

# It's Complicated: Facebook Users' Political Participation in the 2008 Election

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## Abstract

In the 2008 U.S. presidential election, social network sites such as Facebook allowed users to share their political beliefs, support specific candidates, and interact with others on political issues. But do political activities on Facebook affect political participation among young voters, a group traditionally perceived as apathetic in regard to civic engagement? Or do these activities represent another example of feel-good participation that has little real-world impact, a concept often referred to as "slacktivism"? Results from a survey of undergraduate students ( $N = 683$ ) at a large public university in the Midwestern United States conducted in the month prior to the election found that students tend to engage in lightweight political participation both on Facebook and in other venues. Furthermore, two OLS regressions found that political activity on Facebook (e.g., posting a politically oriented status update, becoming a "fan" of a candidate) is a significant predictor of other forms of political participation (e.g., volunteering for an organizing, signing a paper or online petition), and that a number of factors—including intensity of Facebook use and the political activity users see their friends performing on the site—predict political activity on Facebook. Students' perceptions regarding the appropriateness of political activity on Facebook, as well as the specific kinds of political activities they engaged in and witnessed within the site, were also explored.

## Introduction

THE 2008 U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION continued a recent trend in political campaigning, as candidates adapted their message to new communication tools. The popularity of social media such as YouTube, Facebook, and MySpace—especially among younger voters—provided a highly visible environment for candidates to promote themselves, articulate their platforms, and interact with voters in fundamentally different ways than in previous elections. Likewise, these sites enabled users to interact with their peers about political issues and to share and discuss their opinions through a variety of formats. Data from Pew Internet reveal that 65% of social network site (SNS) users aged 18–29 years engaged in at least one of five political activities on a SNS during the 2008 campaign, such as joining a political group on the site or obtaining information about a candidate.<sup>1</sup>

Emerging SNS-politics research has focused on campaign strategy and the adoption of social media technology by political elites.<sup>2</sup> However, little research has investigated the impact that SNS activity has on the political behavior of young people. In particular, Facebook is an important social media site to study because of its high rate of use by the 18-to-24-year-old demographic.<sup>3,4</sup> During the 2008 election, both

Republican and Democratic presidential candidates utilized the site, maintaining pages that allowed users to post comments, share news and videos, and connect with other users. Furthermore, Facebook members had access to various site features that allowed them to share their political views and interact with others on the site, including both their "friends" on the site, as well as other users to whom they connected with through shared use of political groups and pages.

But did these efforts make a difference to the political participation of Facebook users? If so, SNSs may be a way to engage young people—who are often portrayed as apathetic toward politics—in political processes. Alternatively, Facebook may be encouraging a rise in "slacktivism," a term that describes participation in Internet-based forms of political participation—such as joining online groups or signing online petitions—that has little to no real-world impact.<sup>5</sup>

This research employs the resource model of political participation<sup>6</sup> as a guiding theoretical framework. The model posits that there are three determining factors for political participation: psychological engagement, campaign recruitment, and access to resources. SNSs such as Facebook appear to offer potential impacts for all three factors. However, this research focuses primarily on the access to and utilization of resources. The resource model argues that previous analyses

of political resources are often limited solely to the importance of socioeconomic indicators, ignoring the importance of the development of civic skills to actually make use of these resources. Civic skills, particularly those developed in adulthood, are introduced as a complement to the more commonly measured resources of time and money. Civic skills are often thought to develop in formal education environments (such as a civics class) or in family environments. The study reported here adopts the notion that civic skills are also cultivated informally in adulthood through interaction with peers, and examines Facebook as a potential environment for such skills to be cultivated.

This paper will proceed as follows. After presenting a review of literature on political participation, both in its traditional conceptualization as well as its manifestation in online formats, the results of a survey of undergraduate students at a large Midwestern university ( $N = 683$ ) will be discussed, including models predicting political participation both on Facebook and more generally. Connections between these two forms of political activity will be explored, as well as possible avenues for future studies.

## Technology and Politics

### *Political participation on- and offline*

Putnam's<sup>7</sup> argument that political participation is declining due to a reduction in civic engagement (both political and non-political) implies negative consequences for the health of a representative democracy. Recent research suggests that interaction via the Internet may replace some of these lost forms of civic engagement,<sup>8,9</sup> although there has been a debate about the nature of that effect.<sup>10,11</sup> Regardless of the extent of its impact, the Internet provides an additional set of channels for citizens to engage politically with each other and their government.

