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Logged on for Democracy: The Relationship
between Digital Media and Offline Political
Participation over Time

An Honors Thesis

College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University

By

Meredith Grace Jarchow

April 26, 2018

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Abstract Over the years Internet use has become ingrained in Americans' daily lives. In turn, those running for office have begun to utilize the Internet for campaigning at all levels of government. How did Internet use in the 2012 and 2016 elections impact political participation? This honors thesis will examine how Internet use affects six different modes of political participation, and compare it to the findings from Bimber and Copeland's (2013) original study that examined the 12 years prior. In addition, I will also analyze participation in protest marches and signing petitions as two additional acts of political participation. American National Election Study data from the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections concerning Internet use and traditional political participation will be used. My findings support the original authors' expectation that while those who use Internet are more likely to participate than those who do not, it is not a consistent relationship across all of the different acts of political participation, nor is it consistent over time; however, there are a few political acts such as persuading others and doing campaign work that show a possible trend over time for a positive relationship.

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Introduction

As technology rapidly advances, it is nearly impossible for people to imagine life without Internet or social media being easily accessible. Whether it's looking up recipes, using academic websites for homework, or watching YouTube on how to change a flat tire, the use of the Internet has been integrated into our daily activities, schoolwork, careers, and lives. With this ever-present resource, it is important to look at how it affects people in their actions, beliefs, and interactions with others.

Specifically, it is important to understand how the Internet can indirectly and directly affect users in a political context. Just as newspapers and television advertisements aim to bolster support, slander the opposition, and mobilize potential voters, the Internet and social networking sites can do the same thing. By utilizing digital and online tools, political campaigns for all levels of government are able to reach more people more effectively.

The majority of scholarship surrounding Internet use and political participation investigates if Internet use increases the likelihood that citizens will engage in political participation offline. Most of the single cross-sectional studies find a positive effect on political participation, but difficulties may lie in generalizing these results to other election cycles (Bimber and Copeland 2013). The assumption in the literature is that the relationship between digital media and participation should be consistent or strengthening from year to year.

As technology evolves, the way citizens obtain political information changes. By obtaining information through the Internet, some methods of political participation may be influenced. One of the first elections that saw digital media, specifically social media, being used effectively was the 2008 Presidential Election. During the 2008 Obama Presidential campaign utilized Facebook to bolster support in the form of civic engagement, event attendance, and

donating to the campaign (Copeland and Bimber 2014). In the most recent 2016 election, however, Twitter took the main stage when candidate Donald Trump used off-the-cuff messaging that he, himself prepared instead of relying on his campaign team (Marx 2017). Scholarship focused on digital media and political participation is necessary to better understand the effect it has on citizens, and to what degree it can influence voting behavior. The purpose of this study is to look specifically at how online content encourages offline participation. This relationship is important to investigate, because we can begin to determine if campaigns investing in online content is effective or worth the time, effort, and money leading to increased offline participation, most importantly voting.

This research is an empirical study that examines how Internet use impacted political participation in the 2012 and 2016 elections. I will investigate the relationship between Internet use for political information and eight separate acts of political participation. I will provide background from my research and explain why it is an important aspect of the existing scholarship. The discussed results will be compared to the original study done by Bimber and Copeland (2013) and provide a basis for future research needed in the area.

Literature Review

For the purpose of this study, when the Internet is referenced, it will include all activities, information seeking, and interactions on the Internet. Social media is an aspect of the Internet but will reference sites including but not limited to Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Political participation will be defined as the act of taking part in activities that support or promote political candidates and issues offline.

Political Participation

One of the most iconic forms of political participation in our country's history is when our Founding Father drafted the Declaration of Independence and began the long struggle for freedom from the tyranny of Britain. While there are some who would like to revolt and overthrow our current government, most citizens participate in subtler ways. The acts of political participation often investigated in studies include different offline acts like displaying a button or bumper sticker, attending a meeting or rally, working for a party or campaign, donating money to a candidate, party, or other political group, attempting to persuade others, and voting (Bimber and Copeland 2013). Before we can begin to discuss if citizens are participating politically we first need to understand why citizens participate and what factors affect their level of participation. Overall, it is found that citizens are more likely to vote in more competitive electoral environments, when they are mobilized, when they identify with a party, and as age, income, and education increase (Rogowski 2014). However, other factors may play a role in political participation.

For America, polarization can play a larger role in political participation. While polarization may encourage those deeply rooted in their parties on either end of the spectrum to participate, it can discourage more moderate voters from participating. Rogowski (2014) found that when there is a high level of ideological conflict between two candidates for office, voter turnout is reduced. When those who are politically moderate are presented with a far-left candidate and a far-right candidate, they are more likely to abstain from voting. In turn, polarization can also encourage those on either end of the spectrum to participate. It was found that partisan rhetoric can encourage citizens to participate; however, citizens exposed to these partisan messages may be more likely to hold incorrect perceptions of issues (Wojcieszak, Bimber, Feldman, and Stroud 2016). Moving forward, campaigns and news outlets will need to

balance partisan and moderate messaging to ensure that citizens of all ideologies on the political spectrum are reached if their goal is to increase political participation.

