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## Online only: Which Czech young adults prefer online civic participation?

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### Abstract

*This study examined whether people who prefer online over offline civic participation differ from those who participate in both environments, who prefer offline participation, or do not participate. Using a cross-sectional sample of young adults (age 18-28) recruited in the Czech Republic (N = 720), we compared these four groups (defined by their types of civic participation) regarding their socio-demographic profiles, trust (social, individual, and in the media), relationship to politics (political interest, exposure to politics in the media, and internal political efficacy), and political ideology (left-right orientation, concern with environmental issues, and support for immigrants' rights). Results showed that people who prefer online participation adhere to conservative political ideologies than people with other types of participation. Their relationship to politics is as positive as in the case of people active in both environments. No substantial differences in trust and socio-demographics were found.*

Keywords: civic participation; Internet; young adults; political ideology

### Introduction

Civic participation can be defined as contributing to the public good through cooperation with others. Traditionally, it encompasses a broad range of offline activities ranging from voluntary work for the community to attending politically motivated protests. Further possibilities for civic participation have emerged with the spread of the Internet. New platforms such as online discussion forums, blogs, social network sites, or online communities have offered a space for and through which people might engage in civic issues. The field of civic activism has been supplemented by activities such as expressing and discussing political views on blogs, discussion forums or social network sites, expressing support and making donations on specific online sites, or using Internet applications (such as emails or social network sites) to share and spread civic life-related information. Consequently, online participation, realized via modern communication technologies, has been recognized as an important form of civic life, particularly important for young people who are the most frequent Internet users (Banaji & Buckingham, 2010; Gil de Zúñiga, Veenstra, Vraga, & Shah, 2010; Livingstone, Couldry, & Markham, 2007; Mossberger, Tolbert, & McNeal, 2007).

Being widely accessible and low-cost, online participation has given rise to major expectations, it has been heralded as facilitating democratic processes by overcoming barriers characteristic of offline participation (Krueger, 2006; Livingstone, Bober, & Helsper, 2005). But there were also more skeptical voices arguing that many barriers actually persist (and some new ones have emerged, such as differences in digital skills), creating and further reinforcing the democratic divide (Min, 2010; Norris, 2001). Furthermore, some skeptics warn that online participation might exacerbate negative effects, including so-called slacktivism, which refers to non-effective online activities that make participants feel good about themselves (Christensen, 2011), or extremist actions (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Wojcieszak, 2009).

Hence, the contribution of online participation to the quality of civic life within general populations still remains questionable. Many of the concerns stem from a more general question: Do people who participate online systematically differ from those who prefer more traditional offline forms of participation? Although many pointed out that people who participate online have a strong tendency to participate offline as well (Oser, Hooghe, & Marien, 2013; Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2010), there still remains a group of people who are active online but less interested in offline civic activities. Currently, two main hypotheses have been proposed to explain the effects of the online environment on civic participation (Nam, 2012; Norris, 2001). According to the mobilization hypothesis, the opportunity to participate online boosts participation among those who are not active in more traditional offline activities. Hence, proponents of this hypothesis tend to see the Internet as a means of recruiting people who are traditionally disengaged from civic life. On the other hand, the reinforcement hypothesis states that the internet contributes to greater civic participation but mainly among those who are already active offline. So far, support has been found for both hypotheses (Best & Krueger, 2005; Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006; Livingstone et al., 2005). We can presume that both hypotheses are actually accurate and not mutually exclusive (Stanley & Weare, 2004) as they apply for different segments of the public. While the media can serve as a new arena for those who were civically active, they can also capture a new group of people for whom this area is more suitable.

We believe that by focusing on this group, we can reveal distinctive features of online participation. Therefore, in this study, we aim to examine the individual characteristics of people who prefer online over offline civic participation. This group will be compared to three other groups defined by their civic participation: people who are active both online and offline; people who prefer offline over online participation; and people who are generally passive. Compared to previous studies that focused mainly on the socio-demographic profiles of online activists, we pay attention also to their psychological characteristics.

