

Is the Internet Changing the Nature of Civic Engagement?

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Our “Internet and Civic Engagement” Study

- **Key Questions:**
 - What is the current state of online engagement?
 - Are opportunities for online engagement bringing new voices into the civic debate?
 - Will social media change everything?

Online engagement – general findings

- Group Communication
 - 36% of Americans are part of a political or community group
 - **More than half communicate with these groups using online means**
 - Email is as common as face-to-face or telephone, group websites as common as print newsletters
- Civic Voice
 - 32% have signed a petition (46% doing so online)
 - 30% have contacted a gov't official (6 in 10 doing so online)
 - **Response rates and Sat identical for online/offline contact**
- **The rise of the online participatory class**

The demographics of online and offline political participation

Online activities that mirror traditional offline forms of engagement

The Demographics of Online and Offline Political Participation

Offline Activities

- Contact a government official in person, by phone or by letter
- Sign a paper petition
- Send a letter to the editor via mail
- Make a political contribution in person, by phone or via mail
- Communicate with a civic/political group by face-to-face meetings, print letter or newsletter, or telephone

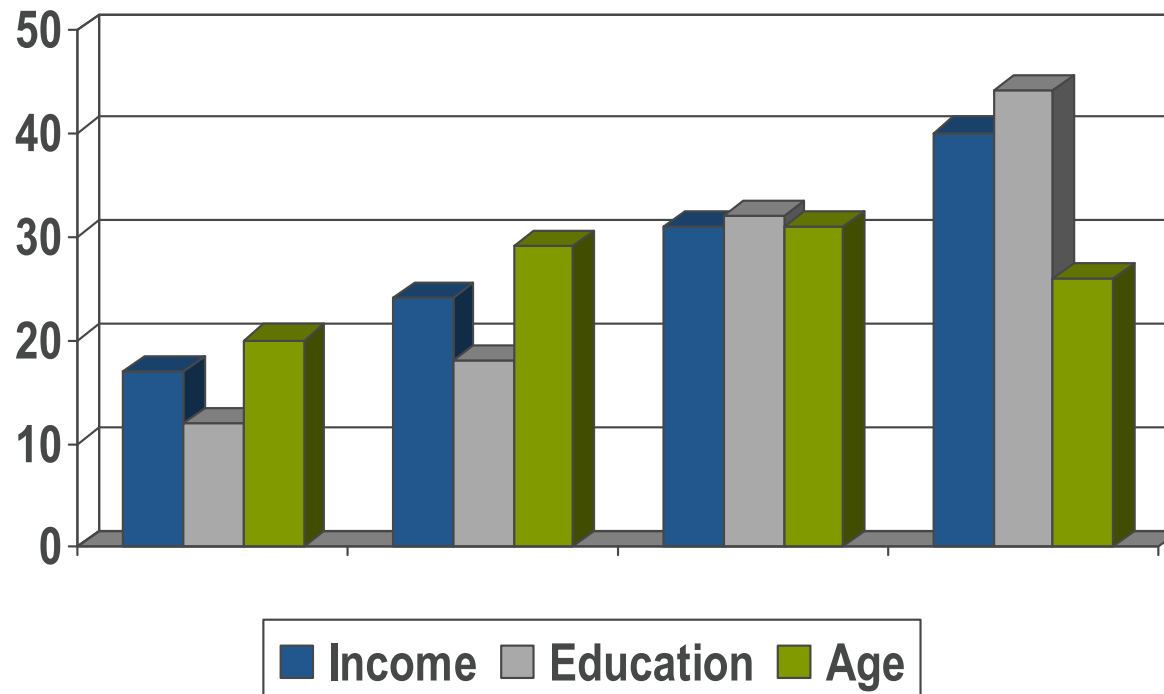
Online Activities

- Contact a government official via email
- Sign a petition online
- Send a letter to the editor via email
- Make a political contribution on the internet
- Communicate with a civic/political group email, text/instant messaging, the group's website or a SNS

We classified respondents as “active online” or “active offline” if they did two or more of the above activities

