Chapter 13

Analyzing the Capacity of Unsolicited Political Email

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ABSTRACT

An enduring concern for students of political mobilization has been whether political mobilization efforts reinforce or expand current patterns of political participation.

Despite some promise, an emerging body of research suggests that email mobilization techniques generally will reinforce existing participatory patterns. Email mobilization campaigns rely heavily on individuals to first submit their email addresses for future contact. Because signing up for future political email is itself an act of political participation, mobilization resulting from these solicited contacts would serve to reinforce the engagement of those already willing and able to participate. Yet, many individuals do receive unsolicited political email. These unsolicited political emails hold the most potential to activate the inactive. Unfortunately, despite speculation about the mobilizing potential of these unsolicited email contacts, political scientists know little about whether unsolicited political messages induce engagement. This chapter seeks to answer the question: Does unsolicited political email independently induce individuals to participate in politics? Using data from a unique probability sample survey of U.S. Internet users, several multivariate regressions suggest that unsolicited email contact from mobilizing institutions does not induce individuals to engage in political activity. These results are robust even when analyzing subgroups most likely to be open to unsolicited email contact.

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INTRODUCTION

The internet has become an important medium for political mobilization, the “process by which candidates, parties, activists, and groups induce other people to participate” (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993, p. 25). In the late 1990’s, Moveon.org’s ascension to one of the United States’ largest independent political organizations on the strength of its email mobilization campaigns prompted other political organizations to begin widespread online mobilization initiatives (e.g., Hara & Estrada, 2005). Many pundits attribute many of the unlikely accomplishments of underdog campaigns such as Howard Dean, Ned Lamont, Ron Paul and Barack Obama to their ability to mobilize voters through the internet (e.g., Gardner, 2008). New innovations, such as social networking platforms, have become increasingly important to online political mobilization efforts, however email continues to rank as the most pervasive form of institution-to-citizen contact; Barack Obama’s 2008 “opt-in email list ended up at more than 13 million addresses” alone (Graff, 2009). Many citizens seem to recognize the importance of the internet for stimulating their political engagement. In the 2008 election cycle, 12% of Internet users reportedly “signed up to receive email from the candidates or campaigns” and 22% suggest that they “would not be as involved in this campaign as much if it weren’t for the Internet” (Smith & Rainie, 2008).

The best current evidence suggests that the preponderance of online mobilization, such as Obama’s opt-in political email, is solicited by those receiving the political email, which marks a key change from traditional offline mobilization that is typically unsolicited (Krueger, 2006). Because signing up for future political email is itself an act of political participation, mobilization resulting from these solicited email contacts would serve to reinforce the engagement of those already willing and able to participate. The size and shape of the participatory universe would not appreciably change if all email mobilization came from opt in lists. Yet, many individuals do receive unsolicited political email. Therefore, only this less common unsolicited political email can potentially activate the inactive, which would expand the participatory universe. Unfortunately, while several studies have demonstrated that online mobilization induces political participation, no research until now has examined whether unsolicited political email contact induces political participation.

This article proceeds by first reviewing the extant literature about political mobilization and the Internet. Then it describes the normative importance of distinguishing between solicited and unsolicited email mobilization. Next, it considers the theoretical arguments concerning the potential of unsolicited political email to induce political activity, which informs expectations about the core research question: Does unsolicited political email independently induce individuals to participate in politics? The data section then describes data drawn from a unique probability sample survey of U.S. Internet users that is used to estimate several multivariate regressions. The results suggest that unsolicited email contact from mobilizing institutions does not induce individuals to engage in political activity, even among subgroups expressing openness to unsolicited contact. The article concludes with a discussion of these findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Passive and Deliberate Internet Mobilization

Beyond citizen self assessments, scholars have shown the internet, variously conceived and measured, to be an effective political mobilization medium. In an important early study, Tolbert and McNeal demonstrate that accessing the internet and consuming online news increases the odds of voting (2003). Several studies show that the use
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