UC Irvine
I.T. in Government

Title

Electronic Democracy in America: Civil Society, Cyber Society and Participation in Local Politics

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0004516g

Authors

Jensen, Michael J.
Danziger, Jim
Venkatesh, Alladi

Publication Date

2005-03-31

Electronic Democracy in America: Civil Society, Cyber Society and Participation in Local Politics

Michael J. Jensen*
James N. Danziger
Alladi Venkatesh
Center for Research on Information
Technology and Organizations (CRITO),
University of California, Irvine
*Contact author: mjensen@uci.edu
http://www.crito.uci.edu/point

March 31, 2005

project
POINT
People, Organizations &
Information Technology

Working Paper

Electronic Democracy in America: Civil Society, Cyber Society, and Participation in Local Politics

Introduction

Internet diffusion and use is growing faster than any communications technology in history, and for many sectors of the population, it is becoming indispensable (ITU 2002, Hoffman, Novak, and Venkatesh 2004). Of Americans online, eighty-eight percent say the Internet plays a role in their daily routines (Fallows 2004). Given these trends, social scientists have begun exploring the political and social implications of Internet use (e.g., Hampton 2003, Hill and Hughes 1998, Bimber 2003, Norris 2001, Davis 1999, Wellman and Haythornthwaite 2002). Of particular interest are comparisons between offline and online modes of political engagement and whether Internet users engage the political system differently. In general, this body of research seeks to understand Internet use in relation to political and community life offline. That is, the question this literature generally seeks to answer is, what does the advent of the Internet mean for offline politics and community life. This research, by contrast seeks to understand what is politics and "community" life like on the Internet as a medium distinct from a variety of offline mediums where politics and "community" life take place? In doing so, we engage in a comparative analysis of politics and interactions with various groups both offline and online.

A central issue posed raised by the contemporary literature is the question of whether the Internet will support and revitalize offline associations and community life or supplant and erode them (Culnan 2005, Hampton 2003, Pinkett 2003, Venkatesh 2003). Many have heralded the development of a panoply of online groups with varying degrees of membership ties. We refer to these groups under the general notion of *cyber society* which denotes interactions with a host of online groups and with the varying degrees of anonymity and affective attachments that characterize everyday surfing habits.[1] Hopes for the reconvening of community life within cyber society is significant in light of

---

[1] This also leaves open the question of the extent to which such groups constitute a "community."

concerns raised by a wide range of scholars who herald civil society as a necessary element in a functioning democracy and who are concerned with the relationship between civil society, politics, and the economy (Putnam 1993, 2000; Alesinia and Wacziarg 2000). Civil society has occupied a central place in American studies of democracy and politics since the publication of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (2000 [1835/40]), which is widely considered to be one of the most perceptive studies of political life in America (Wolin 2001). In his work, Tocqueville detailed the crucial role played by civil society associations in sustaining democracy.

More recently, scholars have returned to the relationship between democracy and civil society amidst concerns that civil society in America is in decline (e.g. Putnam 1995a, 2000, 2002). Relying on numerous measures of social and political activities, Robert Putnam finds an across-the-board decline in political participation and participation in civil society organizations over the latter half of the twentieth century. He charts a decline in activities as diverse as voting, working on political campaigns, attendance at political events, and petition signing that correlates with declines in club meeting attendance, formal club membership, church attendance, and membership in professional associations and unions (Putnam 2000). Putnam identifies television as the most likely cause for the decline in associational membership and sees both television viewing and disengagement from politics and civil society concentrated in younger cohorts (Putnam 1995b, 2000). He remains ambivalent about the prospects that the Internet might revive associational life (Putnam 2000). While privileging face-to-face interactions, Putnam expresses some optimism that the Internet might support and revitalize rather than supplant and erode associational life in civil society. He argues that while television is "pure, unadulterated evil," at least time online tends to trade off with time viewing television.[2]

This paper investigates the relationship between engagement with community life—both offline and online—and engagement with politics—both offline and online. We center our research on an empirical investigation of online and offline community interactions in relation to online and offline local political participation in America. Our central research question is, *are political practices online simply an extension of offline*

---

[2] Personal communication March 2001.

political practices? Building on Tocqueville's analysis, we take governance as a communicative relationship between the political community and the authorities of the regime (Easton 1965, Bang 2003). As a communications technology, there is significant reason, then, to investigate the role the Internet plays in this process of governance. We begin by outlining our conceptual considerations and outline specific research questions by drawing upon and relating literatures on civil society and democracy, political participation, and social informatics—that is the study of information technology and social change (Kling 2000). We then proceed with an analysis of data from a survey regarding online and offline local community and political interactions and last draw some conclusions regarding the role the Internet is playing in our local community and political practices.

Theoretical Considerations

Conceptually, Tocqueville took democracy to refer to "on the whole, more a type of society and manner of acting than a kind of political system, and for the most part, he took the former as more important than the latter" (Gunnell 2004: 49).[3] Tocqueville advocated a decentralized image of the practices of governance spread across the multitude of civil society organizations throughout local communities. Such institutions were instrumental in reconnecting individuals with the community, thereby counteracting the forces of "economic self interest" and "the desire for material gain…that tended to depoliticize society and draw people away from public affairs and communal activity" (Gunnell 2004: 51). This was a particularly important function of localities since Tocqueville took local communities to be the central theater for democratic voices, because "in no other stage of government does the body of citizens exercise a more immediate influence" (Tocqueville 2000: 68). Our research, then, is concerned with the relationship between associational life and participation in local politics in both online and offline mediums. We begin this section with a synthesis of the offline civil society

---

[3] In fact James Bryce derided Tocqueville's focus on the "moral and social sphere" and argues in favor of centering the study of American democracy on the functioning of its institutions (Bryce 1890, p. 4).   This contrasts significantly with much of the more recent empirical work on democracy and civil society today (e.g. Putnam 1993, 2000 and Tarrow 1996) which tend to focus on institutional outputs rather than micropolitical practices.

and political participation literature and then reread this literature in light of recent work regarding the Internet.

