

Political Participation and Ideological News Online: “Differential Gains” and “Differential Losses” in a Presidential Election Cycle

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Observations of the contemporary news media environment often revolve around the topics of ideological polarization and blurred boundaries between mass and interpersonal communication. This study explores these topics through a focus on the association between ideologically oriented online news use, commenting on online news, and political participation. We hypothesize that both ideological online news use generally and proattitudinal online news use are positively related to political participation and that online news commenting creates “differential gains” by augmenting these relationships. Yet we also hypothesize that counterattitudinal online news use is negatively related to political participation and that online news commenting creates “differential losses” by exacerbating this relationship. Analyses of two independently collected and nationally representative surveys found that frequent ideological online news use, proattitudinal online news use, and commenting are all positively related to political participation. We found no evidence for differential gains as a result of online commenting but only for differential losses—counterattitudinal online news use interacts with commenting to create a negative relationship with political participation.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional news media, aimed at a “mass audience,” have been all but subverted by “niche news” media (Stroud, 2011), targeted toward more narrow segments of an increasingly “connected,” “interactive,” and partisan U.S. public. Ideologically oriented online news outlets, including political blogs, are an important part of this shifting media landscape. This article considers the impact of these changes on the extent to which citizens participated politically over the course of the 2008 presidential election cycle. Most empirical evidence suggests that the use of ideological online news is politically mobilizing (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga, Puig-I-Abril, & Rojas, 2009; Lawrence, Sides, & Farrell, 2010). We argue, however, that this outcome is contingent on a specific style of consumption—namely, highly

disproportionate use of proattitudinal information relative to counterattitudinal information—that is common among the U.S. population but to which there are numerous exceptions (Carnahan, Lynch, & Garrett, 2011; Knobloch-Westerwick & Kleinman, 2011). Indeed, exposure to counterattitudinal outlets is likely to be demobilizing, especially when accompanied by interactive dynamics involved in the posting of “comments.”

One of the reasons that the demobilizing effects of online news have not been more explored may be the notion that mass communication and interpersonal communication are fundamentally separate processes. As Mutz and Martin (2001) noted, “An obvious difference is the extent to which [mass media] allow interactivity” (p. 98). Consequently, the exertion of cross-pressures has traditionally been the domain of people, not news organizations. However, ideological online news, unlike mass media news, usually involves a conversational or personal tone by the journalist or blogger and either the observation of or actual engagement in interpersonal communication by consumers, most often in the form of “comments.” Online news dynamics may not precisely mirror those of strongly tied (Granovetter, 1973) “face-to-face” political discussion networks, but no longer can it be said that the news experience is fundamentally noninterpersonal.

Although previous research has examined the linkages between online news and political discussion on political participation (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2009; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005), it has not examined them in ideologically charged contexts. Other research has examined ideological mass media effects, including the mobilizing impact of proattitudinal information (Stroud, 2011) and the demobilizing impact of counterattitudinal information on particular participatory outcomes, especially delayed voter choice (e.g., Dilliplane, 2011; Matthes, 2012; Nir & Druckman, 2008), but has not looked at these effects in relationship to the interactive capacities of online news and broader measurements of political participation, both online and offline.

The current article addresses these omissions. Our theoretical framework extends the “differential gains” hypothesis, which in its original form suggests that political discussion augments the positive relationship between news use and political participation (Hardy & Scheufele, 2005; Scheufele, 2002). We contend that the process is more complex in a polarized media environment, theorizing differential gains in political participation for people who use proattitudinal outlets in conjunction with posting comments but differential losses for people who use counterattitudinal sites in conjunction with posting comments. We test these predictions utilizing two independently collected and U.S. nationally representative data sets. The results are intriguing: We do find evidence of differential losses but not of differential gains. The absence of support for this prediction, which is replicated across

both data sets, is surprising given previous research and theorizing, and we explore potential explanations in the discussion. We begin, however, by laying out the theoretical foundation of our argument and model.

IDEOLOGICAL ONLINE NEWS OUTLETS

Americans are increasingly reliant on online news: The percentage of U.S. citizens who got news about the presidential election online rose from 18% in 2000 to 44% in 2008 (Smith & Rainie, 2008). Use of ideologically oriented online news outlets, such as blogs, is an important part of this trend (Davis, 2009), used by an estimated 14% of Americans during the 2008 election (Garrett & Danziger, 2011). These Internet-delivered sources present politically relevant news and commentary, embracing open partisanship and ideological opinion expression as legitimate elements of the journalistic endeavor. In many, if not most cases, they also allow for some form of interpersonal discussion between consumers and producers or other consumers, often in the form of “commenting.” Although political blogs are perhaps the most well-known examples, partisan online content can also be found on mainstream ideological outlets, such as FoxNews.com, which have increasingly taken on bloglike characteristics. Major news sites increasingly provide hyperpartisan news commentary, viewer comments on news stories, and easy reposting via social networking sites. In this study, we mean to capture a wide range of sites—especially, but not exclusively, political blogs.

