

# Digital Democracy in America: A Look at Civic Engagement in an Internet Age

Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly

1-17

© 2016 AEJMC

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1077699016681969

jmcq.sagepub.com



Jacob L. Nelson<sup>1</sup>, Dan A. Lewis<sup>1</sup>, and Ryan Lei<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Although the Internet has redefined interactions between the individual and the community, the U.S. civic engagement that so impressed Tocqueville still occurs today. Using data derived from a longitudinal survey of undergraduate students at a Midwestern university, we find that digital civic engagement fills the void left by drops in more conventional forms of political participation. We also find that educators have an important role to play in cultivating and maintaining online and offline civic engagement among younger people. We conclude that scholars and undergraduate educators need to develop curricula that build upon the ways students currently participate in democracy.

## Keywords

civic engagement, higher education, digital democracy

The dominant sociological view of civic engagement in the United States is a bleak one. Putnam (2000) and others have argued that we have lost our way and that many people have withdrawn from community life. They argue that political involvement is low (McMillan & Harriger, 2007) and community is dying (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Nielsen, 2015). In this article, we propose a different perspective. Following Tocqueville, we argue that there is a complicated interplay between individualism and community engagement in the United States

---

<sup>1</sup>Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Jacob L. Nelson, Northwestern University, 2240 Campus Drive, Evanston, IL 60208, USA.

Email: jacobnelson4@gmail.com

that flows from the origins of our democracy. Face to face interactions have been with us since the beginning of the Republic, along with print and later the telegraph and then telephones and television. With each technological innovation, this complex interplay between self and other citizens took on different forms. At first, each of these innovations was misunderstood and misjudged (Allen & Light, 2015). The present is no exception.

The Internet has redefined interactions between the individual and the community—indeed, it has redefined what “community” even means—especially for young people. The importance of the physical community has waned, but the Internet has provided an opportunity to cultivate new, digital communities, and with it a new kind of political engagement (Allen & Light, 2015; Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; Hargittai & Shaw, 2013; Zuckerman, 2014; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006). The result is both exciting and concerning. We argue that the Internet has brought young people to civic life in ways that could never have been imagined by Tocqueville, and we build upon his fundamental observation that Americans band together to solve problems. However, the Internet has also created a real challenge for educators uncertain how to encourage this new kind of civic engagement.

Using multilevel modeling of longitudinal survey data of undergraduates, we show that students are far more civically engaged online than offline. We also show that students who take classes where they are pushed to think about and discuss political issues—what we call civic learning courses—are more civically engaged online throughout their years at college than those who do not. What’s more, the online engagement for these students *increases* over time. We also find that students who take civic learning classes maintain offline civic engagement over time, whereas students in classes that do not stress civic learning show a significant decrease. Our analysis joins the growing scholarship that finds younger people to be far more civically engaged than many expect (Allen & Light, 2015; Hargittai & Shaw, 2013; Metzger, Erete, Barton, Desler, & Lewis, 2015; Zukin et al., 2006), and that educators play an integral part in nurturing that engagement (Beaumont, 2011; Bobkowski & Miller, 2016; Boyte, 2008; Lewis, 2014; McMillan & Harriger, 2007; Ronan, 2011; Zuckerman, 2014). By bringing these two scholarly conversations together, we show the important role one has to play in the other.

These findings reveal that college students may not be writing letters to their local politicians, but they are engaging digitally with democracy in important ways. These forms of digital engagement, which include reading and posting about politics online, fill the void left from drops in more conventional forms of democratic participation, such as attending a rally or writing a letter. To borrow from Putnam (2000), people may be “bowling alone” in the physical world, but this decrease in offline participation does not mean a net loss for democratic engagement or for community. It instead points to expanding definitions of the terms “engagement” and “community,” and a need for educators to reckon with these expansions when deciding how best to encourage participatory citizenship.

## Literature Review

### *The Collapse of the Local Community*

Tocqueville extolled the community as the gateway to American democracy. Communities, as Tocqueville observed in 19th-century New England, were self-contained settlements where citizens relished the administrative roles they felt obliged to play. As a result, the community offered citizens the opportunity to get involved in politics in a real and meaningful way (Tocqueville, 2012). This participation gave community members faith in public affairs, and a sense of how their lives fit into the larger society (Bellah et al., 1985). Educational institutions were crucial for teaching citizens that they had important roles to play in pursuit of the “common good” within their communities (Ronan, 2011, p. 13; Tocqueville, 2012).