## **Socio-Demographics**

Recent studies revealed that in terms of resources and demographics online activists are usually similar to people involved in other forms of civic participation. Well-known participatory inequalities between people having low and high socioeconomic status pertain also in the internet environment (Best & Krueger, 2005; Hargittai, 2010; Min, 2010; Oser et al., 2013; Schlozman et al., 2010). Although the gap in access to the Internet seems to be narrowing, the second-level divide in terms of use and skills, which is determined by socioeconomic status, still prevails (Min, 2010). Regarding gender, men and women do not differ in their engagement in online versus offline civic activities (Oser et al., 2013). The only group that seems to benefit from the opportunities provided by the internet are younger people who are represented among online activists in larger numbers than among people involved in other types of civic participation (Oser et al., 2013; Schlozman et al., 2010).

## **Trust**

However, the lack of socioeconomic and demographic differences (with the exception of age) does not preclude differences in psychological characteristics such as trust, relationship to politics, or political ideology. Concerning trust, we distinguish three dimensions in this study: social trust; institutional trust; and trust in the media. Social trust can be defined as people's belief that others will act in their interest or, at least, will not willingly harm them (Newton, 2007). Some authors consider social trust to be a prerequisite for many collective civic actions because higher trust in fellow citizens makes people more willing to cooperate (e.g. Putnam, 2000; Uslaner 1998; Uslaner, 1999). Compared to offline participation, online activities are characterized by higher control over interpersonal interactions and allow a greater degree of anonymity (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002). This makes online participation more individualistic, and consequently not so demanding in terms of trust in others. Hence, it is possible that online activities are preferred by people with lower levels of social trust than offline activities. Similar hypotheses can be suggested concerning trust in social institutions. People who participate offline often have to directly cooperate and negotiate with institutions, such as local governments, while the internet is often perceived as a relatively free space beyond institutional control (Dahlberg, 2001). Thus, online participation might be attractive particularly for people who do not demonstrate much institutional trust and are thus discouraged from offline participation. On the other hand, people who participate online could be distinctive by demonstrating more trust in the media because they use them as tools for participation. All in all, we hypothesize that online activists will show less social and institutional trust but greater trust in the media compared to people who participate in the offline environment.

## **Relationship to Politics**

A second set of psychological characteristics can be labelled as one's relationship to politics or, negatively, as individual political alienation (Linek, 2010; Montero, Gunther, & Torcal, 1997). It is understood as encompassing interest in politics, exposure to politics in the media, and internal political efficacy – i.e. one's perceived competence to understand and participate effectively in politics. Nowadays, the internet serves as a crucial source of information, including politics, that can form the basis of one's civic participation (Papacharissi, 2004; Polat, 2005; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Ward, Gibson, & Lusoli, 2003). According to the mobilization hypothesis, the internet could provide an opportunity to participate for people who are alienated from politics and do not participate in a traditional way. In such cases, we can expect that online activists differ in their relation to politics from people who are active both online and offline. On the other hand, based on the reinforcement hypothesis, online participation attracts people with similar psychological dispositions as offline participation; hence, people active online should not have a different relationship to politics compared to people active in both environments. To evaluate these different expectations, we will test the hypothesis that online activists are less interested in politics, are less exposed to politics in the media and have smaller internal political efficacy than people active offline.

## **Political Ideology**

A final set of characteristics concerns political ideology, which we define as a traditional left-right dimension but also as an endorsement of some post-materialist values, such as environmentalism or support for minority rights (Inglehart, 1997). The discussion whether the internet environment and, more specifically, online civic participation, attract people with specific political ideologies does not have an unambiguous conclusion (Muhlberger, 2003; Norris, 2001). Moreover, many internet activities can remain unseen and participants can actually remain almost anonymous, hidden behind their nicknames (Papacharissi, 2004). Due to increased anonymity, people might be less constrained in participating (Ward et al., 2003) and expressing their own attitudes (Papacharissi, 2004; Suler, 2004). However, this affordance of the online environment is a double edged sword – while it brings more opportunities for those who are traditionally excluded from participation, it also provides a space for radical- or even extremist – activities that are not well-accepted by the public (De Koster & Houtman, 2008; Douglas, 2007; Wojcieszak, 2009). For instance, the internet is an environment in which people might more easily express and be exposed to intolerance (Goodman & Rowe, 2014). Therefore, we could expect that online participation is appealing for people with less mainstream and less tolerant attitudes who otherwise do not get involved in offline non-anonymous activities. Hence, we hypothesize that online activists will endorse less moderate and less tolerant political ideologies than people who participate in offline environment.

