The Internet and Civic Engagement

Just as in offline politics, the well-off and well-educated are especially likely to participate in online activities that mirror offline forms of engagement. But there are hints that social media may alter this pattern.

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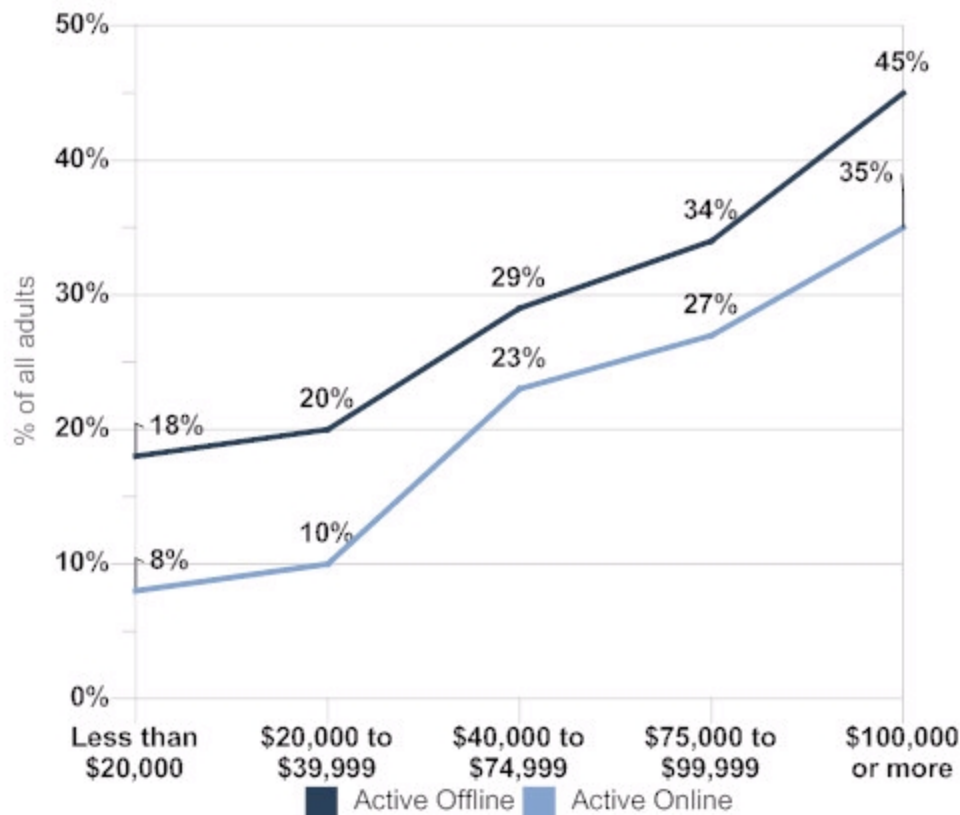# CONTENTS

Summary of Findings

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Whether they take place on the internet or off, traditional political activities remain the domain of those with high levels of income and education.

Contrary to the hopes of some advocates, the internet is not changing the socio-economic character of civic engagement in America. Just as in offline civic life, the well-to-do and well-educated are more likely than those less well off to participate in online political activities such as emailing a government official, signing an online petition or making a political contribution.

Political activity is highly correlated with income, whether that activity takes place online or offline

The proportion of adults within each income category who have participated in two or more online/offline political activities within the last twelve months.

Pew internet & American Life Project August 2008 Survey. Political activities include contacting a government official (via email or in person, by phone/letter); signing a petition (online or on paper); sending a letter to the editor (via email or US Postal Service); making a political contribution (online or offline); and communicating with a civic/political group (using digital tools or non-digital tools).

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In part, these disparities result from differences in internet access—those who are lower on the socio-economic ladder are less likely to go online or to have broadband access at home, making it impossible for them to engage in online political activity. Yet even within the online population there is a strong positive relationship between socio-

economic status and most of the measures of internet-based political engagement we reviewed.
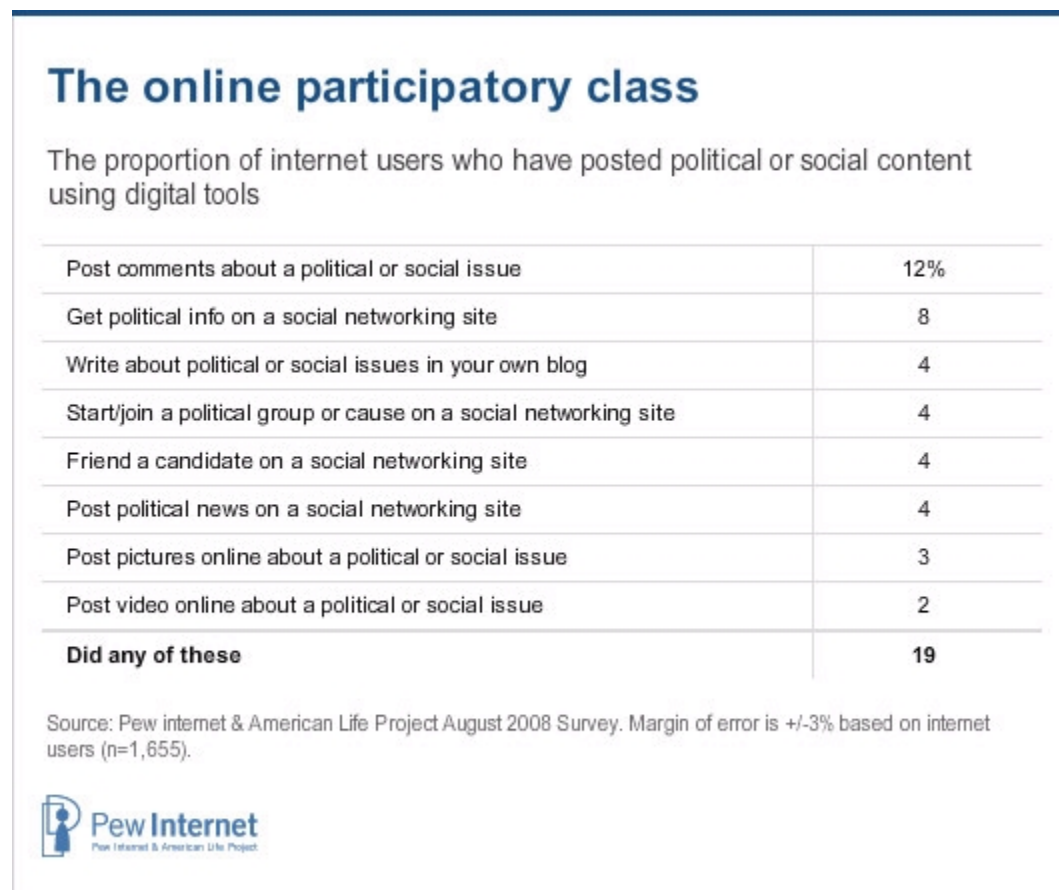
At the same time, because younger Americans are more likely than their elders to be internet users, the participation gap between relatively unengaged young and much more engaged middle-aged adults that ordinarily typifies offline political activity is less pronounced when it comes to political participation online. Nevertheless, within any age group, there is still a strong correlation between socio-economic status and online political and civic engagement.

There are hints that forms of civic engagement anchored in blogs and social networking sites could alter long-standing patterns that are based on socio-economic status.

In our August 2008 survey we found that 33% of internet users had a profile on a social networking site and that 31% of these social network members had engaged in activities with a civic or political focus—for example, joining a political group, or signing up as a "friend" of a candidate—on a social networking site. That works out to 10% of all internet users who have used a social networking site for some sort of political or civic engagement. In addition, 15% of internet users have gone online to add to the political discussion by posting comments on a website or blog about a political or social issue, posting pictures or video content online related to a political or social issue, or using their blog to explore political or social issues.

Taken together, just under one in five internet users (19%) have posted material about political or social issues or a used a social networking site for some form of civic or political engagement. This works out to 14% of all adults -- whether or not they are internet users. A deeper analysis of this online participatory class (see Part Four, "Will Social Media Change Everything?") suggests that it is not inevitable that those with high levels of income and education are the most active in civic and political affairs. In contrast to traditional acts of political participation—whether undertaken online or

offline—forms of engagement that use blogs or online social network sites are not characterized by such a strong association with socio-economic stratification.

The online participatory class

The proportion of internet users who have posted political or social content using digital tools

Post comments about a political or social issue	12%
Get political info on a social networking site	8
Write about political or social issues in your own blog	4
Start/join a political group or cause on a social networking site	4
Friend a candidate on a social networking site	4
Post political news on a social networking site	4
Post pictures online about a political or social issue	3
Post video online about a political or social issue	2
Did any of these	19

Source: Pew internet & American Life Project August 2008 Survey. Margin of error is +/-3% based on internet users (n=1,655).

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In part, this circumstance results from the very high levels of online engagement by young adults. Some 37% of internet users aged 18-29 use blogs or social networking sites as a venue for political or civic involvement, compared to 17% of online 30-49 year olds, 12% of 50-64 year olds and 10% of internet users over 65. It is difficult to measure socio-economic status for the youngest adults, those under 25 -- many of whom are still students. This group is, in fact, the least affluent and well educated age group in the survey. When we look at age groups separately, we find by and large that the association between income and education and online engagement re-emerges— although this association is somewhat less pronounced than for other forms of online political activism.

The impact of these new tools on the future of online political involvement depends in large part upon what happens as this younger cohort of "digital natives" gets older. Are we witnessing a generational change or a life-cycle phenomenon that will change as these younger users age? Will the civic divide close, or will rapidly evolving technologies continue to leave behind those with lower levels of education and income?

Those who use blogs and social networking sites as an outlet for civic engagement are far more active in traditional realms of political and nonpolitical participation than are other internet users. In addition, they are even more active than those who do not use the internet at all.

Those who use blogs or social networking sites politically are much more likely to be invested in other forms of civic and political activism. Compared to those who go online but do not post political or social content or to those who do not go online in the first place, members of this group are much more likely to take part in other civic activities such as joining a political or civic group, contacting a government official or expressing themselves in the media. Only when it comes to making a contribution to a place of worship are the differences among these groups quite minimal.