Another factor that affects political participation is the level and quality of one's education. Research shows that more education leads to higher levels of political participation and knowledge, and that political participation is positively affected by education geared at increasing it (Klofstad 2015; Pasek, Feldman, Romer, and Hall Jamieson 2008). Pasek, Feldman, Romer, and Hall Jamieson (2008) examined The Student Voices program in Philadelphia, which is a program for high school students that encourages political efficacy by combining service learning with a focus on the political system as a problem-solving institution. Their findings indicate that programs like Student Voices can increase political participation by building gains in political self-efficacy and skills for using news media to stay informed (Pasek et al. 2008). Moving forward if more high schools implement similar programs or put a larger emphasis on political efficacy, there may be an increase in political participation in future scholarship. Likewise, it is important to understand the levels of political participation that college students exhibit due to the unique environment of a college campus. College campuses often encourage political discussions inside and outside of the classroom. These discussions can play a role in political participation later on in life as well. Klofstad (2015) found that political discussion not only led to higher political participation while individuals were in college, but also in the years after graduation. While Klofstad (2015) admits that the sample size of 1,068 University of Wisconsin-Madison students out of a possible 4,348 students used is not necessarily generalizable, the results show that political discussion has a degree of influence on participants and opens the door to future research with larger sample sizes. Even though this study will control for education, this scholarship shows that political participation and discussions happen

outside of the classroom which may in turn have an affect on political participation that is not necessarily controlled for.

While many studies have shown a positive, increasing relationship between Internet use and political participation (Boulianne 2009, 2011, Cho et al. 2009), if the relationship is not studied over time and multiple elections, these results may do little to help us understand any more than those isolated elections. The findings from Bimber and Copeland's (2013) previous study shows that there is not a positive relationship over time between political participation and Internet use; they suggest that for each election cycle the relationship is not consistent. This article is an important part of the scholarship because it is the intersection between the study of political participation and Internet use. The results showed that the relationships between Internet use and the six different acts of political participation were idiosyncratic with an absence of a stable relationship; however, those who use Internet for political information will participate more than those who do not (Bimber and Copeland 2013). This study breaks political participation into six separate acts to better gauge participation. For example, voting may show higher results of participation than attending a political rally or event. This distinction between acts of political participation helps expand the scholarship and focus on different areas of participation.

Internet Use and Media

Newspaper and television campaigning played a key role in political campaigns before the invention of the Internet and social media. Even though traditional media by nature discourages two-way communication, campaigns used newspapers to mobilize voters, and then in the 1960s television made it possible for more people to obtain political information and become more informed (Karlsen 2010). While traditional media is still relevant in campaigning,

the Internet and social media platforms are now a key driving force of information. The Pew Research Center reports that in 2016 about 4 in 10 Americans often obtain their news from an online source while the number of respondents who obtain news from the radio and print newspapers is declining (Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthel, and Shearer 2016). Using the Internet for political purposes has actually shown to increase civic engagement, confidence, and efficacy more than traditional media such as televised news or broadcast news on the radio (Reichert and Print 2017). Reichert and Print (2017) found that youth civic discussions on the Internet promoted civic participation directly, and found that the Internet is a key source or facilitator for participation among young people, while exposure to traditional news media does not affect students' intentions to participate in the future. Reichert and Print's (2017) work does examine many facets of the Australian students' interaction, political knowledge, and efficacy which gives us a better idea of what forms of media are most effective for different students.

Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal (2007) also examine why there would be a positive relationship between Internet use and political participation, and how the Internet differs from traditional news media. Just as newspapers require reading, the authors explain how those who use the Internet for political information have a higher level of education, and that Internet more than any other form of media promotes immediate opportunities for inexpensive, interpersonal communication through multiple avenues (Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 2007). They argue that when citizens have access to the Internet, they are exposed to more diverse political views and have more meaningful small group discussions. It was also found that all online activities are linked to increased voting, but during presidential election years only, a positive association between email/chat rooms and voting, and political communication on the Internet parallels the effects of television on political participation (Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 2007). This

results in citizens that are more likely to be knowledgeable about politics, interested in politics, and occupied with discussion about politics more frequently (Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 2007). Results indicate that the internet provides individuals with information that fosters discussion, online news promotes political knowledge, consuming political information online increases interest in politics, and overall the use of online news encourages civic engagement (Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 2007). These findings suggest that future trends in Internet use will positively impact political participation. However, there is not enough information provided in their work in terms of the relationship over time.

Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal (2007) note how the information online varies from political information within traditional media. While the media outlets may have changed in the ten years since the publication of the book their concept stays the same. They argue that there are more extreme, polarized sites on the internet than there are mainstream, traditional news outlets (Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 2007). While those who use the Internet for political information may become more educated and aware of politics, the sources they use for that knowledge may be biased or in some cases not even true. Especially because of the nature of the Internet, it is easy for users to tune out differing opinions that they may not necessarily want to be exposed to. This change in media can in turn affect citizen behavior differently than traditional media has in the past (Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 2007). While the Internet may increase political knowledge and awareness, citizens may be misinformed if they are seeking information from sites that are not credible.

In terms of social media and campaigns, many scholars have examined how social media is used by the campaigns and candidates, specifically the content of the messaging regardless of the platform that is used. Messaging for policy or unrelated topics is aimed to engage users in

dialogue or to simply bolster their opinion of said candidate through positive reinforcement, and is aimed at mobilization of citizens, whether that be through civic engagement such as voting, donating to the campaign, or attending campaign centered events. Social media plays an active role in most citizens' lives, and political campaigns have begun to realize that, and use social media as a tool to mobilize voters. Campaigns are better able to employ inexpensive mobilization tactics through email, as well as grassroots organizations being able to encourage convenient online donations (Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 2007). In recent mobilization and donation solicitation, social media is utilized in addition to emails. On Facebook and Twitter posts are created to bolster the base and sponsored posts, or advertisements, to target on the fence voters. The Obama campaigns of 2008 and 2012 used a total of 16 social networks. The main goal for the campaign was to reach their base and support digital dialogue in all forms (Harfoush 2009). Whether buying the digital yard signs on Facebook, asking for feedback from small business owners on LinkedIn, or giving live updates via Twitter, the Obama campaign techniques engaged voters during the election in addition to advertising their brand (Harfoush 2009). This successful utilization of multiple social media sites with a strong focus on the content produced was a contributing factor to the success of the 2008 and 2012 Obama Presidential campaigns. This was particularly effective considering that during the years of 2000-2007 the percentage of Americans online grew by about half, as well as the growth in Americans who use the Internet frequently (Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal 2007).