## **Aims of the Present Study**

Overall, the present study aims to examine the similarities and differences between people who participate mainly online and those who do not participate, participate mainly offline, or participate both offline and online. Specifically, we will control for their socio-demographic profiles (age, gender, and socioeconomic status) and we will examine their trust (social, individual, and the media), individual relationships to politics (political interest, exposure to politics in the media, and internal political efficacy), and political ideology (left-right orientation, concern with environmental issues, and support for immigrants' rights). We presume that online activists will have similar socio-demographic profiles, lower levels of social and institutional trust, and higher levels of trust in the media compared to other activists. Based on the reinforcement hypothesis, a similar relationship to politics and political ideology could be expected. On the other hand, differences in these variables would comply with the premises of the mobilization hypothesis.

Our study deliberately focuses on people from the majority population. Prior studies have shown that ethnic minorities can have different participatory resources (Best & Krueger, 2005; Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995) and motivations to participate (Byrne, 2007; Jensen, 2008; Stepick & Stepick, 2002) than the majority population. Most importantly, people from ethnic minorities might have specific reasons why they prefer online over offline participation, such as fear of discrimination in offline contexts (Seif, 2010; 2011). To ensure a clear interpretation of the results, members of ethnic minorities are not included in the present analyses.

The study was conducted in the Czech Republic whose context is potentially favorable for online only civic participation. Czech citizens show lower trust in institutions, hold weaker citizenship norms and participate less in offline civic activities than people in West European countries (Bolzendahl & Coffé, 2013;

Catterberg & Moreno, 2006; Vráblíková, 2014). At the same time, the Czech Republic belongs among countries with high levels of internet penetration, with young people being the most frequent internet users. According to the Czech Statistical Office (2013), 97% of the population aged 16-24 and 92% of the population aged 25-34 used the internet in 2013. The combination of distrust in traditional participation and high internet use may give rise to higher levels of online activism.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

Data were collected in 2011 as part of the multinational research project Processes Influencing Democratic Ownership and Participation (<http://www.fahs.surrey.ac.uk/pidop>), which studied the civic behavior and attitudes of adolescents and young adults with different ethnic backgrounds. For the present analysis, participants from the ethnic majority and aged 18-28 were selected. These participants were recruited mostly via university e-mail, with additional snowball sampling to include non-student participants. Those who agreed to participate completed a self-report questionnaire (either online or on paper) about their involvement in civic activities, attitudes, and socio-demographic characteristics. The total sample size in this study is 720 (62% women). The numbers of analyzed cases, however, differ in each analysis due to missing values. Most participants identified themselves as full-time students (73%), one fifth were full-time workers (20%), and the rest were part-time students, part-time workers, or unemployed.

### Measures

**Offline and online civic participation.** Participants were presented with a list of activities and asked how often they had taken part in these in the last twelve months. Responses could range from never (1) to very often (5). Offline civic participation included (a) volunteering, (b) wearing a bracelet, badge, or other symbol to show support for a social or political cause, (c) donating money to a social or political cause/organization, (d) taking part in concerts or fundraising events for a social or political cause, (e) boycotting or buying certain products for political, ethical, or environmental reasons, and (f) attending a public meeting or demonstration involving political or social issues ( $\alpha = .65$ ). Online civic participation was represented by (a) sharing a link to news, music, or videos with social or political content with one's contacts, (b) discussing societal or political questions on the internet, (c) visiting the website of a political or civic organization, (d) participating in an online petition, protest, or boycott, and (e) connecting to a group dealing with social or political issues on Facebook or a similar online social network ( $\alpha = .76$ ). A confirmatory factor analysis showed that offline and online activities formed two distinct dimensions of civic participation ( $\chi^2/df = 3.01$ ; CFI = .92; RMSEA = .06) rather than one common dimension ( $\chi^2/df = 4.78$ ; CFI = .85; RMSEA = .08). Scales were computed with averaged items.

