

Who Speaks? Citizen Political Voice on the Internet Commons

Kay Lehman Schlozman, Sidney Verba & Henry E. Brady

Abstract: Using an August 2008 representative survey of Americans conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, we investigate the consequences of Internet-based political activity for long-standing patterns of participatory inequality. There is little evidence of change in the extent to which political participation is stratified by socioeconomic status, even when we account for the fact that the well educated and affluent are more likely to be Internet users. However, because young adults are much more likely than their elders to be comfortable with electronic technologies and to use the Internet, the Web has ameliorated the well-known participatory deficit among those who have recently joined the electorate. Still, among Internet users, the young are not especially politically active. How these trends play out in the future depends on what happens to the current Web-savvy younger generation and the cohorts that follow as well as on the rapidly developing political capacities of the Web.

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From the Greek agora to the Habermasian public sphere, the public commons is a space, open to all citizens, where political discourse and contestation take place; where citizens gather to discuss and possibly influence public policy; where they inform each other about relevant facts and share and debate their preferences. In the ideal commons, discussion is open and civil and essential to democracy. The public commons takes many forms, ranging from small-scale gatherings in a town meeting to national election campaigns that engage millions. The Internet has added a new commons, a virtual space for citizen communication. The novel properties of the Internet raise many questions: Is the political information on the Internet accurate? Does the Internet encourage understanding among those with different views? Does it create community? In short, what does it mean for democracy?

We are concerned not so much with the nature and quality of the discourse taking place in the Internet commons as with who participates in that discourse. In its earliest incarnation, the Greek agora,

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the commons was open only to a limited set of Athenians. Similarly, for much of our history, full participation in the American political commons was denied to many – in particular, women and African Americans. Although access is more nearly universal now, many are excluded by their youth, incarceration, or immigrant status, and still others take little or no part. More specifically, our question is whether – compared to traditional, pre-Internet modes of expression of citizen political voice – the virtual commons on the Internet makes opportunities for public discourse more egalitarian in terms of who takes part.

The Internet has generated a great deal of discussion about its consequences for democratic equality. Observers have claimed that “[t]he Internet changes everything,”¹ that it functions as “the great equalizer”² and as “our last, best chance to rekindle the great American dream.”³ According to some commentators, the Internet permits ordinary citizens to short-circuit political elites and deal directly with one another and with public officials; to encourage deliberation, enhance trust, and create community⁴; and – of special concern to us – to facilitate political participation.

The following example, one of many that could be culled from the press, illustrates the Internet’s promise in creating networks for organized political action. The Help America Vote Act, passed in response to the irregularities associated with the 2000 election, resulted in the replacement of old-fashioned punch card and lever voting systems with optical scan and Direct Record Electronic (DRE) systems. Then, beginning in 2003, an Internet-based movement among computer scientists led to questions about the security of electronic voting systems and potential for electronic corruption of DREs. Skeptics established websites about

the issue and then moved into more traditional forms of advocacy in opposition to paperless electronic systems. By 2007, twenty-seven states had adopted provisions mandating a paper trail.⁵ This story, a textbook example of a jointly concerned group of citizens working together to have an impact on government, has been used as evidence of the positive consequences of the Internet for democracy.

Most political scientists who study the impact of the Internet on politics have been cautious in their assessments of its implications. According to one such perspective, “[F]ar from revolutionizing the conduct of politics and civic affairs in the real world . . . the Internet tends to reflect and reinforce the patterns of behavior of that world” and constitutes “politics as usual conducted mostly by familiar parties, candidates, interest groups, and news media.”⁶ In fact, what is known about political participation renders the political success of what began as an Internet-based movement among computer professionals as not fully unexpected. While computer nerds have hardly been the most active group in American politics, they have characteristics – in particular, high levels of education – that predispose them to take part in politics should the occasion arise. Not all citizens bring such advantages to political participation on the Internet.

Our interest in studying the role of the Internet in the democratic functioning of the commons grows out of our long-term concern with the issue of political equality: the ideal – though not the reality – of equal voice for each citizen in political matters.⁷ Citizens in American democracy who wish to have an impact on politics can choose from a variety of options for exercising political voice; they can act on their own, with others, or in formal organizations. Working individually or collectively, they can communicate their con-

cerns and opinions to policy-makers in order to have a direct effect on public policy, or they can attempt to affect policy indirectly by influencing electoral outcomes. They can donate their time or their money. They can use conventional techniques or protest tactics. They can work locally or nationally. They can even have political input as the unintended by-product when, for reasons entirely outside politics, they affiliate with an organization or institution that is politically active. Through their political activity, citizens communicate information to public officials about their political opinions and priorities and generate pressure on public officials to pay attention.

One of the basic principles of democracy is the equal consideration by the government of the preferences, concerns, and needs of all citizens. The ideal of equal political voice embodied in the principle of “one person, one vote” is never fully achieved in any democracy, but the deviation from political equality is larger in the United States than in other developed democracies.⁸

Political voice is stratified on many bases, including income and education, race or ethnicity, age, and gender. Our focus is on socioeconomic status (SES), the advantage or disadvantage (based on a combination of income and education) that underlies many forms of inequality in American society. In our investigations, we have been struck by the power and durability of SES-based inequalities in political voice.⁹ Not only are participatory inequalities deeply rooted in American institutions and practices but they are persistent, dating back at least the half-century for which we have systematic evidence and presumably longer.

Our past work has demonstrated the multiple ways that SES is associated with various kinds of political activity.¹⁰ Those who are affluent and, especially, well edu-

cated are in many ways more likely to be motivated and able to take part in politics. They are, for example, more likely to be politically interested and informed; to think that they can make a difference if they take part; to have the kinds of jobs that develop the communications and organizational skills that facilitate activity in politics; to be actively engaged in religious institutions and nonpolitical organizations and, thus, to have further opportunities to develop such civic skills and greater exposure to a variety of political cues; to have the financial wherewithal to make contributions to campaigns and other political causes; to be located in the social networks through which requests for political activity are mediated; and to be asked by others to take part. In sum, all the factors that foster political participation have roots in socioeconomic circumstances.

