

Using digital media reinforces inequalities in political participation.



In the past decade digital spaces have become increasingly important in politics and to political participation. But does using digital media help to mobilize new people to participate in politics? In a new study which looks at data across 25 years, [Jennifer Oser](#) and [Shelley Boulianne](#) find stronger evidence for the opposite effect: political participation motivates digital media use, which reinforces inequalities in political participation.

As our social and political lives in the coronavirus era become increasingly dependent on [digital and social media](#), [how might this affect people's participation in politics](#)? Recent worldwide [protests](#) supporting causes across the political spectrum from *Black Lives Matter* to *Make America Great Again* signal a breakthrough moment of mobilization that clarifies the importance of answering this question.

Given the rapid increase in digital media use (such as online political expression) even before the coronavirus pandemic, researchers commonly assumed that digital media use *mobilizes* new people and groups to become more politically active. In contrast to this assumption, the results of our [new study](#), based on the best available survey data from the past 20 years, show that using digital media reinforces political participation among those already active, which leads to expanding inequalities in political participation.

Why it matters whether digital media use *mobilizes* new people or *reinforces* inequalities

Already twenty years ago, leading researchers on this topic such as [Pippa Norris](#) emphasized the importance of understanding whether digital media use *mobilizes* previously disengaged people to participate in politics—or alternatively, whether it *reinforces* the participation of those who are already active, thereby widening the gap in political participation. From early concerns in the 1980s and 1990s about the potentially isolating effects of the personal computer to contemporary attention to our ever-present smartphones, researchers have sought to determine how changes in the [digital media environment](#) affect patterns of [social capital](#) and [political participation](#).

This question is particularly crucial now, as inequalities of all kinds have increased in recent years. Past research has shown that those with greater [socio-economic advantages](#) are more likely to be politically active, and thus attention has been paid to whether digital media use has the potential to [level the political playing field](#).

"Those who use social and digital media for political activity are already more likely to be doing this outside of the digital sphere"

Jennifer Oser and Shelley Boulianne find that using digital media reinforces inequalities in political participation.

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Why don't we already know whether digital media mobilizes new people or reinforces inequalities?

Despite widespread acknowledgement of the importance of this question, the lack of appropriate data has been an obstacle for researchers aiming to test the relationship between digital media use on political participation. Determining whether one activity leads to another requires gathering data on digital media use and political participation from the same individuals over time.

These types of surveys are expensive and are rarely conducted by established survey programs. Yet research on this topic has gained momentum in recent years, as individual researchers around the world have invested in country-specific representative surveys on these topics.

The most comprehensive study to date in this area

Our new study takes advantage of the recent momentum of research on this topic by analyzing all available 38 studies conducted between 1982 and 2017 that used repeated-wave surveys to study digital media use and political participation. The rapid growth of this field of study is clear—21 of these 38 studies were completed after 2016. Aggregating the results of all of these available studies allows us to conduct the most comprehensive study to date using over-time data to test the relative strength of two possible causal directions: whether digital media use motivates political participation, or alternatively, whether political participation motivates media use.

To assess digital media use, we analyzed actual activities (such as online political expression and the use of online information sources), rather than attitudes. To assess political participation, we analyzed political behaviors (such as voting and protesting) rather than people's willingness to participate. Half of the studies are based on data from the United States, and the other half use data from countries across the globe, including Europe, Asia, South America, and the Middle East.

Digital media use reinforces inequality in political participation

In contrast to the common assumption that digital media use *mobilizes* new people to participate in political activity, our findings show stronger support for the opposite causal direction: that digital media use *reinforces* existing inequalities in patterns of participation; those who use social and digital media for political activity are already more likely to be doing this outside of the digital sphere.

Further, our findings showed an even stronger effect between political participation and digital media use when testing for time lags longer than six months. These findings are unexpected in relation to conventional wisdom on these topics, as researchers most often assume a *mobilization* effect, and social science research generally shows stronger short-term (and weaker long-term) effects for these types of political behaviors. Taken together, our study's use of the best available data on these topics to identify an enduring reinforcement effect is a new contribution to this topic, and raises important next-step questions for researchers and policymakers alike.

Why the reinforcement of inequalities in political participation matters, especially now

The bottom-line conclusion for researchers, protesters, and elected representatives is that digital media use has the potential to increase inequalities in political participation over time. In the coronavirus era, [creative participation](#) is flourishing on the political right and left, including protests *against* social distancing, as well as *socially-distanced protests*. Even before considering recent complications of [partisan digital activism](#) and the need for increased [digital media literacy](#) to combat the online circulation of [false information](#), our study concludes that the growth in digital media use on its own will not mobilize all segments of the public in democratic life. At a moment when [digital politics](#) are affecting how some US states and national economies around the globe are opening up while others are returning to shelter-in-place, our study highlights the importance of the expression of the [public's diverse voices](#) to build [political power](#) inform key policy decisions in the coming months.

- *This article is based on the paper, 'Reinforcement Effects between Digital Media Use and Political Participation: A Meta-Analysis of Repeated-Wave Panel Data' in Public Opinion Quarterly*

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