

## **Plugged In or Tuned Out? Youth, Race, and Internet Usage in the 2008 Election**

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*Over the course of the last three presidential elections, young voters and minorities have become an increasingly sought after segment of the electorate. In particular, youth are also the most likely to be the beneficiaries of advances to technology, while minorities often lag behind in access. The 2008 election provided a number of examples of campaigns utilizing online technology as a means of targeting young voters. This article examines the influence of the Internet on young and minority voters, focusing specifically on Internet use for political purposes, such as visiting a candidate's Web site or engaging in political discussions on blogs, as predictors of youth political participation offline. The authors find that engaging politics online leads to increases in political participation offline and that among younger voters, racial minorities are as connected as whites. However, among older voters, whites are far more likely to have access to and use the Internet politically.*

**KEYWORDS** *online politics, political participation, race, youth*

### INTRODUCTION

If the Kennedy-Nixon campaign season demonstrated the possible impact of broadcast television on presidential politics, the 2008 presidential contest between Barack Obama and John McCain may have been a similar watershed moment for the possibilities of the Internet and digital technology. From third-party social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace to viral videos to e-mail, campaigns and their supporters used the Internet to learn about and promote their candidates. Young voters, generally defined as those aged

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18 to 29, seemed particularly interested in communicating with campaigns through the Web and also using the Internet on their own to speak with friends and family about the election. At the same time, youth turnout increased significantly. In 2008, 53 percent of youth voted, up from 47 percent in 2004 (CIRCLE Staff 2008). In the wake of the 2008 election, young citizens are receiving praise from mainstream media and politicians alike for living up to the rhetoric surrounding the political power inherent in their numbers. As Quindlen wrote two days after the election, “analysts have learned to be skeptical of the so-called youth vote, but all signs suggest that this may be the moment when the country begins to create a new cadre of lifelong voters” (2008).

Interesting questions arise from these events regarding what role the Internet actually played in the political participation of young people in the 2008 election. Is the Internet really a means of driving political participation among young people, and further, is online engagement equally accessible across racial groups? In this paper, we seek to add two new concepts to this story of youth participation in 2008: the impact of race and ethnicity, and the emerging role of online political activity. We argue that online engagement serves as a new bridge to political participation and that among the younger cohort, Internet usage serves to diminish differences between whites and racial minorities in political participation. However, among older cohorts, online engagement will not necessarily elevate minority participation at the same rate as whites as a result of the digital divide. It is for younger voters in particular that online political activity holds great promise in increasing offline participation as well as further incorporating young minority voters.

Over the last decade a number of scholars have outlined the differences in political participation and mobilization efforts in Anglo, African American, and Latino communities (e.g., Tate 2003; Shaw et al., 2000; Pantoja et al., 2001). However, almost all research on mobilization tends to focus on the “adult” cohort which is represented at higher rates in public opinion data, and very little has been done to examine whether the same divisions exist for 18- to 29-year-olds. The need to consider racial and ethnic differences in the political participation of those younger than 30 is particularly important given that it is the most diverse cohort in American history. And while the Internet has been cast as a means of breaking down costs for political engagement, access to the Internet and online behavior may not be identical across racial groups.

To determine the relationship between race and online and offline political participation for young voters, particularly in comparison to older voters, we begin by reviewing the role of young voters, minorities, and the Internet in American politics. Second, we offer a series of hypotheses regarding the impact of Internet usage on the political participation of youth in the context of the 2008 presidential campaign. Finally, we turn to our data, methods, and model and conclude with a discussion of our results.

## YOUTH, RACE, AND POLITICAL MOBILIZATION

Over the past 50 years, the rate of political participation—particularly voting—has dwindled among the general population (Wattenberg 2007). Those with higher socioeconomic status, higher levels of attained education, and higher psychological involvement (often measured as trust in or affinity for government) are significantly more likely to show up at the polls (Rosenstone and Wolfinger 1993; Verba et al., 1995). As the socioeconomic status of the average voter has risen, two additional factors have come to the forefront to explain the decline in voter turnout: a decrease in psychological attachment to the state and changes in the mobilization strategies of political parties and interest groups (Conway 2000; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993).

In particular, it is often said that the declines in political participation have coincided with the lowering of the voting age and the demographic increase in the share of the nonwhite electorate (McDonald and Popkin 2000), two groups that have been shown to have lower rates of political participation.

Young voters suffer from a lack of psychological attachment and are unlikely to be targets for mobilization. Using data from the 2008 National Study of Youth and Religion, Snell demonstrates “that the overwhelming majority of emerging adults are disengaged from politics” based on a variety of factors including apathy, distrust, lack of information, and feelings of disempowerment (Snell 2010, p. 279). Moreover, parties and candidates prioritize mobilizing individuals with resources, demonstrated involvement, and commitment to the cause at hand. Young people fail to meet these criteria and, as such, have been systematically ignored by political parties. As a result, young people and politicians find themselves in a “Catch-22: politicians don’t court young Americans because they don’t vote and young Americans don’t vote because politicians don’t court them” (Rosenberg 2004). Related to voter mobilization, younger voters are less likely to be the targets of the medium used to reach out to voters in past elections, such as mailers, landline “robocalls,” and TV advertising during shows with the highest middle-age demographic. Simply put, young voters have previously been harder to reach and harder to mobilize through traditional campaign practices.

These same criteria have been shown to have an adverse effect on racial and ethnic minorities who are less likely to have a robust voting record, a history of participation, or the financial resources to interest a campaign (Leighley 2001; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; DeSipio and de la Garza 1998). While various forms of voter mobilization have been to work well among minority voters, heretofore, campaigns had not invested significantly in turning out these lower-propensity voters (Ramírez 2007; Michelson 2004; Wong 2004). What’s more, young voters of color likely find the lack of mobilization in minority communities compounded by the lack of mobilization efforts targeted toward those younger than 30, making them unlikely to form

the types of political engagement patterns that more highly mobilized groups experience at younger ages and throughout their lifetimes (Sherrod 2003). Though this paints a grim picture for American politics when one considers the growth of racial minority groups, a positive light can be found in the emergence of the Internet as a tool for political engagement, as evidenced throughout the 2008 primary and general elections.

