participatory politics

New Media and Youth Political Action

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About Us: The YPPSP (Youth & Participatory Politics Survey Project) research team led by Cathy Cohen and Joseph Kahne is a project of the MacArthur Research Network on Youth & Participatory Politics (YPP). The YPP network is made up of eight scholars—Danielle Allen, Cathy Cohen, Howard Gardner, Joseph Kahne, Mimi Ito, Henry Jenkins, Elisabeth Soep, and Ethan Zuckerman—working at the intersection of youth public sphere engagement and digital media use. For more detail on YPP’s research projects see http://ypp.dmlcentral.net/. The YPP Network, funded under the MacArthur Foundation’s Digital Media and Learning Initiative, is also part of the DML Research Hub. For more on DML see http://dmlcentral.net/.

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executive summary
Over a period of just three days in October 2011, 75,000 people signed a petition started by 22-year-old Molly Katchpole on Change.org to protest Bank of America’s proposed $5.00 debit card fee. Ultimately, over 300,000 people signed and more than 21,000 pledged to close their Bank of America accounts. The movement attracted national attention, and Bank of America reversed its decision to charge customers.

“We’re in the business of amplifying. We’re trying to change the balance of power between individuals and large organizations.”
—Ben Rattray, thirty-one-year-old founder of Change.org

In December 2011, Internet users and activists worked together to defeat the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA). Purportedly designed to thwart Internet copyright infringement and intellectual property theft, SOPA enjoyed strong bipartisan support in the House and Senate and was backed by powerful lobbying forces in Washington DC. But then hundreds of websites participated in a synchronized Internet blackout in protest of the legislation, complemented by blog posts, videos, and posts and discussions in forums on an array of websites, organized largely by youth. All of this sent a single message: the pending legislation would undermine internet freedom and invite widespread censorship. Within days, Congress responded and the legislation was blocked. In the aftermath, the Pew Foundation found that young people under the age of thirty followed protests over SOPA more closely than news about the presidential election.

“I think it is an important moment in the Capitol. This is individual citizens rising up.”
—Representative Zoe Lofgren (D-CA), quoted in The New York Times

On September 17, 2011, responding to a blog post and circulated e-mail calling for a peaceful protest and “occupation” of Wall Street by the Canadian-based magazine Adbusters, and inspired by international protests from Egypt to London, hundreds of mostly young people took to the streets surrounding the financial district in New York City. The protesters eventually set up a now-famous camp in nearby Zucotti Park. While the Occupy movement will be known for reinstating the topic of inequality back onto the national agenda, it was also successful in raising money. According to the Chronicle of Philanthropy, the movement raised $454,000 during its first month of activity largely “from some 8000 online donors and other supporters.” While Occupy encampments have been torn down and vibrant discussion of class warfare has faded, what does continue is the potential for people—in particular, young people—to organize independently of elites and elite institutions using new media and social media platforms. But the question remains: How important and long-lasting is the role that new media may play in the reorganization of young people’s lives and politics?

NEW DATA FOR UNDERSTANDING YOUNG PEOPLE’S POLITICS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The Occupy movement, stopping SOPA, and the power of six million users of Change.org are only three of many examples of how new media impact politics in America, especially as politics are practiced among young people. The Obama campaign’s use of social media in 2008 helped to produce record turnout, especially among young blacks and Latinos. In the 2012 elections, all those involved in campaigns are relying more heavily than ever before on social media. The intersection of youth, new media, and politics is not exclusively a U.S. story, however. As recent movements from Tunisia to Egypt to Russia indicate, the significance of new media’s impact on political expression is international in scope.
The Youth and Participatory Politics study defines participatory politics as interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern. Importantly, these acts are not guided by deference to elites or formal institutions. Examples of participatory political acts include starting a new political group online, writing and disseminating a blog post about a political issue, forwarding a funny political video to one’s social network, or participating in a poetry slam. Participatory political acts can:

- reach large audiences and mobilize networks, often online, on behalf of a cause;
- help shape agendas through dialogue with, and provide feedback to, political leaders (on- and offline); and
- enable participants to exert greater agency through the circulation or forwarding of political information (e.g., links) as well as through the production of original content, such as a blog or letter to the editor.