As recently as the 2004 presidential election, many sites that featured prominently in the 2008 election were not yet in existence, including, for instance, The Huffington Post. The 2008 election was thus in many ways a testing ground for the impact of ideological news sites as technologies that had more fully emerged as institutions of the public sphere. Whether one sees these sites as a negative or positive development hinges in part on whether one advocates for a participative or deliberative model of democracy

IDEOLOGICAL ONLINE NEWS EXPOSURE PROMOTES POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Individuals’ use of partisan outlets tends to be governed by selective exposure processes, which favor proattitudinal over counterattitudinal information (see Stroud, 2008) and discussion (Mutz, 2006). This is problematic from a deliberative perspective, which considers exposure to diverse points of view essential to fostering more sophisticated opinions (Arendt,

1968) and rational consensus (Habermas, 1989). “True” public opinion is thought to reside not in the finite minds of individuals but among heterogeneous networks of citizens engaging in an observable deliberative process—the epistemic dimension of democracy (Habermas, 2006). Disproportionate exposure to like-minded individuals and information that people are likely to encounter on ideologically consistent news sites does little to support deliberation or promote a public sphere (Schudson, 1997) and can contribute to political polarization (Stroud, 2010) and fragmentation (Sunstein, 2001).

Yet exposure to like-minded perspectives can also arouse enthusiasm for a cause or candidate, leading to increased political participation. The uniquely interpersonal or “interactive” characteristics of online news, especially blogs, have been praised for their ability to stimulate political engagement, particularly among young people who have grown tired of “institutionalism” and “mainstream news” (e.g., Wall, 2005). Indeed, blog use has been linked to increased political discussion, a sense of community, and political action (Kerbel & Bloom, 2005; Meraz, 2007). More broadly, Gil de Zúñiga and colleagues (2009) found a positive relationship between political blog use and numerous forms of political participation, both online and offline. Although online and offline forms of political participation are in some ways distinct—online participation is more robustly the domain of somewhat younger citizens—the two behaviors often go hand in hand and are both highly related to socioeconomic status (Dutta-Bergman, 2005; Oser, Hooghe, & Marien, 2013).

The positive relationship between online news use and political participation may, in part, be attributed to a more general relationship between news use, political discussion, and procivic behaviors and attitudes (e.g., Moy & Scheufele, 2000; Norris, 2000; Rojas et al., 2005; Shah et al., 2005). Norris (2000) suggested that the process of political communication (i.e., news use and political discussion) can be understood as a “‘virtuous circle,’ a ratcheting process that over the long term gradually reinforces the activism of the active” (p. 309). Scheufele (2002) further identified “differential gains” in political participation as a result of news media use based on the extent to which people engage in political discussion. One reason for the augmenting effect that political discussion has on news use may be that interpersonal processes further alert citizens to political issues or problems and assist them reaching a decision about how they might participate (Lemert, 1981). Another possibility is that individuals use mass media more carefully when they anticipate having discussions with others to be seen as more competent or relatable within their social circles (Scheufele, 2002). Hardy and Scheufele (2005) proposed that in the online environment in particular, interpersonal discussion via chatting could possibly compensate

for some of the deficits associated with online news, including selective exposure to only those news stories that are personally relevant (Tewksbury & Althaus, 1999). In support of this reasoning, they found that the differential gains hypothesis also worked online; chatting about politics augmented the relationship between online news use and political participation. However, researchers have not yet examined the extent to which the differential gains hypothesis applies to ideological news use and online commenting.

One potential advantage of the online news and commenting combination is that it connects news and political discussion in time and space, making it easier to traverse between each discursive form (Brundidge, 2010b, 2010c). This was not the case in the mass media environment, or even in the online environment explored by Hardy and Scheufele (2005). Indeed, research on blogs tends to emphasize their embedded interpersonal features, likening them to community forums (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004) and interactive spaces within political websites (Meraz, 2007). Although information is typically updated by the “blogger,” suggesting a form of broadcasting (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005), it is also dramatically shaped by the people who read and comment on it (Bausch, Haughey, & Hourihan, 2002). In some ways news is discussion and discussion is news (Brundidge, 2010c). Thus, even if people do not actually comment, they may still be exposed to the interpersonal processes involved in commenting.

H1: Use of ideological online news outlets (either conservative or liberal) is positively related to (a) online and (b) offline political participation.

Nevertheless, we suspect that the act of commenting will also be important to political participation, both on its own and by augmenting the positive relationship between ideological news outlet use and political participation in accordance with the differential gains hypothesis.

H2: Posting comments on political websites is positively related to political participation both (a) online and (b) offline.

H3: The relationship between ideological online news outlet use and political participation both (a) online and (b) offline is moderated by commenting on political websites.