Civil Society and Democratic Politics

Until the nineteenth century, civil society "was synonymous with the state or political society," equating civil society with the development of a system whereby persons and groups resolved disputes via a system of laws (Rowley 1998). Tocqueville narrowed this definition by contrasting political society to a domain within "civil life" populated by associations formed "without reference to political objects" (Tocqueville 2000: 63). Tocqueville takes such associations as the basis on which human progress in dealing with the needs of the community is achieved. That such associations both serve as vehicles for persons regardless of status in society to articulate ideas and interests as well as to cultivate an ethos of public spiritedness within the political community. For Tocqueville even the family becomes an important association interpellated by the political institutions and dominant cultural ethos.[4] However, he adds that civil associations are fecund rather than feckless because political associations cultivate effective habits of association. He writes, "*Political* associations may therefore be considered as large free schools, where all the members of the community go to learn the general theory of association" (Tocqueville 2000: 642).[5] He continues, "I do not say that there can be no civil associations in a country where political association is prohibited, for men can never live in society without embarking in some common undertakings; but I maintain that in such a country civil associations will always be few in number, feebly planned, unskillfully managed, that they will never form any vast designs, or that they will fail in the execution of them" (Tocqueville 2000: 643). In Tocqueville's

---

[4]More recently, researchers point as to the reciprocal relationship between the institution of the household (or family) and the political system as another form of association that can be a politically relevant element in the constitution of the political community. Examples include the household constitutes an important site in cultivating political orientations (Myers-Walls and Somali 2001) as well as its members' proclivity to participate politically (Gray 2003). Mary Ann Glendon (1995) describes the family as one of the key "seedbeds of virtue" and citizenship. Additionally, the household serves as an important unit for analyzing many of the relationships between the political community and authorities, insofar as many of the demands household members communicate to the political system relate to needs and interests shared by those in the household (Wolfe 1998). For this reason, we empirically evaluate some aspects of political practices and community life at the level of the household later in the paper.
[5] *Italics* added. In this chapter Tocqueville's central aim is rebutting concerns that the legalization of political associations would destroy community tranquility and produce social instability.

understanding, civil associations are beneficial to the extent members "bring their political habits into private life rather than the reverse" (Wolin 2001, p. 258). That is to say, associations are beneficial if they are designed to bring a public ethos into private matters rather than a private or ethos into the public realm rendering it more social rather than political.

Tocqueville took political associations as playing a crucial role in the circulation of ideas and the uniting of persons in moral causes. Henrik Bang highlights the communicative element in this process, something less pronounced in Tocqueville's writings (Bang 2003). Associations within the local community become places where people discuss and formulate opinions about political matters and also serve as vehicles to voice views to local political authorities. The otherwise hierarchical configuration of the relationship between the political community and the government is not only somewhat flattened, but governance becomes a more distinctly communicative activity and politics is said to be democratic to the extent it is dialogical (Bang 2003). Hence political decisions do not simply reflect the political rationalities of the authorities and regime but the dialogue—as it exists in greater or lesser degrees—between authorities and members of the political community.

Robert Putnam has brought considerable intellectual creativity and methodological rigor to social scientific study of the relationship between civil society and government. However, he elides distinctions between interactions with everything from political groups to community picnics to, of course, bowling leagues (Putnam 1993, 1995c, 2000). His principal aim is to explain how civil society "makes democracy work." He takes a fairly institutionalist understanding of what constitutes democracy focusing his attention on institutional efficiency, responsiveness, and satisfaction with the outputs of the political system rather than the practices of members of the political community.[6] Drawing upon a wide variety of data sources in both the United States and Italy, Putnam has demonstrated a positive relationship between aggregate levels of community engagement in a region and the responsiveness and effectiveness of government institutions (Putnam 1993, 2000). This raises a question whether Putnam is correct in assuming that community involvement in general deepens democracy or

---

[6] In this regard, his work represents another significant break for the Tocquevillian tradition.

whether only involvement in certain kinds of associations is associated with deepening democracy.[7]

From the distinctions we have described, we derive three analytic types of associations: (1) political, (2) community, and (3) social.[8] Political groups are those directed at the pursuit of "political objects." Community associations are groups formed without a direct relationship to the pursuit of political objects, but which draw in the political habits of members and are directed at community interests rather than private interests. Finally, social groups are directed at the pursuit of private interests and fail to bring a public spiritedness into the association.[9] These conceptual distinctions will allow us to explore relationships between different types of associational involvement and political participation.

The rich literature on political participation notes a relationship between participation in different organizational types and political participation (Verba, Nie, Kim 1978, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995—hereafter VSB, Rosenstone and Hanson 1993). However, they place this against a backdrop of socioeconomic status (SES)—education, household income, and occupational status—as a powerful predictor of political participation in the United States. Consistently, this line of research indicates that those who are wealthier, more educated, and from higher occupational classes tend to participate at higher rates than other classes. Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward observe that "the United States is the only major democratic nation in which the less-well-off are, as well as the young and minorities, are substantially underrepresented in the electorate" (Piven and Cloward: 3). Based on their reading of the survey data regarding electoral preferences, Piven and Cloward argue that these disparities in participation

---

[7] This is a question that is obviously irreducible to empirical content and hinges in some ways on how one defines democracy. This paper has been developing a participatory account of democracy whereby democracy is understood in terms of participatory activities taken by members of the political community aimed at influencing the political system. This contrasts with Putnam's institutional and output view of democracy.

[8] These categories are not necessarily static. That is, any association may transition from one type of organization to another. For purposes of our survey, we depend on respondents classify their associations in terms of how they understand their world.

[9] This category is crucial to Hannah Arendt's (1958) critique of civil society. She argues that in the modern world we are seeing the expansion of social life crowding out and supplanting political life.

matter and, for instance, made the difference allowing Reagan to defeat Carter in 1980 (11).[10] Hence SES matters because disparities in participation distort democracy.