Political participation can take many forms, including such activities as making campaign donations, attempting to persuade others, working for a campaign, or wearing a button in support of a candidate.<sup>12</sup> Conway<sup>13</sup> conceptualized political participation as the set of activities that citizens perform in order to influence different levels of the government, such as its structure, policies, or officials. Taken together, political participation may be considered as one's intent to influence government actions through different activities, either directly by affecting the creation or implementation of public policy, or indirectly by influencing the people that make those choices.<sup>14</sup>

While numerous measures of political participation in the United States reveal declines during the last part of the 20th century for both the general population<sup>7,13</sup> and specifically among young adults,<sup>15,16</sup> more recent research points to increases in participation among young voters,<sup>17</sup> with the media—especially the Internet—often cited as a key factor in effecting change and increasing knowledge. Media use has been associated with greater levels of involvement in civic activities, as well as higher levels of political awareness amongst U.S. adolescents.<sup>18</sup> Young adults aged between 18 and 29 years extensively used the Internet for obtaining election information in 2008: 58% went online for political news, 48% watched a political video online, and 65% of those with SNS profiles performed at least one of five political activities on the site.<sup>1</sup>

Research by Barry Wellman et al.<sup>19,20</sup> suggests that rather than transforming or diminishing interaction, the Internet *supplements* more traditional methods of communication. The same may also be true for political participation: the Internet supplements traditional methods of participation (e.g., posting videos from campaign rallies online) and provides additional outlets for participation that do not exist offline (e.g., personal blogs tackling political issues). In addition, many forms of traditionally “offline” participation (e.g., donating to a campaign, signing a petition) may now be performed online. Elin<sup>21</sup> argues that the Internet provides a virtual space that allows individuals to immerse themselves in political information, which in turn can lead to political activities. For example, research on the political rally organizing site Meetup.com found high involvement during the 2008 campaign,<sup>22</sup> and previous research linked Meetup attendance to increases in campaign donations, volunteering, candidate support, and advocacy.<sup>23</sup> While Internet access alone does not generally increase political participation, among those with Internet access, exposure to political material does increase participation.<sup>12</sup> Research has found that the more politically active people are offline, the more they participate in political discussions online,<sup>19</sup> and that exposure to and discussion of political information online has both a main and moderating effect on political engagement.<sup>24,25</sup>

In line with the belief that the Internet supplements other methods of interaction, Polat<sup>26</sup> argues that it is not the technical elements of the Internet that alter and expand political participation; rather, the Internet should be viewed as an expanded information source for politics, an expanded communication medium for people to discuss politics, and finally an expanded public sphere. These capacities of the Internet are particularly salient when considering SNSs; sites such as Facebook combine many of these features into an easily accessible, freely available Internet service. It is then plausible to assume that political activity occurring on SNSs have the potential to influence political participation generally.

### *Facebook and political activity*

SNSs continue to grow in popularity as sites for users to share information about their thoughts and activities, and Facebook has had the biggest growth in recent years with more than 400 million active users.<sup>27</sup> The site's affordances suggest it might be well suited for increasing political participation, in part through the ability to acquire greater political knowledge, increase political interest, and improve political self-efficacy, all of which have been linked to greater political participation in prior research.<sup>28–30</sup> For example, users can join political groups, download candidate applications, and share their political opinions through the many communication tools on the site. Users can view their friends' activities by scrolling through the News Feed on their home page, and they can comment on friends' posts, thus engaging in active conversation about political issues. From a resource perspective, these affordances also offer affordable (i.e., free) opportunities to develop civic engagement skills with little to no additional time costs for users of Facebook, while simultaneously having access to a potentially large enough “public” to develop civic skills.

Little academic research has examined SNS *users'* political activity on the sites during campaign cycles. One study

looking at SNSs and political participation found a positive relationship between one's reliance on SNSs and civic engagement but no relationship between SNS reliance and political participation.<sup>31</sup> Instead, research connecting use of social media and political/civic activity has focused on how candidates and campaigns make use of SNSs;<sup>32</sup> how users interacted with candidates during the 2006 mid-term election and 2008 presidential primaries;<sup>2,33,34</sup> MySpace's partnering with the non-partisan group Declare Yourself to encourage voter registration;<sup>35</sup> civic engagement outcomes resulting from participation in online political forums;<sup>25</sup> and social capital outcomes—including political engagement—resulting from Facebook use.<sup>36</sup> As this research area grows, it is important to examine how end users engage with the medium and the resulting effects of this medium, as well as the adoption and strategies employed by campaigns and other various political entities.

