Generational Differences in Information Technology Use and Political Involvement*

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ABSTRACT

A structural equation model analysis of data from a 2003 national random sample survey (n = 478) on informational technology (IT) reveals important direct and indirect effects of generational demographic and attitudinal differences on electronic forms of political participation. Younger respondents reported more support for IT and fewer technological disadvantages compared to older respondents. Younger respondents showed more desire for public IT availability and e-political participation, whereas older respondents preferred traditional electoral involvement. The more educated held more favorable views of IT generally and of public IT access more specifically. Better-educated respondents were more active civically in both traditional and electronic forms of participation. Supportive technological views led to greater e-political participation and stronger interest in e-elections. Respondents with less concern and fear about IT were more likely to act as digital citizens and were more involved in e-politics and e-elections. Proponents of public IT access were more supportive of e-elections. Our model suggests that e-citizenship will compound existing societal divisions, as non-electronic voices are marginalized and electronic voices are amplified.

Keywords: generational change; informational technology; political activity; SEM

INTRODUCTION

Past research has demonstrated that generational differences play an important role in linking IT literacy and usage with political outcomes such as partisanship, elections, or public policy decisions (Fox,
2004). Other sociodemographic differences, together with generational effects, define what has become known as the digital divide (Castells, 1999; Warschauer, 2003). Attitudes toward the availability and use of information technology (IT) play an important role in contemporary political theory and outcomes regarding political participation.

In this article, we define IT literacy operationally as a self-reported ability to use computer hardware and software for self-expression, communicate with other individuals and organizations, locate and process information electronically, and engage in problem-solving activities. Past research demonstrates that IT literacy is greater among younger members of society, those with higher incomes and more education, more advantaged ethnic groups (white non-Hispanic and Asian), and those with IT resources more readily available at home, at work, or in readily accessible public locations such as libraries or other public buildings (Mossberger, Tolbert & Stansbury, 2003; Norris, 2001; Servon, 2002). A number of studies have identified unequal levels of IT literacy as a significant barrier to equity in citizenship (NRC, 1999; Wilhelm, 2000). Survey data have been useful for fleshing out the characteristics of Internet non-users, as well as particular obstacles and concerns that explain IT non-use.

This study assesses the impact of generational and SES differences on IT literacy and political participation. It argues that cohort differences have a direct influence on traditional and electronic forms of political engagement but also suggests that interest in and support for technology are key factors in shaping notions of digital citizenry. In addition, this research evaluates whether e-political participation occurs at the expense of more traditional forms of electoral involvement.

**Literature Review**

Studies consistently show that age, race, language, and disabilities are significant predictors that shape IT literacy, even when controlling for socioeconomic status (Cooper, 2000; Goslee, 1998; Novak & Hoffman, 1998). Income and education increase the likelihood of access to and use of computers and the Internet (NTIA, 2000, 2002; UCLA, 2000; Wilhelm, 2000) as well as access to broadband (NTIA, 2004). The purchase of a home computer or general access to and availability of computers are considered widely to be dependent on income. Some scholars (Compaine, 2001), however, in situating the rollout of computers and the Internet historically, have concluded that access to computers and connectivity to the Internet, in fact, are diffusing at an unprecedented rate compared to other technologies such as television, radio, and electricity.

In a study of residents of Los Angeles, California, age had no effect on the centrality of the Internet to everyday life; however, older respondents had fewer IT skills than their younger counterparts (Loges & Jung, 2001). Age seems to become a barrier to Internet use among those over 65 years (Lenhart et al., 2000). Concerns about privacy may be an important consideration for elders’ use of IT (Den-