The two principle factors associated with political participation include motivation and capability (VSB: 3). Motivation simply refers to a variety of selective material, social and civic gratifications as well as collective benefits from desired policies (VSB: 108-112). Capabilities refer to politically relevant resources such as time, money, and "civic skills" or organizational and communicative competencies. VSB note "that both the motivation and capacity to take part in politics have their roots in the non-political institutions with which the individuals are associated during the course of their lives. The foundations for future political involvements are laid early in life—in the family and in school" (3). This model, then, takes capabilities to be resources that functionally enable the otherwise motivated to participate politically (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995, Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001).[11]

Cyber Society and Democratic Politics

There has been considerable debate regarding the relationship between the Internet and community life. We take the Internet as a social space distinct from but not subjugated to offline social spaces. Work by Mark Poster (2001), Diana Saco (2002), and Sherry Turkle (1995) suggests the Internet constitutes a new medium that enables the development of new forms of community that are not necessarily subject to the constraints of traditional, offline community life. The Internet affords a considerable degree of anonymity.[12] Bereft of bodies and physical locations as identity markers within cyber society, Poster observes, "one invents oneself and one knows that others invent themselves, while each interpellates the others through those inventions" (Poster 2001: 75). Like Tocqueville's understanding of participatory practices as at least as central to democracy as political institutions, Bruce Gronbeck argues that, "Civic engagement…is

---

[10] That is, based on survey data, those who were eligible but did not vote decidedly favored Carter over Reagan and, had they voted, Carter would have won the election.

[11] While this suggests a mechanistic relationship between resources and participation, this is not to reduce their position to a material determinist argument: certainly some participate who have lower resource levels than would otherwise be predicted by their statistical models.

[12] Not all interactions are equally anonymous. Certain communications are treated simply as extensions of offline contact between persons known to each other (e.g. email) while other communications are designed to bring together persons who would have not otherwise interacted offline (e.g. online dating).

as much a matter of understanding the building and maintenance of political identity…as it is about getting legislation passed. Nowhere is that more clear than in politically interested listservs and chat rooms, where individuals peddle their politics and form individual and collective identities" (Gronbeck 2004: 28).

A considerable amount of research has focused on the relationship between the Internet and the strength of offline social ties.[13] A number of researchers argue that Internet use fosters increased levels of social alienation and weakened offline social connections (Kraut et al. 1998, Nie; Hillygus, and Erbbring 2002; Dreyfus 2001). Other research argues that online and offline connectivity are mutually reinforcing (UCLA Center for Communication Policy 2003, Horrigan 2001). While these two sets of research focus on the relationship between Internet use and offline social life, Keith Hampton's studies of "Netville," a Toronto suburb, focused more specifically on the nature of online social ties and community. He finds that the denizens of Netville formed a distinct sense of community online and that the Internet fosters the development of weak social ties that can facilitate collective action (Hampton 2002, 2003). By contrast, in a study of one of the most publicized community networks in the United States, David Silver notes that much of the potential for vibrant community life within the Blacksburg Electronic Village is co-opted by its predominantly consumerist ethos (Silver 2003). The contrast between offline and online associational interaction raises some important questions about the nature of group interaction and its relevance for deepening democracy. The Internet, if it fosters ties at all seems to foster weaker ties, though it may multiply ties and facilitate the deepening of offline social ties. In an Internet environment, we are largely known to others through our textual and symbolic exchanges rather than through an embodied and spatially localized biographical self characteristic of face to face encounters (Poster 1990).[14] While, Hampton argues that our ties cultivated online, though weaker, are sufficient for collective action to emerge out of interactions in cyber society, Tocqueville viewed face to face contact as central to the functioning of associations noting that when people "have the opportunity of seeing each other, means of execution are readily combined, and opinions are

---

[13] For a fairly extensive review of this literature, see DiMaggio, et al (2004).
[14] This is not to deny the symbolic economy operating in face-to-face encounters. However, the Internet raises the symbolic exchange to a direct and overt status.

maintained with a degree of warmth and energy that written language cannot approach" (Tocqueville: 219-220).

While many theorists have hoped for democratic renaissance in terms in the form of enriched community and an explosion of participation (Rheingold 1993, Sclove 1995, Budge 1996), much of the empirical work under the heading of political science suggests that the Internet tends to reinforce the same social and economic structures that otherwise constitute *determinants* of political practices (Bimber 2003 and 1998, Margolis and Resnick 2000, Hill and Hughes 1998, and Davis 1999).   As Margolis and Resnick argue, "There is extensive political life on the Net, but it is mostly an extension of political life off the Net" (14). Hill and Hughes argue that, "The Internet is a supplement to political discourse, not a gigantic paradigm shift" (179).   Finally, Pippa Norris suggests that "there is a mutually reinforcing interaction in digital politics" whereby "in the longer term…as a result of accumulated experience, this process can be expected to positively reinforce civic engagement" (Norris 2001: 230).

If Norris is correct, there is significant reason to be concerned that the "digital divide" between those who are online and those who lack Internet access will only exacerbate the SES disparities in political participation levels (Warschauer 2003: 178). This is because, while the digital divide may be narrowing as the costs of the technology declines, this divide still mirrors the SES stratification in political participation. However, it is not enough to merely consider the digital divide in such instrumental terms as to whether or not users have access to the Internet. For some, the digital divide is an impossible game of catch-up because "by the time the marginalized group makes any headway in bridging some aspect of any of these divides, the gap widens to an unfanthomable chasm" (Paryali 2005: 42). Such a result might be predicted by Piven and Cloward's pessimism regarding the entrenched structural constraints in place to keep lower income and minority residents from participating in the political system. On the other hand, in a prescient passage penned during the Internet's infancy, French theorist, Michel de Certeau hypothesized that "experiences with the 'Web' and 'E-mail' show that message exchanging and interactivity make it possible to break up the stodginess of local networks and to establish relations with new partners for given projects of common interest." These new networks, he argues, allow for the formation of "small experimental

groups…[enabling] a sort of power of local consciousness-raising for younger generations (whose limited material means and still uncertain status would otherwise hold them in the networks of their superiors)" (de Certeau 1997:110-111).[15]

This literature on the Internet raises a number of questions about the relationship the relationship between participation in different types of associations and participation in politics as well as the relationship of material resources to politics. Answering these questions should simultaneously answer questions directly about the relationship between associations and political participation both offline as well as online as well as allow us to better understand offline participation through our understanding of online participation. In particular we raise the following two research questions that orient our empirical exploration:

> 1. What sorts of associational interactions—both political/community/social and online/offline—are associated with political participation—both online and offline?