## YOUTH, THE INTERNET, AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Beginning with the 2000 Democratic primary, the Internet has been seen as offering a chance for campaigns to move beyond the limited mobilization networks outlined above by allowing citizens to access political information at little cost while providing political elites a means of easily and inexpensively targeting voters.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, early studies of the impact of the Internet on political participation indicated that this may have been true. Tolbert and McNeal's 2003 article showed that simply having access to the Internet and leveraging that access to find political information increased the likelihood that an individual cast a vote in the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections. In the years since Tolbert and McNeal's study, the Internet has become a campaign resource that offers much more than basic political information. Formal campaigns leverage the Internet to restructure their outreach and engagement strategies as well as their internal communication structures (Foot and Schneider 2006; Howard 2006). At the same time, individual citizens take advantage of the opportunities presented by digital technology to create their own content, some of which is adopted by campaigns willing to sacrifice control for bottom-up engagement and creativity (Kerbel 2009). Prime examples include responses to and redeployment of non-campaign-originated media messages from the 2008 presidential election such as "Obama girl" or will.i.am's reinterpretation of Obama's "Yes We Can" speech. The ability of voters to inject their views, voices, and values into the campaign environment has changed the ways campaigns mold and control their communication strategies.

Evidence suggests that members of the millennial generation are, overall, better equipped than previous generations to take advantage of a digitally enhanced political environment. Pew Research Center's report, *Millennials: A Portrait of Generation Next*, offers a number of key observations regarding the relationship between 18- to 29-year-olds and technology (Taylor and Keeter 2010). Millennials are more likely than previous generations to use the Internet for social networking and e-mail and are also more likely to engage in texting, with younger members of the millennial cohort more likely than older cohort members to both have a social networking page and frequently text. Bennett (2007) points out that the political behavior of millennials reflects the opportunities created by such technology.

Alongside taking advantage of new forms of technology, millennials have shifted their approach to political engagement in a manner different from previous generations. The presence of social networks and digital media in the daily life of millennials, nearly one-third of whom report watching a video online or posting a message to an online profile in the past 24 hours, is intricately linked to other aspects of their lives.

Youth are particularly well-positioned to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the Internet and digital technology—including entertainment, data gathering, production, and networking—which have been part of their political socialization (Jennings and Zeitner 2003). Whether youth will take advantage of those opportunities and the effect on offline political behavior is a matter of debate (Baumgartner and Morris 2010; Best and Krueger 2005; Lupia and Philpot 2005). Moreover, access to digital technology is not evenly distributed among the younger-than-30 demographic. While 95 percent of whites and 91 percent of blacks use the Internet and send e-mails at least occasionally, only 73 percent of Hispanics do. The gaps between racial groups<sup>2</sup> widen when looking at social networking use: 83 percent of whites, 71 percent of blacks, and 52 percent of Hispanics have created a social networking profile (Taylor and Keeter 2010). Among those individuals with a profile, “blacks are more likely to use these sites multiple times a day (45 percent vs. 25 percent of whites)” (Taylor and Keeter 2010), indicating that there are racial differences in how plugged in these potential voters are to the Internet. At the same time that racial differences exist in household Internet penetration and usage, among those registered to vote, the gap may be far narrower. Indeed, during 2008 nearly all campaigns relied heavily on online tools to reach out to young voters of various racial and ethnic groups.

## INTERNET OUTREACH IN THE 2008 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

News media around the 2008 presidential campaigns repeatedly emphasized the key role played by the Internet in reaching out to young voters, particularly by the campaign of Barack Obama. In the first presidential campaign to employ the Internet beyond simple Listservs and message boards, Howard Dean’s campaign in 2004 revealed the potential for the Internet to “create local, decentralized social networks from scratch” (Hindman 2005, p. 126). And, while the Dean campaign built an online database, it relied largely on individual volunteers to use third-party Internet platforms to recruit their friends (Hindman 2005). In 2008, presidential campaigns employed the Internet to target youth voters extensively. As Joe Trippi, key architect of Dean’s campaign stated, “I like to say that we at the Dean campaign were the Wright brothers. We put this rickety thing together and got it off the ground. But the folks in Obama’s online team are the Apollo project” (Vargas 2008).

While both Democratic and Republican candidates offered their own Web sites, social networking pages, and online videos, the Obama campaign was significantly more aggressive in reaching out to young people via the Internet (Arsenault 2008). As Karlo Barrios Marcelo from CIRCLE notes, the Obama campaign recruited “some of the best and bright[est] people who knew how to organize online” including one of the original developers of Facebook (CQ Transcriptions 2008). Importantly, the Obama campaign used the Internet specifically to target youth of color. Beyond well-known social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace, the campaign also maintained a strong presence on sites such as “AsianAve.com, MiGente.com, and BlackPlanet.com, social networking sites...targeting Asian, Latino, and black communities” (Vargas 2008). The looming question was whether all that work paid off in terms of increased political participation or whether online politics simply stayed online?

## HYPOTHESES

Given the rapid development in the use of the Internet by both youth and campaigns and the particular efforts of the Obama campaign to engage youth of color in the last election, we offer four hypotheses regarding the possibilities for the Internet and youth political participation:

- H1:* Young registered voters are more engaged in online political activity than older cohorts.
- H2a:* Older cohorts of voters will demonstrate differences in online political activity by racial group.
- H2b:* Younger cohorts of voters will not demonstrate differences in online political activity by racial group.
- H3:* Increased online political activity increases offline traditional political participation.
- H4:* The positive effects of online political activity will be more robust among younger voters.

Our expectation that Internet access will increase offline participation is similar to that of Tolbert and McNeal, but here we focus on the specific behaviors that individuals engage in with regard to politics online. Tolbert and McNeal were greatly limited by the lack of any follow-up questions on Internet activity on the American National Election Studies (ANES) instruments. However, Internet-based engagement has dramatically expanded since 2000 with many new forums, mediums, and opportunities for sharing and accessing political information online. Thus, we expand the broad category of “Internet usage” to focus on specific political behavior online: visiting a candidate’s Web site, blogging or reading blogs about politics, using social networking sites to engage in politics, e-mailing or chatting online about

politics, or signing up to receive e-mails from campaigns. We contend that individuals who engage more frequently online are more likely to engage in political behavior offline. We also examine each independent type of online engagement to determine which are most relevant to spurring offline participation. Finally, we focus on an index of political participation as our dependent variable, rather than voting alone, to allow for variation in effect. We now turn to a discussion of our data and models.

## DATA, METHODS, AND MODEL

To examine political participation during the context of the 2008 general election, we use data from the Collaborative Multiracial Political Study (CMPS 2010). This telephone survey—conducted between November 9, 2008, and January 5, 2009—is the first multiracial and multilingual survey of registered voters across multiple states and regions in a presidential election. In contrast to the 2008 ANES, which oversampled black and Latino voters and was available in Spanish, the CMPS was available in six languages and contains robust samples of the four largest racial/ethnic groups: whites, Latinos, blacks, and Asians.<sup>3</sup> The CMPS contains 4,563 respondents who were registered to vote as of the November 2008 election and who self-identified as Asian, black, Latino, and white, and it was available in English, Spanish, Mandarin, Cantonese, Korean, and Vietnamese; respondents were offered the opportunity to interview in their language of choice.

