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## Offline Student Political Activism: Supported or Thwarted by Online Political Engagement?

### **Abstract**

Social media is an integral part of everyday life for the current generation of college-age students. Researchers debate whether the time invested into these sites has a positive or negative influence on offline political activism. Drawing on an original survey of undergraduate students at Illinois Wesleyan University, this study finds that online political engagement has a significant, positive relationship with offline political activism, and this relationship holds even when controlling for the respondent's political efficacy and natural political inclination. There is a positive relationship between online and offline political activism for students who believe that social media is an appropriate platform for political content; this indicator conditions the strength of online political engagement. Most importantly, observing political content on social media and searching for political information on social media both positively correlated with offline political activism. These results support the theory that the time and energy spent on social media positively influences offline political activism. Therefore, social networking sites should be considered positive mobilization and educational tools for United States college students.

## OFFLINE STUDENT POLITICAL ACTIVISM: SUPPORTED OR THWARTED BY ONLINE POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT?

Nicole M. Jovicevic

***Abstract:** Social media is an integral part of everyday life for the current generation of college-age students. Researchers debate whether the time invested into these sites has a positive or negative influence on offline political activism. Drawing on an original survey of undergraduate students at Illinois Wesleyan University, this study finds that online political engagement has a significant, positive relationship with offline political activism, and this relationship holds even when controlling for the respondent's political efficacy and natural political inclination. There is a positive relationship between online and offline political activism for students who believe that social media is an appropriate platform for political content; this indicator conditions the strength of online political engagement. Most importantly, observing political content on social media and searching for political information on social media both positively correlated with offline political activism. These results support the theory that the time and energy spent on social media positively influences offline political activism. Therefore, social networking sites should be considered positive mobilization and educational tools for United States college students.*

### ONLINE POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AND OFFLINE ACTIVISM

Today's college students are the first generations to have access to the Internet since birth. Resources like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram – otherwise known as Social Networking Sites (SNS) – have allowed this generation to share new articles, events, and ideas across thousands of users/friends almost instantaneously. According to a 2013 study published in *College Quarterly*, college students spend an average of 16.13 hours a week on SNS; this is more than double the average amount students spend on academic reading a week (Capps and Huang 2013). SNS have become a large and integral part of everyday life and a new mode of gaining knowledge, sharing ideas, and creating cultural norms.

Two recent political events in particular have sparked scholarly interest in the relationship between SNS and offline political participation: the 2008 Obama campaign and the Arab Spring. The 2008 Obama campaign fully integrated SNS into its recruitment and mobilization strategies. Obama's campaign took advantage of the free advertising on YouTube and Facebook by posting and sharing videos. In total, the videos were watched for 14.5 million hours, which would have cost \$47 million on broadcast TV (Miller 2008). These free mobilization tools resulted in higher youth voting percentages and increased knowledge about Obama's campaign platforms. Most importantly, these

strategies significantly contributed to Obama's success in the election and produced a continuously salient community of supporters after the election was won.

Similarly, SNS played a pivotal role in the Arab Spring that began in Tunisia in December of 2010. The movement gained a lot of attention quickly; it was the first widespread movement where protesters used SNS to communicate, raise awareness, and organize offline protests. By 2012, the movement took Tunisian rulers out of power and sparked similar movements in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, and other countries in the Middle East. This political movement forced political scientists to expand research on political participation into the online realm (Cornell University Library 2015).

Given these recent examples, empirical studies should support SNS as an additional resource for engaging democratic participation, even though it may not be seen as a traditional avenue of participation. However, the literature has competing claims. One school of thought suggests that SNS actually have a negative impact on political participation. These digital pessimists give online engagement derogatory nicknames like "Clicktivism" or "Slacktivism," arguing that online engagement is only useful in making the participant feel good rather than making real-life political changes. The other school, digital optimists, argues that political action on SNS can expand political knowledge, create supportive communities, and give a platform for voice and expression. Both sides have valid and empirically supported arguments – but which prediction is accurate? Further research is needed to determine the effect of SNS on political participation.

#### DIGITAL PESSIMISTS: ONLINE POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT DOES NOT LEAD TO OFFLINE POLITICAL ACTIVISM

Outside the generic demographic drawbacks of online political engagement, digital pessimists argue that SNS offer only superficial action options, create weak ties where deep ties are needed, and distract from more effective political engagement.

