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An Investigation on the Factor of Media Consumption to Civic Engagement and Political Participation

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Abstract – A national UK survey (N = 1017) examined the association between media consumption and three indicators of civic participation – likelihood of voting, interest in politics, and actions taken in response to a public issue of concern to the respondent. Multiple regression analysis was used to test the variance explained by media use variables after first controlling for demographic, social and political predictors of each indicator of participation. Media use significantly added to explaining variance in civic participation as follows. In accounting for voting, demographic and political/social factors mattered, but so too did some media habits (listening to the radio and engagement with the news). Interest in politics was accounted for by political/social factors and by media use, especially higher news engagement and lower media trust. However, taking action on an issue of concern was accounted for only by political/social factors, with the exception that slightly fewer actions were taken by those who watched more television. These findings provided little support for the media malaise thesis, and instead were interpreted as providing qualified support for the cognitive/motivational theory of news as a means of engaging the public.

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INTRODUCTION

Civic and political engagement has been the focus of scholarly debates 011 the democratic potential of the Internet and other digital technologies, as engagement is foundational to the functioning of a democracy. Empirical evidence from past research in this area has indicated that Internet use may facilitate and even promote civic and political participation, finding that easy access to political information online may be able to modestly enhance political participation in the Web era (e.g., Bimber, 2001). However, the literature seems to consider primarily the informational function of the information and communication technologies (ICTs) as the mechanism connecting ICT use and civic and political participation, overlooking the potentials of the Internet and other digital technologies as a means for political communication.

In a recent commentary on the "disciplinary divide" between political science and mass communication, Jamieson and Cappella (1996) asserted that scholars in these domains "see research through the biases created by their presuppositions and preferred methods" (p. 13). As a result, political scientists often focus their attention on civic consequences and the socioeconomic factors that shape these outcomes, leaving communication researchers to assess the content of media and the impact of messages on political activity. This duality may cause both sides to paint incomplete pictures of the relationship between media and politics. Biases in the scholarly efforts of communication researchers and political scientists may limit the validity and generalizability of their findings to a complex political world of numerous contributing variables, varied media influences, and distinct audience motivations (Jamieson & Cappella, 1996). Graber (1987) warned that as this cross-disciplinary research grows more complex, neither perspective on the "medidpolitics interface" will suffice without drawing insights from the other.

The present study attempts to address a number of these concerns. Following Brehm and Rahn (1997), I specify the process through which social capital is maintained by conceiving of it as the reciprocal relationship between civic engagement (formal group memberships and social participation) and interpersonal trust (generalized faith in the honesty and integrity of others). Further, I identify a number of demographic, situational/contextual, orientational, and attitudinal variables that affect this reciprocal relationship. I also disaggregate television viewing into genres-such as social dramas, news programming, and situation comedies that correspond with particular media uses and gratifications (Garramone, 1985; McLeod & Becker, 1981; McQuail & Windahl, 1993) in order to assess the relationship of viewing these different types of television content with participation in community life and trust in others.

DISPARITIES IN DIGITAL ACCESS

Despite an increase in national broadband adoption, many people remain offline. A recent report by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies found that, among the 100 million Americans who do not have broadband at home, there are significant demographic differences based on age, gender, education, level of Internet experience, and income that potentially influence their acceptance and use of the Internet. While more African Americans and Hispanics are getting online, they tend to be more affluent and better educated. Recent data released by the FCC and the U.S. Department of Commerce affirm this trend. According to the recent FCC Working Paper on broadband adoption and use, 59 percent of African-Americans have broadband connections at home, reflecting a considerable increase from the 46 percent who had adopted broadband at home in 2009.

Unfortunately, those Americans who stand to gain the most from the Internet are unable to use it to break the trajectories of social isolation, poverty, and illiteracy. From seniors, low-income people, and people with disabilities to the less educated, these segments of the American population—wrought with economic and social hardship—are largely not reaping the benefits of digital access. Table 1 illustrates some of these disparities.

Twenty four percent of people with less than high school, and 40 percent of those households with incomes under $20,000 are less likely to adopt broadband in America. While differences in Internet access have slowly narrowed between whites, blacks, and Hispanics, income and educational attainment still define who benefits. The glaring statistics generated by a 2010 report published by the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies shared that low-income high school dropouts were three times less likely to have a residential broadband connection than more affluent and educated individuals.

