Online Social Ties and Political Engagement

Rachel K. Gibson [a] & Ian McAllister [b]

[a] University of Manchester

[b] The Australian National University, Canberra

Accepted author version posted online: 19 Jul 2012.

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Online Social Ties and Political Engagement

Rachel K. Gibson
Ian McAllister

ABSTRACT. While positive effects of social interaction on political participation have been widely confirmed, questions have been raised about whether the relationship holds in the online environment. This article uses data from the 2007 Australian Election Study to address this debate by testing whether greater online social interaction predicts increased political engagement, and whether this differs for interactions within homogenous (bonding) versus heterogeneous (bridging) networks. The findings show that bonding, and not bridging, online social contact predicts offline participation, suggesting that online interactions that do not build on existing offline networks are not as effective in mobilizing "real world" participation.

KEYWORDS. Australia, digital, participation, social capital, Web

There is substantial consensus among social scientists that increased social interaction and membership of groups helps to build social capital, and that such activities can boost political involvement.[1] However, this argument is built on measures of face-to-face interpersonal involvement, and there is less agreement on whether such benefits also hold in the online context. Part of this debate stems from methodological limitations of early analyses that tended to relate basic binary measures of Internet use and access to levels of sociability or political participation, and found nil or even negative effects (Kraut, Kiesler, Mukhopadhyay, Scherlis, & Patterson, 1998; Nie, 2001; Nie & Ebring, 2000). Another part of the debate relates to whether or not online interaction is qualitatively similar to personal contact.

As the literature has expanded and more nuanced measures of online activity have been developed—particularly for contacting and engaging with social networks—a more positive story has emerged about the impact of Internet use on individuals' social connectedness and well being.[2] Recent studies have extended this analysis to look at the link between individuals' online activity and levels of social capital and political engagement, building on the work

Rachel Gibson is professor of political science at the University of Manchester. Her work focuses on the use of the Internet by parties and citizens, particularly in the context of election campaigns, and she has published a range of books and articles on the topic. She currently holds an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Professorial fellowship and is working on a book on digital campaigning to be published by Oxford University Press.

Ian McAllister is professor of political science at The Australian National University, Canberra. His work focuses on comparative political behavior. He is the author most recently of *The Australian Voter: Fifty Years of Change* (University of NSW Press, 2011) and coauthor of *Political Parties and Democratic Linkage* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

Address correspondence to: Rachel K. Gibson, Institute for Social Change, University of Manchester, 2.13 Humanities Bridgeford Street Building, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, UK (E-mail: Rachel.Gibson@manchester.ac.uk).

of Putnam (2000) and others who have linked offline sociability to increased political engagement. (Kittilson & Dalton, 2011; Skoric, Ying, & Ng, 2009). The question of whether the online environment is as hospitable to the formation of authentic social ties that can in turn stimulate participation remains the subject of dispute.

This article addresses the debate about the political effects of online social contacting in four steps. First, we profile the extent and type of social networks that individuals engage with online in a new context—Australia. Australia is an important case study for analysis. In comparison with the U.S., there has been no marked decline in social capital or rates of political participation, making the added effect of online social contact likely to be at the margins, and so difficult to detect. Second, we test how far these networks are centered on offline or existing connections (i.e., bonding social ties) as opposed to newer and more diverse "online-only" contacts (i.e., bridging ties). In a third step, we explore who is engaging in these various types of online networks in Australia and particularly whether the evidence suggests that such activities are increasing social capital. Finally, we relate these online social interactions to levels of political engagement to see if the offline relationship between social networks and support for democratic norms and activities holds true in the virtual world. The analyses are based on the 2007 Australian Election Study (AES), which contained a series of items designed to directly measure individuals' involvement in different types of online social networks.

INTERNET USE AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

There is widespread agreement that citizen interaction through social networks is the key to the formation of social capital—the syndrome of interpersonal ties and trust that scholars such as Coleman (1990) and Putnam (2000) have identified as central to maintaining healthy community and civic life. These interchanges with others—and particularly those occurring repeatedly in the context of defined associational interests such as local community organizations,

charities, and of course the bowling leagues made famous by Putnam—are seen as crucial to developing and nurturing bonds of social trust and reciprocity between members of society. In turn, there is evidence demonstrating that high levels of social capital are associated with higher levels of citizen engagement in democratic politics. This is expressed in terms of positive orientations toward government and in higher levels of activity such as turning out to vote, volunteering to participate in social groups, and in contacting other citizens on issues of mutual concern.[3] What is less clear is the extent to which social interaction in the online sphere generates the same reservoirs of social capital among individuals and thereby a concomitant boost in democratic political attitudes and behaviors. This is the key question investigated in this study.

Putnam himself has questioned whether the electronically mediated form can match the value or quality of its face-to-face equivalent (Putnam, 2000, p. 176; Putnam & Feldstein, 2003). Certainly it follows that the more time people spend in the virtual world, the less time they spend on external activities that we know create social capital, such as socializing, volunteering, attending meetings or visiting museums, and engaging in cultural pursuits (Shaw & Gant, 2002). Moreover, as Uslaner (2004, p. 227) suggests, even if the Internet works well in bringing people together, its self-selection bias may mean this is largely confined to those who already have something in common, which is unlikely to build the generalized trust in others that is at the heart of social capital.

Conversely, there are those who contend that face-to-face communication may not have any inherently greater value for the creation of social capital than the virtual version (Hooghe & Stolle, 2003). Indeed a number of scholars have pointed to the comparative benefits of the online environment for fostering wider and more pluralistic ties between individuals— the so-called "bridging" type of social capital, which is associated with connecting together more diverse and heterogeneous groups of people (Norris, 2001, 2002; Putnam, 2000). The relative anonymity, informality, and lack of geographic boundaries governing online

interaction means that there is actually less likelihood of traditional divides over class, age, gender, and ethnicity hampering cross-cultural conversations (Ho & McLeod, 2008; Norris, 2002; Resnick, 2002).

