



## How Online Social Networking Helps Draw Young Americans into Political Participation

**Kenneth W. Moffett**, Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville  
**Laurie L. Rice**, Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville

Older Americans frequently criticize younger people for their (relatively) low participation rates. Some statistical evidence bears this out, because younger people vote at lower **rates**, are less apt to contact elected officials, and are less trusting of **government**. At the same time, though, younger people are also much more likely to use social networks and to use them for political purposes. Can online political activities help boost political participation away from the internet?

To find out, we conducted surveys of randomly selected undergraduate students at a large university in the Midwest prior to and after the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections. We asked about college students' political engagement in varying online social networking platforms (like Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat), and other forms of political participation. We investigated who is more likely to express themselves politically online, as well as, the relationship between activities on these platforms and other political activity away from the internet.

### Which College Students Participate online?

Interest in politics helps drive participation. Using data from 2016, we **find** that political science majors are more apt to express themselves politically online. Online political expression can be anything from expressing views on a website, blog, on a social media platform (like Facebook and Twitter), or sharing a politically-relevant image on social media. However, students who expressed themselves online also differed from their peers in other ways as well:

- Students who were active in other politically-relevant ways online were also more politically expressive. Those who followed, liked, joined professional networks related to, friended, or liked a video produced by a candidate for office, political party, an interest group more frequently were more apt to express themselves online, too.
- Students who read blogs about politics are also more likely to be politically expressive online. As students read blogs more frequently, they are more likely to express that interest online.

These same attributes are also associated with being more likely to persuade others to vote for or against a candidate or party away from the internet.

### Social Networking and its Connection to Political Participation

But the story doesn't end there for college students. Our research indicates that politically-oriented social networking among college students expands who participates and provides a pathway to get students engaged in other ways as well.

- Being politically active on **Snapchat** yields higher levels of participation away from the internet. Students who sent politically-related pictures via Snapchat regularly or very often were more politically active away from the internet than their peers who did so less often or not at all. What is more, students who sent videos related to politics via Snapchat sometimes, regularly, or very often were also more civically active away from the internet than those who did so rarely or not at all.
- **Tweeting** about politics is connected with higher levels of offline political participation. Students who tweeted more frequently about politics were more politically active in other ways ranging from volunteering to encouraging others to vote for or against a particular candidate or party away from the internet.

- Sharing images or webpages related to politics on **Facebook** leads to more political participation away from the internet. Students who shared webpages or images related to political candidates, political parties, or an interest group on that platform sometimes, frequently, or very often experienced higher levels of political participation.
- **Strong partisans** are more likely to participate. Those who identify strongly as either a Republican or a Democrat are much more civically engaged than those who do not have such strong inclinations.

## College Students and Civic Activity

Scholars who examine why eligible citizens do not always participate have found that individual characteristics matter. Those who make more money and have high levels of education are virtually certain to vote and participate in politics in other ways, **too**. However, our research shows that another important variable that affects civic engagement among college students is online political activity-whether it occurs on Facebook, Twitter, or Snapchat.

Online political activities are one way by which campaigns, interest groups, and others can get college students more interested in politics. Social networking sites provide an easy way for candidates and interest groups to reach out to college students. Online contacts and invitations tend to beget more participation because simple acts such as liking a candidate or interest group or sharing videos or pictures about them can produce many other invitations to become more politically active.

While our research does not explicitly examine the content of online appeals, our data clearly demonstrate that students who were engaged online became more engaged away from the internet, too. In fact, these findings hold after we examine a whole host of other traditional predictors of civic activity ranging from ideology to the extent to which one's friends are also engaged with the political process.

In 2020, the major presidential candidates have used the internet to help boost their campaigns. For example, President Trump's reelection campaign predominantly uses **Twitter**, Instagram, and Facebook to reach prospective voters. Similarly, former Vice President Biden's campaign also uses Facebook, Twitter, and even **Snapchat** to reach potential voters. Why are these candidates doing so? Because they recognize what the Obama campaign did in 2008: if you want to get support from college students, you will have to go online and seek them out there.

**Laurie L. Rice and Kenneth W. Moffett "Snapchat and Civic Engagement among College Students"**  
*Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 16, no. 2 (2019): 87-104.

**Kenneth W. Moffett and Laurie L. Rice "College Students and Online Political Expression During the 2016 Election"** *Social Science Computer Review* 36, no. 4 (2018): 422-439.