Scholars observing local communities a century later found something lost. In an industrialized, globalized world, communities could no longer be self-contained, and it became harder for citizens to see their work as contributions to the greater good (Bellah et al., 1985; Nielsen, 2015). Individualism, which both impressed and worried Tocqueville (2012) in his studies of American society, became the defining characteristic of its citizens. The absence of an obvious collective goal to work toward, combined with a powerful emphasis on self-interest, resulted in a mass retreat from Tocqueville’s ideal of the community (Putnam, 2000; Wolin, 2003). Local communities became harder to define, and people grew less motivated to engage with them (Rothenbuhler, Mullen, DeLaurell, & Choon Ryul, 1996).

The loss of the self-contained community left citizens unsure where to turn for fulfillment, and unsure even about the meaning of citizenship (Bellah et al., 1985). Equally distressing, it left them with less faith in government: Trust in the government decreased from 77% in 1958 to 19% in 2015 (Doherty, Kiley, Tyson, & Jameson, 2015). Politics, which once meant ordinary citizens working together to solve problems, became something that felt disembodied from citizens and beyond their control (Nielsen, 2015). As a result, the perceived responsibilities of citizenship have diminished from one generation to the next. The current generation of young people is reportedly less trusting of their fellow citizens, less likely to feel like they can make a difference in politics, and more likely to need to be persuaded to follow public affairs (Zukin et al., 2006).

Bellah et al. (1985) saw the solution to this detachment in the strengthening of citizen groups. When people banded together in associations and movements, they could more forcefully influence government. Only more democratic participation would lead to a revival of the political (Wolin, 2003). This would bring back the sense of community that Tocqueville so admired, and that Putnam lamented had all but vanished from American society. The reemergence of this sense of community would restore political agency to citizens, allowing them to believe again that they have a role to play in public affairs, and that politics is efficient and tangible rather than unwieldy and abstract. In other words, this would “increase the prestige of government” (Bellah

et al., 1985, p. 211). Over the past two decades, citizen groups have increasingly banded together in this way on the Internet.

### *The Rise of the Online Community*

As the Internet has grown into an indispensable tool for people interested in connecting with others and staying informed, it has simultaneously become a popular source for civic engagement (Smith, 2013). For example, there are about two billion users between both Facebook and Twitter, and a majority report using both to get news (Barthel, Shearer, Gottfried, & Mitchell, 2015). In addition to offering citizens the ability to follow news, these social media platforms offer opportunities for citizens to group together based on shared civic goals. These online communities can lead to more comprehensive perspectives of the “real world” community (Rosenberry, 2010), and can mobilize people to pursue real-world changes. Trending Twitter hashtags have cost politicians elections (Allen & Light, 2015), and private citizens their jobs (Ronson, 2015). Most recently, mobilization on social media has been used to call attention to the deaths of unarmed Black men at the hands of police that have occurred in cities throughout the United States (Kang, 2015). In this instance, online communities used their solidarity and digital savvy to circulate their own narratives, without relying on mainstream news outlets (Freelon, McIlwain, & Clark, 2016). As an article describing the relationship between social media and the success of the Black Lives Matters movement puts it, “If you’re a civil rights activist in 2015 and you need to get some news out, your first move is to choose a[n online] platform” (Stephen, 2015).

The Internet is not the first media platform found to be important for introducing youth to a political world (Hoffman & Thomson, 2009) or cultivating civic participation (Ksiazek, Malthouse, & Webster, 2010). There have been multiple instances in American society where “new media” have had transformative effects on communication and civic engagement, from Roosevelt’s radio “fireside chats” to the televised Nixon–Kennedy debates (Allen & Light, 2015). And like the Internet, these new media were typically feared before they were welcomed. Worries about how the Internet will diminish political engagement echo earlier concerns that television would reduce political participation and news consumption (Katz, 1996). The current challenge is to see past our fears of the transformative effects of the digital age and “understand it, both in itself and also as a context for evolutions in civic and political engagement” (Allen & Light, 2015, p. 35). In other words, the Internet should be understood less in terms of what it might lead to (e.g., the end of political engagement as we know it), and more in terms of what it actually is: a tool that offers, among other things, “a practical and efficient way for interactive communication to occur among citizens of a community grappling with a public issue” (Rosenberry & St. John, 2010, p. 5). In an era where political action can come in the form of a social media movement, it is important to realize that the Internet has rewritten the rules not just of communication, but of citizenship as well.

