ONLINE AND OFFLINE POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AMONG TEENS AND YOUNG ADULTS

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Abstract

of

ONLINE AND OFFLINE POLITICAL ENGAGMENT AMONG TEENS AND YOUNG ADULTS

by

Brittany Petitt

Teens and Young adults are adopting internet-based tools, websites, and applications as sources of information and discussion on political matters. Age is currently a better indicator of political engagement online than both education and income. As this younger generation becomes part of political life, their comfort with online political engagement will likely continue. But what does this mean for the more traditional types of activity in which people engage offline? The purpose of this study is to address that question, taking an exploratory look at the relationship between online and offline political engagement among American youth.

To address the research question, I used panel survey data from the 2013 and 2014 waves of the Youth Participatory Politics Survey conducted by the Growth from Knowledge Group as part of the MacArthur Network on Youth and Participatory Politics. I focus on overall political engagement as well as two specific activities that have direct online and offline counterparts, joining a political group and signing a petition.

I concluded that there is a strong positive relationship between online and offline political engagement for both waves of the survey. Additionally, participating in a political activity that has a direct offline counterpart is associated with an even higher likelihood of participating in both forms of political activity. Issues of establishing causal order remain. However, my research suggests that, at minimum, concern that online activity is preventing young people from engaging in traditional politics may be misplaced.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

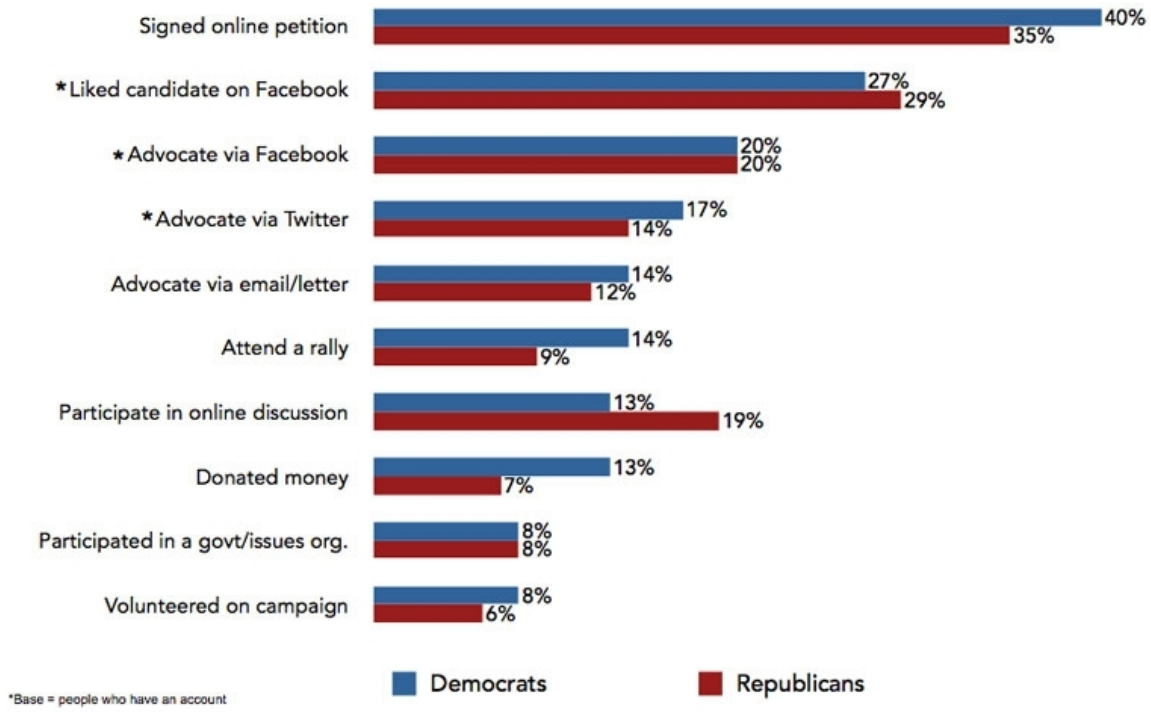
All forms of *New Media* that have risen out of the creation of the Internet represent a fundamental shift in human communication and this shift is changing our modern cultural and political landscape. *New Media* is a term that broadly refers to any media that radically departs from traditional mass-media models that are part of tried-and-true business plans of broadcast media, mass communication, and popular culture of the past (Hartley, Burgess, & Burns, 2013). Internet based forms of *New Media* include blogs, online news sources, mobile applications and social networking sites to name a few. *New Media* is breaking down traditional barriers to cultural and political production and circulation, giving rise to a new participatory culture (Kahne, Ellen, & Danielle Allen, 2014). *New Media*, and especially social networking sites, allow for the circumvention of traditional gatekeepers of information such as newspapers, magazines, television, and even political parties, providing a wide variety of opportunities for political engagement. Both individuals and political organizers are turning to these *New Media* resources to increase political engagement.

Teens and Young adults are especially eager to adopt innovations tailored to virtual spaces. For younger people, internet-based tools, websites, and applications are steadily becoming the norm for engagement in all aspects of life. Young people have more advanced computer skills and access to better technologies compared to their older counterparts. As a result, age is a better indicator of political engagement online than both education and income (Krueger, 2002). This divide is changing how younger generations

relate to politics compared to past generations. After the 2018 primary in the United States, one survey found that 47 percent of respondents 18-24 years old learned about the election from at least one of the four most popular social media platforms, compared to 13 percent who learned about the election from only traditional outreach methods (CIRCLE, 2018). Figure 1.1 below is based on a survey of respondents 18-29 years old and provides a snapshot of the overall political involvement of younger Americans. The figure clearly shows that online forms of political engagement have higher participation than offline forms of engagement, regardless of political party. However, surveys like this do not investigate whether the same individuals are engaging both online and offline.

Figure 1.1: Details on How Democrats and Republicans Engage Politically, Online and Off

Source: Harvard IOP, 2015



Political organizers should look to these emerging trends and engage with young people in the spaces where they are most active. Utilizing this new method of political engagement may be a way to target young people who are not currently being reached by traditional outreach methods. However, before investing important resources into this approach, it is reasonable to ask whether high levels of political engagement online necessarily lead to increased offline political activity. That is the topic for the present research. More specifically, this thesis will conduct a quantitative analysis of survey data to investigate whether American teens and young adults who are politically engaged online are more likely to be involved in political activities offline. While some have explored this topic, the answer remains unclear.