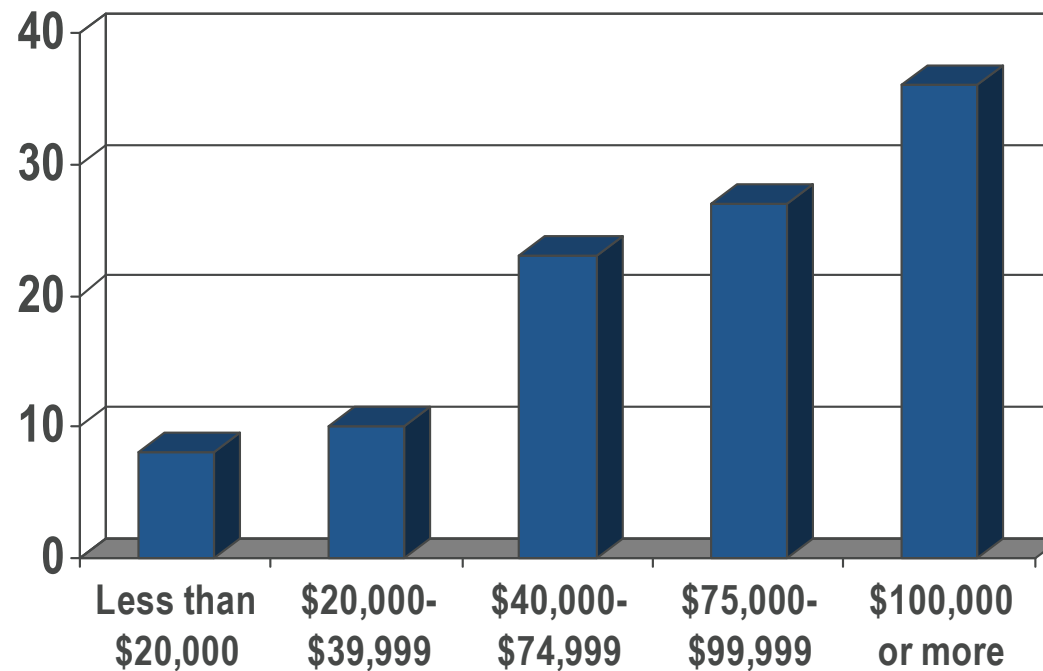
Traditional (offline) forms of engagement are marked by high levels of SES stratification

Engagement in 2+ offline acts



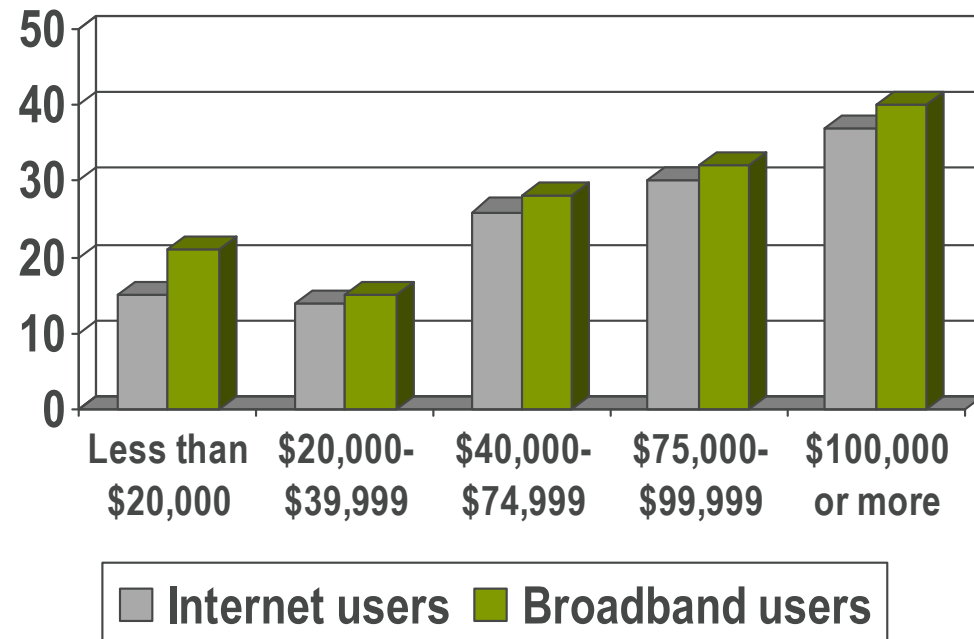
Among all adults, SES plays a major role for online engagement...

