioeconomic background constant. An independent effect of user sophistication on various types of Internet uses calls into question the stability of previous findings on the relationships between Internet use, SES, demographic background and political engagement.

Based on the literature reviewed above, we test the following interrelated hypotheses about young people's political engagement:

- H₁: Greater levels of Internet experiences will associate with increased:
 - H_{1a}: online political information practices
 - H_{1b}: civic engagement
 - H_{1c}: voting
 - H_{1d}: political engagement behaviors other than voting
- H₂: Greater levels of online political information practices will associate with increased:
 - H_{2a}: civic engagement
 - H_{2b}: voting
 - H_{2c}: political engagement behaviors other than voting
- H₃: Greater levels of civic engagement will associate with increased:
 - H_{3a}: voting
 - H_{3b}: political engagement behaviors other than voting

Data and Methods

While data sets exist with detailed information about people's political engagement, participation, knowledge and interests, such data sources are rarely coupled with nuanced measures of people's Internet uses, experiences and skills. To address this shortcoming of available resources, we collected our own survey data to test the hypotheses proposed above.

Data Collection

We administered a paper-pencil survey in February–April, 2009, just a few months after the 2008 U.S. presidential elections, to students in class in the one course at the University of Illinois, Chicago that is required for everybody: the First-Year Writing Program. Overall, counting all students who were enrolled in the course, the final response rate is 80.5% yielding valid data from 1,115 first-year students. Because voting in the presidential election is of central interest to this paper, we excluded people who reported not being eligible to vote and thus our analyses are based on the 1,001 first-year students who were eligible to participate in the elections in Fall, 2008.

We administered the survey in class on paper rather than on the Web so as not to bias against students who are online less frequently or who are less inclined to fill out Web-based forms (e.g., due to lack of enough private time spent online). Since having ample time online to engage in various activities is linked to the questions of interest in this study, it was important not to use a data-collection method that might be related to it.

Independent Variables

Respondent Background

Table 1 presents the demographic and socioeconomic composition of our sample showing that participants are diverse on these measures.

Political Capital. The concept of political capital captures respondents' interest in, knowledge of, and investment in politics. Table 2 presents the basic descriptive statistics about these variables. The item that captured partisanship asked respondents to classify their political views on a five-point scale from "very liberal" to "very conservative" that also included an open-ended "other" response option. We recoded the answers along a 3-point scale where the endpoints of the original scale (i.e., *very conservative* and *very liberal*) were categorized as "high partisanship" and "middle-of-the-road" became "low partisanship." We then coded the open-ended responses by hand using the three-point partisanship scale. The vast majority

Table 1
Background of Study Participants

| Variable | Percent |
|-------------------------------------|---------|
| Men | 40.5 |
| Women | 59.5 |
| Age | |
| 18 | 67.2 |
| 19 | 31.9 |
| 20–24 | 0.9 |
| Race and Ethnicity | |
| African American, non-Hispanic | 10.8 |
| Asian American, non-Hispanic | 20.5 |
| Hispanic | 24.5 |
| Native American, non-Hispanic | 0.4 |
| White, non-Hispanic | 42.0 |
| Parents' Highest Level of Education | |
| Less than high school | 7.5 |
| High school | 15.7 |
| Some college | 23.3 |
| College | 34.2 |
| Graduate degree | 18.6 |

Table 2
Respondents' Political Capital

| Variable | Mean | St. Dev. |
|---------------------------|------|----------|
| Partisanship (1–3) | 1.8 | (0.7) |
| Political interest (1–4) | 2.5 | (0.9) |
| Political knowledge (0–5) | 3.6 | (1.3) |

of these write-in responses expressed a general lack of interest in politics and were coded as “low partisanship.”

To capture respondents' political interest, we asked students to rate themselves on a four-point scale ranging from “not at all interested” to “very interested.” Our political knowledge variable was based on a series of open-ended questions, each of which asked respondents about a different aspect of U.S. government and politics. Specifically, the ones we use here asked respondents the following with percent of correct responses indicated in parentheses: (1) what office Joe Biden holds (71%); (2) which party has the most members in the House of Representatives (64%); (3) which party is more conservative (74%); (4) whose responsibility it is to determine if a law is constitutional (this was a multiple-choice question with the following options: the President, Congress, or Supreme Court) (60%); and (5) how much of a majority is needed in the House and Senate to override a presidential veto (also asked as a multiple-choice question with “one-half,” “two-thirds” and “three-quarters” as possible responses) (93%). These questions were developed previously and have been validated as effective measures of Americans' political knowledge (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). The resulting variable takes on values ranging from 0–5 depending on how many of the questions respondents answered correctly.

