

Online Political Participation and Voting In the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election: Mobilizing,
Reinforcing, or Both?

Kenneth M. Winneg, Ph.D.
Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania
202 S. 36th Street
Philadelphia, PA
kwinneg@asc.upenn.edu

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Abstract

Studies have shown that political participation is biased toward those who are better educated, more affluent, and in greater possession of civic skills. Scholars have pointed to the Internet as a possible remedy for the participation disparity for its potential to lower barriers to those who lack the time, money, and/or necessary civic skills. Research has been mixed on whether the Internet mobilizes new or formerly marginalized participants to the electoral process, simply reinforces those active in that process already, or does both. Because of the greater role played by new media and the Internet in the 2008 U.S. presidential election, the ability to test the mobilization and reinforcement hypothesis is much greater than in previous election cycles.

This research analyzed the post-election telephone panel of the National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) to determine 1) whether the Internet mobilizes new political participants into the political process, reinforces those already engaged or likely to be engaged, or does both, and 2) whether participating online is more likely to predict voting than participating offline. Results indicate that while the Internet did mobilize people to participate in pre-election campaign activities, those engaged in more traditional offline participation activities were more likely to vote. Additionally, data show that the Internet both mobilizes new participants and reinforces those most likely to be engaged.

Overview

The Internet's role in encouraging political participation is a continuing debate among scholars, and is part of the larger debate of who participates in general. Although most scholars grant that participation is at the core of a democratic society, research by Verba and Nie (1972) and others (e.g., Campbell et al., 1960. Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Verba et al., 1995, Conway, 2000) show that some segments of society are more likely than others to participate, specifically the better educated and affluent, and those in greater possession of civic skills.¹

With the rise of the Internet in the mid-1990s, its potential role for opening up the process of political participation to a wider and more diverse range of citizens has drawn much speculation:

The Internet could have a significant impact on broadening political participation by lowering the cost of involvement, creating new mechanisms of organizing groups and opening up new channels of information that bypass traditional media gatekeepers. (Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006, p. 299)

Contrary to these optimistic predictions,² others argue that the Internet is unlikely to bring in those who have not traditionally participated. For example, Margolis and Resnick (2000) argue that cyberspace is not the utopian democratic meeting ground some have envisioned:

¹ The type of participation that I focus on in this research relates directly to engaging in electoral process activities leading up to, and including voting, the ultimate act of political participation. The activities leading up to voting, including persuading, discussing, campaign volunteering, contributing are as important in bringing the more disadvantaged and newer participants into the democratic process.

² In the grand scheme of communication, the Internet has been characterized by some as having the potential to bring people together to form communities of either common interests or diverse backgrounds and viewpoints (Rheingold, 1995). Were the Internet to do so, it might expand the public sphere as envisioned by Habermas (1989). This utopian view is very deterministic, assuming that the Internet technology is an unassailable democratic force

It will not empower the powerless because those who are powerful outside of cyberspace are taking those advantages with them in the Internet. Direct democracy will not happen nor is it desired. Representative democracy is more realistic. Most people neither have the time, inclination, nor aptitude to be aware of the myriad of policy issues. Public policy issues are too complicated and citizens too distracted to devote the time and effort to public affairs that such a society would require. (p. 205)

Taking a related view, Bimber and Davis (2003) argue that while the Internet is indispensable for campaigns and the electoral process, its campaign messages are aimed primarily at niche audiences which actively seek the online tools relevant to their political interests. As more people become connected to the Internet, the effects will become even smaller as the Internet audience would change from one that is more purposive and interested to one that is more like a mass audience. Unlike television viewers, the Internet users are not a captive audience and cannot do as television and newspapers do and “saturate a large audience with messages that interrupt citizens’ focus and direct it toward the campaign and, more specifically, a candidate’s message” (Bimber and Davis, 2003, p. 147). Rather, the interactive nature of the medium allows them to become both direct and indirect participants in the political process.

Generally, the likely impact of the Internet on the amount and diversity of political participation has created two camps: Mobilization theorists and Reinforcement theorists. Mobilization theorists believe the Internet will enfranchise those who have been traditionally marginalized by bringing them into the political process and thereby enhancing democracy. In

(Coleman, 2006). However, some like Putnam (2000) say the Internet will decrease the public sphere and decrease rather than increase participation.

Weare's (2002) summary of mobilization and reinforcement, he asserts that such theorists predict that the "the open, decentralized and interactive nature of Internet communications will enfranchise marginalized sectors of the electorate by making political information more easily accessible and more germane to their concerns and improve the openness of government by equalizing access to information" (Weare, 2002, p. 679). Lower communications and networking costs will make it easier for citizens to enter the political process and perform such activities as learning candidate stands on issues, contacting elective officials, or organizing networks with others on local issues (Norris, 2001; DiGennaro and Dutton, 2006).

According to summaries by Weare (2002) and Norris (2001), reinforcement theory argues that while the Internet may expand and decentralize communication patterns, making information accessible to more people, it will continue to primarily benefit those who are already participants, namely "elites" who have greater access to the technology and who are already highly politically interested (e.g., Bimber and Davis, 2003). The technology offers just another resource for the most motivated, active, and informed members of society (Norris, 2001), at best allowing existing biases in who participates to remain, and at worst exacerbating these disparities.³

Results from the relatively limited but growing number of empirical studies testing the mobilizing versus reinforcing effects of the Internet have been mixed and inconclusive. Some studies have shown evidence of mobilization (e.g., see Weaver, Loumakis and Bergman, 2003, Tolbert and McNeal, 2003, Shah et al., 2001, Gibson, Lusoli, and Ward, 2005; Best and Krueger,

³There is also a body of literature which argues that both reinforcement and mobilization can occur (see Norris, 2001). Some prior research sets up a false dichotomy between mobilization and reinforcement, when both could occur simultaneously by mobilizing some groups and reinforcing others.