Surprisingly, even negative campaigning can be used to mobilize voters. In the past 25 years the frequency of attack advertisements has been increasing drastically; Geer explains that even though scholarly literature does not show attack ads as more effective than positive ads that political consultants believe they are in practice (2012). An explanation offered for why political

consultants continue to use attack ads is because they are a product of the polarization of parties, and that when candidates and parties disagree with each other “these disagreements manifest themselves in attack ads” (Geer 2012, 422). As different methods of political communication have been created through technological advances, there have been no set rules for professionalism of political communication. As a result, definitions and standards developed over the years where is a lack of consensus on what makes contemporary political communication practices and campaigns meet the standard of professionalism (Negrine and Lilleker 2002). It is still not clear where attack advertisements fall in this question of professionalism in political communication.

It is also pertinent to consider why citizens use the Internet and social media for political purposes. People use social media as a tool to mobilize and engage in activism, as well as to learn about the candidates and the issues (Garcia-Galera, Del-Hoyo-Hurtado, and Fernandez-Munoz 2014; Bimber and Copeland 2013, Davies 2012). Campaigns work to mobilize their base in order to encourage voting and spread awareness, and social media has now become an inexpensive, wide reaching tool for campaigns to utilize for mobilization. In a study done on Spanish millennials, it was found that young people use social media with civic purposes in mind, and that social media is a medium for social participation as well as global activism (Garcia-Galera et al 2014). Garcia-Galera et al (2014) also comment on how the Internet and social media make mobilization and activism easier in terms of immediacy, interactivity, and physical limitations. When citizens, especially millennials, use the Internet and social media for the sole purpose of political information-seeking as opposed to being indirectly affected by media they achieve a higher level of knowledge. Additionally, those who actively use the

Internet to obtain political knowledge may be more primed to participate in political activities offline.

Bimber and Copeland (2013) found that during the 2008 presidential election seeing political information online and in social media was associated with more political acts (i.e. persuading others, donating money, attending a political event, and working on a campaign) than in any other year. Similarly, turnout in the 2008 presidential election peaked. The Obama campaign's use of the Internet and social media was able to bolster the electorate, specifically younger voters to not only to vote but also to become involved in the campaign. The 2008 election had the second largest turnout of youthful voters in history (McGrath 2011). The trend in millennials and younger voters utilizing the Internet for information which results in higher political participation can be an indicator for increased political participation for future generations. In addition, there is scholarship that examines the role that social media can play in civic engagement for students.

While there is still a need for more research in this area, initial studies show that social media may have the capacity to generate a more inclusive approach to civic engagement (Davies, et. al 2012). This inclusivity is shown in the switch young people make from traditional modes of civic engagement to more personalized methods such as digital networking, volunteering, and consumer activism (Davies, et. al 2012). These personalized methods of participation make it possible for more citizens to become involved if there is a larger variety of acts of political participation to choose from.

While this research project will focus on citizens who actively seek out political information on the Internet, it is also notable to mention the scholarship that examines the effect that political information online has on citizens who encounter it indirectly or unintentionally.

Even though they are not seeking the information, these citizens can be shaped into digital citizens by it. Findings show that citizens who spend leisure time online can experience unintended consequences of mediated interaction occurring that involve discussion and participation about politics (Zúñiga, Valenzuela, and Weeks 2016). In addition, it was found that small talk and non-political hobby groups online and offline can provide natural conditions that can lead to discussions about current events and issues, which may in turn promote civic participation in the future (Zúñiga, Valenzuela, and Weeks 2016). Even when citizens are not actively seeking political information online, they are still exposed and affected by it.

Theoretical Issues

Bimber and Copeland's (2013) main argument is that while many studies report a positive relationship between the extent of digital media use and political participation in single case observations (Boulianne 2009, 2011; Cho et al. 2009) that the results are not always generalizable across multiple elections spanning years, leaving major theoretical holes. The studies examined had research to support the positive relationship, but Bimber and Copeland (2013) argue that if the relationship between Internet use and political participation is examined narrowly year by year, the results are unable to be generalized over multiple years. By broadening the scope of years studied, their results are more generalizable for future scholarship surrounding the subject matter.

These studies are under the assumption that there is a stable, underlying relationship between general use of the Internet and political participation (Bimber and Copeland 2013). However, research shows that these relationships do not always appear in every election. While this positive relationship between digital media and political participation is present in some years, it is not in others. For example, Bimber (2003) found that political use of the Internet

predicted voting for 2000 but not in 1998. One of the explanations for this discrepancy is that some studies control for political interest, while others do not. By controlling for political interest, scholars are better able to control for respondents who may have a high level of political participation because they also have a high level of political interest. Those with less political interest will usually have lower levels of political participation.

Boulianne's (2009) meta-analysis explains that the inconsistent findings are due in part to variability in measurement or model specification. Her findings show that studies are more likely to produce a positive relationship between Internet use and political participation when they do not control for political interest (2009). However, this is not a completely adequate explanation, because it fails to address studies that have examined more than one year while using identical models with controls for political interest (Bimber 2003; Cho et al, 2009; Tolbert and McNeal 2003).

Another explanation for the discrepancy over time is that the relationship has grown strongly in recent years, so studies examining recent elections would have different results than studies looking at elections from earlier years; however, no systematic test has been done on this theory. Therefore, it is not certain whether there is actually an increasing trend in the relationship between digital media and offline participation, or if it shows the variability across periods or individual elections (Bimber and Copeland 2013). This variability may not be applicable when analyzing data from recent election years.

