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## Does my comment count? Perceptions of political participation in an online environment

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### ABSTRACT

Since the infancy of the Internet, scholars have posited that the medium would mobilize and engage citizens, yet the reality has proven it to be more nuanced and complex. This project examines citizens' motivations to engage in politics online, assessing how people are driven by both a desire to influence government as well as to communicate political ideas to others. We explore the ways these two behaviors are perceived by citizens in online versus offline contexts. We also examine how such perceptions can predict certain behaviors, such as "friending" a candidate and messaging with friends about politics. We find that these behaviors are indeed perceived differently among citizens, and that perceptions predict the likelihood of participating in online political forums.

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### 1. Does my comment count? Perceptions of political participation in an online environment

It has become commonplace for pundits and journalists to claim that the dramatic technological developments of the past several years have changed politics as we know it (e.g., Stelter, 2008; Vargas, 2008). Just as television quickly became a common source of political information for voters after its inception, so too has the Web: 55% of the American adult population went online in 2008 to get involved in politics or get political information—the first time the Internet was cited as a political source for the majority of Americans (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2008). In 2012, nearly three-quarters of American adults engaged with politics online in some way (Smith, 2013). Unlike television, however, the Internet transforms more than just the medium politicians use to communicate with voters. It also changes the very ways ordinary citizens experience and get involved in politics. The present study seeks to examine not only the nature of citizens' political participation online, but also their perceptions of these behaviors. Just as research in political participation offline has attempted to categorize and classify behaviors (e.g., Milbraith & Goel, 1977), this research attempts to clarify distinctions among various types of online political behavior.

#### 1.1. Effects of the Internet on Citizens' Participatory Behavior

Since the infancy of the Internet, scholars have posited that the medium would bring about a great democratizing effect, mobilizing and engaging previously unengaged citizens (e.g., Grossman, 1995). Some "cyber-optimists" envisaged a world in which online activity brings more people into the political process, allowing new voices to be heard, and dramatically re-shaping the democratic relationship between leaders and citizens (e.g. Barber, 1999; Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006; Hill & Hughes, 1998; Negroponete, 1995). Indeed, studies indicate that Internet access and exposure to online political information are significant predictors of increased voter turnout (Tolbert & McNeal, 2003) as well as political efficacy, knowledge, and broader measures of political participation (Kenski & Stroud, 2006)—even with extensive controls. Yet there are qualifiers to this relationship between Internet use and political engagement. For example, Shah, Kwak, and Holbert (2001) found that citizens who report using the Internet for information exchange report higher rates of civic engagement, while those who report using it for social recreation report lower rates of civic engagement.

The Internet certainly makes traditional forms of political engagement easier and more convenient for voters—using a campaign website to donate money, sign up for news mailings, or request the delivery of a yard sign is arguably much easier than traveling to the campaign's headquarters to do it in person. But the most recent innovations—such as online social-networking sites (SNSs) like Facebook and Twitter—offer entirely new ways to engage with politics. With the explosion in new media in the last two decades, the mechanisms citizens can use to engage in politics have proliferated dramatically and swiftly.

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In spite of this increased opportunity for engagement, conflicting findings suggest that caution must be used when drawing conclusions about the Internet's broader democratizing impact. Most notably, work by Bruce Bimber (1998), Bimber (2001) indicates that perhaps the mobilizing impact of the Internet has been exaggerated, as data from the late 1990s and early 2000s do not reveal strong or significant patterns of effects.

Other research has shown that certain types of media use can lead to feelings of vicarious participation (Volgy & Schwarz, 1984), the belief that one has participated when they have not (Wiebe, 1969). The new SNSs, which mimic real-world friendship networks and dynamics, could be a context in which feelings of vicarious participation might flourish, particularly as users might come to believe that "friending" a candidate is as participatory as casting a vote for them at the ballot box. The present research explores how citizens themselves view the consequences of using new media to participate in politics, and examines the predictors of these behaviors.

### 1.2. Distinguishing among various types of online political behavior

Previous work on political participation stresses that not all modes of activity are created equal, and need to be studied separately (Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). Some acts require more resources (e.g., donating money) than others (signing a petition). Some more clearly articulate a message to government (e.g., contacting an official) than others (voting for one candidate over another). And some allow an individual to participate many times (e.g., displaying multiple yard signs or bumper stickers) while others hew more closely to the "one-person one-vote" ideal. Accordingly, most research finds that different modes of political activity are performed by different people, for different reasons, and with differing impacts on the political system (Verba et al., 1995).

Just by virtue of being new modes of participation, activities such as "friending" a candidate or submitting video or audio tips to online media—which have been previously unavailable to citizens—afford scholars an opportunity to examine political participation in new forms. Other online modes of engagement, such as signing an online petition or posting comments on a news website, have counterparts in the offline world (i.e., signing an actual paper petition or writing a letter to a newspaper) and provide us with the opportunity to test theories of participation developed on traditional, pre-Internet modes.

Such new forms of online participation have spurred much research in the area, which demonstrates a number of important conclusions; that the proliferation of online political media has resulted in (1) an increased decentralization of information distribution, (2) increased choice and control on the part of the consumer, and (3) ideological polarization (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Bimber & Davis, 2003; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Manjoo, 2008; Prior, 2005; Tewksbury, 2010; Valentino, Banks, Hutchings, & Davis, 2009). Other scholars have explored whether the online world produces a universe of activists more or less stratified by the economic inequalities of the offline political world (Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2010).