Four factors make participatory politics especially important to those thinking about the future of American politics.

1. Participatory politics allow individuals to operate with greater independence in the political realm, circumventing traditional gatekeepers of information and influence, such as newspaper editors, political parties, and interest groups.

2. Participatory politics often facilitate a renegotiation of political power and control with the traditional political entities that are now searching for ways to engage participants. Witness how newspapers and cable television stations now try to facilitate a controlled engagement with their audience through the use of social media.

3. Participatory politics as practiced online provide for greater creativity and voice, as participants produce original content using video, images, and text.

4. Participatory politics afford individuals the capability to reach a sizable audience and mobilize others through their social networks in an easy and inexpensive manner.

These practices are focused on expression and are peer based, interactive, and nonhierarchical, and they are not guided by deference to elite institutions. The pervasive presence of such practices in the lives of young people is creating an actual culture shift. The participatory skills, norms, and networks that develop when social media is used to socialize with friends or to engage with those who share one’s interests can and are being transferred to the political realm.
To rigorously consider the impact of new media on the political and civic behavior of young people, The MacArthur Research Network on Youth and Participatory Politics (YPP) developed and fielded one of the first large-scale, nationally representative studies of new media and politics among young people. The two principal researchers for the survey component of the YPP, Cathy J. Cohen of the University of Chicago and Joseph Kahne of Mills College, oversaw a research team that surveyed nearly 3,000 respondents between the ages of 15 and 25 years of age. Unlike any prior study of youth and new media, this study included large numbers of black, Latino, and Asian American respondents, which allows for unique and powerful statistical comparisons across race with a focus on young people.

Until now there has been limited opportunity and data available to comprehensively explore the relationship between new media and the politics of young people. One of the few entities to engage in this type of rigorous analysis has been the Pew Internet and American Life Project. The YPP study expands on this field-leading work by including an extensive battery of items addressing participatory politics and adequate numbers of participants from different racial and ethnic groups, thus allowing for analysis of how different groups of young people were engaged with new media in the political realm.

The YPP study findings suggest that fundamental changes in political expectations and practices may be occurring—especially for youth. The analysis of the data collected reveals that youth are taking advantage of an expanded set of participatory practices in the political realm in ways that amplify their voice and sometimes their influence, thus increasing the ways young people participate in political life. The YPP researchers label this expanded set of opportunities and actions participatory politics.

The YPP study, summarized in this executive summary and presented in full in a longer report available online at http://dmlcentral.net/resources/5058, presents important new information about the different trajectories of new media uptake in the United States and its use in the political realm across different groups of young people. It measures the online participatory practices of young people in their social lives, as well as youth engagement with more traditional forms of social and political interaction.

While the topic of new media and youth politics has garnered lots of attention from pundits, politicians, and journalists, these reports often focus on anecdotal or single-case examples of a protest mobilization where new media played an important role. This new comprehensive survey data from YPP provides a strong basis for five major findings on new media and youth political action that can be summarized as follows:

1. **Large proportions of young people across racial and ethnic groups have access to the Internet and use online social media regularly to stay connected to their family and friends and pursue interests and hobbies.**

Contrary to the traditional notion of a technological digital divide, the YPP study finds young people across racial and ethnic groups are connected online.

- Overwhelmingly, white (96%), black (94%), Latino (96%), and Asian American (98%) youth report having access to a computer that connects to the Internet.
- A majority or near-majority of white (51%), black (57%), Latino (49%), and Asian American (52%) youth report sending messages, sharing status updates and links, or chatting online daily.