Fortunately, as more studies focus on the effects of the Internet on politics, evidence abounds that initial skepticism was unfounded. Rather than displacing civic engagement, online activity encourages it (Moy, Manosevitch, Stamm, & Dunsmore,

2005; Zukin et al., 2006). This is especially true for young people: About 40% of all American adults engage in political activity via social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, including two thirds of the 18 to 24 age group (Smith, 2013). This group is more likely to engage politically on social media than in any other venue, and have been found to pursue topics they learn about within these venues via other online or offline political activities (Smith, 2013).

These online communities offer the means with which citizens can recapture the political agency that many scholars worried Americans had lost (Bellah et al., 1985; Boyte, 2008; Putnam, 2000). Zuckerman (2014) called this “participatory civics,” or civic engagement based in the embrace of digital media (p. 156). A major draw of participatory civics is its observable agency—the ability for participants “to see their impact on the issues they’re trying to influence” (Zuckerman, 2014, p. 156). For example, in light of events following the death of Michael Brown, professors and students used the Twitter hashtag #FergusonSyllabus to influence the way that educators discuss race in schools and college classrooms (Schuman, 2014). Online activism appeals to this generation because, whether in the form of a social media trend or a digital petition with hundreds of thousands of signatures, they can immediately see results.

Many studies have concluded that citizens take advantage of these online opportunities to get involved in public affairs (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; Cho, Keum, & Shah, 2015; Hargittai & Shaw, 2013; Lee, 2015). This is consistent with studies that find consumption of traditional news media, such as newspapers, to be positively related with civic engagement and political participation (Peer, Malthouse, & Calder, 2003; Rothenbuhler et al., 1996; Shaker, 2014). For instance, a decline in newspaper circulation is associated with declines in voter turnout (Clogston, 2014), while watching late night television and local television news is associated with higher rates of civic volunteerism (Hoffman & Thomson, 2009). What’s more, there is little evidence in support of “slacktivism,” the idea that a token of political gesture online results in less impactful engagement offline. Online activity is not a substitute for offline engagement. Instead, many have found that the former encourages more of the latter (Christensen, 2011; Lee, 2015; Smith, 2013).

This is encouraging news, and runs counter to the idea that younger people are disengaged from politics. A generation raised in the age of mobile Internet knows how to develop online communities without geographic constraints, and take advantage of this ability to launch coordinated, effective campaigns (Zukin et al., 2006). The challenge now is to understand how online engagement develops and changes over time, and what educators can do to nurture that engagement. Much effort has focused on understanding the online habits of younger people, and the relationship between those habits and civic engagement, but little remains known about where educators fit into that relationship.

### *The Role of Educators*

College and high school instructors can motivate students to get politically engaged, both online and offline (Allen & Light, 2015; Beaumont, 2011; Bobkowski & Miller,

2016; Zukin et al., 2006). In general, education levels are positively related with involvement in civic groups and activities (Smith, 2013). This observation may at first speak to student self-interest, assuming this engagement stems from homework assignments, but, as Bellah et al. (1985) argued, it can lead to routines of habit. Even Tocqueville describes civic engagement beginning with motivations of self-interest, then developing into “habit and taste” (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 174; Tocqueville, 2012). Students grow engaged because courses force them, but in the process they learn what it means to be a citizen (Ronan, 2011). These lessons have lasting effects.

The idea that classroom exposure to political issues predicts political engagement has been observed empirically (McMillan & Harriger, 2007). In their analysis of the first wave of our data, Metzger et al. (2015) found a positive relationship between high school classes that stressed civic responsibilities and the likelihood of contacting a public official, participating in a protest, and engaging in collective problem solving. Beaumont (2011) similarly concluded that political learning experiences are critical for the development of political agency among young people. And Bobkowski and Miller (2016) found that high school journalism classes were positively related to voting in the years following graduation. Yet, opportunities for civic engagement through learning experiences remain rare on college campuses (Beaumont, 2011; Metzger et al., 2015). And although much is known about how educators can influence offline examples of civic engagement, little is known about what role they might play in nurturing engagement online.