In the present research, we take a different approach. Rather than exploring the *type* of people who are active in online and offline politics, we focus on *why* they participate in these forums, and—in particular—the values and functions that they ascribe to them. Are the "new" modes of online engagement motivated by different goals than the "old" modes of offline activity? Do people believe that their on- and offline behaviors serve different functions in democratic society? In particular, to what extent do citizens believe that different forms of political engagement serve different purposes? We discuss two purposes defined as "communication" (helping citizens communicate with others)

and "participation" (helping citizens influence the functions of government). In distinguishing between these two purposes, we are not suggesting that they are necessarily mutually exclusive: publicly communicating a message to others can also influence government, while participating in politics can also help citizens send a message to others. Rather, we investigate whether citizens *themselves* believe certain activities are more likely to fulfill one purpose than another. By exploring the functions that citizens ascribe to various political activities, as well as the relationships between these beliefs and citizens' likelihood of engaging in these behaviors, we can begin to uncover why citizens take part in various forms of on- and offline political engagement.

### 1.3. Motivations to engage with politics

The research identifying predictors of political participation is extensive. Verba et al. (1995)'s "Civic Voluntarism Model" (CVM) explains who participates as a function of three factors. *Resources* such as income or education allow people to overcome the barriers to participation; *psychological attributes* such as efficacy and partisanship increase the importance they place on politics; and *mobilization*—being asked to take part by others—provides further incentive. In the CVM, these factors largely originate from the civic institutions of voluntary organizations, workplaces and religious networks, and predict who takes part in political life with great accuracy. The more demanding question goes beyond the *type* of person who participates to investigate *why* they do so—that is, the motivations for their activity. What do they hope to get out of engaging with politics?

Despite concerns that such a motivation does not neatly fit within a rational choice framework, most models of political behavior assume that citizens engage with politics in order to influence the policy decisions that governments, parties, and candidates make (Downs, 1957; Gelman, Silver, & Edlin, 2009; Riker & Ordeshook, 1968). Indeed, the empirical data that looks at citizen motivations for getting involved in politics largely indicate that most activists consider influencing government as the greatest reason to participate. Schlozman, Verba, and Brady (1995) found that, not surprisingly, the mix of motivations that respondents named as being important to their participation varied across different modes of engagement. However, for a wide variety of activities, instrumentally influencing government policy was cited as a reason for getting involved: fully 61% of those who voted, 84% of those who donated to a political issue PAC, 80% of those who contacted a public official about a national issue, and 80% of those who took part in a protest said that influencing government policy was a significant reason for their decision to get involved.

Conceptually, we can draw a direct line between such modes of engagement as voting and who occupies political office; clearly, votes count for something and have the capacity to shift government policy by altering its composition. For other activities, like displaying a yard sign or joining a political organization, the direct link to influencing government policy is less clear. The glaring question becomes: do citizens believe that these activities are equally as likely to affect government policy, or do they engage in them for other reasons as well?

The introduction of new online modes of engagement forces us to re-examine the motivations individuals have for getting involved in politics. In addition to influencing government, there is a strong *communicative* aspect to many of these acts—where the aim may not just be to alter what political leaders do, but perhaps also to express one's beliefs, allegiances, and identity, to others. Hoffman (2012) argues that different kinds of online political behaviors serve different goals, some helping citizens directly influence government, and some facilitating citizens' communication with one another. According to this line of reasoning, some

modes of engagement (like posting a political link on a social networking site) function as much as a means of communicating to other individuals as of influencing government. This has led some scholars to suggest distinguishing among those behaviors that are more *communicative* than *participatory* (Gibson, Lusoli, & Ward, 2005; Hoffman, 2012).

Historically, the concept of communicating political information to others has been explored in the context of “political discussion” variables, including measures of people’s frequency of discussing politics with friends, family, or coworkers. In general, political discussion is envisioned as a necessary element of a healthy deliberative democracy (Fishkin, 1991; Habermas, 1984; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995). Some scholars posit that the Internet, with its potential to bring new citizens into the political fold, may promote political discussion and offer an opportunity for communication and expression (e.g., Papacharissi, 2004). Others suggest that such online communication can result in “echo chambers” and fragmentation of citizens into homogeneous groups (Galston, Anderson, & Cornfield, 2003; Sunstein, 2000).

But stepping outside of the traditional model of examining Internet effects on engagement, we might find that people are likely driven by different motivations when they choose to engage in politics online. A desire to influence government as well as a desire to communicate political ideas to others could drive both “participatory” and “communicative” behaviors. To a large extent in the offline world, these political behaviors (participation and communication) are conceptualized as mutually exclusive, and occupy separate spheres in the literature (Hoffman, 2012). However, in online contexts, where the mode itself is by definition communicative, the distinction between these different kinds of political behaviors becomes blurred. Therefore, the kinds of motivations driving these behaviors may be quite different online compared to offline. For example, when an individual “friends” a candidate on Facebook, is that more akin to wearing a candidate button or to talking about the candidate with friends? Is it driven more by the desire to influence government or to communicate one’s political preferences to others?

The ways citizens view these new modes of engagement—the beliefs and goals they associate with the various actions—have important consequences for understanding our online polity. Do citizens believe that online and offline modes of engagement fulfill the same functions? Or are they motivated to take part by fundamentally different goals from the “old world” of offline politics? These questions are rooted in uses and gratifications research, which suggests there is a strong correlation between media use and gratifications sought (see Blumler & McQuail, 1969; Ruggiero, 2000). This approach is ideally suited to online media, as it assumes an active and goal-oriented audience (Ancu & Cozma, 2009). Although Ancu and Cozma (2009) note that previous research has suggested that information surveillance is a primary reason citizens use the Internet for political purposes, they also find that social interaction was the main incentive for people to visit candidate profiles on MySpace, although younger people also looked for information while older people looked for entertainment purposes. This research confirms that online political media serve different functions in the minds of citizens, and the outcomes from such use can dramatically differ depending on these goals.

