

Exploring the Contingent Effects of Political Efficacy and Partisan Strength on the Relationship Between Online News Use and Democratic Engagement

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Since the 2008 United States presidential election, more than half of all adults have been using the Internet to stay informed about politics. Two perspectives have been advanced to explain the impact of online news use on democratic engagement: The "instrumental" view asserts that online news use has a direct effect on political and civic participation, and the "psychological" view asserts that the effects of online news use are contingent on individuals' preexisting psychological dispositions. Both perspectives were examined using national survey data from the 2008 and 2012 American National Election Studies Time Series survey (ANES) and the 2008 National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES). The results from the three surveys provide support for both direct and contingent effects of online news use on democratic engagement.

Keywords: political participation, civic engagement, Internet use, political efficacy, partisan strength

The 2008 U.S. presidential election was notable for the important role of the Internet in facilitating information dissemination and communications among stakeholders during the campaign. For the first time, more than half of the adult population used the Internet to stay informed about politics during the election (Smith, 2009). As individuals are increasingly using the Internet to access political and campaign information, it is necessary for communication researchers to continue the task of assessing the effects of online news use on democratic engagement because a normative democracy requires informed citizens who are motivated and have opportunities to engage in political and civic affairs (Delli Carpini, 2004).

Two theoretical perspectives have been used to examine the impact of online news use on participation (Xenos & Moy, 2007). The "instrumental" perspective asserts that Internet news use has a direct effect on engagement because of the reduced costs, greater convenience, and information diversity associated with the technology relative to the traditional media (Bimber, 2001). This perspective aligns with an optimistic view of the Internet as a democratizing technology that reduces barriers to information and communication, which then leads to greater overall participation (Norris, 2001). The "psychological"

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perspective asserts that the technological affordances provided by the Internet are more likely to be utilized by those who are already motivated to find information related to politics (Kaye & Johnson, 2004). A corollary of this is the ongoing debate on whether the technological affordances provided by the Internet only benefit those who are already motivated to engage in the political process. Over time, this may lead to a widening democratic divide between the engaged and disengaged (Norris, 2001).

This article makes three contributions to the literature. First, it follows recommendations from scholars to continually examine the relationship between Internet use and democratic engagement as new national data becomes available (Boulianne, 2009; Xenos & Moy, 2007). Second, it focuses on the contingent effects of political efficacy and partisan strength, two psychological dispositions that have had a long tradition of study and measurement in the political science literature (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Lewis-Beck, Jacoby, Norpoth, & Weisberg, 2008). Despite their theoretical importance, their role as intervening variables between online news use and democratic engagement have yet to be fully examined, which is surprising considering that those who are politically motivated tend to use the media more to stay informed (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 2003) and are more receptive to news that is consistent with their political predispositions (Zaller, 1992).

Third, three national data sets are used to examine the proposed relationships: the 2008 and 2012 American National Election Studies Time Series survey (ANES) and the 2008 National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES). This approach offers several methodological advantages. Although the research designs and implementation of the surveys differ, there are substantive elements that overlap (Wagner, 2011) and concurrent analysis provide opportunities to corroborate the findings derived from one survey with the other and so strengthen the external validity of the findings. Moreover, because certain variables, such as online news use, are operationalized differently in the two surveys and often with single-item measures, it is possible to compare and assess the relative reliability and internal validity of the variables across the surveys. If the hypothesized relationships can be demonstrated with both surveys and the magnitudes of the relationships are similar and in the same direction, greater confidence can be placed on the robustness of the results. Alternatively, if the hypothesized relationships are present in one sample but not in the other, there will be methodological implications for item construction and question wording in future surveys that can be advanced for consideration.

Political participation and civic participation are two key indicators of democratic engagement. The former includes activities that influence the selection of government officials and policy making, such as voting and engaging in campaign work (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995) while the latter includes activities that address public issues that do not directly involve the government, such as volunteering on community projects or donating money to charities (Delli Carpini, 2004). Both forms of participation are examined because they are the barometers of a healthy democracy as they include indirect mechanisms of government policy with direct, community-based action in response to public needs and issues (Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006).

Literature Review

The Instrumental Perspective of Internet Effects on Democratic Engagement

The direct effects of Internet use and democratic engagement have been explained from the perspective of rational choice theory. Individuals seek out information as a way to reduce uncertainty; yet they may be unwilling to do so if it costs too much time and effort (Bimber, 2001). Being uninformed, citizens may not know about or have the motivation to participate in political affairs or community activities. Scholars argue that the case of the Internet might be different. Compared to the traditional media, it offers several affordances, such as greater quantity of information, cheaper access, increased speed of information transmission, and greater interactivity (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 2003), that may overcome such costs.

Early iterations of the ANES (1996 and 2000) and NAES (2000) surveys provided tentative support for this perspective as online news exposure and following online campaign information was related to several forms of political participation, such as donating money to candidates and showing a sign supporting a candidate (Bimber, 2001; Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Tolbert & McNeal, 2003). Based on the 1999 and 2000 Life Style study, another national sample, Shah et al. (2005) found that online information seeking was a direct and indirect predictor of civic participation, which included such activities as volunteering and working for a social cause.