2005; Mossberger, Tolbert and McNeal, 2008). Others tend to support the reinforcement hypothesis. (e.g., see Bimber, 1999; Kaye, 1998; Johnson and Kaye, 1998; Norris, 2001; Scheufele and Nisbet, 2000; Solop, 2006; Bimber and Davis, 2003; Johnson and Kaye, 2004; Polat, 2005; Xenos and Moy, 2007; Shah et al. 2007). Most recently, a meta-analysis (Boulianne, 2009) has also shown equivocal results.

One limitation of most of the earlier studies is their exclusive focus on traditional forms of campaign participation as measured by Verba and Nie (1972) and Verba et al. (1995). These activities include attending political campaign rallies, contributing money to a campaign, and/or working for a campaign, with no attention to whether these and other activities are done “offline” or “online.” Ignoring or failing to distinguish “online participation” may hamper our ability to uncover the mobilizing and/or reinforcing effects of Internet use (Gibson, Lusoli, and Ward, 2005).

Gibson et al. (2005) describe a more contextualized model of online participation as one that “takes into account a wider range of online participatory behaviors and incorporates the various new forms of stimuli present in the new media that can kick-start those behaviors.” (p. 10) Examples of online participation include, discussing politics online in a chat group or via email, forward campaign emails or video to others, viewing campaign ads and other video on sites like YouTube, visiting a campaign website to learn about the issues, and volunteer or donate online. Using these measures, they found some evidence of mobilization among those previously disengaged in the 2002 British elections. Since the publication of their work, others have measured participation using online and offline variables, but again with mixed results (e.g., Best and Krueger, 2005; Shah et al. 2007; Xenos and Moy, 2007).

Additionally, one of the few studies examining the Internet and voting, Nickerson (2007) shows that using emails to invite people to register or vote had no discernible impact on either registration or voting if they are sent in a generalized mass way, like mass mailings.

A shortcoming of the extant research is that access and use of the Internet by citizens has increased dramatically in recent years. So too has the frequency and innovativeness of Internet use by candidates for office, since even the 2004 presidential election cycle. In 2008, the Internet was integral to the campaigns of all the major presidential candidates, not only as a fundraising tool. During the primaries and caucuses, some attributed Sen. Barack Obama's success over Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton and the other Democratic candidates to his campaign's greater effectiveness with using the technology to contact and activate new and younger voters to build a strong and successful base of support.

Research Questions and Methods

In short, findings examining earlier elections may not be a good indication of the current or future impact of the Internet. Based on, but not a replication of, Gibson et al.'s (2005) contextual model of political participation, and drawing on data from the 2008 presidential campaign, this paper is intended to add to our understanding of the mobilizing and/or reinforcing effects of the Internet by specifically addressing the following questions:

RQ1) Did the Internet mobilize new political participants into the political process, reinforce those already engaged or likely to be engaged, or do both in the 2008 U.S. presidential election?

RQ2) Does participating online lead to a greater likelihood of voting than participating offline?

The data source for this research is the 2008 National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) post-election survey. The NAES post-election survey is a panel of respondents from the NAES rolling cross-sectional national probability telephone survey. NAES was in the field continuously from mid-December, 2007 through November 3, 2007, the day before Election Day. Respondents who completed the survey from August 8 through November 3rd, 2008 were recontacted to create the post-election panel. The panel was conducted beginning the day following the general election for president in the U.S. (November 5, 2008) through November 11, 2008. I used the panel data in order to obtain a self-reported measure of voting. However, the final panel sample was matched against a database, compiled by a company called Catalist⁴, of actual registered voters in the 2008 presidential election to indicate with greater accuracy whether people actually voted or not, as opposed to taking respondent self-reported voting behavior at face value. The sample size was 2,188.

Criterion variables

Overview of participation measures in the NAES. The participation questions in this study are based on work by Verba and Nie (1972), Verba et al. (1995), and Gibson et al. (2005), among others, and have been tailored to fit the 2008 election. The general structure of the measures is as follows: 1) Participation activities performed online; and, 2) Participation activities performed offline. Each of the participation activities are dichotomous and were measured discretely by asking respondents whether or not (yes/no) they performed each activity during a given time-frame.

My analysis focuses both on individual activities and aggregate measures of participation (online participation index and offline participation index). The reason for the disaggregation is

⁴ Catalist successfully matched 65 % of the file sent to them.

because different motivations may underlie decisions to undertake diverse activities. For example, the most significant predictors of volunteering on a campaign may be very different from the most significant predictors of forwarding a campaign email to friends, or posting to a political blog.

Offline participation activities—detail. The NAES survey asked respondents, retrospectively, about their behavior during the general election campaign. Activities in this analysis include some of those used by Verba and Nie (1972) in their research and are specifically performed offline: persuading someone offline to support or oppose a candidate, offline volunteering for a campaign, attending a campaign event in support of a presidential candidate, and wearing a presidential campaign button or placing a bumper sticker or sign.

Online participation questions—detail. Online participation consisted of seven online behaviors. These include, persuading others to support or oppose a presidential candidate, online; volunteering online to work on a campaign; online donating of money to a campaign, discussing politics in a chat group; visiting a presidential campaign, political party, or other political web site; viewing a video on a site like YouTube about the presidential candidates or campaigns; and forwarding emails, audio, or video about presidential candidates or campaigns to friends, family, co-workers, and other acquaintances. As with the analysis of offline variables I measured participation behavior performed, retrospectively, during the general election campaign.