We were, thus, concerned as to whether the Internet – which has been so transformative in many other ways – might have the effect of promoting equal citizen voice in politics. In this essay, we draw on a large-scale study of political behavior to assess the impact that opportunities for online political participation have on the stratification of political voice.¹¹ The survey, which was conducted during the presidential campaign in August 2008, provides a unique opportunity to consider whether online political activity – including newer forms of online activity on blogs and social networking sites – has the possibility of remedying the inequalities of political voice so characteristic of traditional, offline participation. Does the Internet bring new people into politics? Even if the Internet is effective in generating political participation, do the activists simply duplicate the participatory inequalities among offline participants? Or is the Internet bringing new kinds of people into political activity?

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We must caution at the outset that, in common with all studies of the impact of the Internet on some aspect of democratic politics, we are dealing with a phenomenon that is very much a moving target – a technology that is, according to political scientist Matthew Hindman, “in its adolescence.”¹² In view of our focus on inequalities in political participation, a second possible objection – that the survey on which we rely was conducted at a particular point during the campaign, in August 2008, after the parties had selected their presidential candidates but before the candidates had been officially nominated and before the campaign was in its final autumn sprint – might, in fact, not be cause for concern. The 2008 presidential campaign had unusual characteristics, including significant activity by younger adults and a candidate who made self-conscious efforts to incorporate the Internet into his campaign. However, Obama’s experience as a community organizer and his obvious appeal to the young and to persons of color could imply that this August 2008 survey more likely understates rather than overstates the extent of class- and age-based participatory inequalities.

In many ways, the Internet makes it easier to be active in politics. The Internet contains a wealth of political information: from the press, government offices, public officials, and interest organizations. Many kinds of political activity are faster and more efficient online. Making political contributions requires a credit card but neither envelope nor stamp. It is possible to contact large numbers of people quickly and cheaply with a persuasive message or a request to sign a petition, attend a protest, or take some political action. These capacities of the Internet have the potential to increase the numbers of political activists.¹³ Our concern, however, is not

with the consequence of the Internet on the *amount* of citizen activity, but with the *equality* of citizen voice. Even if it were unambiguous that Internet use increases political participation, a higher level of political participation does not necessarily imply a less unequal distribution of political activity. While we often associate the use of the Internet as a tool of citizen activation with emergent groups and underdog candidates operating on a shoestring, such use is now common among established as well as emergent interests. In short, if any increase in political participation derives from the same people, or the same kinds of people, who are already active, then a possible consequence of the process is to replicate or even exacerbate existing political inequalities.¹⁴

For more than a decade, social observers have been concerned that the “digital divide” is leaving behind a substantial portion of the public – with implications for equal opportunity in economic life and equal voice in political life. Although the metaphor of the digital divide originally referred to lack of hardware access and suggested a chasm separating cyber haves from the cyber have-nots, it is more appropriate to think of a continuum ranging from, at one end, those who have no Internet access or experience to those, at the other, who have broadband access at home, use the Internet frequently, and are comfortable with a variety of online techniques.¹⁵ Using the Internet to learn about politics and to be politically active requires not simply access to hardware but an array of skills: the capacity both to operate the computer and to seek and understand political information on the Web.¹⁶ But what is critical for our concern with participatory inequalities is not simply that some Americans have been left out of the technological advances of recent decades but that the contours of the

digital divide hew so closely to the socioeconomic stratification that is characteristic of political activity in the United States.¹⁷

Data from the 2008 Pew Internet & American Life survey that provide the basis for our analysis confirm the unevenness in access to the Internet. Reflecting patterns that have emerged from earlier studies, these data show that the attributes associated with access to hardware are in many ways familiar ones that, in important respects, track the socioeconomic class stratification that has such powerful implications for equal political participation.¹⁸ Roughly half of those in the lowest income category (family incomes below \$20,000 in 2007) are online; that is, they send or receive email or otherwise use the Internet at least occasionally. In contrast, at least occasional Internet or email use is nearly universal among those in the highest income category (family incomes of \$150,000 or more in 2007). Similarly, only 38 percent of those who did not graduate from high school, compared to 95 percent of those with at least some graduate education, are online.

In terms of the Internet's political capacities for providing opportunities for participation, access to information, and requests for activity, there is a difference between having Internet access at home and elsewhere – say, at work or the local library. In addition, even for those with Internet at home, there is a difference between dial-up and broadband access. The Pew data indicate that in 2008, three-quarters of those who were online – or 56.5 percent of all respondents – had high-speed Internet at home. Once again, there is a sharp socioeconomic gradient: 30 percent of those in households with annual incomes below \$20,000, compared to 88 percent in households with annual incomes above \$150,000, reported having high-speed Internet access at home; the

analogous figures for education are 22 percent for respondents who did not finish high school, as opposed to 81 percent for those with education beyond college. If we assume, not unreasonably, that a high-speed connection at home is an important resource for political engagement, it is interesting to note that those in the top quintile of SES are four times as likely as those in the bottom quintile to have such a connection.¹⁹

Beyond access to and skillful use of the Internet is the inclination to use it for political purposes. The overwhelming share of Internet use is for nonpolitical activities that range from finding directions to viewing pornography to keeping up with others via a social networking site. Studies of political participation make clear that the predisposition to devote leisure time – that is, time not spoken for by obligations at home, school, or work – to political activity is structured by both age and SES. We were suspicious that, beyond the demographic bias in access to hardware, online political participation might not function to redefine the kinds of people who are active politically but might instead reproduce the widely acknowledged stratification in offline participation.²⁰

The 2008 Pew survey provides a unique opportunity to investigate whether political participation on the Internet overcomes the representational biases that have long been observed as characterizing offline political activity. The survey asked about a series of political activities. Five of these can be performed either online or offline: contacting a national, state, or local government official; signing a petition; sending a “letter to the editor” to a newspaper or magazine; communicating with fellow members of a political or community group; and making a political contribution. We constructed two ac-

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tivity scales measuring either online or offline activity in the counterpart acts.²¹

Figure 1 presents data about the percentage of citizens, divided into five groups based on SES, who engage in at least one participatory act offline and the percentage who engage in at least one act online. The top line shows the proportion who undertake at least one of the five activities *offline*, the bottom line the proportion who undertake at least one *online*. Across the five SES quintiles, offline activity is more frequent than online activity. But more relevant to our concern is the fact that there is a steep slope upward regardless of whether the activity is offline or online. What is more, the gap between the bottom and top socioeconomic categories is greater for online than for offline participation. Clearly, whether political activity is traditional or Internet-based, it rises sharply with SES.