Subsequent findings provided stronger support, perhaps due to the wider use of the Internet among the populace and the increased quantity, variety, and sophistication of online news sources. Gil de Zúñiga, Puig-i-Abril, and Rojas' (2009) examination of 2004 PEW data found that online news use predicted both online and offline participation, and Bakker and de Vreese's (2011) analyses from a Dutch sample also found that online news use predicted both online and offline participation. Moreover, Xenos and Moy's (2007) study of the 2004 ANES survey found that following campaign news online predicted civic participation. Thus, being informed is not only related to activities during an election campaign, but also to community-based activities not necessarily related to politics or elections.

Boulianne's (2009) meta-analysis of 38 previous studies confirmed the generally positive relationship between Internet use and democratic engagement, though the mean effect size was relatively small: .04 in studies where political interest was controlled and .05 in probability-based samples. Given that all of the studies in the meta-analysis were based on pre-2008 ANES and NAES data, a question raised by the author was whether later iterations of the surveys will reveal the same pattern and size of findings. With this in mind, the following hypotheses are thus proposed:

H1a: Online news use will positively predict political participation.

H1b: Online news use will positively predict civic participation.

The Contingent Role of Political Efficacy

As a functioning democracy requires active participation from its citizens, individuals' subjective perceptions of their ability to make a difference in the political process constitute one of the most important foundations for participation in politics (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). In its first conception in the political science literature, political efficacy was defined as "the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have an impact upon the political process" (Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954, p. 187). Subsequent theorizing and development of the concept gave rise to an accepted two-dimensional view of political efficacy: Internal efficacy is the belief that one can understand and participate in politics, and external efficacy is the belief that the government will respond to the demands of citizens (Niemi, Craig & Mattei, 1991). Much research has focused on internal efficacy because researchers have been particularly concerned with individuals' self-perceptions of their own abilities to engage in political and civic affairs rather than their ability to affect political change.

High levels of internal efficacy are desirable because it can enhance the cognitive ability to process complex information and issues (Beaumont, 2010). The plethora of information provides a symbolic environment for individuals to make sense of what is happening in the realm of politics and current affairs, helping them to "process and transform transient experiences into cognitive models that serve as guides for judgment and action" (Bandura, 2001, p. 267). Indeed, past research has found that the relationship between internal efficacy and media use is positive for a wide variety of media, including newspapers and TV (McLeod et al., 1996), talk radio (Newhagen, 1994), online news (Lee, 2006), and online campaign news (Kenski & Stroud, 2006).

Moreover, internal efficacy encompasses motivational and affective processes, such that efficacious individuals are more likely to invest greater effort in an action and sustain this effort over a longer period of time despite challenges and setbacks (Bandura, 1982). In political participation, it can be in the form of working long hours for a candidate during the lengthy election campaign season. In civic participation, it can be in the form of volunteering one's time, money, and energy for a social cause in an attempt to change opinion or policy.

If internal efficacy influences both media use and democratic engagement, and the instrumental perspective points to a positive relationship between online news use and engagement, then the question arises as to the possibility of an interaction effect. For efficacious individuals, online news offers several instrumental advantages over other media in terms of accessibility, diversity, and breadth of information, which can mobilize action by stimulating the various motivational, cognitive, and affective aspects of internal efficacy, which in turn can lead to greater participation. Therefore, it is possible that the positive relationship between online news use and democratic engagement will be even stronger for those with higher levels of internal efficacy.¹ To test the possibility of such interaction effects, the following hypotheses are thus proposed:

¹ This argument is similar to the "differential gains model" proposed by Scheufele (2002). The difference is that his study proposed an interaction between interpersonal communication and media use on

H2a: The relationship between online news use and political participation will be stronger for individuals with higher levels of internal efficacy than for those with lower levels.

H2b: The relationship between online news use and civic participation will be stronger for individuals with higher levels of internal efficacy than for those with lower levels.

The Contingent Role of Partisan Strength

Political scientists have long noted that partisans are the most involved in political affairs, though there is less agreement on the theoretical underpinnings of why partisanship is related to participation (Lewis-Beck et al., 2008). It has been explained in terms of fixed emotional attachments to a political party (Campbell et al., 1960), or a changeable disposition that fluctuates according to the relative performance of political parties and the stances they take on issues that are important to the individual (Fiorina, 1981). Another explanation derives from social identity theory, which argues that the self is construed in terms of social categories and group memberships and that individuals are naturally inclined to exhibit favoritism toward their own social categories (i.e., in-group) as a way to maintain positive group distinctiveness with the out-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

According to Brewer (2001), the activation of a particular social identity (i.e., partisanship) can affect the self-concept in two ways. First, the self-construal extends from the self to the in-group such that differences among group members are minimized while differences with the out-group are maximized. Second, the attitudes, values, and norms associated with the group are incorporated into the self, such that the interests of the group become the interests of the individual. One important mechanism is the strength of group identification (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), which is analogous to partisan strength. When individuals identify closely with their group, they are more likely to adopt the values and attitudes of the group as their own and act in accordance with the group's goals and interests.