Panel Survey Data

The survey data used in this analysis is part of a panel study on media use and participatory politics. I will be analyzing data from two waves conducted in 2013 and 2015. I chose to use this data set for three reasons: 1) I felt the survey questions could accurately represent the research question I am exploring; 2) panel data gives me the opportunity to quickly check my analysis against data collected at another time; and 3) significant changes in participant responses over time could be relevant to future research.

Definition of Youth

Before proceeding further, I need to address the question of how *youth* is defined. In prior studies, ages included in the youth demographic vary depending on the issue discussed. Much of the research and data on youth political engagement focuses solely on people of voting age. For example, the United States Census Bureau provides extensive

data on voter turnout and reports the youngest age block as 18-24. Most research regarding political engagement online focuses on this age group and pays little attention to similar online activities among teenagers. Although voting is considered a particularly important aspect of political engagement, it is by no means the only way to take political action offline. The survey data used in my own study does include teenagers aged 15 and above along with voting age young adults. Although this study does not focus exclusively on teenagers, their experiences are included in this analysis of youth political engagement as a window into the future of the online/offline political engagement dynamic.

Why include teens under the voting age?

As discussed earlier, young people are usually considered early adopters of technology. The Pew Research Center recently released a study that revealed that 95 percent of teens have access to a smartphone and 45 percent of teens report being online almost constantly (2018). Smartphone access is also nearly universal among teens of different genders, races and ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds (Pew Research Center, 2018). Teens are heavy social media users, with one study finding that 70 percent reported using social media multiple times a day (Rideout & Robb, 2018). Teens are not only using social media to communicate with friends and family. A recent study found that 34 percent of teens prefer to get their news from social networking sites compared to 9 percent of adults (Robb, 2017). Teens' preference for social media as a source of information and method of communication is likely to continue into adulthood.

In addition, teens are taking real political action today and have spearheaded political movements on issues that directly affect their lives. Teens are using their

knowledge of social media to get their message out and encourage their peers to become politically active. 2018's March for Our Lives and 2019's Youth Climate Strike are two recent youth-driven political movements that perfectly illustrate the need to include non-voting age teens in a study about online political engagement and offline political action. March for Our Lives is a movement that arose out of a tragic mass shooting at a high school in Florida. Student survivors from this event banned together and organized national school walkouts, and a march on Washington D.C, to protest the lack of government action to enact gun laws addressing the modern epidemic of mass shootings (Shabad, Bailey & McCausland, 2018). The Youth Climate Strike is another youth lead movement that included hundreds of thousands of young people across the globe to protest the failure of all governments to institute meaningful climate protections to ensure a healthy environment for future generations (Sengupta, 2019). Both movements demonstrate that, even though teens may not be able to influence politics though the vote, they are able to take real world political action in other ways.

Summary

The way young people choose to be politically active is clearly shifting to online spaces. Even so, real world political activities are still an important part of political life as the March for our lives and the Youth Climate Strike examples demonstrate. Even though these social movements heavily leveraged social media, the real-world demonstrations and school walkouts were vital to getting the teens' political message taken seriously. Clearly, young people today have the ability to leverage social media as a mode of organization for widespread political movement. However, the question remains as to the extent to which

online and offline activities are connected, which is why this topic should be investigated further. Chapter 2 of this paper will look at what previous literature has to say about social media activism and political participation. Chapter 3 will describe the survey data used and the method of analysis. Chapters 4 and 5 will discuss the subsequent findings and explain the potential implications.

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The field of political engagement provides a wealth of research on traditional forms of political activity. However, political engagement online is relatively new in the field and, although gaining in popularity, existing research on this topic is less common. Empirical research on the relationship between online political engagement and offline political activity is even less common. Surveys, like those conducted by the Pew Research Foundation, are often the best sources for information on the forms of online and offline political activity the public currently engage in. This chapter provides an overview of relevant academic research on traditional theories of political engagement, an overview of participatory politics, and an overview of existing research on political engagement online.

Civic Voluntarism Model

Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) outlined the Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM) of political engagement in their seminal work *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics.* This model claims that political engagement stems from an individual's resources, political engagements, and recruitment through social networks. Individuals need to have money, time and civic skills in order to participate in political activity. CVM points to three basic attributes of people who choose to be politically active: they can, they want to, and somebody asked (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995).

CVM emphasizes the importance of developing civic skills. Civic skills are learned throughout an individual's life, starting with engaging with institutions in a person's formative years and participating in political or non-political voluntary associations in later

life (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995). Examples of non-political associations are civic-oriented groups such as philanthropic organizations, local school or religious volunteer groups or any number of community groups. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) observed that people who engaged in non-political civic activity built a foundation of communication and organizational skills that are applicable to political engagement. CVM claims that those individuals who possess civic skills will find political engagement less daunting and will be more likely to become politically active. Specific examples include formal letter writing, organizing meetings and practicing public speaking (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995). Becoming involved with voluntary associations also broadens an individual's social network, thereby increasing the likelihood that he or she will be invited to participate in political activity.

Critique of Civic Voluntarism

Theiss-Morse and Hibbing (2005) critique the claim that participating in voluntary associations will produce the desired effect of increasing political engagement. Politics is a messy, conflict ridden sphere of public life many people find distasteful. They make the counterclaim that civic participation may actually turn people off of politics, leaving them less, not more, politically engaged (Theiss-Morse & Hibbing, 2005). In contrast to political groups, civic oriented organizations focus on service goals in a community and endeavor to maintain group harmony. Therefore, individuals may join civic oriented groups as a way to avoid politics rather than a first step into political life. Theiss-Morse & Hibbing (2005) go on to critique researchers' failure to consider that ordinary citizens simply are not interested in politics and suggest that gaining civic skills through voluntarism may not help.