Internet usage variables: Internet access and internet frequency.

Internet usage measures are critical to test whether mobilization or reinforcement occurred. I measured the respondents' frequency of general Internet use: several hours per day, almost every day, at least once per week, a few times a month, every month or so, rarely, or never. This

detailed measurement of Internet use allowed me to test interactions between level of Internet use and the demographic variables for both online and offline political participation. The Internet usage question was asked in two parts:

On another subject, do you have access to the Internet at home, at work or someplace else? (IF YES) On average, which of the following best describes how often you are on the Internet?...Several hours per day, almost every day, at least once per week, a few times per month, every month or so, rarely, or never?

The survey contained a number of independent and control variables which I employed in my analysis. These represent the demographic questions measured in the extant research, including education, gender, age, race, income and frequency of religious attendance and serve as the basis for addressing the mobilization and reinforcement hypotheses. Control variables include, party identification, ideology, campaign interest, campaign contact, media use for campaign information, using the Internet for campaign information about the presidential campaign, candidate support, political knowledge, and the aforementioned Internet access and frequency measures. Control variables are used to rule out alternative explanations, but at the same time shed light on what the best predictors are for a given activity.

For purposes of the analyses, I set the demographic variables as dichotomous 0,1 variables. I have chosen the age category, “18 to 29 years old” to measure age because prior research suggests that this younger category is more technologically sophisticated (e.g., Zukin et al., 2005; Howe and Strauss, 2000). The education and income variables were set at higher levels (college graduate or above, household income \$100K or higher), so that they could be used as markers for the traditional biases in participation. Race as a variable was categorized simply as black/non-black to test the levels of participation activities of African-Americans, a group considered to be disadvantaged, politically. Religious attendance is not a dichotomous

variable in my analysis. Instead, I recoded it as a numerical variable ranging from one to five, where one means “never attend religious services” and a five means, “attend religious services more than once a week.”

This analysis will follow three steps: 1) A descriptive analysis of political participation activities; 2) Logistic regression to determine the most robust predictors of voting, and offline and online participation prior to the election; and, 3) Logistic Regression testing interactions between levels of Internet use and demographic independent variables to assess support for mobilization and/or reinforcement. The logic of this analysis is straightforward. Consider, for example, the frequency of offline political discussion. Suppose that in the initial logistic regression analyses described in “step three” I find that frequent internet use *increases* offline political discussion, but being young (18-29) *decreases* offline discussion. If internet use acts to reduce age-related biases in participation beyond the direct or main effects of being young and using the Internet frequently (i.e., has a mobilizing effect), then the interaction between these two variables should be significant and positive. If, however, it acts to reinforce this bias, it should be negative. Beyond this, the size of the interaction (relative to the main effects of age and Internet use) and the specific pattern of this interaction (i.e., whether it is being driven by young people who use the internet frequently increasing their political discussion or Internet users decreasing their political discussion) provides further evidence in support or opposition to the mobilization hypothesis.

Results

Descriptive Analysis of Political Participation Activities

Bivariate analysis of offline and online participation activities by the demographics, without any controls, reveal that better educated and more affluent respondents continue to be advantaged since they are significantly more likely to report participating in most of the measured behaviors than less educated and less affluent (See Table 1). Countering past biases, African Americans were significantly more likely than non-African Americans to say they participated in several political activities. These include, working for a presidential candidate offline, attending political meetings or rallies, and wearing a campaign button or displaying a sign in support of a candidate, visiting a candidate's website, and forward a political email, audio, or video to others.

Among the offline activities, more adults engaged in in-person persuasion either by directly speaking with someone or by the more passive method of wearing a campaign button or displaying a sign or bumper sticker. A roughly equal number reported attending political meetings or rallies and contributing to a campaign or candidate through traditional offline methods. Few said they actually did any work offline for one of the candidates (See Table 1).

In the descriptive analysis of online activities, three activities stood out. A roughly equal proportion of adults said they visited a campaign web site, viewed a political video on a site like YouTube, or forwarded campaign-related emails, audio, or video to others.

About one in five said they discussed politics online during the general election campaign. The data suggest that direct persuasion online, person-to-person, is less popular than offline persuasion. Finally, while much has been written and spoken about online donations, fewer adults said they gave online than offline. However, the proportion of online donors represents a significant number of adults, well into the millions (See Table 1).

Table 1: *Participation Activity by Total Population and by Demographic**Subgroups (without controls)*