Conceptually, we draw from the CVM and the uses and gratifications perspective to ask: are online and offline political behaviors structurally different in terms of the goals and beliefs underlying one’s likelihood of engaging in the behavior? We use this opportunity to explore how various online and offline political behaviors function as similar or disparate modes of political engagement, and how perceptions of these behaviors are interrelated. That is, when it comes to beliefs associated with certain political behaviors; what is ultimately driving them? Are the behavioral beliefs

that predict one’s likelihood of performing *online* political acts different from those that predict *offline* political acts?

How citizens perceive online political action has significant consequences for our understanding of political behavior—online and off. If online activities such as “friending” a candidate or writing a blog post are seen as functionally equivalent to offline activities such as voting or writing a letter, then it may be the case that the electorate is increasingly substituting online political action for offline behavior. In such a scenario, the socioeconomic make-up of those who engage online is as critical as it is offline (Schlozman et al., 2010). On the other hand, if these online and offline activities are perceived as occupying separate spheres and serving distinct purposes by citizens, then arguments about the impact of online activity on politics and concerns about the socioeconomic stratification of Internet users may be overblown. The present study examines how citizens themselves perceive these behaviors in order to understand whether they see online and offline behaviors differently or not.

## 2. Research questions

Because of the exploratory nature of this work, we frame our analyses in terms of non-directional research questions. Our goal is to uncover how citizens conceptualize these behaviors and how their beliefs about the values and functions of various political behaviors relate to their performance of those very acts.

RQ1: Do citizens perceive on- and offline political activities to have different functions (influencing government vs. communicating information to others?)

RQ2: Do citizens categorize political acts in terms of their functional purpose beyond the on- and offline distinction?

RQ3: What kinds of political behaviors (online and offline) tend to be performed in tandem?

RQ4: How do perceptions of the functions of various political behaviors relate to citizens’ performance of those behaviors?

And finally, citizens’ beliefs about the extent to which political acts might influence government is inherently tied to citizens’ own political efficacy (see Pateman, 1970; Thompson, 1970). In Finifter’s (1970) early work on political alienation, a lack of internal political efficacy was captured by the term “powerlessness,” or “an individual’s feeling that he cannot affect the actions of the government” (p. 390). For our purposes, political efficacy matters because it is likely to be a strong correlate of the behavioral beliefs people associate with various forms of political participation. People high in efficacy (internal and external) will certainly be more likely to report that a behavior is a good way to influence the government. However, when it comes to behaviors that people might perceive as more communicative in nature, efficacy might play less of a role. Such distinctions might have important consequences in terms of shaping one’s likelihood of engagement in various online and offline political behaviors.

Given the strong role likely played by political efficacy in shaping citizens’ perceptions of the functional purpose of political behaviors, we explore the moderating role played by political efficacy in these relationships.

RQ5: How do perceptions of behaviors and efficacy affect citizens’ performance of those behaviors?

## 3. Method

The data for the present research come from a specially commissioned survey of American adults designed to assess their

engagement with politics through various online and offline behaviors. The survey selected respondents from Knowledge Networks' online panel, each of whom had agreed to take online surveys on a regular basis in exchange for free Internet access and computing equipment or other incentives. To avoid the potential bias of self-selected Internet surveys (Chang & Krosnik, 2009), Knowledge Networks recruits members of its panel through random-digit dial and address-based sampling, providing households with access to the Internet as needed. Thus, although the respondents are reached electronically and take the survey online, the panel represents approximately 97% of the American public (for more information, see Knowledge Networks, 2010). As a result, the sample is representative, but it does include citizens who do not ordinarily use the Internet. Pew estimates that between 15% and 20% of Americans do not have Internet access, and these people tend to be senior citizens, those who prefer to take interviews in Spanish rather than English, adults with less than a high-school education, and those living in households earning less than \$30,000 per year (Zickuhr & Smith, 2012). The final sample included only 9.3% of respondents who reported that they rarely or never used the Internet at home or work. But the present research is interested in Americans' perceptions of these behaviors, and it is worth knowing perspectives from all Americans rather than an Internet-only sample, so these individuals were included in the analyses.

Knowledge Networks randomly selected a nationally representative sample of 1006 US adults for the survey in late July and early August, 2010. In order to reach the completion goal of at least 1000 interviews, 1783 cases were fielded, resulting in a completion rate of 56%. Respondents indicated typical responses to demographic variables: education ( $M = 2.76$  or between high school and some college,  $SD = 1.05$ ), income ( $M = 11.54$  or between \$40,000 and \$59,999,  $SD = 4.20$ ), employment status (57% employed), partisanship extremity ( $M = 1.84$ ,  $SD = 0.90$  on a 4-point scale from 0 to 3), political interest ( $M = 1.36$ ,  $SD = 1.02$  on a 4-point scale from 0 to 3), age ( $M = 49.80$ ,  $SD = 15.80$ ), and ethnicity (74.6% White).