Those who join the online political discussion on social media sites are highly engaged in other civic/political venues as well

The proportion within each column who engage in different civic/political behaviors

	Among all adults	Among those who post content online about political or social issues	Among those who go online, but do not post content about political or social issues	Among those who do not go online
	%	%	%	%
Overall engagement in civic or political matters				
2+ offline civic/political activities	27	53^	27	14
2+ online civic/political activities	18	48^	19	n/a
Member of a political or civic group	36	56^	38	19
Civic communications				
Contacted a government official	30	50^	30	18
Signed a petition	32	61^	33	13
Sent a letter to the editor	10	22^	9	3
Monetary contritutions				
Made a political contribution	18	33^	18	11
Made a charitable donation	67	81^	74	43
Made a contribution to a place of worship	59	62	61	54

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project August 2008 Survey. Respondents in the 2+ online/offline activities category include who did two or more of the following: contacting a government official (via email or via phone/letter; signing a petition (online or on paper); sending a letter to the editor (via email or US Postal Service); making a political contribution (online or offline); and communicating with a civic/political group (using digital tools or non-digital tools). Margin of error is +/-6% based on those who post political content online (n=276), +/-3% based on those who go online but do not post political content (n=1379) and +/-4% based on those who do not go online (n=596). n/a indicates sample size is too small to analyze. ^ Indicates statistically significant difference between online content creators and other two groups.

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The internet is now part of the fabric of everyday civic life. Half of those who are involved in a political or community group communicate with other group members using digital tools such as email or group websites.

Just over one-third of Americans (36%) are involved in a civic or political group, and more than half of these (56%) use digital tools to communicate with other group members. Indeed, 5% of group members communicate with their fellow members using digital technologies *only*. At the forefront is email—fully 57% of wired civic group members use email to communicate with fellow group members. This makes email nearly as popular as face-to-face meetings and telephone conversations for intra-group communication. In addition:

- 32% of internet users who are involved in a political or community group have communicated with the group using the group's *website*, and 10% have done so via *instant messaging*.
- 24% of online social network site users who are involved in a political or community group have communicated with the group using a *social networking site*.
- 17% of cell phone owners who are involved in a political or community group have communicated with the group via *text messaging* on a cell phone or PDA.

Respondents report that public officials are no less responsive to email than to snail mail. Online communications to government officials are just as likely to draw a response as contacts in person, over the phone, or by letter.

Individuals who email a government official are just as likely to get a response to their query—and, more importantly, to be satisfied with the response they receive—as are those who get in touch with their elected officials in person, by phone, or by letter.

Among those who contacted a government official in person, by phone or by letter, 67% received a response to their query. This is little different from the 64% of those who received a response after sending a government official an email. Similarly, 66% of

individuals who contacted a government official by phone, letter or in person were satisfied with the response they received, which is again little different from the 63% who were satisfied with the response to their email communication.

Those who make political donations are more likely to use the internet to make their contributions than are those who make charitable donations; however, large political donations are much less likely to be made online than are large charitable donations.

Compared to political donations—that is, contributions to a political candidate or party or any other political organization or cause—donations to non-profit and charitable organizations are far more likely to take place offline. Some 30% of political donors gave money online, compared to just 12% of charitable donors. Interestingly though, charitable donors seem more willing than political donors to make *large* contributions over the internet. Offline political donors were nearly three times as likely as online donors to make a contribution of more than $500 to a political candidate or party: 8% of those who made political donations offline contributed more than $500, compared with just 3% of online donors who gave a similar amount. In contrast, online and offline charitable donors were equally likely to make such large contributions.

Compared with political donations, large charitable donations are more likely to occur online

As of August 2008, 18% of all Americans had made a political donation in the preceding twelve months and 59% had contributed to a non-profit or charitable organization. The following are the amounts that each group donated both online and offline.

	Total amount donated online (among online donors)	Total amount donated offline (among offline donors)
	%	%
Political donations		
Less than $100	61	62
$101-$500	29	21
$501-$1,000	2	4
More than $1,000	1	4
Don't know / Refuse	7	9
Charitable donations		
Less than $100	37	38
$101-$500	37	35
$501-$1,000	6	7
More than $1,000	12	10
Don't know / Refuse	9	10

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project August 2008 Survey. Margin of error is +/-9% for online political donors (n=130), +/-5% for offline political donors (n=429), +/-8% for online charitable donors (n=193) and +/-3% for offline charitable donors (n=1,559).

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A special note about this survey

The findings reported here come from a survey that was conducted in the midst of one of the most energizing political contests in modern American history, in which an African-American headed a major-party ticket for the first time. His campaign made a particular effort to incorporate the internet into his campaign. In addition, the U.S.

economy was under enormous stress. Thus, there is the possibility that the patterns described here might not hold in the future.

In addition, this was the final survey conducted by the Pew Internet Project not to include a random sample of respondents contacted on their cell phones. Young adults and minorities are more likely not to have landlines and exclusively use cell phones. A sampling on cell phones would likely have produced more young respondents and more minority respondents. The data here were weighted to reflect the composition of the entire U.S. population and there is evidence in other Pew Research Center surveys that the absence of a cell sample would not substantially change the final results.

Comprehensive work on this has been done by our colleagues at the Pew Research Center for The People & The Press and is available here: http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1266/polling-challenges-election-08-success-in-dealing-with.

The Current State of Civic Engagement in America

Introduction

Like many technical innovations, the internet was greeted enthusiastically by those who thought it would "change everything" when it comes to democratic governance. Among its predicted salutary effects is the capacity of the internet to permit ordinary citizens to short-circuit political elites and deal directly with one another and public officials; to foster deliberation, enhance trust, and create community; and—of special interest to us—to facilitate political participation.

Other observers have been doubtful about the expected benefits, pointing out that every technological advance has been greeted with the inflated expectations that faster transportation and easier communication will beget citizen empowerment and civic renewal. This insight leads to the more cautious assessment that, rather than revolutionizing democratic politics, it would end up being more of the same and reinforcing established political patterns and familiar political elites. Even more sober were those who feared that, far from cultivating social capital, the internet would foster undemocratic tendencies: greater political fragmentation, "hacktivism," and incivility.

For a variety of reasons, the internet might be expected to raise participation: The interactive capacities of the internet allow certain forms of political activity to be conducted more easily; vast amounts of political information available on the internet could have the effect of lowering the costs of acquiring political knowledge and stimulating political interest; the capacities of the internet facilitate mobilization to take political action. However, it is widely known that, with respect to a variety of politically relevant characteristics, political activists are different from the public at large. And more participation does not necessarily mean that participants are socially and economically more diverse. For one thing, internet access is far from universal among American adults, a phenomenon widely known as the "digital divide," and the contours

of the digital divide reflect in certain ways the shape of participatory input. Moreover, access to the internet does not necessarily mean use of the internet for political activity. Therefore, it seems important to investigate the extent to which online political and civic activities ameliorate, reflect, or even exaggerate the long-standing tendencies in offline political activity.

There are several ways in which digital tools might facilitate political participation. For one thing, several forms of political activity—including making donations, forming a group of like-minded people, contacting public officials, and registering to vote—are simply easier on the internet. Because activity can be undertaken any time of day or night from any locale with a computer and an internet connection, the costs of taking part are reduced. The capacities of the internet are also suited to facilitate the process of the formation of political groups. By making it so cheap to communicate with a large number of potential supporters, the internet reduces the costs of getting a group off the ground. The internet reduces almost to zero the additional costs of seeking to organize many rather than few potential adherents even if they are widely scattered geographically.

Perhaps as important in fostering political activity directly is the wealth of political information available to those who have access to the internet. Just about every offline source of political information is now on the Web, usually without charge: governments at all levels along with such visible public officials as members of the House and Senate, governors, and mayors of large cities; candidates for public office, political parties and organizations; print sources of political news including newspapers, wire services, newsmagazines as well as broadcast news sources that mix print material with audio and video clips. In addition, indigenous to the internet are various potentially politicizing experiences. For example, online conversations, often about political subjects, in a variety of internet venues are in most ways analogous to the political discussions that routinely take place over the dinner table or at the water cooler but have the capacity to bring together large numbers of participants spread over vast distances.

The third mechanism by which the internet might enhance political activity follows directly from its capacity to communicate with large numbers of geographically dispersed people at little cost. Candidates, parties, and political organizations do not simply use the internet as a way or disseminating information, they also use its capabilities to communicate with adherents and sympathizers and to recruit them to take political action—either on or offline.

This report examines the state of civic engagement in America. One major goal of the survey was to compare certain offline political activities—for example, signing petitions or making donations—with their online counterparts. Another objective was to investigate the possibility of political and civic engagement through blogs and social networking sites. This survey allows us to compare the offline and online worlds in a variety of ways:

- How and to what extent are digital and online tools being used by Americans to communicate with civic groups, or to engage with the political system?
- Are online avenues for political activity bringing new voices and groups into civic and political life?
- Where do relatively new venues for civic debate such as blogs or social networking sites fit into the overall spectrum of civic and political involvement? Are these tools bringing new voices into the broader civic debate?

All these results come from a national telephone survey of 2,251 American adults (including 1,655 internet users) conducted between August 12 and August 31, 2008. This sample was gathered entirely on landline phones. There was no extra sample of cell-phone users, who tend to be younger and slightly more likely to be internet users.

Political Participation: Nearly two-thirds of all Americans have participated in some form of political activity in the past year.

Just under one-fifth engaged in four or more political acts on a scale of eleven different activities.

In attempting to measure the state of political participation in America, we asked about participation in eleven forms of political activity ranging from working with fellow citizens to solve local problems, to participating actively in organizations that try to influence public policy, to volunteering for a political party or candidate.[1] Fully 63% of all adults have done at least one of the following eleven activities over the previous twelve months:

Civic and political involvement in America

The proportion of adults who did each of the following in the last 12 months

Sign a petition	32%
Contact a national, state or local government official about an issue	30
Work with fellow citizens to solve a problem in your community	28
Attend a political meeting on local, town, or school affairs	24
Contribute money to a political candidate or party or any other political organization or cause	18
Be an active member of a group that tries to influence public policy or government	15
Attend a political rally or speech	12
Send a letter to the editor to a newspaper or magazine	10
Work or volunteer for a political party or candidate	8
Make a speech about a community or local issue	7
Attend an organized protest	4
Any of these	**63**

Source: Pew internet & American Life Project August 2008 Survey. Margin of error is +/-2% based on all adults (n=2,251).

