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Political Pioneers or Bed Texters?

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When it comes to technology, young people, and politics, youth are characterized as either having started the Arab Spring with only their cell phones or as slackers who've dropped out of school to play video games and text friends all day from bed. It seems pundits and the public do not know what to think. As we approach the 2012 elections, where young people and technology are expected to have a significant impact on the presidential race, we need greater clarity.

We asked a nationally-representative sample of 3,000 American youth aged 15-25 about their use of new media and their engagement with politics. We wanted to know whether the same technologies and platforms that allow teenagers to play Castleville and send an average of 60 texts a day are also opening new spaces for political participation and social change.

Results from our survey, "[Participatory Politics: New Media and Youth Political Action](#)," co-authored with Ben Bowyer, Ellen Middaugh, and Jon Rogowski, demonstrate that neither view of social media -- as a waste of time or as the fire igniting increasing social upheaval -- is accurate. Instead, young people's responses reveal that social media and political action are increasingly, and complexly, intertwined.

Our survey shows that, across the country, substantial numbers of young people are engaging in what we call "participatory politics." Participatory politics -- acts such as starting a new political group online, writing or circulating a blog about a political issue, or forwarding political videos to friends and colleagues -- are like traditional political acts in that they address issues of public concern. The difference is that these participatory acts are interactive, peer-based, and do not defer to elites or formal institutions. Often, they are inextricably tied to online platforms that facilitate and amplify young people's actions.

Last year, 41% of young people engaged in at least one act of participatory politics. That's nearly equal to the 44% who participated in at least one act of what might be considered institutional politics, such as working on or donating to a campaign. Even more noteworthy, young people are engaged in participatory political acts across racial, ethnic and socioeconomic lines -- in stark contrast to voting. In 2008 the voting gap between the group in our survey with the highest rate of turnout -- black youth (56%) -- and the group with the lowest rate of turnout -- Latino youth (30%) was 26 percentage points. In contrast, the difference between the group with the highest rate of participatory politics -- white youth at 43% -- and the groups with the lowest rate -- Asian youth at 36% -- is only seven percentage points. Moreover, black youth are online and use their time there to engage in participatory political acts at rates equal to or slightly higher than white youth. It might be time to rethink our notion of the digital divide -- at least in the political realm.

In line with conventional wisdom, we found that how often youth interact with friends on sites such as Facebook was unrelated to levels of political activity. However, many youth participate in online forums, in gaming communities, and create media to share. Contrary to common expectations, young people who use the Internet and social media in these ways to pursue interests in hobbies, sports, entertainment, and gaming were *five times* as likely to engage in participatory politics as those who infrequently engaged in these interest-driven online activities. Just as bowling leagues have been found to foster civic and political engagement, participants in interest-driven online communities appear to be gaining knowledge, skills, and networks -- or what we call *digital social capital* -- which make engaging in civic and political life much more likely.

The dramatically enhanced ability to mobilize others and to create and circulate political content creates risks as well as opportunities. For example, the ratio of information to misinformation may be moving in the wrong direction. Youth understand this. When asked whether they and their friends would benefit from learning more about how to tell if the news and information they found online was trustworthy, a remarkable 84% said yes. Digital media literacy education isn't currently a priority in schools. Let's hope educators catch up with youth in recognizing its importance -- so we can maximize the potential and minimize the problems that new media can create.

Youth may not all be digital activists, but participatory politics are a significant dimension of their political lives. The disappearance of the old digital divide and close connection between engaging in interests and politics online point to an opportunity for drawing more young people into active civic participation, especially in this election year. As we move toward the 2012 presidential election, all those interested in the outcome will need to account for young people and the emerging importance of participatory politics in their lives.

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