There are six states in the country where representative studies will yield robust samples of all four major racial groups. These states are California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, and New Jersey, and our statewide samples range from 243 to 669 cases. In order to arrive at more nationally representative samples of each minority group, we added two supplemental states per racial group, including Arizona and New Mexico (Latinos), North Carolina and Georgia (blacks), and Hawaii and Washington (Asians). Of these 12 states, 3 were considered political battlegrounds in the 2008 presidential election: New Mexico, Florida, and North Carolina. In order to examine multiracial politics in competitive and noncompetitive environments, we supplemented our sample with six additional diverse battleground states<sup>4</sup>: Colorado, Michigan, Nevada, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. As of the 2008 election, two-thirds of the national electorate is concentrated in these 18 states. For Latinos, 92 percent of all registered voters resided in these states, 87 percent of Asian Americans, 66 percent of blacks, and 61 percent of whites.

The sample was drawn of registered voters using the official statewide databases of registered voters maintained by elections officials in each of the 18 states. For voters without listed phone numbers, records were enriched using a combination of public and private sources of consumer

information by Catalyst Data Services (Bartlett, Tennessee). The vendor classified the sample by racial/ethnic group based on a combination of variables: first and last name, population density, and consumer information. In 2008, Catalyst had the most comprehensive database of registered voters and is particularly adept in studying multiracial populations because of their classification methodology. All interviews were conducted by live interviewers via telephone to landlines and mobile phone numbers when they were directly supplied by registered voters on the voter list.<sup>5</sup> The survey contains an overall sample of 4,563 with a margin of error of 1.5 percent for the national sample, 2.5 percent for the Latino sample, and 3.2 percent for the white, black, and Asian samples. Overall, the American Association for Public Opinion Research response rate-1 was 11.4 percent and response rate-3 was 41.9 percent. The average survey length was 24.8 minutes.

Post-stratification weights were applied to correct for any discrepancies for age, gender, and education that may accompany telephone surveys. The November 2008 Current Population Survey (CPS)<sup>6</sup> provides estimates of the registered voter population by race, age, gender, and education level, which we applied to our sample, by racial group, so that our distributions match those of the census on these important demographic categories.

There are 51 items dealing with sociopolitical attitudes, mobilization, and political activity. In addition, there are 21 items that capture demographic information, including age, ancestry, birthplace, education, ethnicity, marital status, number in the household, religiosity, gender, media usage, and residential context. The full survey instrument is available upon request.

For the purposes of this paper we focus on a dependent variable of political participation, mimicking Tolbert and McNeal's construction of political participation, and our key independent variables of online political activity. We run a multivariate regression<sup>7</sup> model, splitting by racial group, to estimate the relationship between this online political behavior and subsequent offline political behavior within each racial group. Thus, we present three models: (1) a replication of Tolbert and McNeal's Internet access/information model, (2) an extension of their model utilizing our more precise measures of political online engagement individually and as an index, and (3) a final model interacting the effects of Internet usage by age to assess the impact on younger voters.<sup>8</sup> We run these models separately (split sample) for the four racial groups sampled, weighting according to each groups national distribution.

### Dependent Variable: Offline Political Participation Index

The dependent variable we focus on in this paper is the offline political participation<sup>9</sup> of the respondent. Given the nature of different survey instruments, we construct our measure as closely as possible to Tolbert and McNeal's ANES index of political behavior. Thus, our index recodes seven political behaviors into a 0/1 dichotomy, where a one indicates that the

respondent engaged in the behavior, and subsequently aggregate them into an 8-point scale (0 to 7). These seven behaviors are attending a political meeting, volunteering for a political party or campaign, donating money to a political party or campaign, attending/participating in a protest, persuading friends/family/others about politics, writing a letter to a political official, and voting in the 2008 election.<sup>10</sup> The final instrument has a scale reliability, or alpha score, of .62, indicating that the aggregation of these indicators is appropriate for measuring political behavior. The range is zero, where the respondent engages in absolutely no political activities, to seven, where the respondent engages in all activities. The distribution of this variable can be found in Graph 1 in the Appendix. Not surprisingly, few respondents engage in all seven activities, and many more engage in far fewer. Nonetheless, the distribution of this variable is relatively well spread out and allows for enough variation for analysis.

### Key Independent Variables: Online Political Behavior

Our paper focuses on the fact that online political activity is no longer simply an information gathering endeavor. Individuals can engage in numerous types of behavior online that promote, develop, and explore their political orientations and that we argue subsequently alter their political behavior offline. Thus, we focus on five specific online behaviors and model them both individually and as an aggregated index. These are whether the respondent (1) visited a candidates' Web site, (2) blogged or wrote something online about politics, (3) used social networking sites to discuss or engage with politics, (4) engaged in basic Internet use (e-mail and chat) to discuss or talk about politics, or (5) signed up to receive e-mails from any campaign. Finally, we have a sixth general item in which the respondent answered "yes" to using the Internet for political activity but then answered "no" to each of the follow-up items above, so we cannot place them into a specific activity, but we know they do use the Internet for politics. Each item is constructed as a dichotomous variable, where zero indicates the respondent did not engage in this behavior and one indicates that he or she did. When aggregated as a 6-point scale, the alpha score is .65, indicating that these activities merge well as an index of online political behavior. Here, zero again indicates that the respondent engages in these behaviors, and the highest value, five, indicates that they engaged in all of these online behaviors. Overall, nearly 45 percent of respondents are engaging in at least one online political activity (for full distribution of political usage variables, see Table 5 in the Appendix)

Significant differences exist in political Internet activity by age. Among voters aged 18 to 29, 67 percent have done at least one online activity, compared to just 32 percent of voters aged 50 or older who took part in at least one online activity. This 35-point gap confirms our first hypothesis that youth are more likely to be engaged in politics online. Further, there is near parity

in Internet activity among racial groups younger than 30, wherein whites older than 50 are more likely to be online, which confirms our second hypotheses that racial disparities will only exist among older cohorts. As the Internet continues to spread and new generations are raised with more knowledge about how to navigate, use, and create content on the Internet, it is likely that this percentage will only increase. Capturing this trend now and exploring these relationships across racial groups will only illuminate the political behavior of these individuals more clearly.

### Other Independent Variables

We also control for traditional predictors of political behavior such as income, age, education, partisanship, and gender. We include a measure of political trust as proxy for political efficacy in Tolbert and McNeal's model, as well as measures of political interest and the use of other media as political sources in addition to the Internet (television and newspapers) to approximate the Tolbert and McNeal ANES model. Given the potential impact of immigration and language on these samples, particularly for Asian and Latino respondents, we also control for the foreign-born status of respondents.

