Chapter XV

Generational Differences in IT Use and Political Involvement: New Directions

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Abstract

A structural equation model analysis of data from a 2003 national random sample survey (n = 478) on information 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-citizensry will compound existing social divisions as nonelectronic voices are marginalized and electronic voices are amplified.

Generational Differences in Information Technology Use and Political Involvement

Past research has demonstrated that generational differences play an important role in linking information technology (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 IT play an important role in contemporary political theory and outcomes regarding political participation.

Complex contemporary issues regarding full participation by older members of the political community revolve around the rapidly expanding reliance on electronic sources of access that all too frequently are unfamiliar to older adults, for the purpose of commenting on pending government rules and the corresponding increased use of exclusively online “e-rulemaking” by public agencies (e.g., Garson, 2005; Shulman, Thrane, & Shelley, 2005). A related IT research front has emerged regarding the global need to adapt technologies that often have been developed of, by, and for the young to the needs of the elderly (e.g., Jaeger, 2005; Thrane, Shelley, Shulman, Beisser, & Larson, 2005). Making “young technologies” available and functional to older users requires careful attention to cognitive, social, and education differences, as well as to the vastly divergent life histories that separate younger “with it” technology users from their elders. An area of particularly critical current application of research on the generational dimension of the digital divide lies in the need to provide and evaluate functional online information and referral systems for services supporting the elderly—and especially the disabled elderly—that can cut successfully across generationally different modes of seeking and following up on sources of assistance for service delivery (e.g., Auh & Shelley, 2006; Shelley & Auh, 2006). The importance of combined online, telephone, and in-person contacts cutting across generations is driven home by the ongoing multiyear Aging and Disability Resource Center initiative of the U.S. Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services and the Administration on Aging to establish information and referral capability for the elderly and disabled in nearly every state. 
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