Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

SPARK

SIUE Faculty Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity

7-2017

College Students and Online Political Expression During the 2016 Election

Kenneth W. Moffett
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, kmoffet@siue.edu

Laurie L. Rice
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, larice@siue.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://spark.siue.edu/siue_fac

 Part of the American Politics Commons, Communication Technology and New Media Commons, and the Social Media Commons

Recommended Citation

Cover Page Footnote

This is the pre-publication version of this manuscript.

College Students and Online Political Expression during the 2016 Election

Kenneth W. Moffett
Department of Political Science
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville
3234 Peck Hall, Box 1453
Edwardsville, Illinois 62026
(618) 650-2649
kmoffet@siue.edu

and

Laurie L. Rice
Department of Political Science
Southern Illinois University Edwardsville
3234 Peck Hall, Box 1453
Edwardsville, Illinois 62026
(618) 650-2075
larice@siue.edu

May 10, 2017

Prepared for submission to the *Social Science Computer Review*

College Students and Online Political Expression during the 2016 Election

While college students traditionally exhibit low levels of political participation and interest in politics, they are more likely to engage in some forms of political expression than their elders. Their greater familiarity with online forms of political expression and engagement potentially lowers their barriers for political involvement. In turn, this potentially draws more young adults into the political process. We compare the precursors of expressive forms of online political engagement to those of talking to someone offline and trying to persuade them to vote for or against a candidate or party among college students. We find that both activities are positively connected with politically-oriented activity on social media, as well as, the frequency with which one reads blogs. We also discover that the mechanisms that explain online political expression are both similar to and different from those that explain offline attempts at persuasion in several key ways.

Rules of polite conversation suggest avoiding two topics: religion and politics. What leads someone to break this taboo and try to persuade someone to vote for or against a candidate or party, engage in online political discussions, or post their political views online for anyone to see? Conventional wisdom suggests that the individuals most likely to engage in various forms of offline political participation are also the most likely to post about politics online or try to persuade others to vote for or against a party or candidate. Strong partisans and those highly interested in politics might be most willing to express themselves.

Surveys from Pew (2012, 2015) show that young adults possess lower levels of political interest and knowledge about politics than their elders. In most cases, these levels of political interest and knowledge appear to depress their levels of political participation, particularly in traditional forms like contributing money to candidates for office, contacting elected officials, and voting (Miller and Shanks, 1996; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins and Delli Carpini, 2006). Yet, prior research suggests that young adults, who lag behind their elders on these measures, try to persuade others at higher rates than older generations (Zukin et al 2006). What might account for this difference?

One potential answer lies in the rapid pace of technological innovation. Growing up with the birth of the blogosphere and the rapid explosion of social media may make online monologues or conversations with strangers seem more normal to young adults than it would to their elders. In 2006, someone under the age of thirty wrote the majority of blogs and politics served as bloggers' second most blogged about subject (Lenhart and Fox, 2006). By 2009, those under 32 years old were far more likely to read and write blogs than older generations (Jones and Fox, 2009).

While some dismiss online political discussion as trivial, Delli Carpini, Cook and Jacobs (2004) argue that researchers should view online discussions about politics in the same way as traditional forms of political participation. When framed in this way, Schlozman, Verba and Brady (2012) refer to political activity through online forms of political expression as nonhierarchical "participatory forms" that appeal to younger cohorts and bypass traditional institutions. Shah, Eveland and Kwa (2005) suggest that the internet might help bridge this age gap in civic engagement.

Several studies illustrate a link between the use of various web 2.0 forms during presidential campaigns and greater levels of offline participation among college students (Rice, Moffett and Madupalli, 2013; Towner, 2013). While some of the factors that encourage online political expression also explain offline civic engagement, Gibson and Cantijoch (2013) suggest there are some important differences between these participatory forms. One important difference involves costs. Online political expression is a more costly form of political participation relative to viewing campaign videos on YouTube, or social networking activities like friending a candidate. Not only does it require increased time and cognitive involvement, like talking to people and trying to persuade others to vote for or against a candidate or party, it also involves public exposure of personal views, and the risk of offending others. Thus, expressive forms of participation, both online and offline, merit further study.

We examine the precursors to online political expression among young adults during the 2016 presidential elections and compare these to predictors of talking to others and trying to persuade others to vote for or against a candidate or party. To do so, we review the relevant literature, and develop a series of hypotheses that elaborate the factors that encourage young adults to express themselves politically. We expect that young adults' familiarity with political

blogs and other forms of online expression might lower their barriers to entry compared to engaging in more traditional forms of participation. To test our hypotheses, we use a survey that was taken before the 2016 election among a random sample of full-time undergraduate students at a large master's level university. To conclude, we discuss our findings and the implications they carry.

Online Political Expression

In 1994, Swarthmore College student Justin Hall launched one of the first blogs, though the word blog was not coined until 1999 (Thompson, 2006). By the early 2000s, blogs shook the political world. Concerned bloggers posted Mississippi Senator and Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott's comments at Strom Thurmond's 100th birthday party about how people in Mississippi were proud to have voted for him in 1948. Although Thurmond had run on a segregationist platform, Lott said, "And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn't have had all these problems over all these years" (Edsall and Faler, 2002). Outrage on the blogosphere over these comments quickly ensued, drew mainstream media attention, and led to Lott's resignation in 2002 (Wallsten, 2007). Howard Dean's Blog for America played a central role in his campaign for the 2004 Democratic presidential nomination and sparked greater involvement by his supporters (Kerbel and Bloom, 2005). Many Americans embraced blog reading, especially young adults. Meanwhile, chatting with others online has a longer history and has evolved from the AOL chatrooms popular in the 1990s to today's plethora of web 2.0 applications.

The explosion in online forms of political expression brings externalities to the forefront. In particular, articulating one's views online can be costly, as this is an expressive form of political participation. Those who engage in this activity must form an opinion, put it in writing,

4

and make it available to an audience. The potential audience can exceed that of talking about politics with others.[1] While these participatory forms can be as private or public as the forum in which these thoughts are articulated, sharing views with others runs the risk of offense. Although one can hide his or her identity when expressing political views online, it is not always possible to do so. Further, expressing one's political views online requires some political skill.

Prior research illuminates why some individuals share their political views online. Ekdale, Namkoong, Fung and Perlmutter (2010) studied the motivations of some of America's most popular political bloggers, and found that most of these bloggers were initially motivated by intrinsic motivations like letting off steam or organizing one's thoughts. Eventually, though, extrinsic motivations became more important (Ekdale et al, 2010).[2] Their sample of bloggers was predominately male[3] and Caucasian[4] but varied in age, income, and ideology.[5]

Web-based forms of online political expression are renowned for their polarization. While they allow for a wide range of individuals to share their views, these views rarely reach across political divides. Partisan blogs rarely link to opposing sides and even less frequently to moderate blogs (Hargittai, Gallo and Kaine, 2008). Sobieraj and Berry's (2011) study of ten leading liberal and ten leading conservative blogs found that 82.8% of their blog entries employed "outrage writing." [6] Gainous and Wagner (2013) discover that those who express themselves via Twitter and other forms of social media for political purposes have higher levels of polarized political attitudes. Altogether, these findings suggest that those who express their political views online tend to have strong, highly partisan, ideologically-oriented political views (Davis, 2009).