The labels "Clicktivism" or "Slacktivism" imply that actions taken online are ineffective and only serve to make individuals feel good rather than create effective change. Halupka defines the heuristics of Clicktivism as an online, impulsive, and non-committal gesture that does not draw upon specialized knowledge and is easily replicated while also engaging a political object (2014). These actions include using a social button, creating a meme, changing a profile picture, sharing an article or video, or signing an online petition. Scholars that argue for the "feel-good" theory believe that the

streamlining of online processes has created a disposition toward easy activism because it provides a sense of moral gratification (Morozov 2009; Lee and Hsieh 2013). From this perspective, simplified forms of engagement and solidarity may be detrimental to offline activism because they normalize easy and ineffective political participation and therefore encourage apathy. A study by Jessica Vitak et al. provided empirical evidence that most online political activity is superficial and non-committal (2011). These findings reinforce the “Slacktivist” stereotype for the digital pessimists.

According to Social Capital Theory, the relationships forged online are similarly superficial and non-committal whereas deep bonds are required for political mobilization. In his book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam argues that previous generations had a greater network size due to their various activities together and therefore felt a stronger connection to each other and the community (2000). If a community is large and connected, it is more likely for that community to engage in civic participation (Putnam 2000). Thus, there should be a positive relationship between online network size and political participation as well, especially because the virtual community connects people globally (Carty and Onyett 2006). However, studies have shown that the number of Facebook friends a user has is not significantly related to political participation (Carlisle and Patton 2013). Unlike bowling leagues, which bring a local community together and help develop relationships, theorists suggest that most online friends do not share a single real community and are sometimes continents apart (Lampe and Obar 2012). These online communities do not develop deep bonds, only superficial connections.

Theorists who do not believe that online political engagement benefits offline political activism also fault SNS for being an unnecessary distraction. According to Bimber, students have no knowledge or stakes in political competition because they are more compelled by their social media profiles (2003). In fact, Vitak et al. found a negative correlation between the intensity of Facebook use and political participation (2011). The theory behind this relationship is that time spent on online political action displaces the time and energy that would instead be spent on offline activism (2011). These actions create obstacles to building stronger communities and connections, which are at the heart of political movements, by substituting actions that develop strong interpersonal ties with low-involvement actions that are done in isolation.

## DIGITAL OPTIMISTS: ONLINE POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT DOES LEAD TO OFFLINE POLITICAL ACTIVISM

For all the criticisms of online political participation, there are many who believe that online political engagement positively influences offline activism. These authors show how posting online can reinforce personal and community values by providing a new medium for expression, observations, and network connections. However, because much of the literature looks at the relationship through mediators like political efficacy, political attitudes, political knowledge, and exposure, it is difficult to determine whether these online actions have a direct effect on offline political activism.

When people invest their time into online politics, it is indicative of and increases their offline activism. Social media can be thought of as a modern venue for civic identity expression (Bennett, Wells, and Rank 2009; Vie 2014). Whereas historically people have expressed their political opinions via face-to-face interactions with friends and family, social media increases the opportunity to express political opinions to networks of friends in a virtual community (Wang 2007). When students express political opinions on social media, it has a positive impact on their political attitudes, political participation, political trust, political interest, and political efficacy (Chang 2006; Wang 2006). More directly, studies have shown that the more frequently respondents express their political opinions through social media, the more frequently they participate in offline political activism, like campaign work (Wang 2007; Johnson et al. 2011).

Online political engagement also supports a cornerstone of social movement theory – collective identity. Because social media integrates both the personal and the political, it has the power to solidify social norms, to create supportive communities, and to connect individuals to personal goals. Something simple that some students do to support movements is change their profile pictures to a meme for a short period of time. In this context, a meme is considered an image meant to represent a cause or an idea and can be used to portray a political message (Vie 2014). When students are part of marginalized groups, like African Americans or LGBTQ+, and see many of their friends change their profile pictures to that of Trayvon Martin or a red equal sign, it combats micro-aggressions by making supportive environments for those who identify with the marginalized groups and by creating solidarity and awareness for those issues (Vie 2014).

Through these small online actions, the virtual community creates a collective identity by forging alliances and defining community values that transfer to offline communities.

Research on exposure and awareness effects also supports online political engagement, showing that there is a positive relationship between observation and awareness of diverse information and political knowledge, interest, and empathy. Vitak et al. shows there is an increase in offline activism, political interest, and political knowledge caused by exposure to one's network's political activity (2011). Exposure focuses on the information people are exposed to by scrolling through their newsfeeds rather than the actions they take online. Thus, simply by observing political information on a newsfeed, offline political activism can be increased.

This broad review of the optimist and pessimist camps leads to the following set of testable hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Participating in online political engagement decreases offline political activism.