Youth are very involved in friendship-driven and interest-driven activities online.

- 78% send messages, share status updates, or chat online on a weekly basis.
- 58% share links or forward information through social networks at least once a week.
- On a weekly basis, roughly one-third engage in particular interest-driven activities, such as posting, linking to, or forwarding information; giving help, advice, or suggestions to others; or posting comments online about someone else’s media.
- About one in six engage in more active self-expression such as organizing an online group or discussion, starting a website, or creating original media to share online.
- Overall, 64% engage in at least one interest-driven activity in a given week, and 32% engage in three or more activities a week.
Participatory politics are an important dimension of politics:
- 41% of young people engage in at least one act of participatory politics, while 44% participate in other acts of politics.
- Specifically, 43% of white, 41% of black, 38% of Latino, and 36% of Asian American youth participated in at least one act of participatory politics during the prior 12 months.

Participatory politics are an addition to an individual’s engagement rather than an alternative to other political activities:
- Youth who engaged in at least one act of participatory politics were almost twice as likely to report voting in 2010 as those who did not.
- A large proportion—37% of all young people—engages in both participatory and institutional politics.
- Among young people who engage in participatory policies, 90% of them either vote or engage in institutional politics.

Participatory politics are equitably distributed across different racial and ethnic groups:
- Contrary to the traditional notion of a technological digital divide, the YPP study finds that overwhelmingly, white (96%), black (94%), Latino (96%) and Asian American (98%) youth report having access to a computer that connects to the Internet.
- The difference in voting in 2008 between the group with the highest rate of turnout according to the U.S. Census Bureau—black youth (52%)—and the group with the lowest rate of turnout—Latino youth (27%)—is 25 percentage points.
- In contrast, the difference between the group with the highest rate of engaging in at least one act of participatory politics—whites (43%)—and the groups with the lowest rate of engaging in at least one act of participatory politics—

Asian Americans (36%)—is only 7 percentage points.

Taking into account participatory politics, institutional politics, and voting, black youth are the most likely to have participated in at least one form of these activities:
- Engagement is highest among black youth, with only 25% reporting no engagement in any form of political behavior, compared with 33% of whites, 40% of Asian Americans, and 43% of Latinos.

Youth get news through participatory channels but believe they would benefit from learning how to judge the credibility of what they find online:
- Youth now consume news through participatory channels. 45% of youth reported getting news at least once a week from family and friends via Twitter or Facebook feeds. This rivals the 49% who got news at least once in the past week from newspapers or magazines.
- Survey respondents were asked, “Do you think people like you and your friends would benefit from learning more about how to tell if news and information you find online is trustworthy?,” and 84% said “yes.”
2. Participatory politics are an important dimension of politics.
   - 41% of young people have engaged in at least one act of participatory politics, while 44% participate in other acts of politics.
   - Specifically, 43% of white, 41% of black, 38% of Latino, and 36% of Asian American youth have participated in at least one act of participatory politics during the prior 12 months.

   Participatory politics are better viewed as an addition to an individual’s engagement than as an alternative to other political activities.
   - Youth who engaged in at least one act of participatory politics were almost twice as likely to report voting in 2010 as those who did not.
   - A large proportion—37% of all young people—engaged in both participatory and institutional politics.
   - Among young people who engage in participatory politics, 90% of them either vote or take part in institutional politics.

   Participatory politics, however, are different than merely taking institutional political activities (e.g., participating in a campaign) and moving them online. Allowing individuals to donate to a candidate online does not make the political act of donating money a participatory act. Today, online politics frequently resemble what we have traditionally seen in the political realm and often is not particularly participatory. YPP researchers are less interested in whether various political activities occur online or offline, but are interested, instead, in the participatory norms, values, and practices of political engagement.