Talking about Politics Offline

While research centered on the forms of online political expression is rapidly developing, far more is known about who engages in expressive forms of political engagement, like talking about politics. Like online political expression, discussing politics is somewhat costly because it requires a willingness to potentially offend or alienate others, some knowledge about politics, and enough interest in the subject. Not surprisingly, discussing politics is strongly connected with measures of political engagement. In particular, those with higher levels of interest in politics, greater political knowledge[7], and stronger partisanship are more likely to engage in political discussion offline (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995). Similarly, strength of party identification, feelings about parties and presidential candidates, and how much one cares which party wins the election are among the strongest predictors of persuading others to vote for or against a candidate or party (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993). There is good reason to expect that these characteristics also drive online political expression.

Prior research yields competing expectations. Collectively, young adults are less likely to fit the traditional profile of people likely to talk about politics or read political blogs because they tend to have far less interest and engagement in politics. This suggests they are also less likely to engage in political expression online. Conversely, they are more familiar with online expression than their elders. Can the lure of online forms of political expression help counteract their predispositions to be unengaged? In the next section, we develop a series of expectations based on these countervailing tendencies.

Online Precursors to Political Expression

Previous research demonstrates that young adults' preferences for information sources differ from their elders. Armstrong and McAdams (2011) suggest young adults turn to blogs for

information instead of traditional news sources. Those who turn to blogs as an information source trust them (Johnson and Kaye, 2004; Davis, 2009; Armstrong and McAdams, 2011), as they somewhat resemble traditional media content. Yet, not all scholars agree that young adults have a greater predisposition to political blogs. Lawrence, Sides and Farrell (2010) find that those who read political blogs are slightly older, even though young adults are more avid blog readers in general.[8] However, others have found that political blog readers tended to be younger and male[9] (Lewis, 2011), very interested in politics (Lawrence et al, 2010), stronger partisans (Davis, 2009; Lawrence et al, 2010), had more extreme ideological views (Davis, 2009), more educated than the general population (Davis, 2009; Lawrence et al, 2010), and more politically involved (Lawrence et al, 2010; Lewis, 2011). Thus, those who read political blogs share many of the characteristics of those who are more likely to discuss politics and engage in other traditional forms of political activity.

Reading political blogs is a likely stepping stone to political expression. Many scholars found that engaging in one form of online political activity is linked with engaging in other forms of political activity (see, e.g., Best and Krueger, 2005; Lewis, 2011). There are numerous reasons why this should be the case. First, online political expression requires familiarity with mechanisms for doing so. Thus, frequency of political blog reading, as a measure of blog fluency, should be associated with higher levels of online political expression (see Gil de Zuniga et al, 2009). Also, to the extent that reading blogs about politics and current events is an informational use of the internet,[10] prior research suggests that doing so should also be associated with higher levels of online political expression (Kenski and Stroud, 2006; Lewis, 2011).

Perhaps the strongest link between political blog reading and political expression, though, lies in political blogs' ability to stimulate expression. Previous research has found that online

deliberation boosts political efficacy and creates a moral obligation to politically act (see Alberici and Milesi, 2016). We expect that exposure to information or others' opinions on political blogs may spark opinions of one's own and the desire to share them. Those who read the opinions of others should be more likely to have well-formed opinions of their own and may feel more empowered to express them. Thus, we expect that young adults are more likely to engage in online political expression as their frequency of blog reading increases. Further, online blog reading may encourage individuals to persuade others to vote for or against a candidate or party, as the empowerment to share political views spills over into the offline world. We expect that frequency of political blog reading should have a lesser but positive association with talking to people offline and persuading others to vote for or against a candidate or party.

Exposure to political messages on social media should also spark political expression. Since young adults use social media at higher rates than their elders (Duggan and Brenner, 2013), this also might help account for why young adults are more likely to talk to others and try to persuade them to vote for a candidate. After all, political use of social media has been linked to greater levels of other forms of offline participation among young adults. For example, in 2008 college students were more likely to engage in other forms of political participation when they friended a candidate or party, or otherwise joined an online political social network (Rice et al 2013). College students' familiarity with these web 2.0 applications serves as a bridge to other less familiar forms of participation (Cantijoch, Cutts and Gibson, 2016). In the case of persuading others to vote for or against a candidate or party, this bridge is likely to be direct – candidates post on Facebook and send out tweets urging their supporters to talk to their family, friends, and neighbors, and canvass on their behalf. Thus, we expect students with greater

exposure to politics on social media to be more likely to talk to others and attempt to persuade others to vote for or against a candidate or party.

Exposure to political messages on social media should also lead young adults to post political messages of their own (Gil de Zuniga, Jung and Valenzuela, 2012). When moved by political messages they read on social networking sites, we expect that college students choose other, familiar forms to express their views like posting their views on Facebook or tweeting an opinion of their own. And, greater exposure to these messages increases the likelihood of being inspired to share one's own political views on social media (Xenos, Vromen and Loader, 2014). Whether emboldened by a steady diet of reading others' opinions or by a request from a campaign or interest group, we anticipate that college students who engage in politically-oriented activities on social media are also more likely to engage in online political expression.

Traditional Predictors of Civic Engagement

We now examine the role that more conventional predictors of political activity play in predicting college students' level of political expression, online and off. Earlier, we suggested that college students' greater familiarity with online forms of participation may help partially counteract the role that traditional predictors play in explaining political activity. Rather than seeing online political expression as taking a big step, they are likely to see such expression as an obvious, ordinary way to share opinions. As a result, traditional predictors of political activity might hold less sway, especially over young adults' online political expression.

Interest in Politics

As a rule, interest in politics strongly predicts political activity (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Verba and Nie, 1972; Verba et al 1995). Among adults, it helps explain who talks to others in an effort to try to persuade others to vote for or against a candidate or party (Verba et

9

al, 1995). This relationship is also likely to hold among college students (Bynner and Ashford, 1994). After all, this activity takes time and also involves potential costs of offending family or friends or being rejected and rebuffed by acquaintances and strangers. Greater interest in politics should make these costs seem more worthwhile.

Interest in politics may spur online political expression too. After all, why take the time to express oneself online about something one finds uninteresting? However, if online expression about everything already comes naturally to a person, s/he may still articulate something about politics even though this person generally finds the subject uninteresting. Consequently, interest in politics may play a lesser role in explaining the propensity to engage in online political expression among young adults than in the general population and it also may be a less powerful predictor of online expression than it is trying to persuade people offline. If the perceived cost of participation is low enough to young adults, then less interest in politics is required. For example, interest in politics did not predict the propensity with which young adults friended political candidates or parties in 2008 (Rice et al, 2013). Thus, increased levels of interest in politics among young adults may be positively connected with both online political expression and trying to persuade others. However, the degree to which interest in politics is connected to online expression may be weaker than its link to persuading others.