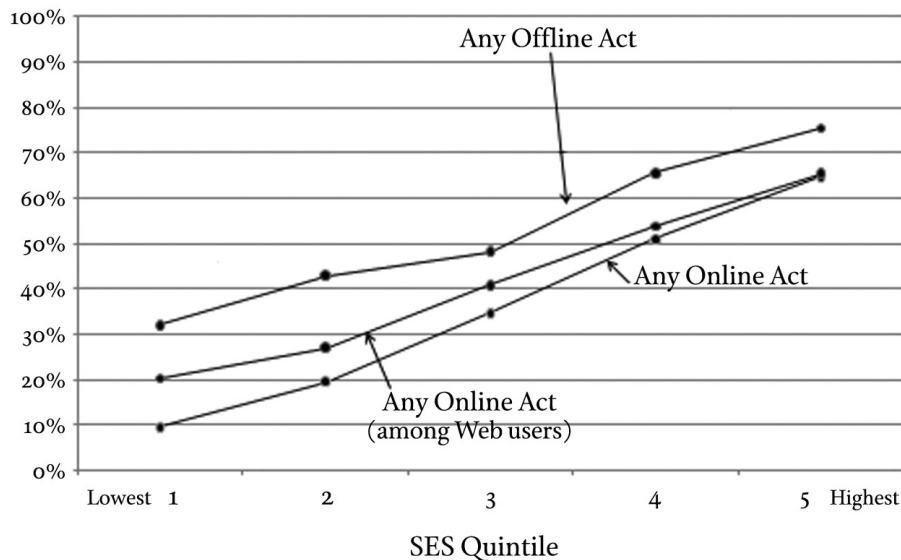
The middle line on Figure 1 shows the proportion engaging in at least one of the five online political activities *among Web users*, that is, those who use the Internet or email at least occasionally. The upward slope of the line for online activity among those with Internet access makes clear an important point: lack of access is only part of the story of the SES structuring of online political activity. Even omitting those who are not online and considering only those who use the Internet or email, we see a strong association between political participation and SES. Note also that the difference in activity between Internet users and those not connected is visible at the bottom of the SES scale and disappears at the top, indicating the double barrier to those with low SES. While lack of access to the Internet obviously makes their online political activity impossible, those who lack Internet access would not necessarily use it for political activity if they were to get connected. Still, the digital divide presumably depresses levels of

online political activity for those at the lower end of the SES ladder. In contrast, at the upper end, where Internet use is nearly universal, the level of online activity is not affected by lack of access to hardware. Thus, far from acting as a great equalizer, the possibility of political activity on the Internet reproduces longstanding patterns of SES stratification not only because the digital divide has an SES component but because the SES-disadvantaged among those online are not using the Internet for political participation.

Because making political contributions is the form of political activity most obviously dependent on access to financial resources – which are distributed unequally across citizens – and because a great deal of attention has been paid to the success of some candidates in raising large numbers of small donations over the Web, we were particularly interested to look more carefully at political giving. The Pew data contain helpful items about political giving that allow us to ascertain not only whether but also how much respondents gave in political contributions, both offline and on the Web.²² These data show that Internet contributions are less common than offline donations: 6 percent of respondents made an online contribution, with 15 percent making an offline one. They also suggest that behind the widely discussed success of Internet-based fundraising in collecting political money in smaller amounts is a more complex pattern. On one hand, the average offline contribution is larger than the average online contribution. On the other hand, the percentage of contributions that were \$50 or less – 38 percent for online and 39 percent for offline – is virtually identical as is the proportion of contributions that were between \$51 and \$100: 28 percent for online and 29 percent for offline.

Figure 1
Percent Engaged in Political Activity, by Socioeconomic Status (SES)

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Source: Data from the August 2008 survey conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project. "Web users" are defined here as those who use the Internet or email at least occasionally.

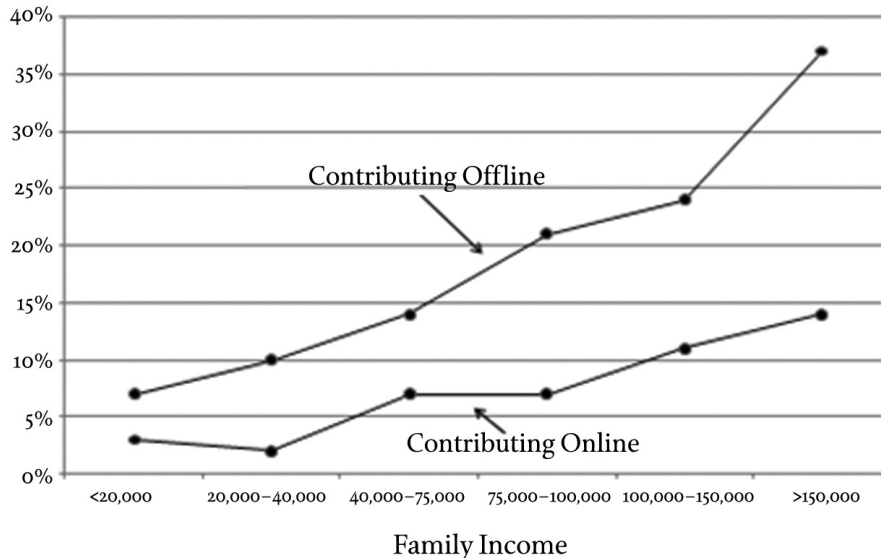
The very large donations that figure so importantly in campaign war chests are much less likely to come via the Web: less than 1 percent of the online contributions – as opposed to nearly 5 percent of the offline contributions – were for amounts greater than \$1,000. We are not certain why donors who give large gifts are less likely to use the Internet. Perhaps, out of security concerns, they are reluctant to enter a credit card number attached to a large donation on the Web. Or perhaps major donors like to be invited to events where they can rub elbows with politicians and celebrities, or they like to contribute in such a way as to allow a friend or political ally to get credit for the donation.²³

But what about the contributors? Does the Internet encourage donations from less affluent donors? Figure 2, which presents data about the proportion of respondents in various family income groups who make political contributions, shows

a familiar pattern.²⁴ Regardless of whether we consider offline or online political donations, the share of respondents who contribute rises sharply with family income and is more than five times greater in the highest family income group than in the lowest.