In addition, the greater convenience and ease of joining and exiting groups online means that individuals (particularly those who might suffer health/mobility problems) are in a better position to make a larger number of looser associational links than would be possible in the offline world (Granovetter, 1973; Skoric et al., 2009). The spread of newer Web 2.0 technologies, particularly social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, Friendster, and MySpace, are seen to further strengthen claims about the Internet as a source of social capital. These sites essentially mirror and expand the individual's existing social networks, leading to expectations that they may deepen the more personalized "bonding" type of social capital that is generated through intragroup ties (Gaines & Mondak, 2008).

The empirical evidence on the question of whether online interactions can substitute for offline ones in the creation of social capital has been mixed, but generally supportive. Initial findings suggested that online activities were actually detrimental to social capital and wider civic engagement (Kraut et al., 1998; Nie, 2001; Nie & Ebring, 2000). However, subsequent work using more specific measures of Internet activities has reported more positive results with links being established to higher levels of social trust, group membership, and social interaction online and offline, particularly with those outside of one's immediate friends and family.[4] Thus, strong empirical support now exists to suggest that online interaction generates social capital.

More recent research work has extended these findings to examine the effects of interaction via Web 2.0 technologies and particularly social networking sites. This research has provided further support to the positive conclusions drawn in the Web 1.0 era that online social networking increases individuals' levels of social capital. Indeed, interesting distinctions have been drawn about the impact of particular sites (i.e., Facebook and MySpace) and their

relative merits in generating these norms and behaviors (Ellison, Steinfeld, & Lampe, 2007; Kim, 2008; Pasek, More, & Romer, 2009), with the former appearing to have more positive effect than the latter. Of course, questions of causality loom large over these findings, given the reliance of most studies on cross-sectional rather than panel data. However, at minimum they allow us to reject the "isolationist" hypothesis that Internet use produces atomized and asocial beings. People who spend a lot of time on the Internet may be reducing their face-to-face interactions with friends and family, but they also appear to be moving contact into the virtual world, as well as forging new associations. Given the links between social capital and political engagement, it is a logical step to assert that online social interaction forms a new opportunity for citizen mobilization. Whether this is indeed the case has received little empirical attention.

THE INTERNET AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Most studies of the impact of Internet use on political participation have related Internet use (generally measured in a binary form, i.e., use/non-use) to various behavioral outcome variables, typically voting. Early analyses by Bimber (1999, 2001), Scheufele and Nisbet (2002), Nisbet and Scheufele (2004), and Norris (2003) pointed to very limited mobilizing effects. If anything, it seemed that Internet use was reinforcing existing participatory biases among voters. Tolbert and McNeal (2003), however, did find engagement to be higher among Internet users in the 1996 and 2000 U.S. presidential elections, and Johnson and Kaye (2003) reported increased levels of political interest among this group in 2000. Subsequent studies using more specific measures of online political participation have increased support for the conclusion that Internet use positively influences political engagement (De Zuniga, Puig-I-Abril, & Rojas, 2009; Gibson, Lusoli, & Ward, 2005; Jensen, Danziger, & Venkatesha, 2007; Krueger, 2002; Quintelier & Vissers, 2008), although questions remain about the magnitude of any

effects (Boulianne, 2009) and the direction of causality (Kroh & Neiss, 2009). These latter concerns have been addressed by some studies with panel data that show a link between Internet use and levels of political and civic engagement (Boulianne, 2011; Jennings & Zeitner, 2003; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005).

While some recent studies have sought to specify more clearly the causal pathway between Internet use and participatory outcomes, these have focused largely on mapping the links between different types of e-participation, such as information seeking, e-petition signing, blog posting, and social network mobilization (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2011; Gil de Zuniga, Veenstra, Vraga, & Shah, 2010; Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009; Shah et al., 2005). There have been only limited attempts to examine the effects of these online pre-political behaviors on participation, and thereby address the key question of whether the online environment works in the same way as the offline context to stimulate political engagement. What has been done, however, indicates that a positive relationship exists.

The key study is that of Kittilson and Dalton (2011), who analyze 2005 data from the U.S. and report a strong positive relationship between various types of social interactions in existing and new online networks and democratic behaviors and attitudes. They conclude that "virtual civil society . . . represents an extension of the past patterns of social engagement through a new medium" (p. 634). A second study, by Skoric et al. (2009), of virtual social capital in Singapore supports these conclusions and extends the analysis to specify types of online social capital. Following Williams (2006), the authors construct two scales measuring bridging and bonding online social capital, which are found to predict various types of off and online participation. They show a significant effect of bridging virtual social capital on online participation and of bonding on offline political activities. The authors argue that online interaction within new and more diverse social networks increases the flow of political information and exposure to new initiatives such as e-petitions or joining of mass e-mail campaigns. Online interactions that occur within a person's established networks, however, are more likely to link to offline behaviors that increase ties to the local community. Of course, the historically low rates of democratic engagement in Singapore and the extent of political control (Rodan, 1998) mean that we need to be cautious in making strong claims from these data.

The results of these studies suggest a number of key findings. First, social interaction online works in a similar manner to its offline counterpart and may be increasing stocks of social capital among groups traditionally less inclined toward group or associational activities. Second, such behaviors may provide a stimulus to increased civic and political participation. Finally, different types of online networks exist and are linked to different modes of participation. In the remainder of the article, we extend these findings by examining online social interaction in Australia and its consequences for political engagement.