Internet Experiences. We include measures of veteran status (how long the respondent has been an Internet user), autonomy (access to the Internet at different locations indicating freedom to use the Internet when and where one wants to), frequency of use and skill. See Table 3 for descriptive statistics.

We measure veteran status in number of user years and find that on average respondents had been online for just under 6 years at the time of the study. We log this measure in the analyses due to the assumption that each additional year of experience with the medium has diminishing returns. We operationalize autonomy of use by counting up the number of locations, from among ten, where respondents report having access to the Internet. Students report 6.6 access locations on average. We log this measure for the same reason as use years. To determine frequency of use, we asked students how much time they spend on the Web (excluding email, chat and voice services) on an average weekday and an average Saturday/Sunday and then calculate weekly number of hours from these responses. On average, students report browsing Web sites for just over 17 hours weekly.

Table 3
Internet Use Context and Experiences

| Variable | Mean | St. Dev. |
|---|------|----------|
| Number of use years (0–9 scale) | 5.7 | (2.3) |
| Number of locations to access the Internet (0–10 scale) | 6.6 | (2.2) |
| Hours spent on the Web weekly | 17.3 | (10.0) |
| Skill index (1–5 scale) | 3.2 | (0.8) |
| Social network site usage (0–2) | 1.0 | (0.8) |

We use an established index measure made up of 27 Internet-related items (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.94$) to measure users' Internet skills (Correa, 2010; Hargittai, 2010). We also include a measure (0–2) of social network site usage, based on two questions. One inquired how frequently respondents check other people's status updates, the other asked about posting their own updates. We coded both as a binary response, counting those who engaged in either activity "a few times a week or more" as a positive outcome and added the two together.

Dependent Variables

We constructed three dependent variables that correspond to online political information practices, civic engagement, and political participation. Online political information practices consist of the consumption and production of political information or discourse online. Civic engagement, by contrast, captures the extent to which individuals are active members of their communities in ways that are less clearly political. Finally, political participation incorporates more explicit forms of political action.

Online Political Information Practices. To determine whether respondents engage with political content online, we asked whether they: (a) use the Internet to look for, read or watch political content; (b) discuss, comment on, respond to, forward, post political content online; (c) visit/read blogs on "politics, economics, law, policy"; and (d) comment on such blogs. We use a binary measure for online political information practices whereby this variable gets a 1 if the respondent reported engaging in any of the above four activities weekly or more often. It may be that people differ in drawing distinctions between blogs and other types of content, but this is not of concern to us since we created one universal binary measure based on all related experiences (see Table 4).

Civic Engagement. To measure civic engagement, we constructed a scale using four variables asking whether respondents had performed each of the following activities offline: (1) attended the meeting of a club or organization to which they

Table 4
Respondents' Online Political Information Practices (in Percentages)

| Variable | Never | At Least a Few Times a Year, But Less than Weekly | Weekly or More Often |
|---|-------|---|-------------------------|
| Looked for, read, watched content online about politics | 20.0 | 37.6 | 42.4 |
| Discussed, commented on, responded to, forwarded, posted content online about politics* | 79.5 | 14.4 | 6.1 |
| Visited/read blogs on politics, economics, law, policy | 39.8 | 34.7 | 25.4 |
| Commented on blogs about politics, economics, law, policy | 84.1 | 7.7 | 8.3 |

Note. *For this question, the answer options were never, have done it once or twice, have done it more often.

belong "every few weeks" or more; (2) ever organized a meeting or event of a club or organization to which they belong; (3) ever performed volunteer work; (4) talked to friends or family about current events and things they heard about in the news "a few times per week" or more.

The majority of respondents report doing volunteer work at least a few times a year. Just over half (54%) talk to friends or family about current events at least a few times a week. Close to half (42%) of respondents attend club or organization meetings with some regularity and a third reported organizing such meetings at least a few times a year. Overall, less than ten percent of the sample does not fall into any of these categories while close to 14% fall on the active end of the scale for all four with the rest in between. The variable for civic engagement ranges from zero to four.