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Taken together, 34% of all adults did one or two of the above activities this year, while

an additional 16% took part in 3-4 activities. A highly-engaged 13% of Americans have taken part in five or more of these activities in the last year.

Our results are consistent with previous research in finding that individuals with high levels of income and education tend to be much more likely to take part politically. As income and education levels increase, so does participation in a wide range of political activities, in particular, working with fellow citizens to solve community problems; attending political meetings; taking part in a civic or political group; attending a political rally or speech; working or volunteering for a political party or candidate; making political contributions; or getting in touch with public officials.

When we consider individual political acts, we sometimes find that a particular subgroup is especially active. For example, those under 30 and English-speaking Hispanics were especially likely to have attended an organized protest in the previous twelve months; suburbanites were more likely to have attended a political meeting on local, town, or school affairs; and fifty and sixty-somethings were especially likely to have contacted a government official. Otherwise, the group differences on the basis of gender, age, race or ethnicity, kind of community are much less substantial than the differences on the basis of income or, especially, education.

Levels of civic and political engagement

The proportion of adults in each group who have taken part in civic or political activities in the past 12 months

	Did any activities	1-2 activities	3-4 activities	5+ activities
Total	63%	34%	16%	13%
Gender				
Male	66	36	16	14
Female	61	32	16	12
Age				
18-24	59	34	13	13
25-34	62	34	14	14
35-44	66	34	18	14
45-54	65	33	19	14
55-64	68	33	19	16
65+	56	34	13	9
Race/Ethnicity				
White, non-Hispanic	65	35	17	13
Black, non-Hispanic	60	34	14	12
Hispanic (English-speaking)	53	26	12	15

Source: Pew internet & American Life Project August Tracking Survey, August 2008. Civic activities include contacting a government official; signing a petition; contributing money to a political candidate or party; sending a letter to the editor; attending a political rally or speech; attending an organized protest; attending a political meeting; working or volunteering for a political candidate or party; making a speech about a community or political issue; being an active member of a group that tries to influence public policy or government; and working with fellow citizens to solve a problem in the community.

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Levels of civic and political engagement

The proportion of adults in each group who have taken part in civic or political activities in the past 12 months
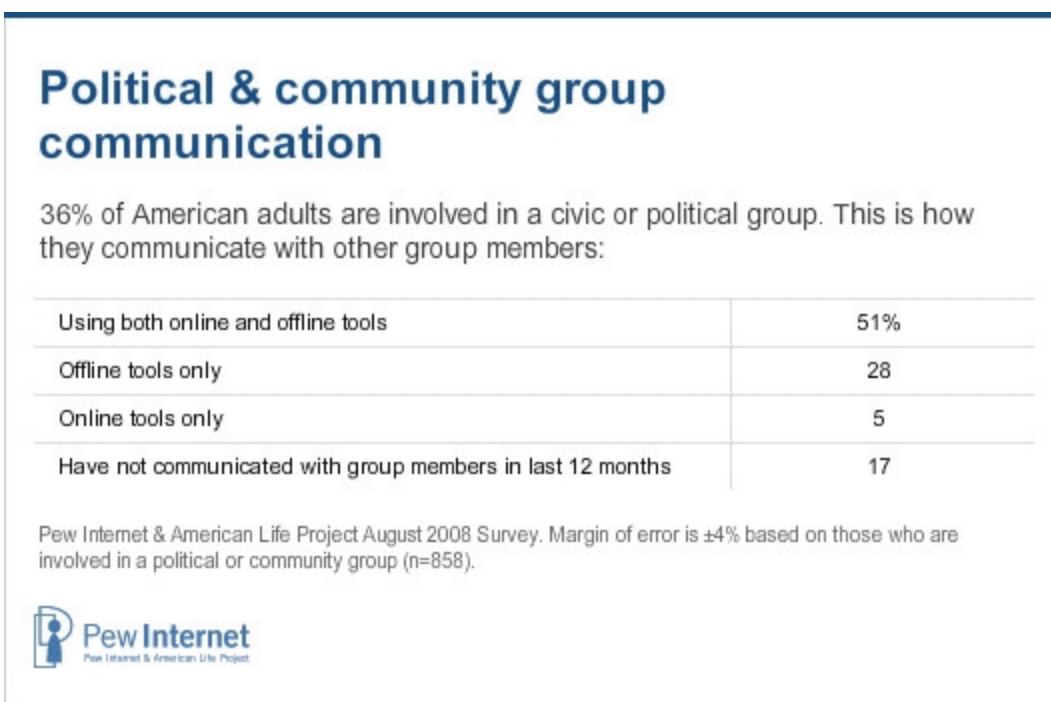
	Did any activities	1-2 activities	3-4 activities	5+ activities
Total	63%	34%	16%	13%
Education				
Less than high school	44	31	8	5
High school grad	52	34	13	6
Some college	72	39	17	16
College grad	79	31	24	24
Annual Household Income				
Less than $20,000	49	31	13	6
$20,000-$39,999	53	31	15	7
$40,000-$74,999	69	38	16	15
$75,000-$99,999	74	36	18	20
$100,000 or more	80	30	25	25
Geography				
Urban	61	33	15	12
Suburban	67	34	18	14
Rural	58	33	13	13

Source: Pew internet & American Life Project August Tracking Survey, August 2008. Civic activities include contacting a government official; signing a petition; contributing money to a political candidate or party; sending a letter to the editor; attending a political rally or speech; attending an organized protest; attending a political meeting; working or volunteering for a political candidate or party; making a speech about a community or political issue; being an active member of a group that tries to influence public policy or government; and working with fellow citizens to solve a problem in the community.

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More than a third of Americans (36%) have gotten involved in a political or community group in the past year by doing at least one of the following: working with fellow citizens to solve a local problem; being active in a group that tries to influence public policy or government; or working or volunteering for a political party or candidate. Fully 83% of those who are involved in such groups have communicated with other

group members in the past 12 months and they use a range of approaches to keep in touch. Some 51% indicated that they communicated with other group members online (using tools such as email, text messaging, or the group's website) *as well as* offline (using face-to-face meetings, letters/newsletters or phone calls). An additional 5% communicated using *only* online tools such as email, and another 28% interacted with group members using *only* offline means: in person, by phone, or through letters or newsletters.

Political & community group communication

36% of American adults are involved in a civic or political group. This is how they communicate with other group members:

Using both online and offline tools	51%
Offline tools only	28
Online tools only	5
Have not communicated with group members in last 12 months	17

Pew Internet & American Life Project August 2008 Survey. Margin of error is ±4% based on those who are involved in a political or community group (n=858).

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Face-to-face meetings and telephone communication are the two single most common ways that members of community/political groups communicate with fellow group members. Among those individuals who are involved in a community or political group:

- 63% have communicated with other group members by having *face-to-face meetings*
- 60% have done so by *telephone*
- 35% have done so through *print letter or group newsletter*

Nearly nine in ten community or political group members go online, and email has

emerged as a key communications tool for facilitating group communications. Fully 57% of wired members of a community or political group communicate with other group members via email -- making email nearly as popular as face-to-face meetings and telephone communication. Furthermore, among those who are involved in a political or community group:

- 32% of internet users have communicated with group members by using the group's *website*, and 10% have done so via *instant messaging*.
- 24% of social networkers have communicated with group members by using a *social networking site*.
- 17% of cell phone owners have communicated with group members by *text messaging* on a cell phone or PDA.

How different demographics communicate with their political or community groups

The proportion of political/community group members within each category who communicate with other group members using online and offline tools

	% involved in a political or community group	% of group members who communicate using offline tools	% of group members who communicate using digital tools (all adults)	% of group members who communicate using digital tools (internet users only)
All adults	36%	79%	55%	63%
Gender				
Male	38	79	52	58
Female	33	79	59	68
Age				
18-29	33	78	67	68
30-49	39	84	62	66
50-64	37	76	50	58
65+	29	72	33	57
Race/Ethnicity				
White, non-Hispanic	36	80	56	64
Black, non-Hispanic	35	79	46*	n/a
Hispanic (English-speaking)	29	n/a	n/a	n/a

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project August 2008 Survey. Margin of error is +/-4% among those who are involved in a political or community group (n=858). Margin of error within subgroups is smaller. Because of small base sizes for those with household incomes under $20,000 (n=67) and African-Americans (n=79) who are both online and involved in a civic/community group, please interpret these results with some caution. n/a = sample size is too small to analyze

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How different demographics communicate with their political or community groups

The proportion of political/community group members within each category who communicate with other group members using online and offline tools

	% involved in a political or community group	% of group members who communicate using offline tools	% of group members who communicate using digital tools (all adults)	% of group members who communicate using digital tools (internet users only)
All adults	36%	79%	55%	63%
Education				
Less than high school	21	n/a	n/a	n/a
High school grad	26	70	33	43
Some college	39	84	63	68
College grad	52	86	73	75
Annual Household Income				
Less than $20,000	21	62*	43*	n/a
$20,000-$39,999	29	75	45	57
$40,000-$74,999	40	85	55	60
$75,000-$99,999	45	81	61	64
$100,000 or more	55	83	71	73
Geography				
Urban	34	78	56	65
Suburban	37	79	58	64
Rural	34	82	45	56

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project August 2008 Survey. Margin of error is +/-4% among those who are involved in a political or community group (n=858). Margin of error within subgroups is smaller. Because of small base sizes for those with household incomes under $20,000 (n=67) and African-Americans (n=79) who are both online and involved in a civic/community group, please interpret these results with some caution. n/a = sample size is too small to analyze

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Communication: Nearly half of all Americans have expressed their opinions in a public forum on topics that are important to

them, and blogs and social networking sites provide new opportunities for political engagement.