Education, Age, Gender

Education

Level of educational attainment is often cited as a reliable indicator of political engagement, especially voter turnout (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995; Leighley, Nagler, & Nagler, Jonathan, 2014). Voter turnout has a positive relationship with education, meaning the higher level of formal education a person attains, the higher the likelihood he or she will vote (Leighley, Nagler, & Nagler, Jonathan, 2014). Educational attainment is also associated with higher levels of civic activity outside of traditional political organizations (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Educational attainment can be viewed as a proxy for socioeconomic status in general. Individuals with high levels of education are more likely to have parents with high levels of education and the resources to send their children to college. Education also influences an individual's life chances in areas such as occupational options and income potential (Leighley, Nagler, & Nagler, Jonathan, 2014). Income is another attribute that is positively correlated with voter turnout and is often used to measure socioeconomic status as well (Leighley, Nagler, & Nagler, Jonathan, 2014). Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) looked at both education and income in their study of civic and political engagement and found that patterns of engagement were very similar for both education and income. One possible explanation could be that, in general, more highly educated people have higher incomes and people with higher incomes are more likely to be highly educated.

Age

Established theories on the association between age and political engagement focus on voter turnout as the most important measurement. Age is consistently shown to have a strong positive relationship with voting, meaning that as a person ages he or she is more likely to vote. Research demonstrates that age is the only demographic characteristic shown to have a greater effect on voter turnout than education and income (Leighley, Nagler, & Nagler, 2014). This is partly because age can be viewed as a proxy for life experience, especially for lower income and lower educated individuals. Literature that addresses ways to increase youth political engagement primarily focuses on civic education and its role in shaping citizens who will be politically active in later life. Teenage and young adulthood are considered years in which an individual's perception of politics and political life can me molded. Civic education, especially in schools, is seen as an antidote to low political engagement among young people by providing essential knowledge of the importance of politics and providing the skills needed to meaningfully engage in political life (Galston, 2004).

Gender

Gender is also considered by some to be a potential determinant of political engagement. Women historically have been less politically active in general due to a variety of societal constraints and they continue to be underrepresented in political office in the United States as well as democracies across the globe (Githens, 2003). Established theories point to women's lack of access to resources such as time, money, and civic skills, compared to men, as a possible explanation for continued differences in political activity

(Schlozman, Burns, & Verba, 1994). Family commitments are a major factor that lead to differing levels of participation. Women who are caregivers for family members and children may have less time to dedicate to learning about politics and engaging in political activities (Schlozman, Burns, & Verba, 1994). However, two recent studies looked specifically at adolescents and found no meaningful differences in gender and overall political interest among this younger population (Hooghe, & Stolle, 2004; Eckstein, Noack, & Gniewosz, 2012). It may be that earlier findings to the contrary are somewhat time bound.

Participatory Culture

Participatory Culture is a term used to describe the new social dynamics that have risen out of the decentralized, user-driven nature of *New Media*. Jenkins (2009) developed the standard definition of *participatory culture*, describing it as "a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices" (pg. xi). An important aspect of *participatory culture* is that members believe their contributions matter, feel connection with one another, and care about the opinions of their peers. Jenkins (2009) identifies the following elements of *participatory culture*:

> **Affiliations**: Memberships, formal and informal, in online communities centered around various forms of media, such as Friendster, Facebook, MySpace, message boards, metagaming, or game clans.

Expressions: Producing new creative forms, such as digital sampling, skinning and modding, fan videos, fan fiction, zines, or mash-ups.

Collaborative problem solving: Working together in teams, formal and informal, to complete tasks and develop new knowledge, such as through Wikipedia, alternative reality gaming, or spoiling.

Circulations: Shaping the flow of media, such as podcasting or blogging. (pg. xi)

Group affiliation, personal expression, collaborative problem solving and circulating material are all part of traditional forms of cultural creation. The unique aspect of *participatory culture* is the ability of individuals to access the tools of creation and dissemination of content. The traditional gatekeepers of cultural production are taken out of the equation. Individuals can organize their own affiliations, produce unique cultural products on their own, build coalitions of collaborators on a project from around the world and express their personal views to a wide audience.

Participatory Politics

Participatory politics is the political counterpart to *participatory culture* and arises out of the same technologies and shift in forms of communication. This definition of *participatory politics* is distinctive from general political science definitions of participatory democracy and participatory politics which deal with broader theories of democratic political systems (Kahne, Middaugh, & Allen, 2014). The modern conceptualization of *participatory politics* addresses political activity that involves peer-to-peer forms of organization that exist outside of politics as usual. *New Media* and *participatory culture* are opening new opportunities to participate in civic and political life

in ways that did not exist in the past. Drawing from Jenkins' (2009) definition of *participatory culture*, Kahne, Middaugh, and Allen (2014) identified the following elements of *participatory politics*:

Investigation: Community Members actively seek out, collect, and analyze information, to check the veracity of information that is circulated by institutions, such as newspapers and political candidates.

Dialogue and feedback: A high degree of dialogue and feedback exists among community members on issues of public concern and the decisions of civic and political leaders. Dialogue can take place by commenting on blogs as well as engaging in other digital or face-to-face interactions.

Production: Community members create original content that allows them to advance their own perspectives such as a blog post or political video.

Circulation: The flow of information is shaped by many in the broader community rather than by a small group of elites. This might include posting content to a group site, forwarding links to political information, or sharing information at a face-to-face meeting.

Mobilization: Community members utilize their social network to rally others to help accomplish civic or political goals.

Participatory politics has the potential to circumvent traditional gatekeepers of political influence, such as newspapers and political parties, allowing individuals to shape the political narrative. Political engagement online also has the potential to enhance the voices of traditionally marginalized groups. Circumventing traditional media sources allows for the creation of counter-narratives created by groups themselves, provides better

representation, and forwards dialogue on issues a group finds important (Stornaiuolo, & Thomas, 2017). For example, undocumented youth advocating for the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act benefited from opportunities to share their own unique experiences and recruit other undocumented youth into the movement through the use of social media. Social media activism on this issue is credited with politicizing youth who otherwise were not interested in engaging with traditional institutions and demonstrating that they could have political power, despite their undocumented status (Zimmerman, 2012). The example of DREAMer activism illustrates the power of participatory politics to enhance democratic political movements and engage marginalized members of society in the political process.