Many analysts of campaign finance emphasize expanding the ranks of small donors as the solution to the conundrum of money in democratic politics. Because small donations are unlikely to arrive with a set of policy instructions attached and can exercise limited leverage even when they do, small donations seem to ameliorate the possibilities for compromise of political equality in a campaign finance system that relies heavily on contributions from individuals. Hence, it is noteworthy that even those who made what would seem to be very small donations of \$50 or less in 2008 were relatively unlikely to be drawn from the lower rungs of

Figure 2
Percent Making a Campaign Contribution, by Family Income



Source: Data from the August 2008 survey conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

the income ladder, a regularity that characterizes online as well as offline donors.²⁵ If anything, online donors were somewhat better off financially: 18 percent of all the respondents in the Pew survey – compared to 21 percent of those who made small contributions offline and 29 percent of those who made such contributions online – reported family incomes over \$100,000. Thus, at least in the time period covered by the Pew data, the Internet seems to have brought in more small donors but not to have brought in a less affluent set of small donors.

Social movements fascinate precisely because they are not politics as usual and because they hold out the promise of mobilizing outsiders who would not otherwise take part in politics. Processes of mobilization are indeed potent for generating political participation, and social movements often bring into politics previously

quiescent publics, thus diminishing inequalities of political voice. Still, much more common than mobilization through social movements are the processes through which neighbors, workmates, and fellow organization and church members ask one another to take part in politics. A great deal of political activity occurs in response to such ordinary processes of recruitment. However, those who seek to get others involved in politics act as rational prospectors, directing their requests at people with characteristics that make it likely that they will assent when asked and that they will be effective when they take part.²⁶ The result of rational prospecting is to exaggerate existing participatory biases – including the class stratification of political activity – rather than to ameliorate them. Those who take part in response to requests from others are even better educated and more affluent than those who participate at their own initiative.

What happens if recruitment is via the Internet? The Internet provides a number of modalities – of which email and social networking sites are, at present, especially prominent – that make it nearly costless to multiply the number of specially crafted messages to selected publics. In fact, the level of Internet-based political recruitment has already expanded to nearly the same level as offline recruitment: 29 percent of our respondents indicated that they receive an email and 35 percent that they receive a phone call at least once a month asking them to get involved politically.

Figure 3, which reports requests for political activity that come by phone or by email, allows us to compare offline and online recruitment with respect to the extent to which it is structured by SES. Regardless of whether the request arrives by phone or email, the probability that a respondent reports a request for political activity rises steadily with SES. In fact, the curve is much steeper for email requests for political participation. The pattern shows that political recruitment exacerbates the class-based inequality in political activity; inequality is even more pronounced when requests arrive over the Internet.

We have seen no evidence that class-based inequalities of political voice are reduced when political participation is online rather than offline. However, we find a very different pattern when it comes to age. The young are more likely than their elders to use the Internet. Every study of Internet access and use, no matter what the measure, shows a steady, sharp decline with age. In the 2008 Pew survey, 88 percent of those who were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four reported using the Internet, and 70 percent reported having a high-speed connection at home. In contrast, the fig-

ures for those in their fifties are 76 percent and 56 percent and, for those over sixty, 44 percent and 29 percent, respectively.

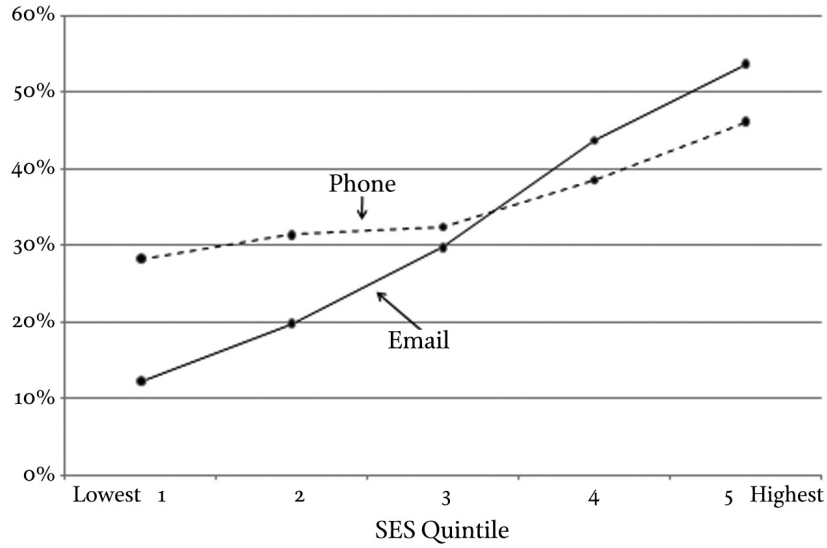
The generational component to Internet use suggests that, unlike the case with SES, the age profile of political activists will not be the same for offline and online activity. Figure 4, which shows, for each of seven age groups, the percentage who undertake at least one participatory act online and at least one offline, confirms that suspicion. Consider the top line, which shows, for offline political participation, a pattern long known to characterize the relationship between age and political activity: a roughly curvilinear trajectory over the life cycle. Political participation starts at a relatively low level, rises with age, peaks among those in their fifties, and falls off among the sixty-somethings and those over seventy. Still, age is much less powerful in structuring political activity than is SES: the gap in participation between the most and least active of the seven age groups is much smaller than the gap between the lowest and highest of the SES quintiles.

When it comes to online activity – shown in the bottom line for all respondents, regardless of whether they are Internet users – the difference between the youngest group and the middle-aged is relatively small, much smaller than for offline activity. For those under sixty, there is little relationship between age and online political activity. However, those who are over sixty are considerably less likely than those in any of the younger age groups to undertake any political activity online. In contrast to what we observed for offline political activity, the absence of online activity among the elderly represents, we assume, not a fall-off from previous Internet-based participation, but instead a “never was.”

