

HOW ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKING HELPS DRAW YOUNG AMERICANS INTO POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

by Laurie L. Rice and Kenneth W. Moffett, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

Representative democracy requires active participation by each generation of citizens. Although young adults have been at the center of some of America's major social and political movements, their participation in politics has recently lagged far behind engagement by older citizens. Young adults are consistently underrepresented at the voting booth and are far less likely to contact elected officials, volunteer, send letters to the editor or engage in other well-established ways.

The 2008 presidential campaign marked the start of the significant use of online social networking – and the same younger generation least politically involved in traditional ways was the group most familiar with social networking and most likely to respond to online campaign contacts. “Liking” a candidate, joining a campaign’s social network, or “friending” a political party required little more than a click of a mouse or a tap on a smart phone. Could these simple actions that drew young people into the 2008 campaign lead to additional political participation?

To find out, we conducted surveys of randomly selected undergraduates at a large university in the Midwest before and after the 2008 presidential elections. We asked about college students’ engagement in online political social networks, as well as other forms of political participation. We examined the relationship between online social networking and other forms of political activity, and measured differences between young people who join a politically focused online social network and those who participate in a variety of offline forms of civic engagement.

Who Joins Online Political Social Networks?

Political science majors not surprisingly participate in politics more than their peers majoring in other subjects. Overall, students who joined campaign-related social networks in 2008 were little different than those involved in traditional forms of offline participation.

- **Students who read more online news are more likely to participate.** The more students read news online, the more likely they are both to engage in offline forms of participation and to friend or like a candidate, political party, or other political group online.
- **Students who post their views online are more likely to participate.** Making one’s political views available online for others to see requires the courage of one’s convictions. Students who did so were both more likely to join online political social networks and more engaged in traditional forms of participation.

Social Networking as a Pathway to Political Participation

Our research suggests that online, politically-focused social networking among college students broadens engagement and serves as a way to engage students in additional kinds of participation.

- **Interest in politics is not a prerequisite for joining an online political social network.** Previous research has found that one of the strongest predictors of political activity is individual interest in politics. After all, why would a person devote time to a subject that is not interesting? Our research confirms that students increase their participation offline as they become more interested in politics. However, we find no link between prior interest in politics and liking or friending a candidate, or taking part in an online political social network. Online networking attracts college students who would otherwise not participate.
- **Online friending facilitates higher levels of engagement in other forms of political participation.** Once students join an online social network that is political in nature, they also become more likely to participate in various offline civic and political activities.
- **Participation leads to more participation.** Engaging in one form of participation, regardless of type, means that college students are more likely to engage in other forms too.

Mobilizing College Students to Become Active Citizens

Scholars investigating why eligible citizens *may not* participate in democratic politics have discovered that individual characteristics and motivation matter. Educated people with a strong interest in politics almost always vote, for example. But another important predictor is whether citizens are asked to get involved – by a social contact or a political campaign.

In elections, one of the reasons many U.S. college students end up not participating is because nobody asks. That is changing fast as online tools are deployed. Social networking sites provide an easy way for candidates and political groups to reach out to large numbers of college students and invite them to participate. And online contacts and invitations tend to proliferate, because a student's decision to friend or like a candidate, political party, or other political group begets numerous invitations to participate in the electoral and political process. Our study did not examine the actual content of online appeals, but our data clearly show that students who engaged in campaign-related social networking were more politically mobilized. In fact, friending or otherwise joining an online, politically-focused social network was associated with engaging in more offline forms of participation than any other factor we examined, including the traditionally powerful factor of level of interest in politics.

Barack Obama's ability to generate enthusiasm among college students was widely touted. That happened for a variety of reasons, but when our research took into account strength of partisanship, ideology, and other commonly predictive factors, supporters of Obama were not unusually likely to be politically engaged offline. Instead, the Obama campaign's savvy use of social networking greatly helped to mobilize college students. In future elections, candidates and political organizations seeking support from college students will be wise to build a strong presence online and actively appeal to these young Americans via social networking sites.

Read more in Laurie L. Rice, Kenneth W. Moffett, and Ramana Madrupalli, "[Campaign-Related Social Networking and the Political Participation of College Students](#)." *Social Science Computer Review* 31, no. 2 (2013): 257-279.