Engagement in 2+ online acts, all adults



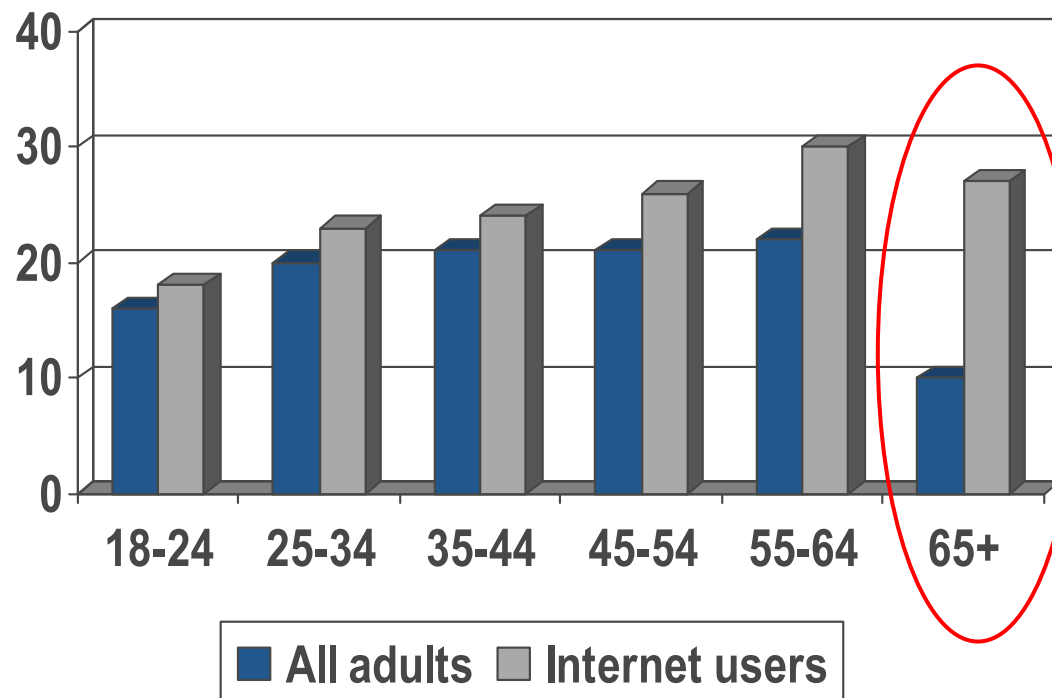
The digital divide only explains some of these differences

Engagement in 2+ online acts, Internet and Broadband Users



What the digital divide does explain—age differences in online engagement

Engagement in 2+ online acts



Despite overall low levels of internet use, online seniors are a highly engaged population

Summary

- **Online activities that mirror traditional offline forms of engagement** feature similar SES-based stratification.
- The digital divide explains some of this, but generally plays a small role
 - Even among broadband users, **the well-off and well-educated dominate**, and high overall levels of participation by young people are **almost entirely due to near-universal internet penetration within this cohort**
- Implications
 - **Simply letting people take traditional actions in an online setting is not sufficient to bring new voices into civic life**

New forms of online engagement

Will social media change everything?

The social media activities we evaluated

Social Networking-Specific

- Get candidate or campaign information
- Start or join a political group or cause
- Sign up as a “friend” of a candidate or campaign

General Social Media Usage

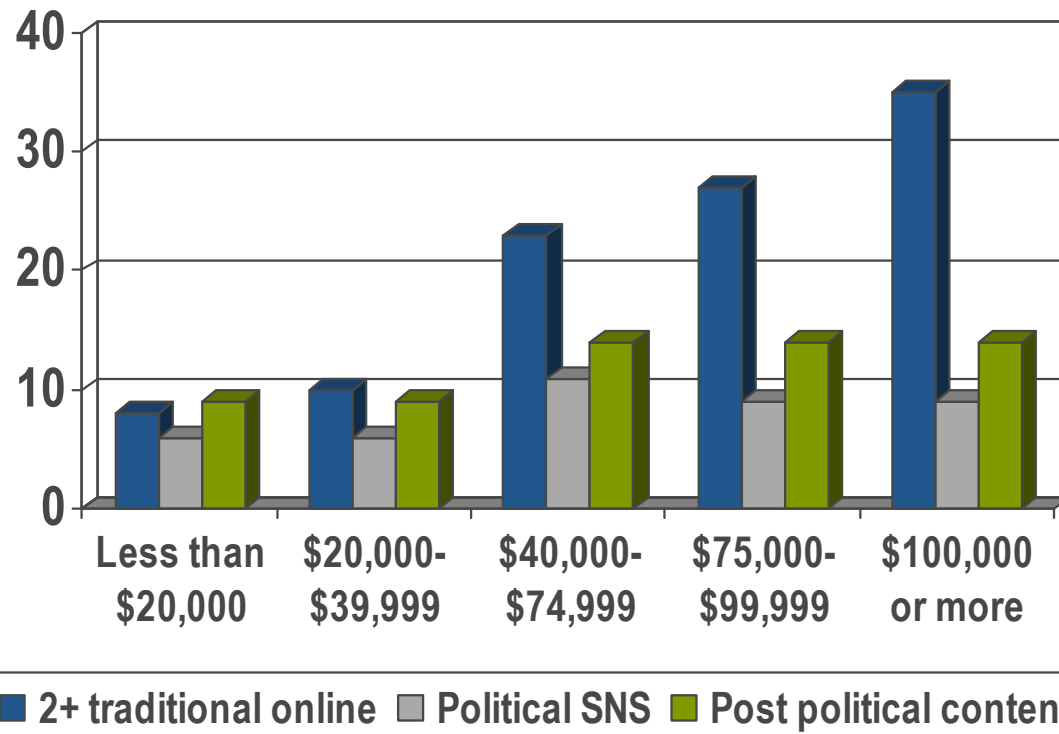
- Post comments on a website or blog about a political issue
- Post pictures or video online about a political or social issue
- Write about political or social issues in your own blog
- Post political content for others to read on a social networking site