The American political system is a good exemplar because the partisan divide between the Republican and Democratic parties naturally leads to a differentiation of *us* versus *them*. Therefore, strong partisans are more politically motivated to participate in rallies and vote for their parties (Greene, 2004). In-group favoritism can also be manifested through news use preferences. For example, Iyengar and Hahn (2009) found that high-identifying Republicans preferred news channels that generally supported their views and avoided news channels that did not. Research has also shown that strong partisans tend to visit political Web logs that share their views (Johnson, Bichard & Zhang, 2009). From a social identity perspective, exposure to like-minded media is one of several ways to maintain one's self-concept as an in-group member.

participation, such that those who discuss politics a lot are more likely to extract more "mobilizing information" from the media than those who discuss less, which in turn boosts participation.

If partisan strength predicts both political participation and media use, it is then a logical step to predict that partisans' decisions to participate in activities that improve the status of the in-group (e.g., winning the election) will interact with online news exposure. If individuals only read, hear, or watch online news that reflects the political attitudes and values of their in-groups, there will be more accessible psychological cues that activate or sustain the salience of their partisanship, which in turn can further mobilize participation. Therefore, the following hypothesis is raised:

H3a: The relationship between online news use and political participation will be stronger for individuals with higher levels of partisan strength than for those with lower levels.

While partisan strength is an important factor during an election season, it is unlikely that it will play a major role for civic participation. This is because civic-related activities tend to be nonpartisan in nature. Individuals typically volunteer for social groups and donate money to charity based on their own personal norms, beliefs, and values rather than on party-based partisan interests. Therefore, it is expected that:

H3b: There will not be a relationship between partisan strength and civic participation, or an interaction effect of partisan strength and media use on civic participation.

Method

To test the hypotheses, data from the ANES 2008 and 2012 Time Series study and the 2008 National Annenberg Election Survey—Online were analyzed. The ANES studies comprised both pre- and postelection surveys drawn from samples of American citizens of voting age. The pre-election ANES 2008 survey consisted of computer-assisted personal interviews of 2,323 respondents between September 2, 2008, and November 3, 2008. Of that number, a total of 2,102 were re-interviewed for the postelection survey conducted between November 5, 2008, and December 30, 2008. Based on the standards of the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR, 2011), the response rate was 78.2% for the pre-election survey and 70.8% for the postelection survey (RR5). Similarly, the ANES 2012 study comprised a pre- (2,054 interviews) and post-election (1,929 interviews) survey, supplemented with an online panel of 3,860 respondents before the election and 3,581 respondents after the election. The two modes of interviews provided a total of 5,914 pre-election interviews and 5,510 postelection interviews.²

The ANES surveys adopt a nonoverlapping, multisplit sample design, which means some concepts relevant to this study (e.g., political interest and online news use in the 2008 survey) are measured by two differently worded versions of the question and administered to each half of the sample. To maintain the sample size and statistical power of subsequent tests, the responses to the two questions were combined to form a single measure.

² Final response rates have yet to be released by ANES. Preliminary information mentioned a response rate of 49% (based on AAPOR RR3) for the face-to-face interviews and 2% for the online interviews. See http://www.electionstudies.org/studypages/anes_timeseries_2012/anes_timeseries_2012.htm.

The NAES study consisted of a five-wave panel design in which respondents were sampled randomly from Knowledge Networks' "Knowledge Panel," which consists of a nationally representative sample of U.S. households. This study used the postelection wave (Wave 5), which was conducted between November 5, 2008, and January 31, 2009, and consisted of 19,234 respondents, who had also completed a core and public affairs profile questionnaire prior to the wave. This wave was selected because it included the most comprehensive range of participatory behaviors compared to the earlier waves of the survey. The response rate of the wave was 69.1%. Although the study utilizes the postelection survey data for participatory behaviors, some variables for this study were by necessity taken from pre-election survey data.

As much as possible, equivalent items were chosen from the three surveys to measure the same variable and thereby facilitate comparability.

Operationalization of 2008 ANES Survey

The following participatory behaviors were informed by the previous literature and included as dependent variables.

Political participation. Respondents answered "Yes" (1) or "No" (0) regarding whether they engaged in the following during the presidential campaign: talk to anyone about voting for or against a candidate; go to any political meetings, rallies, or speeches; wear campaign buttons or post signs or bumper stickers; do any (other) work for party or candidate; contribute money to a specific candidate's campaign; contribute money to a political party; contribute to any other group for/against a candidate. The seven items were summed to form a cumulative index of political participation ($M = .99$, $SD = 1.30$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .96$).

Civic participation. Respondents answered "Yes" (1) or "No" (0) regarding whether they participated in the following activities: joined a protest march or rally, attended a city/school board meeting, signed a paper petition on an issue, gave money to a religious organization, gave money to a social/political organization, attended a social/political meeting, invited others to a social/political meeting, or distributed social/political group information. The eight items were summed to form a cumulative index of civic participation ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 2.38$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$).