Argument

It is important to consider the holes that exist in the current literature. The World Wide Web became active in 1991, and in less than 30 years it has grown into a resource for education, a necessity in the workplace, and an avenue for leisure activities. While the Internet progressed

very quickly, scholarship on its influence on political participation is sparse. This gap in scholarship poses a problem when trying to understand the relationship between Internet use for political information and real world participation. Without this research, it is difficult for campaigns to craft effective, targeted messaging, and for scholars to understand the relationship in order to conduct more specific studies that focus on areas within the umbrella of digital media. This absence of literature concerning digital media and political participation is the driving force behind this research project.

As Obama's two presidential campaigns paved the way in social media and Internet use for political campaigns (Harfoush 2009) and the Trump campaign of 2016 took over Twitter (Marx 2017), it is obvious that the use of the Internet for political participation is not going away anytime soon and that it is increasing. However, that does not mean that the current relationship is consistent and positive between the two. While the approaches to digital media taken by Obama and Trump are drastically different, their efforts had similar results. Both were able to mobilize their base and reach on the fence voters through social media that translated into votes (harfoush 2009; Marx 2017). While voting is arguably the most important action of political participation, there are other forms of political participation that were not as closely observed. However, looking at single elections is not enough to draw generalizable results.

Digital media is a large umbrella that covers various forms of media including social media, websites, online advertising, and mobile phone applications, to name a few. However, this study will examine general Internet use for political information to address whether or not over time there is a positive relationship between Internet use and digital media. The primary expectation of this study is the same as Bimber and Copeland who argue, "when measurement and model specification are consistent, and multiple cross-sections are compared, there should be

no stable relationship between use of the Internet for political information and political participation over time in national samples” (2013, 128-9). Therefore, similar to the original Bimber and Copeland (2013) study, I hypothesize (a) the lack of a stable relationship between political participation and Internet use for political information, (b) idiosyncratic variation between 2012 and 2016, and (c) a possible trend toward a stronger relationship over time.

Methodology

My findings will compare the 2012 and 2016 general elections using ANES data. I will then compare these results with Bimber and Copeland’s (2013) original study including the election years 1996, 1998, 2000, 2004, and 2008. The original authors included midterm election years. My study excludes the 2010 and 2014 midterm elections due to the lack of complete ANES Time Series Studies including specific participation and Internet use questions. While the ANES data for Internet use is lacking in specificity, it is the best available data set for the study in question and will allow for direct comparison to the Bimber and Copeland (2013) findings. For the most part, the language in the questioning is consistent as well as the sample sizes. This helps reduce error across the years of the study. I modeled my study on Bimber and Copeland’s (2013) original study, with the addition of two more acts of political participation which include participating in protest marches and signing petitions. Due to time restrictions I was unable to analyze the additional acts over the years the original authors conducted their study: 1996, 1998, 2000, 2004, and 2008; however, this is an area for possible future research.

Dependent Variables

The Bimber and Copeland (2013) article originally modeled six acts of political participation as dependent variables: voting; displaying a button or bumper sticker; attending a meeting or rally; working for a party or campaign; attempting to persuade others; and donating

money to a candidate, party, or other political group. In this study, I include each of these six measures and also include two additional measures: signing a petition and participating in protest marches.

The questions asked by ANES that were identical for 2012 and 2016 and similar to previous years are as follows. For campaign work respondents were asked “Did you do any (other) work for one of the parties or candidates?” For attempting to persuade others the ANES asked “We would like to find out about some of the things people do to help a party or candidate win an election. During the campaign, did you talk to any people and try or show them why they should vote for or against one of the parties or candidates?” Respondents’ measure of attending political rallies and meetings was measured by the question “Did you go to any political meetings, rallies, speeches, dinners, or things like that in support of a particular candidate?” The act of displaying a message was measured by ANES with the question “Did you wear a campaign button, put a campaign sticker on your car, or place a sign in your window or in front of your house?” For donating money, I modeled the dummy variable of the original authors that combined the three measures of donation to a candidate, party, or group and coded as “1.” All answers for the first five acts had dichotomous responses, with no coded as “0” and yes coded as “1.”

For voting, the question asked in 2012 and 2016 varied from the original question asked in past ANES studies, which was “In talking to people about elections, we often find that a lot of people were not able to vote because they weren’t registered, they were sick, or they just didn’t have time. How about you – did you vote in the elections this November?” However, for the 2012 and 2016 the question changed to allow for four different responses: “In talking to people about elections, we often find that a lot of people were not able to vote because they weren’t

registered, they were sick, or they just didn't have time. Which of the following statements best describes you: One, I did not vote (in the election this November); Two, I thought about voting this time, but didn't; Three I usually vote, but didn't this time; or Four, I am sure I voted?" In order to stay true to the dichotomous nature of the previous responses, I created a dummy variable for the voting measure. Responses one, two, and three were coded as "0" for no, I did not vote and response four was coded as "1" for yes, I did vote.

For the measures of political participation that I introduced for my study, signing a petition and participating in protest marches, the questions were similar for 2012 and 2016 but the time spans varied. For the act of joining a protest march, the 2012 ANES dataset asked "During the past 4 years, have you joined in a protest march, rally, or demonstration, or have you not done this in the past 4 years?" the 2016 question is structured the same, except it asks respondents if they have participated in a protest march in the past 12 months. This is a very small consistency in the question but moving forward it would be ideal if ANES asked about participation over four years, as the typical citizen is often more politically engaged right before, during, and after general elections. The midterm election year ANES Time Series Studies are often incomplete or contain small sample sizes. For the political act of signing a petition the same difference in time span was observed: 4 years for 2012 and 12 months for 2016. The question was structured "During the past [4 years/12 months], have you signed a petition on the Internet or on paper about a political or social issue, or have you not done this in the past [4 years/12 months]?" For 2012 the question was asked separately for paper petitions and online petitions, so I combined the two variables. Responses for petition signing and joining protest marches were dichotomous. It should also be noted that the surveys were administered before the

marches that followed the 2016 presidential inauguration, therefore not perhaps fully encapsulating the level of engagement in protests during the election season.