These forms of online political engagement are the domain of the young

- Remember how engagement by young adults in “traditional” online activities was a function of their high rates of internet usage?
- This is not true for engagement with social media
 - Even when we control for internet and broadband use, **young adults are *far* more likely to use these tools for political purposes than are their elders**
- 18-35 year olds: 28% of the population, 72% of political social networking site users and 55% of those who post political material online
- **18-24 year olds: 10% of the population, 40% of those who use social networking sites politically and 29% of those who post their own social/political material**

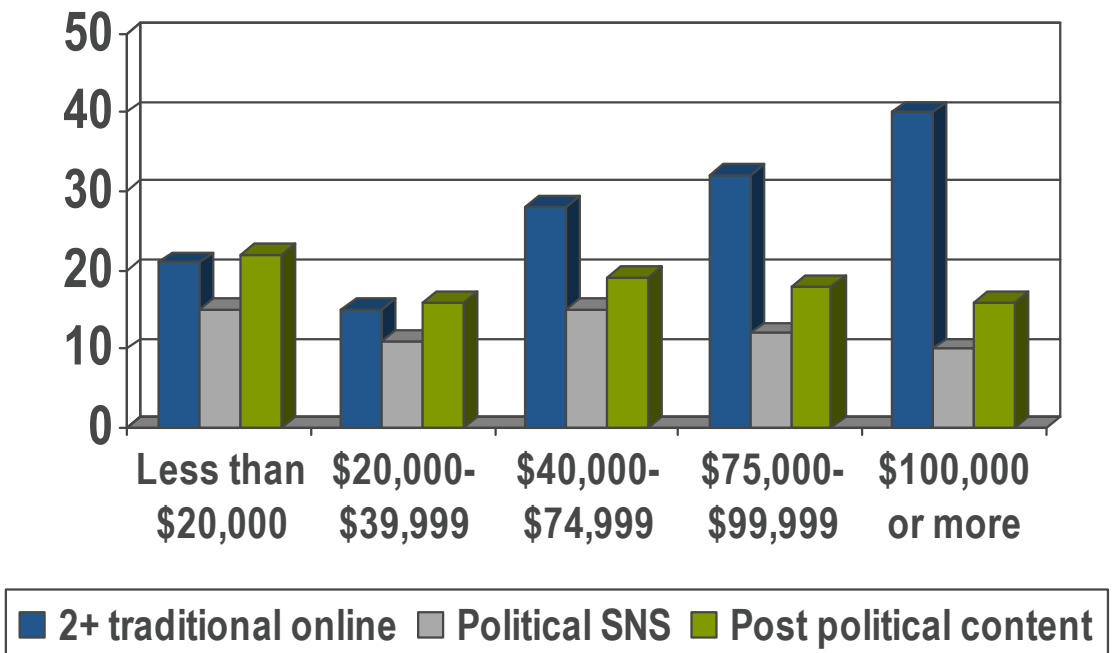
It's not just age: the online participatory class also has a very different socio-economic flavor

Online engagement by income (all adults)



Among broadband users, the low-SES cohort is actually the most active using new tools