Further enhancing the participatory effects of online outlets may be the homophily enhancing content of both its news and audience commentary (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954). Homophily, which is characterized by interaction with and exposure to likeminded others, is a generally enjoyable experience (Huckfeldt, Johnson, & Sprague, 2002; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995) with a number of participation-enhancing benefits. Social networks

composed of like-minded individuals can help members solidify their political perspectives and alert them to issues of common interest (Hampton, 2003), reinforce their political self-concepts (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2011), and create bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000), arousing enthusiasm and support for a particular cause or candidate and stimulating political participation (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954). Thus, just as encounters with like-minded discussion partners has a large and positive contribution to political participation (e.g., Eveland & Hively, 2009), we anticipate that proattitudinal news outlet use should have a similar influence and as suggested by the differential gains model (Hardy & Scheufele, 2005; Scheufele, 2002), especially when use of them is combined with online commenting.

- H4: Use of proattitudinal news outlets is positively related to political participation, both (a) online and (b) offline.
- H5: The relationship between proattitudinal online news outlet use and political participation, both (a) online and (b) offline, is moderated by posting comments on political websites.

COUNTERATTITUDINAL IDEOLOGICAL ONLINE NEWS EXPOSURE HINDERS PARTICIPATION

Although individuals exhibit a preference for homophilous interaction and online selectivity can reinforce this tendency, the structure of the Internet does not promote the active avoidance of non-like-minded perspectives (Garrett, Carnahan, & Lynch, 2011). For example, a substantial proportion of links embedded in blog posts point to ideological divergent websites (Hargittai, Gallo, & Kane, 2008). There is also evidence that online news use and political discussion may contribute more to heterogeneity than some have imagined based on people's tolerance for, if not attraction to, political difference (Garrett, 2009), and through inadvertent encounters with non-like-minded individuals (Brundidge, 2010a). People's exposure to political difference likely falls short of the goals of deliberative democracy, but this does not mean that audiences of ideological online news outlets are insulated in "information cocoons" à la Sunstein (2001).

Despite the risks of news audience fragmentation and political polarization posed by using like-minded news outlets, using ideologically discrepant sources poses a different normative dilemma. A substantial body of research has found that frequent exposure to political disagreement or "crosscutting" political perspectives, although beneficial to deliberative norms, can actually be detrimental to participatory norms (e.g., Eveland & Hively, 2009; Mutz, 2002b, 2006). The People's Choice study, for example, found that exposure to politically

non-like-minded others decreased the likelihood that one would vote, leading Lazarsfeld and his colleagues to conclude, “Whatever the source of the conflicting pressures, whether from social status or class identification, from voting traditions or the attitudes of associates, the consistent result was to delay the voter’s final decision” (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944, p. 60).

Diana Mutz (2002a, 2002b, 2006), who has more recently taken up the reigns of crosscutting political exposure research, found that exposure to political disagreement, defined as the discussion of politics with non-like-minded others, is inversely related to many forms of political participation. She concluded, “The kind of environment widely assumed to encourage an open and tolerant society is not necessarily the same kind of environment that produces an enthusiastically participative one” (Mutz, 2002b, p. 851). Mutz (2006) specified two mechanisms whereby disagreement leads to political demobilization. First, intrapersonal ambivalence may reduce political participation due in part to its connection to more cognitively complex assessments of political issues (also see Lavine, 2001; Sniderman, 1981). Second, interpersonal cross-pressures may create anxiety and political paralysis as it becomes impossible to agree with and please all parts of one’s network (Mutz, 2006).

However, not all research supports the hypothesis that exposure to disagreement is politically demobilizing. In fact, several studies have found a stimulus effect on political participation (e.g., Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; McLeod, Scheufele, & Moy, 1999; Nir, 2005; Scheufele, Nisbit, Brossard, & Nisbit, 2004). Seemingly contradictory findings have stimulated research which attempts to clarify the precise circumstances under which interpersonal disagreement does or does not lead to decreases in political engagement (e.g., Eveland & Hively, 2009; Feldman & Price, 2008; McClurg, 2006; Pattie & Johnston, 2009).

Nir (2011) suggested that much of the variation hinges on how heterogeneous political discussion is measured, whether from the perspective of the ego (e.g., Mutz, 2006; Scheufele et al., 2004) or the heterogeneity of the network regardless of the ego position (e.g., Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Nir, 2005). She found that heterogeneous political discussion from the perspective of the ego, or network *opposition* was negatively related to political participation, whereas a heterogeneous political network composition or *competition*, irrespective of the ego, was unrelated to political participation. She concluded that the opposition in one’s discussion environment is more likely to lead to the internal ambivalence and interpersonal cross-pressures that Mutz (2006) described due to a less ambiguous conflict with the ego position.

