

Chapter 5

Online Political Participation in the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election: Examining the Democratic Divide

Taewoo Nam

University at Albany, State University of New York, USA

Djoko Sigit Sayogo

University at Albany, State University of New York, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates how the democratic divide has been established due to socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, by analyzing the data from the Pew Research Center's survey conducted during the campaign season of the 2008 U.S. presidential election. The study compares five different types of online political activity: communication, mobilization, information consumption, information production, and involvement in social networking websites. Sociodemographic characteristics such as age, gender, race, education, and income determine the degree of online political involvement. The conventional notion that better-educated and more affluent citizens actively participate in politics is magnified on the Internet for white males more than non-whites or females. The generational divide is salient for adoption of social networking sites, but the websites serve a political function to encourage participation by those disadvantaged in terms of education and economic means.

INTRODUCTION

Various concerns arising from the digital divide account for the performance of digital democracy. The digital divide, the disparity in access, skill level of users, and usage (Bélanger & Carter,

2009; Gunkel, 2003; NTIA, 2002; Steyaert, 2002; van Dijk, 2005, 2006), is an obstacle to political activity on the Internet. This divide is a root cause of inequality in benefiting from the democratic potential of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Beyond technical concerns, the divide raises social and political concerns because

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the use of online systems disproportionately benefits groups who already have an advantage in the existing socioeconomic system. Differing technological capabilities and competence between individuals aggravates participatory inequality in digital democracy. Accordingly, the degree of the digital divide predetermines the extent to which ICTs enhance participatory democracy mediated by the Internet.

What we should take into account for digital democracy in the United States is not only physical access to ICTs, but also the conventional pattern of historical political inequality: *ascriptive hierarchy* (ascription of inequality)¹ shaped by traditional exclusion of the less affluent, the less educated, and non-whites from mainstream politics (Mossberger et al., 2008; Smith, 1993). Indeed there has been a strong historical pull toward social exclusion and inequality before the disparities between technology-haves and have-nots and between the technology-savvy and the technology-illiterate ever appeared. Socioeconomic status (SES) and demographic conditions outline a snapshot of the digital divide and historical political inequality. In this sense, we hypothesize that sociodemographics heavily influence *the democratic divide*—i.e., the gap in political activities via the Internet—which is the conceptual junction between the trend of the digital divide and the pattern of historical political inequality. Considering the reality of digital democracy, our thesis to be tested is: *sociodemographics influence the democratic divide*.

This chapter proposes to answer the following research question: *How do sociodemographic characteristics affect the pattern of the democratic divide?* Within the lens of the supposition that “sociodemographics have an effect,” we examine the gap in political activities during the 2008 U.S. presidential election campaign season, when the campaign camps made unprecedented heavy use of Web 2.0 technologies (e.g., social networking and social media sites, blogs, micro-blogging, and multi-media sharing) and broadcast email for discussion, information dissemination and shar-

ing, and contribution to a candidate. The analysis on the data from Pew Internet and American Life Project’s 2008 pre-election survey will reveal whether sociodemographic markers like age, gender, race, education and income had generated a democratic divide in individuals’ political activities during the presidential primary season. We will explore several types of online political activity: communication, mobilization, information consumption, information production, and activity on social networking sites (SNS).

The chapter is organized into various sections. The following section solidifies theoretical and empirical grounds of the democratic divide, and constructs hypotheses drawing on the literature review. Next, a subsequent section will describe data, measurements, and method. The analysis sheds light on the patterns of the democratic divide and sociodemographic predictors of the democratic divide. We will discuss results of the analysis to contribute practical significance and provide social implications for our main findings. The chapter ends with conclusive remarks.

THEORETICAL, CONCEPTUAL, AND EMPIRICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Multiple Concepts of the Digital Divide

The digital divide as a phenomenon of inequality encompasses a variety of contexts. Not only does it represent the gap between those who have and don’t have physical access to technology, but the concept has evolved to include multiple dimensions. Academics’ concerns of the digital divide comprise various aspects of ICT-mediated life. The access divide is central to diverse aspects of the digital divide, but the concept of access suggests deeper and richer nuances beyond simple physical access. The multidimensional concept of the digital divide, hence, diversifies the definition of access.

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