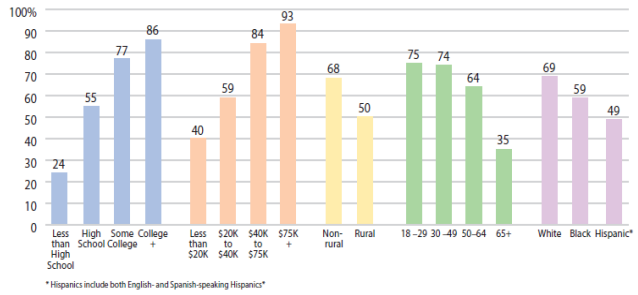

Table: Broadband Adoption by American Adults by Socioeconomic and Demographic Factors

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND BEHAVIORAL ANTECEDENTS OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

In addition, we include a series of psychological and behavioral antecedents of political participation as control variables in the analysis. Specifically we use political efficacy political trust, political knowledge, and political news consumption to account for the association between people's psychological engagement in politics and their political participation (Finkek 1985: Levi & Stoker. 2000; Verba, et al., 1995). To measure political efficacy, we construct an index variable by averaging the responses to four 5-point scale (i.e. from 1= strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree) questions of participants' beliefs about their own competence to understand and to participate in politics and the responsiveness of governmental authorities (Mean=3.1, SDK).6, Cronbach's a=. 51).

Similarly, we construct a political trust index by averaging the responses to four 5-point scale questions of participants' beliefs about whether or not the government is functioning in accord with citizens' expectations (Mean=2.6, SDK).8, Cronback's a= 85). To measure political knowledge, we look at participants' responses to four factual questions about political affairs at the time, such as the tenure of presidency, countries with official diplomatic relationship with Taiwan, the president of China, and the executive chief of Hong Kong: we then create a political knowledge measure by calculating the number of correct answers provided from respondents, where 0 indicates little political knowledge, and 4 suggests a great understanding of the current politics in Taiwan (Mean=2.1 SD=1.0).

ENDOGENOUS VARIABLES

Civic Engagement-membership in formal community groups and participation in social activities-was operationalized by constructing an additive index of five behavioral items. Respondents were asked to report how often they considered themselves influential in their neighborhood, went to a club meeting, attended church, did volunteer work, and worked on a community project (see the Appendix for exact wording of items). Survey participants responded on ascale ranging from 1 (none in the past year) to 7 (weekly). The resultant index achieved α = ***-66.*** Interpersonal Trust-generalized faith in the honesty and integrity of others- was operationalized by a single indicator because only one item in the survey-"Most people are honest-dealt with the construct as traditionally defined.

Respondents were asked to state their level of agreement with the statement on a standard evaluative measure, a scale ranging from 1 (definitely disagree) to 6 (definitely agree) and containing no neutral category. Other items that addressed issues of trust-such as "An honest man cannot get elected to high office" and "The big investment firms are honestly doing their best to help people plan for the future-did not correlate highly with the Interpersonal Trust item and thus could not be used to construct an internally consistent index. These items were used as indicators of trust in institutions and are described in greater detail below.

Three key demographic predictors must be considered first: age, education, and income. Previous research has demonstrated that older Americans are both more trusting and more engaged in civic life (Norris, 1996; Putnam, 1995b; Putnam & Yonish, 1997; Rahn, 1997; Uslaner, 1998). Therefore, age should be positively associated with Interpersonal Trust and Civic Engagement.5 Education is expected to manifest a positive relationship with Civic Engagement, because education provides citizens with the skills required to engage in civic life-letter writing and organizing events, for example-and socializes them to value civic participation for its own sake (Norris, 1996; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 1995).

DECLINING CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Participation is a multidimensional phenomenon (Norris 1999; Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley 2004; Scheufele and Nisbet 2002). Forms of participation may vary in significance in different countries (Haste 2004), and there is a lack of consensus regarding both definition and measurement of participation. None the less, there is sufficient justification for Pharr, Putnam and Dalton's claim (2000: 7, 9), based on cross-national findings, that although there is 'no evidence of declining commitment to the principle of democratic government … by almost any measure political alienation soared over the last three decades'. A recent survey of UK citizens found a high level of 'disconnection' (72 per cent felt disconnected from Parliament) fairly evenly spread across age, social class and gender (Coleman 2005), though policy concern tends to focus on the young (BBC 2002; Hansard 2001; Morris, John and Halpern 2003) and, to a lesser degree, on socioeconomic status and ethnicity (Electoral Commission 2005a; Scheufele and Nisbet 2002; US Census Bureau 2004).

Of various indicators charting declining civic participation, electoral turnout is crucial. Norris (1999) reviews evidence of a decline in voting across established democracies (c.f. Coleman 2005; Power Inquiry 2006). In the UK, this decline is evident in local, national and European elections: turnout for the 2001 UK general election was 59 per cent, the lowest for any postwar UK general election, and at 61 per cent the 2005 election turnout was only marginally higher. In the USA, national voter turnout at federal elections fell from 63 per cent in 1960 to 55 per cent in 2004 (US Census Bureau 2004; c.f. Scheufele and Nisbet 2002).

The UK's Power Inquiry (2006) concluded that the public is neither simply contented, nor apathetic, for levels of community or voluntary work, along with other participatory activities, have remained relatively high. The decline, in short, is primarily focused on voting, accompanied by falling interest in and rising distrust of politics and politicians (Bromley, Curtice and Seyd 2004). Low political efficacy among the public helps to explain the declining vote, since trust, efficacy and turnout are linked (Bromley, Curtice and Seyd. 2004). The Power Inquiry concurred with many commentators that the shift to a post-industrial economy has destabilized long-established relations of authority and deference, while failing to put in their place an alternative structure of engagement and representation (Bennett 1998; Scheufele and Nisbet 2002), though it should not be assumed that the public would, in consequence, prefer participatory to representative democracy (Coleman 2005).