I created separate models for each year, just as the original authors did. This will ensure easier comparisons between the relationships. The models for all years are then combined into tables, and graphs for each political participation act.

Independent and Control Variables

The independent variable for this study was the use of Internet for political information. This is an important distinction, as the ANES asking various questions about general Internet use. By choosing a variable that includes the aspect of political information it is easier to draw generalizable results as compared to all Internet use. To measure this, the ANES in 2012 asked “Did you read, watch, or listen to any information about the campaign for President on the Internet?” In 2016, the question asked was “How many times did you read, watch, or listen to any information about the campaign for President on the Internet? [None, just one or two, several, or a good many]” As a result of the variation in the 2016 question, I recoded the responses just one or two, several, or a good many as “1” for yes, and none as “0” for no, to maintain the dichotomous responses. In all models, I included the same control variables as the previous authors: age, education, income, gender, party contact, internal political efficacy, and political interest. For the control of level of education, age in years, gender, and annual income the standard ANES variables were used. The same question for previous years for party contact was asked in 2012 and 2016 which was “As you know, the political parties try to talk to as many people as they can to get them to vote for their candidate. Did anyone from one of the political parties call you up or come around and talk to you about the campaign this year?” The same question for past years was also asked to gauge internal political efficacy. Respondents were

given the statement “People like me don’t have any say about what the government does” and asked if they agreed strongly, agreed somewhat, neither agreed nor disagreed, disagreed somewhat, or disagreed strongly with the statement. To assess political interest the ANES asked “How often do you pay attention to what’s going on in government and politics? [Always, most of the time, about half the time, some of the time, or never]” This question followed a similar format to past years.

Results

To stay true to the original article, I first ran frequencies for each political act, and then proceeded with bivariate correlations to determine which political acts are correlated through participation with seeing political information online. These results are shown in Table 1, which shows the frequency of participation for each of the eight acts over time. The percentage for “All people” is the percentage of all ANES respondents that participated in each participatory act. “Saw political info online” is the percentage of those people who participated that saw political information online. The frequencies show fairly consistent percentages for both years which is similar to the results found in the Bimber and Copeland (2013), but there are slight decreases across acts from 2012 to 2016 with the exception of persuading others with saw an increase of 4% for all people and 2% for those who saw political information online and signing a petition which showed an approximately 13% decrease in all people and a 21% decrease for people who saw political information online. A few other notable frequency changes including displaying a message and attending political rallies and events. The frequencies for displaying a message decrease for all people by almost 5% and 8% for those who saw political information online. Bimber and Copeland (2013) reported frequencies over 20% for both categories in 2004 and 2008. This decrease in 2012 and 2016 can possibly be explained by citizens, specifically

TABLE 1. Frequency of Participation in the Eight Political Acts, 2012 and 2016

	2012	2016
Voted		
All people	67.6	63.9
Saw political info online	89.6	86.4
<i>p</i>	<0.001	0.072
Displayed message		
All people	15.0	10.3
Saw political info online	20.6	12.7
<i>p</i>	<0.001	0.004
Attended event		
All people	5.9	6.1
Saw political info online	8.4	7.9
<i>p</i>	<0.001	<0.001
Did campaign work		
All people	3.9	2.8
Saw political info online	5.7	3.6
<i>p</i>	<0.001	0.004
Donated money		
All people	14.1	12.8
Saw political info online	20.5	16.0
<i>p</i>	<0.001	<0.001
Persuaded others		
All people	38.8	42.8
Saw political info online	50.6	53.1
<i>p</i>	<0.001	<0.001
Signed a petition		
All people	34.2	20.8
Saw political info online	48.1	26.9
<i>p</i>	<0.001	<0.001
Attended a protest march		
All people	5.9	2.7
Saw political info online	8.9	3.6
<i>p</i>	<0.001	0.002

Note. Values are percentage of all people engaging in each political act and the percentage of those people who saw political information online who engaged in each act. The *p* values are Chi-square test results (χ^2). Source of data is ANES.

millennials, displaying political messages in different ways (i.e. stickers on laptops, campaign T-Shirts, phone cases). The act of attending political rallies and events also had a small percentage of respondents who participated; however, the results showed increase and decrease. There was an exact increase of 0.2% for all people, but a decrease for those who saw political information online of exactly 0.5%. These almost stagnant results are comparable to the original Bimber and Copeland (2013) study for attending a political event. However the lower percentage during two election years is notable, compared to the 2004 and 2008 results. For each year and political act, those who see political information online are more likely to participate in one of the eight offline acts of participation. In 2012 and 2016 voting was the political act that had the highest percentage of participation regardless of whether or not political information was seen online. In 2012 approximately 68% of those who did not see political information online voted, compared to approximately 90% of people who saw political information online. For 2016 the results were similar: approximately 64% and 86%, respectively. The values reported in Table 1 are similar to the original findings which are idiosyncratic over time. Chi-square tests are significant at the $p < 0.05$ level in both years for the acts of displaying a message, attending an event, doing campaign work, donating money, persuading others, signing a petition, and attending a protest march. Voting was found to be significant at the < 0.05 level in 2012, but not in 2016. The original authors found similar results for significance (Bimber and Copeland 2013).