> 2. Are there differences between those who participation online and those who participate offline?

Data and Methods

We investigate these two questions on the basis of data collected from a telephone random digit dialing (RDD) survey of U.S. households and individuals in 2003 (N=1203). We surveyed 12 geographically diverse metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) on a variety of household and individual practices with respect to their use of information technology in the home and interactions in the local community. The MSAs were selected on the basis of a having a relatively high degree of broadband Internet access and use in the home under the assumption that if Internet use is implicated in changing political practices, we would most likely find evidence of it occurring here first. From each MSA, 100 respondents were surveyed based on a probability sample with an overall response rate of 44.3%.[16] While these areas tend to include wealthier communities, there is some diversity in income distribution, with 30% of our sample reporting yearly household incomes of $50,000 or less and more than 12% of our sample earning $30,000

---

[15] ( ) in original.
[16] A full listing of the MSAs can and response rate information can be found in Appendix 1.

or less. Furthermore, there is diversity in the types of communities in our survey; they include rural areas, small towns, suburbs, and cities. The sample is 85% percent Caucasian, 4.8% African American, 4.6% Asian American, and 3.5% Hispanic, and the rest classified themselves otherwise or declined to state an ethnicity.

Community Interaction Measures

We operationalized community involvement through the respondents' reports on self and household engagement in a variety of community activities in the preceding year.[17] These were based on categories of community engagement explored by Putnam (2000) and Tocqueville. In terms of offline interactions we take the household as the reference point for our analysis given Tocqueville's observation that the family was a site interpellated by community and political practices in the local community. Four types of offline community involvement were measured:

-Respondent or household member has been a member of a local club or organization.
-Respondent or household member attended a neighborhood event.
-Respondent or household member planned a neighborhood event.
-Respondent or household member held office in a local club or organization.

Cyber society interactions were measured in terms of the frequency (Often, Sometimes, Hardly Ever, or Never) with which respondents used the Internet for contacting or obtaining information from each of four types of associational groups.

-A local community group or association
-A local group with whom they shared a particular interest, activity, or hobby
-A political group or special interest group
-A religious group or organization

We classified these interactions with respect to the three conceptual categories previously derived: political, community-oriented, and social. These classifications are depicted in Table 1.

Table 1: Taxonomy of Offline and Online Groups

Political	Community-Oriented	Social
Online Political Group	Online Community Group	Attend Neighborhood Event
Planned Event Offline	Online Religious Group	Member of a Local Club
Held Office in Offline Organization		Online Hobby Group

[17] Exact question wordings can be found in Appendix 2.

Political Participation Measures

We measured online political engagement and participation in terms of three modes of participation. Each item was dichotomous (Yes or No), and the data were used to construct an additive scale, ranging from 0-3, based on the number of activities engaged[18] in during the preceding year. For this measure, the following items were derived from the work of VSB (1995):

-Respondent or a household member contacted a public official in the local government online.
-Respondent or a household member obtained information about past/upcoming public meetings online.
-Respondent participated in an online discussion about local politics.

<u>Offline political participation</u> was also assessed by constructing an additive scale based on two measures of activities engaged in during the preceding year. These were also derived from research by VSB (1995):

-Respondent or a household member attended a local public meeting.
-Respondent or a household member contacted a local public official on the telephone, in person, or in writing.

Offline Nonparticpatory Engagement

Finally, we also included as an independent variable a key form of offline engagement (taken from the work of Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995) with the local political system where the respondent was considered a consumer or user of government services, rather than an active participant in the process of governance. The item for this measure was:

-Respondent or a household member visited a city office to complete transactions like paying bills or taxes.

Results

Frequency data on the community interaction variables are displayed in Figure 1. In terms of online activities, the most frequently reported activity is contacting a hobby or

---

[18] While VSB make a distinction between political participation and engagement, we use these terms interchangeably in this paper to refer to a host of participatory and information collecting activities.

interest group (57%), followed by contacting a community group (35%). Political groups (28%) and religious groups (23%) are less frequently contacted. This could be the result of a lag in these latter groups going online or these data could simply reflect a preference amongst users away from political and religious uses of the Internet in favor hobby and community interests (or a combination of both factors). Among the offline activities, membership in an organization (62%) has the highest proportion of participants, followed by attending a neighborhood event (60%), planning a neighborhood event (31%), and holding an office in a local organization (22%). These data indicate a great deal of variation across both offline and online community interactions.

Figure 1: Percent Active in Online and Offline Community Life
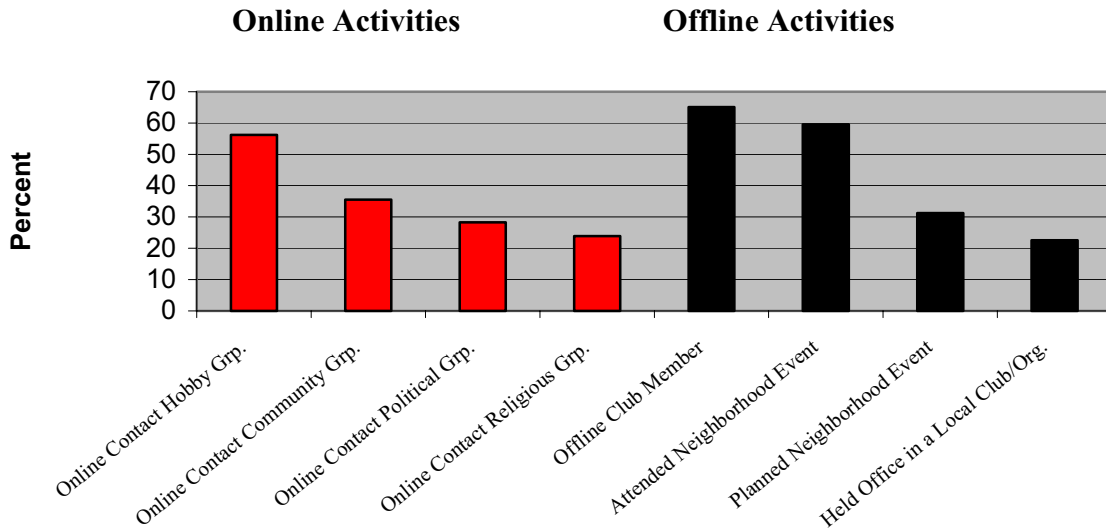
Note: For each of the offline activities, this percentage refers to the percentage of households replying affirmatively that they engaged in the particular activity while each of the online activities refers to the percentage of respondents indicating that they "often" or "sometimes" have contacted a particular type of group online.