PATTERNS OF ONLINE INTERACTION IN AUSTRALIA

To date, any systematic analysis of the relationship between online social interaction and political engagement has been restricted to the U.S. Replication of the analysis beyond the American experience is thus important to establish how far the relationship is generalizable. Indeed, declining social capital and formal participation rates in the U.S. arguably make it a less than ideal case for such an analysis, in that upswing from such a low base becomes likely in the post-Internet era. Australia is a good case study in that its levels of social capital and participatory activities remain robust (Bean, 2005; Burchell & Leigh, 2002). Although the system of compulsory voting masks any long-term decline in election turnout, evidence from trends in other forms of participation (other than party membership trends, see Ward, 2003) shows no obvious cause for concern (McAllister, 2011). As such, it could be argued that any increases in both the independent and dependent variables of interest are likely to be marginal. Detection of any significant effects for Internet-based social contacting on participation would,

therefore, provide stronger evidence to support the contention that the online arena is providing a new context in which participatory practices are being fostered and sustained.

In addition to its social and political context, Australia also provides an appropriate level of technological readiness for this analysis that is similar to or greater than the U.S. In terms of Internet penetration, Australia has consistently been among the top-10 nations.[5] Estimates derived from the Australian Election Study report show that in 2007, just one in four voters said that they did not have Internet access, down from 32% in 2004, 43% in 2001, and 73% in 1998.[6] By 2007, one in three of those who were connected to the Internet said that they were using it several times a day—the group who are usually defined as "digital citizens" (Mossberger, Tolbert, & McNeal, 2008). Having developed the rationale for an analysis of the Australian case, we now turn to the data and measures used in the analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS AND MEASUREMENT

Data

The data are from the Australian Election Study, which is a national survey of voters conducted by mail self-completion immediately after each federal election; the response rate for the 2007 survey was 40.2% (see McAllister & Clarke, 2008: Appendix B for methodological details of the 1987–2007 surveys). The 2007 survey contained an extensive range of items dealing with the Internet and the election. The results presented here are restricted to those voters who reported that they had Internet access (N = 1,379).[7]

Analyses

Three basic sets of analysis were performed on the data to address the research questions posed. First, we report basic frequencies relating to the amount and type of online social contact that individuals engage in online, paying particular attention to the distinction between bonding and bridging types of contact. We then examine the characteristics of those engaging in these different types of online social contact by creating indices of each type of contact that are regressed on a series of socio-demographic variables. To what extent do they differ from the profile of those already active in the offline civic sphere? Finally, we examine the impact of online social interactions as independent variables on levels of political engagement to test the hypothesis that online relationships influence support for democratic norms and activities. Table 1 lists the variables used in the analyses, together with their coding and means.

Measures

The key variable—online social contact—is measured by the question "Thinking about the time you spend using the Internet, can you say how much it has helped you do each of the following things?" Eight response categories were offered ranging from interacting with close family and friends through to people from other countries and other ethnic backgrounds (see Table 2, which reports the full list, together with the frequencies). These variables have the advantage that they replicate those asked in Kittilson and Dalton's (2011) U.S. study and thereby provide direct comparability.[8]

The predictors of online social contact are several key socio-demographic variables including education, age, gender, urban residence, income, employment, marital status, and religiosity. The specific measures used are reported in Table 1. The final model predicting participation included our social contact measures, socio-demographic controls, and two attitudinal variables measuring political trust and efficacy. Research on participation has shown that higher levels of political engagement are associated with feelings of trust and efficacy (Parry, Moyser, & Day, 1992; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995), thus controls for these attitudes were considered necessary to accurately estimate the net effect of online social contacts. The scale for trust in government is constructed from two questions: "In general, do you feel that the people in government are too often interested in looking after themselves, or do you feel that

TABLE 1. Variables, Coding, and Means

Variable	Coding	Mean	Standard deviation
Internet social contacts			
Bridging social contacts	Zero to 10	2.27	2.65
Bonding social contacts	Zero to 10	2.62	2.16
Political attitudes and behavior			
Political trust	Zero to 10	4.32	2.32
Political efficacy	Zero to 10	7.28	2.34
Political participation	Number of acts, zero to 4	1.05	1.19
Social structure			
Age (years)	Years in decades	4.73	1.49
Gender (male)	1 = male, 0 = female	.47	.50
Urbanization	1 = rural, 2 = provincial, 3 = outer metro, 4 = inner metro	2.64	1.18
Tertiary education	1 = yes, 0 = no	.32	.47
Family income	Tens of thousands of dollars	7.74	4.83
Non-manual worker	1 = yes, 0 = no	.67	.47
Married	1 = yes, 0 = no	.70	.46
Church attendance	0 = never, 0.25 = less than once year, 0.5 = several times year, 0.75 = at least once per month, 1 = at least once per week	.30	.35
Australian born	1 = yes, 0 = no	.77	.42

Source: 2007 Australian Election Study.

TABLE 2. Use of the Internet for Social Contact (%)

Internet enables you to interact with . . .	A lot	Some	Only a little	Not at all	Total	(N)
Bonding contacts						
. . . people you feel really close to such as family and very close friends	35	31	14	20	100	(1,372)
. . . groups and organizations you already belong to	14	22	17	47	100	(1,367)
. . . people or groups who share your hobbies or interests	15	24	19	42	100	(1,362)
. . . people or groups who share your religious beliefs	2	5	7	86	100	(1,355)
. . . people or groups who share your political views	2	6	10	82	100	(1,359)
Bridging contacts						
. . . people from different ethnic backgrounds	4	10	11	75	100	(1,355)
. . . people of different ages or generations	8	18	18	56	100	(1,350)
. . . people from other countries	14	21	15	50	100	(1,351)

Note. "Thinking about the time you spend using the Internet, can you say how much it has helped you do each of the following things?" Estimates are for respondents with Internet access only.
Source: 2007 Australian Election Study.

they can be trusted to do the right thing nearly all the time?" and "Would you say the government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves, or that it is run for the benefit of all the people?"