In addition to participating directly in civic groups or activities, 49% of Americans have spoken out about an issue that is important to them in the past year by contacting a government agency or official, signing a petition, writing a letter to the editor or calling into a radio or television show. Over this time period:

- 32% of all adults have signed a petition. One-quarter (25%) of all adults have signed a paper petition, while 19% of internet users have signed a petition online.
- 30% of all adults have contacted a national, state, or local government official about an issue that is important to them. One-quarter (24%) of all adults have done so in person, by phone or by letter, while 25% of internet users have done so via email.
- 10% of all adults have sent a "letter to the editor" to a newspaper or magazine. Five percent of all adults have sent a physical letter to the editor through the US Postal Service, while 10% of internet users have done so via email.
- 8% of all adults have called into a live radio or TV show to express an opinion.

As the numbers above indicate, many people engage in civic communications using multiple channels—for instance, they may sign a paper petition for one issue and an online petition for another—and certain types of communications are especially likely to take place online. Letters to the editor are most commonly sent via email: among those who sent a letter to the editor using any delivery method, fully 49% did so online or via email, and an additional 22% did so both electronically and via the US Postal Service. In contrast, among those who have signed a petition more than half signed a paper petition only.

Americans engage in a range of civic communications, using online and offline methods

In the past twelve months 32% of Americans have signed a petition; 30% have contacted a government official; and 10% have sent a letter to the editor. Those who engage in these civic communications do so in a range of ways:

	In person, by phone or by letter only	Online or via email only	Both online and offline	Total online
Among those who sent a letter to the editor	29%	49%	22%	71%
Among those who contacted a government official	40	18	42	60
Among those who signed a petition	54	23	23	46

Pew Internet & American Life Project August 2008 Survey. Margin of error is +/-7% based on those who sent a letter to the editor (n=238), +/-4% based on those who contacted a government official (n=788) and +/-4% based on those who signed a petition (n=746).

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Among those Americans who have done at least one of these activities in the last year, fully 54% did so online—whether by signing an online petition, sending an email to a government official or sending a letter to the editor via email—while 81% did so offline.

Interestingly, the method citizens use to contact government officials appears to have little relationship to whether or not they receive a response, or whether they are satisfied with the result of their communication. Among those who contacted a government official in person, by phone, or by letter, 67% said they received a response to their query, a rate little different from the 64% who received a response after sending a government official an email.

Similarly, 66% of individuals who contacted a government official by phone, letter or in person were satisfied with the response they received, once again little different from the

63% who were satisfied with the response to their email communication.

Today's wired citizens are offered a range of other avenues for civic involvement. With the rise of the blogosphere, social networking sites and other online tools, interested citizens can now take part in the online community of political and civic activists by posting their own commentary on social issues online. Indeed, 15% of internet users (representing 11% of all adults) have gone online to add to the political discussion in this way. One in eight internet users (12%) have posted comments on a website or blog about a political or social issue, 3% have posted pictures, 2% have posted video content and 4% have posted political content for their friends to read on an online social network. In addition, 31% of bloggers have used their blog to explore political or social issues. Since 13% of internet users maintain an online journal or blog, that means that 4% of internet users have blogged about political or social issues.

In addition to the possibilities for posting content on blogs and other websites, social networking sites have also become fertile ground for engagement with the political process. As of August 2008, 33% of internet users had a profile on a social networking site and 31% of these social network site members had engaged in activities with a civic or political focus (such as joining a political cause, or getting campaign or candidate information). That works out to 10% of all internet users who used a social networking site for some form of political or civic engagement.

Taking these two activities (posting content online and engaging politically on a social networking site) together, fully 19% of all internet users can be considered members of the online "participatory class".

The online participatory class

The proportion of internet users who have posted political or social content using digital tools

Post comments about a political or social issue	12%
Get political info on a social networking site	8
Write about political or social issues in your own blog	4
Start/join a political group or cause on a social networking site	4
Friend a candidate on a social networking site	4
Post political news on a social networking site	4
Post pictures online about a political or social issue	3
Post video online about a political or social issue	2
Did any of these	**19**

Source: Pew internet & American Life Project August 2008 Survey. Margin of error is +/-3% based on internet users (n=1,655).

Pew **Internet**
Pew Internet & American Life Project

As we shall see, the nature of this online activism differs in some important respects from the other civic or political activities discussed in this report.

Mobilization: 40% of email users received requests by email to take part in a political activity in 2008, and an additional one in ten used email to ask others to get involved in politics.

In 2008, Americans were frequently asked -- and, in turn, asked others -- to take part in political activities. Two in five adults received at least occasional requests to take part politically via email, telephone, or letter, while an additional 25% were asked to do so in person. Although very few (just 3%) sent letters asking others to take part politically, roughly one in ten sent emails or made phone calls asking others to get involved, and 15% did so in person.

How Americans communicate about getting involved with politics

The proportion of adults who sent/received requests to get involved in a political activity

	Received request to get involved politically via	Made request for others to get involved politically via
	%	%
Email (among email users)	40	11
Phone call	40	12
Letter	41	3
In person	25	15

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project August 2008 Survey. Margin of error is +/-3% based on email users (n=1,580). For all other forms of political communication, margin of error is +/-2% based on all adults (n=2,251)

Pew Internet
Pew Internet & American Life Project

For a small share of the public, email functioned in 2008 as a key tool for *daily* political communication and mobilization. Five percent of email users say they receive emails on a daily basis asking them to get involved in a political activity, and an additional 7% receive such emails every few days. Far fewer Americans receive phone calls (1% get phone calls on a daily basis, and 3% do so every few days), letters (1% daily, 3% every few days) or in-person requests (1% daily, 1% every few days) to take some form of political action.

As of August 2008, 7% of internet users had gone online to donate to a political candidate or organization. Supporters of the Democratic Party led the way in online giving.

As of August 2008, just under one in five (18%) Americans had contributed money to a

political candidate, party or other political organization or cause. Among these political donors, more than two-thirds (69%) made a contribution solely through offline means— over the phone, by mail, or in person. Three in ten went online to make a political donation—15% donated money *only* over the internet, while an additional 15% donated *both* online and offline. Put another way, 7% of internet users (representing 6% of all adults) made an online political contribution by the summer of 2008.[2]

In our August sample, Democrats and Republicans were equally likely make a political contribution—23% of Republicans and 24% of Democrats did so. However, Democratic donors were far more likely than their Republican counterparts to donate money over the internet. In total, 39% of Democrats who donated money this election cycle did so online, compared to 18% of Republicans. Indeed, fully 21% of Democrats who donated money this election cycle did so *only* online. Just 4% of Republican donors relied exclusively on the internet to make political contributions.

Among political donors, Democrats and Independents are more likely than Republicans to make an online contribution

As of August 2008, 18% of all Americans had made a political contribution in the last 12 months.

	Among Republican political donors	Among Democratic political donors	Among politically independent political donors
Offline only	81%	62%	63%
On the internet only	4	21	20
Online and offline	14	18	15
Total donated online	**18%**	**39%**	**35%**

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project August 2008 Survey. For those who made a political contribution in the previous twelve months, margin of error is +/-8% among Republicans (n=168), +/-7% among Democrats (n=205) and +/-10% among Independents (n=108).

Pew **Internet**
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Compared to political donors, charitable donors are less likely to go online to make their contributions, but charitable donors are more likely to make a large contribution over the internet.

Fully 80% of all Americans have made a contribution to a political, religious, or charitable organization in the past year, with religious and charitable giving being particularly widespread. Within the last twelve months, six in ten Americans (59%) contributed money, property or other items to a church, synagogue, mosque or other place of worship while two-thirds (67%) contributed to a charity or non-profit organization *other than* their place of worship.

Compared to political donations, donations to non-profit and charitable organizations

(excluding places of worship) are far more likely to take place offline. Among those who contributed to a non-profit or charitable organization in the past year, just 12% did so online (In comparison, 30% of political donors gave money online.) Still, because there are a large number of charitable donors within the population, this means that fully 11% of internet users (representing 9% of all adults) went online to donate money to a non-profit or charitable organization in the past year.

While much was made in this election cycle of the phenomenon of the "small online donor," online and offline political contributors in our survey were equally likely to have contributed small amounts of money to a political party or candidate or any other political organization or cause. Among those who made at least one political contribution online, 35% contributed a total of $50 or less while 26% contributed between $50 and $100. This is nearly identical to the rates for those who made an offline political donation: within this group, 35% donated less than $50, and 27% donated between $50 and $100.

Although online and offline political donors do not differ significantly at the low end of the contribution scale, larger political contributions are confined primarily to the offline world. Among political donors who gave money online, just 3% said they had contributed more than $500 online in the past year. By contrast, 8% of those who had donated money to a candidate or campaign offline said they had contributed in excess of $500 in the preceding year.

This tendency for large political donations to occur offline is especially interesting when compared to donations to non-profit institutions or charitable causes. Those who make charitable donations are less likely one the whole to make online donations than are political donors. Nevertheless, in contrast to political donors, who are less likely to make a large contribution if they are contributing on the internet, charitable contributors are equally likely to make large contributions regardless of whether they are donating online or offline. Among those who made charitable donations online about one in six (17%) contributed more than $500, and 12% contributed more than $1000. For offline

charitable donors, the analogous figures are nearly identical—18% of offline charitable donors contributed more than $500 and 10% contributed in excess of $1000. For whatever reason, the tendency of political donors to make large contributions offline is not apparent when it comes to charitable giving.

Compared with political donations, large charitable donations are more likely to occur online

As of August 2008, 18% of all Americans had made a political donation in the preceding twelve months and 59% had contributed to a non-profit or charitable organization. The following are the amounts that each group donated both online and offline.

	Total amount donated online (among online donors)	Total amount donated offline (among offline donors)
	%	%
Political donations		
Less than $100	61	62
$101-$500	29	21
$501-$1,000	2	4
More than $1,000	1	4
Don't know / Refuse	7	9
Charitable donations		
Less than $100	37	38
$101-$500	37	35
$501-$1,000	6	7
More than $1,000	12	10
Don't know / Refuse	9	10

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project August 2008 Survey. Margin of error is +/-9% for online political donors (n=130), +/-5% for offline political donors (n=429), +/-8% for online charitable donors (n=193) and +/-3% for offline charitable donors (n=1,559).

Pew Internet
Pew Internet & American Life Project

[1] Because this survey was conducted prior to the 2008 presidential elections, the most basic form of civic engagement—voting—is absent from the list of activities we measured for this study.

[2] In our post-election survey conducted later that year in November 2008, we found that 9% of internet users had made a political contribution over the internet.