**Income.** Household income indicated socioeconomic status in this study and was assessed by asking: Does the income of your household cover everything that its members need? The response scale ranged from not at all (1) to completely (4).

**Social trust.** Respondents' beliefs in the trustworthiness of other people were measured by the item: I feel that most people can be trusted. The response scale ranged from absolutely disagree (1) to absolutely agree (5).

**Institutional trust.** Trust in institutions was measured by rating six institutions (national government, local governments, the European Union, courts, police, and political parties) on a scale from I absolutely don't trust (1) to I absolutely trust (5). The final score was computed with averaged items ( $\alpha = .74$ ).

**Trust in the media.** Participants rated the trustworthiness of newspapers, television, and the internet on a scale from I absolutely don't trust (1) to I absolutely trust (5). All the three items were averaged to obtain a final score ( $\alpha = .76$ ).

**Political interest.** Three items were used to assess respondents' interest in politics: I discuss social and political issues with friends and acquaintances; I introduce political and social issues into discussions with others; and, I am interested in politics. The response scale ranged from absolutely disagree (1) to absolutely agree (5). The final score is an average of the items ( $\alpha = .84$ ).

**Exposure to political news in the media.** The frequency of participants' exposure to politics in the media was measured by asking: How often do you do these activities? Three items were offered: I follow

what is going on in politics by reading articles in newspapers or magazines; I watch television programs or listen to radio broadcasts that deal with political issues; and, I pay attention to information about politics on the internet. The response scale ranged from never (1) to daily (5). The final score was computed with averaged items ( $\alpha = .77$ ).

**Internal political efficacy.** Two items based on Husfeldt, Barber, and Torney-Purta (2005) were used to measure respondents' beliefs in their competence to understand and participate in politics: I know more about politics than most people of my age; When political issues or problems are being discussed, I usually have something to say. The response scale was from absolutely disagree (1) to absolutely agree (5). The items were averaged to obtain the final score ( $r = .69$ ).

**Left-right ideology.** Respondents' self-placement on the left-right ideological spectrum was measured by asking: How would you describe your political opinions? The response scale was extreme left (1); left; center left; center; center right; right; and extreme right (7).

**Belief in environmental causes.** Respondents' belief that the country has environmental issues was measured by the question: Does your country struggle with environmental issues? The response scale ranged from absolutely disagree (1) to absolutely agree (5).

**Participants' tolerance** was indicated by their support for immigrants' rights. Because solidarity with immigrants, compared to other disadvantaged social groups, is relatively low in European countries, including the Czech Republic (van Oorschot, 2006), we considered it a touchstone of participants' tolerance towards minorities. Three beliefs about immigrants' rights were measured by scales replicated from Nata and Menezes (2004). The response scales ranged from absolutely disagree (1) to absolutely agree (5). The final scores were computed with averaged items.

**Support for immigrants' equal rights** was measured by four items: Immigrant children should have the same opportunities to study as any other person; Immigrants should earn the same wage when doing the same job as any other person; Immigrants should be entitled to the same social benefits (e.g., health care, unemployment benefits etc.) as Czech people; and Immigrants should be granted the same rights as any other person ( $\alpha = .89$ ).

**Support for immigrants' cultural rights** was measured by four items: Immigrants should be allowed to preserve their language; Immigrant children should have the right to learn their language in school; Immigrants should have the right to maintain their traditions and cultural heritage; and, Immigrants should have the right to build places of worship for their own religions ( $\alpha = .81$ ).

**Support for affirmative action towards immigrants** was measured by three items: Immigrants should be granted special rights once they are discriminated against; Immigrants should have a representative in the country's parliament because they are a minority; and It should be made easier for immigrant children to enter university since they are disadvantaged in our society ( $\alpha = .68$ ).

## Data Analysis

Respondents were classified based on median values as demonstrating low or high levels of offline and online civic participation. By combining these categories, four groups representing different types of civic participation were created: people with high online and low offline participation ( $n = 90$ ); people with high offline and low online participation ( $n = 110$ ); people with low offline and online participation ( $n = 194$ ); and, people with high offline and online participation ( $n = 228$ ).