## FINDINGS

The role of the Internet in political participation literature has spanned a wide array of topics, including mobilization, content creation, targeting, fundraising, and information gathering. Here, we take the work of Tolbert and McNeal and expand on it to integrate a discussion of Internet use as something beyond simply access or information gathering. Further, we explore how Internet use has differing effects across age cohorts and racial groups (and the exposure to emerging technology this entails). Table 1 illustrates differences in the rates of online political activity by age and race. With this in mind, we turn to the results of our three regression models predicting political participation.

**TABLE 1** Internet Activity by Age Cohort and Race

	Number of political activities online		
	None (%)	1 or More (%)	2 or More (%)
All voters 18–29	33	67	36
Whites 18–29	35	65	29
Latinos 18–29	33	67	31
Blacks 18–29	33	67	39
Asians 18–29	28	72	50
All voters 50 plus	68	32	12
Whites 50 plus	56	44	15
Latinos 50 plus	75	25	10
Blacks 50 plus	72	28	14
Asians 50 plus	72	28	10

In the first model, shown in Table 2, we simply applied Tolbert and McNeal's model to new data from 2008, slightly modifying their model due to data limitations. Nonetheless, the results reveal very similar conclusions

**TABLE 2** Predictors of Political Participation, 2008 CMPS Data Set

	White	Black	Latino	Asian
<b>Political information variables</b>				
Used Internet as source of political information	0.420** (0.085)	0.835** (0.097)	0.289** (0.079)	0.421** (0.111)
Used newspapers as source of political information	0.366** (0.083)	0.243** (0.090)	0.375** (0.070)	0.146 (0.099)
Used TV as source of political information	-0.002 (0.129)	-0.064 (0.158)	0.109 (0.112)	-0.184 (0.136)
<b>Political variables</b>				
Level of trust in government	-0.226** (0.064)	0.193** (0.065)	-0.075 (0.051)	0.064 (0.072)
Interest in politics during 2008 election	0.479** (0.059)	0.306** (0.068)	0.326** (0.046)	0.234** (0.069)
Strength of identification with a party	0.422** (0.064)	0.400** (0.073)	0.271** (0.055)	0.375** (0.071)
<b>Demographics</b>				
Age of respondent	0.000 (0.002)	0.009** (0.003)	0.005* (0.002)	-0.002 (0.003)
Female respondent	0.057 (0.078)	0.005 (0.090)	-0.06 (0.068)	0.085 (0.094)
Foreign-born respondent	-0.23 (0.215)	0.041 (0.154)	-0.100 (0.072)	-.316** (0.099)
Education level of respondent (6-point scale)	0.138** (0.036)	0.093* (0.043)	0.179** (0.031)	-0.072 <sup>+</sup> (0.043)
Middle-income respondent	-0.208 <sup>+</sup> (0.108)	0.186 (0.114)	0.316** (0.084)	0.288* (0.133)
High-income respondent	0.06 (0.138)	0.690** (0.167)	0.390** (0.128)	0.069 (0.157)
Missing income	-0.158 (0.120)	-0.004 (0.115)	-0.024 (0.094)	0.040 (0.143)
Constant	0.138 (0.245)	-0.46 (0.297)	-0.171 (0.205)	1.365** (0.299)
Observations	1,061	863	1,402	702
R <sup>2</sup>	0.22	0.23	0.22	0.13

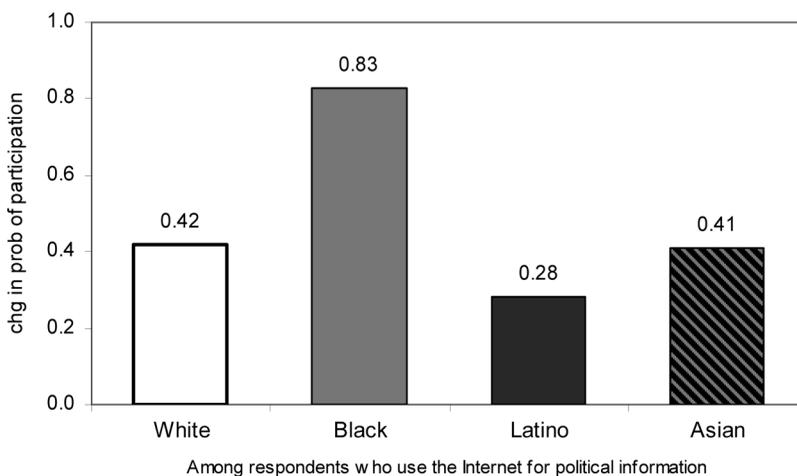
*Note.* Standard errors are in parentheses.

<sup>+</sup>Significant at 10%; \*significant at 5%; \*\*significant at 1%.

Dependent variable is 7-item participation index: attending a political meeting, volunteering for a political party or campaign, donating money to a political party or campaign, attending/participating in a protest, persuading friends/family/others about politics, writing a letter to a political official, and voting in the 2008 election. Ordinary least squares regression coefficients and standard errors reported.

to the previous work. The Internet as a source of political information is statistically significant and positively related to political participation, and this is true across all four racial groups. Similar to Tolbert and McNeal, we also assessed the likelihood for endogeneity between political interest and political Internet use. Back in 2000 when using the Internet for politics was rare, endogeneity was an issue. By 2008 there were numerous opportunities for people to access the Internet and to engage in politics online, and not simply the result of each respondent's underlying political interest. In other models, we estimated a two-stage relationship, first predicting political Internet use as a function of interest in politics and then plugging the residuals into a model predicting political participation. However, the amount of variance in political Internet use explained by political interest alone is only around 2 percent, and political Internet use remains an overwhelming predictor of political participation in the second-stage model. Thus, we rely only on the single-stage ordinary least squares regression models throughout this article (additional estimations are available on author's Web site).

Similar to Tolbert and McNeal's findings with the ANES, the new CMPS data from 2008 clearly illustrates that the Internet as a political information source does increase an individual's propensity to participate. The predicted probabilities illustrated in Figure 1 demonstrate that across the board for all racial groups, there is a positive effect on political participation if the respondent reports using the Internet for political information, with the most robust effect for African Americans. Whites who use the Internet for political information, for example, show a 0.42 increase in political participation, similar to Asian Americans, who show an increase of 0.41. Though this indicates a 0.42 or 0.41 increase of the discrete variable of political participation (i.e., moving from 1 political activity to 1.42 political activities), it is important to note that



**FIGURE 1** Change in probability of political participation by Internet usage.

the effect nonetheless increases political participation. When we consider the effects for African Americans, the increase is 0.83, almost twice as large as that of whites and Asians, and coming close to a 1-point increment. In contrast, for Latinos, the increase in participation as a result of Internet consumption is just 0.28. However, the question left unanswered is whether any specific type of online political activity will increase political participation unilaterally across the four racial groups and to what extent there are differences by age.