Hypothesis 2: Participating in online political engagement increases offline political activism.

#### DESIGN, OPERATIONALIZATION, AND MEASUREMENT

This research is based on an original survey distributed to a randomized sample of students at Illinois Wesleyan University (IWU), a four-year selective liberal arts college in central Illinois. This sample controls for some demographic factors, including age, access to the Internet, and education.

An online survey was best suited for this study because students could complete it on their own time and because it removed interviewee apprehension to answer questions in a certain way. The study did not pose any risks to the respondent because anonymity was retained and only aggregate data are presented. The survey was created, distributed, and exported through Qualtrics and then coded. The survey questions as well as the cover letter can be obtained by e-mailing the author at [njovicev@iwu.edu](mailto:njovicev@iwu.edu). The survey was administered to a randomized sample of 250 male and 250 female students attending IWU. Of the 500 students who were sent this survey, 179 students returned responses.

The dependent variable for this study is offline political activism. Offline political activism is broadly defined as actions taken off of the Internet that engages political issues and furthers political knowledge or participation in some way. This score is

measured by combining a tally of interest, information seeking, voting, general political activities like protests and demonstrations, and confidence in engaging in political conversation. The questions used to indicate online political engagement can be viewed in Appendix A. Online political participation is calculated using 14 various actions that could be completed on Facebook and Twitter. These sites are used because a study completed by Lampe and Obar confirms that Facebook and Twitter are the main platforms that students and activist organizations use to mobilize (2012).

The literature identifies two potential exogenous variables that could explain both online and offline political engagement/activism: political efficacy and natural political inclination. Political efficacy refers to a person's belief that political and social change can be influenced through an individual's efforts, either alone or in concert with others (Gale 2008). In this survey, efficacy is measured by a series of three Likert-scaled questions. When the scaled responses are summed, high scores indicate high efficacy and low scores indicate low efficacy. Natural political inclination may be defined as how open and involved a person is and believes others should be when it comes to community and government issues. It is comprised of five Likert-scaled questions, identified in Appendix A. These are effective indicators because they account for the various ways an individual's natural character could increase their offline political engagement. Political efficacy and natural political inclination explain the propensity individuals have toward political engagement and their belief that continuing with these actions is a good use of their time. In order for online political engagement to remain an influential variable, it must remain significant and robust when put into regression with these two exogenous variables. Thus, two more hypotheses are added:

Hypothesis 3: Any apparent relationship between online political engagement and offline political activism will be accounted for by a prior interest in political activism that accounts for both online engagement and offline activism.

Hypothesis 4: Any apparent relationship between online political engagement and offline political activism will be accounted for by prior level of political efficacy that accounts for both online engagement and offline activism.



## DATA ANALYSIS

Broadly speaking, the data reject the null hypothesis and Hypothesis 1 and affirm Hypothesis 2 – online political engagement does increase offline political activism. For the sample of Illinois Wesleyan students, there is a .526 positive correlation between online engagement and offline activism significant at the .001 level (Table 1). At least among IWU students, online political engagement does not depress or prevent offline political activism.

**Table 1:** *Bivariate Correlation of Offline Political Activism and Online Political Engagement*

Variable Name	Offline Political Activism		Significance Level
<b>Online Political Engagement</b>	0.526	N = 154	0.001 (2-tailed)

Table 2 reveals that the relationship between online political engagement and offline activism remains significant at the .001 level when efficacy and natural political inclination are included in a multivariate OLS regression model. Political efficacy does not remain significant when placed in the multivariate regression. Natural political inclination is significant at the .020 level. However, while natural political inclination is significant, online political engagement remains robust with this exogenous variable. Thus, the level of natural political inclination in the model does not diminish the independent explanatory power of online engagement. Here, it is possible to conclude that there is a causal relationship between online political engagement and offline activism and to reject Hypothesis 3 and Hypothesis 4.

**Table 2:** *OLS Regression Analysis: Potential Exogenous Variable Accounting for the Relationship Between Offline and Online Political Engagement*