Campaign Attention

Interest in politics and campaign attention often accompany one another, but not in all instances. Presidential campaigns can potentially spark interest and attract the attention of those otherwise uninterested in politics (Conover and Feldman, 1989). In their efforts to woo voters, candidates must go where voters are. They appear on late night talk shows, run advertisements, and visit communities. These activities generate attention. For example, late night talk show

appearances can help candidates gain the attention and favorability of viewers who otherwise exhibit low levels of political awareness (Baum, 2005). During the 2016 campaign, Trump rallies routinely drew large crowds of people, some of whom were unaccustomed to political involvement. Campaign activities potentially promote campaign attention[11] and, whether interested in politics or not, those who pay more attention to the campaign should have more fodder with which to try and persuade others to vote for or against a candidate or party. Also, their greater attention to the campaign may indicate they care more about the election outcome, making it seem more worthwhile to take the time and the risk of trying to persuade others to vote for their preferred candidate. However, as with interest in politics, given their high familiarity with online forms of expression, little campaign attention may be required to make paying the costs of online political expression seem worthwhile to college students.

Strong Partisanship

Among the general population, strength of partisanship predicts most traditional forms of political activity (Verba et al, 1995; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993), reading political blogs (Davis, 2009; Lawrence et al, 2010), and expressing political views via Twitter (Gainous and Wagner, 2013). Those with stronger ties to political parties might be expected to have more robust political views and care more about who wins elections. As a result, strong partisans may also be more likely to engage in varying forms of online political expression as well as to talk to others and try and persuade others to vote for or against a candidate or party.

Ideology

More extreme ideological views may also encourage political expression (Davis, 2009).[12] To the extent being conservative or liberal as opposed to moderate is associated with the development of stronger political viewpoints, one's ideology may contribute to a greater

likelihood of online political expression and a higher propensity to persuade others to vote for or against a candidate or party For instance, Best and Kreuger (2005) suggest that those who participate online lean to the left. Thus, we anticipate that those who self-identify as liberal or conservative may be more likely to engage in online political expression and try to persuade others to vote for or against a candidate or party.

Other Predictors

Other factors should also influence one's propensity to engage in political expression. We also control for civically engaged peers and political science majors. Those with more civically engaged friends and neighbors may hear more about politics (Rogers Green, Ternovski and Young, 2017). This could make them more likely to share their views. Political science majors should be more interested in and more knowledgeable about politics than their peers (Conroy, Feezell and Guerrero, 2012). This could lead to an increased likelihood of both online political expression and persuading others to vote for or against a candidate or party.

<center>**Data and Methods**</center>

We performed web-based surveys of randomly selected, full time, undergraduate students who are between 18 and 25 years old at a public university right before the 2016 presidential election.[13] This university is a four year, Masters-level University located approximately 20 miles from St. Louis, Missouri with approximately 14,000 students.[14] We employed internet-based instruments to investigate online forms of civic engagement because one cannot perform these activities when s/he lacks the ability to use a computer to complete rudimentary tasks, like participating in a survey of this nature.

We executed our survey between October 11and October 25, 2016. Our sample was composed of the list of university-assigned student e-mail addresses. Approximately 933 of the

<center>12</center>

9,576 students who were eligible to complete the survey did so. The response rate for this survey (roughly 9.7%) lies within the range of response rates that other organizations who have conducted in this manner have reported (Pew, 2016). Also, the characteristics of respondents are consistent with those of the broader University population on gender (59.23% female in the sample vs. 54.18% in the population), race (9.69% African American in the sample vs. 13.20% in the population), and age (21.12 among undergraduates in the sample, and 21.00 for this same group in the population).[15]

The dependent variable is an index of four items that gauge the extent to which each student has engaged in online political expression (α=.86). Using three separate questions, we asked each student how often they have expressed their views about politics, a presidential candidate, a political party, another candidate for political office, or a political interest group on a: 1) website; 2) blog; or 3) social media platform (like Facebook or Twitter). In addition, we asked each student how frequently s/he has shared an image or webpage related to politics, a presidential candidate, a political party, another candidate for political office, or a political interest group on a social media platform. Each respondent was asked about the frequency with which s/he has engaged in each of these activities that ranged from "never" to "very often" using a five point scale. The online appendix provides a more expansive discussion of this and the other variables used in this analysis.[16] We employed ordinary least squares regression to test our theoretical expectations because our dependent variable is relatively continuous.

We asked each respondent about the extent to which s/he tried to talk to people and explain why they should vote for or against one of the parties or candidates. Each respondent was asked about the frequency with which s/he has engaged in this activity that ranged from

13

"never" to "very often" using a five-point scale. Since this variable is ordered enough, we employed ordered logistic regression to test our expectations.

We employed an additive index consisting of five questions that asked respondents about the extent to which they engaged in a variety of online activities via social media (α=.86). We asked each respondent how frequently s/he did each of the following activities involving a presidential candidate, political party, another candidate for political office, or a political interest group on any social media platform: 1) following; 2) liking; 3) joining a professional network; 4) friending; and 5) liking a video produced by one of the aforementioned. Separate from the index, we asked each respondent how frequently s/he read internet blogs about politics and current events. The items that we used to measure each concept are measured on a five-point response scale for which zero points were allocated to "Not at all," and four points for "Very often."

Respondent Attributes and Political Characteristics

We employed six sets of variables to investigate the effects of respondent characteristics on online engagement. First, we asked each respondent to rate the extent with which s/he is interested in politics on a four-point scale ranging from three points for "Very Interested," and zero points for "Not at all Interested." [17] Second, we measure the degree of partisanship among respondents by asking each student whether s/he identifies as a Democrat, Republican, independent or something else. Using two questions with slightly different wording, each respondent who self-identified as a member of one of the major political parties was asked whether s/he strongly or not strongly identified as a member of one of them. From this data, we constructed a dichotomous variable that is coded one for those who strongly identify with either the Democratic or Republican parties.

Third, we constructed an index based on three questions that examined the degree to which each student's friends engaged in a series of activities to investigate the effects of peer civic experiences on online engagement. Each of the items that we used were answered on a five-point response scale that ranged from zero points for "strongly disagree," to four points for "strongly agree" (α=.68).[18] Fourth, we created a binary variable for political science majors based on a question about student major(s) in the survey.

Fifth, we considered the effects of presidential campaigns by asking each respondent about the level of attention that s/he paid to political campaigns during the relevant election cycle. We used a four-point scale for this question, with values that ranged from three points for "Very Interested," to zero points for "Not at all Interested."