Still unclear, is the extent to which conclusions about the crosscutting effects associated with face-to-face interpersonal communication might

extend to the context of counterattitudinal online news outlets. Research on exposure to mass media news suggests that counterattitudinal information can indeed be demobilizing (e.g., Dilliplane, 2011; Matthes, 2012; Nir & Druckman, 2008). Although exposure to counterattitudinal information in the absence of strong interpersonal influences is unlikely to create interpersonal cross-pressures, ambivalence remains a viable psychological mechanism (Dilliplane, 2011). It seems logical that counterattitudinal online news, with its frequent emphasis on polarizing, and especially interpersonally oriented content matter, would be at least as detrimental to political participation as counterattitudinal mass mediated news. However, Lawrence et al. (2010) found that exposure to blogs offering a diversity of political perspectives, both liberal and conservative, does not undermine the positive relationship between political blog use and political participation. Of importance, though, they did not look at the effect of *counterattitudinal* exposure in particular. Or in Nir's (2011) terms, they looked at "competitive" blog use and not "oppositional" blog use. A specific look at counterattitudinal online news outlets thus seems in order. It is also important to compare the impact of counterattitudinal news on both online and offline forms of political participation to examine whether or not the form of participation matters (see Lee, 2012).

H6: Use of *counterattitudinal* ideological online news outlets is negatively related to political participation, both (a) online and (b) offline.

The demobilizing influence of counterattitudinal sites is likely to be intensified rather than lessened through the interpersonal processes involved in online commenting. Commenting in conjunction with exposure to counterattitudinal information may reveal an attempt to resolve cognitive dissonance, but it is unlikely to inspire social support and may create interpersonally charged disagreement, which may exacerbate any internal ambivalence and possibly activate the experience of cross-pressures (Mutz, 2006). Worse, the relative anonymity of the commenting environment is likely to inspire hostile and uncivil commentary in response from other consumers who are in agreement with the news outlet's perspective, which may contribute to negative feelings about the political process in general (Papacharissi, 2004). Thus, in the context of counterattitudinal sites, online commenting is less likely to create differential gains in political participation and more likely to create differential losses.

H7: The relationship between *counterattitudinal* ideological online news outlet use and political participation, both (a) online and (b) offline, is moderated by posting comments on political websites.

METHOD

The data for this study come from two sources: a national random-digit-dial (RDD) telephone survey of individuals living in the continental United States, and a web-administered survey using a population-matched sample drawn from two large online panels. Using these two data sets provides a unique opportunity to replicate relevant analyses with slightly different populations, time frames, and operationalizations. A description of both data sets follows.

The telephone survey ($N = 600$) was conducted between November 6 and 20, 2008, the weeks immediately following the presidential election, by Abt SRBI, Inc. The survey achieved a response rate of 26.2%, calculated using AAPOR method two (RR2) and treating non-English speakers as ineligible (American Association for Public Opinion Research, 2008). A comparison of respondent demographics to census data (2006 American Community Survey) indicates that the sample is reasonably representative of the U.S. population, although there are a few differences. Whites are overrepresented (73.9% nationally vs. 82.8% in this sample), as are older Americans (nationally 23.0% of the population are between the ages of 50 and 64 vs. 34.7% in this sample), and respondents are better educated than the American population at large (nationally 74.1% hold a high school diploma vs. 93.1% in this sample). In summary, the sample provides adequate representation of the national population. Although there are a few attributes on which the sample falls short, there is little reason to expect these attributes to influence the relationships between the variables examined here.

The second data set was collected as part of the Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (CCAP), which was administered by YouGov/Polimetrix. YouGov/Polimetrix constructed a sampling frame for CCAP from the 2007 American Community Survey using data on age, race, gender, education, marital status, number of children younger than 18, family income, employment status, citizenship, state, and metropolitan area.¹ The target sample was then selected by stratifying on age, race, gender, education, and state (with battleground states double sampled) using simple random sampling within strata, excluding all nonregistered persons.

¹The frame was constructed using stratified sampling from the full 2007 American Community Survey sample with selection within strata by weighted sampling with replacements (using the person weights on the public use file). Data on reported 2004 voter registration and turnout from the November 2004 Current Population Survey was matched to this frame using a weighted Euclidean distance metric. Data on religion, church attendance, born again or evangelical status, news interest, party identification, and ideology was matched from the 2008 Pew Religious Life Survey.

Once the target was defined, respondents were recruited from the Polling-Point and MyPoints panels. This yielded a pool of completed interviews from which a final “matched sample” was drawn. To construct this sample, respondents in the pool were matched to individuals in the target frame using weighted Euclidean distances metric.² There were, on average, between two and three possible matches from the pool for each of the respondents in the target sample, but only the best one was used in the matched sample. For example, if a 40-year-old Republican woman with a college degree is drawn for the target sample, YouGov/Polimetrix used nearest-neighbor matching to select the one respondent in the pool who most resembled this woman.

The CCAP data collection effort included six waves, beginning in December 2007, but only fifth wave data, which were collected in October 2008 and included detailed questions about media use and online behavior, are used in this study. This subsample had a within-panel response rate of 78%, yielding a total of 1,101 respondents.