3. Interest-driven online activities appear to lay a foundation for engagement in participatory politics through the development of “digital social capital.”
   Those using new media to pursue interests and hobbies from sports to technology to gaming may be gaining knowledge, skills, and networks, that is, digital social capital, which makes engaging in participatory politics more likely.
   - Youth who were highly involved in nonpolitical, interest-driven activities are more than five times as likely to engage in participatory politics and nearly four times as likely to participate in all political acts, compared with those infrequently involved in such activities.

   Encompassed within this digital social capital is the important element of networks. While similar to networks of the past, which played a crucial role in politics and social movements, such as the civil rights movement, the YPP data suggest that the role and possibility of networks in a digital era are different in three key ways:
   - Circulating materials to those we know as well as to those whom we have never met is much easier through social media.
   - Social media affords the ability to circulate customized political expressions.
   - The process of customization and creation of material allows for a freedom with regard to defining what actually counts as “politics.” Among friends, political information and political action may originate from a variety sources and are not strictly defined by political elites.

   As Henry Jenkins has written, online contexts may well be the bowling leagues of the twenty-first century. They provide a space of connection to others where trust is built and deliberation happens. Like the bowling league, online contexts can facilitate social exchange where collective identities can be built and mobilized for civic and political engagement.

4. New media has the potential to facilitate an equitable distribution of political participation among young people from different racial and ethnic groups.

   Participatory politics are generally equitably distributed across different racial and ethnic groups.
   - The difference in voting in 2008 between the group with the highest rate of turnout according to the U.S. Census Bureau—black youth (52%)—and the group with the lowest rate of turnout—Latino youth (27%)—is 25 percentage points.
   - In contrast, the difference between the group with the highest rate of engaging in at least one act of participatory politics—whites (43%)—and the groups with the lowest rate of engaging in at least one act of participatory politics—Asian Americans (36%)—is only 7 percentage points.

   Taking into account participatory politics, institutional politics, and voting, black youth are the most likely to have participated in at least one form of these political activities, contradicting the common assumption that white youth are the most engaged in the political realm.
Engagement is highest among black youth, with only 25% reporting no engagement in any form of political behavior, compared with 33% of whites, 40% of Asian Americans, and 43% of Latinos.

Black and Asian American youth are more likely to engage in friendship and interest-driven activity.
- On average black youth are more likely to engage in friendship-driven activity.
- Black and Asian American youth are significantly more likely to engage in interest-driven activity than are white and Latino youth.
- These differences hold up even when income is taken into account and controlled for.

The data on the distribution of political participation raise important questions about how the political landscape might change in the future, given both the growing influence of new media in the lives of young people and the changing demographics of the country. While youth of color are active online and engaged in friendship- and interest-driven activities as well as some forms of participatory politics, they will need infrastructure and interventions to leverage their proficiencies in the digital world to their benefit in the political realm.

5. Many youth get news through participatory channels but believe they would benefit from learning how to judge the credibility of what they find online.
- Youth now consume a great deal of news through participatory channels. Forty-five percent of youth reported getting news at least once a week from family and friends via Twitter or Facebook. In addition, 21% said they received news from blogs or YouTube posts devoted to political and social topics, and 22% reported getting news or information from an online community where people discuss a hobby, sport, or fandom.
- This rivals the 49% who reported receiving news at least once in the past week from newspapers or magazines.

Youth recognize the challenge of judging the credibility of the information they receive through these media.
- Survey respondents were asked, “Do you think people like you and your friends would benefit from learning more about how to tell if news and information you find online is trustworthy?,” and 84% said “yes.”

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS: REALIZING THE POTENTIAL OF PARTICIPATORY POLITICS

The analysis of data from the YPP study shows that participatory politics are worthy of substantial attention and that these practices present both risks and opportunities for the full, equitable, and productive engagement of youth in the political realm.

Participatory politics provide a substantial opportunity to reinvigorate both youth politics and political life in general.