My next step was to conduct the multivariate analysis for 2012 and 2016 which show that seeing political information online is a significant predictor ($p < 0.05$) for all acts with the exception of voting and attending a protest march in 2016. The previous authors found less consistency across years and political acts (Bimber and Copeland 2013). While this consistency in 2012 and 2016 is promising, it is important to note the two acts in 2016 that were not

TABLE 2. Coefficients for Seeing Political Information Online in Models Predicting Eight Actions, 2012 and 2016

	2012	2016
Vote		
Coef.	0.498	0.306
(SE)	0.096	0.157
<i>p</i>	<0.001	0.051
Display message		
Coef.	0.713	0.416
(SE)	0.087	0.180
<i>p</i>	<0.001	0.021
Attend event		
Coef.	0.652	0.999
(SE)	0.137	0.301
<i>p</i>	<0.001	0.001
Campaign work		
Coef.	0.782	1.026
(SE)	0.167	0.445
<i>p</i>	<0.001	0.021
Donate money		
Coef.	0.823	0.666
(SE)	0.095	0.178
<i>p</i>	<0.001	<0.001
Persuade others		
Coef.	0.673	0.813
(SE)	0.064	0.110
<i>p</i>	<0.001	<0.001
Sign petition		
Coef.	0.982	1.164
(SE)	0.066	0.172
<i>p</i>	<0.001	<0.001
Attended protest march		
Coef.	0.835	0.878
(SE)	0.142	0.470
<i>p</i>	<0.001	0.062

Note. “Coeff.” Is the logistic regression coefficient for the variable Seeing Political Information Online in models predicting the eight acts. Control variables in the models are omitted from the table: educations, gender, age, income, party contact, internal political efficacy, and political interest. Results are not sensitive to small changes in model specification, such as inclusion of variables for following campaigns on television or in print newspapers. Bold indicates significance at the 0.05 level. Source is ANES, 2012 and 2016.

significant at the < 0.05 level. While the original authors did not look at the political act of participating in a protest march, the results for significance for voting is idiosyncratic across years. The act of persuading others shows the most consistency, with seeing political information as a predictor since 2004. Table 2 shows the results for Internet use for both years all of the acts.

In order to better visualize the effects of the logistic regression analysis, I investigated the predicted probabilities of citizens engaging in each act. Figure 1 shows the predicted probabilities for each of the eight acts with all other values held at their means over the two election years. The graphs compare predicted probabilities for people who saw political information online with those who did not. For every act in each year, the probabilities of acting politically are higher for those who saw political information online. Most of the differences reach statistical significance, with the exception of voting and attending protest marches in 2016.

Similar to the original authors findings, the predicted probabilities graphs show three main classes of results across the six acts originally studied: (a) the absence of a stable relationship between political participation and Internet use, (b) idiosyncratic variation from year to year, and (c) a possible trend toward a stronger relationship over time. For the acts of signing a petition and participating in a protest march, the same findings are shown, although the possible trend toward a stronger relationship is not as strongly supported with only the two election years' worth of data.

Even though those who see political information online are more likely to participate politically than those who do not, there is not a stable relationship between Internet use and participation. The political acts of displaying a message and doing campaign work were not predicted by seeing political information online in past years but now show significance. However, voting was not predicted in 2016 but was in years prior, which reinforces the

FIGURE 1. Predicted Probability of Participation for People who saw Political Information Online, 2012 and 2016