### 3.1. Measures

#### 3.1.1. Past performance of political behaviors

Respondents were asked about a variety of political behaviors that constitute the key variables in this study. Different modes of

political engagement were selected based in part on Hoffman (2012)'s delineation of participatory and communicative behaviors. We selected 11 different types of political activity that represent the repertoire of modes of engagement citizens can use to further their goals both on- and offline. Respondents were first told that "There are many different ways people can get politically involved. In the past year, did you:" followed by a list of the 11 modes of engagement (see Table 1). For each activity, respondents were coded as 1 if they claimed to have done it in the past year, 0 otherwise.

### 3.2. Perceptions of the political behaviors

In addition to asking about their past behavior, the survey also probed respondents' beliefs about the likely functions of these different activities. Respondents were told that "the next set of questions asks for your views on the different ways that people can get involved in politics," then asked to indicate whether they strongly disagreed, disagreed, agreed, strongly agreed, or did not know what they thought about two statements concerning each mode of political engagement:

"[Activity] is a good way to influence what campaigns and governments do."

"[Activity] is a good way to communicate political information to other people."

For each of the eleven different ways that respondents could get involved in politics, we thus know the extent to which they saw the activity as influencing government (i.e., political participation) and the extent to which they saw the activity as communicating information to others (i.e., political communication).

These batteries allow us to assess three important outcomes: whether respondents have done the activity in the past, the extent to which they believe it is a good way to influence government, and the extent to which they believe it is a good way to communicate information to others. These questions give us unique insight into the ways ordinary citizens view both online and offline political behaviors. Summary statistics for these variables are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
Question wording and summary statistics.

Activity	Percent that did activity in past year (in descending order) (%)	Perceived as good way to influence government (M, SD), ranges 1–4	Perceived as good way to communicate information to others (M, SD), ranges 1–4
Vote in an election <sup>a</sup>	51.70	3.23 (.76)	3.04 (.78)
Sign an online petition	18.11	2.64 (.77)	2.67 (.74)
Put up a political yard sign or bumper sticker or wear a campaign button or shirt for any candidate or political party <sup>a</sup>	17.30	2.35 (.73)	2.83 (.72)
Go online to communicate with others about politics using email, instant messaging, or a social networking site	11.01	2.33 (.75)	2.80 (.71)
Sign up for online updates from news organizations, candidates, campaigns, or parties	10.83	2.18 (.73)	2.56 (.75)
Post comments, questions, or information about politics on a website	9.61	2.35 (.73)	2.76 (.70)
Add a candidate or politician as a friend, become a fan, or "like" them on a social networking site	8.93	2.12 (.73)	2.52 (.79)
Contribute money online to a candidate, party, or political group	8.14	2.45 (.84)	2.48 (.81)
Work for a political party or candidate <sup>a</sup>	6.51	2.64 (.77)	2.97 (.72)
Start or join a political group online, including on a social networking site	5.30	2.43 (.73)	2.82 (.72)
Submit video, audio, or tips to a media organization online	1.58	2.37 (.76)	2.62 (.75)

<sup>a</sup> Denotes traditional offline political behavior.



3.2.1. Political efficacy

Because of the likely role played by efficacy in shaping citizens' perceptions of the functions of political behaviors, political efficacy was measured by asking respondents to agree or disagree with three statements: "People like me have no say over what the government does" (reverse-coded), "Sometimes politics seems so complicated that a person like me cannot really understand what is going on" (reverse-coded), and "I consider myself well-qualified to participate in politics." Responses to the first two statements were coded from 1 to 4 with higher values indicating a greater level of efficacy ( $M = 2.45, SD = .65$ ).

4. Results

RQ1 asked whether citizens perceive differences in the traditional offline ways of engaging in politics and the new online modes available to them. For each activity, we coded responses to the questions about whether it was a good way to influence government [1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree)] and if it was a good way to communicate with others [1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree)]. To assess whether some acts are perceived as better able to influence government or to communicate with others, we calculated a difference score for each act by subtracting the "influencing government" rating from the "communicating with others" rating. Positive scores thus indicate that the respondent believed the act functioned best as a way to communicate with others rather than as a way to influence government; negative scores indicate the belief that the act is better suited to influencing government than to communicating information; and scores of zero that the act was perceived to be equally good at each.

Fig. 1 presents the means of these difference scores for each act graphically. The eight online behaviors are presented first, followed by the three offline behaviors (voting, yard sign, and working for a party/candidate). Bullets represent the mean difference score ascribed to the act by respondents, while the lines show the 95% confidence intervals comparing the mean difference score

to zero. The results suggest that, on the whole, citizens believe almost all of these acts to be better suited to communicating information than to influencing government. With the exception of voting, where respondents believed on average it was a better means of influencing what campaigns and governments do than of communicating information, both the on- and offline activities are perceived to be more communicative behaviors than pragmatically influential ones.

There are two other possible exceptions to this trend: contributing money online and signing an online petition, both of which respondents perceived as roughly equally capable of influence and communication. Because both of these acts involve a clear object of the behavior—contributing money goes directly to a party, organization, or candidate, and signing a petition likely ends up in the hands of government officials—it is logical that these acts would be perceived as capable of influence.

To explore RQ2 regarding how citizens categorize the functions of these political acts beyond merely on- versus offline, we used factor analysis to reveal the underlying structures beneath these perceptions. We included perceptions of how well-suited each act is for influencing government as well as perceptions of how well-suited each is for communicating information, for a total of 22 items (two evaluations of 11 acts). A Principal Components Factor Analysis with Oblimin rotation uncovered three dimensions. The structure matrix obtained from the analysis is shown in Table 2.