Political Participation. We use three separate measures for political participation: (1) having voted in the 2008 presidential election; (2) having signed a petition; and (3) having engaged in various other types of political action. The level of voting by respondents (62.1%) mirrors the national level for young people enrolled in college (59.7%) (Godsay et al., 2010; Kirby & Kawashima-Ginsberg 2009). Over one hundred students (11.5%) reported having registered to vote, but not having voted, while the rest (26.4%) had not registered.

To assess petition signing as well as our other political action variable, we rely on a series of binary measures asking whether respondents had in the past two years ever (a) "signed a petition about a social or political issue (online or on paper)"; (b) "contacted a political official"; (c) "worked as a volunteer on a political

campaign”; (d) “donated money to a political campaign”; or (e) been “paid to work on a political campaign.” Note that none of these phrasings specify whether the respondents performed any of the activities in question online or offline, resulting in a measure that captures engagement across both domains. Of these five actions, the first—signing a petition—requires much less involvement than the others and so we look at it separately. Almost two-thirds (64.9%) of respondents reported having done this at least once in the two years preceding the study.

We created a separate binary variable for more involved political action, which got a 1 if the respondent had engaged in any of the four activities (b–e on the list above) at least once in the past two years. An affirmative response to any of these five activities resulted in a 1 for the binary political action variable. Just over a fifth (21.5%) of participants had contacted a political official, 14.1% had donated money to a political campaign, just over a tenth (10.6%) had volunteered on a political campaign and 4.1% had been paid to work on a political campaign. Overall, about a third (34.0%) of respondents had engaged in at least one of these four activities.

Methods of Analysis

We run a series of logistic and OLS regressions to explore what explains variation in online political information practices (binary outcome), civic engagement (interval outcome), voting in the presidential election (binary outcome) and engaging in political action (binary outcome for both signing a petition and being involved in another way). First, we look at how user background and political capital are related to the outcome variables and then we consider how Internet experiences mediate those relationships.

Results

Explaining Online Political Information Practices

Model 1 in Table 5 considers how respondents’ demographic and socioeconomic background as well as political capital relate to their likelihood of visiting or interacting with political content online. Women are much less likely to do so than men and, not surprisingly, those who are more interested in politics are much more likely to do so than those who are less interested. Once we add information about Internet experiences to the model (Model 2), we find that time spent online as well as Web-use skills are both positively related to accessing or discussing political content on the Web. The addition of these variables barely changes the size of the coefficient for having an interest in politics, but reduces the coefficient and decreases the statistical significance for gender. This is in line with other work that has found that skill is a mediating factor when it comes to women’s online engagement in

Table 5
Logistic and OLS Regressions on Online Political Information Practices, Civic Engagement, Voting in the Presidential Election and Political Action (Standard Errors in Parentheses)