The following independent variables were measured prior to the election.

Interest in following politics. Two differently worded questions measured this variable, each of which was administered to half of the sample. For version A, respondents answered from 1 = *Not much interested* to 3 = *Very much interested* to the question "Some people don't pay much attention to political campaigns. How about you?" For version B, respondents answered from 1 = *Not interested at all* to 5 = *Extremely interested* to "How interested are you in information about what's going on in government and

politics?" To maintain the sample size, the two questions were combined to form a single measure ($M = 3.37$, $SD = .90$).³

Partisan strength. Respondents self-identified their party affiliation according to a 7-point scale ranging from *Strong Democrat* to *Strong Republican*. The variable was then folded to produce an indicator of partisan strength that included 1 = *Independent*, 2 = *Lean Democrat or Republican*, 3 = *Weak Democrat or Republican* and 4 = *Strong Democrat or Republican* ($M = 2.80$, $SD = 1.01$).

Internal political efficacy. Two differently worded questions were used to measure this concept and administered to each half of the sample. For version C, respondents answered from 1 = *Agree strongly* to 5 = *Disagree strongly* to "Sometimes, politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on" and "I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country." The second question was subsequently reverse coded and combined ($r = .22$, $p < .001$). For version D, respondents answered from 1 = *All the time* to 5 = *Never* to "How often do politics and government seem so complicated that you can't really understand what's going on?" and 1 = *Not well at all* to 5 = *Extremely well* to "How well do you understand the important political issues facing our country?" Both questions were combined ($r = .30$, $p < .001$). Despite the differences in the wording of the questions and answers, the statistical properties of both versions were very similar ($M = 3.10$, $SD = .86$ and $M = 3.05$, $SD = .85$, respectively), with almost identical variance, skewness, and kurtosis values, suggesting that both sets of questions were reliable and valid measures of internal efficacy. Therefore, the two versions were combined to form a single measure of internal political efficacy ($M = 3.07$, $SD = .85$).

Online news use. Two different question formats were used to measure media use and administered to each half of the sample, including "How many days in the past week did you read a daily newspaper on the Internet?" and "During a typical week, how many days do you watch, read, or listen to news on the Internet, not including sports?" The answer choices were the same: 0 = *None* to 7 = *Seven days*. The answers were combined to form a single measure of online news use ($M = 1.63$, $SD = 2.53$).

Other media. Using the above procedure, answers were combined to form single measures of newspaper use ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 2.70$), radio use ($M = 2.26$, $SD = 2.70$), and TV use ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 2.68$).

Demographic information collected included *Gender* (Female = 57%), *Age* ($M = 47.37$, $SD = 17.38$), *Education* (median category = 4, grade 13+, no degree), and *Household income* (median category = 14, US\$35,000–\$39,999).

³ The 3-point scale of version A ($M = 2.40$, $SD = 1.43$) was integrated into the 5-point scale of version B ($M = 2.53$, $SD = 1.07$) as follows: *not much* = *slightly interested*, *somewhat* = *moderately interested* and *very much* = *very interested*. To statistically control for the effect of question format on the dependent variables, the procedure used by Dylko (2010) was adopted, in which a dummy variable is created and entered into the regression models to control for question format.

Operationalization of 2012 ANES Survey

The following participatory behaviors were included as dependent variables.

Political participation. Respondents answered "Yes" (1) or "No" (0) regarding whether they engaged in the following during the presidential campaign: talk to anyone about voting for or against a candidate; go to any political meetings, rallies, or speeches; wear campaign buttons or post signs or bumper stickers; do any (other) work for party or candidate; contribute money to a specific candidate's campaign; contribute money to a political party; or contribute to any other group for/against a candidate. The seven items were summed to form a cumulative index of political participation ($M = .94$, $SD = 1.33$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .70$).

Civic participation. Respondents answered "Yes" (1) or "No" (0) regarding whether they participated in the following activities in the previous four years: joined a protest march or rally; attended a city/school board meeting; signed a paper petition on an issue; gave money to a religious organization; gave money to a social/political organization; written a letter to a newspaper or magazine about an issue; called the radio or television about an issue; signed an Internet petition; or sent a message on Facebook/Twitter about an issue. The nine items were summed to form a cumulative index of civic participation ($M = 1.80$, $SD = 1.72$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .64$).

The following independent variables were measured prior to the election.

Interest in following politics. Respondents answered from 1 = *Not much interested* to 3 = *Very much interested* to the question "Some people don't pay much attention to political campaigns. How about you?" ($M = 2.28$, $SD = .71$).

Partisan strength. Respondents self-identified their party affiliation according to a 7-point scale ranging from *Strong Democrat* to *Strong Republican*. The variable was then folded to produce an indicator of partisan strength that included 1 = *Independent*, 2 = *Lean Democrat or Republican*, 3 = *Weak Democrat or Republican*, and 4 = *Strong Democrat or Republican* ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 1.07$).