The scale for political efficacy is also constructed from two questions: "Some people say it doesn't make any difference who is in power. Others say that it makes a big difference who is in power. Using the scale below, where would you place yourself?" and "Some people say that

no matter who people vote for, it won't make any difference to what happens. Others say that who people vote for can make a big difference to what happens. Using the scale below, where would you place yourself?" The scales were constructed by first coding missing values to the mean of the item. The items were then divided by their standard deviation, to ensure that no single item dominated the scale, and combined into a single additive scale that was rescaled from zero to 10. This measure of external political

efficacy was used because we wished to test the link between online activity and political engagement.[9]

Table 1 shows that Australians in general have higher levels of political efficacy (with a mean of 7.28) than political trust (mean of 4.32). This is in line with the finding that while Australian voters are more likely to be distrustful about politicians' motives, they do have a strong sense of efficacy, and a belief that they will be treated as well as anyone else by those in political office. This stems from Australia's strong egalitarian political culture (Burchell & Leigh, 2002; McAllister, 2011).

The dependent variable—political participation[10]—is measured by four items based on the following question: "Over the past five years or so, have you done any of the following things to express your views about something the government should or should not be doing? . . . Contacted a politician or government official either in person, or in writing, or some other way. . . . Taken part in a protest, march, or demonstration. . . . Worked together with people who shared the same concern. . . . Signed a written petition." The items were highly correlated; the mean inter-item correlation was 0.49 and the reliability coefficient (Cronbach's alpha) was 0.74, suggesting a robust scale. The respondents were given a score based on the number of activities they had engaged in; the mean for the sample was 1.05 out of a possible maximum of four.[11]

RESULTS

Table 2 reports the frequencies of the eight types of online social contact that were measured in the 2007 AES. The results reveal that individuals are more disposed toward using the Internet for contact with others who are already known to them in the offline context. Family and friends are seen as key contacts online, as are individuals from existing recreational networks. There is less inclination to use the virtual world to build new networks with those from other backgrounds and cultures, although there is clearly an interest in communicating with those overseas via the Web. Following the work of Skoric et al. (2009) and Williams (2006), who reported that different types of social capital exist, we divided the items into those that foster bonding networks (i.e., family, friends, shared interests) the those that developed bridging networks (i.e., contact with people from other countries, ages and generations, and ethnic backgrounds).

In addition to measuring the overall level and types of social ties that Australians are building online, we also wanted to profile the people who are engaged in building this virtual social capital. To do this, we constructed two scales based on our bonding and bridging items, using the method described earlier. Based on these new measures, the average respondent scored 2.62 on the bonding scale and slightly lower, 2.27, on the bridging scale. The scales were highly correlated (r = 0.64, p < .001); however, the Cronbach's alpha for each was calculated— the bridging scale coefficient was 0.81, and the bonding scale was 0.73—suggesting that both were robust and reliable scales. The scales were regressed on the individual's socioeconomic background, and the results are presented in Table 3.

The results reveal that, as in the U.S., younger people are generally much more disposed to engage in virtual social group activities of both types, suggesting that the Internet may similarly be filling the gap in formal associational involvement among Australian youth that has opened up in recent years (Donovan, Denmark, & Bowler, 2007).[12] With the exception of education, there appears to be little evidence of the classic "digital divide" emerging in Australians' proclivity for online social interaction, with individual characteristics of gender, income, and occupational status failing to achieve statistical significance. Social context, however, does appear to be significant in determining one's level of online socializing. Those living in a city and who are single or not married are much more likely to seek out social connection online. Finally, being foreign born increases a respondent's likelihood of engagement in online social group contact. This possibly reflects the greater need that migrants have to assimilate into their new communities and foster wider social connections.

TABLE 3. Social Structure and Internet Social Contacts (OLS Estimates)

	Bridging contact		Bonding contact	
	Partial	Stand.	Partial	Stand.
Age (years)	−.34**	−.19**	−.22**	−.15**
Gender (male)	−.10	−.02	−.06	−.01
Urbanization	.27**	.12**	.12*	.07*
Tertiary education	.64**	.11**	.76**	.17**
Family income	.01	.02	.01	.03
Non-manual worker	.03	.01	.26	.06
Married	−.70**	−.12**	−.61**	−.13**
Church attendance	.03	.02	.16**	.13**
Australian born	−.58**	−.09**	−.17**	−.13**
Constant	3.92		4.13	
Adj R-squared	.11		.12	

Note. OLS regression estimates showing partial (b) and standardized (beta) regression coefficients predicting online contact. Contact measures are based on additive scales (see Table 2). See Table 1 for further details of variables. N = 1,379 Internet users.
**Statistically significant at p < .01, * p < .05.
Source: 2007 Australian Election Study.

While the profile of the respondents who engage in bonding and bridging ties online is substantially similar—especially with regard to age and education—there are some important differences that emerge from these findings. First, those living in urban environments are about twice as likely to engage in online contacting of the bridging variety than of the bonding type. This may reflect the more diverse cosmopolitan networks that exist in urban areas. Second, more frequent church attenders are significantly more likely to engage in the more familiar bonding networks online, but there is no effect for bridging contacts. This is likely to reflect the stronger community orientation of respondents with a religious faith and efforts to connect with others of religious faith (an item on the bonding scale). Third, those who are married are less likely to engage in these activities, suggesting, perhaps, a greater desire for virtual social interaction among those living alone or, more practically, that married people have less available time to spend online.