| | Online Political Information Practices | | | Civic Engagement | | | Voting in the Presidential Election | | | Political Action I: Signing Petition | | | Political Action II: Other | | |
|-----------------------|--|----------------|----------------|------------------|----------------|----------------|-------------------------------------|--------------|---------------|--------------------------------------|--|--|----------------------------|--|--|
| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 | Model 6 | Model 7 | Model 8 | Model 9 | Model 10 | | | | | |
| Female | -.692*** (.17) | -.490*** (.18) | -.012 (.08) | .082 (.08) | .559*** (.15) | .635*** (.16) | .261# (.15) | .429** (.16) | .136 (.15) | .180 (.17) | | | | | |
| Independent Variables | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Race/Ethnicity | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| African American | .116 (.27) | .057 (.28) | .010 (.13) | .026 (.13) | 1.356*** (.31) | 1.317*** (.31) | -.435# (.24) | -.418# (.25) | .337 (.24) | .387 (.25) | | | | | |
| Asian American | .163 (.11) | -.102 (.11) | .207*** (.05) | .189*** (.05) | -.353*** (.09) | -.382*** (.10) | -.145 (.10) | -.159 (.10) | -.065 (.10) | -.053 (.10) | | | | | |
| Hispanic | -.154 (.22) | -.110 (.23) | -.113 (.10) | -.054 (.10) | .371 (.20) | .451* (.20) | -.138 (.19) | -.031 (.20) | -.136 (.20) | -.028 (.20) | | | | | |
| Parental Education | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Less than high school | -.080 (.37) | -.001 (.38) | -.450** (.17) | -.329 (.17) | .304 (.35) | .334 (.37) | .182 (.33) | .374 (.34) | .704 (.33) | .805* (.34) | | | | | |
| High school | .005 (.27) | .102 (.28) | -.436*** (.13) | -.335** (.13) | -.421 (.25) | -.412 (.26) | .073 (.25) | .269 (.25) | .024 (.25) | .123 (.25) | | | | | |
| Some college | .123 (.25) | .154 (.26) | -.285* (.12) | -.243 (.11) | -.313 (.23) | -.341 (.23) | -.147 (.22) | -.052 (.23) | -.226 (.22) | -.227 (.23) | | | | | |
| College | .038 (.23) | .027 (.23) | -.171 (.10) | -.158 (.10) | -.292 (.21) | -.319 (.21) | -.009 (.20) | -.080 (.21) | -.257 (.20) | -.283 (.20) | | | | | |
| Political Capital | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Partisanship | .227 (.12) | .239 (.12) | -.030 (.06) | -.031 (.05) | .223* (.11) | .211 (.11) | .136 (.10) | .109 (.11) | .226* (.11) | .226* (.11) | | | | | |
| Interest in politics | 1.554*** (.11) | 1.543*** (.12) | .221*** (.04) | .119* (.05) | .370*** (.09) | .333*** (.10) | .002 (.08) | -.059 (.10) | .486*** (.09) | .456*** (.10) | | | | | |
| Political knowledge | .070 (.07) | .070 (.07) | .009 (.03) | .008 (.03) | .214*** (.06) | .215*** (.06) | .178*** (.06) | .167** (.06) | .029 (.06) | .044 (.06) | | | | | |

(continued)

Table 5
(Continued)

| | Online Political Information Practices | | Civic Engagement | | | Voting in the Presidential Election | | | Political Action I: Signing Petition | | Political Action II: Other | |
|--|--|---------------------|------------------|----------------|----------------|-------------------------------------|----------------|---------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|--|
| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 | Model 6 | Model 7 | Model 8 | Model 9 | Model 10 | | |
| Civic engagement | — | — | — | — | .145* (.06) | .113 (.06) | .418*** (.06) | .352*** (.07) | .374*** (.06) | .341*** (.07) | | |
| Online political information practices | — | — | — | .260** (.09) | — | .137 (.18) | — | .111 (.17) | — | .072 (.18) | | |
| Internet Experiences | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Years of Internet use | — | .494 (0.56) | — | —0.062 (.26) | — | —0.11 (.52) | — | —0.434 (.50) | — | .679 (.51) | | |
| Number of access locations | — | .244 (.63) | — | 1.327*** (.28) | — | .171 (.57) | — | .481 (.55) | — | .739 (.57) | | |
| Time spent on Web weekly | — | .615** (.23) | — | .038 (.10) | — | .212 (.21) | — | —0.271 (.21) | — | .092 (.21) | | |
| Social network site use | — | .127 (.11) | — | .097* (.05) | — | .023 (.10) | — | .356*** (.09) | — | .182# (.10) | | |
| Internet skill | — | .357*** (.12) | — | .132* (.05) | — | .101 (.11) | — | .433*** (.11) | — | .040 (.11) | | |
| Intercept | —3.968*** (—8.83) | —9.361*** (2.36) | 1.729*** (.19) | —2.445* (1.04) | —2.03*** (.40) | —3.419 (2.12) | —1.07*** (.38) | —2.001 (2.04) | —3.233*** (.43) | —7.819*** (2.13) | | |
| N | 978 | 966 | 978 | 966 | 978 | 966 | 975 | 963 | 978 | 966 | | |
| Pseudo R ² | .275 | .298 | .077 | .132 | .112 | .119 | .057 | .087 | .087 | .097 | | |

Note: # $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

various realms (e.g., Correa, 2010; Hargittai & Walejko, 2008). Our results also support previous findings indicating a strong association between political interest and political information practices engagement more broadly (Zukin et al., 2006). These results lend support to H_{1a}.