The middle line on Figure 4, which shows the frequency of online political

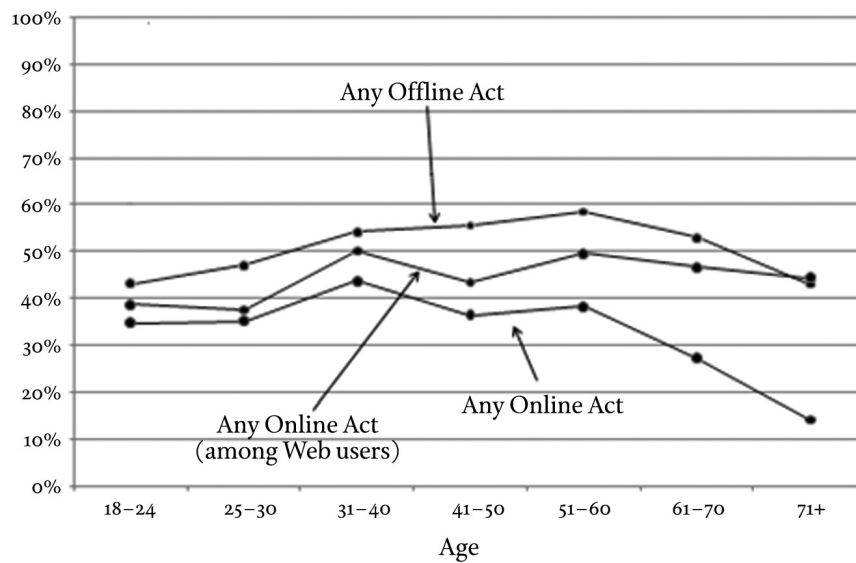
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Figure 3
Percent of Requests for Political Activity that Came by Phone or Email



Source: Data from the August 2008 survey conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

Figure 4
Percent Engaged in Political Activity, by Age



Source: Data from the August 2008 survey conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project. "Web users" are defined here as those who use the Internet or email at least occasionally.

activity among Internet users only, is striking in showing no pattern at all. There is relatively little difference among age groups in the share who are active online. Among those who use the Internet and email, the oldest groups are not especially inactive, and the young are the least likely to be politically active online. Thus, the digital divide has its greatest impact among older respondents. The small number of Web users among older respondents – a group that surely is not a random selection – are quite politically active on the Internet.

Figure 5 reaffirms the centrality of SES for online political participation. The lines on Figure 5 report for the various age groups the percent undertaking at least one participatory act online across SES quintiles.²⁷ The overall pattern shows the impact of SES and the comparative irrelevance of age. The five lines are bunched quite closely; they rise in tandem with SES. Each age group shows the expected association between SES and political activity. Within any SES quintile, there is much less variation among age groups and little consistent pattern as to which age group is the most active. The data reinforce our understanding of the strength of the relationship between SES and political activity.

The activities we have just considered are political acts that existed before the advent of the Internet – which is what allows us to compare them in their offline and online manifestations. Certain modes of Internet-based engagement have no direct offline counterpart, including posting comments on blogs (whether one’s own or someone else’s) and using social networking sites like MySpace, Facebook, or LinkedIn. Most people who post to blogs or, especially, join social networking sites do so for reasons having nothing to do with politics. Figure 6 gives

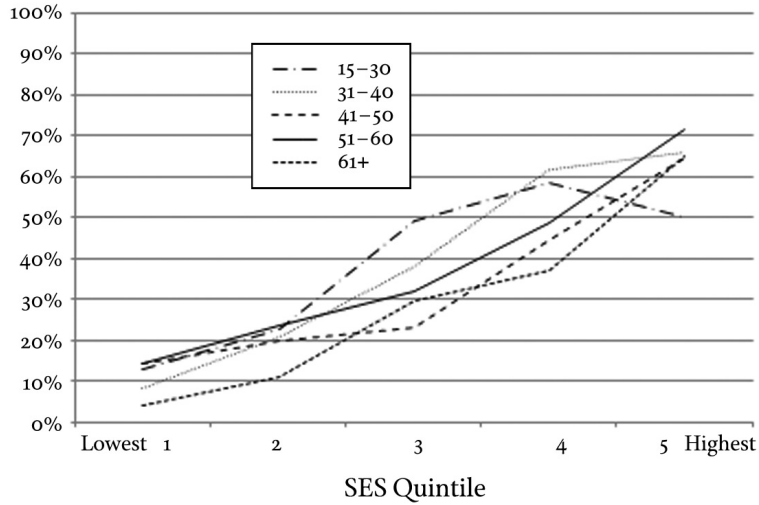
information about the proportion of respondents in each age group who reported blogging or using social networking sites, whether or not for politics. Figure 6 makes clear that the young are much more likely to exploit these relatively recent and rapidly developing Internet capabilities. Especially striking are the data for social networking, which show that the overwhelming majority of respondents under twenty-five are social networkers, a proportion that has undoubtedly grown since the survey was conducted.

Both modes of Internet engagement can also be used for political purposes. The Pew study asked explicitly about political blogging: that is, writing about a political or social issue on a blog, either one’s own or, more frequently, someone else’s. The survey also asked about political use of social networking, namely, doing any of the following on a social networking site: getting campaign or candidate information; starting or joining a political group or group supporting a cause; signing up as a “friend” of any candidates; or posting political news for friends or others to read.²⁸

The forms of political engagement in these venues about which the Pew survey asked do not fall squarely under the definition of political participation as “activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action – either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies.”²⁹ The items from the Pew survey focus on the ways that a social networking site is more a forum for political talk than for organized political effort; even the political groups formed are more about affinity than concerted political action. “Friending” a candidate is not the same as working in a campaign. In many ways, these modes of political involvement reflect some of the distinctive