Forty-one percent of youth ages 15 to 25 engaged in at least one form of participatory politics. These acts of participatory politics occur at rates that parallel many institutionally based activities, such as contributing to a political party, attending a meeting or campaign event, wearing a campaign button, or signing a petition. Focusing on participatory politics, therefore, is important for anyone concerned about the politics of young people and, more broadly, about the future of politics in the United States and abroad.

Participatory politics are an important avenue to provide young people with a level of voice and control not often seen in the realm of institutional politics. As confidence in elected officials is at historic lows (only 13% said they approved of the job Congress was doing in a recent poll), participatory politics may provide a set of practices through which young people can communicate their political commitments and instincts directly to those most relevant in their lives—family and friends.

While self-expression through participatory politics does not guarantee that one will have influence, news reports over the past several years have been filled with examples of how participatory politics have influenced policy debates and changed governmental and corporate policies.

Almost every major campaign now employs strategies that aim to tap the potential of participatory politics. The attempt of conventional political campaigns to capture and exploit the power of participatory politics was evident in 2008 when then-candidate Obama and his supporters used new media to connect with and mobilize young voters.
Despite common assumptions regarding a “digital divide,” the YPP study found that participatory political activities are more equitably distributed than voting. So these practices may provide a valuable access point for those who are hoping to amplify marginalized voices, especially those of youth of color, in a democratic system.

Participatory politics clearly present risks as well as opportunities.

While it is true that participatory politics are more equitably distributed than voting, some formidable inequalities and challenges still exist.

• Substantial portions of youth are far less likely than others to have voice and influence. Interventions aimed at leveraging the full potential of participatory politics cannot focus solely on schools, especially colleges, if all youth are to be included.

• The potential for misinformation has never been greater. Youth, to a degree never before seen, are inundated with information. At the same time, the vast majority (84%) reports that they and their peers would benefit from help judging the credibility of what they see online.

• Attending to participatory political activity may obscure the fact that youth political engagement is the exception and not the rule. While the YPP study has vivid examples of youth using digital media to meaningfully engage in varied forms of political and social change, it is clear from the study’s data and a substantial number of previous studies that most youth are not engaged in institutional or participatory politics.

• There is, finally, the risk that proponents of participatory politics, including youth themselves, will fail to focus on the distinction between voice and influence. YPP researchers do not want to undervalue the significance of voice, especially for youth who are in the process of developing their political identities. At the same time, the YPP study recognizes that the promise of a democratic society is predicated on the belief that political actors have more than voice—they must also have influence.

IMPLICATIONS

When it comes to youth engagement with participatory politics, the presence of risks as well as opportunities makes clear the need for action in this fast-changing arena.

• Broadening the focus of policymakers, parents, the press, educators, scholars, funders, and other stakeholders to focus on participatory politics when engaging in their work is essential if we are to understand the current state of political life and act in ways that support the quality, quantity, and equality of political engagement.

• It is essential to identify priorities and create infrastructure and supports for individuals and organizations to more fully tap into the potential of these practices. Clearly, the digital era expands the need for media literacy. Youth must learn how to judge the credibility of online information and find divergent views on varied issues.

• Youth may benefit from supports in formal and informal educational settings that strengthen their ability and desire to produce media that is informed, persuasive, and distributed effectively.

• Organizations hoping to tap the full potential of this new domain will benefit from opportunities to learn about and reflect on the impact of varied strategies for leveraging the potential of participatory politics. A turn to new media is not a turn away from offline activity. Rather, it is essential to recognize and highlight the integration of these two domains in the lives of young people.

• Promoting broad and equitable access to the support and infrastructure youth need to move from voice to influence will be important in order for participatory politics to reach its full potential.

Participatory politics are a significant dimension of the political life of young people. The risks as well as the positive potential require careful attention. This is a unique and important moment. If stakeholders at multiple levels provide appropriate supports, participatory politics may provide valuable opportunities to engage young people in the political realm, giving them greater control, voice, and potentially influence over the issues that matter most in their lives.
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