Finally, we examined the effects of ideology by asking each respondent whether s/he identifies him or herself as a conservative, moderate, liberal, other, or did not know. If the respondent replied, "don't know" or "unknown," then we followed up with a question about whether that respondent identifies oneself as a liberal or conservative. We created binary variables for liberals and conservatives based on replies to both questions.[19] For example, the dummy variable for conservatives is coded one when the respondent replied that s/he was a conservative or self-identified as a conservative in the follow-up question that was directed to those who did not know their ideology.[20]

Results

[TABLE ONE ABOUT HERE]

Table One provides the results. The models use two measures of political expression as the dependent variable. The model to the left examines the online political expression index, while the model to the right examines the extent to which one persuaded others offline. To

15

interpret the results of the persuading others model, we used CLARIFY (King, Tomz, and Wittenberg, 2000) to calculate the change in the predicted probability of each level of persuading others. In each illustration within both figures, the horizontal axis denotes the frequency of persuading others, while the vertical axis is the change in the predicted probability. Finally, each illustration corresponds to a change in the value of a particular variable, all else equal.[21]

<center>[FIGURE ONE ABOUT HERE]</center>

Before we move to our key variables of interest, we review the results of the controls. Figure One displays the change in the predicted probability of persuading others to vote for or against a candidate for each control. There is strong evidence that being a liberal had a significant relationship with online political expression and a weaker, but still statistically significant relationship with talking to others and trying to persuade others to vote for or against a candidate. More specifically, being a liberal is connected with an increase in online political expression by 1.28 points. In addition, self-identifying as a liberal resulted in decreases in the predicted probabilities that one never persuades others by 4.8% and rarely performs this activity by 4.1%. However, being a liberal is associated with increases in the predicted probabilities that one sometimes persuades others by .2%, regularly engages in this activity by 4.2%, and engages in this activity very often by 4.5%. Interestingly, self-identifying as a conservative is not statistically associated with either online civic activity or persuading others to vote for or against a candidate.

As expected, political science majors are more likely to engage in both online expression and trying to persuade others to vote for or against a candidate. Among political science majors, expected values of the online expression index increased by 1.63 points. Moreover, being a political science major is linked with in decreases in the predicted probabilities that one never

<center>16</center>

persuades others by 10.7%, rarely does so by 11.3%, and sometimes does so by 5.1%. Yet, political science majors face increases in the predicted probabilities that one regularly persuades others by 9.7%, and does so very often by 17.4%. Meanwhile, we found no evidence that the civic experience of one's peers significantly influenced either activity.

Moreover, we uncovered a key difference in the relationships between respondent attributes, offline attempts to persuade others and online political expression. Campaign attention had a positive and statistically significant relationship with trying to persuade others to vote for or against a candidate. When students shift from being sometimes to regularly interested in campaigns, the predicted probability that students never persuade others decreased by 18.3%, rarely do so by 22.6%, sometimes do so by 26.4%, and regularly do so by 6.3%. However, this increase in campaign attention is connected with a 73.6% increase in the predicted probability that students persuade others very often.   Yet, we found no evidence of a significant relationship between campaign attention and online civic expression.

Internet-Based Activities, Interest in Politics, and Strong Partisanship

[FIGURE TWO ABOUT HERE]

We now discuss the primary theoretical variables. Figure Two displays the change in the predicted probability of persuading others to vote for or against a candidate for the primary variables of interest. College students' online political expression and offline civic engagement seem more influenced by their internet activities. Each one unit increase in social media activity is associated with an increase in online civic expression of .325 points. To contextualize this effect, an increase in politically-oriented social media activity from the mean to one standard deviation above the mean yields one additional activity being performed very often that was previously done sometimes.

17

It also leads to an increased likelihood of trying to persuade others to vote for or against a candidate or party. More specifically, a one standard deviation increase in the social media activity index resulted in decreases in the predicted probabilities that one never persuades others by 5.4% and rarely performs this activity by 4.6%. However, this same increase in the social media activity index was associated with increases in the predicted probabilities that one sometimes persuades others by .1%, regularly engages in this activity by 4.7%, and engages in this activity very often by 5.2%.This result is not surprising, especially since Rice et al (2013) found a similar link between friending and offline engagement in 2008.

However, the effects of internet activities go beyond the activities that take place on social media. We discovered that frequency of blog reading is positively connected with both online political expression and trying to persuade others to vote for or against a candidate. We found a change in blog reading from doing so sometimes to regularly results in decreases in the predicted probabilities that one never persuades others by 1.8% and rarely performs this activity by 1.3%. However, this same rise in blog reading increases the predicted probabilities that one sometimes persuades others by .3%, regularly engages in this activity by 1.4%, and engages in this activity very often by 1.4%. Yet, each unit increase in blog reading was associated with a .61-point increase in online political expression.

As expected, an increase in interest in politics is connected with higher levels of online political expression, and with persuading others to vote for or against a candidate. Each unit increase in interest in politics yielded an increase of .47 points. Roughly speaking, going from being completely uninterested in politics to having the highest level of interest in politics has the effect of performing an online expressive activity that was performed sometimes to being done very often. In addition, an increase in interest in politics from somewhat interested to very

18

interested in politics results in decreases in the predicted probabilities that one never persuades others by 6.4%, rarely performs this activity by 5.7%, and sometimes performing this activity by .4%. However, this same shift in interest in politics yields increases in the predicted probabilities that one regularly persuades others by 5.7%, and engages in this activity very often by 6.7%.

Strong partisans were more likely to engage in online expression and to persuade others to vote for or against a candidate or party. However, the increased online expression by strong partisans amounts to only half a single level of increased frequency of a single activity. Also, self-identifying as a strong partisan resulted in decreases in the predicted probabilities that one never persuades others by 3.6% and rarely performs this activity by 2.9%. However, being a strong partisan was connected with increases in the predicted probabilities that one sometimes persuades others by .3%, regularly engages in this activity by 3.1%, and engages in this activity very often by 3.2%.

Finally, we specified the models in a variety of ways to verify the robustness of the results. We incorporated demographic variables, whether one intended to vote in the 2016 election[22], alternative measures in place of some of the ones reported here, and removed one control variable at a time from the models. When we did so, our results were consistent with those reported here in most model specifications.[23]

Implications and Conclusions

Today's college students have grown up with an online world at their fingertips. Forms of online expression and activity that were unimaginable to their parents' generation are routine to them. This provides new routes to political expression. We find that several distinct forms of online activities can lead college students who might not otherwise participate politically to venture into the political world. First, college students who engaged in social media activity that

19

is political in nature are more likely to engage in online political expression and to try to persuade others to vote for or against a candidate. This counteracts the view that college students' use of social media amounts to slactivism. We demonstrate that political uses of social media have real world consequences for college students' political expression, making them more likely to use their voice both online and offline.

Second, the frequency of reading others' blogs consistently predicts who expresses themselves politically.[24] The results suggest that those college students most steeped in the opinions of others are more likely to share their views online and to venture offline to try to persuade others to vote for or against a candidate or party. While there is some relationship between news and blog content (Wallsten, 2007), the political blogosphere tends to be highly polarized (Hargittai, et al, 2008; Sobieraj and Berry, 2011). These results suggest some cause for concern and also call for further study.

Future researchers should also disaggregate the different routes by which one can express their political views online. That said, our study breaks new ground by establishing that the factors that explain online political expression among college students are similar in many ways to those that explain which college students try to persuade others to vote for or against a candidate or party. This may be an artifact of the increasing familiarity and ubiquity of online routes of political expression for college students.