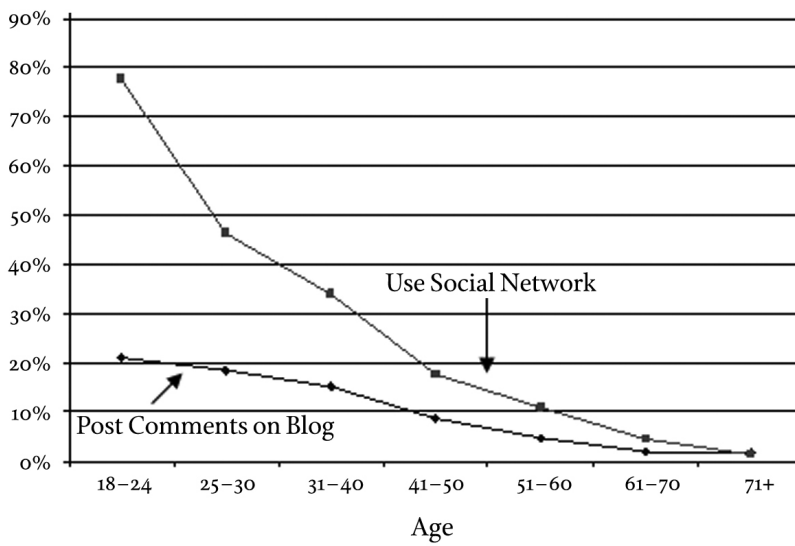
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Figure 5
Percent Engaged in Any Online Political Activity, by Socioeconomic Status (SES) and Age



Source: Data from the August 2008 survey conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

Figure 6
Percent Engaged in Any Blog or Social Network Use, by Age



Source: Data from the August 2008 survey conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

civic tastes of post-Boomer cohorts: their preference for participatory forms that are anchored in nonhierarchical and informal networks and that eschew such traditional political intermediaries as campaigns, parties, and interest groups.³⁰

Thus, as Figure 7 makes clear, blogging about political and social issues and political social networking are closely connected to age. The lower two lines – which show the percentage in various age groups reporting that, in the past year, they have posted comments about a political or social issue on a website or blog and the percentage reporting that they have undertaken at least one of the four political activities on a social networking site – fall sharply from the level for those under twenty-five. Figure 7 also repeats the data from Figure 4 about the proportion of respondents who engage in the online version of “conventional” political activities, such as making a political contribution or getting in touch with a public official. As before, the pattern is quite different. Although there is a steep drop-off among those over sixty, the youngest groups are not especially active in conventional online political activity.

Although these possibilities for political engagement through social networking sites do not simply reproduce participation as we have always known it, they may nevertheless lead to forms of online and offline political participation as conventionally understood. Besides, in the period since the Pew survey was conducted, these modes of involvement have become less exclusively the province of the young and have continued to evolve. There is a well-known pattern such that new technologies initially look a lot like the older technologies they eventually replace before their unique capacities are developed. For example, before the power of visual images was refined, early campaign ads on television used talking heads with

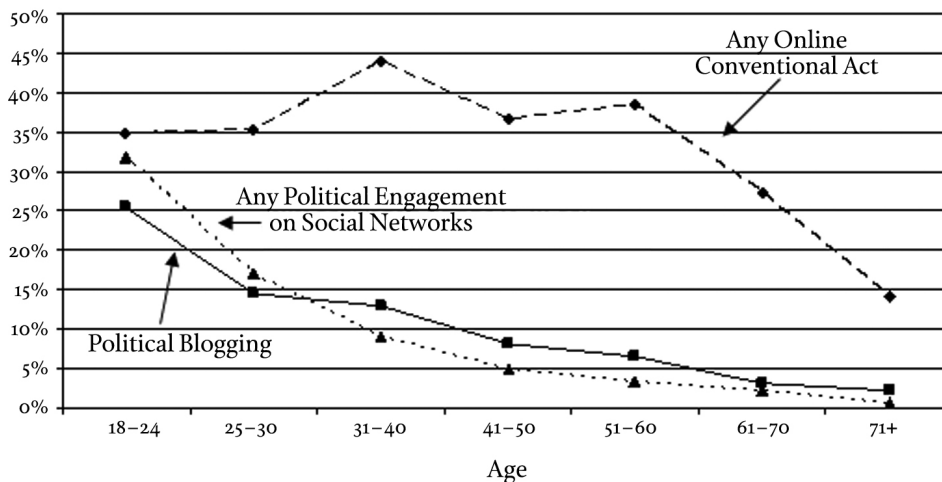
wordy messages suitable for radio. In certain ways, as increasing numbers of politicians move from maintaining websites to establishing a presence on Facebook, what is happening is almost the opposite. More conventional forms of political discourse and advocacy have established a beachhead in this brave new world.

Do these new types of activity hold the promise of diminished inequality of political voice when it comes to social class? We are reluctant to draw conclusions from these August 2008 data about the extent to which these Web 2.0 phenomena have the potential to overcome the structuring of political participation by SES. Figure 8 shows data analogous to Figure 7, but in this instance plots the data based on SES quintile rather than age. As revealed in Figure 1, the relationship of more traditional political activity carried out on the Internet slopes sharply upward with SES. The lines for political social networking and blogging about political and social issues also rise with SES, but the increase is much less pronounced.

Before we conclude prematurely that new forms of political engagement on the Web might break the long-standing association between social class and political participation, let us go one step further. Most of the political bloggers and political social networkers are twenty-somethings. It is difficult to measure SES for young adults. Forty-two percent of the respondents in the Pew survey who are between eighteen and thirty reported still being in school either full or part time. This group, which has not yet achieved its full educational attainment, includes many respondents whose measured incomes are artificially depressed by their student status but whose incomes will, in the future, rise more sharply than those in their cohort who left school earlier.

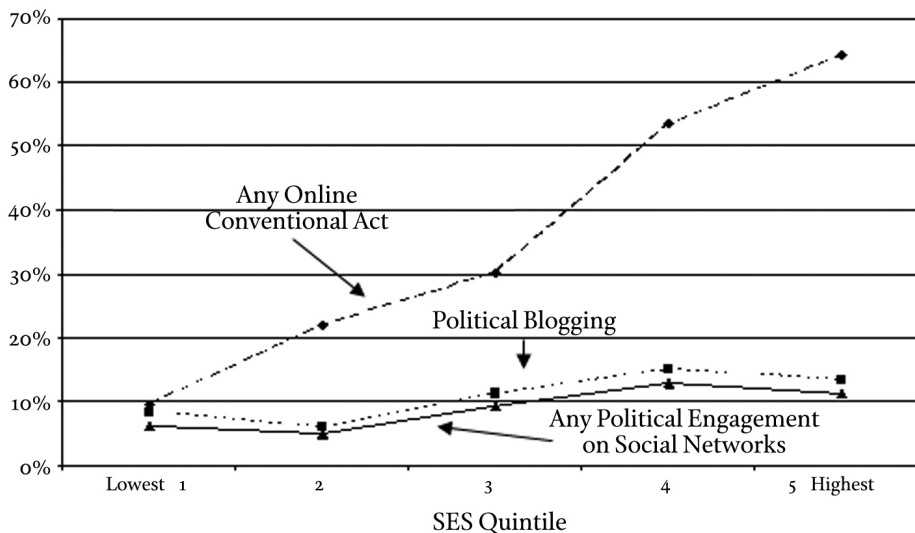
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Figure 7
Percent Involved in Online Conventional Political Activity, Political Blogging, and Political Engagement on Social Networks, by Age