The Demographics of Online and Offline Political Participation

Introduction

Traditional offline political participation has long been the domain of certain groups: in particular, those with high levels of income and education. As opportunities for political activity have expanded with the internet, we wished to know whether these possibilities for online political engagement have potential to change that pattern. Does the internet bring in new kinds of activists by making it easier to take part politically, or does online engagement simply mirror the stratification seen in traditional offline civic activities?

To explore this question, we constructed separate scales measuring political participation on and off the internet, each containing five political activities that can be conducted either online or offline. These measures were:

Offline Activities	**Online Activities**
• Contact a government official in person, by phone or by letter	• Send an email to a government official
• Sign a paper petition	• Sign a petition online
• Send a letter to the editor through the US Postal Service	• Email a letter to the editor
• Make a political contribution in person, by phone or through the mail	• Make a political contribution on the internet
• Communicate with a civic/political group by face-to-face meetings, print letter or newsletter, or telephone	• Communicate with a civic/political group by messaging, instant messaging, using the grou using a social networking site

Respondents were classified as "active offline" or "active online" if they took part in two or more of the above activities during the preceding year. In all, 27% of American adults have taken part in two or more offline activities, while 18% (representing 24% of internet users) have engaged in two or more activities online. Interestingly, while there is a good deal of overlap between these two groups, those who are active online are more likely also to be active offline than vice versa: fully 73% of online activists are also active offline, compared to the 48% of offline activists who are also active online.

In addition to analyzing overall involvement along these two dimensions, we also considered the activities individually. In conducting this analysis, we sought to address the following questions:

- Is online political participation characterized by higher levels of activity by the well-educated and the affluent that have long been observed for offline political activities?
- To what extent is political engagement on blogs or social networking sites characterized by the same kinds of socio-economic effects as offline political engagement?
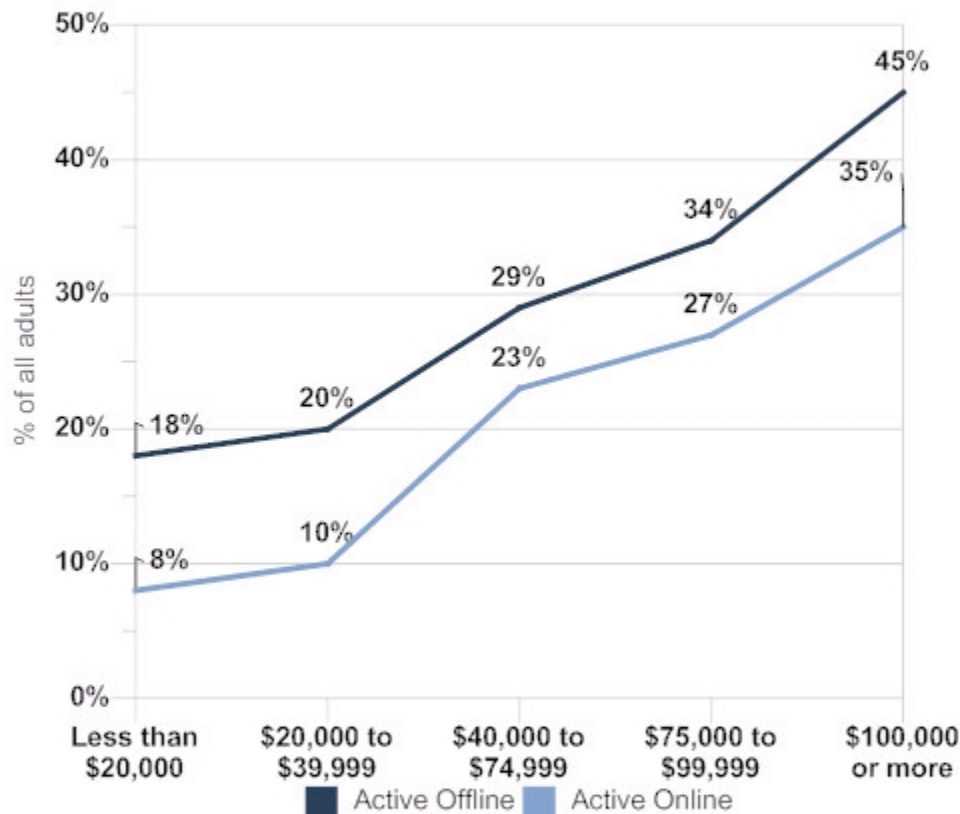
Online political activities are marked by the same high levels of stratification by income and education as their offline counterparts.

Nearly all traditional forms of civic activity are stratified by socio-economic status. That is, as income and educational levels increase, so do community involvement, political activism, and other types of civic engagement. This stratification holds not only for offline political acts but also for political participation online. One in five (18%) of those in the lowest income category (who earn less than $20,000 per year) take part in two or more offline activities, compared to 45% of those earning $100,000 or more per year, a difference of 27 percentage points. For online acts the difference between these two income groups is identical: 8% of those in the lowest income category as opposed to 35%

for those in the highest income group.

Political activity is highly correlated with income, whether that activity takes place online or offline

The proportion of adults within each income category who have participated in two or more online/offline political activities within the last twelve months.

Pew internet & American Life Project August 2008 Survey. Political activities include contacting a government official (via email or in person, by phone/letter); signing a petition (online or on paper); sending a letter to the editor (via email or US Postal Service); making a political contribution (online or offline); and communicating with a civic/political group (using digital tools or non-digital tools).

Pew **Internet**
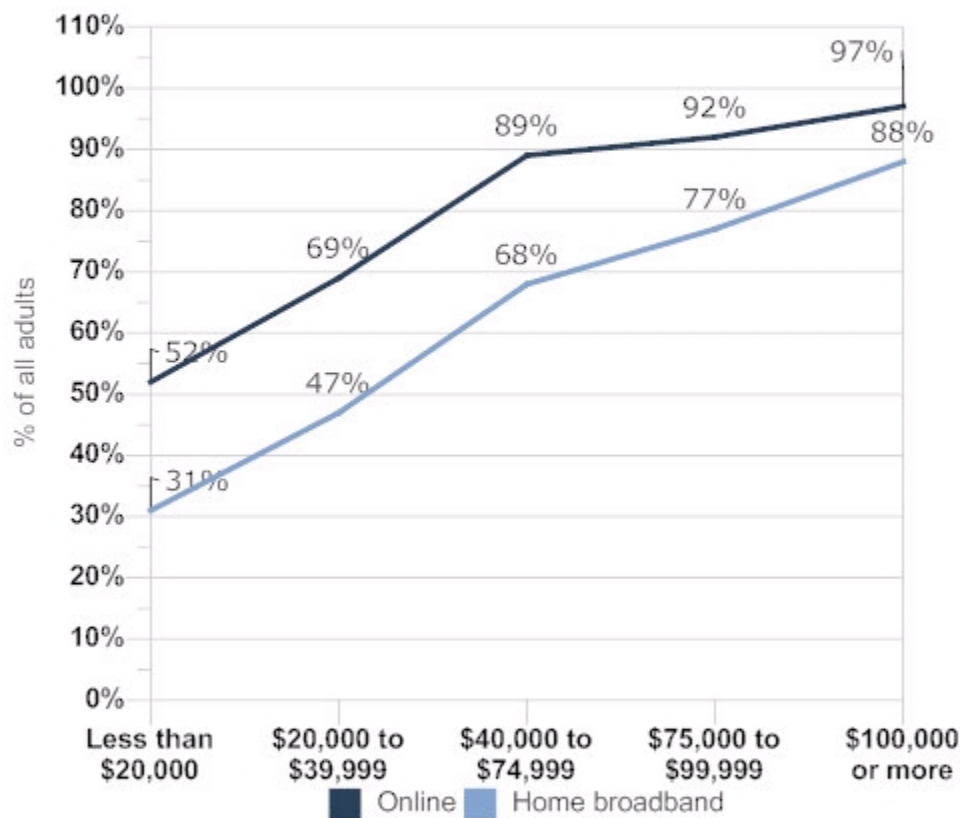Pew Internet & American Life Project

To be sure, access to the internet is part of the story. Those with higher levels of income are much more likely than those at lower levels of income both to use the internet and

to have high-speed internet access at home. Moving from the lowest income category to the highest, internet usage rates rise from roughly 50% to more than 90%, and home broadband adoption rises from roughly one in three to nearly nine in ten. Thus, at least one factor responsible for lower levels of online political activity among those at the lower end of the income spectrum is lack of internet access.

Internet and home broadband use by annual household income

The proportion of adults within each income category who go online and have a high-speed internet connection at home.
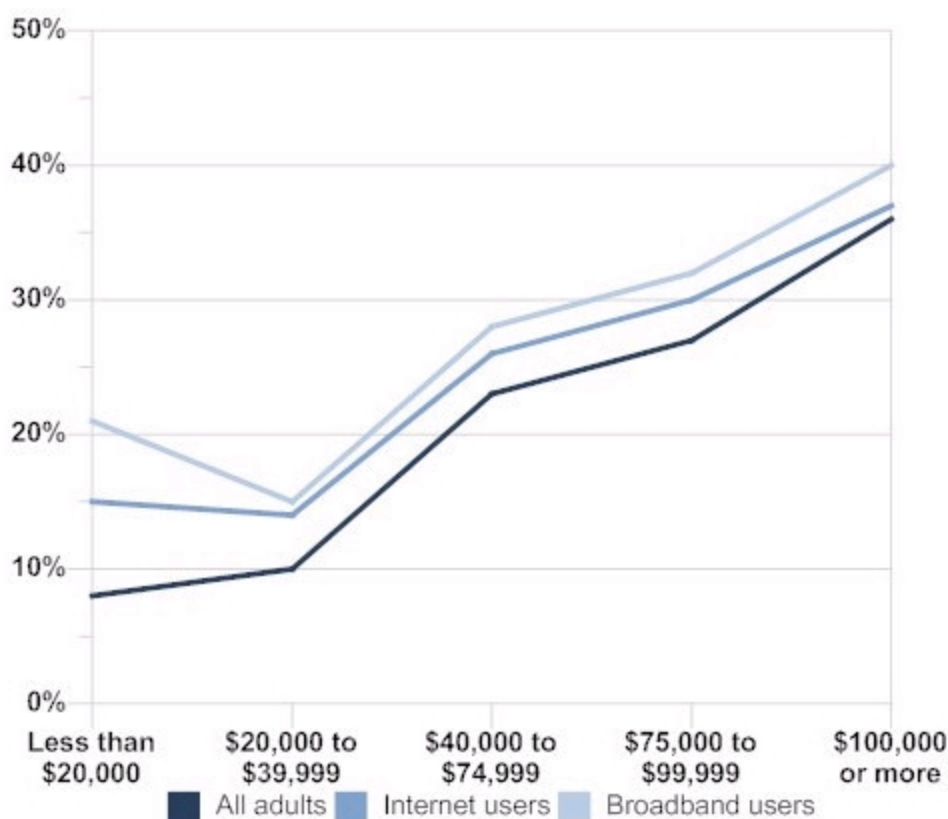

Pew internet & American Life Project August 2008 Survey. Margin of error is +/-2% based on all adults (n=2,251)

Pew Internet
Pew Internet & American Life Project

Lack of internet access is a partial, but not a full, explanation for the lesser levels of online political activity among those with low levels of income. When we consider three groups—all adults, internet users, and those have a home broadband connection—separately, we find that for all groups there is a strong relationship between online internet political activity and income.