As can be seen in Table 2, the analysis suggests that three dimensions underlie perceptions of these activities: (1) evaluations of online activities as being a good way to influence government, (2) evaluations of online activities as being a good way to communicate information, and (3) evaluations of offline activities that serve both functions. This suggests that citizens have a fairly sophisticated view of the value of these online activities; evaluations of the act's ability to influence government and its ability to communicate information are indeed separable. In contrast, respondents' evaluations of offline activities as either influencing government or communicating information are inextricably tied together. For the new online activities, respondents appear to be

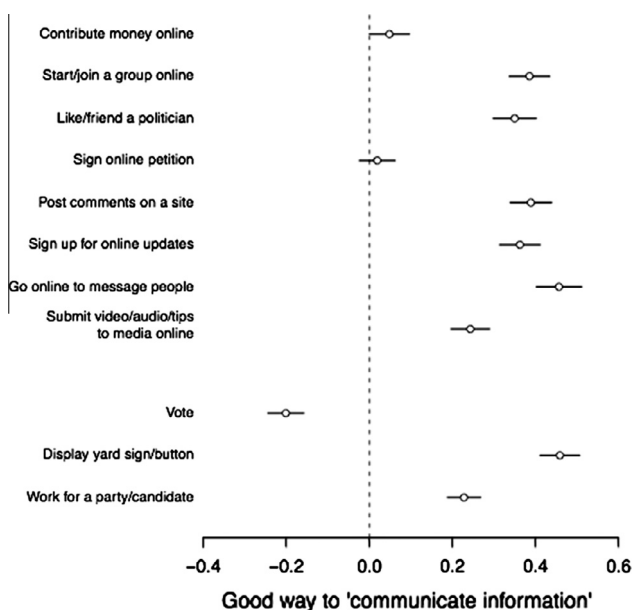


Fig. 1. Citizens' perceptions of each type of activity (bullets) and 95% confidence intervals (lines). Negative numbers (to the left of the dashed line) indicate that the act was perceived to be better suited to influencing government than to communicating information. Positive numbers (to the right of the dashed line) indicate that the act was perceived to be better suited to communicating information than to influencing government.

Table 2

Structure matrix from factor analysis of perceptions of political behaviors as a good way to influence government and as a good way to communicate information.

	Dimension		
	1	2	3
<i>Good way to influence government</i>			
Contributing money	0.429	0.726	0.324
Starting/joining group	0.543	0.808	0.447
Liking/friending a candidate	0.459	0.857	0.212
Posting comments online	0.472	0.845	0.415
Signing up for news updates	0.418	0.865	0.289
Sending messages online	0.520	0.866	0.431
Signing online petition	0.625	0.557	0.590
Submitting video/audio/tips to media	0.594	0.742	0.409
Voting	0.324	0.289	0.820
Displaying yard sign/button	0.356	0.581	0.647
Working for party/candidate	0.523	0.517	0.750
<i>Good way to communicate information</i>			
Contributing money	0.463	0.628	0.267
Starting/joining group	0.855	0.450	0.422
Liking/friending a candidate	0.803	0.505	0.222
Posting comments online	0.876	0.498	0.362
Signing up for news updates	0.721	0.559	0.209
Sending messages online	0.863	0.459	0.384
Signing online petition	0.753	0.482	0.427
Submitting video/audio/tips to media	0.821	0.511	0.257
Voting	0.270	0.408	0.748
Displaying yard sign/button	0.630	0.373	0.642
Working for party/candidate	0.690	0.378	0.736

Note: Shaded cells indicate highest correlation with underlying dimension for each act.

able to identify that they fulfill distinct functions. Two activities, however, received more ambiguous findings; ratings of signing an online petition as a way of influencing government, and of displaying a yard sign or button as communicating information load on the first and second, or first and third dimensions, respectively.

RQ3 asked how performance of various on- and offline political behaviors would hang together. In other words, do people tend to take part in certain kinds of activities over others, and what constitutes the categorical distinctions that define the types of behaviors performed? To explore RQ3, factor analysis was used to capture which factors exist within the battery of the 11 political behaviors respondents reported having done in the past year. Using Principal Components Analysis and Oblimin rotation, the analysis uncovered three dimensions. The structure matrix obtained from the analysis is shown in Table 3. These results suggest two possible interpretations that will be discussed further in the Discussion section: (1) that mode of communication (online versus offline)—rather than the function of the behavior—is the main dimension separating citizens' reported participation in various political activities, or (2) that level of difficulty divides the performance of these behaviors.

RQ4 queried whether the evaluations that respondents ascribe to these different activities influence their decision to participate. We have already seen that citizens are able to distinguish between

online activities that influence government and that communicate information. But do these different perceptions predict levels of engagement? Are citizens more or less likely to participate in the new modes of online politics if they believe they can influence government as a consequence? Or are they driven more by the desire to communicate information than affect policy?

For each of the 11 activities, the dependent variable was a simple dummy measuring whether the respondent said they had participated in this way in the past year. As independent variables, we included our key theoretical variables: the evaluation that the act is a good way to communicate information and the evaluation that the act is a good way to influence government. These variables were entered into the model as a main effect as well as an interaction with efficacy to explore RQ5, regarding the moderating role of political efficacy in these relationships. We also included controls for education, income, employment status, partisanship extremity, political interest, age, and ethnicity.

