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## Is Online Participation Distinct from Offline Participation? A Latent Class Analysis of Participation Types and Their Stratification — [Source link](#)

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## **Is Online Participation Distinct from Offline Participation? A Latent Class Analysis of Participation Types and Their Stratification**

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### **Abstract**

The increased availability of the Internet has led to the emergence of new forms of political participation. Opinions differ, however, on whether this has led to a reinforcement of stratification patterns, or to the political mobilization of new groups in society. To address this question, we first examine whether online political participation is a distinctive type of participation and then examine the socio-demographic stratification patterns of the identified participation types. Based on a latent class analysis of a U.S. representative sample, it is ascertained that online activism is indeed a distinctive type of political participation since a distinct group of online activists is identified. A comparison of the stratification patterns of offline and online activists indicates that the mobilization thesis is strongly confirmed regarding age, and is also confirmed for gender; for SES, however, the findings suggest a reinforcement of traditional education and income inequalities in online political participation.

**Key words:** online participation, Internet, political participation, Pew Internet Survey, latent class analysis

## SUMMARY

### **Introduction**

There is little doubt that the Internet has been rapidly adopted as a tool for political participation. To cite but one example: in the early months of 2011, social networks like Facebook were attributed with playing a key role in the rapid proliferation of political protest in the Arab world (Lynch 2011, 307). Online opportunities for political participation have become an important avenue of citizen participation in stable democracies as well (Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 2008; Oates, Owen, and Gibson 2006). The rise of online politics has been accompanied by high expectations. Given the increasing prevalence of Internet access and online opportunities for political participation some authors have expressed hope for increased citizen participation, while others are more skeptical about the Internet's democratic potential. For example, it has been shown that the Internet has turned out to be "a weapon of the strong" (Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2010) since it is more commonly used by advantaged groups that dominated the participation arena well before the Internet era (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

One can claim, therefore, that the current debate about the consequences of the political use of the Internet is still well-framed by the distinction made by Pippa Norris (2000) more than a decade ago between the mobilization and reinforcement theses. Although proponents of both approaches agree that the Internet is an important tool for political participation, assumptions about the democratic consequences of Internet participation sharply differ. The mobilization thesis argues that due to the availability of new information and communication technologies, previously disengaged groups of the population are being drawn into politics. The reinforcement thesis assumes that in the best case scenario, the Internet will not change existing patterns of

political participation, and in the worst case scenario may actually widen participatory gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged populations.

In this article we test the empirical merits of both claims by using the Pew Internet and American Life Project's August 2008 survey (n=2,251) to determine whether online participation is distinct from offline participation. To address this question, we first use latent class analysis (LCA) to assess whether online political participation is adopted in distinctive ways in individual-level participation repertoires. We consider this a crucial first step in adjudicating between the reinforcement and mobilization theses: if those who are most active in traditional offline participation are the same individuals who are most active in online participation, this would lend strong support to the reinforcement thesis with no need for further analysis. If a distinct type of online activists is identified, however, this could lend support to the mobilization thesis, since it is possible that this group was previously disengaged and became politically mobilized through the opportunity of online engagement.

This examination of participation repertoires based on a variety of offline and online political activities is an innovation in comparison to the reliance in prior research on separate analyses of online versus offline political activities. This research design therefore heeds the call for the need to move beyond the study of "the Internet" in terms of a narrow focus on technology, and toward an investigation of how technological opportunities are affecting broader historical and political patterns (Bimber 2000).

While we cannot assess over-time trends with these data to determine whether the previously disengaged are becoming politically mobilized, it can be ascertained if the different participation types identified by LCA have distinctive background characteristics. By comparing the stratification patterns of the different participation types, it can be determined if different

participation types are mobilizing socio-demographic groups that have traditionally been politically disengaged. Therefore, the second analytical step in this article is to examine the socio-demographic characteristics of the identified participation types to ascertain whether stratification patterns apply. We conclude with observations about the empirical merits of the mobilization and reinforcement theses, and about what the findings mean for the democratic potential of the Internet.