In the second model, we explore how the relationship between Internet usage and political participation is affected when controlling for specific types of Internet usage, allowing us to reveal much more precision in the relationship. Shown in Table 3, this model controls for whether the respondent used the Internet to visit a candidate's Web site, blog about politics, engage in discussions on social networking sites about politics, engage through e-mail or chat about politics, or signed up to receive e-mail updates from a political campaign. These five activities are controlled for in Table 3.

Turning first to the individual political Internet usage variable effects, we can see in Table 3 that visiting a candidates Web site, blogging about politics, and signing up to receive e-mail contact from campaigns are positive and statistically significant across all four racial groups. Using a social networking site for politics spurred political participation only for black and Latino respondents. Similarly, basic Internet use was statistically significant for all but black respondents. Nonetheless, the relationship between these variables is indicative of a positive effect on political participation, though the coefficients are not equal for all groups.

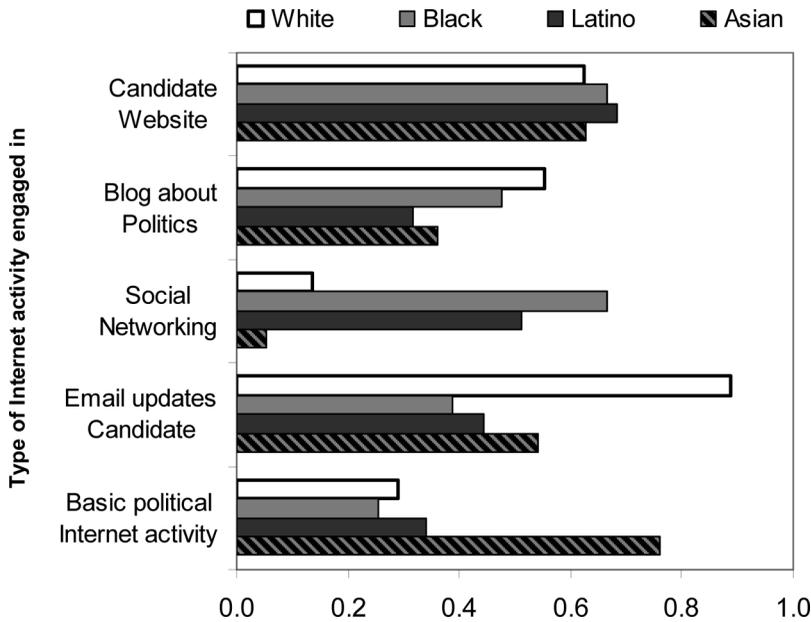
Again, turning to the graphic presentation of the coefficient magnitude, the results reveal interesting patterns that are differentiated by race. As Figure 2 illustrates, the only political activity that appears to have a relatively equal impact across all four racial groups is visiting a candidates Web site, where an increase in participation of about 0.60 or greater is seen in all racial groups. However, the impact of the remaining four political online activities are far more disparate, suggesting that different modes of online political activity work better for different racial groups. For example, blogging about politics elicited the strongest effect among whites (0.55) and then blacks (0.48) compared to much smaller effects for Latinos (0.32) and Asians (0.36). Social networking had a substantial effect for blacks (0.67) and lesser for Latinos (0.51), but did very little for Asians and whites, where the result was not statistically significant. Signing up to receive e-mail updates from campaigns had the strongest effect by far among whites (0.89) compared to lesser effects on minorities, though still an important factor overall. Finally, basic political activity online that was not identified uniquely as any of the above types had the largest effect on increasing Asian American political participation (0.76) and far less noticeable effects for whites (0.29) and Latinos (0.34); effects were insignificant for blacks. Individually, each type of online

**TABLE 3** Predictors of Political Participation Using Expanded Internet Variables

	White	Black	Latino	Asian
<b>Political Internet usage variables</b>				
Visited a candidates Web site	0.625** (0.092)	0.666** (0.113)	0.682** (0.091)	0.627** (0.130)
Blogged about politics	0.554** (0.111)	0.475** (0.139)	0.317** (0.109)	0.363* (0.142)
Used social networks for politics	0.136 (0.144)	0.666** (0.163)	0.513** (0.133)	0.054 (0.157)
Signed up to receive e-mail contact from campaigns	0.889** (0.119)	0.389** (0.131)	0.444** (0.105)	0.541** (0.128)
Basic Internet use: e-mail/talk about politics	0.291* (0.122)	0.255 (0.220)	0.339** (0.115)	0.762** (0.186)
<b>Political information variables</b>				
Used newspapers as source of political information	0.402** (0.077)	0.281** (0.085)	0.308** (0.066)	0.121 (0.094)
Used TV as source of political information	0.096 (0.120)	0.108 (0.150)	0.146 (0.105)	-0.062 (0.129)
<b>Political variables</b>				
Level of trust in government	-0.164** (0.059)	0.150* (0.062)	-0.069 (0.048)	0.079 (0.069)
Interest in politics during 2008 election	0.375** (0.055)	0.299** (0.065)	0.241** (0.043)	0.177** (0.066)
Strength of identification with a party	0.360** (0.059)	0.357** (0.070)	0.238** (0.052)	0.341** (0.068)
<b>Demographics</b>				
Age of respondent	0.003 (0.002)	0.011** (0.003)	0.011** (0.002)	0.005 (0.003)
Female respondent	0.064 (0.072)	0.058 (0.086)	-0.002 (0.064)	0.047 (0.090)
Foreign-born respondent	-0.331 <sup>+</sup> (0.199)	-0.046 (0.147)	-0.125 <sup>+</sup> (0.067)	-0.177 <sup>+</sup> (0.096)
Education level of respondent (6-point scale)	0.089** (0.033)	0.028 (0.042)	0.144** (0.029)	-0.095* (0.041)
Middle-income respondent	-0.320** (0.100)	0.196 <sup>+</sup> (0.107)	0.164* (0.080)	0.282* (0.126)
High-income respondent	-0.014 (0.127)	0.453** (0.160)	0.144 (0.122)	0.042 (0.150)
Missing income	-0.151 (0.111)	0.014 (0.108)	-0.062 (0.088)	0.075 (0.137)
Constant	0.18 (0.227)	-0.41 (0.284)	-0.23 (0.193)	1.031** (0.293)
Observations	1,061	863	1,402	702
R <sup>2</sup>	0.34	0.31	0.32	0.22

Note. Standard errors are in parentheses.

<sup>+</sup>Significant at 10%; \*significant at 5%; \*\*significant at 1%.



**FIGURE 2** Increase in political participation by Internet usage (unstandardized beta coefficients).

political activity seems to have a unique and positive effect on the political participation of racial and ethnic minorities, yet we know that many people were engaged in a plethora of online activities. If each individual activity has the capacity to increase participation, when taken together, we should expect even more substantial effects on participation. What's more, we have hypothesized that the effects may be stronger among younger voters who are more active users of the Internet.