The results from the regression models with significant interaction terms are shown in Table 4. Three forms of participation appear to be most affected by respondents' perceptions of those activities: (1) liking or "friending" a candidate, (2) going online to communicate with others about politics, and (3) joining or starting an online political group. To probe these significant interactions, we simulate the predicted probability that a respondent has done each activity, given different evaluations of the act's functions and holding all other independent variables at their mean or mode. We specifically examine two groups of respondents: those who have low efficacy (1 on our 1–4 scale) and those who have high efficacy (4). These predicted probabilities are shown in Figs. 2–4.

The results provide us with some interesting insights into the relationship between perceptions of online behavior and the decision to participate in these new forms of politics. The figures show similar patterns for each of the three acts, and we see the biggest differences between the two motivations for those respondents who have high efficacy. Specifically, those with higher efficacy appear to be motivated by the perception that these behaviors communicate information to others. What these figures reveal is that the extent to which respondents perceive the act as a good way to influence government is *not* what is driving their behavior. Rather, the probability that they participate in each of these activities increases with the perception that it is an act that is good at

**Table 3**  
Structure matrix from factor analysis of having done each activity in the past year.

	Dimension		
	1	2	3
Contributed money	0.322	0.513	0.387
Started/joined group	0.688	0.088	0.259
Liked/friended a candidate	0.665	0.164	0.114
Posted comments online	0.672	0.247	0.233
Signed up for news updates	0.742	0.310	0.118
Sent messages online	0.686	0.299	0.003
Signed online petition	0.612	0.265	0.206
Submitted video/audio/tips to media	0.272	0.069	0.847
Voted	0.246	0.727	-0.154
Displayed yard sign/button	0.309	0.795	0.224
Worked for party/candidate	0.246	0.596	0.642

Note: Shaded cells indicate highest correlation with underlying dimension for each act.

**Table 4**  
Logistic Regression Results Predicting Having Done the Behavior in the Past Year.

Predictors	Joined or Started an Online Political Group			Liked or "Friended" a Political Candidate			Communicate Online with Others about Politics		
	$\beta$	s.e.	Exp( $\beta$ )	$\beta$	s.e.	Exp( $\beta$ )	$\beta$	s.e.	Exp( $\beta$ )
Constant	-8.18***	4.69	.00	0.88	2.89	2.42	-6.38*	2.81	.00
Influences government	2.52***	1.29	12.37	-.19	1.00	1.21	1.54***	0.84	4.65
Communicates info	-0.21	1.55	0.82	-1.55	1.04	0.21	-0.54	1.03	0.59
Efficacy	0.61	1.60	1.83	-2.66*	1.09	0.07	0.00	1.00	1.00
Education – HS	-0.81	0.59	0.92	0.27	0.55	1.31	-0.12	0.50	0.89
Education – some college	-0.70	0.48	0.48	-0.33	0.41	0.72	-0.15	0.33	0.86
Education – BA or higher	-0.48	0.42	0.62	0.35	0.37	0.70	0.04	0.31	1.04
Income	-0.06	0.04	0.94	-0.00	0.04	0.99	0.03	0.03	1.03
Employed	-0.15	0.38	0.86	-0.57***	0.34	0.57	0.25	0.27	1.29
Partisanship extremity	0.12	0.17	1.13	0.03	0.16	1.03	-0.12	0.13	0.88
Political interest	0.80**	0.20	2.24	0.86**	0.17	2.35	0.90**	0.15	2.47
Age	-0.02	0.01	0.98	-0.02***	0.01	0.98	0.00	0.01	1.00
Race – black	-0.25	0.61	0.78	0.45	0.48	1.57	0.34	0.46	1.40
Race – other	-0.66	0.83	0.52	-0.72	0.81	0.49	0.77	0.50	2.16
Race – hispanic	0.40	0.54	1.49	-0.83	0.68	0.44	-0.26	0.53	0.77
Race – more than 2	0.28	0.71	1.33	0.39	0.65	1.21	-0.06	0.60	0.94
Influences government X efficacy	-0.79***	0.43	0.45	-0.96	1.00	0.91	-0.56***	0.23	0.57
Communicates info X efficacy	0.46	0.54	1.58	1.15*	1.04	3.17	0.54	0.32	1.72

Comparison group for education is less than HS. Comparison group for race is White.

\*  $p < .05$ .  
\*\*  $p < .01$ .  
\*\*\*  $p < .10$ .

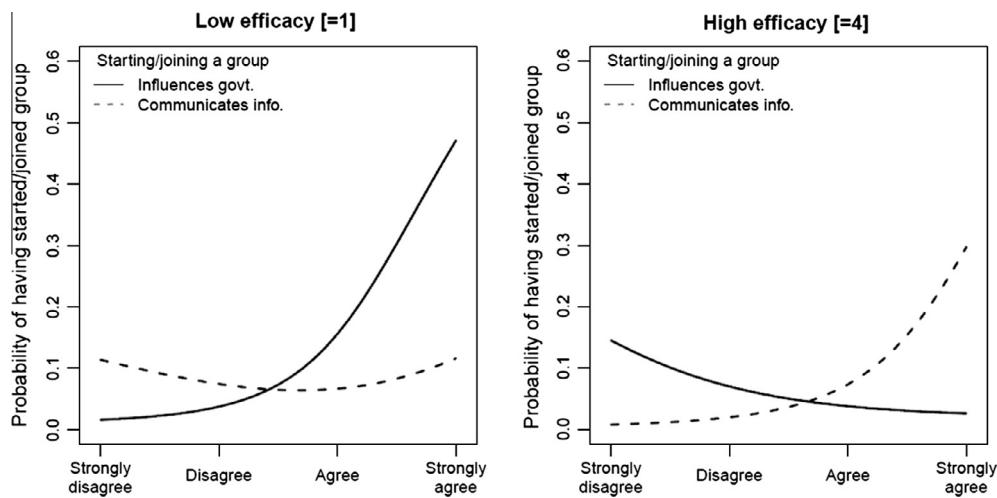


Fig. 2. Simulated probabilities that a respondent with low (left plot) or high (right plot) efficacy started or joined a political group online, given changes in their perceptions of that activity. Note. Based on regression estimates presented in Table 4.

