The Internet and College Students’ Motivation to Vote

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As a new national election cycle begins, looking at voters’ motivation becomes the forefront of thought among politicians. This research investigates the impact of the political information available on-line on college students’ motivation to vote. The results illustrate that not only politicians, but educators should be cognizant of this civic engagement process. Schools and teachers of all levels are one the front lines of the battle to create a more informed, more involved citizenry; higher education has a strong influence on motivation to vote. Though speculation abounds regarding the information age, new access to information via technology simply does not have the impact that many, especially in the media would like to imagine. In reality, it is the educator that has the largest role in predicting college students’ motivation to vote.

The Internet and College Students’ Motivation to Vote

Much debate has surrounded the Internet and the extent to which it has revolutionized life in America—it changing everything from individuals’ shopping habits and personal communication, to education and information access. Undoubtedly, the vast majority of commentary on the Internet has emphasized that it will encourage persons around the globe to find out more about the world around them. While the Internet has been touted or decried as having a positive impact on higher education, a lingering question is whether it will change the participation of the American voter. Can the Internet make better citizens of its users?

The Internet provides a ready source of information about political contests—virtually all incumbents and challengers in the 2000 federal races, as well as all of the presidential candidates used the Internet to communicate their message to potential voters. Advocates who argue that the Internet will increase political participation hold out the promise that with ready access to information, barriers to voting will diminish. Commentators have posited that obtaining and changing voter registration will be made easier with on-line access, absentee ballots can be requested more easily, and most auspiciously, the “netizens” will be able arm themselves with knowledge about the issues and will be more likely to vote. Thus, the Internet has been lauded as being a panacea that will presumably decrease the voter apathy which prevails especially among college students. It is argued
that this new generation of high-tech savvy students will be able to overcome political indifference.

Laments of civic apathy are nothing new. The U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics recently reported that most students have insufficient information about the U.S. political process with less than fifty percent reading the national news, and only a small percentage actually discussing issues with parents. In a random national survey, only fifteen percent of respondents reported feeling highly efficacious—they felt their presence in the political arena actually mattered (Hibbing, 1995).

As all political science professors teach their students in introductory courses—since 1930, the highest voter turnout in a presidential election year was reported 62.6 and the average turnout in the last two decades has hovered somewhere between 50-55 percent of eligible citizens. More disturbing is that in mid-term elections for the last twenty-five years, approximately one-third of all eligible voters actually exercise their right to do so (Ornstein, 1998). Nowhere is this apathy more profound than in the “typical” college age student.

Studies report that young adults, from 18 to 25 years of age, are indifferent toward public affairs (Oreskes, 1990). Of the over 15 million college students in the U.S. (55% of whom are under age 24), voting rates are abysmal. Less than one-third of students have voted in presidential elections and in 1996, voter turnout for this age group was the lowest it has been since 1972 (Schackner, 2000). The Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press reports that young adults ages 18 to 25 are a generation that, “knows less, cares less, votes less, and is less critical of its leaders and institutions than young people in the past.” The Times Mirror study, appropriately called “The Age of Indifference”, found young Americans for the first time since World War II “less knowledgeable about people and events than their elders” (Editor, 1990). These are unsettling statements for a nation founded on the ideals of democracy and dependent on this generation to make decisions in the decades that lie ahead.