Income stratification in online political participation

The proportion of adults who have engaged in two or more online political activities in the past year, by annual household income and internet usage type

Pew internet & American Life Project August 2008 Survey. "Online civic activities" include donating money online; sending an email to a government official; signing an online petition; emailing a letter to the editor; or using digital tools to communicate with a political or civic group.

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A similar pattern holds for education as well. Those with higher levels of education (some college experience or a college degree) are much more likely to take part politically than are those with a high school diploma or less -- regardless of whether that political activity occurs online or offline. Even among who use the internet, college experience is strongly associated with participation in online political activities.

In short, income and education have the same relationship to online and offline political activity, and there is no evidence that Web-based political participation fundamentally alters the long-established association between offline political participation and these socio-economic factors.

Online and offline civic engagement by different demographic groups

The proportion of adults within each category who have taken part in 2 or more civic/political activities in the past 12 months (through offline or online means)

	Active Offline	Active Online (among all adults)	Active Online (among internet users)
Total	27%	18%	24%
Gender			
Male	29	18	24
Female	26	18	25
Age			
18-24	18	16	18
25-34	26	20	23
35-44	30	21	24
45-54	28	21	26
55-64	33	22	30
65+	26	10	27
Race/Ethnicity			
White, non-Hispanic	28	19	26
Black, non-Hispanic	25	13	18
Hispanic (English-speaking)	23	18	23

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project August Tracking Survey, August 2008. Margin of error is +/-2% based on all adults (n=2,251) and +/-3% based on internet users (n=1,655). Respondents were classified as "active offline" or "active offline" if they engaged in two or more of the following activities using traditional or digital technologies: contact a government official; sign a petition; send a letter to the editor; make a political contribution; or communicate with a civic/political group.

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Online and offline civic engagement by different demographic groups

The proportion of adults within each category who have taken part in 2 or more civic/political activities in the past 12 months (through offline or online means)

	Active Offline	Active Online (among all adults)	Active Online (among internet users)
Total	27%	18%	24%
Education			
Less than high school	12	2	n/a
High school grad	18	9	13
Some college	32	23	26
College grad	44	35	37
Annual Household Income			
Less than $20,000	18	8	15
$20,000-$39,999	20	10	14
$40,000-$74,999	29	23	26
$75,000-$99,999	34	27	30
$100,000 or more	45	35	37
Geography			
Urban	25	17	23
Suburban	29	21	26
Rural	27	13	20

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project August Tracking Survey, August 2008. Margin of error is +/-2% based on all adults (n=2,251) and +/-3% based on internet users (n=1,655). Respondents were classified as "active offline" or "active offline" if they engaged in two or more of the following activities using traditional or digital technologies: contact a government official; sign a petition; send a letter to the editor; make a political contribution; or communicate with a civic/political group.

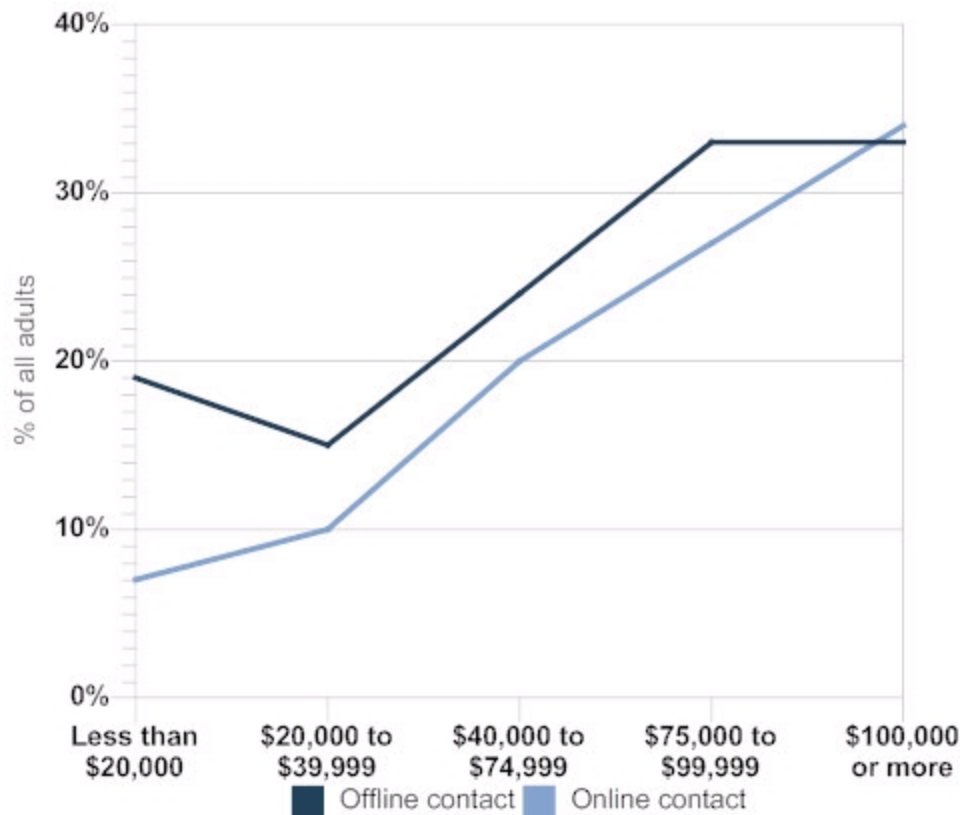**Pew Internet**
Pew Internet & American Life Project

Compared to income and education, the relationship between age and these political activities is somewhat more complex. For offline political participation, young adults (those ages 18-24) are the group that is least likely to take part. In contrast, when it comes to online political activity, for the population as a whole, the participatory deficit

of young adults is less pronounced, and it is seniors who are the least active group. This relationship, however, is largely a function of very high rates of internet use among young adults. When we consider just the internet users within each age cohort, young adults are again the least likely group to engage in political acts online, and the relatively small group of internet users who are 65 and over are quite active. In other words, the underrepresentation of the young with respect to political participation over the internet is related to their greater likelihood to be internet users and not necessarily to any innate propensity to use the internet politically once online.

The patterns are similar for specific activities—for instance, contacting a government official directly about an important issue. There is a high correlation with income for both online and offline methods of contacting government officials. Indeed, the difference between the highest and lowest income groups is actually higher for contacting a government official by email than it is for contacting a government official by phone or by letter (27 percentage points for online contact, compared to 14 percentage points for offline contact).

Online and Offline government contact by income

The proportion of all adults within each income range who contacted a government official, either offline (by phone, by letter, or in person) or online (by email).
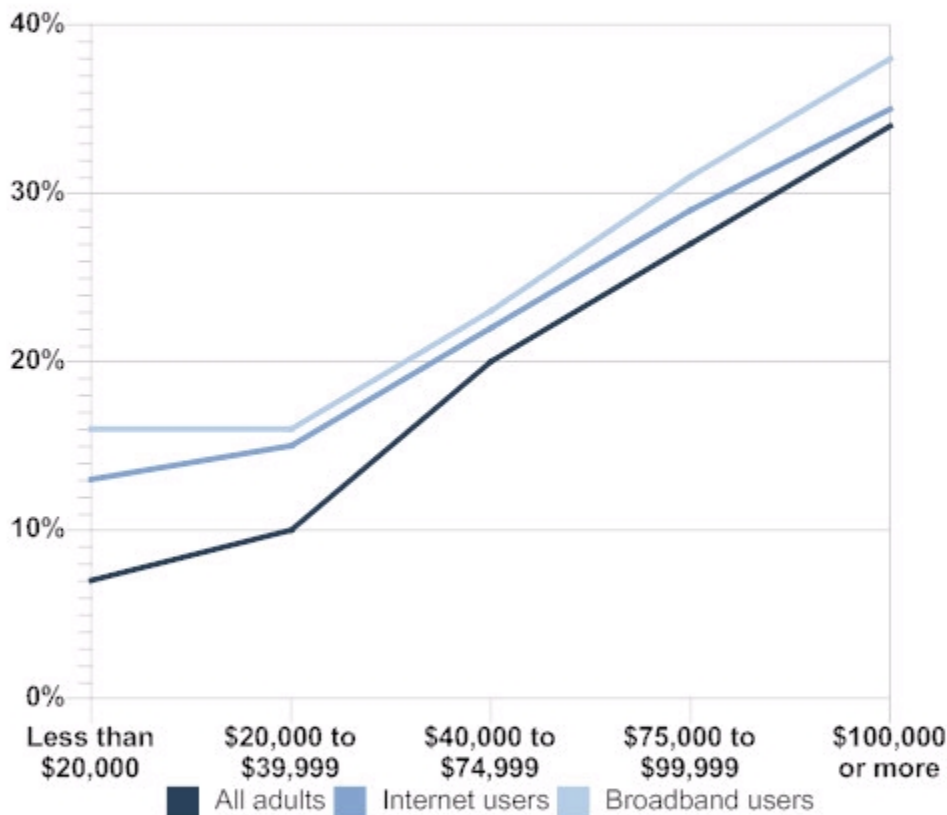

Pew internet & American Life Project August 2008 Survey. Margin of error is +/-2% based on all adults (n=2,251)

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As with the broader measure of online political participation discussed earlier, low rates of internet access among lower-income Americans tell part, but only part, of the story. Even when we focus on those respondents who go online or have a high-speed connection at home, those at the high end of the income scale are still much more likely than those at the bottom to contact a government official via email.