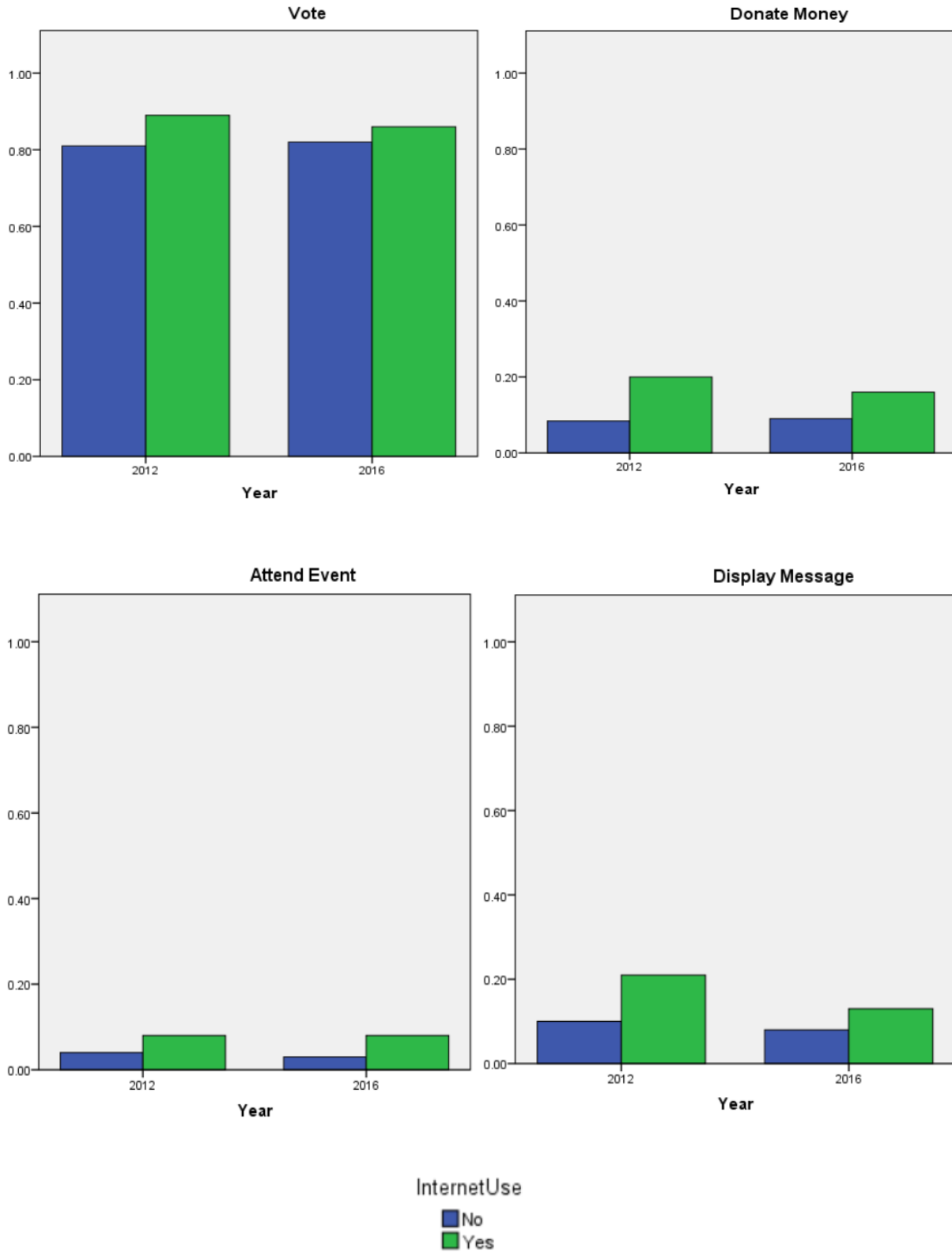
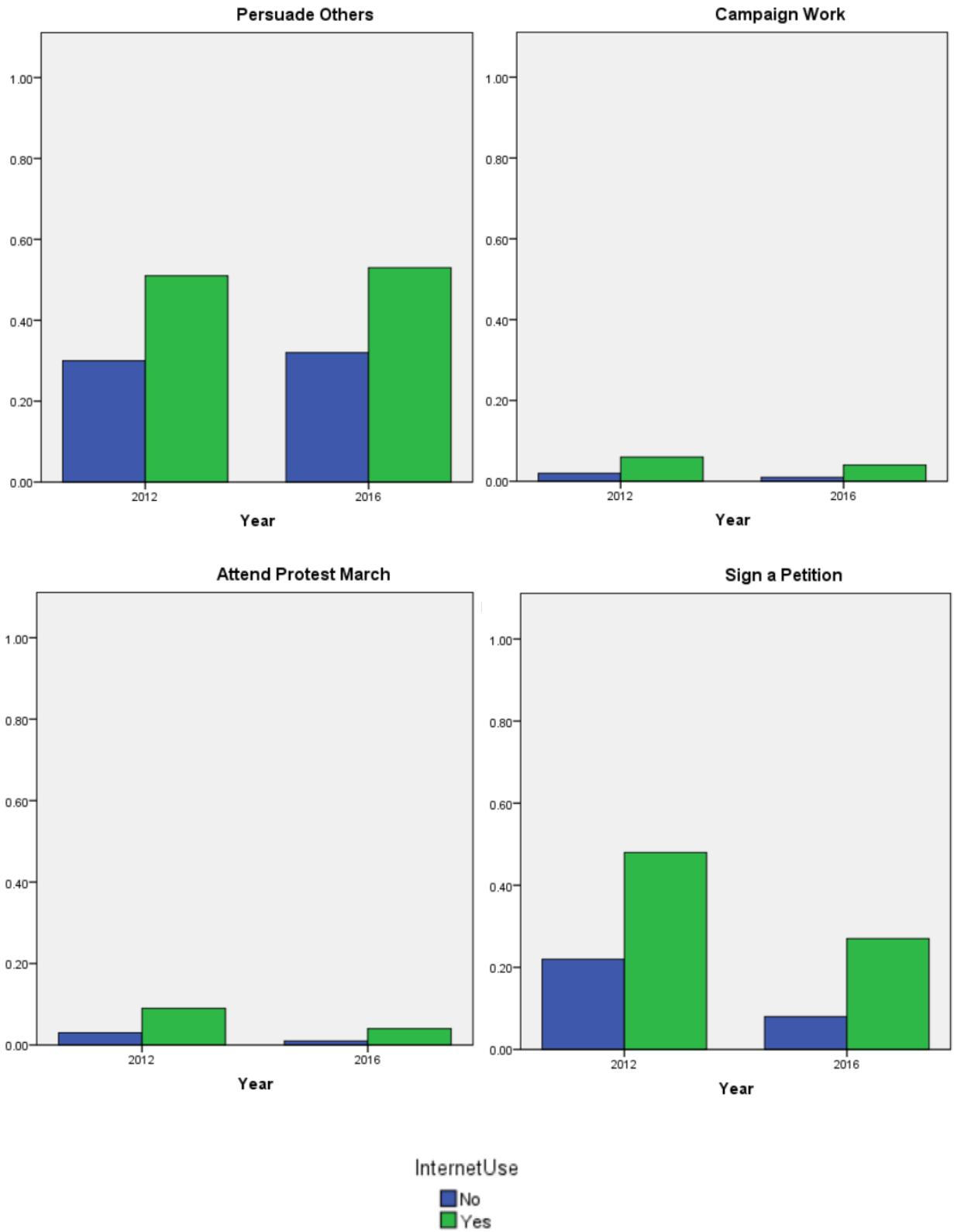


FIGURE 1, CONTINUED.



previously observed unstable relationship. In addition, acts such as attending an event, campaign work, and attending protest marches show little difference in those who use the Internet for political information and those who don't.

The second finding in the predicted probabilities and the relationship between Internet use and participation show an idiosyncratic relationship for most of the acts. With the exception of the acts of doing campaign work and persuading others not being predicted before and now being predicted for over three and four years analyzed respectively, the other six acts are predicted in some years, and not in others. While all acts were predicted for 2012, voting and attending a protests march were the only two acts not predicted in 2016. The previous authors found an already idiosyncratic relationship for voting for the years studied between 1996-2008, and it is surprising that voting was not predicted for 2016 considering the polarized nature of the presidential election. In 2016 there was a 5% difference between those who saw political information online and those who did not. This unstable, idiosyncratic relationship with voting does not align with the expected results after the social media heavy campaign efforts of the 2016 election.