### Research questions

Facebook offers a number of methods through which users can interact with each other directly (e.g., wall postings, instant messaging, messages) and indirectly (e.g., posting notes, status updates). Of particular interest to this study is Facebook's News Feed, which aggregates and displays a user's friends' activities, including status messages, recently uploaded photographs, new notes, and recently joined groups. During the 2008 presidential election campaign, users could engage in a number of political activities, including becoming a "fan" of a candidate, downloading political applications, and joining political groups, which would also appear in the News Feed, thus enabling them to engage their Facebook friends in conversation related to the election. Political activity on the site also occurred through more standard features: users could post status updates about politics, post political messages on friends' walls, or write and share political Notes with their network. Furthermore, Facebook allowed users to comment on their friends' posts, which enabled interaction between users who were not Facebook friends. Peer-to-peer interaction drives social media and may provide a more powerful incentive to engage in political activity—both on Facebook and in other venues—than more generic messages sent from a candidate to users. For example, research on the youth-centered site TakingITGlobal.org, which provides young people with a number of tools to interact with each other about political and civic issues, found that the majority of site users were inspired by peers they engaged with or read about on the site, and nearly half reported becoming more engaged in their community because of their experiences on the site.<sup>25</sup>

This study examines trends in Facebook use by college students in the weeks leading up to the 2008 presidential election, both to quantify their political use of Facebook and to describe the relationship between students' political activities on the Web site and their political participation in general, as measured by participation in activities such as writing to one's representative or running for political office. One of the major differences between political participation generally and political activity on Facebook relates to the reduced resources typically associated with engaging in political activities online. In general, political activities on Facebook such as writing a politically themed status update

or joining a political group on the site are not resource intensive, as they require little time or effort from the user. Contrarily, many forms of offline political participation (e.g., volunteering for a campaign, attending a town meeting, running for a political office) require a more substantive commitment of resources on the part of the individual. Though the intensity of resource use is offered as a general distinction between traditional forms of political activity and online political activity, general political participation also includes offline activities low in resource intensity, such as watching a televised political debate. In addition, it should be noted that general political participation in this research is not limited to unimodal activities, but instead encompasses activities that occur in both offline and online environments, such as signing a petition or donating money to a campaign. By comparing political activities on Facebook with those in other environments, this research contributes to the growing body of literature considering the impacts of interactive media on political participation.

The following research questions address the relationship between individuals' engagement in political activities on Facebook and their general political participation. First, we investigated the various ways our sample participate in the political process, both generally and specifically on Facebook. Such an exploration provides some evidence of the manner in which the sampled participants are making use of their political resources, most specifically time and opportunities for the development of civic skills.

*RQ1a: What are the general political activities college students engage in?*

*RQ1b: What political activities on Facebook do college students engage in?*

Before being able to investigate the potential impact of Facebook use on general political participation, it is important to ascertain whether our sample believes that political activity on Facebook is socially appropriate. Facebook was originally a closed network, only available to college students. Since then, it has opened up to larger audiences, and users have slowly come to accept this expansion. While previous research found college students disapprove of political candidates using the site for campaign purposes,<sup>34</sup> we were curious if those opinions have changed over time, just as college students now accept other populations among the user base. In addition, it is important to gauge students' perceptions of political activity on Facebook, because if they do not view the site as a place where politics can be expressed, it is unlikely they will engage in these behaviors.<sup>34</sup> Therefore:

*RQ2: Do college students perceive Facebook as an appropriate venue for political activity?*

The primary intent of this research is to investigate the potential relationship between the political activities people engage in on Facebook and their political activity in general. In order for us to begin the process of understanding this potential relationship and to initiate an empirical investigation into the slacktivism concern, we asked:

*RQ3: Does political activity on Facebook influence general political participation?*

Previous research has found a positive correlation between Facebook use and both civic engagement and political

knowledge.<sup>28</sup> However, a number of other political factors may be influencing the relationship. In addition, we would expect that factors such as how much one is engaged with Facebook and friends' political activity—as visible through the News Feed—could influence the level of political activity one engages in on the site. Therefore, we examined the factors that may encourage people to participate on Facebook, including: the intensity of their Facebook usage; their political knowledge, efficacy, interest, and party; the amount of exposure they have to political information through the Facebook News Feed; and their general political participation. Answers to this question will help provide direction for future investigation into user political activity on Facebook and other SNSs. Thus:

*RQ4: What factors influence political activity on Facebook?*

## Method

### Participants

From a population of approximately 47,000 undergraduate students, a random sample of 4,000 undergraduates was obtained from the registrar's office of a large Midwestern university. Students were then invited via their university e-mail address to participate in an online survey hosted on Zoomerang. Three reminders were sent after the initial invitation to participate. The survey period lasted for 2 weeks in October 2008. We received 683 usable responses, yielding a response rate of 17%. Respondents tended to be female (68%) and white (86%), with a mean age of 20 years. Most participants reported having a Facebook account (96%) and being registered to vote (96%). Survey respondents were entered into a raffle for one of 10 gift certificates as an incentive to participate.

### Measures

A number of validated scales were employed to gauge participants' use of Facebook and political-related components. The Facebook Intensity (FBI) scale<sup>3</sup> ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ) measured Facebook usage, and included items regarding the number of Facebook friends a user has and the amount of time spent on the site, as well as five Likert-type statements concerning users' psychological orientation toward the site. Other measures that have been shown in previous research to affect political participation included a 5-item scale of political knowledge<sup>37</sup> ( $\alpha = 0.57$ ), a 4-item scale of individual political efficacy<sup>29</sup> ( $\alpha = 0.75$ ), and a 5-item scale of political interest<sup>29</sup> ( $\alpha = 0.81$ ). A 12-item index for political participation was adapted in order to include online activities, as well as more traditional offline activities, and included items such as watching a debate on TV or online, signing a paper or online petition, attending a public meeting, holding political office (e.g., student government), or writing a letter to a government official or local newspaper.<sup>30</sup> The use of validated and reliable scales permits comparisons between our findings and the findings reported in other similar studies and, in the case of this study, helps allay reliability concerns associated with the political knowledge scale, which has a lower alpha than in previous research. The reliability of this scale may have been impacted due to the timing of the survey (the month prior to a presidential election) and the delivery of the survey (Web format).

Facebook's features could be used in a number of ways to engage in political participation on the site during the 2008 campaign season. Participants were asked whether they had participated in any of 14 political activities using the features of the site. Likewise, participants were asked to report which types of political content they had observed via their News Feed. This particular feature of Facebook was selected for the survey, as it is the default interface display users see when logging into their account and provides users with a continuously updating stream of information about their Facebook friends' activities. The percent of respondents reporting performance or observation of these behaviors is reported in Table 1.

Finally, participants were asked to indicate their agreement on a 5-point Likert-type scale to five statements about the appropriateness of using Facebook for political purposes, such as expressing political views and convincing others to vote for a specific candidate. These items have been used in previous research assessing the appropriateness of candidates' use of Facebook for political purposes.<sup>34</sup>

## Results

### General and Facebook political participation

Of the 12 possible general political activities we investigated, the mean number of reported activities was 2.68 ( $SD = 1.86$ ). The most common forms of general political participation were watching campaign debates, either online (66.6%) or via traditional news media (84.6%), followed by signing a paper petition (31%), attending a public meeting on town or local affairs (24.2%), and signing an online petition (20.7%). The least common forms of general political participation were writing a letter to a newspaper regarding politics (2.6%) and writing an article for a magazine or newspaper (1.7%). In general, activities that required more time and effort were less common. A similar pattern was observed for Facebook political participation. Of the 14 possible political activities that participants could have engaged in, the reported mean was 1.33 ( $SD = 1.97$ ). Once more, the more easily accomplished activities were more common, such as posting a wall comment about politics (20.4%) and posting a politically oriented status message (18.4%). The least common activities were taking a political quiz (2.7%), posting a political note (3.6%), and adding or deleting a politically themed application (3.8%).