Blurred Lines

Political participation is broadly defined as an "activity that is intended to or has the consequence of affecting, either directly or indirectly, government action" (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995, pg. 37). The "directly or indirectly" concept is especially relevant to political expression online. Political activity online is not confined to explicitly political spaces; nor does it necessarily resemble traditional political discourse. Youth often use metaphors drawn from popular culture for political ends and share political opinions throughout their participation in a variety of online communities. A notable example is the Harry Potter Alliance, a social group inspired by the Harry Potter book series, which worked to organize fans around philanthropic issues such as raising humanitarian aid (Kligler-Vilenchik & Shresthova, 2012). The Harry Potter alliance is an example of fan activism. Fan activism can be described as efforts to address civic or political issues

through engagement with and strategic deployment of popular culture content, leveraging the infrastructure of existing fan-based networks (Jenkins, 2015; Brough, & Shresthova, 2012). Jenkins (2015) observed that, through the use of pop icons, fan-based activism has the ability to easily frame issues in a way young people can understand and *New Media* platforms can quickly disseminate information to educate potential supporters.

Criticism of Online Political Activity

While the democratizing potential of *participatory politics* is encouraging, it is not a shortcut to increased genuine political engagement. Critics point to several negative qualities of online political activity that may actually impede an individual's ability to engage meaningfully. Sobieraj and Berry (2011) found that political discourse on blogs included more uncivil language compared to discussions on television or radio, raising concerns about the quality of political discourse online. A study of youth experiences of political discourse online identified that online spaces which hold the most potential for political dialogue, news sources with comment threads and social media, exposed youth to heightened levels of conflict (Middaugh, Bowyer, & Kahne, 2017). Since youth are more likely to consume news from online sources and are the heaviest users of social media, young people today may be exposed to higher levels of conflict in political discourse than previous generations. Youth are also more likely to experience conflict in interest-driven communities, such as a fan group, versus friendship-driven communities, such as Facebook (Middaugh, Bowyer, & Kahne, 2017). Exposure to conflict matters because it may be a factor in an individual's choice to opt out of future political engagement (Middaugh, Bowyer, & Kahne, 2017; Theiss-Morse & Hibbing, 2005).

Believers in the power of *participatory politics* to foster political engagement assume that political engagement in online spaces is distinct from offline political engagement. However, there is a lack of empirical research that looks at whether or not *participatory politics* online is just a new interpretation of existing political engagement theories. It could be that there are no meaningful differences in political engagement outcomes as a result of participation in political activity online It may be that the same people who participate online are already participating offline. One study of youth online political engagement found that the level of political engagement online is driven by political interest and was closely associated with education and family background (Keating, & Melis, 2017). This study seems to support Verba, Schlozman, and Brady's (1995) conclusion that individuals need to have money, time and civic skills in order to be politically active. These factors may still be the most important determinants of political engagement both online and offline. Furthermore, existing research has not explored whether the skills young people learn to engage politically online are useful in offline political situations. In alignment with Theiss-Morse and Hibbing's (2005) critique of civic voluntarism's potential to foster political engagement, perhaps some people just do not want to participate and providing more opportunities to shape political discourse will not encourage someone to become politically engaged if they are not already interested in becoming politically active.

Survey of Related Research

The majority of empirical research on youth political participation online focuses on questions of how, where, and why youth are politically engaged (Literat, Kligler-

Vilenchik, Brough, & Blum-Ross, 2018; Bennett, Wells, & Freelon, 2011) A diverse body of work makes the case that *participatory politics* and *participatory culture* are intrinsically linked for youth, resulting in much of youth political activity happening within mediums that act as both cultural and political tools (Jenkins, 2015; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2013; Bond et al, 2012; Kligler-Vilenchik & Shresthova, 2012). The majority of research on youth political engagement online is primarily focused on dynamics and goals of groups that participate in political activities both online and offline rather than group members as individual political actors (Bennett, Wells, & Freelon, 2011; Literat, Kligler-Vilenchik, Brough, & Blum-Ross, 2018).

Kahne and Bowyer (2018) looked at the relationship between an individual's frequency of participation in interest-based or friend-based online activity and an individual's political activity both online and offline. They found that participation in friend-based activity is associated with an increase in online political activity and interest-based activity is associated with an increase in offline political activity (Kahne, & Bowyer, 2018). However, they did not look specifically at the relationship between participating in political activity online and also participating in offline political activity. Bond et al. (2012) conducted a more targeted analysis of the relationship between social ties and political activity offline. Bond et al. (2012) conducted an extensive analysis of 61 million Facebook users to understand how encouragement within social networks affected an individual's likelihood to vote. They ultimately found that encouragement by close friends did increase voter turnout but encouragement from acquaintances was less effective.

In 2013, the Pew Research center conducted an exhaustive survey of online and offline political activities (Smith, 2013). This study asked adults in the United States detailed questions about their political activities. However, only one question was asked about engaging in political activities both online and offline. The survey revealed that overall, social networking sites are not a separate realm of political activity for most politically active users. For example, findings indicated that politically active social networking site users frequently also engage in civic activities offline. However, in the18-29 age range, 57 percent reported that they only participate in political activities on social networking sites and only 32 percent reported that they engaged politically on social media and other venues (Smith, 2013). The disparity between these two statistics is startling. As this survey and the literature discussed in this section demonstrate, young people are gravitating to online spaces as a form of political engagement. Research on this topic is working on a dangerous assumption that political engagement online will necessarily carry over to its offline counterparts. It is important to look at this direct relationship and identify future research approaches to fill this gap in the existing literature.

Summary

A rich body of research has examined political participation as it relates to traditional forms of political activity. However, the adoption of decentralized *New Media* changed the way people consume and produce culture which in turn changed how people participate politically. Existing research on youth engagement in the realm of *participatory politics* is primarily concerned with political activity online and pays little attention to the translation of online activity to offline activity. It is important not to make assumptions

about the influence political engagement online may have on political activity offline and take a critical look at the relationship between online and offline political engagement.

Chapter 3

METHODS

Many potential avenues exist to investigate a given research question and it is important to be clear about the specific methods used to maintain a clear research approach. The central research question of this thesis is as follows: Is political engagement online associated with political activity offline? I will investigate this question using secondary data, which is data that was collected by someone other than myself. In this chapter, I will lay out the approach used to investigate my research question. I will provide a description of the survey data used, outline the independent and dependent variables, as well as provide a description of the method of analysis.