Internal political efficacy. Like the ANES 2008 survey, two sets of questions were used to measure this concept. For the "standard" version, respondents answered from 1 = *Agree strongly* to 5 = *Disagree strongly* to "Sometimes, politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on" and "I feel that I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing our country." The second question was subsequently reverse coded and combined ($r = .35$, $p < .001$). For the "revised" version, respondents answered from 1 = *All the time* to 5 = *Never* to "How often do politics and government seem so complicated that you can't really understand what's going on?" and 1 = *Not well at all* to 5 = *Extremely well* to "How well do you understand the important political issues facing our country?" Both questions were combined ($r = .37$, $p < .001$). Despite the differences in the wording of the questions and answers, the statistical properties of both versions were very similar ($M = 3.27$, $SD = .93$ and $M = 3.20$, $SD = .84$, respectively) so they were combined to form a single measure of internal political efficacy ($M = 3.24$, $SD = .89$).

Online news use. Respondents answered from 0 = *None* to 7 = *Seven days* in response to the question "During a typical week, how many days do you watch, read, or listen to news on the Internet, not including sports?" ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 2.75$).

Social media use. Respondents answered from 0 = *None* to 7 = *Seven days* in response to the question "During a typical week, how many days do you use social media such as Twitter or Facebook to learn about the election for President?" ($M = 1.49$, $SD = 2.51$).

Blog use. Respondents answered from 0 = *None* to 7 = *Seven days* in response to the question "During a typical week, how many days do you use blogs to learn about the election for President?" ($M = 0.31$, $SD = 1.17$).

Other media. The same question format above was used to measure newspaper use ($M = 2.21$, $SD = 2.61$), radio use ($M = 2.54$, $SD = 2.57$), and TV use ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 2.59$).

Demographic information collected included *Gender* (Female = 52%), *Age* (median category = 50–54), *Education* (median category = 3, some high school, no degree), and *Household income* (median category = 13, US\$40,000–\$44,999).

Operationalization of 2008 NAES Online Survey

The following participatory behaviors were included as dependent variables.

Political participation. Respondents answered "Yes" (1) or "No" (0) regarding whether they engaged in any of the following activities in the previous 12 months: told people why to vote for or against a candidate, gave money to a campaign, worked for the campaign, attended a political meeting, or displayed a campaign sign. These five items were summed to form a cumulative index of political participation ($M = 1.07$, $SD = 1.31$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .71$).

Civic participation. Respondents answered "Yes" (1) or "No" (0) regarding whether they had participated in the following activities in the previous 12 months: attended a school board meeting, attended a community meeting, donated blood, gave money to charity, worked for a charity/church, worked in the community, served on a community board, or wrote a letter to the editor. The eight items were summed to form a cumulative index of civic participation ($M = 2.04$, $SD = 1.55$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .58$).

The following independent variables were measured prior to the election.

Partisan strength. Respondents self-identified their party affiliation according to a 7-point scale from *Strong Democrat* to *Strong Republican*. The variable was then folded to produce an indicator of partisan strength that included 1= *Independent*, 2 = *Lean Democrat or Republican*, 3 = *Weak Democrat or Republican* and 4= *Strong Democrat or Republican* ($M = 2.99$, $SD = .92$).

Interest in politics. Respondents answered from 1 = *Not at all interested* to 4 = *Very interested* to the question "In general, how interested are you in politics and public affairs?" ($M = 2.82, SD = .94$).

Internal political efficacy. Respondents answered from 1 = *Strongly agree* to 5 = *Strongly disagree* to the statement "Someone like me can't influence government" ($M = 2.99, SD = .92$).

Online news use. Respondents answered from 1 = *Never* to 5 = *Three times a week or more* to the question "How often do you search for news on the Internet?" ($M = 3.05, SD = 1.60$).

Other media. The same question format described above was used to measure national network news use ($M = 3.54, SD = 1.45$), local TV news use ($M = 4.14, SD = 1.23$), and cable TV use ($M = 3.26, SD = 1.52$). Measures of newspaper and radio use with the same question wording were not available in this NAES wave, so the following alternative measures were used to maintain equivalence with the ANES variables. Respondents answered 1 = *Yes* or 0 = *No* to the question "From which of the following sources have you heard anything about the presidential campaign?" Among the choices were newspapers (Yes = 69%) and radio news (Yes = 45%).

Demographic information collected included *Gender* (Female = 53%), *Age* ($M = 46.82, SD = 17.30$), *Education* (median category = 5, Associate degree), and *Household income* (median category = 12, US\$50,000–\$59,999).

