



# POLICY BRIEF

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## Reimagining Political Participation in the Digital Age

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By now, most people can point to anecdotal examples of how the internet, digital, and social platforms—those things we might call new media—are influencing politics as we know it. Whether it was Obama’s historic election in 2008, or the Arab uprising from Tunisia to Egypt, or the Occupy movement or more recently the Black Lives Matter movement, new media and digital platforms played a role in mobilizing people. In fact, a recent article in the *New York Times* described the evolution of the black lives matter movement as one that “began as a hashtag and grew into a protest slogan—after prominent police killings of blacks over the past year—and became an Internet-driven civil rights movement.”<sup>1</sup>

New media has the potential to open up the political process, not only bringing more people into the political realm, but bringing often silenced and marginalized voices of young people of color into politics. Specifically, research indicates that the affordances of new media have the ability to affect political participation. However, one has to refine the places where you look for such an effect. For example, when we look at acts of political participation enabled through new media, acts labeled “participatory politics,” there is the potential to see something new, both in terms of the politics being enacted and the people involved.<sup>2</sup>

By participatory politics, I mean those acts that are interactive and peer-based through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern using the affordances of new media. When young people create a political video and circulate it to friends and a larger public, that is participatory politics. When organized groups mount an online petition gathering thousands of signatures, that is participatory politics. When individuals report to friends and the media what is happening on the ground during protests in places like Ferguson, that is participatory politics.

Importantly, these acts are often not guided by deference to elites or formal institutions. Participatory politics is more in line with actions and skills young people are already pursuing and acquiring online, thus the leap from participatory acts or participatory culture to participatory politics is a much smaller one with fewer costs than the leap to formal institutional politics.

Data from the Youth and Participatory Politics survey indicate that *black youth generally participate in various online acts of participatory politics at rates equal to or slightly higher than other groups.*<sup>3</sup> Thus, for many youth, and especially black youth, online participatory politics serves as an important outlet for their political voice and a new pathway to more traditional political acts and institutions of political power. Moreover, research suggests that socioeconomic status plays less of a role in dictating who will participate. The data suggest that poor and working-class young people are just as likely to be engaged in participatory politics as middle- and upper-class

*youth, including youth of color. Thus, digital media have the potential to revitalize a black public sphere that has proved so essential to the collective organizing of black communities.*

Although digital platforms and online access have the potential to open up the political realm, this transformation of politics will not happen without some necessary policy changes. The policy changes range from providing all with speedy and reliable broadband access, to teaching every young person a K-12 curriculum of digital literacy and coding, to revamping civic education to make it relevant and digitally advanced.

**Expand broadband access.** Although many still think of the digital divide as between those who have access to a computer and those who do not, access becomes less of a concern with the development of mobile technology. Nearly 95 percent of young people independent of race and ethnicity indicate they have access to the internet, often through their cellphones. One area that continues to reflect a digital divide is the speed with which individuals can access the internet or the degree to which all communities have broadband internet access. Research has shown that *those in more affluent, urban, and educated households having greater access to broadband connections.*<sup>4</sup> *We need policies that will guarantee broadband access, not just availability, for all households and schools.*

**Require digital literacy and coding curriculum for all K-12 students.** The opportunities for political engagement that digital media provide is obvious but not inevitable. Although, the trope of “digital natives” often attached to young people suggests they inherently know how to engage online, a recent Youth and Participatory Politics survey found that 84 percent of respondents indicated that they would benefit from supports that help them learn to decipher trustworthy information on the internet.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, although African American youth are more likely to be online, they often have lower levels of internet skills and knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

**Require civics education for all K-12 students.** Currently, far too few students are provided quality civic education in this country. Moreover, we know that race and class shape the opportunities students receive for civic education. Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh, in a report issued by CIRCLE, found that school systems exacerbate race and class differences in political and civic participation among young people by “providing more opportunities to learn about politics to higher income students, white students, and academically successful students.”<sup>7</sup> We need a federal requirement that all students receive civic education in grades K–12. However, it is not enough to offer off-the-shelf traditional civic education. We must rethink what civic education looks like, including infusing digital subject matter along with topics that are relevant to a range of students from different lived conditions. For example, data from Youth and Participatory Politics demonstrate that black youth are better able to identify who Mike Brown is than the majority party in the U.S. House of Representatives. The question we must confront is how to develop a civics curriculum that builds on the knowledge of all young people and that recognizes that the knowledge of traditional political institutions is one form of political knowledge, but not the only or the most valuable form.

Fundamentally, we must provide members of the political community with the tools, skills, access, and knowledge necessary to become effective political actors moving the issues they care most about.

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<sup>1</sup> John Eligon, "One Slogan, Many Methods: Black Lives Matter Enters Politics," *New York Times*, November 18, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> C. Cohen and J. Kahne, "Participatory Politics: New Media and Youth Political Action" (Youth Participatory Politics Research Network, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Youth Participatory Politics Research Network, "Youth Participatory Politics Survey Project," (Youth Participatory Politics Research Network, n.d.), <http://ypp.dmlcentral.net/projects/youth-participatory-politics-survey-project>.

<sup>4</sup> J. Horrigan and M. Duggan, "Home Broadband 2015" (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, December 21, 2015), <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/12/21/home-broadband-2015/>.

<sup>5</sup> Eligon, "One Slogan, Many Methods."

<sup>6</sup> E. Hargittai, "Digital Na(t)ives? Variation in Internet Skills and Uses among Members of the 'Net Generation,'" *Sociological Inquiry*, 80 (2010): 92-113.

<sup>7</sup> J. Kahne and E. Middaugh, "Democracy for Some: The Civic Opportunity Gap in High School." Working paper 59. (College Park, MD: CIRCLE, 2008).