Description of Data

The data set I chose to use is the Youth Participatory Politics Survey conducted by the Growth from Knowledge Group as part of the MacArthur Network on Youth and Participatory Politics (Cohen & Kahne, 2018). The survey examined the use of *New Media* technologies among young people in the United States aged 15 through 29 and includes multiple measures of online and offline political engagement. The survey asked questions about political and civic attitudes, media practices, community involvement, political engagement, news sources, and social influences. The Youth Participatory Politics Survey is an ambitious nationally representative three-wave panel survey of young people in the United States conducted in 2011, 2013 and 2015 (Cohen & Kahne, 2018). The survey data is carefully crafted to provide responses from the same participants to the same questions at different points in time. However, the researchers made changes to the survey

methodology after the 2011 survey. To maintain consistency, this thesis will only utilize the data collected in 2013 and 2015 (waves 2 and 3). Additionally, only respondents who completed both wave 2 and wave 3 are included in the data set.

The Youth Participatory Politics Survey acquired its population sample from KnowledgePanel®, a probability-based web panel designed to be representative of the United States, as well as a sample drawn from the U.S. Postal Service Delivery Sequence File (Cohen & Kahne, 2018). Wave 2 was administered both online and through telephone interviews, while wave 3 was administered entirely online. Wave 2 was conducted between July and November 2013, sampling 2,343 US residents aged between 15–27 years old. Wave 3 was conducted between June and November 2015 and raised the upper age limit to 29 years old. The survey was also administered in both English and Spanish-language versions.

Research Method

Political engagement online is a relatively new area of research and, as discussed in the literature review, most of the existing research focuses solely on the ways in which people engage politically online. Little existing research is focused on the translation of political activity online into real-world activity. There are a variety of methods that can be used to investigate a research question. Qualitative methods, such as case studies, and quantitative methods, such as multivariate regression analysis, are common methods used in previous literature on this topic. Case studies are frequently used due to the complex nature of online communities. Less quantitative research has been applied to the translation of online political activity to offline political activity. In light of this gap, I will conduct an

exploratory study to see if a relationship exists that warrants further investigation. I will utilize descriptive statistics to identify patterns in the data that can be investigated in future research. I will be conducting bivariate analyses of sets of two variables to determine whether a relationship is likely to exist and how much influence one variable has on the other. Descriptive bivariate analysis does not take into account all of the possible variables that could affect the relationship between the variables I have chosen to analyze and there is a possibility for omitted variable bias. Despite these limitations, an exploratory study that utilizes descriptive statistics will still provide useful information to direct future research.

Causal Assumptions

As previously stated, the type of exploratory study I will conduct will not attempt to establish causality. Even so, I am approaching the research question with implicit assumptions about the expected relationships between variables. I assume that the more a person engages online, the more he or she will engage in offline political activity. Specifically, I assume that online political activity will encourage an individual to be more politically active offline. It is important to note that the relationship could exist in the opposite direction. It is possible that being politically active offline could lead to increased online political activity. The important question for this thesis is to discover if a relationship between the two exists to inform future research.

Dependent Variables: Offline Political Activities

Some political activities have online and offline forms that are essentially equivalent such as signing a petition, donating to a political candidate, or contacting elected

representatives. Other political activities have no equivalent online counterpart such as demonstrating, attending a political event, and volunteering for a campaign. While campaigns may have online outreach efforts that volunteers take part in, the assumption here is that at least some offline activity will be a part of volunteering for a political campaign. The dependent variables included in this thesis were chosen to most closely represent political activities that are traditionally conducted offline.

Table 3.1: Dependent Variables

Offline Political Activity: measures respondents' participation in real world political events
Offline Political Group Membership: measures respondents' status as members of a political group that meets face-to-face
Offline Petition Signature: measures respondents' act of signing in-person political petitions

Offline Political Activity is a composite variable that combines a respondent's participation in six specific real-world political activities including: attend a political meeting, rally, speech, or dinner; work for a political campaign; or actively engage in a political group that meets face-to-face. If a respondent replied yes to taking part in at least one of these activities, they are considered to be politically active offline. Offline Political Group Membership is a measure of just one of the political activities included in the composite variable, participation in a political group that meets face-to-face. Offline Petition Signature is an offline counterpart to signing an online political petition. All three of these variables are measured as (1) Yes and (2) No with *yes* meaning a respondent has participated in the activity and *no* meaning the respondent has not participated in the listed activity.

Independent Variables: Online Political Activities

The Youth and Participatory Politics Panel Survey contains numerous questions about specific political activities one may engage in online. I chose to include one broad measure of political engagement online and two specific measures of political engagement online.

Table 3.2: Independent Variables

Frequency of Political Discussion Online: measures how often respondents discuss politics online
Virtual Political Group Membership: measures respondent's status as members of a political group on a social networking site
Online Petition Signature: measures respondent's act of signing an online petition

Frequency of Political Discussion Online is a broad measure of how often a respondent participates in political discussions online in general. This variable was chosen because it is not dependent on a respondent's use of any single social networking site or web-based platform, capturing the overall level of political discussion online. The Frequency of Political Discussion Online variable is measured as (1) Never, (2) Rarely, (3) Sometimes, (4) Often. Virtual Political Group Membership is a specific measure of a respondent's membership in a political group on a social media website. Online Petition Signature is a measure of a respondent's signature of a political petition online. Both the Virtual Political Group Membership and Online Petition Signature are measured Yes (1) and No (2).

Test for Independence and Association

To test for a possible relationship, I conducted chi-Square Tests of Independence. The chi-Square test determines whether there is an association between two categorical

variables (i.e., whether the variables are independent or related). Chi-square tests utilize a measure of association to produce a single summarizing number that reflects the strength of the relationship between variables, indicating the usefulness of predicting the dependent variable from the independent variable. The measure of association chosen depends on the type of categorical variables used in the analysis. This study uses both ordinal and dichotomous nominal variables. The Frequency of Political Discussion Online variable is considered ordinal because the rank of the responses is meaningful. The remaining variables are considered dichotomous nominal variables because there are only two categories of responses (yes and no) and there is no meaningful ranking between them. The measure of association that can be used for both types of categorical variables is Gamma and this measure of association was used for each analysis discussed in the next chapter.

Control Variables

Although this thesis does not set out to conduct a truly multivariate analysis, it will be useful to set a couple of common control variables. It is possible that an apparent relationship between variables may actually be due to an underlying relationship with another variable. I chose to include only two control variables, education, and gender, as a starting point for a deeper analysis of the relationship between variables.