### Facebook as politically appropriate

Our second research question asked whether users felt that Facebook was an appropriate venue for political activity. We analyzed this question by reviewing responses that measured participants' agreement with five statements regarding the appropriateness of various political events that can occur on the site. Participants indicated a minimal level of acceptance of the presence of candidates on Facebook ( $M = 3.33$ ,  $SD = 1.09$  on a 5-point Likert-type scale, where 1 = "strongly disagree" and 5 = "strongly agree"), as well as Facebook being an appropriate platform for sharing political beliefs ( $M = 3.32$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ). However, respondents objected to using Facebook as a means of persuading others. Motivating others to vote, both in general ( $M = 2.01$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ) and for a specific candidate ( $M = 1.88$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ), were met with

TABLE 1. INDEX ITEMS FOR POLITICAL ACTIVITY ON FACEBOOK AND EXPOSURE TO NETWORK'S POLITICAL ACTIVITY ON FACEBOOK

<i>In the past week, which of the following have you done in Facebook/seen in your news feed?</i>	<i>Percent of sample performing this behavior<sup>1</sup></i>	<i>Percent of sample observing this behavior being performed by others<sup>2</sup></i>
Added or deleted political information from their Facebook profile	5.8%	26.8%
Added or deleted an application that deals with politics	3.8%	19.8%
Became a "fan" of a political candidate or group	8.8%	51.0%
Discussed political information in a Facebook message	8.9%	n/a
Discussed political information using Facebook's instant messaging system	6.9%	n/a
Joined or left a group about politics	13.8%	51.2%
Posted a status update that mentions politics	18.4%	70.0%
Posted a photo that has something to do with politics	10.0%	49.3%
Posted a photo of someone at a political event	9.6%	48.4%
Posted a wall comment about politics	20.4%	43.2%
Posted a link about politics	6.1%	41.9%
Posted a Facebook Note that has something to do with politics	3.6%	35.5%
RSVPed for a political event	13.8%	42.5%
Took a quiz that about politics	2.7%	11.1%

Notes: (1) For participants' responses to the number of activities they had performed on Facebook in the last week, the mean number of "Yes" responses was 1.33 (*SD*=1.97) out of 14 total items. This index represents the "Political Activity on Facebook" variable in the regressions. (2) For participants' responses to activities they had observed other members of their Facebook Friend network performing, the mean number of "Yes" responses was 4.91 (*SD*=3.42) out of 12 total items. This index represents the "Exposure to Network's Political Activity on Facebook" variable in the regressions.

disagreement. A Spearman's correlation coefficient was calculated for the relationship between subjects' perceptions of appropriate Facebook use and their reported political activity on Facebook. A statistically significant positive correlation was found ( $r = 0.256, p < 0.001$ ), indicating a relationship between perceptions of Facebook as an appropriate medium for political communication and the amount of political activity one engages in on Facebook.

*Facebook use as a predictor of general political participation*

The primary focus of this research was to investigate the relationship between political participation on Facebook and

general political participation. An OLS regression was performed to detect whether an initial bivariate correlation ( $0.392, p < 0.001$ ) remained significant in the presence of other possible factors. See Table 2 for the variables included and the results of this regression predicting general political participation. We tested for multicollinearity between these scales using a *Variance Inflation Factor (VIF)*, and did not find significant collinearity between the two scales. We report standardized coefficients to account for different types of data included in this model. The *N* reported for this model is lower than reported above as the regression analysis excludes cases with missing data. Gender and Political Party were treated as dummy variables, with Female and Democrat being the included variables.

TABLE 2. OLS REGRESSIONS PREDICTING POLITICAL ACTIVITY ON FACEBOOK AND GENERAL POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

<i>Independent variables</i>	<i>Model 1 predicting general political participation</i>	<i>Model 2 predicting political activity on Facebook</i>
	<i>Standardized coefficients</i>	
Gender	-0.055	0.075
Age	-0.026	0.050
Year in school	-0.019	-0.089
GPA	-0.077	-0.029
Political party	-0.068	-0.172***
Political knowledge	0.172***	0.111*
Individual political efficacy	0.070	0.035
Political interest	0.299***	0.157***
Facebook intensity	-0.134**	0.241***
Political participation	—	0.250***
Political activity on Facebook	0.239***	—
Exposure to network's political activity on Facebook	0.141***	0.106**
Adjusted <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.318	0.285

\* $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\* $p \leq 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq 0.001$ , two-tailed test.