Predictors

Ideology. A single item 5-point scale ranging from *very liberal* to *very conservative* (RDD survey, $M = 3.6$, $SD = 1.58$; CCAP survey, $M = 3.3$, $SD = 1.13$).

Ideological online news outlets. Both surveys use a pair of items to assess how frequently respondents used ideologically oriented blogs and other ideologically oriented online sources of news about the presidential candidates or the campaign, one for conservative sites and the other for liberal sites. The telephone survey framed the question in terms of websites of “a politically conservative (liberal) news organization or blog.” Responses were on a 5-point scale ranging from *never* to *every day or almost every day* (Conservative site use, $M = 1.24$, $SD = .78$; Liberal site use, $M = 1.15$, $SD = .63$). The CCAP survey asked respondents about the exposure to liberal or conservative blogs specifically, using a 4-point scale anchored by *never* and *regularly* (Conservative site use, $M = 1.6$, $SD = .90$; Liberal site use, $M = 1.5$, $SD = .84$).

These items were also used to compute exposure to proattitudinal and counterattitudinal sites. Respondents’ use of ideological sites matching their personal

²The variables in the distance function include metropolitan statistical area, age, race (White, Black, Hispanic, other), years of education, interest in news, gender, 5-point party identification, 3-point ideology, and “don’t know” response on ideology. For unordered variables, matrices of distances were used.

ideology (e.g., conservatives using conservative sites) serves as a measure of proattitudinal exposure ($M = 1.37$, $SD = 1.0$), whereas their use of sites of a different ideological persuasion (e.g., conservatives using liberal sites) is the measure of counterattitudinal exposure ($M = 1.12$, $SD = .54$). Moderates are omitted because there is no obvious way to measure which sites share their predispositions. In the CCAP data proattitudinal exposure ($M = 1.90$, $SD = 1.1$) and counterattitudinal exposure ($M = 1.23$, $SD = 0.58$).

Posting comments on political websites. In the telephone survey data, two frequency measures were summed: one for posting a comment on the website of a news organization, and the other for posting a comment on a political blog or online discussion forum. Both items utilized a 5-point response scale, ranging from *never* to *every day or almost every day*. A score of zero corresponds to no posting, with higher values denoting more frequent commenting ($M = .31$, $SD = .98$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .764$). In the CCAP data set a single item that enquired whether the person had expressed their political views online was employed (yes = 19.6%).

Nonpartisan online news sites (control). The telephone survey used a single reverse-coded 5-point-scale item assessing the frequency with which respondents used websites associated with "a major national news organization." After recoding, 1 means *never* and 5 means *every day or almost every day* ($M = 2.45$, $SD = 1.67$). The CCAP survey averaged four items asking about use of national newspaper websites, local newspaper websites, online news magazines, and Internet news aggregators, each of which was measured using a 4-point scale ranging from *never* to *regularly* ($M = 2.3$, $SD = .83$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .72$).

Attention to campaign (control). The telephone survey used a single reverse-coded 4-point scale to assess campaign attention. Respondents were asked to indicate how closely they followed news about the 2008 election, with responses anchored by 1 (*not at all closely*) and 4 (*very closely*; $M = 3.4$, $SD = .82$). The CCAP survey used a single 4-point scale (not reverse coded) to assess campaign attention. Respondents were asked how closely they paid attention to news stories about the candidates for the 2008 presidential election, with responses anchored by *not at all closely* to *very closely* ($M = 1.6$, $SD = .84$).

Swing/battleground state (control). A dichotomous variable was used to indicate whether the respondent resided in a swing state. There were eight swing states in the 2008 election: Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Missouri, Montana, North Carolina, Ohio, and Virginia. In the RDD sample, 28% of respondents were living in a swing state. The CCAP by design oversampled

in battleground states (Florida, Iowa, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Nevada, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin) and not surprisingly a larger proportion of respondents in that sample belongs to battleground states: 40.7%.

Criterion Variables

Political participation. The telephone survey measured online political activity as a summative measure based on one reverse-coded 5-point-scale item (e-mail a candidate/elected official; anchored by *never* and *every day or almost every day*) and four reverse-coded 4-point-scale items (signed an online petition, donated money online, volunteered to help a campaign online, and volunteered online for a political demonstration; anchored by *never* and *more than a couple times*). A zero score on the index corresponds to no activity, and higher values reflect more activity ($M = .78$, $SD = 1.73$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .668$). Note that although the alpha is low, we believe that it is appropriate to use this as an index of activity, a composite measure that captures several related aspects of a common domain of behavior. CCAP survey's measure captured the frequency of offline political activity by averaging four 7-point-scale items with responses ranging from *not at all* to *frequently*: volunteer work, contributed money to campaign, worked for a candidate, and attended political meeting ($M = 1.8$, $SD = 1.1$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .78$).