Table 3.3: Control Variables

Education: A respondent's attendance or graduation from college
Gender: A respondent's gender

Education is an important variable to consider in political participation research because, as discussed in the literature review, educational attainment can be a predictor of political engagement in general. Because the survey is comprised of young people, some of whom are still in high school, it is important to note that the education control variable only takes into account respondents who have graduated from high school and therefore have the opportunity to attend college. The education variable is recoded into (1) some college experience or graduated college and (2) no college experience. The second control variable, gender, is important to consider because this could also have an underlying relationship which could affect the results. Gender is simply recorded as male (1) or female (2).

Summary

This chapter outlined the approach I took to investigate my research question: Is political engagement online associated with political activity offline? I used panel survey data conducted at two points in time, 2013 and 2015, to conduct a bivariate analysis of variables with the chi-square statistic and the gamma measure of association. Although this type of descriptive statistics limits the number of control variables that can be applied to the analysis, I used two basic control variables, education, and gender, to add a second layer to my analysis.

Chapter 4

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The previous chapter outlined my research approach; this chapter presents the results of my analysis. Again, the overarching research question for my thesis is whether political engagement online is associated with political activity offline. I will also address two questions regarding specific political actions that can be done both online and offline: joining a political group and signing a petition. The results for each question are grouped based on the date of each study year and discussed together. While I conducted many statistical tests, I have attempted to make this chapter as clear as possible by presenting only the most important information. The full bivariate results for both waves of the survey are presented and analyzed first followed by summarized results for analysis adding control variables.

Technical Points

Interpreting Chi-Square Tests

The chi-square test for independence is appropriate when the independent and dependent variables are both categorical, as is the case with the variables used in this thesis. The resulting chi-square statistic identifies whether an independent variable and dependent variable are statistically independent of each other. If the variables are statistically independent, there is no relationship between the variables and a person's response to the independent variable does not help predict their response to the dependent variable. If the variables are found to be statistically dependent, then there is a relationship between the variables and a response to the independent variable can help predict the response to the

dependent variable. The null hypothesis for a chi-square test is always that there is no relationship and the alternative hypothesis is that there is a relationship. The larger a chi-square statistic is, the more likely there is a relationship between the variables; a significance level is used to determine whether the null hypothesis should be accepted or rejected. To reject the null hypothesis, I have chosen to set a significance level of .01, meaning that there is less than one in a hundred likelihood that a chi-square statistic as high as I found would occur by chance alone.

The chi-Square statistic only demonstrates that there is a relationship between variables but does not indicate the strength of that relationship. If the alternative hypothesis is accepted and a relationship exists, measures of association determine the strength or magnitude of the relationship. The measure of association chosen is based on the type of variables used in the analysis. This thesis will use gamma which measures the strength of the relationship and the direction of the relationship, either positive or negative. Gamma ranges from -1.00 (a perfect negative relationship) to +1.00 (a perfect positive relationship), with zero meaning no relationship. A negative relationship indicates that as the values of one variable increase the values of the other decrease. A positive relationship indicates the opposite. For the purposes of interpreting the strength of the relationship: between 0 and ±19 is considered weak, ±.20 to ±.39 is considered moderate, ±.40 to ±.59 is considered strong, and ±.60 to ±1.00 is considered very strong. It is important to remember that this type of analysis only identifies independence and association between variables which is different than identifying a causal relationship. It is possible that other omitted variables may be the real driving force behind the relationship, or that the direction of causality is

the reverse of what is expected. As stated previously, this thesis is an exploratory study and additional variables may be included in future research if a relationship is identified.

After running the chi-square results, I identified that a couple of modifications needed to be made for the chi-square results to be valid. The chi-square statistic is a measure of the difference between the observed responses and the expected responses if there is no relationship between variables. For a chi-square test to be valid there must be a certain number of responses in each cell. I identified that I needed to make adjustments to ensure that all tests met the required number of responses in each cell. For the variable that measures frequency of political discussion online, I combined the "sometimes discusses politics online" and "often discusses politics online" categories to meet the threshold of expected values needed to run a chi-square test. For the tests that look at membership in a political group and signature of petitions, I used Fisher's exact test which is a variation of the chi square test for independence. Fisher's exact test is appropriate and commonly used for 2x2 tests using dichotomous variables, especially when the number of values in the cells is small enough as to make chi-square test results unreliable. Fisher's exact test does not produce a number value like chi-square but does provide a significance level for the probability that the observed relationship would exist by chance.

Missing Data

In the chi-square tables provided below, there is a category of data titled *missing*. Missing data in a survey indicates when a respondent, referred to as a case, did not answer the question or answered the question with a value not identified by the survey. Missing data can present a problem for data analysis when there is a high rate of non-response,

which can bias the findings, and when missing data is coded in a way that interferes with conducting the analysis. In the case of the data set used here, there are some missing values. However, the rate of non-response is only 5.4 percent or less for all variables. Considering that the data set is large, 1033 respondents for both waves of the survey, there is a small amount of missing data and this should not bias the results. On the issue of coding and analysis, the data analysis program codes all the missing data as "systems missing" data which standardizes the missing data into one simple code. The tool used to conduct the statistical analysis for this thesis is SPSS. SPSS has a standard way of addressing systems missing data for a chi-square statistic; it simply removes all the cases of missing data and only calculates available data. This effectively makes the sample size smaller. However, considering how few cases were removed, there should not be a significant effect on the results. The missing data is still included in the table to maintain consistency among each table and transparently identify the differences in how many cases are used in each analysis.