The final step of the analysis is to examine the influence of different types of social interaction on active or behavioral engagement in politics, controlling for a range of traits typically associated with participation. For this analysis, we included in the model the online contact scales, the social and political attitudinal variables explored in the previous tables, and a range of individual socio-demographic characteristics. Using ordinary least squares (OLS) multiple regression, we tested the effects of these measures on our measure of political participation, i.e., the number of political acts that the respondent reported having engaged in during the previous five years (ranging from zero to a total possible of four).

In terms of the key question—the link between online contacts and political participation—the central finding reported in Table 4 is the strong and significant positive relationship between engaging in social group interaction online and political engagement. However, this holds only for bonding forms of social interaction; bridging forms of online contact are not predictive of the participatory behaviors measured here. This replicates, in part, the results of Skoric et al. (2009); we explore its implications in our conclusions below.

By comparing the coefficients of the model, we can conclude that using the Internet for maintaining and building ties with family, friends, and those with whom the respondent has shared interests is at least as influential as socioeconomic status and attitudinal factors in predicting both participation and turnout attitudinal items.[13] Beyond use of the Internet for social contacting, the results in Table 4 show

TABLE 4. Political Participation and Internet Social Contact
(OLS Estimates)

	Political participation	
	Partial	Stand.
Internet social contacts		
Bridging contacts	.02	.05
Bonding contacts	.11**	.20**
Political attitudes		
Trust	−.05**	−.09**
Efficacy	.09**	.19**
Social structure		
Age (years)	.01**	.13**
Gender (male)	−.09	−.04
Urbanization	.00	.00
Tertiary education	.31**	.12**
Family income	−.01	−.03
Non-manual worker	.07	.03
Married	.00	.00
Church attendance	.08	.02
Australian born	.14	.05
Constant	−.42	
Adj. R-squared	.12	

Note. OLS regression estimates showing partial (b) and standardized (beta) regression coefficients predicting participation, likelihood of voting if voting voluntary, and left/right position. See Table 1 for details of variables. N = 1,379 Internet users.
**Statistically significant at $p < .01$, *$p < .05$.
Source: 2007 Australian Election Study.

that being older and having a higher education also significantly increases the likelihood of participating more actively in politics. In terms of attitudinal factors, political trust and efficacy are all also important in explaining political participation. While levels of efficacy operate in an expected manner, showing a strong and positive relationship to political involvement, levels of political trust are found to be negatively related to involvement in more active types of participation. Such findings confirm the view of those who argue that low levels of political trust are not necessarily damaging to levels of political participation and engagement, particularly for more active and extra-representational types such as signing petitions and protest (Citrin, 1974).

CONCLUSION

This analysis has revealed that online social interaction in Australia, while not yet something that a majority of citizens engage in, is regularly undertaken by up to one-third of Internet users. The bulk of the interaction occurs with relatives, friends, and those with shared interests; the Internet is less well used to mix with people of diverse backgrounds. This is in line with the results for the U.S. (Kittilson & Dalton, 2011). Furthermore, based on their social profile, we also conclude that those engaging in the new forms of digital networking are less well connected to existing community life. They tend to be younger, more educated urban dwellers and are more likely to be single and foreign-born. As such, arguments that the online environment is a source of extra social capital within Australian society rather than simply reinforcing existing supplies are made more convincing.

Beyond these descriptive findings, our analysis has provided fresh empirical support for the contention that social uses of the Internet may be helping to foster political engagement in the offline world. As in the U.S. and Singapore, where these relationships have been

tested, online social interaction does appear to act as a stimulus to real-world participation. Like these earlier studies and much of the wider Internet and participation literature, this study uses cross-sectional data to reach this conclusion, which, even with extensive controls in place, raises issues of causality. Panel data that track increasing engagement in online social contact and proclivity to participate are necessary to confirm these findings. However, our results do make an important contribution to this debate by extending the analysis to a new democratic context. More importantly, as argued earlier, Australia has higher levels of social capital and political participation than case studies from other countries. It thus provides a more stringent test of the key hypothesis that social use of the Internet is prompting increased political engagement.

As well as pointing to a connection between virtual social networks and participation, our results have also shown the complexity of the relationship. More specifically, it is interaction within existing networks of family and friends online, as well as with wider associational networks of shared interests (i.e., bonding networks), that is predictive of offline participatory activity. Involvement in online bridging networks—those consisting of people with different outlooks and opinions and beyond one's circle of friends and family—appears to have no impact on whether one undertakes "real world" political activities. These findings echo those of Skoric et al. (2009) and are significant in that they signal the importance of familiarity and context in promoting a link between online to offline activities. More specifically, it suggests that a stronger commitment to doing one's civic duty (in the shape of voting) follows from spending more time with family and friends online. The same does not hold true for spending more time online with relative strangers. This lack of a relationship between interactions in looser and more heterogeneous online networks and increased participation in "real world" politics is important, since it challenges the idea that bridging networks (or at least those formed on the Internet) foster the type of community and social connection that triggers offline political engagement. Whether this is because these ties

really are too weak and "virtual" to carry over into real-world activism is not something that we address here. But it is a topic for future research to explore. Finally, the importance of online contact with family and friends also confirms that the Internet only generates social capital when it reinforces offline connections. This suggests the ongoing normalization of the medium into everyday life and the need for future work in this area to move away from theorizing it as a distinctive and separate sphere of social activity.

NOTES

1. This is a standard finding in the classic works of political participation, starting with the Civic Culture study of the 1950s (Almond & Verba, 1963/1989) and continuing through to the 1970s and beyond (see Parrye, 1992; Verba & Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 1995).