RESULTS

A brief overview of American's exposure to ideologically oriented news sites sets the stage for the analyses that follow. Table 1 describes the prevalence of this behavior in our representative telephone sample. Websites affiliated with major news organizations were used by about half (49%) of the respondents in the sample, which dwarfs use of the more ideologically oriented (liberal or conservative) news sites (14%). Restricting ourselves to those individual who self-identified as either liberal or conservative (thereby omitting moderates), we find that Americans are more likely to choose explicitly proattitudinal sites (14%) than to use sites that are biased in favor of the opposing ideology (5%). It is worth noting, however, that among those who seek out proattitudinal information, a large majority (84%) also visits the more balanced major news sites. Perhaps surprisingly, almost one third (33%) of these individuals also visit sites representing other side. In the CCAP data there is a similar pattern of partisan and mainstream media use.

Now let us consider the implications that these patterns of news media exposure for Americans' political participation, online and off. Consistent

TABLE 1
Comparing Use of Ideological and Mainstream News Outlets
Online (Telephone Survey)

Major news site use	49.0%
Ideologically oriented site use	13.5%
Conservative site use	11.3%
Liberal site use	7.2%
Conservative and Liberal site use	5.0%
<i>n</i>	600
Relative to respondent ideology ^a	
Proattitudinal site use	14.2%
Counterattitudinal site use	5.8%
<i>n</i>	346
Among users of ideologically consistent sites ^a	
Major news site use	83.7%
Counterattitudinal site use	32.7%
<i>n</i>	49

Note. Cell values correspond to proportion of respondents who use specified source.

^aAmong respondents who self-identified as either liberal or conservative.

with prior scholarship in this area, our data confirm that use of ideological online news outlets is associated with higher levels of political participation (H1). We demonstrate these relationships using multivariate regression, controlling for factors such as campaign attention, education, and whether the respondent was in a swing state, all of which are known to vary with both key predictors and outcomes. We begin by considering online participation levels using the telephone survey data. The stage 1 model shown in Table 2 reports the unstandardized coefficients of an OLS regression on the frequency of online political activity. This model explains almost 40% of the variance in participation, and online news use in its various forms is among the strongest of predictors. Specifically, we see that liberal and conservative media use are each significantly associated with political activity.³ Thus, H1a is supported.

The evidence for the effects of blog exposure on offline participation is also present. The model of offline participation shown in Table 2 lists the OLS regression coefficients generated using CCAP data. The predictive power of this model is quite low, explaining only about 13% of the variance, suggesting that the factors included in the model contribute only modestly to our understanding of offline participation. As with the prior model, we

³We also note that although liberal and conservative media use are positively correlated, the correlation is not so high as to produce problems with collinearity ($r = .44, p < .001$).

TABLE 2
Regressing Political Activity on Use of Ideological Online News Outlets

	<i>Political activity</i>							
	<i>Online frequency (telephone survey)</i>				<i>Offline frequency (CCAP)</i>			
	<i>Model 1</i>		<i>Model 2</i>		<i>Model 1</i>		<i>Model 2</i>	
Attention to campaign	0.14	(0.08)	0.14	(0.08)	0.12* ^a	(.04)	0.12**	(.04)
Female	0.20	(0.12)	0.20	(0.12)	0.17 ^a	(.07)	0.18*	(.07)
Age	0.01*	(0.00)	0.01*	(0.00)	0.01	(.00)	0.01	(.00)
Education	0.13***	(0.04)	0.13***	(0.04)	0.07**	(.03)	0.07**	(.03)
Swing/battleground state	0.26*	(0.13)	0.26*	(0.13)	0.08	(.07)	0.09	(.07)
Online news site, nonpartisan	0.12**	(0.40)	0.12**	(0.40)	0.09	(.05)	0.10	(.05)
Ideological conservatism	-0.11	(0.06)	-0.11	(0.06)	-0.02	(.04)	0.02	(.04)
Conservative blogs & news sites	0.25**	(0.08)	0.19*	(0.09)	0.09*	(.04)	0.11*	(.04)
Liberal blogs & news sites	0.56***	(0.11)	0.58***	(0.13)	0.21***	(.05)	0.17**	(.06)
Postpolitical comments online	0.58***	(0.07)	0.51***	(0.11)	0.20*	(.08)	0.19*	(.09)
Post × Conservative Site	—		0.07	(0.05)	—		.026	(.03)
Post × Liberal Site	—		-0.03	(0.05)	—		.06	(.03)
Constant	-2.06***	(0.41)	-2.03***	(0.42)	1.23***	(.33)	1.24***	(.34)
<i>N</i>	552		552		831		831	
<i>R</i> ²	0.394		0.396		0.129		0.130	

Note. Unstandardized coefficients shown (standard error in parentheses). CCAP = Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project.

^a $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

see that both liberal and conservative news use has a positive and significant influence on the frequency of offline participation. Thus, H1b receives support. We conclude that use of ideological online news generally is associated with higher participation levels.

We also sought to confirm the influence of political expression, in the form of posting comments on political news sites, on political activity levels (H2). The data also support this hypothesis. Our evidence comes from the regression models described previously. Frequency of commenting was included as one of the predictors of interest for both models. The coefficient in all models of online and offline participation indicate that posting has a positive and significant effect (see Table 2). These results support H2a and H2b.