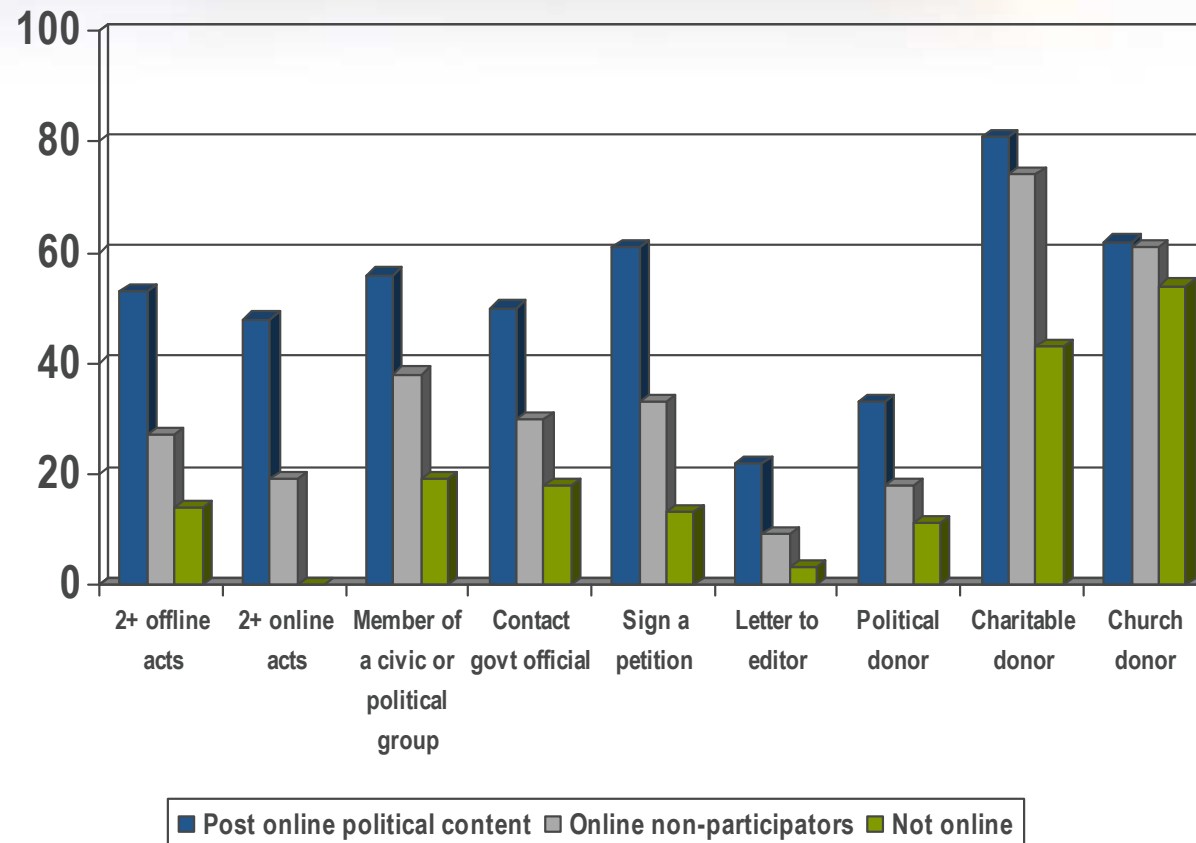
Online engagement by income (broadband only)



A few caveats...

- Socio-economic status is difficult to measure for a cohort that is young and has not yet entered the workforce in large numbers
- **We do not know what these young adults will look like as they age and enter the workforce**
 - Current college students are especially active
 - Will these young activists become the elites of the future?
- This survey was conducted during a very specific time in American politics, and it remains to be seen whether young adults will remain as engaged in the future
 - Put another way: **will these trends outlast the very specific features of the 2008 election?**

I'm saving my favorite chart for last...



Recommendations for government and non-profits conducting online outreach

- **Access and participation matter**
 - Not everyone is online (or loves their technology)
 - Find out where your “community” lives and reach them there (whether that’s online, offline or both)
- **Don’t be afraid to start small**
 - Email is still the most-used digital communication medium
- **Have a real voice and engage your community**
 - If people don’t see the point in doing something offline, allowing them to do it online won’t really help matters
 - Your constituents are real people with something to offer; if you treat them as such, they’ll return the favor

Questions?

- **For a free download of the report**, go to the Pew Internet website (www.PewInternet.org)
<http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/15--The-Internet-and-Civic-Engagement.aspx>
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