Activities Regardless of Whether Performed Offline <u>during</u> <u>residential campaign</u>	All Adults % (n=2,188)	College Graduate Or Higher % (n=1,029)	Not College Graduate % (n=1,159)	Male % (n=940)	Female % (n=1,248)	Age 18-29 % (n=58)	Age 30 or older % (n=2,130)	African American % (n=113)	Not African American % (n=2,075)	Household Income: \$100K Or more % (n=522)	Household Income: Less than \$100K % (n=1,666)
on Election Day	86.9	90.1***	84.0	87.4	86.5	81.0	87.0	81.4	87.2	88.3	86.4
OFFLINE Activities during the residential campaign											
Attempt to persuade someone OFFLINE to support or oppose a candidate	39.0	40.6	37.6	41.2	37.4	36.2	39.1	38.9	39.0	41.6	38.2
Do any work for one of the residential candidates OFFLINE	6.4	8.8***	4.2	5.2*	7.3	6.9	6.4	21.2***	5.6	8.2*	5.8
Contribute money to campaigns of residential candidates OFFLINE	13.7	15.4*	12.2	14.1	13.3	3.4*	13.9	17.7	13.4	16.3*	12.8
Attend political meetings, rallies, dinners, dinners or things like in support of a particular residential candidate OFFLINE	12.1	16.7***	7.9	12.1	12.0	19.0	11.9	29.2***	11.1	14.9*	11.2
Attend a presidential campaign event, put a campaign sticker on your car, put a campaign sign in your window/ in your yard/ in front of your house.	22.2	26.5***	18.4	21.5	22.8	22.4	22.2	46.9***	20.9	26.2*	20.9
OFFLINE activities during the residential campaign											
Attempt to persuade someone to support or oppose one of the residential candidates ONLINE	8.0	12.0***	4.5	9.5*	6.9	8.6	8.0	9.7	7.9	14.2***	6.1
Do any work for one of the residential candidates ONLINE	0.9	1.6*	+	1.1	0.8	0.0	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.8	1.0
Contribute money to campaigns of residential candidates ONLINE	8.5	13.6***	4.0	7.4	9.3	12.1	8.4	13.3	8.2	13.8***	6.8
Discuss politics online	19.5	27.3***	12.5	21.8*	17.7	37.9***	19.0	23.9	19.2	27.0***	17.1
Visit Web site of a presidential candidate or political party	29.2	39.4***	20.2	30.6	28.1	50.0***	28.6	44.2***	28.4	40.0***	25.8
Watch video on sites like YouTube about the presidential candidates or campaign	29.4	40.0***	19.9	31.5	27.8	53.4***	28.7	36.3	29.0	43.5***	25.0

rded emails, audio or video presidential candidates or signs to friends, families, workers or other people you	29.4	39.6***	20.4	28.0	30.5	34.5	29.3	38.9*	28.9	40.8***	25.9
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+ = less than 0.5%, ***Chi Square is significant $p < .001$, **Chi Square is significant $p < .01$, *Chi Square is significant $p < .05$

Determining Predictors of Pre-Election Online and Offline Political Participation

The Internet plays a significant role in predicting a variety of online and offline pre-election political behaviors. With the presence of statistical controls in the regression models, the data indicate which variables are more robust predictors of pre-election political participation activities. In this section, I assess the impact of the more traditional variables on participation and the extent to which Internet use predicted political participation. Then I answer in a more direct fashion RQ1, whether the Internet mobilizes, reinforces, or does both. I present results of the multivariate analyses of the two classes of participation activities: 1) online activities including online persuasion, volunteering, online donating, political discussion, visiting campaign web sites, viewing political campaign-related videos on sites like YouTube, and forwarding emails, audio or video related to the presidential campaign, and 2) offline activities including offline persuasion, offline campaign volunteering, offline donating, attending presidential campaign meetings or rallies, or the wearing of campaign buttons.

Predictors of online participation activities

Those most likely to say they engaged in the online participation activities tend to be better educated, younger, more affluent, and female. Politically, they benefitted from online campaign contact and were very interested in the presidential campaign. Online participants' Internet behavior suggests they spend a lot of time online, in general, and rely on the Internet as an important campaign source. Better educated adults were significant predictors for online political discussion, visiting a campaign web site, viewing a political video online, online donating and forwarding a political email, audio or video. Younger adults were more likely to say they discussed politics online, visited a campaign web site, and viewed a political video

online. Females were more likely to say they donated online and forwarded a political email. More affluent adults were more likely to say they donated online and viewed an online political video. Online contact significantly predicted all of the measured online activities except volunteering online. High campaign interest was a significant predictor of online persuasion, online donating, visiting a campaign web site, viewing an online political video, and forwarding a political email, audio or video as did using the Internet as a campaign device. The more one was online, the more likely one was to say they performed several of the measured online activities. Finally, higher levels of political knowledge were associated with online behavior (See Table 2a-b).

Table 2a: *Predictors of Online Political Participation (Part 1)*
Logistic Regression EXP(B)

	Attempt to Persuade someone to support/ oppose candidate ONLINE	Volunteer for Candidate or Campaign ONLINE	Contribute Money to a candidate or campaign ONLINE
Education (College Grad+)	1.411	2.504	1.715*
Gender (male)	1.056	1.22	.561**
Age (18-29)	.904	.000	1.294
Race (African American)	.971	.859	.778
Income (\$100K plus)	1.478*	.297*	1.416
Religiosity	1.026	.693	.757***
Party (Democrat)	.829	.769	1.274
Ideology (liberal)	.997	.989	1.077
Internet for campaign info in past 7 days	1.250***	1.376*	1.152***
Talk Radio for Campaign in past 7 days	1.048	1.004	1.144***
Newspaper for campaign in past 7 days	.955	.963	.952
TV News for campaign info in past 7 days	.913*	.901	.977
Online Frequency (Several hours/day)	1.265	1.060	.788
Campaign Interest	3.203***	3.382	2.635***
Contacted by Campaign ONLINE	3.747***	3.714*	12.667***
Obama Voter	1.111	1.133	2.315**
Political knowledge	1.092	1.424	1.339*
Constant	.000***	.000***	.000***
N	2,092	2,092	2,092
Correctly Classified	92.1%	99.0%	92.3%
Nagelkerke R Square	.295	.242	.443

*=p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Table 2b: *Predictors of Online Political Participation (Part 2)*
Logistic Regression EXP(B)