Building on the first two hypotheses, we predicted that the influence of ideological news consumption on political participation would be moderated by the individual's commenting behavior (H3). Specifically, we theorized that the participation-enhancing effects of consuming ideological news would be augmented by online political talk. However, we fail to find evidence of this effect. To test our prediction, we add a pair of interaction

terms to the regression models previously reported, one representing the relationship between liberal site use and commenting and the other representing the interaction with conservative site use. Neither term was a significant predictor on political participation—the effect of ideological online news use does not vary by the level of commenting—thus H3a and H3b are not supported.

The extent to which the alignment between individual ideology and the content consumed shapes the effects of exposure is the subject of the next several hypotheses. We anticipated that consumers’ use of political sites that share their ideology would promote political activity (H4), whereas use of sites representing an opposed ideology would reduce activity (H6). The first of these predictions is strongly supported by our data, but the second is not. The models used to test these predictions are comparable to those previously used, except that the media-use variables take respondents ideologies into account (Table 3). Use of proattitudinal news sites is a highly significant predictor of online and offline political activity, and its magnitude

TABLE 3
 Regressing Political Activity on Use of Proattitudinal and Counterattitudinal
 Online News Outlets

	<i>Political activity</i>							
	<i>Online frequency (telephone survey)</i>				<i>Offline frequency (CCAP)</i>			
	<i>Model 1</i>		<i>Model 2</i>		<i>Model 1</i>		<i>Model 2</i>	
Attention to campaign	0.15	(0.10)	0.16	(0.10)	.09	(.05)	.11	(.05)
Female	0.10	(0.15)	0.11	(0.15)	.11	(.09)	.14	(.09)
Age	0.01	(0.01)	0.01	(0.01)	.00	(.00)	.00	(.00)
Education	0.12*	(0.05)	0.11*	(0.05)	.08**	(.03)	.09**	(.03)
Swing/battleground state	0.49**	(0.17)	0.49**	(0.17)	.08	(.09)	.07	(.09)
Online news site, nonpartisan	0.18**	(0.05)	0.18***	(0.05)	.13*	(.06)	.14*	(.06)
Ideological conservatism	-0.19**	(0.07)	-0.19**	(0.06)	-.05	(.03)	-.03	(.03)
Proattitudinal site use	0.58***	(0.09)	0.55***	(0.10)	.15***	(.05)	.15***	(.05)
Counterattitudinal site use	-0.22	(0.16)	0.02	(0.20)	-.01	(.09)	-.08	(.09)
Postpolitical comments online	0.58***	(0.10)	0.74***	(0.19)	.20*	(.11)	.09*	(.11)
Post × Proattitudinal Site	—		0.06	(0.06)	—		-.06	(.04)
Post × Counterattitudinal Site	—		-0.21*	(0.11)	—		-.09*	(.04)
Constant	-1.42**	(0.54)	-1.62*	(0.55)	1.43**	(.39)	1.23**	(.40)
<i>N</i>	341		341		522		522	
<i>R</i> ²	0.384		0.392		0.135		0.154	

Note. Unstandardized coefficients shown (standard error in parentheses). CCAP = Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project.

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

makes it the largest single predictor of online political participation in the model and one of the most important ones in the offline model. In contrast, the coefficient on counterattitudinal site use is nonsignificant, although it is in the predicted direction. H4a and H4b are supported, whereas H6a and H6b are not.

Finally, we predicted that the influence of both pro- and counterattitudinal news consumption would be moderated by political commenting (H5 & H7, respectively). The results are intriguing: Although the influence of proattitudinal news is unaffected by political commenting, counterattitudinal news consumption does significantly hinder political participation when it is accompanied by political commenting. Evidence for the interaction is found in Table 3 with the addition of a pair of interaction terms in the second stage of the models. Only H7a and H7b are supported; H5a and H5b are not.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the participatory consequences of ideological online news outlet use. We proposed that the posting of “comments,” as a form of political discussion, would lead to differential gains (Hardy & Scheufele, 2005; Scheufele, 2002) in political participation for people who use proattitudinal outlets but differential losses for those who use counterattitudinal outlets. The results were not entirely anticipated by our review of extant theory and research but do lend support to the possibility of a tension between deliberative and participative models of democracy (see Table 4).