Next, participants divided into four different types of civic participation were compared according to several variables (various dimensions of trust, relationship to politics, and political ideology) using factorial analysis of covariance (ANCOVA). Compared to simple analysis of variance (ANOVA), the advantage of this statistical method is that it allows controlling for the effects of other variables. In our analyses, respondents' sex (factor), age and income (covariates) were controlled for. Follow-up planned comparisons were used to test the hypotheses that the high online group differs from the remaining three groups.

## Results

Median values, which were used for the classification of respondents into four types of civic participation, and other descriptive statistics can be found in Table 1. Analyses of control variables (Table 2) showed that respondents' type of civic participation was independent from their sex ( $\chi^2_3 = 5.09, p = .17$ ), age ( $F_{3,618} = 1.90, p = .13, \eta^2 = .01$ ), and income ( $F_{3,486} = 1.32, p = .27, \eta^2 = .01$ ).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics.

	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>
Offline participation	628	1.91	1.83	0.66	1.00	4.50
Online participation	623	2.22	2.20	0.78	1.00	5.00
Sex (% women)	714	62%				
Age	720	22.33	22.00	2.82	18	28
Income	498	3.39	4.00	0.77	1.00	4.00
Social trust	517	2.33	2.00	1.00	1.00	5.00
Institutional trust	525	2.61	2.67	0.65	1.00	4.33
Trust in the media	524	2.83	3.00	0.73	1.00	5.00
Political interest	696	3.30	3.33	1.03	1.00	5.00
Exposure to politics in the media	695	2.99	3.00	0.95	1.00	5.00
Internal efficacy	538	3.04	3.00	1.15	1.00	5.00
Left-right ideology	481	4.52	5.00	1.19	1.00	7.00
Belief in environmental issues	511	3.84	4.00	1.06	1.00	5.00
Support for immigrants' equal rights	501	4.22	4.50	0.88	1.00	5.00
Support for immigrants' cultural rights	500	3.06	3.00	1.03	1.00	5.00
Support for affirmative action towards immigrants	504	1.87	1.67	0.81	1.00	5.00

Table 2. Comparisons of Respondents with Different Types of Civic Participation.

	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean (Standard error)</i>			
		<i>High online</i>	<i>Both low</i>	<i>High offline</i>	<i>Both high</i>
<b>Control variables</b>					
Sex (% women)	619	56%	62%	71%	63%
Age	622	21.91 (0.30)	22.06 (0.19)	22.75 (0.29)	22.23 (0.18)
Income	490	3.35 (0.09)	3.35 (0.07)	3.54 (0.07)	3.41 (0.05)
<b>Trust</b>					
Social trust	485	2.40 (0.12)	2.20 (0.08)	2.35 (0.11)	2.49 (0.07)
Institutional trust	487	2.62 (0.08)	2.54 (0.05)	2.51 (0.07)	2.72 (0.05)
Trust in the media	486	2.92 (0.09)	2.84 (0.06)	2.71 (0.08)	2.85 (0.05)
<b>Relationship to politics</b>					
Political interest	488	3.49 (0.11)	2.83 (0.08)**	3.18 (0.10)*	3.70 (0.07)
Exposure to politics in the media	488	3.24 (0.10)	2.57 (0.07)**	2.77 (0.09)**	3.35 (0.06)
Internal efficacy	487	3.28 (0.13)	2.67 (0.09)**	2.90 (0.11)*	3.55 (0.08)
<b>Political ideology</b>					
Left-right ideology	469	5.02 (0.14)	4.47 (0.10)**	4.46 (0.13)**	4.43 (0.09)**
Belief in environmental issues	483	3.52 (0.13)	3.68 (0.09)	3.93 (0.11)*	3.94 (0.08)**
Support for immigrants' equal rights	485	4.19 (0.10)	4.03 (0.07)	4.24 (0.09)	4.38 (0.06)
Support for immigrants' cultural rights	484	2.78 (0.12)	3.01 (0.09)	3.15 (0.11)*	3.21 (0.07)**
Support for affirmative action towards immigrants	486	1.51 (0.09)	1.90 (0.07)**	1.91 (0.08)**	1.92 (0.06)**