	Discuss politics ONLINE	Visit Campaign Web site	Viewed Political Video on Sites Like YouTube	Forward Political Emails, Audios, or Videos to Others
Education (College Grad+)	1.640***	1.306*	1.306*	1.512**
Gender (male)	1.014	.886	.891	.541***
Age (18-29)	2.605**	2.926**	3.090**	1.200
Race (African American)	1.050	1.537	.817	1.362
Income (\$100K plus)	.973	1.134	1.410**	1.155
Religiosity	.953	1.033	1.091*	.989
Party (Democrat)	1.055	.858	.926	.922
Ideology (liberal)	.979	1.172*	1.068	.925
Internet for campaign info in past 7 days	1.198***	1.262***	1.229***	1.183***
Talk Radio for Campaign in past 7 days	1.075**	1.044*	1.044*	1.073**
Newspaper for campaign in past 7 days	.979	.944**	.948**	1.000
TV News for campaign info in past 7 days	.973	.975	.916**	.962
Online Frequency (Several hours/day)	1.539**	1.127	1.515**	1.732***
Campaign Interest	1.249	1.717***	1.524***	1.487***
Contacted by Campaign ONLINE	2.196***	3.609***	2.435***	3.228***
Obama Voter	.923	1.225	1.362*	.750
Political knowledge	1.092	1.187*	1.232**	1.197*
Constant	.029***	.007***	.016***	.035***
N	2,092	2,092	2,092	2,092
Correctly Classified	81.2%	78.9%	77.2%	77.3%
Nagelkerke R Square	0.245	.380	.331	.329

*=p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Predictors of offline participation activities

The demographic analysis of offline participation activities reveals that even applying statistical controls, African Americans are more likely to say they took part in these traditional behaviors of political participation. This is particularly true for offline volunteering, attending rallies, and displaying support for a candidate. Politically, online campaign contact appears to have made a difference for offline activities as well as online activities. Online contact significantly predicted, volunteering offline, attending rallies or meetings, displaying campaign support, and donating money offline. Similarly, high campaign interest was a significant

predictor of offline persuasion, offline donating, rally attendance, and displaying support (See Table 3).

Table 3: *Predictors of Offline Political Participation*
Logistic Regression EXP(B)

	Attempt to Persuade someone to support or oppose a candidate OFFLINE	Volunteer for candidate OFFLINE	Contribute Money to a Candidate or Campaign OFFLINE	Attend Rally/ Meeting	Wear Campaign Button/ Display Bumper Sticker/Lawn Sign
Education (College Grad+)	.906	1.200	1.106	1.509*	1.077
Gender (male)	1.071	.629*	1.008	.896	.842
Age (18-29)	.886	.794	.144	1.483	.895
Race (African American)	.825	2.365**	1.076	2.165**	2.158**
Income (\$100K plus)	1.030	1.206	1.269	.973	1.093
Religiosity	.970	1.093	1.018	1.139*	1.036
Party (Democrat)	1.321*	1.422	1.484*	1.582*	1.885***
Ideology (liberal)	.885*	1.139	.877	1.058	.962
Internet for campaign info in past 7 days	1.011	1.040	.927**	1.041*	1.042
Talk Radio for Campaign in past 7 days	1.070***	1.071*	1.046	1.041**	1.084***
Newspaper for campaign in past 7 days	1.031*	1.014	1.133***	1.049	1.010
TV News for campaign info in past 7 days	1.011	.988	1.033	.916*	.993
Online Frequency (Several hours/day)	.818	1.026	.818	.896	.935
Campaign Interest Contacted by Campaign	1.490***	1.346	1.795***	2.093***	1.857***
ONLINE	.917	4.628***	1.664**	2.726***	2.771***
Obama Voter	1.045	3.063**	.908	1.500	1.098
Political knowledge	1.247***	1.169	1.003	1.294**	1.067
Constant	.112***	.001***	.004***	.001***	.008***
N	2,092	2,092	2,092	2,092	2,092
Correctly Classified	62.1%	93.7%	86.4%	87.9%	79.2%
Nagelkerke R Square	.074	.256	.108	.219	.201

*=p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Evidence for Mobilization, Reinforcement or Both

Thus far, this study has detailed the frequency of participation across activities and found that the reporting frequency was generally low. The data also showed that the biases of the past were reinforced but there was also evidence that groups marginalized in the past became more active and participatory than in prior elections. While there has been no direct linkage to the effectiveness of the Internet in this regard, the role of online campaign contact cannot be discounted. However, a better test of mobilization and reinforcement involves testing the logistic models with interactions between Internet frequency and the significant demographic variables produced by the initial logistic regression models.

The logistic models produced a significant interaction between frequent Internet use and education for predicting online political discussion and viewing a political video on a site like YouTube. These interactions provide evidence that the Internet both mobilizes and reinforces (See Table 4).

Table 4: Testing for Mobilization and Reinforcement--Significant Interactions:
(Exp(B)(b coefficient)

	Online Political Discussion: with Interaction (Internet Frequency X Education (Coll grad or higher))	Viewing A Political Video on a Site Like YouTube (Internet Frequency X Education (Coll grad or higher))
Education (College Grad+)	2.370***	1.714**
Gender (male)	1.023	.897
Age (18-29)	2.503**	3.021**
Race (African American)	1.103	.849
Income (\$100K plus)	.987	1.431**
Religiosity	.946	1.0865
Party (Democrat)	1.068	.936
Ideology (liberal)	.977	1.067
Internet for campaign info in past 7 days	1.193***	1.226***
Talk Radio for Campaign in past 7 days	1.076**	1.045*
Newspaper for campaign in past 7 days	.980	.949**
TV News for campaign info in past 7 days	.975	.918**
Online Frequency (Several hours/day)	2.540***	2.262***
Campaign Interest	1.245*	1.522***
Contacted by Campaign ONLINE	2.192***	2.431***
Obama Voter	.916	1.357
Political Knowledge (Delli Carpini/Keeter)	1.080	1.222**
Online Frequency X Education (Col Grad/ higher)	.454** (b=-0.789)	.513* (b= -668)
Constant	.025	.015
N	2,092	2,092
Correctly classified	81.4%	77.4%
Nagelkerke R Square	.251	.335

