Chapter VI

Resisting Government Internet Surveillance by Participating in Politics Online and Offline

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Abstract

While more is probably known about the causes of political participation than any other political behavior, the research program suffers in that it generally assumes citizens operate within an unproblematic surveillance context. This chapter argues that the growing use of the Internet for political participation and the government's expanded electronic surveillance capacities make this assumption increasingly dubious. Drawing on Michel Foucault's insights concerning surveillance and resistance, I develop empirical hypotheses related to surveillance and Internet political participation. Testing these hypotheses using data derived from a unique probability sample survey of U.S. Internet users, surveillance is shown to influence online political activity. Those who oppose the current administration, and who perceive the government monitors their Internet behavior, participate in politics online at the highest rates. Next, I test whether perceptions of online surveillance lead to a similar higher probability of conventional offline political activity. The results suggest that for those opposed to the regime's policies, online surveillance increases the likelihood of engagement in offline political participation.
Introduction

Political participation plays a well-understood role in various theories of democratic politics. Participation is said to promote system stability by legitimizing the current regime (e.g., Salisbury, 1975), facilitate the moral development of individuals (e.g., Mill, 1991; Pateman, 1970) and determine who governs and receives policy benefits (e.g., Key, 1949; Radcliff, 1994). Given the importance of political participation across a diverse range of democratic theories, a persistent question for empirical political scientists has been, “why do people participate?” Broadly considered, the factors found to facilitate individual political participation commonly fall into four categories: socioeconomic (e.g., Milbrath, 1965), psychological (e.g., Miller & Shanks, 1996), civic resources (e.g., Verba & Nie, 1972), and mobilization (e.g., Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). Yet, while scholars probably know more about the causes of political participation than any other political behavior, the research program suffers in that it generally assumes ordinary citizens operate within an unproblematic surveillance context.

Typically, when scholars do consider the impact of surveillance on political participation, they focus on narrowly defined targets such as Black Panther, Communist, or Native American activists rather than on citizens in general (e.g., Churchill & Vander Wall 1990; Cunningham 2004; Donner, 1980; Rogin, 1987). Even those who do include ordinary individuals’ privacy concerns as a determinant of political participation (completion of the U.S. Census) argue explicitly that these concerns likely do not extend to other forms of political participation (Couper, Singer, & Kulka, 1998; Singer, Mathiowetz, & Couper, 1993).

Although the political participation literature’s neglect of surveillance was perhaps reasonable a decade ago, three developing conditions render it questionable. First, the Internet has become a mainstream avenue for political participation in the United States. Over 60% of the U.S. adult population now connects to the Internet. Of those who do connect, two-thirds engage in some type of online political activity (CSRA, 2003). This worldwide network of computers provides the technological infrastructure that makes the widespread surveillance of mass activity feasible for the first time in U.S. history (Nehf, 2003; Schwartz, 1999; Westin, 2003).

Second, the September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon provided justification for the passage of several new “antiterrorism” laws that expand the government’s surveillance powers (for reviews, see Nelson, 2002; Pikowsky, 2002; Solove, 2004). Many of the key provisions of the central piece of antiterrorism legislation, the USA PATRIOT Act (Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism), focus directly on electronic surveillance. Lower barriers now exist for the government to intercept electronic mail transmissions and monitor Web surfing, all without necessarily informing the individual of this surveillance (Berkowitz, 2002; Nelson, 2002).