Yet, we still see differences between online forms of political expression and persuading others to vote for or against a candidate. Those who were more attentive to political campaigns were more likely to persuade others to vote for or against a candidate. This result is consistent with what others have found, as Hillygus (2005) found that campaign efforts are connected with the decision to vote. Similarly, Mattes and Redlawsk (2015) imply that those who pay attention

to campaigns are exposed to useful information that otherwise would not have been available. This information, then, could become part of the pitch for one to persuade others to vote for or against a candidate.

However, we found no evidence of a relationship between online political expression and campaign attention. For college students, sharing one's political views online in the midst of a presidential campaign does not require the prerequisite of attention to the campaign. This insight is somewhat consistent with what others have found, as they discover that participatory acts via social media are often situational (Kushin and Yamamoto, 2010) and linked to exposure to like-minded perspectives (Kim and Chen, 2016). Yet it is also important in its own right as it shows another way in which online forms of engagement broaden who participates.

Our study also breaks new ground by showing that social media activity and blog readership are just as important if not more important in predicting college students' political expression than interest in politics and strong partisanship. In some respects, these results provide support for the continued role of the three pillars of Verba, Schlozman and Brady's (1995, 267) civic volunteerism model — "resources, psychological engagement with politics, and access to networks through which individuals can be recruited to political life" — and their applicability to college students. Two of these pillars, resources and access to networks, have expanded significantly for young adults in the online and social media era. Blog readership can help young adults build the civic skills needed to express themselves online or persuade others offline, giving them the resources to participate. Meanwhile, social media activity can both build civic skills and facilitate young adults' participation in politics through broadening their networks to receive invitations to participate.

We find evidence that both activities are associated with college students engaging in higher levels of online political expression and being more likely to persuade others offline. Yet, the level of engagement of students' friends did not shape either behavior. Together, these results suggest that resources and access to networks are shifting, at least for college students. Meanwhile, psychological attachments continue to shape college students' political expression. When it comes to persuading others offline, interest in politics, strong partisanship, majoring in political science, and attention to the campaign all matter. However, online political expression is not significantly influenced by attention to the campaign. Thus, while those who care more about politics are more likely to engage in political expression, the civic resources built online and the new recruitment networks social media offers help young adults become more likely to talk about politics, both online and offline. This may help explain why young adults are willing to break taboos about talking about politics and engage in these activities at higher rates than their elders.

References

Alberici, A.I. and Milesi, P. (2016). Online Discussion, Politicized Identity, and Collective

Action. *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, 19(1), 43-59.

Armstrong, C.L. and McAdams, M.J. (2011). Blogging the Time Away? Young Adults'

Motivations for Blog Use. *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, 19(2), 113-128

Baum, M.A. (2005). Talking the Vote: Why Presidential Candidates Hit the Talk Show Circuit.

American Journal of Political Science, 49(2), 213-234.

Best, S.J. and Krueger, B.S. (2005). Analyzing the Representativeness of Internet Political

Participation. *Political Behavior*, 27(2), 183-216.

Bynner, J. and Ashford, S. (1994). Politics and Participation: Some Antecedents of Young

People's Attitudes to the Political System and Political Activity. *European Journal of*

Social Psychology, 24(2), 223-236.

Cantijoch, M.; Cutts, D. and Gibson, R. (2016). Moving Slowly up the Ladder of Political

Engagement: a 'Spill-over' Model of Internet Participation. *British Journal of Politics*

and International Relations, 18(1), 26-48.

Conover, P.J. and Feldman, S. (1989) Candidate Perception in an Ambiguous World:

Campaigns, Cues, and Inference Processes. *American Journal of Political Science,* 33,

912-940.

Conroy, M.; Feezell, J.T.; and Guerrero, M. (2012). Facebook and Political Engagement: A

Study of Online Political Group Membership and Offline Political Engagement.

Computers in Human Behavior, 28(5), 1535-1546.

Davis, R.H. (2009). *Typing Politics: The Role of Blogs in American Politics*. New York City,

NY: Oxford University Press.

Delli Carpini, M.X., Cook, F.L., and Jacobs, L.R. (2004). Public Deliberations, Discursive

   Participation and Citizen Engagement: A Review of the Empirical Literature. *Annual*

   Review of Political Science, 7(1), 315-344.

Duggan, M. and Brenner, J. (2013). The Demographics of Social Media Users – 2012: Social

   Networking Site Users. http:/www.pewinternet.org/2013/02/13/social-networking-site-

   users/. Accessed 21 November 2014.

Edsall, T.B. and Faler, B. (2002). Lott Remarks on Thurmond Echoed 1980 Words. *The*

   Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2002/12/11/lott-

   remarks-on-thurmond-echoed-1980-words/c613ae1c-e17d-41c1-836a-

   4dd0741ec7c8/?utm_term=.5180b9038c6a/. Accessed 20 April 2017.

Ekdale, B., Namkoong, K., Fung, T.K.F., and Perlmutter, D.D. (2010). Why blog? (then and

   now): Exploring the Motivations for Blogging by Popular American Political Bloggers

   New Media and Society, 12(2), 217-234.

Gainous, J. and Wagner, K.M. (2013). *Tweeting to Power: The Social Media Revolution in*

   American Politics. New York City, NY: Oxford University Press.

Gelman, A. (2007). Struggles with Survey Weighting and Regression Modeling. *Statistical*

   Science, 22(2), 153-164.

Gibson, R. and Cantijoch, M. (2013). Conceptualizing and Measuring Political Participation in

   the Age of the Internet: Is Online Political Engagement Really Different to Offline?

   Journal of Politics, 75(3), 701-716.

Gil de Zuniga, H., Puig-I-Abril, E., and Rojas, H. (2009). Weblogs, traditional sources online

   and political participation: an assessment of how the internet is changing the political

   environment. *New Media & Society*, 11(4): 553-574.

Gil de Duniga, H., Jung, N. and Valenzuela, S. (2012). Social Media Use for News and

    Individuals' Social Capital, Civic Engagement and Political Participation. *Journal of*

    Computer-Mediated Communication, 17(3), 319-336.

Hargittai, E., Gallo, J., and Kane, M. (2008). Cross-Ideological Discussion among Conservative

    and Liberal Bloggers. *Public Choice,* 134(1), 67–86.

Hillygus, D.S. (2005). Campaign Effects and the Dynamics of Turnout Intention in Election

    2000. *The Journal of Politics*, 67(1), 50-68.

Johnson, T.J. and Kaye, B.K. (2004). Wag the Blog: How Reliance on Traditional Media and the

    Internet Influence Credibility Perceptions of Weblogs among Blog Users. *Journalism and*

    Mass Communication Quarterly, 81(3), 622-642.

Jones, S. and Fox, S. (2009). Generations Online in 2009. Pew Internet and American Life

    Project Data Memo. January 28.

Kenski, K. and Stroud, N.J. (2006). Connections between Internet use and Political Efficacy,

    Knowledge, and Participation. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 50(2),

    173-192.