**Notes:** The higher scores of left-right ideology represent more right-wing political orientations. Except for control variables, marginal means are presented. Marginal means were estimated, controlling for the effects of age, gender, and income. Asterisks in the last three columns indicate whether the group mean is significantly different from the group mean of the *high online* group (based on planned comparisons). \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

## Trust

Respondents with different types of civic participation did not differ in their social trust ( $F_{3,481} = 2.41, p = .07, \eta^2 = .01$ ), or trust in the media ( $F_{3,479} = 1.06, p = .37, \eta^2 = .01$ ). Although we found some differences regarding institutional trust ( $F_{3,480} = 3.36, p < .05, \eta^2 = .02$ ), planned comparisons showed no significant differences between people with high online participation and the other three types of civic participation (Table 2).

## Relationship to Politics

People characterized by different types of civic participation differed in their political interest ( $F_{3,481} = 26.09, p < .01, \eta^2 = .14$ ), exposure to politics in the media ( $F_{3,481} = 27.53, p < .01, \eta^2 = .15$ ), and internal political efficacy ( $F_{3,480} = 21.76, p < .01, \eta^2 = .12$ ). Specifically, people with high online participation showed higher levels of political interest, more extensive exposure to politics in the media and higher levels of internal political efficacy than people with low levels of both online and offline participation as well as those with high levels of offline participation, but they were not different from people with high levels of both online and offline participation (Table 2).

## Political Ideology

The type of participation was associated with respondents' left-right ideology ( $F_{3,462} = 4.62, p < .01, \eta^2 = .03$ ). Specifically, people with high levels of online participation reported more right-wing political ideology than people with all other types of participation. Differences were also found regarding respondents' beliefs in environmental issues ( $F_{3,476} = 3.79, p < .05, \eta^2 = .02$ ). In this case, people with high levels of online participation believed that the country has fewer environmental issues compared to people with high levels of offline participation and high levels of both online and offline participation; no significant difference was found compared to people with low levels of both online and offline participation. Further, the type of participation was related to respondents' support for immigrants' equal rights ( $F_{3,478} = 4.54, p < .01, \eta^2 = .03$ ). However, planned comparisons showed no significant differences between people with high levels of online participation and people with any other type of participation. Different results were found regarding respondents' support for immigrants' cultural rights ( $F_{3,477} = 3.30, p < .05, \eta^2 = .02$ ). People with high online participation supported immigrants' cultural rights less than people with high levels of offline participation as well as those with high levels of offline and online participation; the difference from people with low participation online and offline was not significant. Finally, people with different types of participation differed in their support for affirmative action towards immigrants ( $F_{3,479} = 5.16, p < .01, \eta^2 = .03$ ). Respondents with high online participation supported affirmative action towards immigrants significantly less than respondents with all three other types of participation (Table 2).

## Discussion

The main goal of our study was to explore whether people who prefer online over offline civic participation systematically differ from people characterized by other types of civic participation. Overall, the group of online activists appears to adhere to a distinctive political ideology, their relationship to politics is similar to people active both online and offline, and they do not differ in terms of social or institutional trust.

The most striking results concern political ideology. Compared to all other groups, online activists describe themselves as being closer to the political right on a left-right ideological spectrum and they support affirmative action towards immigrants less. Moreover, they support immigrants' cultural rights less and have fewer concerns regarding the environment than other civically active people. The mixture of right-wing orientation, lower endorsement of post-materialist values, and lower approval of immigrant support beyond the provision of basic rights suggests that online activists adopt a more conservative political ideology than other groups. However, this does not mean that they should be perceived as right-wing extremists because, on average, they describe themselves as being center right. Moreover, their support for immigrants' equality, which is similar to people with other types of participation, indicates that they do not reject immigrants' rights as such.

The question is whether online participation attracts people who already adhere to a more conservative ideology, or whether it makes activists more conservative. Muhlberger (2003), who found identical results for the comparable age group in the United States, argues for the former option and infers that the internet may serve as a space for people with unusual political views for their demographic group.

Although the support for conservative ideology seems to be relatively spread among Czech youth (Kunštát, 2007) it is possible that young people who support conservative beliefs perceive themselves as being in a minority, which makes them prefer online participation. Such processes were documented in the more extreme cases of right-wing online communities (De Koster & Houtman, 2008) and it is possible that they apply to more moderate political orientations as well.