Our dependent variables are additive indexes of affirmative responses to each participatory action. Online participation constitutes a scale ranging from 0-3 while offline participation ranges from 0-2. These activities make up a variety of different approaches—both offline and online—to participating in the political community. The distribution of each of the individual components for the indexes can be found in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Offline and Online Political Activities
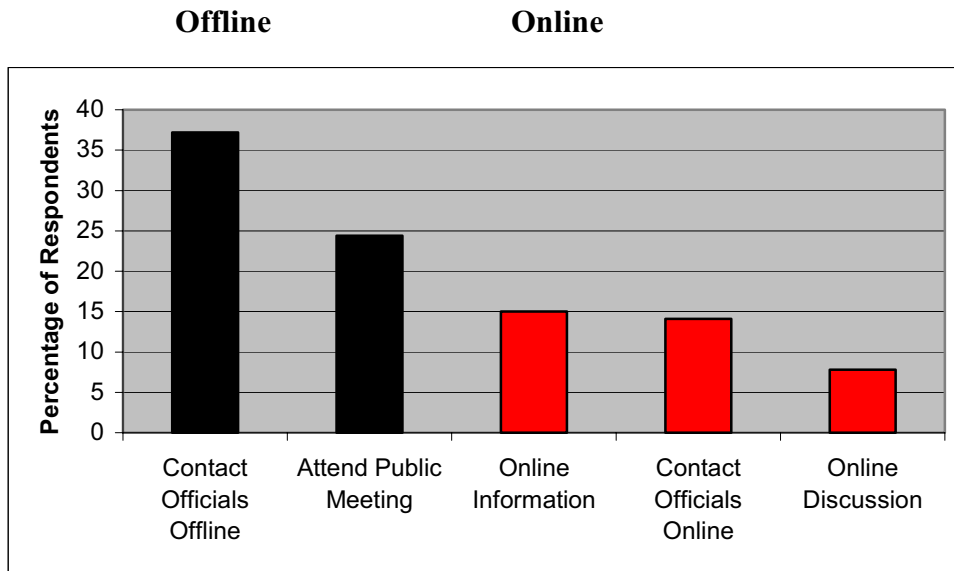
Note: The above activities were asked regarding the household with the exception of the question regarding online political discussion which was asked at the level of the respondent.

Figure 2 indicates that the most commonly engaged in activities are offline: contacting a public over the phone, in writing, or in person (37.2%) and attending a public meeting (24.4%). In terms of online forms of political engagement, 15% have looked up information regarding a past or upcoming public meeting online, 14.1% have contacted a public official online, and 7.8% have engaged in online discussion about politics. The resulting distributions and standard deviation of the dependent variables are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2: Online and Offline Political Activities: Descriptive Statistics

Number of Participatory Activities

	0 (Valid %)	1 (Valid %)	2 (Valid %)	3 (Valid %)	N (Std. Dev)
Online Participation	242 (47.4%)	160 (31.3%)	84 (16.4%)	25 (4.9%)	511 (.88912)
Offline Participation	648 (54.3%)	352 (29.5%)	194 (16.2%)	N/A	1194 (.74906)

These figures represent the valid percents for each index. Hence, the online participation index reflects the population of those in our sample who have visited a local government website—though not necessarily used that interaction to participate politically.[19] Despite this difference however, we find that the percentages of those reporting one participatory activity or more to be roughly equal between offline and online modes of participation.

We examined cyber society and civil society with respect to its relationship to online and offline participation in the local political community using OLS regression models. The first model predicts online participation and the second model predicts offline participation. This will help us answer our two research questions regarding the types of associational interactions related to participation in the political community as well as analyze differences between those who participate offline and those who participate online. The results are displayed in Table 3 on the next page. To begin with, we find respondent education is interestingly unrelated to participation. This may be an indication that the experience of living in a place is more important for engagement in local politics than a formal level of education, however this finding requires additional investigation.[20] Additionally, we find a relationship between households that have completed a transaction at a public office and those that politically engaged online (B = .193, p < .05) and this relationship is particularly strong for offline engagement (B = .290, p < .001). This result is not surprising in the case of offline participation since the dependent variable includes attendance at a public meeting and both processing a transaction at a government facility and attending a public meeting require respondents to travel to a government office. In the case of online participation, this shows that if people have contact with the government for even nonpolitical reasons, they are still more likely to be engaged politically.

---

[19] Indeed, visitors to local government websites are more likely to use it for nonpolitical purposes such as applying for a permit or looking up information on government services.

[20] This non-finding may also be a result of the disparity between education as an individual level variable and the measures of participation at the level of the household. By contrast, the majority of our variables are measured at the level of the household. This could produce spurious positive relationships between variables aggregated at the level of the household (if one attempts to deduce individual level relationships between these findings), however null findings between our independent and dependent variables should be unaffected since a null finding at the level of the household would also apply at the level of the individuals who comprise the household.