*=p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

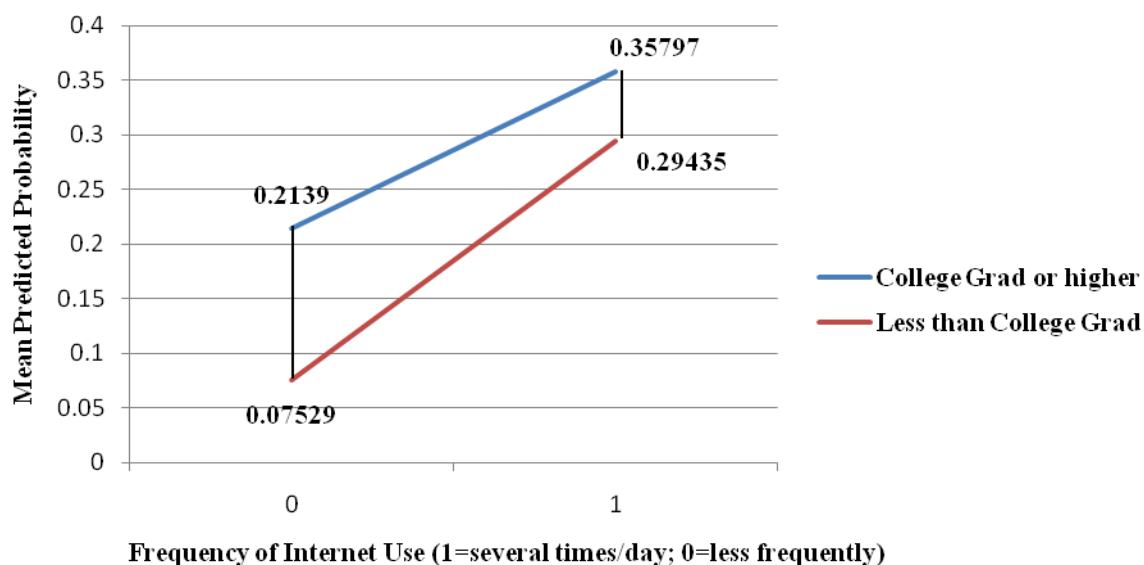
In order to see the effects of the interactions more clearly, one must observe the graphical figures. The figures provide evidence for both mobilization and reinforcement (See Figures 1 and 2).

Education (college grad or higher) by high internet use predicting online political discussion

The interaction between frequent Internet use and education produced evidence for both mobilization and reinforcement in predicting online political discussion. Those who have earned at least a college degree but frequently on the Internet are more likely to say they discussed politics online than those who reported being online less frequently. A similar pattern exists for

those with less education, but the starting point is at a lower point (See Figure 1). The Internet will mobilize previously disengaged citizens to participate online and using the Internet will reinforce the online participation of already engaged citizens.

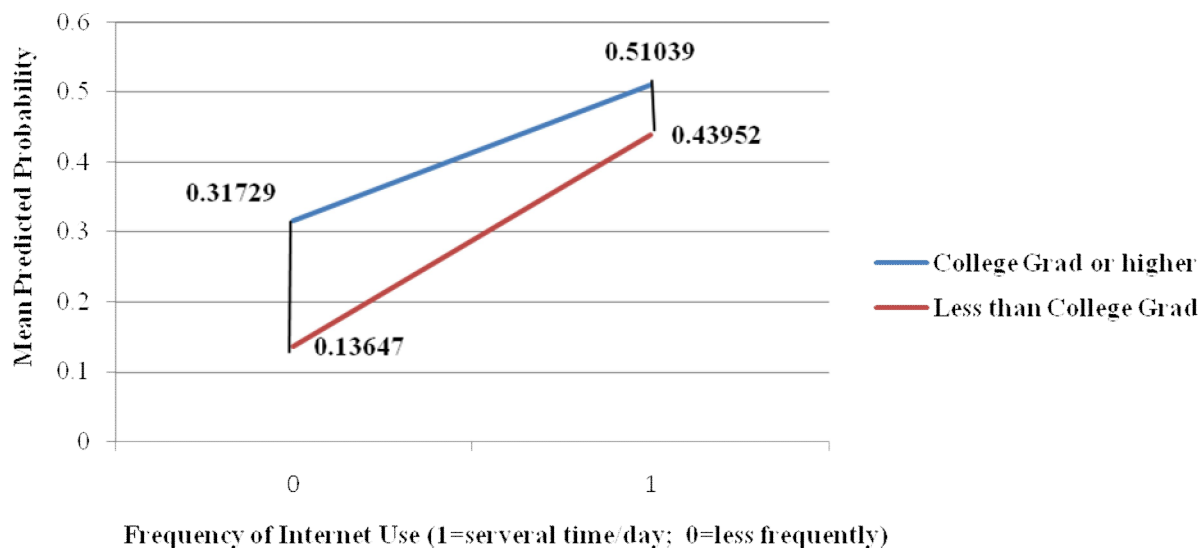
Figure 1: Interaction-Education (College Grad or higher) by High Internet Use Predicting Online Political Discussion



Education (college grad or higher) by high internet use predicting viewing political video on sites like YouTube

Interacting education and frequency of Internet use produces significant outcomes for predicting viewing political video on sites like YouTube in much the same way it predicts online discussion. The more frequently one is online, the more likely they are to say they viewed political videos. The patterns are similar for both those with and without college degrees (See Figure 2), thus, this is more evidence of both mobilization and reinforcement.