During the last election cycle, many popular media outlets seemingly heralded the World Wide Web as a panacea for voter apathy. “Today’s political whistle-stop campaign is all electronic, a digital democracy that is giving candidates even more ways to reach voters” (Barta 1999). Dough Bailey—political strategist—argues “Instead of being an afterthought, the Web has become a central part of our campaigns...part of our lives” (Roberts, 1999). The Pew Research Center reports that half of the American public now has access to the Internet, up from 40 percent a year ago, and just 23 percent three years ago (Barta, 1999). In California a movement is underway to allow votes to be cast over the Internet because it is a “Virtual New Hampshire: a quirky but pivotal place where campaigns are launched or scuttled, where savvy organizers and voters roam in search of action, answers and influence” (Fineman, 1999). After meeting with then Vice-President Al Gore, WebTV founder Steve Perlman gushed, “The prophets decreed that politics as we know it would yield to a post-political age in which the principles of the new economy—information based, networked, decentralized—would be applied to social problems that partisan hacks and their partisan dogmas had failed to solve” (Breslau, 1999).
For several years, the Internet has been gaining attention as it relates to elections, and the notion of “e-Democracy” has found its way into literally hundreds of newspaper articles and magazines with the last two years. The now famous and frequently misstated Gore phrase regarding his role in the invention of the Internet is the least of the modern hype concerning this new political tool. Bill Clinton was the first presidential candidate to engage in an on-line chat in 1996; a tradition recent Democratic candidate Gore continued (Barta, 1999). In 1998, Jesse Ventura, the Reform party candidate for governor of Minnesota credited Internet activities with providing his margin of victory. Indeed in his bid for Governor, Ventura raised two-thirds of his campaign funding pledges via the Internet (Barta, 1999). Today, sites are available for raising money, recruiting volunteers, and some sites even allow voters to view actual campaign events. Indeed, the first “e-scandal” developed on-line leading to an FBI investigation about whether Republican National Committee sent out spam mail to Democratic supporters (Shiver 2000).

For all these reasons, political pundits claimed that the year 2000 would be the year that the Internet played a major role in campaigns. Preliminary results from convention coverage at least, did not support such conclusions. A study at Harvard University’s Vanishing Voter Project found that among 1,000 randomly selected adults only on in 10 saw information about the Republican Convention on the Internet, and only three percent had some sort of "meaningful online connection” (Zehren 2000).

The claims of Internet grandeur to solve college student apathy found its way into the 2000 election and the targeting of students. College students were invited to log on after the first debate at DiscoverWhy.com and vote for the candidate they thought had won (Crummy, 2000). At the University of Pittsburgh, a national campaign to get out the college student vote was established through the “ivote2.com” website which sent students messages reminders about voting and provided website info to for students to do research on campus (Schackner, 2000). The Thursday before Election Day, CNN hosted the largest on-line voting exercise in the Web’s history called the “mock the vote”. Secondary students were able to cast their votes on-line with Wolf Blitzer announcing the results later that evening.

The claims are grandiose, and the possibilities are endless, but the question still remains. What impact will the Internet have on voter turnout for college students? After all, on-line chats, credit card fundraising, and interactive Web sites are of no avail if the people accessing them do not first register to vote, and then get in the car, drive to the polling place, and stand in line to cast their vote on the second Tuesday in November. Does this new "techno-access” to candidates make any difference in the rate at which citizens participate in voting?

The most reticent of the voting population—the college student—was targeted in this research. With the exception of the fluke voter turnout in Clinton’s 1992 victory, those falling between the ages of 18-34 have not voted at anything approaching a high rate since eighteen-year-olds gained suffrage in 1972. A close look at the 1998 congressional elections revealed that 84% of the 161 congressional and gubernatorial campaigns used some form of online politicking (Katz, 1999). Still, the voters ages 18-34 did not vote at any higher rate. By November 2000, experts predicted that half of the voting population will have
Internet access (Barta, 1999). Will that make any difference in citizens’ motivation to vote? More importantly, will this new age of technologically connected college students access the Internet for political events?

**Method, Data, and Hypotheses**

The experiment and survey took place at a large, urban university in North Texas during the Fall semester and large-scale election cycle to evaluate whether students were more likely to vote if they received information and stimulation regarding the election via the Internet. A sample of university students was chosen to participate in a study about the motivation of college students. The university is an optimal point for the study, because it is in a large, public school (over 27,000 students), with easy access to a large, southern metropolitan area. The university provides Internet access, and while students may not necessarily have access in their home, apartment or dormitory room, the facilities are available on-campus around the clock through 24-hour computer labs. Moreover, as part of the their political science classes students were required to access the Internet for class assignments, and specific training was given at the beginning of the course to assist students with doing Internet research. All the participants in the study were members of American Government classes taught by the same professor (N=290) with their ages ranging from 18-28. Each participating student (except for the control group) took a pretest (see Appendix A) to determine their involvement in the 1998 and 2000 election cycles, their party affiliation, and whether or not they planned to vote, as well as demographic background information that was used as control variables in the model. The participants were randomly divided into three treatment groups each containing approximately 85 students. A control group also took a post-test to insure that there were no effects from the initial survey being given in one of the classes. This control group was separated from the original pre-test group of the students. They were not told until the day after the election that there would be a survey. The results showed no substantial differences between Group 1 and the control group. Those results have been omitted, but the data are available from the authors.