To examine the main-effects hypotheses, hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to assess the impact of demographics, psychological antecedents, and media use on democratic engagement. As noted earlier, two dummy variables were created to control for potential question format effects of the combined variables in the ANES sample (political interest and internal efficacy). Preliminary regression analyses with the full models showed that none of the coefficients were statistically significant. Therefore, subsequent analyses of the ANES sample were run without the two dummy variables. Interaction terms were created by separately combining online news use with political efficacy and partisan strength. All variables were mean-centered prior to calculating the interaction term.⁴

⁴ This procedure was not conducted for the purpose of reducing multicollinearity, as statisticians have discredited this practice and shown that centering does not alter the magnitude of effect estimates in any way (Hayes, Glynn, & Huges, 2012; Kam & Franzese, 2007). However, the authors do recommend centering on some occasions for the purposes of facilitating a "substantive interpretation" of the results (Kam & Franzese, 2007), such as when a variable cannot logically or conceptually be zero because it falls outside the range of the measurement scale, as is the case in the present study, where party identification and internal efficacy have scales that start at 1. Thus, centering these variables facilitates interpretation because the effect of b_1 on the dependent variable is contingent on the values of b_2 that are within the range of the scale (i.e., around the mean), not zero.

Results

As summarized in Table 1, the combination of predictors significantly predicted political participation for the 2008 ANES sample ($R^2 = .24$, $F(13,1866) = 44.77$, $p < .001$), 2012 ANES sample ($R^2 = .18$, $F(19,4782) = 103.95$, $p < .001$), and NAES sample ($R^2 = .25$, $F(15,13697) = 302.69$, $p < .001$). Moreover, as summarized in Table 2, the models predicting civic participation were significant for the 2008 ANES sample ($R^2 = .34$, $F(13,1863) = 73.75$, $p < .001$), 2012 ANES sample ($R^2 = .19$, $F(13,4761) = 103.83$, $p < .001$), and NAES sample ($R^2 = .22$, $F(15,14171) = 272.50$, $p < .001$). In all of the models, online news use was significantly related to both political and civic participation at $p < .001$. Thus, H1a and H1b were supported. Moreover, the main effects of internal efficacy and partisan strength were also significant and in the expected direction.

The next set of analyses examined the interaction effects proposed in this study. The results showed a significant interaction for participation in all samples such that the relationship between online news use and political participation was stronger for those with higher levels of political efficacy than for those with lower levels. Thus, H2a was supported. The same pattern of findings was also present for civic participation, supporting H2b. Finally, the interaction of partisan strength and online news use was significant for all samples such that the relationship between online news use and political participation was strengthened by higher levels of partisanship. H3a was supported. As expected, the direct and indirect effects of partisan strength on civic participation were insignificant. H3b was supported. Exploratory analyses were also conducted to test the interactions for social media and blog use for the ANES 2012 sample. None of the interactions were significant.

To probe the interactions in greater detail, the Johnson-Neyman (J-N) technique, as described by Hayes and Matthes (2009), was applied to each model to identify the specific starting point in the interactions at which the effects of the moderators on the relationship between online news use and participation become statistically significant. For the 2008 and 2012 ANES samples, the interaction between internal efficacy and online news use on political participation becomes statistically significant starting from an internal efficacy value of 2.76 and 2.80, respectively. The equivalent figures for civic participation were 2.44 and 2.26, respectively. The interaction between partisan strength and online news use on political participation is significant starting with a partisan strength value of 2.70 and 2.32, respectively. For the NAES sample, the effect of internal efficacy is significant starting at 1.40 for civic participation and 1.80 for political participation. The effect of partisan strength is significant starting at 2.01 for political participation. These additional findings suggest that online news use does not have a substantive impact for those with low levels of efficacy and partisanship relative to those with higher levels.

Table 1. Predictors of Political Participation.

| | Political participation | | | | | |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| | (ANES 2008) | | (ANES 2012) | | (NAES 2008) | |
| | b | (β) | b | (β) | b | (β) |
| <i>Block 1</i> | | | | | | |
| Gender (1 = female) | .06 | (.02) | -.06 | (-.02) | .07 | (.03) *** |
| Age | -.01 | (-.01) | .02 | (.05) *** | .01 | (.04) *** |
| Education | .11 | (.13) *** | .06 | (.05) *** | .05 | (.07) *** |
| Income | -.01 | (-.02) | .02 | (.02) | .01 | (.04) *** |
| Interest in politics | .31 | (.21) *** | .57 | (.31) *** | .43 | (.30) *** |
| Newspaper use | .05 | (.10) *** | .02 | (.05) *** | .10 | (.03) *** |
| Radio news use | .05 | (.10) *** | .02 | (.04) ** | .23 | (.09) *** |
| TV news | -.01 | (-.02) | .02 | (.03) | | |
| Network news | | | | | -.01 | (-.01) |
| Local TV news | | | | | -.04 | (-.04) *** |
| Cable news | | | | | .02 | (.02) * |
| Adjusted R ² | .19 | | .15 | | .21 | |
| <i>Block 2</i> | | | | | | |
| Internal efficacy | .19 | (.12) *** | .15 | (.11) *** | .10 | (.09) *** |
| Partisan strength | .18 | (.14) *** | .15 | (.12) *** | .23 | (.16) *** |
| Online news | .04 | (.08) *** | .02 | (.05) *** | .06 | (.08) *** |
| Social media | | | -.01 | -.01 | | |
| Blogs | | | .07 | (.05) *** | | |
| Efficacy x Online news | .03 | (.05) * | .02 | (.03) * | .03 | (.04) *** |
| Partisan strength x Online news | .03 | (.06) ** | .03 | (.06) *** | .04 | (.04) *** |
| Efficacy x Social media | | | -.02 | (-.02) | | |
| Partisan strength x Social media | | | .01 | (.01) | | |
| Efficacy x Blog | | | .02 | (.02) | | |
| Partisan strength x Blog | | | .03 | (.02) | | |
| Final adjusted R ² | .23 | | .18 | | .25 | |
| N | 1,879 | | 4,801 | | 13,712 | |