Figure 2: Interaction-Education (College Grad or higher) by High Internet Use Predicting Viewing Political Videos on Sites like YouTube



Predictors of Voting

Thus far, the findings clearly show the Internet as a significant predictor of online and offline participation activities, leading up to voting. The next question is whether online participation is more likely to predict voting than offline participation (RQ2). Using logistic regression, with both the online and offline participation indexes in the model, among a number of statistical controls, the results show that the more traditional offline participation activities continue to be the stronger predictors of voting than participating in online activities (See Table 5). Those engaging in offline activities were twenty-five percent more likely to vote than those who did not. Online participation as a predictor of voting was not statistically significant. Additionally, Table 5 shows that the traditional predictors found in prior voting studies (e.g., Verba and Nie, 1972 and Verba et al., 1995) continue to be the best predictors of voting, even in the context of the 2008 election. Education, race, and campaign interest are the most robust

predictors of voting in the 2008 presidential election. Those with a college education or better are a third more likely to vote than those with less education. Despite the energizing of African-Americans and young people in 2008, non-African Americans and older people continue to be more likely to vote. This also bears out when looking at the bivariate analysis of who voted in 2008 (refer back to Table 1).

Table 5: *Predictors of Voting in the General Election*
Logistic Regression EXP(B)

	B	S.E.	Odds Ratio (Exp(B))
Online Participation	.077	.060	1.080
Offline Participation	.225	.078	1.253**
Education (College Grad+)	.299	.153	1.349*
Gender (male)	.046	.138	1.048
Age (18-29)	-.388	.363	.679
Race (African American)	-.878	.276	.416**
Income (\$100K plus)	-.191	.175	.826
Religiosity	.085	.052	1.088
Party (Democrat)	-.043	.157	.958
Ideology (liberal)	-.034	.067	.966
Online Frequency (Several hours/day)	.210	.169	1.234
Campaign Interest	.242	.089	1.274**
Internet for campaign info in past 7 days	.026	.158	1.026
TV News for campaign info in past 7 days	.062	.028	1.064*
Newspaper for campaign in past 7 days	.034	.023	1.035
Contacted by Campaign Online	.066	.172	1.068
Constant	.104	.394	1.109

N=2,102

Nagelkerke R Square=.068

*=p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Discussion

This study has been an attempt to clarify the role of the Internet in mobilizing citizens to vote and in attracting new participants in the political process as well as acting as a reinforcing mechanism for those involved already. In this paper, I have shown that there is evidence of both mobilizing those traditionally less likely to participate to engage in a variety of pre-election participation activities and reinforcing those already involved. For instance, evidence points to a pattern showing the Internet mobilizing less educated groups and reinforcing better educated groups. The net effect, shown by the graphic presentations, is that the less educated are closing the gap slightly, but, the results suggest that improved access to the Internet will continue to increase political participation for all citizens. As long as the digital divide remains wide, however, mobilization effects of the Internet will remain limited.

While the Internet both mobilizes and reinforces political participation, the data do not demonstrate consistency across the various participation activities. The findings illustrate that Internet use, in certain instances, is more likely to motivate certain groups to engage in participation activities, especially lower educated ones. Again, this is evidence that the Internet effect on the political process is still evolving.

Nevertheless, the Internet has changed the nature of participation in the sense that much of what traditionally occurred offline now takes place online. The levels of traditional participation continue to be low, but the absolute amount has increased with the inclusion of such activities as viewing political videos on YouTube, engaging in online discussion, visiting campaign web sites, donating money online and forwarding emails, videos, and audios to those in ones social network as a means of persuasion.

Logistic analysis showed that with controls in place, the effect of education and income diminished for some activities, but continued to remain significant for others. Young people (18-29) emerged as significant predictors of several online pre-election participation activities. While the findings indicate that race was not a significant predictor of online activities, African-Americans were more likely to participate in a variety of traditional offline pre-election activities. Online campaign contact and campaign interest, more often than not, produced the highest odds ratios, and thus, emerge as the most robust predictors of pre-election offline and online participation activities.

However, online contact and online participation in general did not have a significant effect at all on the ultimate form of participation: voting. Rather, it was the more traditional demographic and political behavioral predictors—higher educated, white, highly politically interested which more likely led to voting. Further, participating in the traditional offline activities was more likely to lead to voting than participating in the online activities. Perhaps through a more indirect path, Internet usage leads to voting⁵.

While the traditional offline activities and demographic factors remain the strongest predictors of voting. With the growth in both the usage and reach of the Internet in politics, its role as a vote predictor will likely emerge in future elections. As a result of this study, I cannot make that claim. It must be left to future research to determine its effectiveness. Evidence from this study points to the medium as having little to no effect on voting, but has a significant effect on encouraging those to do the things to become involved in the campaign itself. In Boulianne's (2009) meta-analysis of online participation research, she asserts that when political interest is

⁵A path analysis shows that online campaign contact leads to offline participation. Offline participation leads to voting. The indirect effect is small but significant.

combined with Internet use in models predicting engagement, the effect of Internet use “does not have a substantial impact on engagement” (p. 193). My findings are partially consistent with this conclusion.

Finally, I must note some limitations to this study. First, the 2008 election was unique in the sense there was a convergence of several factors hitherto not seen in any national election—extensive use of online tools, an African American nominee for president, a female presidential candidate who was considered the front-runner going into the early primaries, a female vice presidential nominee, and a collapsing national economy. The question remains to be answered about whether these findings can be replicated in future elections. Every election is different and as stated above, technologies progress and campaigns find different approaches to mobilize and engage supporters. Nevertheless, the uniqueness of the 2008 election may have drawn new participants, but the Internet helped provide the tools for participation—not just for those already interested but those who may not have done so otherwise.