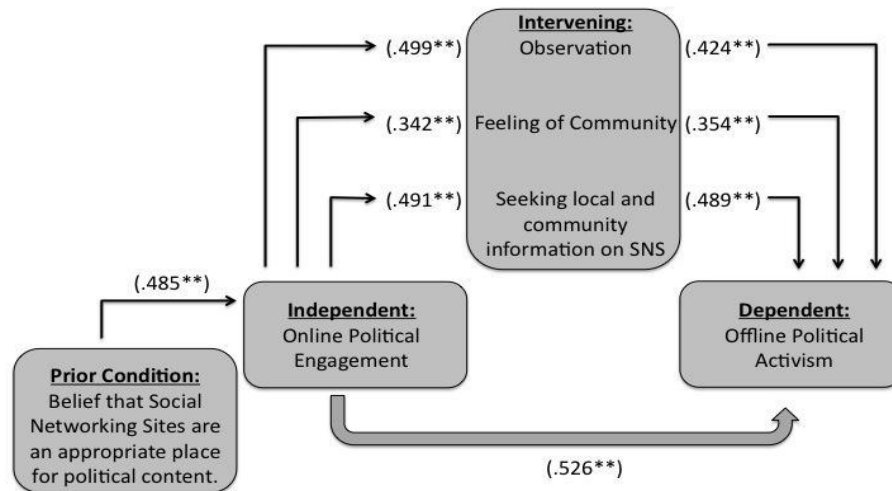
Variable Names	Offline Political Activism	
	Standardized Beta Weights	Standard Error
Online Political Engagement	(0.691)**	0.121
Level of Efficacy	(0.186)	0.183
Natural Political Inclination	(0.334)*	0.142
<b>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></b>	0.332	

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level; \*\* at the 0.001

Since there is a significant, positive relationship between online political engagement and offline activism, it is now possible to more deeply explore the mechanisms that connect online engagement to offline activism. Visually represented in Figure 1, the belief that SNS are an appropriate place for political content is a prior condition to whether students will engage in online political engagement. In fact, this condition alone explains almost 50% of the variance of online political engagement.

The literature suggests three potential intervening variables: observation of political content on the newsfeed, a feeling of online community, and actively seeking local and community information on SNS.

Figure 1 provides a model of the process and bivariate correlation results between each variable at every stage. All of these relationships are significant at the .01 level and positive. Each helps to explain why online political engagement is related to offline political activism. These relationships are valid because their strength remain stable between online engagement and offline activism. The mechanism that has the strongest effect on offline political activism is the act of seeking local and community information on SNS at .489. Observing political information on the newsfeed of Facebook and Twitter has a .424 relationship with offline political activism. The final mechanism analyzed is the feeling of having an online community; it has a .354 relationship with offline political activism. Together, this model illustrates the prior conditions for online engagement and some of the mechanisms that connect online political engagement with offline activism.

*Figure 1: Visual Model of Relationships*

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Notes: *N* ranges from 155-159

## CONCLUSION

SNS are a significant portion of how students communicate and experience the world. They are a great tool for relating narratives of peace and conflict, sharing ideas, and going beyond biased media. The data in this study support the digital optimists who claim that online political engagement increases offline activism. The strongest mechanism of this relationship appears to be seeking news information on SNS, followed closely by observing political content on the newsfeed, and feeling a sense of online community.

Although future research may find this relationship does not hold for the general collegiate population, it is still useful to understand that online activism increases offline activism for liberal arts students because they become the majority of the cultural leaders and opinion shapers in the world (British Council 2015). Although the findings may not be generalizable, political mobilizers looking to find dedicated champions for their cause can use SNS to target student leaders in liberal arts colleges.

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## Appendix A – Coding

### **Coding Guide:**

#### **Offline Political Activism Formula:**

$$Q22\_1 + Q22\_2 + Q22\_3 + Q22\_4 + Q22\_5 + Q22\_7 + Q22\_9 - Q22\_6$$

*Q22 Indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements:*

I have become more interested in the presidential primaries and politics in general due to my activities on Facebook/Twitter. (1)

Facebook/Twitter provides me with information that helps me decide who to vote for and which organizations to support. (2)

I am more likely to vote in the primary elections because of activities I have been involved in or information I have gained from my Facebook/Twitter use. (3)

I participated in more offline political activities because I heard about them on Facebook/Twitter (protests, demonstrations, letter writing campaigns, educational sessions, volunteering, etc). (4)

I have found more websites dealing with political content because I heard of them on Facebook/Twitter. (5)

I used to do more offline political activities, but now I participate primarily through Facebook/Twitter or other online sources. (6)

I didn't used to feel comfortable talking about politics, but using Facebook/Twitter has given me more confidence that I can talk about politics with others.(7)

The news feed helps me stay informed with daily political information. (9)