Important in this discussion, given the nature of technology use across generations, is the role that age can play across these groups. Indeed, we have spent much of this article theorizing about the political participation and mobilization of young voters. In Table 4, we present an interaction model in which we employ an aggregated scale of online political activity interacted with the age of the respondent. The results indicate that there is indeed an interaction effect for three of the groups—whites, blacks, and Asians—but that it is older voters who are able to convert online political activity into offline political participation more readily. Taking the coefficients for political Internet usage index, age, and the resulting interaction item, we assess the predicted probability of participation, allowing age and political Internet usage to vary from their low to high values.

Looking to Figure 3, the reader should first note that each separate panel represents the results for each of the four racial groups in the study and that within each panel, the different lines represent the slopes for different ages.

**TABLE 4** Interaction Model of Age X Internet Usage Predicting Political Participation

	White	Black	Latino	Asian
<b>Engagement/ information variables</b>				
Political Internet usage index	0.216* (0.101)	0.317** (0.106)	0.477** (0.089)	0.207 <sup>+</sup> (0.111)
Age X political Internet usage index	0.007** (0.002)	0.006* (0.002)	0.001 (0.002)	0.005 <sup>+</sup> (0.003)
Used newspapers as source of political information	0.382** (0.077)	0.272** (0.084)	0.319** (0.066)	0.138 (0.094)
Used TV as source of political information	0.123 (0.120)	0.087 (0.149)	0.149 (0.105)	-0.11 (0.130)
<b>Political variables</b>				
Level of trust in government	-0.160** (0.060)	(0.062)	-0.07 (0.048)	0.082 (0.069)
Interest in politics during 2008 election	0.387** (0.055)	0.297** (0.065)	0.244** (0.043)	0.184** (0.065)
Strength of identification with a party	0.366** (0.059)	0.354** (0.069)	0.244** (0.052)	0.340** (0.068)
<b>Demographics</b>				
Age of respondent	-0.008* (0.004)	0.001 (0.005)	0.010** (0.004)	-0.003 (0.005)
Female respondent	0.06 (0.072)	0.066 (0.085)	0.011 (0.064)	0.072 (0.089)
Foreign-born respondent	-0.324 (0.198)	-0.097 (0.146)	-0.126 <sup>+</sup> (0.067)	-0.178 <sup>+</sup> (0.096)
Education level of respondent (6-point scale)	0.075* (0.034)	0.012 (0.042)	0.146** (0.029)	-0.077 <sup>+</sup> (0.040)
Middle-income respondent	-0.318** (0.100)	0.184 <sup>+</sup> (0.107)	0.171* (0.080)	0.285* (0.127)
High-income respondent	-0.029 (0.127)	0.423** (0.160)	0.148 (0.121)	0.05 (0.151)
Missing income	-0.167 (0.110)	0.017 (0.108)	-0.045 (0.088)	0.092 (0.136)
Constant	0.177 (0.303)	-0.443 (0.349)	-0.716** (0.247)	0.926* (0.374)
Observations	1,061	863	1,402	702
R <sup>2</sup>	0.34	0.31	0.31	0.21

Note. Standard errors are in parentheses.

<sup>+</sup>Significant at 10%; \*significant at 5%; \*\*significant at 1%.

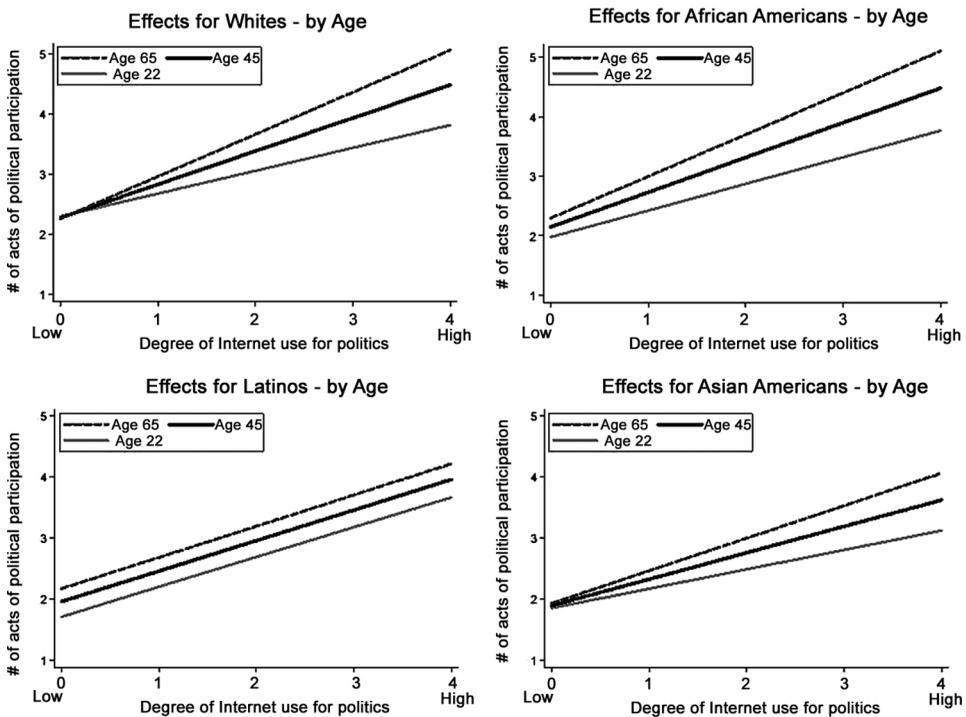
The x-axis marks the degree of political Internet usage, while the y-axis represents the expected amount of political participation. In all cases, that is for all age groups across all racial groups, increased online political activity increases offline political participation. However, for three of the four groups, the slope is most steep for the oldest cohort of voters. For whites, blacks, and Asians, the reader will notice that the lines are not parallel and that the top line, representing a voter aged 65, slopes upward with more

**TABLE 5** Distribution of Responses to Political Internet Usage Variables

% Yes	Whites (%)	Blacks (%)	Latinos (%)	Asians (%)
Use Internet for political info	58.0	45.9	42.0	57.7
Use Internet to learn about politics	51.1	39.7	35.1	36.7
Visit candidate Web site	34.0	31.8	25.4	24.1
Write or read politics blog	18.2	17.9	13.7	14.3
Use social networking site politically	8.7	9.3	6.6	9.3
Sign up for candidate e-mail alerts	13.1	16.1	11.1	11.9

intensity, suggesting even greater political participation, as online political activity increases. In contrast, the bottom line, representing a voter aged 22, slopes upward less severely. Only for Latinos, no age interaction exists, with the three lines noticeably parallel. At this point, the results would seem to reject our fourth hypothesis that Internet effects would be stronger for younger voters. Perhaps older voters, who are more experienced in political participation, can more easily convert their online activism to offline participation, while younger voters are still learning the ropes of offline political participation.