(...)

### **Results I: Latent Class Analysis Findings**

Table 1 details the participation acts included in this analysis. The indicators are listed beginning with the most prevalent, with offline indicators denoted by darker shading, and online indicators by lighter shading. Three of the four online acts of political participation are directly parallel to offline acts: contacting, petitioning, and donating. The fourth online political indicator of starting or joining a political group through a social networking site can be understood as a parallel online activity to the offline act of having been an active member of a group that tries to influence public policy or government. In addition to these eight indicators of parallel online and offline activity, we utilize two additional offline acts that have no online parallel in the dataset: attending a political rally, speech or organized protest; and working or volunteering for a political party or candidate. The ordering of the indicators in Table 1 by descending means demonstrates that even though online political activities are less prevalent overall, these acts are common enough to warrant serious investigation.

-Table 1 About Here -

In applying LCA, the first step is to determine the optimal number of latent classes for most accurately describing the research population. LCA can be applied in an exploratory manner by beginning with the one-class model, and systematically increasing the number of classes in order to assess model fit. The Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) is the most widely used statistic for identifying optimal solutions, and a smaller BIC indicates better model fit.<sup>1</sup> An additional, less formal approach that complements the more statistically precise BIC statistic is to assess the percent reduction of the likelihood ratio chi-squared statistic  $L^2$  in comparison to the 1-cluster model (Magidson and Vermunt 2004, 176-177). Table 2 lists the LCA model fit statistics for the analysis.

-Table 2 About Here -

Although the absolute value of the BIC is still decreasing up through the seven-cluster model, it is evident that already after the four-cluster model there is a marginal gain in improvement in the percent reduction of the  $L^2$ . While the six- and seven-cluster solutions are clearly not preferable due to the small reduction in the  $L^2$  and increased classification error, we investigated the substantive results of both the four-cluster and five-cluster solutions and found that the five-cluster solution adds no meaningful nuance to the four-cluster solution.

Since LCA is not yet widely used in the study of political participation, we methodically introduce the graphical depiction of the findings in Figure 1 for the four-cluster solution. The x-axis includes the offline participation acts grouped on the left, and the online participation acts grouped on the right, and within both groups the participation acts are ordered by ascending means in the sample population. These means are noted beneath the x-axis labels for each participation act (e.g. 8.1 percent of the U.S. population reported being involved in work for a

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<sup>1</sup> Model fit cannot be determined using the more familiar chi-squared distribution for computing the p-value since data are sparse, so information criteria like the BIC provide goodness-of-fit indicators that take both model fit and parsimony into account.

political party). The y-axis represents the conditional probability that members of a given cluster will participate in each participation act on the x-axis. Thin lines connect these markers to draw the reader's attention to the distinctive participatory patterns of each cluster. Given the ordering of offline and online indicators by ascending means, if the findings displayed parallel lines that did not cross, this would indicate that the different clusters merely represent different levels of overall engagement. However, since the lines in Figure 1 are not parallel either within the two groups of participation acts (online versus offline), or overall, the distinctive characteristics of each participation type must be examined.

(...)

## **Discussion**

In this article we asked two research questions in order to assess the empirical merits of the mobilization versus reinforcement theses. The findings provide strong evidence in support of a positive answer to the first research question: online participation is empirically identified as a distinctive type of participation. Specifically, latent class analysis of participation repertoires identifies online activists to be a distinct group of activists in comparison to the three other identified participation types: offline activists, a group that specializes in contacting, and a large group (73 percent of the population) that is relatively disengaged from political activity. A note is in order about the lack of an online-only specialist type in the findings. The analysis did not identify a group of respondents who are disengaged from traditional offline politics, but are compensating for this disengagement by participating in new online political opportunities. Therefore, as we proceed to summarize the differences in the background characteristics of type members, it is important to keep in mind that the online and offline activists identified in this

study reflect different emphases, and not exclusive specialization in one kind of activity or another.