The overall model is statistically significant,  $F(11, 451 = 20.205)$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Political activity on Facebook remained highly correlated with general political participation even when accounting for these other factors ( $\beta = 0.239$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Facebook Intensity is significantly related to political participation, but the coefficient indicates a negative trend ( $\beta = -0.134$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), such that more intense Facebook use is associated with a decrease in political participation. Other significant predictors in the model include political interest ( $\beta = 0.299$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), political knowledge ( $\beta = 0.172$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and exposure to one's network's political activity ( $\beta = 0.141$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

#### *Contributing factors to political activity on Facebook*

A similar OLS regression was conducted using the same variables to predict Facebook political activity (see Table 2) and was also found to be significant,  $F(11, 451 = 17.454)$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . The strongest indicator in the model is general political participation ( $\beta = 0.250$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), not surprising considering the previously reported relationship. Unlike general political participation, however, political activity on Facebook is positively associated with Facebook Intensity ( $\beta = 0.241$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Traditional markers of political participation—including political interest ( $\beta = 0.157$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), political knowledge ( $\beta = 0.111$ ,  $p = 0.016$ ), and political party affiliation ( $\beta = -0.172$ ,  $p < 0.001$ )—are significant factors. It is also noteworthy that the political activity of one's Facebook network contributes to one's own Facebook political activity in a meaningful way ( $\beta = 0.106$ ,  $p = 0.014$ ).

#### **Discussion**

The findings from this research suggest that young people's use of social media technology and their political participation is a complex relationship. First, the level of engagement indicated by our sample suggests that while young voters may be participating in political activity, the degree of this participation is somewhat superficial. As reported previously, the most common forms of general political participation tended to be informational and low in resource intensity (e.g., watching a debate), whereas political actions that required a greater commitment of resources (e.g., volunteering) were less frequent. This finding in isolation lends credibility to the concern that young citizens are becoming "slacktivists," engaging in feel-good forms of political participation that have little or no impact on effecting change. While there are a variety of ways to participate, our sample indicated they overwhelmingly engaged in the least intrusive, least time-consuming activities. Information seeking is an important element to political involvement, but if little concrete political action follows, it is reasonable to speculate that the political participation of our sample is less likely to impact institutions of government. Research has demonstrated the power of online groups to amass large numbers of participants for political cause;<sup>38</sup> however, each of these groups has ultimately performed some action.<sup>39</sup>

The resource model of political participation predicts that low-time-commitment political participation would be preferred by users. This does not indicate, however, that our sample has denigrated into political slacktivists. An alternative viewpoint is that as we age, our political participation inevitably increases, in part due to the accumulation of civic

skills.<sup>40</sup> By this line of reasoning, any political activity—whether occurring on Facebook or in other venues—facilitates the development of civic skills, which in turn increases political participation. One advantage to the more lightweight political activity enabled via Facebook is the opportunity to "practice" civic skills with a minimal commitment of time and effort. Not only is Facebook accessible at any time of the day, but activities such as joining a political group or sharing a link can be accomplished with a few clicks of the mouse. These site characteristics create unique opportunities for participants to develop skills in their own time, representing a lower threshold for informal civic-engagement education.

Findings regarding students' views on Facebook as a political outlet may reinforce the civic-development notion. Our sample generally felt that political self-expression on Facebook was appropriate, which is reflected in the finding that the most commonly reported political activities on the site—posting politically oriented wall posts or status updates—involved personal expression of political views. Participants also indicated slight acceptance of the presence of candidates on Facebook, which is contrary to previous research conducted during the 2008 presidential primary that found students disapproved of candidates maintaining profiles on Facebook and MySpace.<sup>33</sup> This difference may be accounted for by the passage of time and an increasing level of comfort with candidate profiles on Facebook, as well as different research methodologies (survey versus focus group). Efforts to persuade or recruit others politically, on the other hand, were seen as less appropriate by our participants, suggesting that the norms of political activity on Facebook are nuanced, and that personal expression is seen as more appropriate than calls to action. A norm of expression without persuasion suggests that Facebook users are experimenting with self-expression as political beings, yet do not perceive explicit attempts at affecting political ideologies or agendas as appropriate in Facebook. Such an environment appears to be conducive to the development of civic skills, through self-expression, without the consequences or costs that political participation can have.

A positive relationship between the use of Facebook for political purposes and general political participation was also found. This should not be surprising, as previous research has found that any form of association, including the networked relationships that are typical of the Facebook environment, helps political participation.<sup>30</sup> Results from the regression suggest that as the number of political activities people engage in on Facebook increases, so does political participation in other venues, and vice versa. As our participants overwhelmingly indicated engaging in the most basic forms of participation (information gathering/observing), we would expect that increases in political activity on Facebook would be associated with more action-oriented forms of political participation.