Table 3: Predicting Online and Offline Participation in the Political System

Variable	Online Participation B (Std. Error)	Std. B	Offline Participation B (Std. Error)	Std. B
Constant	-.041 (.285)		-.610*** (.143)	
Online Community Grp.	.026 (.046)	.030	.026 (.026)	.035
Online Hobby Grp.	.057 (.039)	.071	-.015 (.022)	-.023
Online Political Grp.	.212*** (.044)	.246	.140*** (.025)	.183
Online Religious Grp.	.015 (.040)	.018	.001 (.024)	.002
Offline Club Member	.183 (.099)	.096	.083 (.053)	.055
Attend Neigh. Event	.097 (.093)	.051	.061 (.050)	.039
Planned Neigh. Event	.308** (.097)	.153	.137* (.057)	.075
Held Office in Local Club	.131 (.092)	.073	.142** (.054)	.088
News from Internet (Dummy)	.168 (.101)	.077	.006 (.061)	.003
Offline Transaction	.193* (.079)	.109	.290*** (.044)	.193
Years Lived in Community	.004 (.031)	.006	.038* (.017)	.073
Respondent Age	-.004 (.032)	-.006	.070*** (.017)	.134
Respondent Education	-.017 (.021)	-.038	.012 (.011)	.034
HH Income	-.035 (.029)	-.055	.056*** (.016)	.106
Race (White)	-.130 (.127)	-.046	-.048 (.066)	-.022
Respondent Gender	.031 (.080)	.071	.007 (.044)	.005

OLS Regression:
Online: R = ..464, Rsq. = .216, Std. Error of Est. = .79364
Offline: R = .461, Rsq = .212, Std. Error of Est. = .67055
***p =< .001, **p =< .01, *p =< .05

Furthermore, there are noticeable distinctions between both the relationship between associational types and online and offline political participation as well as the various predictors of offline and online participation. First, these results suggest that interactions with online community groups, online hobby groups, and online religious

groups are not related with participation in the political community. In fact, of the online associations, only interaction with political groups is associated with political engagement—whether offline or online (B = 212, p < .001 and B = .140, p < .001, respectively). This variable is, unsurprisingly, the strongest predictor in the case of online participation and the second strongest predictor of offline participation. Furthermore, in the case of offline community life, only planning a neighborhood event is associated with online participation (B = .308, p < .01). In the case of offline participation, only planning a neighborhood event (B = .137, p < .05) and holding office in a local club (B = .142, p < .01) appear related to engagement with the political system. By contrast membership in a club or attendance at a neighborhood event is unrelated to either offline or online participation.

There are notable differences between the predictors of offline and online participation. Unsurprisingly, as noted above, contact with a political group online is more strongly associated with online participation than it is with offline participation. These data indicated additional distinctions. With the exception of respondent education variable noted above, the SES variables are related to offline participation, as we would anticipate, with household income strongly related to offline participation (B = .056, p < .001). Furthermore other status variables including respondent age (B = .070, p < .001) and years lived in the community are also related offline participation (B = .038, p < .05). All three of these status variables, however, are unrelated to online participation. In fact, while insignificant, the coefficients are negative in the case of respondent age and household income.

However, these non-findings of status relationships for online participation may be an artifact of the subsample, which is a population of only those who have visited their local government website. We noted at the outset that while the majority of our sample reports an annual household income above $50,000, there is a great deal of variation in the overall sample. To determine the extent to which this variation persists in the subsample, we ran a series of correlations between the screening question—whether or not the respondent/household had visited their local government website—and these three status variables. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Online Participation Subsample Correlations with Status Variables

Variable	Visited Local Government Website
Years Lived in Community	.067*
Household Income	-.059
Respondent Age	-.017

Pearson interval by interval correlation coefficients
* p < .05

These results suggest that apart from "years lived in the community," there is not a significant relationship between the subsample and the status variables. In the case of years lived in the community, those who have lived in the community are slightly more likely to have visited their local government's website which means our subsample is slightly biased in the direction of those who have lived in the community longer to begin with.

Discussion and Conclusions

The general question this paper speaks to concerns whether and in what ways the Internet is implicated in changing practices in the local political community. In doing so we do not consider the Internet simply as a supplement to offline practices, but instead seek to understand each medium on its own terms. We addressed that question in terms of two specific research questions. The first question regards what kinds of associational interactions are related to engagement in the political system. Our second question was whether or not the same relationships between associational involvements as well as SES function the same across modes of engagement or not. In analyzing practices on the Internet, then, we may also gain additional insights into offline political and associational practices. In general we find support for a differentiated image of civil society and cyber society in terms of its relationship with deepening democratic participation as well as we find that politics online is not simply an extension of politics offline but is somewhat subject to different mediated dynamics than its offline counterpart. We draw three specific conclusions from our above data analysis.

First, we find support for a divide between political, community-oriented, and social interactions within civil society with respect to their relationship with political participation. The above data analysis indicates that in terms of cyber society *only interaction with political groups is associated with political engagement—both offline and online*. Contacting online religious, hobby, and community groups is not associated with offline or online political engagement. Furthermore, not all offline interactions in the local community are associated with political engagement either. Only planning a neighborhood event or, in the case offline participation, holding office in a local club or organization is associated with political engagement. Our analysis provides some empirical support for Tocqueville's conceptualization of the relationship between political and community life in contrast to the view popularized recently by Robert Putnam.[21] Engagement with the regime and authorities within the political system is related only with interactions with political groups or leadership positions within the community that would bring a political ethos into their interactions with the group. In the words of Robert Gannett, "we simply cannot equate family picnics with various types of political engagement if we hope to make our democracy work. But at the very least, if we insist on doing so, we should remove Alexis de Tocqueville as an expert witness or national cheerleader for this saccharine project" (Gannett 2003: 2).

Second, we find evidence that SES, age, and length of time lived in the community matter less for online participation than offline participation. This finding is particularly interesting given that these are central components of conventional models of participation. Furthermore, given the digital divide, would otherwise expect the Internet would further exacerbate the already significant SES disparities in political participation. The SES variables are generally significant predictors of offline participation as we would expect them to be—in particular household income. Additionally, length of time in living in the community is another community status variable that previous work has associated with offline participation at both the local and the national level (VSB 1995: 452-3). This is consistent with previous work concerning the participants in online political discussions (Muhlberger 2004). Our finding suggests that *the Internet's erasure*

---

[21] We make no claims to fully "test" or explore these theories nor do we attempt to make causal claims regarding the directionality of the statistical relationships we present here.

of traditional markers of identity frees persons from some of the constraints operating in offline political contexts. In this sense, as there are greater degrees of social inclusion online, we might find greater levels of participation in the political community.