Online government contact by income and connection type

The proportion within each income range who contacted a government official by email

Pew internet & American Life Project August 2008 Survey.

Pew Internet
Pew Internet & American Life Project

When we look at the relationship of age and education to contacting a government official, we see patterns similar to what we saw earlier for overall online and offline civic involvement. Education is highly correlated with both online and offline government contact -- even among internet users. With respect to age, the relative likelihood of young adults to email a government official is largely a function of their high rates of

internet use: within the online population, those aged 65 and older are roughly three times more likely to contact a government official via email as are those aged 18 to 24 (35% vs. 13%).

Online and offline government contact by different demographic groups

The proportion of adults in each group who contacted a government official either offline (in person, by phone or by letter) or online via email in the past 12 months

	Contacted offline	Contacted via email (among all adults)	Contacted via email (among email users)
Total	24%	18%	25%
Gender			
Male	27	19	27
Female	22	17	23
Age			
18-24	13	11	13
25-34	20	15	18
35-44	24	19	23
45-54	25	21	28
55-64	35	26	38
65+	26	13	35
Race/Ethnicity			
White, non-Hispanic	26	20	28
Black, non-Hispanic	20	11	18
Hispanic (English-speaking)	17	12	17

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project August Tracking Survey, August 2008. Margin of error is +/-2% based on all adults (n=2,251) and +/-3% based on email users (n=1,580). Margin of error for subgroups is higher. n/a indicates sample size is too small to analyze.

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Online and offline government contact by different demographic groups

The proportion of adults in each group who contacted a government official either offline (in person, by phone or by letter) or online via email in the past 12 months

	Contacted offline	Contacted via email (among all adults)	Contacted via email (among email users)
Total	24%	18%	25%
Education			
Less than high school	13	n/a	n/a
High school grad	18	10	16
Some college	30	22	26
College grad	34	33	35
Annual Household Income			
Less than $20,000	19	7	15
$20,000-$39,999	15	10	16
$40,000-$74,999	24	20	23
$75,000-$99,999	33	27	31
$100,000 or more	33	34	35
Geography			
Urban	21	16	23
Suburban	26	21	27
Rural	25	13	22

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project August Tracking Survey, August 2008. Margin of error is +/-2% based on all adults (n=2,251) and +/-3% based on email users (n=1,580). Margin of error for subgroups is higher. n/a indicates sample size is too small to analyze.

Pew **Internet**
Pew Internet & American Life Project

The second individual activity that drew our interest is donating money to a political candidate, party or other political organization. Because it offers the potential to bring new voices into the political system, we were particularly interested in investigating the making small donations online.

As with the other activities we have examined, the likelihood of making political contributions rises steadily with income. Just 9% of those with incomes under $20,000 per year made one or more political contributions in 2008, compared to more than one-third (36%) of those with incomes over $100,000—a difference of 27 percentage points. As might be expected, this difference shrinks as the amount donated decreases. For donations under $100, the difference between the lowest and highest income groups is 11 percentage points. For donations of less than $50 the difference between these two groups is substantially smaller: 5% of those in the lowest income group, compared to 8% of those in the highest, made a small donation of $50 or less.

Interestingly, these differences do not exhibit a great deal of variation for online versus offline donations. The difference between the lowest and highest income categories with respect to making small contributions of no more than $50 is nearly identical for online versus offline donations—2% versus 3%. In other words, the ability to make small donations online does not in and of itself appear to be drawing large numbers of low-income small contributors into the political system. However, it is important to reiterate that this survey was conducted in August, prior to Barack Obama's autumn online fundraising push, and should be interpreted accordingly.

Political donations by income

The proportion of adults within each income category who have made political donations in 2008

	Less than $20,000	$20,000-$39,999	$40,000-$74,999	$75,000-$99,999	$100,000 or more	Difference between $20k and $100k+ income groups
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Have made a donation of any amount						
Total	9	12	18	25	36	+27
Online	3	2	7	7	13	+10
Offline	7	10	15	22	30	+23
Have made donations totaling less than $100						
Total	7	9	12	14	18	+11
Online	2	1	5	4	8	+6
Offline	6	8	11	12	16	+10
Have made donations totaling less than $50						
Total	5	6	6	7	8	+3
Online	2	1	2	2	4	+2
Offline	4	6	6	6	7	+3

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project August 2008 Survey.

Pew **Internet**
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Will Political Engagement on Blogs and Social Networking Sites Change Everything?

Introduction

Thus far we have discussed online political activities for which there is a clear offline counterpart—for example, emailing a government official vs. sending a letter, or donating money online vs. doing so offline. A key finding of this analysis is that the ability to take action online is not necessarily bringing into political activity the kinds of people who do not usually take part. Indeed, to the extent that those with low levels of income or education are less likely to be online in the first place, such differences may even be exacerbated in the internet era.

However, the development of new forms of communication on the internet—like blogs and social networking sites—potentially expands the opportunities for civic engagement. These rapidly developing modes of internet-based expression and communication are very much a work in progress. At this point, we are in a position to pose questions, but not to draw definitive conclusions, about two significant matters. First, in contrast to the activities we have discussed so far, might these new forms of interaction engage new kinds of people, thus offering an avenue for civic involvement to the historically inactive? Second, will these new forms of communication, which often involve large numbers of people on the internet, have the effect of mobilizing people to undertake the kinds of activities, whether offline or on, that have the intent or effect of influencing government action -- either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies? That is, will activities like writing about political issues on a blog or signing up as a friend of a candidate—like old-fashioned political discussions at dinner or at work—lead to political participation?

We looked at these forms of internet-based civic involvement in two ways. The first

focuses on political engagement on social networking sites, and includes anyone who has done at least one of the following on these sites: get candidate or campaign information; start or join a political group or cause; or sign up as a friend of a candidate or campaign. The other measure captures the possibilities for political expression and includes those who have done one or more of the following: post comments on a website or blog about political or social issues; post pictures or video online about a political or social issue; write about political or social issues on their own blog; or post political content for others to read on a social networking site.

These forms of online political engagement are, quite simply, the domain of the young.

What is most unambiguous is that posting material about political or social issues on the Web and using social networking sites politically are forms of online engagement that are dominated by the young—especially the youngest adults. Recall that, when it comes to the online political activities discussed earlier, within the population as a whole, the youngest adults (those 18 to 24) are less likely than other age groups to take part in online political activities and more likely to do so than those aged 65 and over. This pattern is largely a function of the extraordinarily high rates of internet use by young adults—90% of whom go online. When we look just at internet users, 18-to-24 year olds are actually the least likely of all age groups to take part in such online political acts as emailing a public official or making an online political donation.

In contrast, civic involvement on social network sites and blogs exhibits a much different pattern. Whether we are looking at the population as a whole or only at those who are online, these modes of online civic engagement decline steadily with age—with the youngest adults much more likely than their elders either to make political use of social networking sites or to post material about political or social issues. Among internet users, just 18% of 18-to-24 year olds engage in two or more acts of political participation online based on the activities identified in the previous chapter, but fully 33% make

political use of social networking sites, and 34% post political material on the Web.

Put another way, those under age 35 represent 28% of the respondents in our survey but make up fully 72% of those who make political use of social networking sites, and 55% of those who post comments or visual material about politics on the Web. The youngest members of this group—those under age 25—constitute just 10% of our survey respondents but make up 40% of those who make political use of social networking sites and 29% of those who post comments or visual material about politics online.

Young adults are more likely to engage in "new" forms of online civic engagement

The proportion within each age group who take part in the following activities

	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+	Difference between 65+ age group and 18-24 age group
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Two or more offline political activities	18	26	30	28	33	26	+8
Among all adults							
Two or more online political activities	16	20	21	21	22	10	-6
Make political use of social network sites	29	15	5	3	3	1	-28
Post political content online	30	17	11	7	7	3	-27
Among internet users							
Two or more online political activities	18	23	24	26	30	27	+9
Make political use of social network sites	33	17	6	4	4	2	-31
Post political content online	34	19	12	9	10	8	-26
Among home broadband users							
Two or more online political activities	21	25	29	31	35	35	+14
Make political use of social network sites	35	18	7	5	5	4	-31
Post political content online	40	21	14	9	10	9	-31

Pew Internet & American Life Project August 2008 Survey. Respondents in the 2+ online/offline activities category include who did two or more of the following: contacting a government official (via email or via phone/letter; signing a petition (online or on paper); sending a letter to the editor (via email or US Postal Service); making a political contribution (online or offline); and communicating with a civic/political group (using digital tools or non-digital tools). Margin of error is +/-2% based on all adults (n=2,251), +/-3% based on internet users (n=1,655) and +/-3% based on home broadband users (n=1,246). Margin of error for subgroups is higher

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It is noteworthy that neither political involvement on social networking sites nor posting material about political or social issues on the Web is strongly associated with socio-economic status. For the scale of online political activity we presented earlier, the difference between the lowest and highest income groups was 27%. For political use of social networking sites on the other hand, the difference is 3% and, for posting political content online, the difference is 5%.