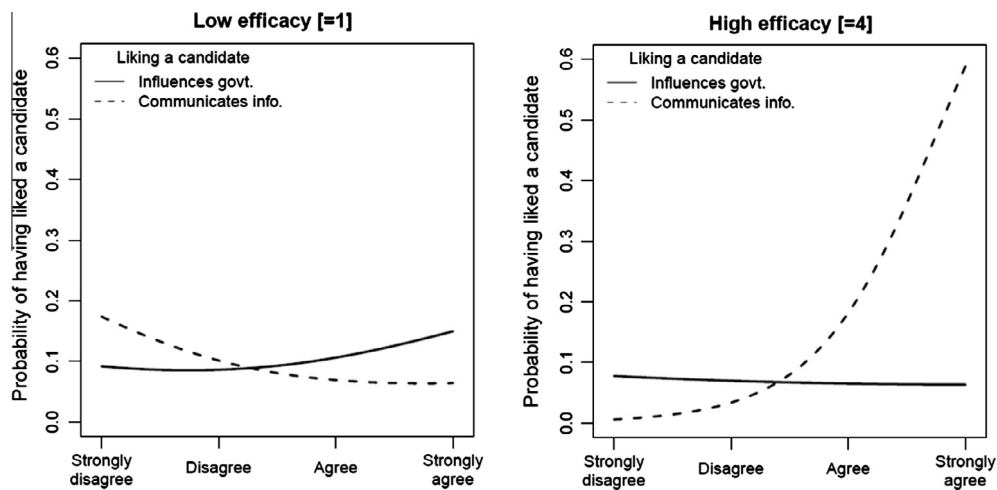


Fig. 3. Simulated probabilities that a respondent with low (left plot) or high (right plot) efficacy liked or "friended" a candidate online, given changes in their perceptions of that activity. Note: Based on regression estimates presented in Table 4.

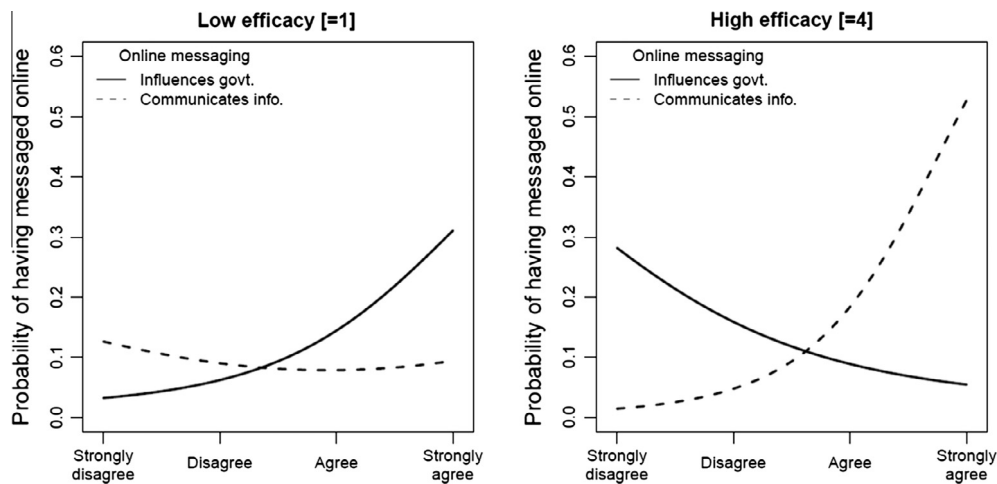


Fig. 4. Simulated probabilities that a respondent with low (left plot) or high (right plot) efficacy messaged with others about politics online, given changes in their perceptions of that activity. Note: Based on regression estimates presented in Table 4.

communicating information to others. Increasing the perception that it can influence government has essentially no effect on the likelihood that they take part in that activity.

## 5. Discussion

This research sought to explore uncharted territory in the study of the Internet and democratic life. Rather than looking at *who* is engaging in political acts online or the impact of these diverse behaviors on other political outcomes, we believe it is crucial to understand *how* citizens perceive new and diverse political behaviors. Our results suggest that citizens do perceive (and perform) these behaviors as having distinct purposes. What are the implications of this result when compared to recent findings (Schlozman et al., 2010) suggesting that socioeconomic status plays as important of a role in predicting online political behavior as offline? Perhaps it suggests that the behavioral beliefs and perceived uses of the online medium to enact such behaviors are more (or at least as) important predictors as SES.

We suggested earlier that if online activities are perceived as functionally equivalent to offline ones like voting, then we might be able to conclude that citizens are substituting online behavior for offline behavior. However, our results suggest the opposite. These online and offline behaviors are seen as occupying separate spheres of activity, serving distinct purposes in the political realm. It follows, then, that arguments about the impact of online activity on the political environment may be overblown. That is, if citizens do not perceive these online behaviors as actually influencing government, then they do not necessarily replace the offline activities that are perceived to do so.