Third, not only does the Internet seem to provide people with an alternative to their offline communities, *the Internet also seems to free them from traditional authority structures that might otherwise keep some with marginalized identities from participating* as de Certeau hypothesized over twenty years ago. Reading this finding back on our understanding of the conventional, resource model of political participation elucidated above by VSB, this finding would seem to challenge their conclusions. If financial resources, for example, were a prerequisite for offline participation as the model states, then we would expect it to also be a prerequisite for online political participation. The fact that it is not the case suggests that resources are less functional prerequisites for participation amongst the otherwise motivated, but status markers indicating who is accepted as a participant in the local political community. This interpretation of the data is consistent with previous work by Heilig and Mundt finding that those from lower SES categories were reluctant to contact city officials in person because they felt they would be treated in a condescending manner (Heilig and Mundt 1984).

From these findings, we can suggest some broader inferences regarding the function of the Internet. Our findings lend support to Poster, Gronbeck, and de Certeau's celebration of the possibility that the Internet can serve as an interactive and democratic site for the production, consumption, and communication of information. The Internet seems to be a space where those less rooted in the offline community can congregate for both social and political purposes. While there are politically motivated persons who are often active both online and offline, cyber society also seems to provide an environment where some who are otherwise inactive are freed from the traditional offline authority structures that might deter their participation. The Internet, then, seems to constitute a space outside the normal authority patterns that structure beliefs about political possibilities. This is not to suggest that authority structures have not or will not emerge

in cyber society; however, our data indicate that there are differences between offline community authority structures and those existing or emerging online. Furthermore, in terms of sites, both offline and online, for the cultivation of democratic modes of membership in the political community, it seems there are associations—and then there are associations of political consequence. It is only through distinctly political organizations that we find evidence of a relationship between associational engagement and democratic participation within the local political community.

While our research indicates that democratic practices are, indeed, occurring in cyber society—and in some ways that differ from offline democratic engagement—additional research will be necessary to delineate the role each mode of interaction plays in the public policy process. Such research could also explore the significance that policymakers at the local government level attribute to different modes of communication and the extent to which the mode of communication matters in terms of setting public agendas and defining the policy debate. Additional research could also explore the nature of online political discussions in terms of the role they play in opinion formation for members of the political community. In exploring such research issues, we will contribute to our understanding of how cyber society might influence both our modes of democratic engagement and also the dialogue of governance between the political community and the authorities of the regime.

Appendix 1: National Survey of 12 Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs)

These data comes from a probability sample of twelve MSAs (listed below). The data were collected using a random digit dialing drawing 100 respondents from each of the 12 MSAs conducted in the summer of 2003. The overall response rate for the survey was 44.3% using AAPOR response rate method 2.[22]

$$\frac{(I+P)}{(I+P) + (R+NC+O) + (UH+UO)}$$

Note: I=completed interviews, P=partial interviews, R=refusals/breakoffs, NC=non-contacts, O=others, UH=unknown if housing unit, UO=unknown other. The intuition underlying this formula is that the response rate is the number of interviews divided by the number of interviews, plus the number of non interviews, plus all the cases of unknown eligibility.

The respondents were 44% male, 56% female.

MSAs

1. Orange County, CA
2. San Francisco, CA
3. Olympia, WA
4. Austin-San Marcos, TX
5. Boston, MA
6. Des Moines, IA
7. Ft Collins-Loveland, CO
8. Middleton-Summerset-Hunterdon, NJ
9. Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN
10. Portland, ME
11. Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill, NC
12. Washington DC-MD-VA

---

[22] For more information, see the American Association for Public Opinion Research site at: http://www.aapor.org/default.asp?page=survey_methods/standards_and_best_practices/standard_definitions#response.

Appendix 2: Question Wordings

Offline Community Life Questions:

In the last year, (have you) (has anyone in your household) done any of the following?
[Dispositions: 1 = yes, 0 = no]

a. Been a member of a local club or organization
b. Attended a neighborhood event
c. Planned a neighborhood event
d. Held office in a local club or organization

Online Community Life Questions:

As I read a list of groups, please tell me if you have ever used the Internet to be in contact
with or get information form each type of group. (First/Next), how about… (read in
random order) [Dispositions: often (4), sometimes (3), rarely (2), or never (1) unless
otherwise noted]

a. A local community group or association
b. A group for people with whom you share a particular interest or hobby
c. A political group or special interest group
d. A religious group or organization

Government Website Questions:

In the last year, (have you) (has anyone in your household)…? (read in random order)
[Dispositions: 1 = yes, 0 = no]

a. Obtained information about government services on your local government website?
b. Downloaded forms for home related needs on your local government website?
c. Completed transactions like paying bills or taxes on your local government website?
d. Found out about past or upcoming local council meetings on your local government
website?
e. Contacted public offices on your local government website?

Offline Government Interaction Questions:

Now I'd like to ask you some questions about activities not involving the Internet or
email. In the last year (have you) (has anyone in your household)…? [Dispositions: 1 =
yes, 0 = no]

a. Contacted a local public official on the phone, in writing, or in person?
b. Visited a city office to complete transactions like paying bills or taxes
c. Attended city council, planning commission, or similar meetings

Primary Source for Local News:

When you need to get information about local politics and community affairs, which source do you depend on the most? (Read in random order):

1. Television
2. Newspaper
3. Internet
4. Radio
5. Friends/Family/Neighbors
6. Some Other Source

These responses were recoded into binary variables for the first 5 options whereby 1 = primary source for news and 0 = not primary source for news.

Bibliography

Alesinia, Alberto and Wacziarg, Romain (2000). "The Economics of Civic Trust." In *Disaffected Democracies: What's Troubling the Trilateral Countries?* eds. Pharr and Putnam, pp: 149-170. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Arendt, Hannah (1958). *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bang, Henrik (2003). *Governance as Social and Political Communication*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.