2. The literature is substantial and growing. See, for example, Best & Krueger, 2006; Boase, Horrigan, Wellman, & Rainie, 2006; Curtice & Norris, 2007; Gallup Organization, 2008; Ho, Kluver, & Yang, 2003; Horrigan & Rainie, 2002; Howard, Rainie, & Jones, 2001; Jennings & Zeitner, 2003; Kavanaugh, Reese, Carroll, & Rosson, 2005; Kim, 2007; Shah, Schmierbach, Hawkins, Espino, & Donavan, 2002; Veenhof, Wellman, Quell, & Hogan, 2008; Wang & Wellman, 2008; Wellman, Boase, & Chen, 2002; Wellman et al., 2003.

3. See, for example, Howard & Gilbert, 2008; Klesner, 2007; Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998; Putnam, 1993, 2000, 2002; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993; Uslaner, 1998; Verba et al., 1995; Zhang & Chia, 2006.

4. There is a large volume of literature on this; see the works listed under Footnote 2.

5. Annual statistics on Internet use are published by the International Telecommunications Union ITU (International Telecommunication Union), the UN Agency for Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs); see http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/index.html.

6. The question that was asked in 1998 about Internet access was not directly comparable and is therefore not reported here.

7. The questionnaire, codebook, and the data are publicly available from the Australian Social Science Data Archive (http://assda.anu.edu.au) and were deposited on April 11, 2008.

8. We acknowledge that the "technological potential" aspect of this question means that we may overestimate the amount of actual contact behaviors. However, the frequencies in Table 1 do not signal particular cause for concern. The measure also appears to be reliable in that the mean for Americans across the seven items (family and very close friends was not included) was

1.95 on a 0–10 scale, and only slightly for Australians, 2.28. The individual types of contact showed similar rankings with individuals in both countries most likely to use the Internet to keep in contact with groups or individuals who they already know. Americans were slightly more likely to use the Internet to interact with different age groups and Australians more likely to use the Internet to interact with those in foreign countries.

9. Using a measure of internal political efficacy, rather than the external efficacy measure used here, would not have permitted us to test this link, in so far as we wished to test the link between the political system and the individual's sense of empowerment.

10. Voting is not included in the battery of items or as a separate dependent variable, given that it is compulsory in Australia, and turnout rates are consistently around 95% of the registered population.

11. For the analysis in Table 4, we tested using a version of political participation that excluded "working with people who share the same concern" on the grounds that this item may measure social capital rather than political participation. However, the results using the three-item scale were substantively similar to the full four-item battery, and for that reason and for completeness, we opted to retain it in the full analysis in Table 4.

12. The lack of measures of offline involvement in associations in the 2007 Australian Election Study limits our ability to draw strong conclusions here, as was done in the U.S. study.

13. The 2007 AES lacked measures of offline social contact, which means that we are likely to be capturing some of its effects in our measures of online social contact, given that it is likely that there is covariance between them. Kittilson and Dalton's (2011) analysis combined offline and online associational involvement and found the latter remained significant in predicting attitudes/engagement and for some dependent variables (political discussion/electoral activities) were as strong or stronger predictors than offline ties. While such findings do not automatically carry over to the Australian case, the extent to which our findings directly replicate those of Kittilson and Dalton in the range and frequency of online social ties formed provides a basis for anticipating a similar independent effect on our attitudinal and behavioral variables.

REFERENCES

Almond, G., & Verba, S. (1989). *The civic culture: Political attitudes and democracy in five nations*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage. (Original work published 1963)

Bean, C. 2005. (2003). Is there a crisis of trust in Australia? In S. Wilson, G. Meagher, R. Gibson, and D. Denemark (Eds.), *Australian social attitudes: The first report* (pp. 122–140). Sydney, Australia: UNSW Press.

Best, S. J., & Krueger, B. S. (2006). Online interactions and social capital: Distinguishing between new and existing ties. *Social Science Computer Review*, *24*, 395–410. doi:10.1177/0894439306286855

Bimber, B. (1999). The Internet and citizen communication with government: Does the medium matter? *Political Communication, 16*(4), 409–428.

Bimber, B. (2001). Information and political engagement in America: The search for effects of information technology at the individual level. *Political Research Quarterly*, *54*, 53–67. doi:10.1177/106591290105400103

Boase, J., Horrigan, J. B., Wellman, B., & Rainie, L. (2006). *The strength of Internet ties: The Internet and email aid users in maintaining their social networks and provide pathways to help when people face big decisions.* Washington, DC: Pew Internet and American Life Project. Retrieved from http://socialnetworking.procon.org/sourcefiles/PIP_Internet_ties.pdf.pdf

Boulianne, S. (2009). Does Internet use affect engagement? A meta-analysis of research. *Political Communication*, *26*, 193–211. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10584600902854363

Boulianne, S. (2011). Stimulating or reinforcing political interest: Using panel data to examine reciprocal effects between news media and political interest. *Political Communication, 28*(2), 147–162.

Burchell, D., & Leigh, A. (Eds.). (2002). *The prince's new clothes: Why do Australians dislike their politicians?* Sydney, Australia: University of NSW Press.

Citrin, J. (1974). Comment: The political relevance of trust in government. *American Political Science Review*, *68*, 973–988.

Coleman, J. S. (1990). *Foundations of social theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Curtice, J., & Norris, P. (2007). Isolates or socialites? The social ties of Internet users. In A. Park (Ed.), *British social attitudes: The 23rd report* (pp. 59–84). London, England: Sage.