INFORMATION, EFFICACY, AND INCENTIVES

Well informed people and citizens who feel more powerful are more likely to participate in all forms of civic and political life. This should not be surprising, since education is a strong determinant of engagement and more highly educated people are also more likely to become informed. However, keeping informed (through reading newspapers) spurs participation, above and beyond education. Similarly, educated people will feel more empowered–and also that the government is more likely to pay attention to them. But again, efficacious people are more likely to become involved in civic and political life even controlling for education levels.

Not all forms of media exposure lead greater engagement. Newspaper readership leads to much greater civic involvement, while there is less agreement on the effects of television. People who read newspapers are much more likely to vote (Teixeira, 1992, 200), to give to charity (Uslaner, 2002, 133), and to take part in civic life more generally (Putnam, 2000; Markus, 2002; Guterbock and Fries, 1997, 26-27). High levels of newspaper readership are connected with high levels of volunteering in Netherlands (Social and Cultural Planning Office, 1996, 518).

This nuanced view of media effects may explain the contradictory findings in the literature on television and civic and political engagement. On the one hand, there is the "mean world" argument most closely associated with Gerbner et al. (1980) and Putnam (1995b, 1996, 2000). On the other hand, there is the "virtuous circle" argument of Norris (2000, ch. 11): Putnam's (1996, 677-680) case against television rests on two foundations. The first is a direct cause of waning participation in civic affairs: Television viewing eats up time. If you are hooked in front of your television set, you can't be out and about partaking in civic life. The second part gets to civic participation through television's effect on personality.

THE FUTURE OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Tapping into the potential of citizens is becoming increasingly important in our society. In the National Broadband Plan, the FCC identified civic engagement as one of many core issues that needs to be powered by the expansion of broadband. In the plan, it states that:

"Broadband can inform our communities and increase the level of citizen participation to strengthen local communities and the fabric of America's democracy. It can also expand opportunities to weave citizen-based innovation and collaboration into our government."

Stating that civic engagement is the "lifeblood" of our democracy and the "bedrock" of its legitimacy, the National Broadband Plan offers concise recommendations that bring people closer to government, and government information and tools closer to its constituents. Broadband is perceived as enhancing democratic participation, particularly as it seeks to inform and advise the public, and extend the reach of information about the governing process.

The rapid transition to a digital economy as discussed in this paper does not come without challenges. In good conscience, policymakers and other civic leaders must seek out solutions that ensure a more just and equitable Internet that not only reflects the diversity of our nation, but also encourages broad coalitions among different groups of people, and their causes. Based upon the findings shared in this essay, policymakers might consider the following approaches to ensure that citizens are fully represented in the deliberative exchanges that take place on the Internet.

- First, policymakers, in partnership with web developers, should consider an Internet that empowers and engages people to institute social change. This might require a different approach to its design, and a new set of implementers to develop it.

- Second, for Americans to drive the future of our democracy through the Internet, we must seed more online macro-communities, proportionate to those that are niche-based, to engage broad groups of people from all backgrounds, viewpoints, and interests.

- Third, policymakers must accelerate access to high-speed broadband for underrepresented groups. If the online world is becoming the central destination for sharing, exchanging, and formulating opinions on issues that improve the nation, all people need to be involved in the conversation.

- Fourth, it goes without saying that the value of relationships is still critical in a democracy. How we relate to one another both online and offline is at the core of civic engagement. When a person goes into a store, he or she forms a relationship with the sales associate. When a child goes to school, he or she develops a connection with the teacher.

CONCLUSIONS

For those sceptical that everyday media use contributes, positively or negatively, to civic participation, the present findings provide some support. In each regression model presented above, demographic variables and traditional political and social factors taken together account for the largest proportion of the variance explained. For the likelihood of voting, demographic variables (age and SES) were most important (c.f. Scheufele and Nisbet 2002), while for political interest and taking action, the political and social factors were more important (especially social capital and political efficacy; c.f. Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley 2004). These variables accounted for between 15-17 per cent of the variance in our three indicators, a respectable if moderate finding consistent with previous research.

Demographics, resources, engagement with politics, social networks (including attending religious services), mobilization, and values all shape levels of civic engagement. The impact of each varies according to the arena of participation. Two dimensions of participation are key to understanding the relative importance of determinants of engagement: The amount of effort of the act and the intended consequence.

Some forms of engagement are simply more demanding than others. Voting takes relatively little time and most people develop the "habit" of going to the polls in early adulthood (Plutzer, 2002). It is not difficult to stimulate habitual voters to cast ballots. Contacting public officials or newspapers, attending public meetings or rallies, and campaigning for candidates or parties takes time and depends upon skills people may have.

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