Kerbel, M.R., and Bloom, J.D. (2005). Blog for America and Civic Involvement. *The Harvard*

    International Journal of Press/Politics, 10(4), 3-27.

Kim, Y. and Chen, H-T. (2016). Social Media and Online Political Participation: The Mediating

    Role of Exposure to Cross-Cutting and Like-Minded Perspectives. *Telematics and*

    Informatics, 33(2), 320-330.

King, G., Tomz, M. and Wittenberg, J. (2000). Making the Most of Statistical Analyses:

    Improving Interpretation and Presentation. *The American Journal of Political Science*,

    44(2), 341-355.

Kushin, M.J. and Yamamoto, M. (2010). Did Social Media Really Matter? College Students'

> Use of Online Media and Political Decision Making in the 2008 Election. *Mass*

> *Communication and Society* 13(5), 608-630.

Lawrence, E., Sides, J., and Farrell, H. (2010). Self-Segregation or Deliberation? Blog

> Readership, Participation, and Polarization in American Politics. *Perspectives on Politics,*

> 8(1), 141-157.

Lenhart, A., and Fox, S. (2006). Bloggers: A Portrait of the Internet's New Storytellers. Pew

> Internet and American Life Project Data Memo. July 19.

Lewis, M. (2011). An Analysis of the Relationship Between Political Blog Reading, Online

> Political Activity, and Voting During the 2008 Presidential Campaign. *The International*

> *Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences*, 6(3), 11-28.

Miller, W.E., and Shanks, J.M. (1996). *The New American Voter*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard

> University Press.

Moffett, K.W. and Rice, L.L. (2016). *Web 2.0 and the Political Mobilization of College*

> *Students*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2012). GOP Holds Early Turnout Edge, But

> Little Enthusiasm for Romney. Released June 21. http://www.people-

> press.org/2012/06/21/gop-holds-early-turnout-edge-but-little-enthusiasm-for-romney/.

> Accessed 1 September 2013.

Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2015). Political Interest and Awareness

> Lower Among Millennials. Released June 1.

> http://www.journalism.org/2015/06/01/political-interest-and-awareness-lower-among-

> millennials/. Accessed 20 March 2017.

Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2016). Flashpoints in Polling. Released October 24. Available at http://www.pewresearch.org/2016/08/01/flashpoints-in-polling/. Accessed on March 8, 2017.

Prior, M. (2005). News vs. Entertainment: How Increasing Media Choice Widens Gaps in Political Knowledge and Turnout. *American Journal of Political Science*, 49(3), 577-592.

Redlawsk, D. P. and Mattes, K. (2015). *The Positive Case for Negative Campaigning*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Rice, L.L. (2005). *Campaigns Matter: Advertising Effects on Potential Voters in the 2000 Presidential Primary*. Ph.D. diss. University of California, San Diego.

Rice, L.L., Moffett, K.W., and Madupalli, R. (2013). Campaign-Related Social Networking and the Political Participation of College Students. *Social Science Computer Review*, 31(3), 257-279.

Rogers, T.; Green, D.P.; Ternovski, J. and Young, C.F. (2017). Social Pressure and Voting: A Field Experiment Conducted in a High-Salience Election. *Electoral Studies,* 26(April 2017), 87-100.

Rosenstone, S.J., and Hansen, J.M. (1993). *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*. New York, NY: Longman.

Schlozman, K.L., Verba, S., and Brady, H.E. (2012). *The Unheavenly Chorus: Unequal Political Voice and the Broken Promise of American Democracy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Shah, D.V., Cho, J., Eveland, W.P., and Kwa, N, (2005). Information and Expression in a Digital Age: Modeling Internet Effects on Civic Participation. *Communication Research*, 32(5), 531–565.

Sobieraj, S. and Berry, J.M. (2011). From Incivility to Outrage: Political Discourse in Blogs, Talk Radio, and Cable News. *Political Communication*, 28(1), 19–41.

Thompson, C. (2006). The Early Years. *New York*. February 20. http://nymag.com/news/media/15971. Accessed 1 September 2013.

Towner, T. L. (2013). All Political Participation Is Socially Networked?: New Media and the 2012 Election. *Social Science Computer Review,* 31(5), 527-541.

Verba, S. and Nie, N.H. (1972). *Participation in America: Political Democracy and Social Equality.* New York, NY: Harper and Row.

Verba, S., Schlozman, K.L., and Brady, H.E. (1995). *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wallsten, K. (2007). Agenda Setting and the Blogosphere: An Analysis of the Relationship between Mainstream Media and Political Blogs. *Review of Policy Research*, 24(6), 567-587.

Winship, C. and Radbill, L. (1994). Sampling Weights and Regression Analysis. *Sociological Methods and Research*, 23(2), 230-257.

Xenos, M.; Vromen, A.; and Loader, B.D. (2014). The Great Equalizer? Patterns of Social Media and Youth Political Engagement in Three Advanced Democracies. *Information, Communication and Society*, 17(2), 151-167.

Zukin, C., Keeter, S., Andolina, M., Jenkins, J., and Delli Carpini, M.X. (2006). *A New Engagement? Political Participation, Civic Life, and the Changing American Citizen*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Table One: Online Political Expression and Persuading Others Offline in the 2016 Election

|	Online Political Expression	Persuade Others Offline
Social Media Activity	0.325 ***	0.080 ***
	(0.028)	(0.014)
Blog Readership	0.609 ***	0.138**
	(0.105)	(0.058)
Interest in Politics	0.470 *	0.550 ***
	(0.202)	(0.120)
Strong Partisanship	0.522 *	0.290 *
	(0.296)	(0.170)
Peer Civic Engagement	0.002	0.017
	(0.052)	(0.033)
Political Science Major	1.628 **	1.165 ***
	(0.605)	(0.351)
Campaign Attention	0.030	0.381 ***
	(0.142)	(0.087)
Liberal	1.279 ***	0.389 *
	(0.300)	(0.179)
Conservative	0.144	-0.229
	(0.315)	(0.194)
Cut Point One		1.678 ***
		(0.334)
Cut Point Two		2.844 ***
		(0.343)
Cut Point Three		4.169 ***
		(0.368)
Constant	-0.736	5.368 ***
	(0.461)	(0.388)
N	688	690
R^2	0.471	-
F-Statistic	65.49	-
Prob>F	<.0001	-
Standard Error of the Estimate	3.221	-
Pseudo R^2		.140
Chi-Squared		242.01
Prob>Chi-Squared		<.0001

First, * $p<0.05$; ** $p<0.01$; *** $p<0.001$; all one-tailed tests. Second, the values in parenthesis are standard errors.