Notes:

*** = $p < .001$, ** = $p < .01$, * = $p < .05$

Table 2. Predictors of Civic Participation.

| | Civic participation | | | | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| | (ANES 2008) | | (ANES 2012) | | (NAES 2008) | |
| | b | (β) | b | (β) | b | (β) |
| <i>Block 1</i> | | | | | | |
| Gender (1 = female) | .39 | (.08) *** | .16 | (.05) *** | .27 | (.09) *** |
| Age | .01 | (.10) *** | .03 | (.05) *** | .01 | (.06) *** |
| Education | .48 | (.32) *** | .26 | (.18) *** | .16 | (.16) *** |
| Income | .02 | (.05) * | .01 | (.04) ** | .05 | (.13) *** |
| Interest in politics | .45 | (.17) *** | .38 | (.16) *** | .29 | (.17) *** |
| Newspaper use | .05 | (.06) ** | .04 | (.06) *** | .19 | (.06) *** |
| Radio news use | .05 | (.06) ** | .04 | (.05) *** | .28 | (.09) *** |
| TV news | -.05 | (-.05) * | -.03 | (-.05) ** | | |
| Network news | | | | | .04 | (.04) *** |
| Local TV news | | | | | .03 | (.02) * |
| Cable news | | | | | -.01 | (-.01) |
| Adjusted R ² | .30 | | .15 | | .20 | |
| <i>Block 2</i> | | | | | | |
| Internal efficacy | .48 | (.17) *** | .20 | (.10) *** | .20 | (.15) *** |
| Partisan strength | .03 | (.01) | .01 | (.01) | -.03 | (-.02) |
| Online news | .09 | (.09) *** | .05 | (.08) *** | .08 | (.08) *** |
| Social media | | | .07 | (.11) *** | | |
| Blogs | | | .14 | (.08) *** | | |
| Efficacy x Online news | .04 | (.05) * | .02 | (.03) * | .03 | (.03) *** |
| Partisan strength x Online news | -.01 | (-.01) | .01 | (.01) | -.01 | (-.01) |
| Efficacy x Social media | | | -.01 | (-.01) | | |
| Partisan strength x Social media | | | -.02 | (-.02) | | |
| Efficacy x Blog | | | .01 | (.01) | | |
| Partisan strength x Blog | | | .01 | (.01) | | |
| Final adjusted R ² | .34 | | .19 | | .22 | |
| N | 1,876 | | 4,780 | | 14,186 | |

Notes: *** = $p < .001$, ** = $p < .01$, * = $p < .05$

Discussion

The study of online news consumption and its implications for democratic engagement is important because American citizens are increasingly turning to the Internet and away from the traditional media as their news source (PEW, 2012a). This is exemplified by the 2008 and 2012 ANES data examined in this study. Online news was accessed on average 1.63 days a week in 2008 and was the least popular media; in 2012, however, it was accessed 3.73 days a week, ranking behind only television in popularity.

In line with the instrumental perspective, online news use was positively related to both political and civic participation in all the samples even after controlling for a broad range of demographic, media use, and attitudinal variables. This provides further evidence that the Internet can be a democratizing force in society and, to some extent, allays early fears that increased use of the Internet could lead to a more disengaged citizenry (Putnam, 2000). Indeed, when the findings are compared to Boulianne's (2009) meta-analysis, it is apparent that the relative effect sizes are larger in the present study. Given the importance of the media to keep citizens informed of salient information, issues, and arguments relating to public affairs, it appears that when it comes to informing citizens and providing mobilizing information the Internet has become the dominant media, driven largely by its technological advantages relative to newspapers, TV, and radio. Being informed not only means greater political participation, which is perhaps most salient during the election season, but also greater civic participation, which has equally an important but less politicized role in affecting change in society.

Of course, Internet access is far from universal, and the digital divide appears to be narrowing as those who in the past did not have the required combination of a desktop PC and landline Internet connection can now use alternative technologies such as mobile phones to access the Internet (Zickuhr & Smith, 2012). Thus, the three trends of greater reliance on online news, decreasing reliance of TV, newspapers and radio, and lessening of the Internet divide among the citizenry will have important implications on future democratic engagement, how political and civic organizations tailor their messages, and how media outlets disseminate the news.