Berry, William D. (1993). *Understanding Regression Assumptions*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Budge, Ian (1996). *The New Challenge of Direct Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Brady, Henry E., Verba, Sidney, and Schlozman, Kay Lehman (1995). "Beyond SES: A Resource Model of Political Participation." *American Political Science Review*. 89 (2): 271-294.

Bryce, James (1890). *The American Commonwealth*. New York: MacMillan Company.

Burns, Nancy, Schlozman, Kay Lehman, and Verba, Sidney (2001). *The Private Roots of Public Action: Gender, Equality, and Political Participation*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Certeau, Michel de. (1997). *The Capture of Speech and Other Political Writings*. trans. Conley. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Culnan, Mary J. (2005). "Online Communities: Infrastructure, Relational Cohesion, and Sustainability." Presented at the Workshop on Social Informatics: Extending the Contributions of Professor Rob Kling to the Analysis of Computerization Movements. March 11-12, Irvine, CA.

DiMaggio, Paul et al. (2004). "Social Implications of the Internet." *Academy and the Internet*. eds. Nissenbaum and Price, pp: 35-70. New York: Peter Lang.

Dreyfus, Hubert L. (2001). *On the Internet*. New York: Routledge.

Easton, David (1979 [1965]). *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Fallows, Deborah. (2004). "The Internet and Daily Life." *Pew Internet and American Life Project*. August 11, 2004. (http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Internet_and_Daily_Life.pdf).

Gannett, Robert T. Jr. (2003). Bowling Ninepins in Tocqueville's Township. *American Political Science Review*. 97 (1): 1-16.

Glendon, Mary Ann. 1995. *Seedbeds of Virtue: Sources of Competence, Character, and Citizenship*. Lanham: Madison Books.

Gray, Mark. (2003). "In the Midst of Fellows: The Social Context of the American Turnout Decision." Presented to the 2003 American Political Science Convention. Philadelphia, PA.

Gunnell, John G. (2004). *Imaging the American Polity*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Hampton, Keith N. (2002). "Place-Based and IT Mediated 'Community.'" *Planning Theory and Practice*. 3 (2): 228-231.

Hampton, Keith N. (2003). "Grieving for a Lost Network: Collective Action in a Wired Suburb." *The Information Society*. 19 (5): 417-428.

Heilig, Peggy and Mundt, Robert J. (1984). *Your Voice at City Hall*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Hill, Kevin A. and Hughes, John E. (1998). *Cyberpolitics: Citizen Activism in the Age of the Internet*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.

Horrigan, John B. 2001. "Online Communities: Networks that Nurture Long-Distance Relationships and Local Ties." *Pew Internet and American Life Project*. (http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Communities_Report.pdf).

King, Gary (1989). *Unifying Political Methodology: The Likelihood Theory of Statistical Inference*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Kling, Rob (2000). "Learning About Information Technologies and Social Change: The Contribution of Social Informatics." *The Information Society*. 16 (3), p. 217-232.

Meyers-Walls, Judith A. and Somalai, Péter (2001). *Families as Educators for Global Citizenship*. Burlington: Ashgate.

Muhlberger, Peter (2004). "Access, skill and motivation in online political discussion: Testing cyberrealism." *Democracy online: The prospects for political renewal through the Internet*, ed. Shane. New York: Routledge.

Nie, Norman, D., Hillygus, Sunshine, and Erbring, Lutz (2002). "Internet Use, Interpersonal Relations, and Sociability." *The Internet in Everyday Life*, eds. Wellman and Haythornwaite, pp. 215-243. Malden: Blackwell Publishers.

Parayil, Govindan (2005). "The Digital Divide and Increasing Returns: Contradictions of Informational Capitalism." *The Information Society*. 21 (1): 41-51.

Piven, Frances Fox and Cloward, Richard A. (2000). *Why Americans Still Don't Vote*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Poster, Mark (2001). *What's the Matter with the Internet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Putnam, Robert D. (1993). *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Putnam, Robert D. (1995a). "Bowling Alone." *Journal of Democracy*. 6 (1): 65-78.

Putnam, Robert D. (1995b). "Tuning in, Tuning out." *PS, Political Science*. 28 (4): 664-83.

Putnam, Robert D. (1995c). "Bowling Alone: An interview with Robert Putnam about America's collapsing civic life." (http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_democracy/v006/putnam.interview.html) .

Putnam, Robert D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Putnam, Robert D. (2002). *Democracies in Flux: The Evolution of Social Capital in Contemporary Society*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Rheingold, Howard (1993). *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. Reading: Addison-Wesley.

Rosenstone, Steven J. and Hanson, John Mark (1993). *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.

Sclove, Richard E. (1995). "Making Technology Democratic." in *Resisting the Virtual Life: The Culture and Politics of Information*. Brook and Boal—eds. San Francisco: City Lights.

Silver, David (2003). "Communication, Community, and Consumption: An Ethnographic Exploration of an Online City." *Virtual Publics: Policy and Community in an Electronic Age*. ed.—Kolko. pp: 327-353 New York: Columbia University Press.

Tarrow, Sidney (1996). Making social science work across space and time. *American Political Science Review*. 90 (2): 389-397.

Turkle, Sherry (1995). *Life in the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

UCLA Center for Communications Policy (2003). *The UCLA Internet report: Surveying the Digital Future Year Three*. (http://ccp.ucla.edu/pdf/UCLA-Internet-Report-Year-Three.pdf).

Verba, Sidney, Nie, Norman, and Kim, Jae-on (1978). *Participation and Political Equality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Verba, Sidney, Schlozman, Kay, and Brady, Henry (1995). *Voice and Equality: Civic Volunteerism in American Politics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Wolfe, Christopher (1998). *The Family, Civil Society, and the State*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

Wolin, Sheldon S. (2001). *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds: The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Wolin, Sheldon S. (2004 [1960]). *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*. Expanded Edition. Princeton: Princeton University Press.