Chapter 5

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

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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...
the use of online systems disproportionately ben-

efits groups who already have an advantage in the
existing socioeconomic system. Differing tech-
nological 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: soci-
odemographics 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 gener-
ated a democratic divide in individuals’ political
activities during the presidential primary season.
We will explore several types of online political
activity: communication, mobilization, informa-
tion 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 dimen-
sions. 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 sug-
gests deeper and richer nuances beyond simple
physical access. The multidimensional concept of
the digital divide, hence, diversifies the definition
of access.