Group 1 received no further contact from the Internet advocate researcher (who was not the professor). Group 2 received weekly emails containing links to Web sites containing political news and information that was helpful. Group 3 received the same email from the researcher, but this group was given more detail about each site and an email address to which they could respond with questions and comments. The purpose of dividing the three groups was to provide different levels of interaction and encouragement in order to facilitate students to become more active "netizens". While Group 3 was invited to participate actively in political, on-line discussion with the researcher, the authors were also curious about whether "smaller doses" of encouragement would lead to increased interest and perhaps voter turnout.

The post-test was conducted the day following the election for both the three groups as well as the control group. Students who were absent that day, or who incorrectly filled out the post-test survey (and therefore could not be matched with their pre-test) were not included in the results. Thus the overall number of the three groups (excluding the control group) was N=179, and with the control group N=265.
Statistical analyses addressed a series of specific questions. Each focused on one of the following hypothesized relationships between voter turnout and student stimulation from Internet activities:

1) Traditional perspectives about college age turnout should continue to be supported.
   a. Students who identify with one of the major national parties will be more likely to vote.
   b. Students who planned on voting would be more likely to vote.
   c. Students who took an active interest in the election (by watching at least one of the presidential debates) would be more likely to vote.

2) Several Internet-related perspectives should emerge.
   a. Students in Group 3 should have higher levels of turnout than Groups 1 or 2 because they received active stimulation and support to find out more information.
   b. Students in Group 1 should have the lowest voter turnout because they received no stimulation or support other than class discussion about the election.
   c. Students with a computer in their home or university residence hall should be more likely to vote because it is easier for them to access the Web.
   d. Students who access the Web more frequently especially for political information should be more likely to vote.

Results

The results below highlight that the Internet may indeed play some role in increasing student interest in voting, but that commitment by students to plan to vote, as well as identifying with one of the national parties is perhaps the most important variable for increasing voter turnout out for college age students. Relying on logistic regression—which is more appropriate when you have a dichotomous dependent variable, the model results are presented in Table 1. The overall model performed fairly well, but there were some rather interesting and counterintuitive outcomes.

First, typical hypotheses about student voter turnout and partisan identification continued to be supported—and there was an even split between the two parties (56 Republicans; 51 Democrats), as well as a fairly even divide between those who identified with the major parties and those that did not (the remainder identified themselves as Independent or no affiliation, and two persons identified with the Libertarian or Green party). Of interest is that Democrat-identified students were more likely than their Republican counterparts to have voted. The distinction, in part, may be due to the fact that Texas is Bush territory. Given the pronouncements over and over that Bush would win the state of Texas, perhaps this energized the Democrat students to turn out to vote. Alternatively, Governor Bush received broad support from southern Democrats especially when he ran for a second term of Governor; perhaps this accounts in part for the turnout. Such conclusions are tentative here, however, because it is unknown whether or not those Democrats actually voted for Bush, just that they were more likely to turn out to vote.

Second and consistent with other studies, persons who planned on voting, were more likely
to subsequently turnout to vote. These results lend credibility to strategies which focus on getting students to commit to vote well in advance of the actual election date. The initial survey was taken in August, months before the election, and all students (including those in the control group) were given information about how to get registered to vote. Even so, there were only marginal differences between the control group and Group 1 (results not shown), with students being only slightly more likely to vote in Group 1 than in the control group. Both Groups 2 and 3 received specific information about websites for registration information. This info was sent well in advance of the 30-day deadline required for Texas voters.