Second, as a survey research study, there is the issue of indeterminate causal direction. This is a problem for all surveys. The data show a very strong relationship between online contact and participation. While more study is needed on the specifics of how the Internet affects participation, and on the impact of unique aspects of each campaign, my research, overall, suggests that the Internet is a new driver of political participation.

The measure of Internet frequency was very useful in this study, allowing me to draw conclusions about the mobilizing effects of the Internet. However, there are a number of ways that Internet use can be effectively measured. Eszter Hargittai, for example, believes that Internet frequency as employed in this study is a poor proxy for Internet use. Instead, she

recommends a nuanced measure of Internet efficacy as a more accurate proxy. Future studies will employ both an Internet literacy/efficacy question as Hargittai recommends in her work (2005 and 2009) and the self-reported Internet frequency measure utilized in this research.

Rapid changes in technology will alter both the design and direction of future research. Just since the election, the growth of Twitter, the messaging social networking tool has far exceeded the level of use during the election. It is impossible to predict which online techniques will be the new effective mechanisms for campaign contact, communication, and learning. Television and the Internet are converging. In this election, the NAES did not disaggregate TV viewing or newspaper reading online compared with offline. In 2012, the distinctions may become entirely blurred or vanish completely. Despite these fast-moving changes, I believe this research is structured in such a way as to serve as a useful foundation for future studies.

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APPENDIX D: POST-GENERAL ELECTION PARTICIPATION QUESTIONS

IN ORDER TO DIFFERENTIATE INTERNET USE**IF I9=1**

I9A. On average, which of the following best describes how often you are on the Internet?...Several hours per day, almost every day, at least once per week, a few times per month, every month or so, rarely, never

- 1 Several hours per day
- 2 Almost every day
- 3 At least once per week
- 4 A few times per month
- 5 Every month or so
- 6 Rarely
- 7 Never
- 8 Don't know
- 9 Refused

V1. During the presidential GENERAL ELECTION campaign, did you receive email from either the Obama or McCain campaigns? IF YES Which campaign?

- 1 Yes, from Obama campaign
- 2 Yes, from McCain campaign
- 3 Both, campaigns
- 4 No
- 8 Don't know
- 9 Refused

Participation**ASK V5-V18 AS A SET IN RANDOM ORDER**

During the presidential GENERAL ELECTION campaign, **(READ FOR EACH ITEM)**

V5. DID you talk to any people and try to show them why they should vote for or against one of the presidential candidates?

- 1 Yes
- 2 No
- 8 Don't know
- 9 Refused

V6. (IF YES-V5(1)) Was that (rotate) by telephone, in-person, by regular mail, email or other online method?

(ACCEPT MULTIPLE RESPONSES)

- 1 Telephone
- 2 in-person
- 3 regular mail
- 4 Email or other online
- 7 (VOL) Other (SPECIFY)
- 8 Don't know
- 9 Refused

V7. During the presidential GENERAL ELECTION campaign did you do any work for one of the presidential candidates?

- 1 Yes
- 2 No
- 8 Don't know
- 9 Refused

V8. (IF YES-V7(1)) Was that (rotate) by telephone, in-person, by regular mail, or email or other online method?

(ACCEPT MULTIPLE RESPONSES)

- 1 Telephone
- 2 in-person
- 3 regular mail
- 4 Email or other online
- 7 (VOL) Other (SPECIFY)
- 8 Don't know
- 9 Refused

V9. (IF YES-V7(1)) For which Candidate did you do work?

[MUTLIPLRE RESPONSES]

- 1 John McCain
- 2 Barack Obama
- 7 Other (SPECIFY)
- 8 Don't know
- 9 Refused

V10. During the presidential GENERAL ELECTION campaign did you give money to any of the presidential candidates?

- 1 Yes
- 2 No
- 8 Don't know
- 9 Refused

V11. IF YES TO V10. Please tell me which of the following ways you donated money to the candidate, during the presidential General Election campaign. **READ. ACCEPT MULTIPLE RESPONSES**

- 1 Through the mail
 - 2 Online donation through the Internet
 - 3 In person at a fundraiser or other campaign event
- DO NOT READ
- 4 Other (SPECIFY)
 - 8 Don't know
 - 9 Refused

V12 IF YES TO V10 Which Candidate did you contribute to?
[MULTIPLE RESPONSES]

- 1 John McCain
- 2 Barack Obama
- 7 Other (SPECIFY)
- 8 Don't know
- 9 Refused

V13. During the presidential General Election campaign, did you go to any political meetings, rallies, speeches, dinners or things like that in support of a particular presidential candidate.

- 1 Yes
- 2 No
- 8 Don't know
- 9 Refused

V14 During the presidential GENERAL ELECTION campaign, did you wear a presidential campaign button, put a campaign sticker on your car or place a sign in your window or in front of your house?.

- 1 Yes
- 2 No
- 8 Don't know
- 9 Refused

V15 During the presidential GENERAL ELECTION campaign, did you visit a website of a presidential campaign?

- 1 Yes
- 2 No
- 8 Don't know
- 9 Refused

V16. . During the presidential GENERAL ELECTION campaign, did you forward any emails, audio or video about presidential candidates or campaigns to friends, families, co-workers or other people you know?

- 1 Yes
- 2 No
- 8 don't know
- 9 Refused

V17. During the presidential General Election campaign, did you view video on sites like YouTube about the presidential candidates or campaign?

- 1 yes
- 2 no
- 8 Don't know
- 9 Refused

V18. During the presidential General Election campaign, did you discuss politics online with people over email, in chat rooms, using message boards, forums or instant messaging services?

- 1 yes
- 2 no
- 8 Don't know
- 9 Refused