Given the support for the instrumental perspective, are the arguments for the psychological perspective much diminished? When the Internet was first diffused into society, some scholars feared that it might exacerbate gaps in democratic engagement because only the very motivated will fully utilize the features of the Internet and become more involved in political and civic affairs (Norris, 2001; Sunstein, 2001). The evidence for the direct effects do not support this view. Nevertheless, all the proposed interactions in this study were significant as the relationship between online news use and democratic engagement varied systematically according to partisan strength and internal efficacy. Indeed, subsequent analyses showed that the relationship between online news use and democratic engagement was stronger particularly for those with high levels of internal efficacy and partisanship.

Thus, the most tenable conclusion of this study is that while online news has a "universal" effect on democratic engagement, the relationship can also be further strengthened by high levels of partisanship and internal efficacy. Yet, while the interaction effects were generally weaker than the direct effects, it was noticeable in the ANES 2012 political participation results that the betas for the interaction

effect of partisanship and online news was slightly higher than for the direct effect. A possible explanation for this is the continuing polarization of voters in the United States (PEW, 2012b), such that partisans are creating an online news environment that supports their own political views and has greater potential to provide mobilizing information. An obvious concern from the perspective of a deliberative democracy would be that the effects may be indicative of the potential to exacerbate extant participation gaps among the citizenry, particularly along the lines of partisanship. Therefore, future studies should continue to gauge direct and contingent effects.

The findings for civic participation are more optimistic as online news use is generally the most powerful media predictor of civic engagement and the direct effects are twice the size of the interaction effect (internal efficacy x online news). Moreover, the ANES 2012 results show that both social media and blog use has direct effects on civic participation, while only blog use predicted political participation. This suggests that a variety of online sources can serve as important catalysts for individuals to actively participate in local, community, or national causes that may not necessarily be political in nature. Future studies should therefore continue to measure a variety of online sources and their effects on both forms of participation because, as Zukin et al. (2006) note, both are essential and are reflective of the overall dynamics and health of American democracy.

A notable contribution of this study is the general consistency of the findings despite the different ways in which the key variables such as internal efficacy and online news use have been operationalized. The use of the three samples thus strengthens the internal and external validity of the results. Of course, this is not to say that the measures cannot be further improved. The breadth of measures available in secondary data such as the ANES and NAES is matched by the lack of *depth* in such measures, such as questions regarding the range of participatory behaviors (Dylko, 2010). Existing measures of participation and involvement that rely on summed indices cannot account for those individuals who dedicate substantial amounts of their time to just one or a few types of activities. Moreover, the relative theoretical clarity of political and civic participation is not matched by the consistency of their operationalization. For example, there is considerable variation in the number of items used to measure political participation, from four items in one study (e.g., Xenos & Moy, 2007) to 11 in another (e.g., Jung, Kim, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2011).

Another limitation is the measure of online news, which is a very broad measure. As the findings from the 2012 ANES survey demonstrates, learning about the election from social media and blogs are also important predictors of participation. Therefore, future studies should continue to use a range of measures to fully capture the online sources people use for acquiring information. The issue of the degree of specificity in the wording of the questions is also pertinent to the discussion of the smaller sample size of the ANES samples compared to the NAES, as the former has less statistical power and ability to uncover smaller effects. This is exemplified by the demographic variables where the analysis of the NAES data found gender, age and income to be significant predictors of political participation, whereas the ANES analysis did not (the same as Xenos and Moy's analysis of 2004 ANES data). Given the lack of statistical power, the level of specificity in the wording of the questions could become even more important as some scholars have questioned the predictive power of general "time spent" measures (Price & Zaller, 1993). Recent research suggests that greater predictive power can be obtained by increasing the specificity of

question wordings that match the context under investigation (Romantan, Hornik, Price, Cappella, & Viswanath, 2008).

Some limitations of the study and suggestions for further research need to be addressed. While the study did find interaction effects among the key study variables, such that the relationship between online news use and engagement varied according to levels of partisanship and efficacy, it is also possible that the relationships can be explained in terms of mediation among variables. For example, the O-S-R-O-R model propose a variety of mediators linking news use and political participation (Cho et. al., 2009), and one study found that political efficacy mediated the relationship between news use and political participation (Jung, Kim, & Gil de Zuniga, 2011). Given that the mediation effect in the study was only partial (i.e., the direct effect was still significant after mediation), the authors' findings do not necessarily contradict those of this study. Nevertheless, future studies may attempt to compare both mediation and moderation models for the purposes of testing different theories and explanations underlying the relationships.

Finally, although this study uses nationally representative data and thus the findings are generalizable to the general population, it is still based on cross-sectional data. Therefore, causality and temporal changes of the key variables need to be taken into account. For example, media use and various political attitudes were measured from the pre-election sample of the ANES data. It is quite likely that media use may rise and feelings of efficacy and strength of partisanship increase as the election date draws nearer. This may lead to possible underreporting of measures at the time when respondents were asked about their campaign activities during the post-election survey. Therefore, longitudinal designs are necessary to shed some light on the temporal changes and directionality of effects. As both ANES and NAES have panel designs, they may be suitable starting points to explore the directionality of the relationships in greater detail.

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