

Monkey Cage

How social media helps young people — especially minorities and the poor — get politically engaged

By **Matthew D. Luttig** and **Cathy J. Cohen** September 9, 2016

Donald Trump tweets. Hillary Clinton shares campaign videos through YouTube. The Black Lives Matter movement started as a hashtag.

Social media has transformed the relationship among citizens, news and politics. We wanted to understand whether social media brings young people of color and those with few socioeconomic resources into the political arena. That's what we have been investigating as part of the MacArthur Research Network on Youth and Political Participation (YPP), a network of scholars from across the country focused on youth engagement in participatory politics.

Our findings suggest that new media can encourage millennials — the most enthusiastic users — to get actively involved in politics, albeit in ways different from previous generations. For example, young people may share political information online or use social media to get others to join a protest — as during the Arab Spring, the Occupy Wall Street movement and the Black Lives Matter movement.

“Participatory politics”: what it is and how it differs from what’s happened in the past

How is this new form of online peer-based political activity, or what we call “participatory politics,” different? It's more open to marginalized groups, and in particular, to people with fewer socioeconomic resources. Past research shows that individuals with more resources — especially education — have been more likely to engage in politics, even in protests. But we find that education and other socioeconomic status variables have very little effect on engagement in participatory politics, by which we mean all kinds of efforts that can be connected to social change — everything from creating and circulating a blog post about a political issue to starting a political group online to taking part in a protest, demonstration or sit-in.

That's because the Internet has opened up virtual spaces that bypass traditional gatekeepers. Historically marginalized groups, such as African American and Latino/a young people, can now discuss and get information about issues that affect their lives. Some of these new spaces include social media networks and websites devoted to young people of color, such as the Black Youth Project or presente.org.

But how exactly does digital media use affect political engagement?

Most research shows that the Internet widens the participatory gap between those with and without socioeconomic resources. Our research found something different.

To examine the ways in which young adults use the Internet to engage in politics, we used data from the YPP. In 2011, 2013, and 2015, the project fielded nationally representative surveys of young people between the ages of 15 and 29, oversampling African Americans, Latinos and Asian Americans. Surveys were conducted both over the phone and online, in both English and Spanish.

We present data here from the 2013 survey, which had more than 2,300 respondents. We measured socioeconomic status with both the education level of the respondent and, separately, the education level of the respondent's mother.

Respondents were asked about their political participation through 2012. They also answered questions about how often they consumed political news from traditional media (e.g., print and online newspapers), social media (e.g., online communities, blogs and Facebook) and websites that cater to people of color.

We found several important patterns.

1. Young people of color are the biggest consumers of new, online forms of political media. Two-thirds of African Americans in our surveys regularly visit websites created by and for people of color. African Americans, Latinos and Asian Americans were also the most active users of social media for political information.

2. In contrast, young people of all races consumed roughly equal amounts of traditional media, by which we mean newspapers and television news.

3. Among our respondents, **young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged households are more likely to get their political information from new online media sources** than young people from households with more abundant resources.

4. By contrast, **young people with more socioeconomic resources are more likely to turn to traditional news sources.**

In other words, it's not true that the rich are getting richer online, as some have suggested. We find, rather, that those with more limited resources use digital media to learn, to speak out, and to amplify their voices.

All this has consequences for political engagement, as you can see in the figures below (all estimated while controlling for other predictors of political participation). On the left side, you can see that when a respondent says she consumes traditional news sources, her likelihood of saying that she votes increases notably. That's not as strong for people who say they use social media or visit websites devoted to people of color.

By contrast, you can see in the chart on the right that social media users are more likely to protest a business practice than are traditional news consumers. (Here, we're using protest as one example of participatory politics.) In a separate analysis, we found that frequently visiting websites catering to people of color is also strongly associated with this kind of political activity, especially among young African Americans, Latino/as and Asian Americans.

Using social media predicts more political engagement as time goes on

In 2015, we followed up with approximately one-third of our 2013 respondents. The young people who increased their engagement the most between 2013 and 2015 were the ones who talked the most about politics on social media: people of color and individuals with few socioeconomic resources.

In short, new media are mobilizing young people — especially young people who are of color and the socioeconomically disadvantaged. Using new media, young people are bypassing traditional gatekeepers and mobilizing informal connected networks to make social change.

Matthew D. Luttig is a postdoctoral scholar in political science at the University of Chicago.

Cathy J. Cohen is the David and Mary Winton Green Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago and author of “Democracy Remixed: Black Youth and the Future of American Democracy” from Oxford University Press.

This post is part of a series on youth political engagement organized by the Monkey Cage and CIRCLE, a national research center on youth civic education and engagement that is part of the Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University.