Figure One: Effects of Ideology, Majoring in Political Science, and Campaign Attention on Persuading Others.
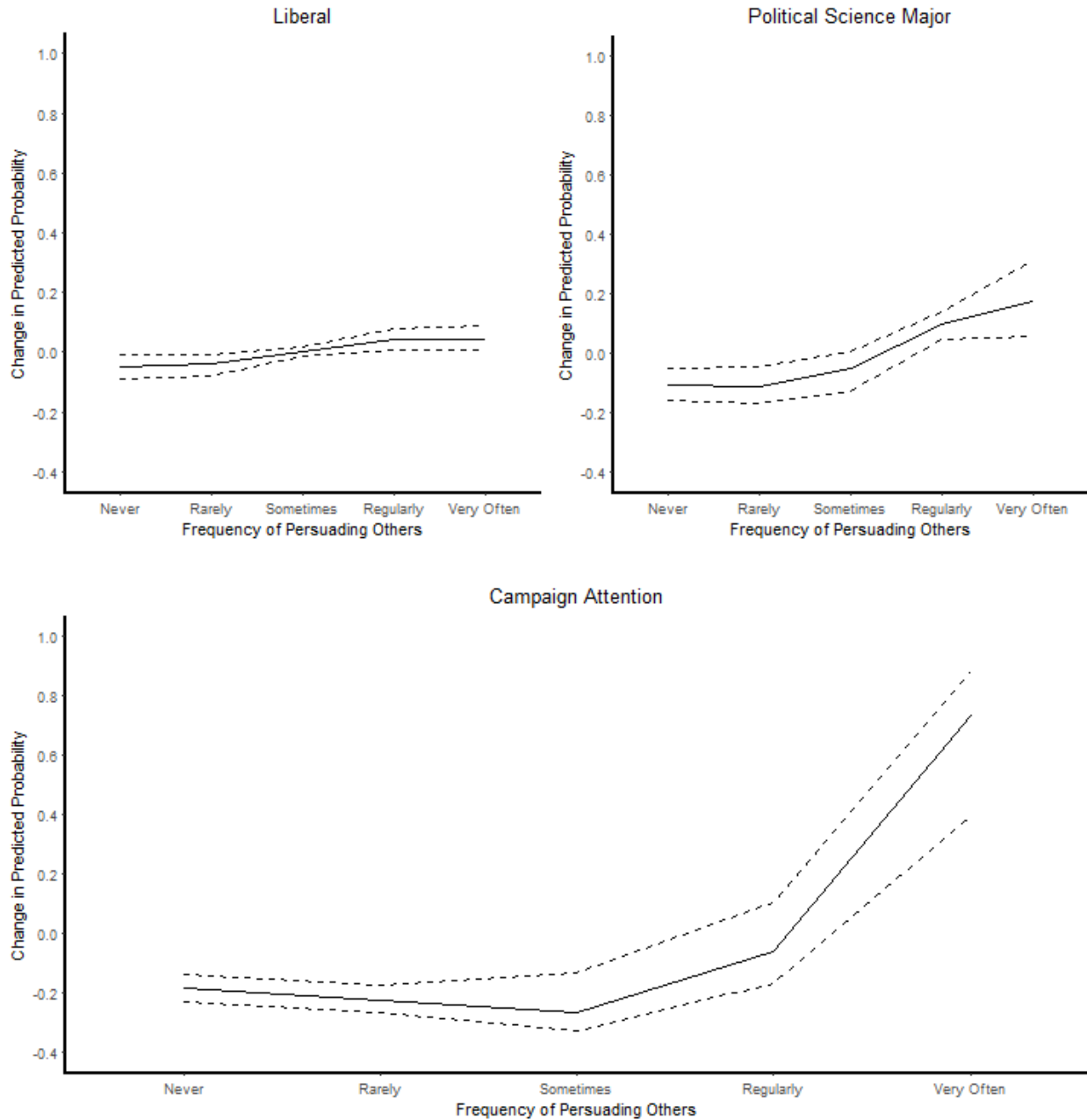
Note: To compute each change in predicted probability, we hold the values of all binary variables at zero, the value for interest in politics at two (somewhat interested), blog readership at two (sometimes), campaign attention at three (sometimes), and the remaining variables (peer civic engagement and social media activity index) at their means. Then, we modify the value of each variable titled above its corresponding illustration from zero to one (for liberals and political science majors), and from three to four (for campaign attention). The solid line is the mean change in predicted probability of persuading others, while the dashed lines are the 95% confidence interval surround this predicted change.

Figure Two: Effects of Social Media Activity, Blog Readership, Interest in Politics, and Strong Partisanship on Persuading Others.
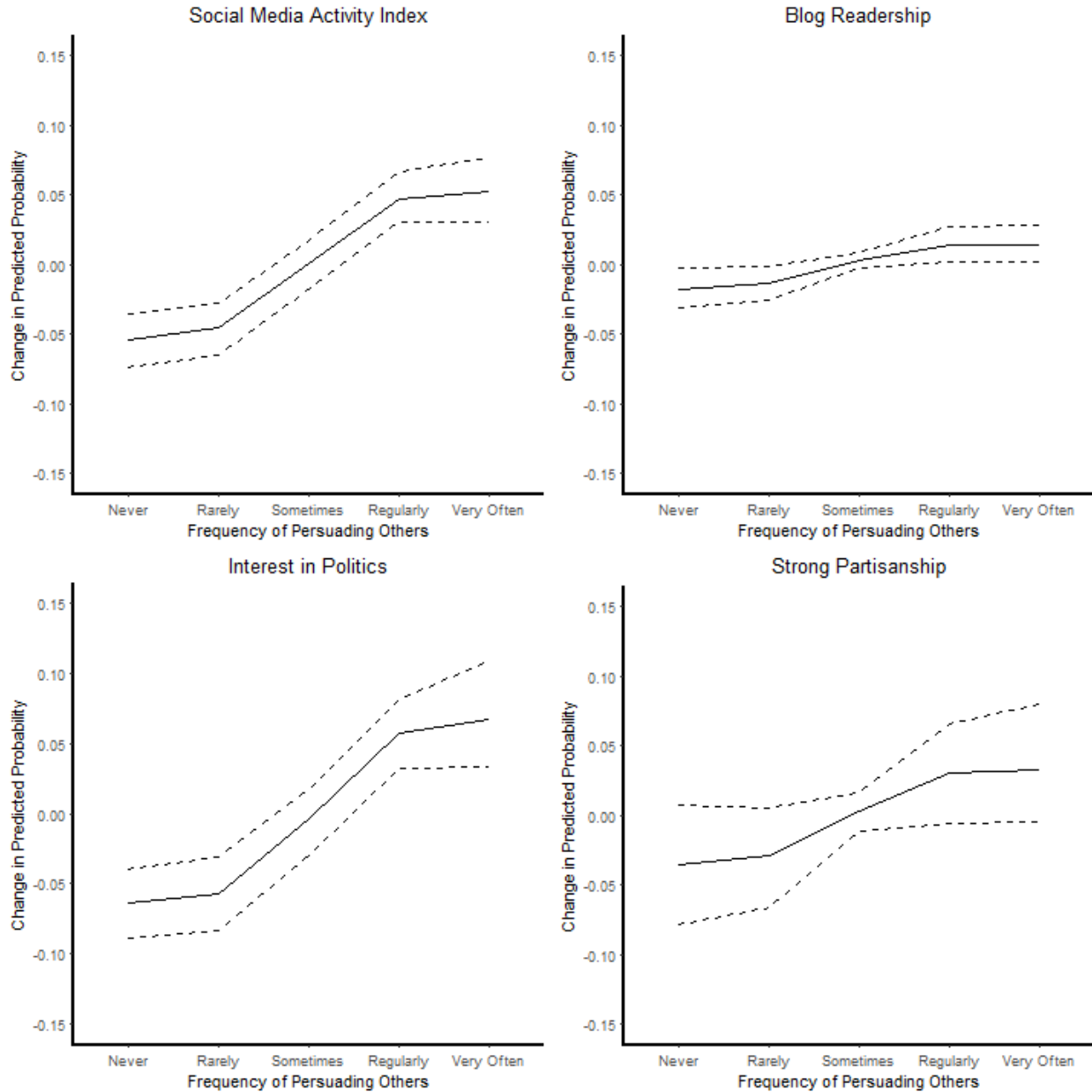
Note: To compute each change in predicted probability, we hold the values of all binary variables at zero, the value for interest in politics at two (somewhat interested), blog readership at two (sometimes), campaign attention at three (sometimes), and the remaining variables (peer civic engagement and social media activity index) at their means. Then, we modify the values in each respective illustration for social media activity index from the mean to one standard deviation above it (for social media activity index), from two to three (for blog readership and interest in politics), and for strong partisanship from zero to one. The solid line is the mean change in predicted probability of persuading others, while the dashed lines are the 95% confidence interval surround this predicted change.