De Zuniga, H. G., Puig-I-Abril, E., & Rojas, H. (2009). Weblogs, traditional sources online and political participation: An assessment of how the Internet is changing the political environment. *New Media and Society*, *11*, 553–574. doi:10.1177/1461444809102960

Donovan, T., Denemark, D., & Bowler, S. (2007). Trust, citizenship and participation: Australia in comparative perspective. In D. Denemark, G. Meagher, S. Wilson, M. Western, and T. Phillips (Eds.), *Australian social attitudes 2: Citizenship, work and aspiration* (pp. 81–106). Sydney, Australia: University of NSW Press.

Ellison, N. B., Steinfeld, C., & Lampe, C. (2007). The benefits of Facebook "friends": Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *12*, 1143–1168. doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00367.x

Gaines, J. J., & Mondak, B. J. (2008, April). *The friend of my friend is my friend? Ideological clustering on Facebook*. Paper presented at Politics Web 2.0: An

International Conference, Royal Holloway, University of London, London, UK.

Gallup Organization. (2008). *Information society as seen by EU citizens*. Analytical Report based on Flash Eurobarometer #241 (November). Coordinated by European Commisssion, DG Information Society and Media. Retrieved from http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/flash/fl_241_en.pdf

Gibson, R., & Cantijoch, M. (2011, November). *Conceptualizing and measuring participation in the age of the internet: Is online political engagement really different to offline?* Paper presented at the "Methodological challenges in participation research" Colloquium, Institute for Advanced Social Studies, Cordoba, Spain.

Gibson, R. K., Lusoli, W., & Ward, S. J. (2005). Online participation in the UK: Testing a contextualised model of Internet effects. *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, *7*(4), 561–583. doi:10.1111/j.1467-856X.2005.00209.x

Gil de Zuniga, H., Veenstra, A., Vraga, E., & Shah, D. (2010). Digital democracy: Reimagining pathways to political participation. *Journal of Information, Technology & Politics, 7*(1), 36–51.

Granovetter, M. (1973). The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, *78*, 1360–1380.

Howard, M. M., & Gilbert, L. (2008). A cross-national comparison of the internal effects of participation in voluntary organizations. *Political Studies*, *56*, 12–32. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9248.2007.00715.x

Ho, K. C., Kluver, R., & Yang, C. (2003). *Asia.com: Asia encounters the Internet*. London, England: Routledge.

Ho, S. S., & McLeod, D. M. (2008). Social-psychological influences on opinion express in face-to-face and computer-mediated communication. *Communication Research*, *35*, 190–207. doi:10.1177/0093650207313159

Hooghe, M., & Stolle, D. (Eds.) (2003). *Generating social capital: The role of voluntary associations, institutions and government policy*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Horrigan, J. B. & Rainie, L. (2002). *Getting serious online*. Washington, DC: Pew American Life and Internet Project Report. Retrieved from: http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2002/Getting-Serious-Online-As-Americans-Gain-Experience-They-Pursue-More-Serious-Activities.aspx.

Howard, P., Rainie, L., & Jones, S. (2001). Days and nights on the Internet: The impact of a diffusing technology. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *45*, 382–404. doi:10.1177/0002764201045003003

Jennings, M. K., & Zeitner, V. (2003). Internet use and civic engagement: A longitudinal analysis. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *67*, 311–334. doi:10.1086/376947

Jensen, M. J., Danziger, J. D., & Venkatesha, A. (2007). Civil society and cyber society: The role of the Internet in community associations and democratic politics. *The Information Society*, *23*(1), 39–50. doi:10.1080/01972240601057528

Johnson, T., & Kaye, B. (2003). A boost or bust for democracy? How the Web influences political attitudes and behaviors in the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections. *Harvard Journal of Press/Politics*, *8*, 9–34. doi:10.1177/1081180X03008003002

Kavanaugh, A. L., Reese, D. D., Carroll, J. M., & Rosson, M. B. (2005). Weak ties in networked communities. The *Information Society*, *21*, 119–131. doi:10.1080/01972240590925320

Kim, S. H. (2007). Media use, social capital and civic participation in South Korea. *Journalism and Mass Communication*, *84*, 477–494. doi:10.1177/107769900708400305

Kim, Y. (2008, April). *Politics as friendship: The impact of online social networks on political behavior*. Paper presented at Politics: Web 2.0: An International Conference, Royal Holloway, University of London, London, UK.

Kittilson, M. C., & Dalton., R. J. (2011). Virtual civil society: The new frontier of social capital. *Political Behavior*, *33*(4), 625–644. doi:10.1007/s11109-010-9143-8

Klesner, J. L. (2007). Social capital and political participation in Latin America: Evidence from Argentina, Chile, Mexico, and Peru. *Latin American Research Review*, *42*(2): 1–32. doi:10.1353/lar.2007.0022

Kraut, R., Kiesler, S., Mukhopadhyay, T., Scherlis, W., & Patterson, M. (1998). Social impact of the Internet: What does it mean? *Communications of the ACM*, *41*(12), 21–22. doi:10.1145/290133.290140

Kroh, M., & Neiss, H. (2009, August). *Internet access and political engagement: Self-selection or causal effect*? Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Krueger, B. S. (2002). Assessing the potential of Internet political participation in the United States: A resource approach. *American Politics Research*, *30*(5), 476–498. doi:10.1177/1532673X02030005002

Lake, R. L. D., & Huckfeldt, R. (1998). Social capital, social networks, and political participation. *Political Psychology*, *19*, 567–583. doi:10.1111/0162-895X.00118

McAllister, I. (2011). *The Australian voter: Fifty years of change*. Sydney, Australia: University of NSW Press.

McAllister, I., & Clarke. J. (2008). *Trends in Australian political opinion: Results from the Australian Election Study, 1987-2007*. Canberra, Australia: Australian Social Science Data Archive.