To develop curricula that can more forcefully work toward this goal, scholars have begun looking less at how the current generation compares with generations before in terms of their media use and political engagement, and more at how our understanding of citizenship is changing in a digital age. Lewis (2014) wrote,

The question here is less “How do the young compare with their elders?” and more “What are the new forms of citizenship that are emerging?” . . . Putnam and others have been looking under the streetlamp for the lost keys because the light is better there (meaning our literatures and methods are better suited for looking there), not because that is where the keys are likely to be. (p. 62)

The power and immediacy of the Internet is a strong draw for younger people looking to make a difference. Students have begun exploring an evolving and increasingly significant form of political agency, and educators are in the unique position to nurture and encourage that exploration. By incorporating course content that pushes students to follow politics, to consider ways of addressing social issues, and stresses “solving public problems and building democratic society” (Boyte, 2008, p. 16), higher education institutions can empower students to deliberate and take on the responsibility of engaged citizenship (McMillan & Harriger, 2007; Ronan, 2011). To do this in the digital age, these institutions must acknowledge the outsized role the Internet currently plays by providing context to the online tools these students are already using. Rather than asking how online engagement compares with more traditional modes, educators should focus on what this new engagement says about contemporary understandings of citizenship. Answering this question will help educators determine their role in a

digital world that comprises a different kind of community. With that, our research question is as follows:

**RQ1:** To what extent are college courses that stress civic learning related to levels of online and offline civic engagement among undergraduates?

## Method

The data for this project come from a longitudinal study that surveyed a random sampling of undergraduate students from a midsized, private university in the Midwestern United States in three waves. Students were surveyed the summer before they arrived to campus (2011), at the end of their first year (2012), and at the end of their senior year (2015). All students were invited to participate in this survey through an email, and had access to this email invitation for about 5 weeks during each wave of data collection. The first wave sampled 1,034 randomly selected undergraduates and collected 676 students (65% response rate). Only participants who consented in the first wave were invited to participate in Waves 2 and 3; 288 participants completed surveys in the second wave (42% response rate), and 221 of those completed surveys in the third (77% response rate).

The survey assessed levels of students' online and offline civic and political engagement, as well as information about their home and school environments that may contribute to engagement. As Metzger et al. (2015) described in their analysis of the first wave of results, survey items were chosen from the Index of Civic and Political Engagement (Andolina, Keeter, & Zukin, 2003), the National Civic and Political Engagement of Young People Survey (Portney & O'Leary, 2007), and a survey made by the Consortium on Chicago School Research (Kahne & Sporte, 2008). Other questions examined Internet use and news media consumption by participants. Apart from minor revisions, questions remained the same across all three waves.

With participants' informed consent, the survey data were linked with data collected by the university's Office of Student Affairs that captured information about selection of major, interactions with diverse students, use of various resources at the university, stress levels, and overall satisfaction at the university. The Office of Student Affairs also provided information including gender, race, and ethnicity, ACT and SAT scores, hometown, parental income, parents' educational attainment, and major during freshman year. The synthesis of these two data sets allowed us to control for demographic information as we examined the relationship between undergraduate coursework and civic engagement.

## Civic Learning

Following Metzger et al. (2015; who built on the work of Kahne & Sporte, 2008), we measured civic learning by using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) where participants answered questions about experiences that had occurred in at least one of their classes in the last year. We aggregated seven items into a civic learning index. Those items were as follows: "I was required to keep up with

politics or government, either by reading a newspaper, watching TV, or going to the Internet”; “I learned about things in society that need to be changed”; “I met people who work to make society better”; “The teacher focused on issues I care about”; “The teacher encouraged students to make up their own minds about political and social topics”; “I learned about ways to improve my community”; and “The teacher encouraged students to discuss political and social topics on which people have differing opinions.” The scale exhibited acceptable reliability ( $\alpha = .77$ ).