Explaining Civic Engagement

Consistent with previous literature (e.g., McAdam & Brandt, 2009; Zukin et al., 2006), parental education, our proxy for socioeconomic status, exhibits a statistically significant relationship with traditional forms of civic engagement (see Model 3 in Table 5). Students who come from families where parents have lower levels of education (whether less than high school, high school or some college) are less likely to engage in civic activities than those who have at least one parent with a graduate degree. Our results also suggest that Asian American students are more likely to participate in such activities. Political interest also shows a strong relationship to this outcome.

In Model 4, we add online political information practices as well as other Internet experiences and Web-use skill to the model. Online political information practices are positively related to traditional forms of civic engagement. Additionally, autonomy of Internet use, engaging with social network sites and Internet skill also show a positive relationship to this outcome. The coefficient for Asian Americans decreased slightly, but remains statistically significant at the $p < 0.001$ level. The relationship of parental education, however, seems to be affected by some of the variables in the full model. This relationship merits further consideration as it suggests that skilled, autonomous Internet users who engage politically online and in social network site usage tend to pursue civic engagement to a greater extent than their socioeconomic peers. These results show support for H_{1b} and H_{2a}.

Explaining Voting in the Presidential Election

Consistent with the literature, results of the logistic regression looking at what explains voter participation in the 2008 presidential election (Model 5 in Table 5) suggest that female and African American students were more likely to vote while Asian American respondents show lower likelihood to have done so than Whites (Kirby & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2009). There is no relationship with our proxy for socioeconomic status, parental education. Partisanship, political interest, and political knowledge are all positively related to voting. Our findings also highlight a positive relationship between traditional measures of civic engagement and having cast a vote in the election despite the fact that the underlying correlation between these measures was weak ($\alpha = .07$).

Interestingly, the addition of Internet experiences including online political information practices results in very moderate changes in the findings and only a slight improvement in model fit. Women are even more likely to have voted,

Asian Americans are even less, but now Hispanic students exhibit a slightly higher likelihood of voter participation than Whites. Also, civic engagement is no longer related to voting. Notable is the absence of any relationship, whatsoever, between each of our Internet use variables and voting in the presidential election. That is, reading or discussing political content online, spending more time online, having been an Internet user longer, having more autonomy or higher skill, and engaging with social network sites are all unrelated to voting. Here we find no support for H_{1c} and H_{2b} , and only weak support for H_{3a} .

Explaining Political Engagement

Models 7 and 8 as well as 9 and 10 in Table 5 explore variations in non-voting forms of political participation, first for signing a petition, and then for more involved types of political action.¹ The results of Model 7 indicate that of the demographic and socioeconomic attributes, only gender and race have a relationship with signing a petition. Women were more likely to sign petitions while African American respondents were less likely to do so. As was the case for voting, political knowledge and civic engagement also have strong, positive associations with petition signing.

The addition of Internet experience measures in Model 8 reveals two additional explanatory factors of petition signing: social network site use and Internet skill. The strength and magnitude of these associations illustrate the salience of certain kinds of Internet experiences for one specific form of low-intensity political engagement.

For forms of political action that demonstrate more exceptional levels of engagement, Models 9 and 10 in Table 5 reveal some intriguing relationships in our data that deviate from our other outcome measures. Here we find no evidence of a relationship between gender, race or ethnicity and political action. However, we do see robust, positive associations between partisanship, political interest, civic engagement and political actions other than voting and petition signing. This is true despite the fact that, as with voting, our measures of civic engagement and political engagement were only weakly correlated ($\alpha = .22$ for signing a petition, $\alpha = .21$ for other political action). Adding Internet experience variables in Model 10 reveals that two additional factors help explain political action: social network site usage and low (less than high school) parental education. On the basis of these models, we find weak support for H_{1d} ; no support for H_{2c} ; and strong support for H_{3b} .