Third, it was posited that watching the debates would increase the likelihood of voting, but in fact it did not. While students were more likely to vote had they watched at least one of the presidential debates, the results were insignificant (p > .09). Perhaps this is not so surprising given that the survey came from an American Government class where the students were informed when the debates would be occurring, and then debates were discussed briefly in class after each debate occurred.

Fourth, the authors were also interested in whether the kind and degree of computer access increased the probability of a student turning out to vote. Moreover, does having a “Webmaster” sending information to students and providing encouragement increase the probability of voting? It was initially thought that students who have computer access at home (or in the residence hall), or students who regularly access the Internet for information, including political information would have greater awareness about political issues and would be more likely to vote. Thus, the researcher distinguished between several different types of computer access. Because students with computers at home can access the Internet more easily, perhaps they would be more likely to do so. This, in turn may lead to greater interest as a result of “surfing the Web.”

This hypothesis was, in part, correct, but does not display the entire picture. While students with computer access were more likely to vote, it is not because they necessarily use that access to find out about politics. These results are not at all what was expected. Indeed it did not matter whether the students frequently access the Internet, in general, or specifically for political information. The results from both variables were rather puzzling. Even when the groups were divided into separate user groups (specifying those daily users from the rest of the groups), accessing the Internet in general or politics in specific remains insignificant. Perhaps persons who commit to purchasing a computer (even students who live in the residence halls must bring their own) are students that are more likely to take an interest in their education. This interest does not necessarily manifest itself in accessing the Internet for information. Students who take an interest in their education are also the same set of students that are more likely to turn out to vote. In any event, future pedagogical research should investigate the way in which students use their computers and the role that the Internet plays in developing students’ active interests in their studies and their civic participation.

Finally, will the Internet be a panacea for increasing voter turnout among students? The results do not provide a definitive answer, but political pundits and political science
professors who argue such a proposition should be wary and approach the issue with caution. Indeed, it was thought that having an active “Webmaster” send information to the students and provide encouragement would increase turnout, and enhance dialogue and debate, as well as provide resources for finding answers to questions they might have. While students in this Group 3 category were more likely to vote than the students in Group 1 and the control group (who received no information), it was the students in Group 2 who had the highest voter turnout (p > .013, one-tailed test). Recall that this group only received information about “cool websites”. No further encouragement was provided, nor was there detail given about what the website contained. Perhaps in part the results indicate that there is a law of diminishing returns as it relates to the Internet and motivating voters. Piquing students’ interest is important, but spoon-feeding them information does not necessarily provide additional value.

Conclusion

The picture that emerges from this study is that we still do not understand completely whether the “e-Democracy” movement will be a cure-all for ailing American voter turnout. It was quite surprising after hearing all of the anecdotal rhetoric about the Internet and college students that there has been virtually no empirical research on whether there is a relationship between the Internet and subsequent participation by students. Most of the information is anecdotal and speculative.

The implications of this research are far-reaching. As college professors the results send one clear message: Students are most likely to vote when they plan ahead of time to do so. Civic motivation does not commence on the second Tuesday of November. Students must be motivated, and plan to vote long before Election Day. Professors, and for that matter teachers of all levels play an important role in educating the electorate, and spurring them to decide that voting is a valuable demonstration of their rights as a citizen. For politicians, the message is evident. While web-sites and targeted emails do raise voter interest in students age 18-28. However, the additional cost of an interactive “webmaster” does not appear to increase motivation to vote by a statistically significant margin. In short, the Internet is useful to college students, and those with home computer access are slightly more likely to use the Internet to gain political news and information, however, claims that the Internet will revolutionize voter behavior and turnout are broadly misstated. Future research should investigate the threshold at which using the Internet for political information actually raises the motivation to vote. Of benefit too would be an analysis of how students most use the Internet when searching for political news or information.

References


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Gender   0.76  0.39  1.94
Black    -1.17  0.63  -1.863
Asian    -0.60  1.34  -0.450
         Hispanic  0.53  0.97  0.548

Constant  -6.99  1.719154  -4.065**

N = 179
LR ÷ 2(13) = 59.
Log likelihood = -94.17**
Pseudo R² = 0.2410
* p > .05
** p > .01