Due to time limitations, signing petitions and attending protest marches were unable to be analyzed for the previous years that the original authors analyzed for the other six acts of political participation. Therefore, I conclude that there is not enough data to deem the relationships between the acts and internet use as idiosyncratic; however, further scholarship and analysis of the two acts would benefit the scholarship as signing petitions and attending protest marches have been on the rise since the 2016 presidential election.

The third result is that there is a possible trend toward a stronger relationship over time. As mentioned before, persuading others and participating in campaign work have had a

statistically significant relationship with Internet use for the 2004 and 2008 and 2008 election years respectively in the previous authors' results, and were both significant in 2012 and 2016. These statistically significant relationships point to an upward trend. Specifically for persuading others, this relationship can be partially explained by the accessibility of the Internet through social media on mobile devices. After the success of the Obama digital media campaign in 2008, more citizens have taken to platforms like Twitter and Facebook to engage in dialogue on political issues. The use of Twitter by Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential elections is also another likely factor in the significance of the relationship between persuading others and Internet use for political information.

Discussion

To provide some context, the original authors found that the election years studied between 1996 and 2004 that there was not a statistically significant relationship between using the Internet for political information and political participation, and "it depends" for the period from 2000 to 2008 (Bimber and Copeland 2013). In analyzing 2012 and 2016 I have found that while some of the political participation acts such as voting and donating money show idiosyncratic relationships, there is more evidence that points to a possible stronger relationship than the Bimber and Copeland (2013) study initially suggests. My findings support the assertion that examining single or two-year cross sections are inadequate; when looking at the 2012 and 2016 results alone there is a strong indicator of a stable relationship. However, analyzing the results in the context of the original study show that the 2012 and 2016 results are at times idiosyncratic and unstable. My findings show that with the exception of persuading others and doing campaign work that the other four acts originally analyzed by Bimber and Copeland

(2013), donating money, voting, displaying a message, and attending an event, are idiosyncratic in nature.

In contrast, persuading others and performing campaign work showed stronger, more stable relationships with Internet use for political information. Bimber and Copeland (2013) noted a strengthening relationship for persuading others, which my findings also support. It is unclear why persuading others shows more promise of a stable relationship than the other acts; however, there are a few possible explanations. The variable used to measure persuading others by the ANES asked respondents “We would like to find out about some of the things people do to help a party or candidate win an election. During the campaign, did you talk to any people and try or show them why they should vote for or against one of the parties or candidates?” There is nothing wrong with this question, but it is important to notice that it does ask how the respondent attempted to persuade someone else. With the complete encapsulation social media has on our daily lives, it is now commonplace to discuss politics on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. The spectrum of social media political discussions ranges from the polite and civil to the extreme which oftentimes includes threats, name calling, and claims with no supporting evidence. No matter where one falls on the spectrum of discussion, the act of persuading others is arguably the easiest to participate. In addition, as human beings we often are drawn to discussions and being “right.” This is best fulfilled by persuading others, whereas some of the other acts that take a little more initiative (attending an event or protest, working for a campaign) do not have instant gratification.

Despite the trend toward a more stable relationship between Internet use and political participation, it is important to note the decreases that were measured for some of the acts. Bimber and Copeland (2013) found that out of all the years studied that in 2008 seeing political

information online was associated with more political acts than in any other year observed. They attributed this finding to the rise of social media and the unique nature of the Obama campaign. In contrast, 2012 and 2016 both showed declines. The 2012 was a reelection year for Obama and his campaign did not bolster citizens as much as the 2008 campaign, but it is interesting that the unorthodox use of Twitter by the Trump campaign did not inspire more citizens to participate. With this in mind one may ask why the measure for participating in protest marches is not higher after the Trump Inauguration sparked marches across the world; however, ANES collected post-election surveys in December 2016 and early January 2017 before the inauguration occurred. Moving forward in the scholarship, it will be beneficial to see the results of the ANES 2018 Time Series Study for protest marches.

A limitation of this study is that my findings are restricted to the data available by ANES. While the ANES is a useful dataset, it often lacks in terms of digital media data. It is difficult to accurately measure social media which is changing every day, which is a big gap in the literature. Until another survey is designed to keep up with the fast pace of social media there will always be a hole in the scholarship. Additionally, even if new surveys are developed, it will take a few election cycles before scholars can analyze and make informed, educated generalizations about the data. In the United States, midterms are every two years, and presidential elections are every four years. It may be another decade or so before scholars are able to draw concrete findings from the data.

Conclusion

Throughout this study I have been able to expand on Bimber and Copeland's (2013) original study and analyze how the relationship between Internet use and political participation

in two general election years following the 2008 general election which forever changed campaigning with Obama's utilization of digital media (Harfoush, 2009).

I found similar results which showed that there is not a stable relationship between Internet use for political information and each of the eight acts of political participation, but the acts of attending an event, doing campaign work, displaying a message and persuading others reinforced my hypothesis that in time there may be a stronger trend towards a positive relationship. I still observed idiosyncratic relationships in the acts of voting and donating money. For the additional acts that I observed, participating in protest marches and signing petitions, the results showed a possible consistent relationship for petition signing but not for protest marches. Additional research is needed for these two areas of political participation.

Moving forward, it is crucial for scholars to examine multiple election years, and possibly only analyze general elections together and midterm elections together, as turnout and participation vary between the two. While the results point to a possible stable relationship, more scholarship is needed in the future to ensure the trend or show that there are still idiosyncrasies in the relationships. Digital media is not going away any time soon, so further research is needed to help understand how the human element intersects with the online world.

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