Source: Data from the August 2008 survey conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

Figure 8
Percent Involved in Online Conventional Political Activity, Political Blogging, and Political Engagement on Social Networks, by Socioeconomic Status (SES)



Source: Data from the August 2008 survey conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

Table 1

Personal and Political Use of the Internet among Respondents under Thirty (among Web Users)

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	Personal Use of Internet	Political Use of Social Network	N
Educational Status			
Current Student	54%	43%	94
Highest Education Level Achieved			
High School or Less	60%	18%	129
Some College	58%	25%	62
College Graduate	62%	36%	49

Personal use of the Internet includes seeking information about someone one knows or would like to get to know or finding dates; political use of a social networking site includes seeking political information on a social networking site, joining a political group, signing up as a “friend” of a candidate, or posting political messages. Source: Data from the August 2008 survey conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

Table 1 allows us to look more closely at the social networking behavior of these younger respondents. In addition to asking about their use of social networks to engage in political activities, the Pew study queried respondents about their use of the Internet for personal reasons (to learn more about people they knew or hoped to get to know or to find dates). Instead of focusing on SES, we compare groups based on educational attainment: those who are still full-time students; and, among those no longer in school, those with no education beyond high school, those with some college, and college graduates. Even in an election year that witnessed an upsurge of activity by younger citizens, those under thirty were considerably more likely to use the Internet for personal objectives – to find information about people or to find dates – rather than to use social networking sites for political ones. In addition, when it

comes to personal use of the Internet, there is no association with current student status or, for non-students, with educational attainment. The pattern for use of social networking sites for political purposes is quite different. Those who are still students are the most active and, among non-students, the higher the education level, the more likely someone is to take political actions on the Internet. This finding is especially germane to our concern with class-based inequalities of political voice and suggests that even these new forms of Internet-based political involvement may not act as the circuit breaker interrupting the long-standing connection between SES and citizen political activity.

Because the Internet continues to create new possibilities for communication and the dissemination of information with astonishing rapidity, we are reluctant to make predictions about its future conse-

quences for inequalities of political voice. The opportunities for online political engagement continue to proliferate both in ways that mimic older forms of political participation and in ways that were not imagined even a few years ago. At present, political engagement on blogs and social networking sites clearly overcomes the historical underrepresentation of younger citizens with respect to political activity, but its impact on the socioeconomic stratification of participation is less certain. As older cohorts quickly register on social networking sites, the extent to which the young dominate these venues

is also less certain. Moreover, we cannot know whether the current techno-savvy generation will be trumped by their successors who are now in elementary school. We consider it premature to conclude, as others have suggested, that interactive forms of online political participation hold the key to unlocking the association between political participation and SES. The links between social class and political participation have proved to be powerful and enduring. We are not ready to bet our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor that the Internet will sunder them.

ENDNOTES

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¹ The title of an article by Stephen M. Johnson, "The Internet Changes Everything: Revolutionizing Public Participation and Access to Government Information through the Internet," *Administrative Law Review* 50 (1998): 277–337.

² Howard Rheingold, "The Great Equalizer," *Whole Earth Review* (Summer 1991): 6, quoted in Bruce Bimber, "The Internet and Political Transformation: Populism, Community, and Accelerated Pluralism," *Polity* 31 (1998): 138.

³ William Wresch, *Disconnected: Haves and Have-nots in the Information Age* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 237; and Daniel Burstein and David Kline, *Road Warriors: Dreams and Nightmares along the Information Highway* (New York: Dutton, 1995), 360, quoted in Richard Davis, *Politics Online: Blogs, Chatrooms, and Discussion Groups in American Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 2005), x.

- ⁴ A strong statement of this theme is contained in Steve Davis, Larry Elin, and Grant Reeher, *Click on Democracy: The Internet's Power to Change Political Apathy into Civic Action* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2002). Kay Lehman Schlozman, Sidney Verba & Henry E. Brady
- ⁵ For a brief version of this story, see Paul Herrnson, Richard G. Niemi, Michael J. Hanmer, Benjamin B. Bederson, Frederick C. Conrad, and Michael W. Traugott, *Voting Technology* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2008), 11–12.
- ⁶ Michael Margolis and David Resnick, *Politics as Usual: The Cyberspace "Revolution"* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2000), vii.
- ⁷ Our major work on the subject is Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995). See also, Henry E. Brady, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Sidney Verba, "Prospecting for Participants: Rational Expectations and the Recruitment of Political Activists," *American Political Science Review* 93 (1999): 153–168; Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, "Rational Action and Political Participation," *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 12 (2000): 243–268; Henry E. Brady, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Sidney Verba, and Laurel Elms, "Who Bowls?: The (Un)Changing Stratification of Participation," in *Understanding Public Opinion*, ed. Barbara Norrander and Clyde Wilcox (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2002); and Sidney Verba, "Would the Dream of Political Equality Turn out to Be a Nightmare?" *Perspectives on Politics* 1 (2003): 663–679. In addition, see Nancy E. Burns, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Sidney Verba, *The Private Roots of Public Action: Gender, Equality, and Political Participation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).
- ⁸ See, for example, Sidney Verba, Norman Nie, and Jae-on Kim, *Participation and Political Equality: A Seven Nation Comparison* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979); G. Bingham Powell, Jr., "Political Representation in Comparative Politics," *Annual Review of Political Science* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Annual Reviews, 2004), 273–296; and Russell J. Dalton, *Citizen Politics: Public Opinion and Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, 4th ed. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2006).
- ⁹ On these themes, see our forthcoming book, tentatively titled *The (Un)heavenly Chorus: Unequal Political Voice in American Democracy*.
- ¹⁰ Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, *Voice and Equality*, chap. 15.
- ¹¹ During Summer 2008, we collaborated with Lee Rainie and Scott Keeter of the Pew Internet & American Life Project to design a survey to collect information about Internet use and about political activity both off and on the Internet. We are very grateful to them for having responded to our suggestion about the importance of collecting systematic national data comparing online and offline participation, for allowing us to be partners in the design of the questionnaire, and for making those data available to us.
- ¹² Matthew Hindman, *The Myth of Digital Democracy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009), 129.
- ¹³ A succinct and sober estimate of the participation-enhancing capacities of the Internet is contained in Richard Davis, *The Web of Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 20–27.
- ¹⁴ On this issue, see Pippa Norris, *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 230–231.
- ¹⁵ Anthony G. Wilhelm, *Democracy in the Digital Age* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 67ff. See also, Anthony G. Wilhelm, "Civic Participation and Technological Inequality: The 'Killer Application' Is Education," in *The Civic Web*, ed. David M. Anderson and Michael Cornfield (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002).
- ¹⁶ Karen Mossberger, Caroline Tolbert, and Mary Stansbury call these capacities, respectively, "technical skills" and "information literacy"; see Karen Mossberger, Caroline J. Tolbert, and Mary Stansbury, *Virtual Inequality: Beyond the Digital Divide* (Washington, D.C.: George-