On the other hand, the positive correlation between political participation generally and on Facebook highlights an interesting puzzle. While Facebook Intensity and political activity on Facebook are positively related, there is a strong negative relationship between Facebook Intensity and general political participation. In thinking about the positive relationship, a mere exposure effect<sup>41</sup> may come into play, whereby the more intensely people use Facebook—operationalized in this study as the amount of time spent on

the site, the number of Facebook Friends, and their psychological connection to the site—the more likely they will see friends engaging in political activity, and the more likely they will follow their friends' lead.

The negative relationship between Facebook Intensity and general political participation is more difficult to explain. One interpretation of this relationship is that the most intense users of Facebook are classic "slacktivists," meaning that they do not translate their political activities on the site into other more commonly valued forms of political participation. However, a number of alternative explanations are also possible. It may be that politically active users are only accessing Facebook to supplement their political participation in other venues. It is important to note that this does not suggest that only those who are already engaged are benefiting from the use of SNSs in the political realm. As indicated in both regression analyses, exposure to friends' political activities on the site is positively related to both Facebook and general political participation. Consistent with the notion that Facebook appears to be an environment where users can develop civic skills, it also seems plausible that those who use Facebook more intensely may still be developing their civic skills, whereas those with more developed civic skills are no longer exploring their political identity but are actively participating in arenas outside of Facebook.

Because this study cannot definitively answer the questions raised by our findings related to Facebook Intensity and participation, further research should explore these opposing interpretations. Future research should also investigate whether individuals who are exposed to more politically active network members begin to develop or explore civic skills and cognitive engagement with political processes, as well as whether certain members of users' Friend network (e.g., Katz and Lazarsfeld's "opinion leaders"<sup>42</sup>) have a greater impact on political participation. This raises important questions for political researchers, as people are frequently treated as isolated beings instead of nested in a dynamic social network. The influence of this social network warrants additional research so that the influence and mechanisms of these networks can be better understood.

Another area for future research is the extent to which political participation on SNSs differs between election and non-election years. While the timing of this research to coincide with the presidential election was an explicit aspect of our research design, it would be prudent to replicate our survey during a non-election season. Presidential elections are typically times of high political engagement and, consequently, the levels of political activity reported by our sample are likely to be greater than during periods between election cycles. Research conducted during non-election periods would help create a richer picture of how political participation and SNSs are related across time.

In many ways, Facebook supports political activity through its technical and social affordances. The site enables individuals to find others with shared political beliefs through features such as political Groups and Pages. It includes political affiliation as one of its profile fields, suggesting that this ranks as an important identity marker for the site designers. Through a broad range of public and private communication features, it facilitates user communication with a large network of "friends," giving those with a political message an effective platform for evangelizing. Our findings indicate that,

to some extent, this form of political engagement is indeed occurring within the Facebook environment, suggesting that the popular SNS is an avenue for young people to express and share their political views. Most importantly, this study has revealed that political activity on Facebook is significantly related to more general political participation. It should be noted, however, that because of these unique affordances, the findings of this research are not generalizable to political activity in other online forums such as message boards, where users are able to retain some degree of anonymity.

We are encouraged that political content is contributed and consumed by this population and believe in the possibility that such engagement can effect positive change. An individual's interest in politics does not just happen; it takes practice and exposure to cultivate political engagement and civic skills. Research suggests that the period between the ages of 18 and 29—termed "emerging adulthood" by psychologist Jeffrey Arnett—is characterized by experimentation with different worldviews.<sup>43</sup> Facebook and other SNSs may offer young citizens an opportunity to experiment with their political opinions and beliefs while also being exposed to those of their peers, which could, in turn, stimulate their own interest and knowledge. Likewise, the highly interactive nature of Facebook's News Feed may encourage users to become more active political participants and possibly expand beyond basic forms of engagement to more vigorous and effective political behaviors. While Facebook may not be the cure-all to lagging political participation among young adults in the United States, this research provides support to the Internet-as-supplement argument that Wellman et al.<sup>19,20</sup> have made in regards to general communication. Facebook is not inspiring non-active people to run suddenly for political office, but at the same time, it is not replacing other types of political participation. Instead, it serves an additive role to other forms of participation by providing users with another outlet through which they can engage in these activities or develop the skills necessary to do so in the future.

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