Bivariate Results

Overall Political Activity

Table 4.1: Overall Political Activity in 2013

		Discuss Politics Online			
		Sometimes or Often	Rarely	Never	**Total**
Politically Active Offline	Politically Active	52 43.0%	54 18.1%	31 38.0%	137 14.0%
	Not Politically Active	69 57.0%	244 81.9%	527 57.0%	840 86.0%
	Total	121 100.0%	298 100.0%	558 100.0%	977 100%
	Missing Cases	56 5.4% of 1033			
Gamma: .672* Chi Square: 121.462 with 3 degrees of freedom *Statistically Significant at .000					

Table 4.2: Overall Political Activity in 2015

		Discuss Politics Online			
		Sometimes or Often	Rarely	Never	**Total**
Politically Active Offline	Politically Active	48 42.1%	38 12.7%	34 5.6%	120 11.8%
	Not Politically Active	66 57.9%	262 87.3%	573 94.4%	901 88.2%
	Total	114 100.0%	300 100.0%	607 100.0%	1021 100.0%
	Missing Cases	12 1.2% of 1033			
Gamma: .638, Statistically significant at .001 Chi Square: 123.648 with 3 degrees of freedom, Statistically significant at .000					

Analysis

Table 4.1 and 4.2 presented above display the results of running a chi-square test including all survey respondents for the 2013 and 2014 waves of the survey. The first thing that jumps out is the high chi-square test value and the very high level of statistical significance; clearly there is a relationship between discussing politics online and engaging in political activity offline for both waves of the survey. The gamma value identified that the relationship is very strong for both waves, .672 in 2013 and .638 in 2015. Gamma identifies the relationship as positive, meaning that respondents who discuss politics online are far more likely to be politically active offline, and vice versa. Gamma for 2015 is slightly weaker, but considering the strength of the relationship, I do not think this small change is meaningful. Overall, the chi-square results from both waves of the survey were remarkably similar and I am confident that the relationship is stable over time. It is important to note the low number of survey respondents who took part in political activity of any kind, both online and offline. To reiterate, offline political activity included engaging in one or more of the following activities in the previous year: attending a political meeting, rally, speech, or dinner; working for a political campaign; or being active in a political group that meets face-to-face.

Membership in a Political Group

Table 4.3: Membership in a Political Group in 2013

Started or Joined a Political Group on a Social Network Site				
		Yes	No	**Total**
Been Active in or Joined a Political Group that Meets Face to Face	Yes	33 39.8%	40 4.4%	73 7.3%
	No	50 60.2%	872 95.6%	922 92.7%
	Total	83 100.0%	912 100.0%	995 100.0%
	Missing Cases	38 3.7% of 1033		
Gamma: .870* Fisher's Exact Test: *statistically significant at .000				

Table 4.4: Membership in a Political Group in 2015

Started or Joined a Political Group on a Social Network Site				
		Yes	No	**Total**
Been Active in or Joined a Political Group that Meets Face to Face	Yes	24 44.4%	39 4.1%	63 6.2%
	No	30 55.6%	920 95.9%	950 93.8%
	Total	54 100.0%	959 100.0%	1013 100.0%
	Missing Cases	20 1.9% of 1033		
Gamma: .899* Fisher's Exact Test: *statistically significant at .000				

Analysis

Table 4.3 and 4.4 presented above display the results of Fisher's exact tests for both waves of the survey. As stated previously, this test only reports the statistical significance of a relationship between the variables. Fisher's exact test shows a very high level of

statistical significance, revealing that there is a relationship between signing a petition online and signing a petition offline in both 2013 and 2015 waves of the survey. The gamma value reveals that this is a very strong positive relationship, meaning that participating in a political group online indicates much greater likelihood of participating in a political group offline, and vice versa. The Gamma value reveals that the relationship between participation in online and offline political groups is even stronger than overall political activity online and offline. One possible explanation for the strength of this relationship could be that online political groups direct members to similar offline political groups and offline political groups direct members to online counterparts. Again, I observed that the number of respondents who participated in either type of political group was low for both waves of the survey. Overall, the Fisher's exact test results from both waves of the survey were again very similar and I am confident that the relationship is stable over time.

Signature of Petitions

Table 4.5: Signature of Petitions in 2013

Signed an Online Petition				
		Yes	No	**Total**
Signed a Paper Petition	Yes	135 54.9%	64 8.5%	199 20.0%
	No	111 45.1%	685 91.5%	796 80.0%
	Total	246 100.0%	749 100.0%	995 100.0%
	Missing Cases	38 3.7% of 1033		
Gamma: .857* Fisher's Exact Test: *statistically significant at .000				

Table 4.6: Signature of Petitions in 2015

Signed an Online Petition				
		Yes	No	**Total**
Signed a Paper Petition	Yes	107 45.3%	50 6.4%	157 15.5%
	No	129 54.7%	729 93.6%	858 84.5%
	Total	236 100.0%	779 100.0%	1015 100.0%
	Missing Cases	18 1.7% of 1033		
Gamma: .847* Fisher's Exact Test: *statistically significant at .000				

Analysis

Table 4.5 and 4.6 display the Fisher's exact test results for both waves of the survey. Again, there is a very strong positive statistically significant relationship between signing online petitions and signing offline petitions, meaning that a respondent who signed a petition online is much more likely to also sign a petition offline. Overall, the Fisher's exact test results from both waves of the survey were again remarkably similar and I am confident that the relationship is stable over time. Although participation in either type of petition is low, there are more respondents who signed petitions than were members of a political group. One interesting aspect of the results is that approximately half of the respondents who signed online petitions also signed offline petitions. Although the type of petition is not specified in the survey, this information could be useful to identify people who are likely to sign ballot initiatives.

Control Variable Results

To limit the effect of omitted variable bias in my analysis, I chose to analyze two control variables that could possibly influence political activity, education, and gender. The statistical tool used to compute the following analyses, SPSS, allows for the addition of a control variable in a three-way contingency table. The three-way contingency table shows the relationship between independent and dependent variables while holding the effect of the control variable constant. Chi-square and fisher's exact test with the measure of association gamma are still used to identify the existence of a relationship and its strength. Reproducing all the three-way contingency tables in their entirety for each wave of the survey is not useful in this case because the relationship between variables previously described continued for all tests I conducted with control variables and there was little change between each wave of the survey. For these reasons, I will illustrate the results with simplified tables of gamma values for the 2015 wave only.

Education

Table 4.7: Attended College 2015

Overall Political Activity	Gamma: .661
Membership in a Political Group	Gamma: .884
Signature of a Petition	Gamma: .796

Table 4.8: Did Not Attend College 2015

Overall Political Activity	Gamma: .662
Membership in a Political Group	Gamma: .979
Signature of a Petition	Gamma: .903

Analysis

Above are summary tables of gamma values for the education control variable. Table 4.7 displays the results for respondents who attended college and Table 4.8 displays results of respondents who did not attend college. Educational attainment level had surprisingly little effect on the results. After controlling for college attendance, a very strong positive relationship remained for all tests. However, the relationship seemed to become even stronger for those who did not attend college in two tests: joining a political group and signing a petition. One interpretation of this difference could be that there is a reliance on social networks for political engagement for those who do not have a college education.