[1] In reality, there is no guarantee of an audience when one uses online forms of political expression.

[2] These include influencing mainstream media, helping a cause, changing public opinion or advocating for a party (see Ekdale et al, 2010).

[3] Some studies of the top political bloggers suggest that political bloggers are more likely to be male (Davis, 2009; Ekdale et al, 2010), but a Pew study on blogging failed to find any significant difference based on gender (Lenhart and Fox, 2006). When we included gender alongside our other independent variables, it was not significant when we examined online political expression. However, females were less likely to persuade others to vote for or against a candidate than males ($p<.05$). All remaining variables retained the same signs as those that are reported in this paper, though.

[4] If bloggers are primarily Caucasian, then this suggests a testable hypothesis. We found no evidence that Caucasians express themselves online at rates that are different from any other group. Also, the signs and significance patterns of the results did not change when we included this variable.

[5] Later, we test whether ideology affects the propensity to engage in blogging.

[6] While Sobieraj and Berry (2011) note that this is a lesser percentage than that of cable news and talk radio shows, it is high nonetheless.

[7] We tested whether political knowledge affects one's propensity to express him or herself online, as well as, to engage in offline forms of political participation. We measured political knowledge by asking each respondent which political party held a majority of seats in the U.S. House of Representatives. Correct answers to this question were coded one, while incorrect answers and don't knows were coded as zero. We chose this question to measure political knowledge because it is a common measure that others use to measure this concept (see e.g., Prior, 2005).

Our measure of political knowledge was not significant in either model. When we examined the propensity to persuade others to vote for or against a candidate, though, strong partisanship lost significance ($p<.10$). The signs and significance patterns of the remaining coefficients did not change.

This analysis implies that we do not have other political knowledge questions in the survey. Ideally, we would utilize the responses to the other questions to construct a political knowledge index to measure this concept in place of the question used in this paper. Unfortunately, we do not have a reliable way of measuring whether this is the case in our data, as the Chronbach's alpha values that correspond to the political knowledge questions in our survey are nowhere near high enough to meaningfully get at this concept ($\alpha=.23$).

[8] Lawrence et al (2010) did not find a difference in political blog reading based on gender.

[9] Pew research also suggests that young adults read blogs about politics and current events at lower rates than their elders (Pew, 2010).

[10] Research by Armstrong and McAdams (2011) suggests a number of young adults use blogs for information-seeking and Johnson and Kaye (2004) conclude that more frequent blog readers find blogs more credible than other information sources.

[11] For example, Rice (2005) demonstrates a link between levels of campaign advertising and campaign attention during presidential primaries.

[12] To directly test this statement, we created a variable based on our measure of ideology that is coded one for those who self-identified as very liberal or very conservative, and zero otherwise. When we did so, this variable was positive and statistically significant ($p<.05$). In both models, strong partisanship lost statistical significance ($p<.15$). Further, self-identifying as a liberal lost significance with persuading others to vote for or against a candidate, but not with online political expression. Our measure of ideological extremism is not strongly correlated with strong partisanship ($r=.28$).

[13] Hereafter, we refer to this survey as the Student Election Survey.

[14] Because this survey was taken at a single university, it is possible that the results are an artifact of the site at which the survey was administered. There is no reason to believe, nor evidence to indicate, that students at this university systematically differ from their counterparts at universities across the United States with respect to civic engagement (see Moffett and Rice 2016).

[15] It is possible that the results reported here are the result of not having weighted our observations according to the two categories by which the sample diverges from the population: race and gender. Following Winship and Radbill (1994), we constructed poststratification survey weights to account for both race and gender. When we ran our regressions with the survey weights combined with robust standard errors, the signs and significance patterns are identical to those that are reported in Table One. When this occurs, Winship and Radbill (1994) recommend

reporting the unweighted results over the weighted ones because the standard errors are more easily interpreted (c.f., Gelman, 2007).

[16] This appendix is available at http://www.kenmoffett.net/research.html.

[17] It is possible that interest in politics, strong partisanship and being a political science major are interrelated such that the individual effects of each variable are muted by including all of them in the same model. To consider this possibility, we removed each of these variables, one at a time to investigate whether our results change. When we did so, the signs and significance patterns of the results mirror those reported here.

[18] These were the only questions asked about peer civic experiences in both surveys. Some respondents replied that they did not know for these questions. We coded values for these variables as missing for the purposes of index construction. Thus, no peer civic engagement score exists for those who answered "don't know" for at least one of the questions.

[19] Unfortunately, our survey does not contain a measure that allows us to determine the strength of ideological attachment. That said, considering ideology in the manner that we do in this analysis allows us to determine the effect of ideological direction on civic engagement.

[20] We coded the dummy variable for liberals in the same manner.

[21] In each figure, we compute the change in predicted probability by assuming that the values of all binary variables have a value of zero, the value for interest in politics at two (somewhat interested), blog readership at two (sometimes), campaign attention at three (sometimes), and the remaining variables (peer civic engagement and social media activity index) at their means. To calculate this change, we modify the value of each variable from zero to one (if it is binary), and from the mean to one standard deviation above it (if it is continuous).

[22] This variable was not significant when examining online political expression, but was positive and significant when examining the propensity of one to persuade others to vote for or against a candidate. When examining the tendency of one to persuade others to vote for or against a candidate, strong partisanship lost statistical significance ($p<.10$). Otherwise, the signs and significance patterns for the remaining variables in both models remained unchanged.

[23] These models are available from the authors upon request.

[24] It is possible that expressing oneself politically online might also make one more likely to read others' blogs about news. Thus, the results in this paragraph should be regarded with some caution because of the possibility of endogeneity.