The income gap is reduced for those who take part in "new" civic activities

The proportion within each income group who take part in the following activities

	Less than $20,000	$20,000 -$39,999	$40,000 -$74,999	$75,000 -$99,999	$100,000 or more	Difference between under $20k and $100+ groups
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Two or more offline political activities	18	20	29	34	45	+27
Among all adults						
Two or more online political activities	8	10	23	27	35	+27
Make political use of social network sites	6	6	11	9	9	+3
Post political content online	9	9	14	14	14	+5
Among internet users						
Two or more online political activities	15	14	26	30	37	+22
Make political use of social network sites	11	9	12	10	9	-2
Post political content online	17	13	16	16	15	-2
Among home broadband users						
Two or more online political activities	21	15	28	32	40	+19
Make political use of social network sites	15	11	15	12	10	-5
Post political content online	22	16	19	18	16	-6

Pew Internet & American Life Project August 2008 Survey. Respondents in the 2+ online/offline activities category include who did two or more of the following: contacting a government official (via email or via phone/letter; signing a petition (online or on paper); sending a letter to the editor (via email or US Postal Service); making a political contribution (online or offline); and communicating with a civic/political group (using digital tools or non-digital tools). Margin of error is +/-2% based on all adults (n=2,251), +/-3% based on internet users (n=1,655) and +/-3% based on home broadband users (n=1,246). Margin of error for subgroups is higher

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These forms of civic engagement are not simply drawing a more diverse mix of participants in terms of income—they are also more balanced in terms of education as well. The difference between college graduates and those with no college experience is 28 percentage points for both of the online and offline scales of political activity we discussed earlier. By contrast, the difference between these groups when it comes to engaging politically on social networking sites or posting political material is just 7 percentage points.

The education gap is reduced for those who take part in "new" civic activities

The proportion within each group who take part in the following activities

	High school grad or less	Some college	College grad	Difference between college grads and high school or less
	%	%	%	%
Two or more offline political activities	16	32	44	+28
Among all adults				
Two or more online political activities	7	23	35	+28
Make political use of social network sites	5	10	11	+6
Post political content online	8	12	15	+7
Among internet users				
Two or more online political activities	12	26	37	+25
Make political use of social network sites	9	11	11	+2
Post political content online	14	13	16	+2
Among home broadband users				
Two or more online political activities	13	31	40	+27
Make political use of social network sites	11	14	12	+1
Post political content online	17	17	17	0

Pew Internet & American Life Project August 2008 Survey. Respondents in the 2+ online/offline activities category include who did two or more of the following: contacting a government official (via email or via phone/letter; signing a petition (online or on paper); sending a letter to the editor (via email or US Postal Service); making a political contribution (online or offline); and communicating with a civic/political group (using digital tools or non-digital tools). Margin of error is +/-2% based on all adults (n=2,251), +/-3% based on internet users (n=1,655) and +/-3% based on home broadband users (n=1,246). Margin of error for subgroups is higher

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However, we must be cautious before concluding that these rapidly evolving, internet-based forms of political engagement will disrupt the long-standing association between education or income and various forms of political involvement. Assessing the strength of the relationship between socio-economic status and either political involvement on

social networking sites or posting material about political or social issues on the Web is complicated by the fact that these forms of engagement are the province of the youngest citizens—for whom measuring socio-economic status (SES) is problematic. Because many of them are still in school or are just setting out in the work force, the 18-to-24 year olds who constitute such a disproportionate share of those who engage in these forms of internet use have not yet come to rest in terms of level of income or education and are, in fact, the least affluent and least well-educated group in the survey. Thirty-four percent are in the lowest income category, and 62% have not graduated from high school. The analogous figures for their immediate elders, those who are 25 to 34, are markedly different: 16% and 36% respectively. And, unlike the elderly, who also have relatively low levels of income and education, and the youngest adults are likely to see improvements in their educational attainment and income in the near future.

Unfortunately the relatively small number of 18-24 year olds in our survey prevents us from conducting a detailed analysis of this subgroup. However, we can gain some insight into the relationship among age, socio-economic status and these forms of internet-based engagement by isolating those under the age of 30 and comparing different subgroups within this cohort.

Considering those under thirty, we see familiar patterns for the association between online political activity and both education and income. Furthermore, when it comes to political engagement on social networking sites or posting political content online, similar patterns emerge for income but not for education. What is most striking, however, is the strong relationship between being a student and these measures of online political engagement. Among those under thirty, students are much more likely than those who are not in school both to make political use of a social networking site and to post political material online. Thirty-nine percent of the students, but only 16% of the non-students, make political use of social networking sites. The analogous figures for posting political information online are 39% and 15% respectively.

Focus on 18-29 year olds

The proportion of 18-29 year olds within each category that engage in the following civic/political activities

Household income	Less than $40k (n=87)	$40k or more (n=95)
Two or more online political activities	7%	26%^
Make political use of social network sites	20	31
Post political content online	19	30
Educational attainment	**High school degree or less (n=111)**	**Some college or college grad (n=104)**
Two or more online political activities	6%	26%^
Make political use of social network sites	26	25
Post political content online	31	30
Student status	**Not currently in school (n=129)**	**Currently enrolled (n=87)**
Two or more online political activities	11%	22%^
Make political use of social network sites	16	39^
Post political content online	15	39^

Pew Internet & American Life Project August 2008 Survey. Respondents in the 2+ online/offline activities category include who did two or more of the following: contacting a government official (via email or via phone/letter; signing a petition (online or on paper); sending a letter to the editor (via email or US Postal Service); making a political contribution (online or offline); and communicating with a civic/political group (using digital tools or non-digital tools). ^Indicates statistically significant difference between columns

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Hence, we must watch carefully to see whether these new modes of online political engagement will act as a trip wire interrupting the usual patterns of stratification of political involvement by income and education. We will have to see whether the fascinating patterns that have emerged in this survey—one that was conducted during a particular and in many ways atypical presidential campaign—will recur though time. What is more, we will have to see whether the internet continues to evolve politically, offering still more possibilities for political engagement and participation.

Will the students who have embraced the political possibilities of the internet so much more fully than their elders continue to act as early political adopters or will they be

locked into their youthful technological experiences only to be trumped by a succeeding generation in the vanguard of the political uses of the Web? Furthermore, will these forms of internet-based political engagement which entail opportunities for political expression and communication among large numbers of dispersed people foster the forms of political participation that involve attempts to influence political outcomes?

Methodology and Acknowledgements

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One of the nation's most renowned political scientists, Professor Verba is an award-winning author of over twenty books and numerous articles on American and comparative government. Much of his writing is on the role of citizen engagement and activism in a democracy, with an emphasis on issues of equality in American political, social, and economic life. He has been President of the American Political Science Association, and won the Association's Kammerer Award for the best book on American politics and its Woodrow Wilson award for the best book in political science.

He is a member of the National Academy of Sciences (where he has chaired the Social and Political Science Section and currently chairs the Committee on Human Rights), the American Philosophical Society, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Among his awards are the James Madison Prize of the American Political Science Association, the Association's highest award, given every three years for a career contribution to political science, the Skytte Award from Upsalla University in Sweden, the major international award for significant contributions to political science world wide, the Dinerstein Prize from the World Association of Public Opinion Research for contributions to the methodology and study of public opinion, and the Warren Miller Prize for contributions to the study of elections and public opinion.

Professor Verba served as Director of the Harvard University Library for 24 years. As Director of the University Library, Professor Verba assumed a leadership position in a range of library initiatives both nationally and here at Harvard. He was a founding member of the Commission on Preservation and Access and served on the Board of its parent organization, the Council on Library and Information Resources. He has been a member of the Higher Education Advisory Committee of OCLC and has served on the Visiting Committee to the Stanford University Library. He testified before Congress on behalf of the library and humanities communities in support of the National

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Brady has also authored numerous articles on political participation, political methodology, the dynamics of public opinion, and other topics. He was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences in 2003 and a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 2006.

Methodology

This report is based on the findings of a daily tracking survey on Americans' use of the Internet. The results in this report are based on data from telephone interviews conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International between August 12 to August 31, 2008, among a sample of 2,251 adults, 18 and older. For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects is plus or minus 2.4 percentage points. For results based Internet users (n=1,655), the margin of sampling error is plus or minus 2.8 percentage points. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting telephone surveys may introduce some error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

The sample for this survey is a random digit sample of telephone numbers selected from telephone exchanges in the continental United States. The random digit aspect of the sample is used to avoid "listing" bias and provides representation of both listed and unlisted numbers (including not-yet-listed numbers). The design of the sample achieves this representation by random generation of the last two digits of telephone numbers selected on the basis of their area code, telephone exchange, and bank number.

New sample was released daily and was kept in the field for at least five days. The sample was released in replicates, which are representative subsamples of the larger population. This ensures that complete call procedures were followed for the entire sample. At least 10 attempts were made to complete an interview at sampled households. The calls were staggered over times of day and days of the week to maximize the chances of making contact with a potential respondent. Each household received at least one daytime call in an attempt to find someone at home. In each contacted household, interviewers asked to speak with the youngest male currently at home. If no male was available, interviewers asked to speak with the youngest female at home. This systematic respondent selection technique has been shown to produce samples that closely mirror the population in terms of age and gender. All interviews completed on any given day were considered to be the final sample for that day.

Non-response in telephone interviews produces some known biases in survey-derived estimates because participation tends to vary for different subgroups of the population, and these subgroups are likely to vary also on questions of substantive interest. In order to compensate for these known biases, the sample data are weighted in analysis. The demographic weighting parameters are derived from a special analysis of the most recently available Census Bureau's March 2007 Annual Social and Economic Supplement. This analysis produces population parameters for the demographic characteristics of adults age 18 or older, living in continental US households. These parameters are then compared with the sample characteristics to construct sample weights. The weights are derived using an iterative technique that simultaneously balances the distribution of all weighting parameters.

Following is the full disposition of all sampled telephone numbers:

Table 1: Sample Disposition

28,295	**Total Numbers Dialed**
1,504	Business/Government
1,477	Computer/ Fax
7	Cell phone
11,111	Other Not-Working
2,374	Additional projected NW
11,822	Working numbers
41.80%	**Working Rate**
723	No Answer
69	Busy
1,486	Answering Machine
111	Other Non-Contacts
9,434	Contacted numbers
79.80%	**Contact Rate**
497	Callbacks
6,038	Refusal 1 - Refusal before eligibility status known
2,899	Cooperating numbers
30.70%	**Cooperation Rate**
352	Language Barrier
2,547	Eligible numbers
87.90%	**Eligibility Rate**
296	Incomplete
2,251	Complete
88.40%	**Completion Rate**
21.70%	**Response Rate**

PSRAI calculates a response rate as the product of three individual rates: the contact rate, the cooperation rate, and the completion rate. Of the residential numbers in the sample, 80 percent were contacted by an interviewer and 31 percent agreed to participate in the survey. Eighty-eight percent were found eligible for the interview. Furthermore, 88 percent of eligible respondents completed the interview. Therefore, the final response rate is 22 percent.