The clear conclusion is that there is a distinct type of respondents who prefer online forms of participation. Contrary to what some authors assume, however, this group is also involved in offline participation. Further research would be needed to determine whether online opportunities are recruiting this group of online activists into political activity of all kinds, or whether those who would be politically active in any case are simply adding online participation to their repertoire of political activity.

The findings provide mixed evidence regarding the second research question: the background characteristics of online activists differ significantly from offline activists in terms of age, but they do not differ in terms of gender and socio-economic status. Young people's high probability of belonging to the online activist type is relevant to the ongoing concern about the disengagement of young people from political life. The variety of ways in which young people have become disengaged from traditional party-based politics has been well documented, and online political participation has been identified since its early stages as a potential avenue for connecting young people to politics (Delli Carpini 2000). The findings in this article therefore contribute to the accumulating evidence indicating that young people are indeed taking advantage of technological opportunities to engage with politics in a new way through online means (Jennings and Zeitner 2003; Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 2008; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2010). Future research is necessary, however, to determine the differential political impact and influence of these different types of engagement.

The lack of evidence of a gender divide for any of the participation types is an important contribution in the context of research on gender and online participation. Although recent



studies have noted a decrease in the gender gap favoring men's greater engagement in both general and political Internet use, salient gender differences have still been consistently identified (Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 2008). The lack of distinction between the men and women's probability of belonging to any of the four participation types identified in this study is therefore noteworthy, especially given the wide range of online indicators included in this analysis in comparison to prior research. This disappearance of a gender divide may be taking place due to the different ways in which men and women are taking advantage of the proliferating opportunities for more interactive and relational technologies. A review of trends of Internet usage between 2000 and 2005 indicated that women were catching up with men's early adoption of new technologies, and were focusing their online activities on deepening their relational connections (Fallows 2005). In fact, recent research indicates that women are even more likely than men to use social media in the U.S. (Hampton et al. 2011). The inclusion of a broader array of online participation indicators in the analysis, including political social media use, may be contributing to a new understanding of an era in which gender differences in online political participation are becoming obsolete.

Regarding SES, it is noteworthy that the socio-economic stratification is basically the same for the online as for the offline activist type. As such, the perennial "participation gap" with regard to socio-economic status apparently is simply reproduced with regard to online activism, and this form of activism indeed can be considered one more "weapon of the strong" (Schlozman, Verba and Brady 2010).