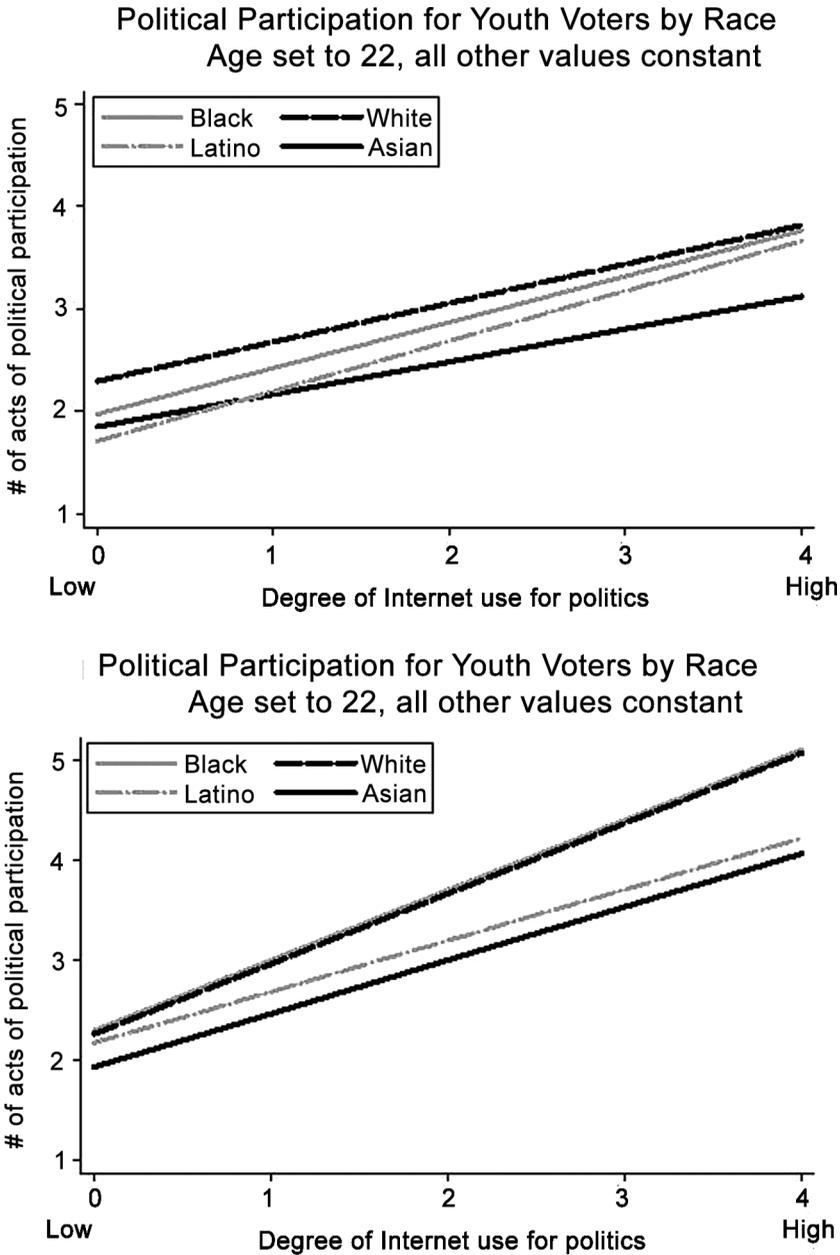
However, given the striking differences in the rates of online political activity reported previously in Table 1, we are not ready to give up on hypothesis four quite yet. While the slopes are less robust, in reality, younger



**FIGURE 3** Predicted probability of political participation by Internet usage and age (panels by race).

voters are much more likely to find themselves halfway or all the way up the slope as compared to older voters (that is, further to the right on the x-axis). In fact, Table 1 notes that 67 percent of young voters are engaged in at least one online political activity, while among older voters 68 percent are engaged in none. In fact, the modal category for younger voters is *two or more* online activities, compared against the modal category of *none* for older voters. So by their very nature of heightened online political activity, younger voters are witnessing higher rates of political participation than older voters who are far less engaged online. Return for a moment to Figure 3. Starting with the first panel, if we place a young white voter on their modal category of two activities online, the young voter line appears to cross the y-axis at an estimated 3 acts of political participation. In contrast, if we place the older voter at their mode of zero activities online, they appear to be at about 2.3 acts of political participation. In this case, holding all other variables constant and assigning voters to their modal category of online political activity by age, the typical younger voter is estimated to have had higher political participation than the typical older voter in 2008. This same trend holds for all racial groups, whereby younger voters who are black, Latino, and Asian had even higher rates of political participation than older cohorts of racial minorities, and thus their modal position would be higher rates of online political activity and, therefore, higher rates of overall political participation.

Finally, we assess the extent to which online political activity can help bridge participation gaps across racial groups, by age. If young people are more likely to be engaging the Internet politically, we should expect to see differences in participation rates disappear among active Internet users. In Figure 4 we plot the relationships as in Figure 3, only this time we arrange them according to age group, with four lines for each racial group. The panel on the left side is where age is set to 22, and the panel on the right is where age is set to 65. Starting with the younger voters, we notice that the lines for whites, blacks, and Latinos converge at almost the exact same point, about 3.8, when online political activity is highest. For young Asian Americans, a participation gap still persists after increases in online political activity. Among the older voters, controlling for the host of socioeconomic variables in the model, whites and blacks have virtually the same probability of political participation; however, Latinos and Asians move further away as online activity increases. Thus, with the exception of Asian Americans, online political activity appears to have a unifying force among younger voters whereby whites, blacks, and Latinos are all participating at equal rates, when they are actively engaged with politics online. It is clear that more work needs to be done to understand the role that the Internet plays in the mobilization and engagement of voters, but as these findings suggest, the outlook is positive in terms of increased youth political engagement, even across racial minority groups.



**FIGURE 4** Predicted probability of political participation by Internet usage and race (panels by age).

### CONCLUSION

During the 2008 election, the Internet was no longer an amusing side story but rather a central feature of the presidential election. Both candidates had a

sophisticated and extensive online presence and used their Web sites to register new voters, engage in political discussions, showcase videos of candidate speeches, and most important, raise money. At the same time that online political activity has increased in importance, political mobilization has begun to focus on two important subgroups in the electorate: young voters and ethnic minorities. Even in the most recent call by President Obama in a YouTube message about mobilizing the Democratic base, his emphasis was on the mobilization of young voters, African Americans, Latinos, and women. Thus, the recent shifts in targeting these groups is not solely an offline issue, but one that finds its call to action through online networks like YouTube, Facebook, and many more offshoots in the future. While there has been a tremendous focus on getting out the youth and minority vote by campaigns and some scholars, the scholarship has not considered the intersection of these important groups to examine trends in youth voters across racial groups and with an emphasis on online activity.