Mossberger, K., Tolbert, C. J., & McNeal, R. S. (2008). *Digital citizenship: The Internet, society, and participation*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

Nie, N. (2001). Sociability, interpersonal relations, and the Internet. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 45, 420–435. doi:10.1177/00027640121957277

Nie, N., & Ebring, L. (2000). *Internet and society: A preliminary report*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society.

Nisbet, M. C., & Scheufele, D. A. (2004). Political talk as a catalyst for online citizenship. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 81*(4), 877–896.

Norris, P. (2001). *Digital divide: Civic engagement, information poverty, and the Internet*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Norris, P. (2002). The bridging and bonding role of online communities. *Harvard International Journal of Press Politics*, *7*(3), 3–13. doi:10.1177/1081180X0200700301

Norris, P. (2003). Revolution, what revolution? The Internet and US elections, 1992-2000. In E. C. Kamarck & J. S. Nye (Eds.), *Governance.com: Democracy in the information age* (pp. 59–80). Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

Parry, G., Moyser, G., & Day, N. (1992). *Political participation and democracy*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Pasek, J., More, E., & Romer, D. (2009). Realizing the social Internet? Online social networking meets offline civic engagement. *Journal of Information Technology and Politics*, *6*(3/4), 197–215. doi:10.1080/19331680902996403

Putnam, R. (1993). *Making democracy work*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and renewal of American community*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

Putnam R. (2002). *Democracies in flux: The evolution of social capital in contemporary society*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Putnam, R. L., Feldstein, M., with Cohen, D. (2003). *Better together: Restoring the American community*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

Quintelier, E., & Vissers, S. (2008). The effect of Internet use on political participation: An analysis of survey results for 16 year olds in Belgium. *Social Science Computer Review*, *28*(4), 411–427. doi:10.1177/0894439307312631

Resnick, P. (2002). Beyond bowling together: Sociotechnical capital. In J. H. Carroll (Ed.), *Human communication interaction in the new millennium* (pp. 247–272). Boston, MA: Addison Wesley.

Rodan, G. (1998). The Internet and political control in Singapore. *Political Science Quarterly*, *113*(1), 63–89.

Rojas, H., & Puig-i-Abril, E. (2009). Mobilizers mobilized: Information, expression, mobilization and participation in the digital age. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 14*(4), 902–927.

Rosenstone, S., & Hansen, M. (1993). *Mobilization, participation, and democracy in America*. New York, NY: Macmillan.

Scheufele, D., & Nisbet, M. (2002). Being a citizen online: New opportunities and dead ends. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, *7*(3), 55–75. doi:10.1177/1081180X0200700304

Shah, D. V., Cho, J. C., Eveland, W. P., & Kwak, N. (2005). Information and expression in a digital age—modelling internet effects on civic participation. *Communication Research*, *32*, 531–565. doi:10.1177/0093650205279209

Shah, D. V., Schmierbach, M., Hawkins, J., Espino, R., & Donavan, J. (2002). Nonrecursive models of Internet use and community engagement questioning whether time spent online erodes social capital. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, *79*, 964–987. doi:10.1177/107769900207900412

Shaw, L. H., & Gant, L. M. (2002). Users divided?: Exploring the gender gap in Internet use. *Cyberpsychology and Behavior*, *5*(6), 517–527. doi:10.1089/109493102321018150

Skoric, M. M., Ying, D., & Ng, Y. (2009). Bowling online, not alone: Online social capital and political participation in Singapore. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *14*(2), 414–433. doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2009.01447.x

Tolbert, C., & McNeal, R. S. (2003). Unravelling the effects of the Internet on political participation. *Political Research Quarterly*, *56*(2), 175–185. doi:10.1177/106591290305600206

Uslaner, E. (1998). Democracy and social capital. In M. E. Warren (Ed.), *Democracy and trust* (pp. 121–150). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Uslaner, E. M. (2004). Trust, civic engagement, and the Internet. *Political Communication*, *21*, 223–242. doi:10.1080/10584600490443895

Veenhof, B., Wellman, B., Quell, C., & Hogan, B. (2008). *How Canadians' use of the Internet affects social life and civic participation.* Statistics Canada, Connectedness Series. Catalogue no. 56F0004M. Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: Statistics Canada. Retrieved from http://dsp-psd.pwgsc.gc.ca/collection_2008/statcan/56F0004M/56f0004m2008016-eng.pdf

Verba, S., & Nie, N. H. (1972). *Participation in America: Political democracy and social equality*. New York, NY: Harper and Row.

Verba, S., Schlozman, K., & Brady, H. E. (1995). *Voice and equality: Civic voluntarism in American politics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wang, H. H., & Wellman, B. (2008, May). *The Internet and the increasingly connected American life: Trend spotting through a year-to-year comparison, 2002-2007*. Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communication Association, Montréal, Quebec, Canada.

Ward, I. (2003). Localizing the national: The rediscovery and reshaping of local campaigning in Australia. *Party Politics*, *9*, 583–600. doi:10.1177/13540688030095004

Wellman, B., Quan Haase, A., Witte, J., & Hampton, K. (2001). Does the Internet increase, decrease or supplement social capital? Social networks,

participation and community involvement. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *45*(3), 436–455. doi:10.1177/00027640121957286

Wellman, B., Boase, J., & Chen, W. (2002). The networked nature of community: Online and offline. *IT and Society*, *1*, 151–165. Retrieved from http://www.websm.org/uploadi/editor/Wellman_Boase_2002_Networked_nature.pdf

Williams, D. (2006). On and off the "Net": Scales for social capital in an online area. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 11*, article 11. Retrieved from http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol11/issue2/williams.html

Zhang, W., & Chia S. C. (2006). The effects of mass media use and social capital on civic and political participation. *Communication Studies*, *57*, 277–297. doi:10.1080/10510970600666974