#### **Online Political Engagement:**

$$Q10\_1 + Q10\_2 + Q10\_3 + Q10\_4 + Q15\_1 + Q15\_2 + Q15\_3 + Q15\_4 + Q16\_Cumulative$$

$$\text{OR simplified } Q10\_Cumulative + Q15\_Cumulative + Q16\_Cumulative$$

*Q10 Have you ever used Facebook/Twitter or other social networking sites to friend, like or follow: (yes or no)*

a community organization, such as charity or non-profit organization that raises funds or provides services to the needy? (1)

a political party? (2)

a political group that is not affiliated with a party, such as an environmental organization, a human rights organization or an other organization working to advance a cause? (3)

elected officials, candidates for office or other political figures? (4)

*Q15 Have you ever used social networking sites to: (yes or no)*

Encourage other people to vote? (1)

Encourage other people to volunteer? (2)

Encourage other people to donate? (3)

Encourage other people to take action on an issue that is important to you? (4)

*Q16 In the past week, which of the following have you done on Facebook/Twitter or other social networking sites? Check all that apply.*

- Posted a status update that mentions politics (1)
- Joined or left a group about politics (2)
- Become a "fan" of a political candidate or group (3)
- Posted a Facebook/Twitter Note that has something to do with politics (4)
- Posted a wall comment about politics (5)
- Posted a photo that has something to do with politics (6)
- Discussed political information using Facebook/Twitter's instant messaging system (7)
- Added or deleted an application that deals with politics (8)
- Posted a link about politics (9)
- Took a quiz about politics (10)
- Posted a photo of myself or others at a political event (11)
- RSVPed for a political event (12)
- Added or deleted political information from my profile (13)

**Time spent on social media:** Q9\_RC + Q12 ; Max – 13

*Q9 In a typical week, how often do you use social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook?*

- Several time a day (6)
- About once a day (5)
- 3 to 5 days a week (4)
- 1 to 2 days a week (3)
- Less Often (2)
- Never (1)

*Q12 In a typical day, about how much time do you spend reading and posting messages on the profiles of online groups you have joined on Facebook/Twitter?*

- No time at all (1)
- Less than 10 min (2)
- 10 to 30 min (3)
- 30 min to 1 hr (4)
- 1 hr to 2 hrs (5)
- 2 hrs to 3 hrs (6)
- More than 3 hrs (7)

**Community:** Q13\_1 + Q13\_2

*Q13 Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:*

I feel out of touch when I haven't logged on to Facebook/Twitter for a while. (1)

I feel I am part of the Facebook/Twitter community. (2)

**SNS as appropriate platform for politics:** Q13\_3 + Q13\_4 + Q13\_5

*Q13 Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:*

Facebook/Twitter is an appropriate place for people to express their politics. (3)

It's good that presidential candidates have pages on Facebook/Twitter. (4)

I use Facebook/Twitter to express my political views. (5)

**Efficacy:** Q22\_10 + Q22\_11 + Q22\_12

*Q22 Indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements:*

I believe that students like me can make a difference on issues I care about. (10)

I believe that students like me have the power to influence government decisions on issues I care about.

(11)

I believe that students like me can make a difference on issues I care about through organizations and non-profits that support the cause. (12)

**Natural inclination:** Q22\_13 + Q22\_14 + Q22\_15 + Q22\_16 + Q22\_17

I believe that students like me can make a difference on issues I care about. (10)

Everyone should be involved in working with community organizations and the local government on issues that affect the community. (13)

I think it is important to get involved in improving my community. (14)

Being actively involved in national, state and local issues is my responsibility. (15)

I am interested in political issues. (16)

I can learn a lot from people with backgrounds and experiences that are different from mine. (17)

**Recoding for efficiency:**

**Q2 – Majors:** Coded to social science major as 1, and non-social science majors as 0. Social Science includes: Political Science, International Studies, Sociology, Anthropology, Economics, Education, History, and Environmental Studies. A second variable was coded to indicate political science majors (1) and non-political science majors (0).

**Q4 – Race:** Recoded with Caucasian being 1, and minority/other being 2.

**Q5 – Ideology:** A new variable was created to indicate either conservative or liberal. Strongly Liberal and Leaning Liberal were combined, and Strongly Conservative and Leaning Conservative were combined as well.

**Q9:** Reversed coding to match with decrease of time spent online. Instead of 1-6 it is now switched 6-1.

**Q10:** Recoded no to be a 0 and yes to be 1. Then created a new variable, Q10\_Cumulative, to make online political engagement easier to compute.

**Q15:** Recoded no to be a 0 and yes to be 1. Then created a new variable, Q15\_Cumulative, to make online political engagement easier to compute.

**Q16\_Cumulative:** New variable indicates cumulative number of boxes checked for question 16.

**Q19\_Cumulative:** New variable indicates cumulative number of boxes checked for question 19.