### *Defining Civic Engagement*

Many terms have been used to describe the ways citizens interact with or follow public affairs. Some distinguish between civic volunteerism and civic participation (Shah, Schmierbach, Hawkins, Espino, & Donovan, 2002), whereas others distinguish between political and civic engagement—The former includes activities that specifically affect government and the latter refers to activities that are designed to promote the public good (Warren & Wicks, 2011; Zukin et al., 2006). There is also the question of what constitutes “engagement” and what constitutes “participation.” Some consider participation to refer primarily to offline activities, such as attending campaign events or rallies (Dilliplane, 2011), while engagement refers specifically to measures of exposure to community or political news. However, others more or less use “engagement” and “participation” interchangeably (Baek, Wojcieszak, & Delli Carpini, 2012; Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; Paek, Yoon, & Shah, 2005; Shah, 1998; Shah, McLeod, & Yoon, 2001). In our effort to observe how college courses do or do not shape young people’s involvement with public affairs, we define civic engagement as comprising all of these activities. For the purpose of our project, we simply distinguish between online and offline civic engagement.

*Online engagement.* Online civic engagement was measured as a composite of three items ( $\alpha = .66$ ): “Look for, read, or watch content about politics online”; “Take part in discussions about politics online, for example, by commenting on, responding to, forwarding, or posting such material”; and “Read the news on the Internet.” Participants reported how often they took part in the first two activities on a 5-point scale that ranged from 1 (“never”) to 5 (“daily”). The survey measured Internet news consumption with an 8-point scale from 1 (“never”) to 8 (“7 days a week”).

Given the data set’s nested nature and missing data, we used multilevel modeling (MLM). MLM is uniquely suited to handle unbalanced data, as it derives adjusted means clustered to the individual instead of the arithmetic mean. We first ran a fully unconditional model and determined that between-person variation accounted for 52% of the variance in online engagement ( $\rho_1 = \tau_{00} / [\tau_{00} + \sigma^2]$ ). The Level 1 model was used to examine within-subjects variation in online engagement as a function of time:

$$\text{ONLINEENGAGEMENT}_{it} = \pi_{0i} + \pi_{1i}(\text{TIME}_{it}) + e_{it}.$$

Online engagement for a given person  $i$  at a given time  $t$  was modeled as a function of the intercept  $\pi_0$  (the amount of engagement right before beginning college) and the

amount of change expected as a function of time. To test our main research question, we extended the analysis to a Level 2 model to include person-level factors (i.e., enrollment in classes that stress civic learning) that may influence the change in engagement over time:

$$\pi_{0i} = \gamma_{01} + r_{0i},$$

$$\pi_{1i} = \gamma_{10} + r_{1i}.$$

The first equation estimates intercepts-as-outcomes, where  $\pi_{0i}$  is the overall intercept across participants, and was estimated as a function of the fixed effect of the predictor variable for each participant. The second equation estimates slopes-as-outcomes, where  $\pi_{1i}$  estimates the rate of change for each participant. We combined these two equations with the predictor variables to arrive at the following Level 2 equation:

$$\text{ONLINEENGAGEMENT}_{it} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}(\text{TEACHCIVIC}_{it}) + \gamma_{10}(\text{TIME}_{it}) + \gamma_{11}(\text{TIME} \times \text{TEACHCIVIC}_{it}) + [e_{it} + r_{i0} + r_{i1}\text{Time}_{it}].$$

This model allowed us to examine individual differences in how much courses stressed civic learning for students as a between-person factor in predicting online engagement in general and the change in online engagement over time.

*Offline engagement.* Offline civic engagement was measured by summing four items: “Contacted or visited a public official—at any level of government—to express your opinion”; “Contacted a newspaper or magazine to express your opinion on an issue”; “Called in to a radio or television talk show to express your opinion on a political issue, even if you did not get on the air”; and “Taken part in a protest, march, or demonstration.” Although all variables were binary, summing them allowed us to create one continuous dependent variable. In general, most participants completed one or less of these items ( $M = 0.67$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ), though some students reported doing all four. The analytic strategy was the same as for online engagement.