Gender

Table 4.9: Males 2015

Overall Political Activity	Gamma: .661
Membership in a Political Group	Gamma: .900
Signature of a Petition	Gamma: .856

Table 4.10: Females 2015

Overall Political Activity	Gamma: .611
Membership in a Political Group	Gamma: .900
Signature of a Petition	Gamma: .841

Analysis

Above are summary tables of gamma values for the gender control variable. Table 4.9 displays the gamma values for males and table 4.10 displays the values for females.

Gender had an even smaller effect on the results than the education variable and the results were similar for both waves of the survey. Females and overall political activity in the 2015 wave of the survey did reveal a weaker gamma value compared to both males and the original bivariate results. However, the change is slight, and the relationship is still considered strong. Additionally, males and females had very similar or identical gamma values for both membership in a political group and signature of an online petition. Considering the small difference and similarity for the other two tests, I am comfortable concluding there is no meaningful difference between genders with respect to the relationship between online and offline political participation.

Summary

The big picture takeaway from the results presented in this chapter is that there is indeed a relationship between online political participation and offline political activity. The relationship exists between online forms of participation and 1) overall political activity, 2) membership in a political group, and 3) signatures on an offline petition. Relationships for each test were all very strong and consistently positive for both waves of the survey. Controlling for education and gender generally resulted in similar or even stronger relationships. I am comfortable concluding that political engagement online is indeed associated with political activity offline. While the direction of causality remains untested, it is apparent that those engaging in political activity online are also more likely to participate in offline political activity. Additionally, participating in a political activity that has a direct offline counterpart is associated with an even higher likelihood of

participating in both forms of political activity. In the next chapter I turn to the implications for civic engagement more generally.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

This thesis grew out of my observation that young people are adopting *New Media* at high rates and there is great potential for youth to use their familiarity with these new forms of communication to discuss political issues online and organize political movements. My analysis identified that engaging in political activity online is indeed associated with a much greater likelihood of participating in offline political activity. The relationship was strongest for political activities that have direct online and offline counterparts. Additionally, results were consistent for both the 2013 and 2015 waves of the survey, indicating that the relationships are stable at these different points in time. As I stated previously, my thesis is exploratory and I present a discussion of suggestions for future research later in this chapter.

Finding that young people engage in political activity both online and offline tends to contradict concerns that young people will use online spaces to express their political views but not take the next step of becoming politically active offline. My research does not allow one to determine which came first, the online or offline activity. But, at minimum, there is no evidence that people engaging in online activity are disproportionately those avoiding political work offline—quite the reverse. However, it is important to acknowledge that the overall political engagement among young people was very low. This observation upholds previous research findings that political engagement is low among young people and increases later in life.

Implications for Political Groups

Respondents who were part of an online political group were much more likely to be members of an offline political group. Although my analysis cannot predict causality, I have three general theories that could explain this relationship: 1) online group members share information with other members about similar groups offline, and vice versa, 2) a single group could have an online and offline presence, with members participating in both forms, and 3) the type of person who likes to join groups in general will join both online and offline groups. Whether the reality is explained by one or all of these theories, it is beneficial to know that the young people who do join groups online are much more likely to also join groups offline.

Implications for Petitions

The relationship between signing an online and offline petition was by far the strongest relationship I observed and the total number of respondents who reported signing a petition was higher than the number of those who joined a political group. This is probably due to the low level of commitment and energy expenditure necessary to sign an online or offline petition. It is unlikely that a person will sign the same petition in both online and offline formats; this suggests that the type of person who is willing to sign a petition in general will be more likely to sign both online and offline petitions. While the survey mentions petitions as a blanket term, there are several instances where signing petitions can have real political power, such as a petition to qualify a ballot initiative and a petition to recall an elected official.

Recommendations for Future Research

My results only reflect that online political activity is associated with offline political activity, not that one causes the other. The results can also be interpreted as indicating that people who are politically active offline are more likely to be politically active online. Future research should take the knowledge that there is a relationship between online and offline political activity and investigate specific potential applications. For example, researchers could investigate the causal relationship between online and offline political group membership. It would also be interesting to construct a study that followed offline political groups that conducted outreach among members of similar online only groups to see if they could be convinced to participate in the offline group.

My thesis used panel survey data taken two years apart and did not find any meaningful differences in my results. However, this does not mean that there could not be changes in political engagement online and offline as the sample group gets older and presumably becomes more politically active with age. Unfortunately, the Youth Participatory Politics Survey I used did not continue past 2015. While this survey focused only on youth, there was a broad range of ages, starting with those aged 15-27 at the 2013 wave. A similar project could take this concept further and follow a group of young people of similar ages, perhaps starting in the teen years, and following them through different stages of life. A study such as this would give a clearer understanding of the relationship between online and offline political activity as individuals age as well as better account for the influence of education and other potential variables.

The Future of Political Engagement

It is undeniable that political engagement is in a time of flux. The survey data used in this thesis was compiled five years ago, but in that relatively short time span gaining access to the internet has become cheaper and easier; as a result, millions more Americans have the opportunity express their political views online. Even while writing this thesis, world events dramatically changed political engagement for all Americans. In response to the 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19) worldwide pandemic, the United States enforced social distancing policies that limited opportunities to engage politically offline. To put this in perspective, all the offline political activities discussed in this thesis were either prohibited or extensively modified to ensure people did not have direct contact. The constraints put in place essentially shifted all political engagement into online spaces and more people than ever before became politically active online.

The social distancing restrictions in response to COVID-19 were a temporary measure to slow the spread of this specific disease. At the time of this writing, long-term changes in social norms are yet to be seen. However, in person political activity, such as protesting, campaigning, attending speeches and rallies, etc., will always be an important part of the United States democratic system. Increases in access to the internet since the original survey was conducted and recent world events highlight that it is more important than ever to investigate the relationship between online and offline political activity. The contribution this thesis can offer is the reassurance that political engagement online does not necessarily take away from political engagement offline.

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