In addition, by examining what on- and offline political behaviors are performed in tandem, as well as citizens' perceptions of the utility of these behaviors, we can better untangle the mechanism underlying citizen engagement in the burgeoning digital democracy. This study contributes to the literature from several theoretical traditions. It expands our understanding of rational choice in illuminating *why* citizens participate. Finally, we have extended the uses and gratifications literature by supplementing Ancu and Cozma's (2009) findings that citizens seek media for different purposes, and, specifically, they see the Internet primarily as a discursive medium when it comes to politics. As such, it appears citizens have realistic expectations of the medium's utility in influencing government.

As illustrated by the factor analysis, citizens appear to make distinctions between online activities that they see as well-suited to influence government (traditional participation) and those that are best-suited for communicating with others (communication). This provides us with a nuanced understanding of political behaviors—one in which citizens are not duped into thinking that every online political act is necessarily going to influence government. There are normative implications here as well; if citizens did perceive every online political act as an effective way to influence the government, it would certainly raise some concerning questions about the nature of our democracy. Instead, we see that they differentiate between those activities that—according to some assessments (e.g., Hoffman, 2012)—are better able to serve as communicative mechanisms rather than truly participatory ones. What this might suggest is that citizens do not necessarily believe that all types of participation directly influence government. In fact, they perceive the majority of them as better tools for communicating information more broadly. This is a promising finding, because it suggests that citizens are not putting undue pressure on this new medium to bring results that may not be attainable.

When we examine the factor analysis results for respondents' reported past behaviors (Table 3), however, we do not see citizens

demarcating actual behaviors along the participation/communication divide. Instead, respondents appear to have participated in the various activities according to one of two possible factors: mode or resources. In the first scenario, respondents either tend to have participated mostly online (starting/joining a group, sending messages, signing up for news updates, signing a petition, or liking/friending a candidate) or offline (voting and displaying a yard sign/button/shirt). However, that leaves two behaviors in a third factor that are both online (submitting tips to media) and offline (working for a candidate or party). This suggests a second interpretation—that respondents participate in behaviors in ways that could reflect the Civic Voluntarism Model of Verba et al. (1995). That is, there are those behaviors that require generally low resources, time, and skills (e.g., “friending” a candidate) those that require somewhat greater resources, time, and skills (e.g., voting or obtaining and displaying a yard sign), and those that require the most resources, time, and skills (actually working for a candidate or submitting video and tips to the media). In any event, while perceptions of the goals or functions of these activities do vary within the online realm, actual behaviors seem to be driven by other factors.

What is perhaps most compelling about these findings is what we can glean from the regression analyses predicting one's likelihood of having performed a political act. Here we see that among the most politically efficacious citizens, even when political acts are perceived as largely communicative in nature, citizens are still performing these behaviors. This reflects a broader and more sophisticated conceptualization of democratic life that what would be suggested by the traditional rational-choice models. Rather than a paradigm in which citizens act because they want to see their behavior as directly influencing government, we find citizens taking part in diverse political activities that they consider more communicative in nature. The figures—which provide simulated probabilities of liking a candidate, messaging online about politics, and joining or starting a political group—further suggest that it is the perception that an act serves a communicative function that drives high-efficacy citizens to perform it. Perhaps this is pointing to a breed of political engagement in which the benefits are found in the performance of the act itself, rather than in the perceived outcome or effects of that act (influencing government).

Of course there are limitations to this research. We could ask only a limited number of questions about the behaviors people engage in online in order to keep the survey at a reasonable length. Ideally, we would have asked about more offline behaviors, as well as the multitude of possible online behaviors as reported by the Pew Internet and American Life Project (2008). As it is, these results are really a conservative test of a few behaviors, yet the consistency in how citizens perceive these behaviors is perhaps remarkable in that sense.

Additionally, this survey asked about past behaviors in an off-election year (2009–2010), so our results are likely a conservative estimate of past behaviors. Our results did not demonstrate any discernable patterns for offline behaviors, but this could be because we asked about only three offline behaviors: voting, displaying a yard sign, and working for a party or candidate. Indeed, the most frequent online activity was signing an on-line petition, which was only reported by 18% of respondents. Future research should critically evaluate which political behaviors to include on a survey in order to get the most generalizable results. Even with these limitations, however, we believe that our representative sample of Americans provides a realistic glimpse into the behaviors and motivations of citizens when it comes to online political participation.

Finally, it is also worth noting that in our simulated probabilities (Figs. 2–4), these activities vary along a private–public continuum—i.e., exchanging online messages is more private than liking a candidate or joining a group. Perceptions and performance of these behaviors is thus likely to differ. Indeed, some research (Hayes,



Scheufele, & Huges, 2006) has found that individual characteristics can predict which types of online activities they perform. Moreover, people perceive and use social media in ways different from other online outlets (see, e.g., DeAndrea, 2012; Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012). Ross et al. (2009) also note that there is a strong communication motivation for using social media. With the increased usage of social media that span both public and private spheres, future research should examine differences in perceptions of political behaviors across these various platforms.

Our goal in this study was to examine why citizens participate online and how they perceive the effectiveness of these behaviors. The results suggest that new modes of online engagement appear to be motivated by realistic perceptions that the behavior is an effective means of communicating information to others, rather than directly influencing government. We also proposed that people might believe that on- and offline behaviors serve different functions in a democratic society. Indeed they do—voting is clearly a way of influencing government, while many of the other forms of participation are seen as better means of communicating information to others. That citizens see these behaviors differently suggests a sophistication beyond traditional measures of knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. It implies that citizens do understand their role in a democratic society, and that communication serves as a bedrock for political engagement and involvement.

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