- town University Press, 2003), 40–50. In an interesting study that parallels what we find here, Samuel Best and Brian Krueger demonstrate that online skills (measured as the sum of whether the respondent has designed a Web page, sent an attachment via email, posted a file to the Internet, or downloaded a program from the Internet) function in predicting Internet-based political activity in just the same way that organizational and communications civic skills (using the measure in Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, *Voice and Equality*) do in predicting offline activity; see Samuel Best and Brian Krueger, “Analyzing the Representativeness of Internet Political Participation,” *Political Behavior* 27 (2005): 183–216.
- ¹⁷ For discussion of inequalities in access to and use of the Internet and citations to the literature, see Paul DiMaggio, Eszter Hargittai, Coral Celeste, and Steven Shafer, “Digital Inequality: From Unequal Access to Differentiated Use,” in *Social Inequality*, ed. Kathryn M. Neckerman (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004), chap. 9; and Karen Mossberger, Caroline Tolbert, and Ramona McNeal, *Digital Citizenship: The Internet, Society, and Participation* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008), chap. 1.
- ¹⁸ For a general discussion, see Michael Alvarez and Thad E. Hall, *Point, Click, and Vote* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2004), 44–53. Other data sets show similar patterns to those presented here. See the October 2003 Current Population Survey contained in National Telecommunications and Information Administration 2004 (Table A-1); and John B. Horrigan and Aaron Smith, “Home Broadband Adoption 2007,” Pew Internet & American Life Project, <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2007/Home-Broadband-Adoption-2007.aspx?r=1> (accessed May 18, 2010).
- ¹⁹ We generated a scale based on education and family income and divided respondents into five roughly equal groups or quintiles. Although there is very little missing data on educational attainment, we lack information about family income for 19 percent of respondents. While the respondents for whom family income is missing are distributed fairly evenly along the educational hierarchy, they are somewhat less active politically—especially with respect to online political activity—than are those who reported family income.
- ²⁰ There are so many different paths by which the Internet might influence political activity that we have no reason to expect that studies focusing on different participatory acts or focusing on Internet mobilization as opposed to online participation would find identical results. Nevertheless, all studies of particular political acts find that online participants are not representative of the public as a whole. See, for example, Bruce Bimber, “The Internet and Citizen Communication with Government: Does the Medium Matter?” *Political Communication* 16 (1999): 409–428; Michael Alvarez and Jonathan Nagler, “The Likely Consequences of Internet Voting for Political Representation,” *Loyola of Los Angeles Law Review* 34 (2001): 1115–1154; John Clayton Thomas and Gregory Streib, “The New Face of Government: Citizen-Initiated Contacts in the Era of E-Government,” *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 13 (2003): 83–102; and Davis Schlosberg, Stephen Zavestoski, and Stuart W. Schulman, “Democracy and E-Rulemaking: Web-Based Technologies, Participation, and the Potential for Deliberation,” *Journal of Information Technology and Politics* 4 (2007): 37–55.
- ²¹ With regard to any particular form of participation, the survey recorded whether respondents were active offline, online, or both. The questionnaire can be found at <http://pewinternet.org/Shared-Content/Data-Sets/2008/August-2008--Civic-Engagement.aspx>.
- ²² We should remind the reader that these data were collected in August 2008, before Obama’s Web-based September fundraising blitz. Thus, one must be cautious in generalizing from them to the situation closer to Election Day. However, the Pew survey is the first large-scale survey to collect data about the size of political contributions since our 1990 Citizen Participation Study and contains valuable data comparing online and offline giving. We must also mention that the two-stage design of the Citizen Participation Study in 1990 permitted the oversampling of those who made large contributions, thus facilitating the analysis of political activity in which the input is money rather than time. With very few large donors in the

Pew survey, we do not feel comfortable drawing conclusions about those who make very large contributions.

²³ We thank Michael Malbin for the first suggestion and Daniel Schlozman for the second.

²⁴ Because the size of political contributions has been shown to be a function of family income rather than education, we substitute categories based on family income for SES quintiles.

²⁵ As expected, donors of large amounts are almost exclusively affluent. As mentioned above, the Pew data contain too few cases of those who make very large campaign contributions to justify drawing conclusions. However, the fact that the Pew respondents who indicated having made campaign contributions of more than \$2,500 are drawn almost uniformly from the highest income category is consistent with earlier studies.

²⁶ Brady, Schlozman, and Verba, "Prospecting for Participants."

²⁷ In order to facilitate the graphic presentation, we have reduced the number of age groups from seven to five.

²⁸ Respondents to the Pew survey were asked about "signing up as a 'friend' of any candidates on a social networking site." However, supporting a political figure on Facebook is not the same as "friending" someone.

²⁹ Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, *Voice and Equality*, 38.

³⁰ See, for example, Cliff Zukin, Scott Keeter, Molly Andolina, Krista Jenkins, and Michael X. Delli Carpini, *A New Engagement?: Political Participation, Civic Life, and the Changing American Citizen* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), chap. 4.

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