

Monkey Cage

# When young people get involved in online communities, it leads them toward politics

By **Benjamin Bowyer** and  
**Joseph Kahne**

October 21, 2016

The 18-year-olds who can vote for the first time this November were born in the same year that Google was incorporated. Unlike most voters, they've come of age within the Web 2.0 era. Online media are central to how they build relationships and stay socially connected. In fact, the Pew Research Center found that 92 percent of teens ages 13 to 17 go online every day; fully 24 percent, or almost a quarter, say they're online almost constantly.

Most of the time, most young people's online activity is not political. However, we've found that young people who are involved in online communities become more engaged in politics. Even when these groups involve shared interests like fashion or gaming that are not explicitly political, they encourage political engagement.

***[A politician walks into a joke. Does it affect whether young people vote for her?]***

When they are posting about their hobbies on social media or sharing videos with friends, young people are developing skills that they can later apply to political causes. When they see online discussions spill over into social issues, they come to pay closer attention to politics. They are more likely to be encouraged to vote or to take some other political action.

## **How do we know?**

We analyzed data from the Youth Participatory Politics (YPP) Survey, which we collected in partnership with political scientist Cathy Cohen and her team at the University of Chicago. The YPP survey was collected in three waves in 2011, 2013 and 2015. Each wave included a nationally representative sample of more than 2,000 young people between the ages of 15 and 29, as well as oversamples of African American, Latino and Asian American youth.

This post focuses on the 1,033 respondents who took the YPP survey in both 2013 and 2015. Earlier surveys have told us that there's a correlation between online activity and political participation.

These panel data do more: They let us assess whether and how online activity actually leads young people to become more politically engaged. Specifically, the YPP data tells us how politically engaged individuals were and what online activities they were involved with in 2013 and 2015.

[\*\[Does arguing about politics turn young people off politics? Surprisingly, no.\]\*](#)

Our approach allows us to test whether nonpolitical online activity in 2013 actually causes greater political engagement two years later. Our approach controls for individuals' political engagement in 2013 and a number of other factors (like personality or socioeconomic status) that also might affect their political engagement in 2015.

### **We looked at different kinds of online activities and how they related to various kinds of political activities**

The YPP survey asks about two distinct forms of online activity: friendship-driven activity and interest-driven activity. In their friendship-driven activities, young people use digital and social media to interact with friends and family members — by, for instance, sharing status updates or tagging photos. The YPP survey tells us that 50 percent of young people engage in at least one friendship-driven activity online every day.

It also tells us how often young people engage online with their interests — say, fashion, music or sports. For example, whether they create and share videos or give advice to others online related to these interests. According to the YPP survey, about 25 percent of youth engage in at least one online activity related to their interests every day.

We looked into how, over time, friendship-driven activity and, separately, interest-driven activity online are related to three different kinds of political engagement: voting; offline political action (attending a political event, donating money to a political campaign, taking part in a protest, or working on an election campaign), and online political expression.

The latter, which this project calls participatory politics, includes, for example, creating and circulating political information or perspectives, posting a status update about politics, or commenting on political content through online social networks.

[\*\[Here's how social media helps young people — especially minorities and the poor — get politically engaged\]\*](#)

Here's what we found:

#### **1. When young people are involved in nonpolitical online communities, they become more likely to participate in politics.**

Young people who were active online (non-politically) in 2013 tended to become more politically active two years later. Specifically, friendship-driven activity online in 2013 led to more online political activity. And interest-driven activity online resulted in more offline political action, like going to an event or donating money.

#### **2. Young people involved in nonpolitical online communities become more likely to take part in political discussions online and to be encouraged to vote.**

Young people who engaged in interest-driven activity online in 2013, over time, became more likely to participate in online political discussions. And those young people who took part in online political discussions became more likely to engage in online participatory politics.

Similarly, young people who engaged in interest-driven activity online in 2013 also became more likely to have someone online ask them to participate in politics. And those young people who were asked to participate became more likely to vote in the 2014 elections.

### **3. Young people with large online social network are more likely to be exposed to politics.**

All of this was especially true among those young people who had the largest online social networks (the number of “friends” or “followers” that they have on social networking sites like Facebook or Twitter). Young people who in 2013 who were heavily engaged in interest-driven activity online and who had relatively large social networks became more likely to have political discussions online, to be asked to get involved in politics, to express themselves politically through social media, to vote and to take other political actions.

In summary, online communities aren’t the problem. In fact, they might be part of the solution.

Online communities appear to provide pathways into political engagement.

**[*More and more people get their news via social media. Is that good or bad?*]**

As Henry Jenkins has suggested, online communities may be the digital analogues to the civic associations like bowling leagues that Robert Putnam argued were so essential to Americans’ political participation in the 20th century.

Of course, online social activity isn’t enough to guarantee a robust and healthy civic life. Youth turnout in the 2014 elections was a record low, with fewer than 20 percent of 18 to 24 year-olds voting. This figure should concern everyone interested in the political engagement of American youth.

But online communities might be a good place to start for those who want to activate young voters in 2016 and beyond.

**Benjamin Bowyer** is a lecturer in political science at Santa Clara University and researches the effects of social context on political attitudes and behavior.

**Joseph Kahne**, the Ted and Jo Dutton Presidential Professor of Educational Policy and Politics at the University of California at Riverside, studies young people’s political development and the factors that shape it.

*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.*