Nevertheless, our findings are based on cross-sectional data; hence we should not completely rule out an alternative explanation. Although we found no direct support for the crystallization of extremist opinions through online participation (Bowman-Grieve, 2009; Wojcieszak, 2010), it is still possible that online participation, characterized by a greater possibility to seek like-minded content or discussion partners, contributes to a greater polarization of one's ideology (De Koster & Houtman, 2008; Douglas, 2007). The stronger conservatism of online activists in our study probably cannot be fully explained by the polarization of political ideology through online participation because there is no apparent reason why online participation should polarize political beliefs only in a conservative direction. However, a possible scenario could be that young people with conservative beliefs are attracted to online participation that makes their previous beliefs even stronger.

Finally, it is also possible that leftists' online participation spills over into offline participation more easily than in the case of conservatives. Lawrence, Sides, and Farrell (2010) found that readers of American right-wing blogs were less active in offline political participation than readers of left-wing blogs. They suggested that it is because leftist blogs have greater tendencies to mobilize their readers' offline participation. Analogously, it is possible that the group of online activists in our study is more conservative because many left-wing online activists have been mobilized via the internet to participate in offline civic activities while conservative online activists have not.

Further, we found that online activists have a more positive relationship to politics in terms of their political interests, exposure to news, and internal political efficacy than people who do not participate or prefer offline participation. The finding that online activists differ from people who do not participate and are similar to people who participate in both environments supports the reinforcement hypothesis. In other words, online participation is apparently not exploited, to a great extent, by people who are alienated from politics. Rather, it seems that the offline participatory gap between people who do and do not take interest in politics and feel competent in this area is merely reproduced online (Brundidge & Rice, 2009).

Although we found that people who prefer online participation have an even more positive relationship to politics than people who prefer offline participation, it should be noted that this finding might stem from how we measured offline participation. Questions on offline participation targeted many civic activities that are not necessarily connected to politics, such as volunteering or donating money, which might be a reason why people who prefer offline participation reported a less positive relationship to politics. It is possible that if we had targeted more offline political activities (e.g. working for political parties), the difference between online and offline activists would have disappeared.

Similar levels of social and institutional trust among all groups in our study indicate that online participation is not a domain for people who are distrustful of their fellow citizens or social institutions. Neither does trust in the media seem to be a motive for preferring online over offline civic activities. Such results suggest that the motivations for online participation are not based on these generalized social views.

Further, our analyses of socio-demographic profiles support previous findings that the representation of women and men among online activists is not different from other types of civic participation (Oser et al., 2013). Likewise, no differences were found regarding age. This result reveals that the preferences for online participation are homogenous among people aged 18 to 28. Thus, age seems to matter only if this generation is compared with older generations as shown in previous research (Oser et al., 2013; Schlozman et al., 2010). Finally, people involved in different types of participation did not differ in terms of their socioeconomic status, as denoted by the self-evaluated sufficiency of household income. Lacking differences between people with low and high participation can be surprising in the context of other studies (Oser et al., 2013; Schlozman et al., 2010) but they should be attributed to small differences between our respondents in terms of their socioeconomic resources, with most of them having a high status. A more socioeconomically diverse sample and a better measurement of this variable would be necessary for a better comparison with previous studies. However, putting aside this limitation, the present results give additional support to the reinforcement hypothesis that expects no socio-demographic differences between people participating online and offline.



A number of caveats need to be noted regarding the present study. Our data is cross-sectional, which makes causal inferences difficult, and represents only young adults with a relatively high socioeconomic status. Moreover, to gain a better insight into the studied differences in the future, we would recommend to conduct a more detailed analysis of the different types of online participation, distinguishing, for instance, between more solitary (e.g., online petitions) and more social activities (e.g. online discussions). Using this elaboration, some differences that were expected but not confirmed in this study, such as those regarding social trust, could be explored.

Despite these limitations, however, several important conclusions about the civic life of young people on the internet can be drawn. Online activism does not seem to be a tool for people who are politically alienated or lack resources for offline civic participation. On the other hand, the internet might provide an opportunity for greater activism for young people with conservative political beliefs.

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