This article has examined the evolution of the Internet as a source of political information (and mobilizing force) to a more nuanced role in the political engagement of voters. Given the decline in overall participation and turnout, the outlook was grim given the participation barriers facing minority and youth voters. Socioeconomic barriers and a lack of targeted mobilization often excluded these groups as “unlikely” or “high-cost” voters not worth a candidate or party’s mobilization efforts. However, the results here have shed considerable light on understanding the role that online political participation can play in voter mobilization and engagement. Voters are no longer constrained to centralized party mobilization but are now the conduits and forces behind their own participation in offline politics because of online political activity. Voters actively engage candidates on their Web sites, blog about politics, discuss political issues through e-mail and social networks, and control their own political participation. More importantly, the role that political Internet usage plays in equalizing participation for the youngest voters illustrates that the possibility of an equally accessible political landscape is only a few clicks away.

This paper has found that online political activity is a significant and robust predictor of offline political participation and that this general trend holds across all racial and ethnic groups in the United States. Though we have delved deeper than simply using the Internet to learn about politics, a variable used in previous analysis, in this paper we examine the types of political activity online such as visiting a candidate’s Web site, reading or responding to a political blog, and using social networking sites to discuss politics. It is clear that each type of online activity can spur political participation, but each has differing effects that vary across racial and ethnic groups. Finally, our focus on young voters suggests that their high rates of online engagement hold great promise in further increasing their overall political participation and that among young blacks and Latinos, in particular, online activity promotes participation rates equal to that of whites.

## NOTES

1. Though in 1996 both Bill Clinton and Bob Dole had Web sites, they were hardly used or mentioned in the media, other than for their novelty.
2. Asian youths are excluded here from the Pew analysis because of their small numbers; they account for only 4 percent of the millennial population (Pew 2010). Please add the Pew 2010 citation to the reference list or delete the citation).
3. The Asian American sample includes the six largest national origin groups: Chinese, Asian Indian, Filipino, Korean, Vietnamese, and Japanese.
4. States were identified at the time of the sample frame design as battleground, in September 2008.
5. A cell phone-only sample was not conducted; however, some registered voters have provided their cell phone number on the voter registration record and those numbers were eligible to be dialed.
6. We rely on tables 2 and 6 from the 2008 CPS, which can be found here: <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/voting/cps2008.html>.
7. We additionally ran Poisson regression models in consideration of the “count” nature of our dependent variable and found the results to be almost identical.
8. Also, to assess potential endogeneity between political interest and online political activity, we ran a two-stage least squares model in which we first modeled online activity as a function of political interest. Those results are consistent with those presented here and can be found in the Appendix.
9. Though Tolbert and McNeal’s paper models both vote propensity and participation, the CMPS is a sample of registered voters across the nation across a single election. The distribution of voters versus nonvoters in this particular sample was highly skewed: 207 respondents did not vote, while the remaining 4,356 claim to have voted. Data limitation also limited our ability to incorporate the environmental variables (minority diversity index and number of initiatives) used by Tolbert. Nonetheless, given that this is a single election analysis, these variables would not have contributed to our interpretation as the authors utilized them to illustrate change over election cycles.
10. Excluded from this index but present in Tolbert and McNeal’s political participation index are whether the respondent displayed political buttons or signs and whether he or she gave money to interest groups. These are items that are unavailable on the CMPS, but given the amount of detail available regarding the online political behavior of respondents, the loss of these two items in the dependent variable is negligible.

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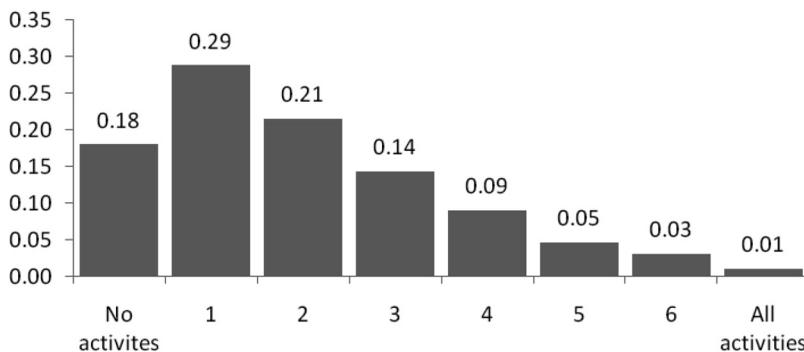
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## APPENDIX

### Political Participation index distribution



**GRAPH 1** Distribution of dependent variable.

**APPENDIX** Internet Usage by Age and Race

% Yes By age	Among Whites			
	18–35	36–50	51–60	61+
Use Internet for political info	72.9%	72.9%	66.9%	44.4%
Use Internet to learn about politics	68.2%	61.5%	57.4%	40.1%
Visit candidate Web site	48.6%	43.0%	40.3%	24.1%
Write or read politics blog	30.8%	22.2%	19.8%	13.2%
Use social networking site politically	23.4%	9.5%	6.5%	6.4%
Signup for candidate e-mail alerts	14.0%	13.6%	14.8%	11.9%
% Yes By age	Among Latinos			
	18–35	36–50	51–60	61+
Use Internet for political info	67.5%	54.2%	40.1%	25.5%
Use Internet to learn about politics	62.3%	44.7%	33.9%	19.1%
Visit candidate Web site	43.3%	32.7%	25.1%	13.9%
Write or read politics blog	23.8%	17.0%	13.0%	8.0%
Use social networking site politically	13.9%	7.3%	5.7%	3.9%
Signup for candidate e-mail alerts	17.9%	12.6%	11.3%	7.3%
% Yes By age	Among Blacks			
	18–35	36–50	51–60	61+
Use Internet for political info	64.6%	53.5%	45.8%	33.0%
Use Internet to learn about politics	60.6%	50.3%	38.2%	24.9%
Visit candidate Web site	48.0%	40.6%	31.6%	19.3%
Write or read politics blog	30.9%	20.3%	14.7%	12.3%
Use social networking site politically	18.9%	9.6%	6.2%	6.4%
Signup for candidate e-mail alerts	18.3%	18.7%	18.2%	12.3%
% Yes By age	Among Asian Americans			
	18–35	36–50	51–60	61+
Use Internet for political info	81.0%	72.3%	60.5%	41.8%
Use Internet to learn about politics	66.9%	46.1%	34.2%	23.9%
Visit candidate Web site	56.2%	32.0%	16.8%	13.7%
Write or read politics blog	38.8%	16.0%	10.0%	8.0%
Use social networking site politically	36.4%	5.8%	5.3%	4.7%
Signup for candidate e-mail alerts	14.9%	15.5%	11.6%	9.2%