Taken together, the survey results indicate that several aspects of college students' Internet use help explain variations in their online political information practices, civic engagement, and some political engagement activities although not voting. Socioeconomic status, race, and gender, by contrast, matter to varying degrees for online political information practices, civic engagement, voting, and petition signing, but hardly at all for other forms of political engagement. As expected, political capital variables (i.e., political interest, knowledge and partisanship) play a significant role in explaining all of the outcomes of interest. Also, online political information practices help explain variations in civic engagement, which in turn

shows a strong positive association with both voting and other forms of political engagement.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results support recent research indicating that more skillful Internet use and social network site use can facilitate social capital building and political engagement (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; Hampton et al., 2009, 2011; Schlozman et al., 2010; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Smith et al., 2009; Vitak et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2010). This finding is especially important in light of the strong associations between social capital and democratic participation. We do not find evidence that college-age youth in Chicago around the time of the 2008 U.S. presidential election demonstrated extraordinary patterns of voting behavior or online political engagement. The glaring absence of any significant associations between the Internet-related variables and voting lends strong support to previous findings that the Internet does not directly affect this particular form of political participation (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; Bimber, 2001, 2003; Vromen, 2007; Xenos & Moy, 2007; Zhang et al., 2010).

However, our story becomes more complicated when we consider political activities that go beyond casting a ballot. Participation on social network sites and higher Web-use skills matter when it comes to explaining which people sign a petition. Furthermore, we see that social network site use also helps to explain more involved forms of political engagement such as volunteering, donation, and contacting political officials. In addition, we find support for an indirect relationship linking online political information practices through civic engagement to other forms of political engagement (including voting).

As a result, we conclude that the young people in our sample who use the Internet more actively do not appear less engaged nor less likely to participate in their communities than their counterparts. Nonetheless, more active Internet use alone is unlikely to overcome longstanding trends towards disengagement. We do find evidence that online social networking may bring about heightened political activity. We show that those individuals who possess the ability to navigate the Internet more skillfully are also more likely to engage in low-intensity forms of political action such as signing petitions. Inasmuch as Web-use skills are associated with other forms of socioeconomic status and privilege—and prior research has suggested that they are (Correa, 2010; Hargittai, 2010; van Deursen, 2010)—these results provide additional evidence that the mere presence of the Internet in society does not result in the transcendence of longstanding social inequalities. Indeed, our finding a relationship between Internet skills and petition signing arguably suggests that the facilitation of “clicktivism”—relatively “low quality” forms of engagement that do not enhance the deliberative character of a democracy—would be limited to those Internet users with the ability to click more effectively in the first place (Shulman, 2009).

This finding takes on added significance in light of previous work showing that young people's participation in civic, political and other sorts of engagement predicts their engagement levels later in life (McAdam & Brandt, 2009; McFarland & Thomas, 2006). Our results indicate that particular kinds of online behaviors—and in particular SNS usage—associate with enhanced democratic engagement. Future research should elaborate and test more specific mechanisms through which these online modes of participation may or may not contribute to the set of practices known to advance democratic engagement.

While our paper was able to address holes in the literature, important puzzles remain. More research needs to be done to understand what it is about social network site usage in particular that explains higher likelihood of engagement in political action and its relationship to traditional forms of civic engagement (Gil de Zúñiga & Valenzuela, 2011; Hampton, 2011; Vitak et al., 2011). It would be interesting to learn more about the processes that underlie the relationship between online political information practices and traditional forms of civic engagement and why they do not pertain similarly to political activities (Papacharissi, 2010). In addition, given the unique characteristics of the sample population included in this study and the timing of the survey administration following the 2008 presidential election, it would be important to revisit these questions in light of future data. Hopefully our findings encourage the collection of appropriately detailed, and longitudinal data on engagement and Internet experiences. Likewise, the question remains whether any of the associations we observe here may or may not also become national phenomena. Our results that Web skills and SNS usage associate strongly with civic engagement activities is particularly relevant in light of past findings that youth voluntary association participation contributes to engagement later in life (McFarland & Thomas, 2006). Future research can assess whether or not these associations are additive or causal. Furthermore, our findings that various measures of Internet use, Web-use skills, and Web autonomy help explain online political information practices, civic engagement, petition signing, and political engagement activities lend strong support to the claim that Internet use is a differentiated phenomenon whose variations matter for a wide range of social, economic, and political outcomes.

Note

¹While voting correlates with the other forms of political engagement ($\alpha = .12$ for signing a petition, $\alpha = .17$ for other political action), we chose to leave it out of Models 7–10 to preserve analytical and conceptual clarity of our results. Post-hoc testing revealed that the results reported in both of these models are robust to the inclusion of voting.

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