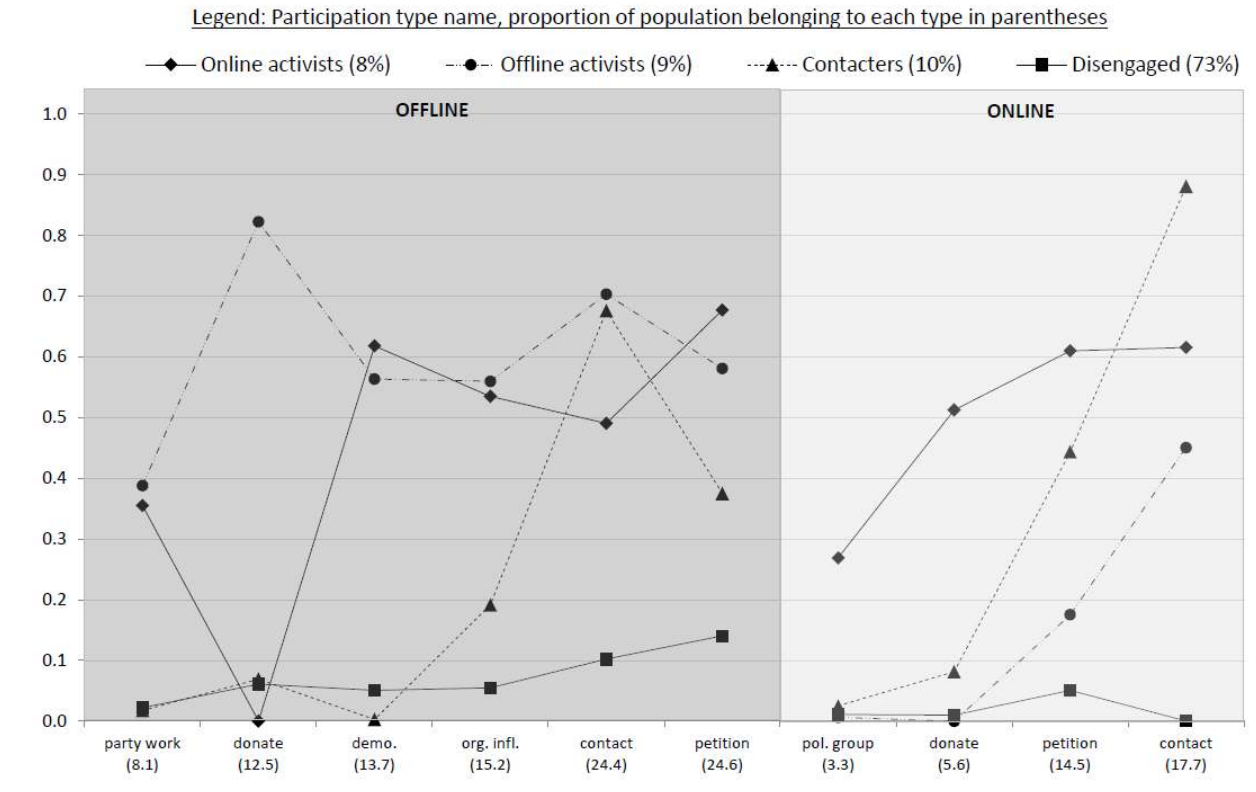
In sum, the findings for the two research questions examined in this article indicate that online participation does not simply reinforce patterns of offline participation across the board. A distinct group of activists is drawn to specialize in online versus offline repertoires of political

participation, indicating that online political activities are not exclusively the purview of those who are most active in traditional offline activities. Yet, the main stratification mechanisms with regard to political participation of age, gender and socio-economic status do not act in unison in relation to the competing mobilization and reinforcement theses. It is clear that the mobilization thesis is strongly supported with regard to the involvement of young people as online activists. The lack of a gender gap for both online and offline participation also supports the mobilization thesis, in contrast to prior research which found that women were even less politically active online than offline. For SES, however, in contrast to the mobilization thesis, the advantaged are more active in both online and offline participation, suggesting a reinforcement of traditional education and income inequalities in online political participation. Given the salience of socio-economic inequality in American democracy and recent findings suggesting the strong influence of the socio-economically advantaged in influencing policy outcomes of all kinds (Bartels 2008; Gilens 2005), the reinforcement of socio-economic status inequalities certainly limits the democratic potential of the Internet for impacting upon patterns of political participation and participatory inequality.

Ending on a note of caution, the limitations of the survey utilized in this research in the midst of Barack Obama's presidential campaign must be taken into account. Like other presidential, congressional, and gubernatorial candidates in 2008, the Obama campaign made extensive use of the Internet, and proved to be particularly successful at recruiting the support of both young people and women through online and offline recruiting methods (Kenski, Hardy, and Jamieson 2010). In addition, the socio-economic stratification of online participation found in the U.S. may be less applicable to other contexts. Therefore, further research in different

contexts is needed, including non-presidential U.S. elections and different national contexts, in order to examine the generalizability of the conclusions reached in this study.

**Figure 1: Participation for Four Groups of Respondents**



Source: Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2008 (n=2,251). Notes: LCA findings using Latent Gold 4.0 software (Vermunt and Magidson 2005). y-axis=conditional probability that cluster members perform a participation act. x-axis=offline participation indicators grouped on the left, online on the right, and ordered by ascending means within each group of participation acts. The sample mean of every participation act is noted in parentheses beneath x-axis labels.