In support of our hypotheses and consistent with previous research (e.g., Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2009; Lawrence et al., 2010), we found that ideological

TABLE 4
Summary of Results: Online and Offline Participation

<i>Prediction</i>	<i>Online</i>	<i>Offline</i>
H1. Ideological news use promotes participation	✓	✓
H2. Posting comments on political news sites promotes participation	✓	✓
H3. Commenting moderates influence of ideological news use	×	×
H4. Proattitudinal news use promotes participation	✓	✓
H5. Commenting augments the participatory benefits of pro-attitudinal news	×	×
H6. Counterattitudinal news use reduces participation	×	×
H7. Commenting augments the participatory harm of counterattitudinal news	✓	✓

Note. ✓ = supported; × = unsupported.

online news outlet use, proattitudinal news outlet use, and online commenting are all positively associated with political participation, both online and offline. In contrast with our expectations, however, we found no evidence of a “differential gains” effect (Hardy & Scheufele, 2005; Scheufele, 2002). The positive influences of ideological outlet use and proattitudinal outlet use on political participation are not augmented by commenting on online news sites. Yet we did find support for differential losses: The negative influence of counterattitudinal outlet use on political participation varies significantly by the extent to which consumers comment on political content.

Our results suggest that online commenting, although generally mobilizing, does little to augment the feelings of homophily created by exposure to ideological online news outlets in general. Commenting does appear, however, to amplify the ambivalence created by exposure to counterattitudinal outlets. A possible explanation is that exposure to crosscutting information in this context is less easily dismissed after people embroil themselves in the potentially unpleasant and ambivalence inducing experience of commenting in hostile political territory.

It is important to note that we found highly similar results across both of our data sets, but the online participation model is especially robust. Proattitudinal news and commenting may be particularly mobilizing in the online context, due to the high “traversability” between online news and online forms of political participation (Brundidge, 2010c). Citizens may become mobilized in the proattitudinal context and immediately translate their motivation into participation. Conversely, the counterattitudinal news exposure and commenting combination may be particularly demobilizing in the online context, due to an increased association among citizens between online political engagement and feelings of ambivalence.

Despite the importance of our findings, this study does have several limitations. First, as with all cross-sectional survey data, causality cannot be established. Theory and previous research support the directionality proposed in the current study, yet it is possible that low levels of political engagement cause counterattitudinal news exposure and commenting rather than the other way around. However, we did control for a number of theoretically important variables, such as the level of attention to the campaign, education, whether the respondent lives in a swing state, and political ideology, which makes this possibility unlikely. Future research might use panel or experimental data for more definitive evidence of causality.

Another limitation of survey data generally is the ability of respondents to accurately recall their behavior. Of particular concern in the current study is whether respondents’ assessments of the ideological orientation of sites are accurate. However, we would point out that the ego’s (i.e., the respondent’s) perception of whether an outlet is conservative or liberal, rather than

an objective assessment of the ideological orientation of an outlet, is what is most theoretically at stake here.

It is additionally important to note that surveys for the two data sets were administered at different times, one in 2007 and the other in 2008. It is therefore possible that differences in the effect sizes for each model are due to the timing of surveys rather than differences between online and offline political participation.

There is also reason for caution when interpreting the interaction between online news commenting and ideological online news use. Our measures did not assess whether online news comments took place after consuming ideological online news, so we cannot know if the two occurred in the same social setting.

Finally, our data do not allow us to examine mediating psychological mechanisms between our communication variables and political participation, which would have been ideal. It is therefore not empirically clear why online news commenting moderates the relationship between counterattitudinal news outlet use and political participation, only that it does. Although theory and previous research suggest that people may reduce their political participation due to ambivalence (e.g., Dilliplane, 2011; Mutz, 2006), it may be that the mechanism in the online context is somehow different—an examination of this mechanism would be useful in future research.

Conclusion

Limitations aside, this study productively extends and builds upon conclusions drawn from research on interpersonal political discussion (e.g., Eveland & Hively, 2009; Mutz, 2002, 2006; Nir, 2005; Scheufele et al., 2004) and mass media news use (e.g., Dilliplane, 2011; Matthes, 2012; Nir & Druckman, 2008) to the more communicatively hybrid online news environment. Here, we too find an unfortunate trade-off between participative and deliberative models of democracy. We find that a more proattitudinal experience of the online political environment, which may be accompanied by political polarization and intolerance for divergent views (Mutz, 2006; Stroud, 2010), fosters increased political participation but that a more deliberative online experience, which includes interaction with counterattitudinal perspectives, fosters decreased political participation.

Thus, the extent to which exposure to counterattitudinal perspectives is viewed as positive or negative, partially hinges on the model of citizenship to which one subscribes. A participative model views high levels of individual political participation as central (e.g., voting; see Putnam, 2000), whereas a deliberative model considers exposure to diverse political perspectives

as essential to achieving rational consensus, “true” public opinion, and informed political participation (Arendt, 1968; Habermas, 1989; Mill, 1859/1998). The former model is results oriented, whereas the latter is more focused on the process and quality of citizenship without any guarantees of increased participation. Our results suggest a tension between these two models, one not easily resolved. This state of affairs is not inevitable; instead, it is a symptom of a political environment beset by hyperpartisanship, “horse-race” political news coverage, ideological polarization, and incivility. Under such conditions, it can hardly be surprising that those people who see matters in more complex ways and do not wholly identify with one particular in-group, can come to see themselves on the outside of electoral politics.

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