## Results

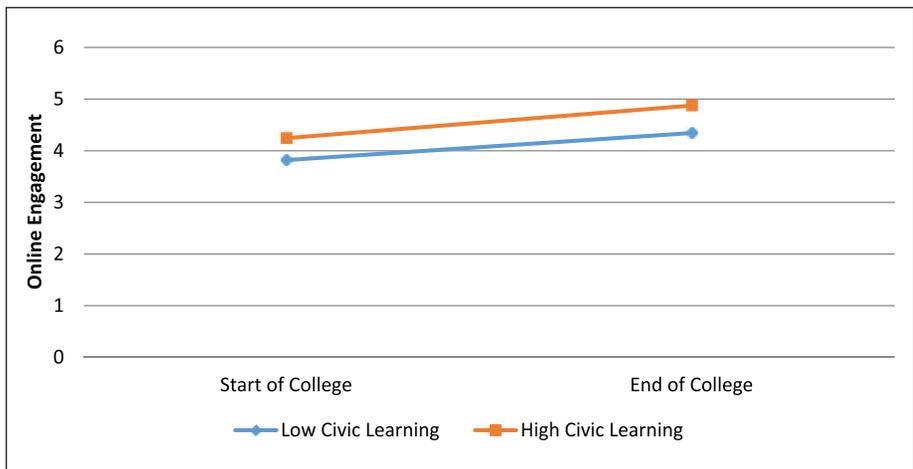
Table 1 shows the results of the random-coefficient regression models for online and offline civic engagement. The Level 1 model results indicate that time is a significant predictor of online civic engagement: Over time, students engaged more online. The Level 2 model, however, which includes as a variable the civic learning courses students took, indicates that participation in these classes is the only main effect (Figure 1). Neither time nor the interaction of time and participating in a civic learning course are a significant predictor of online civic engagement. This suggests that participation in civic learning courses explains a significant proportion of the increase in online civic engagement that would otherwise appear to occur as a function of time.

**Table 1.** Effect Estimates and Standard Errors for Level 1 and Level 2 Models Predicting Online and Offline Engagement.

	Level 1	Level 2
<b>Online engagement</b>		
Intercept	3.69 (.08)**	2.66 (.51)*
Time	0.307 (.04)*	0.17 (.25)
Civic learning		0.25 (.13)*
Time × Civic Learning		0.05 (.06)
<b>Offline engagement</b>		
Intercept	0.99 (.06)***	2.00 (.38)***
Time	-0.17 (.03)***	-0.82 (.16)***
Civic learning		-0.26 (.09)**
Time × Civic Learning		0.17 (.04)***

Note. Coefficients are estimates of the fixed effects (standard error in parentheses).

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Figure 1.** Effect of classes that stress civic learning on online engagement.

The analysis of offline civic engagement paints a different picture. The Level 1 model indicates that students will civically engage offline significantly less over time. This effect remains significant in the Level 2 model, and is joined by a significant, smaller negative effect of participation in civic learning courses. However, both of these effects are subsumed by the interaction between time and participation in civic learning courses. This interaction suggests that students who took civic learning courses maintained their levels of offline civic engagement over time, whereas students who did not take civic learning courses reduced their offline engagement throughout their undergraduate experience (Figure 2).

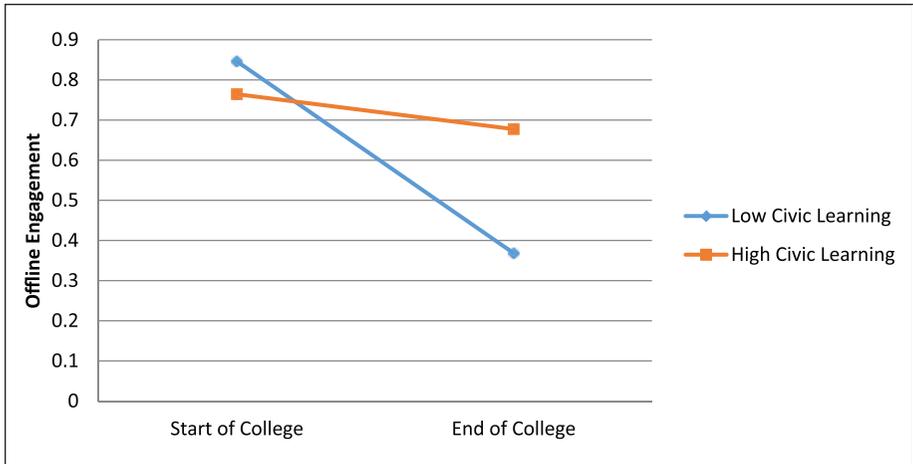


Figure 2. Effect of classes that stress civic learning on offline engagement.

## Discussion

Millennials are often seen as the canary in the coalmine of civic collapse. Their poor performance on the measures of traditional civic engagement (voting, working on campaigns, writing to their Congressional representatives, etc.) is regularly cited as evidence of the decline of American democracy. But just as the telegraph and television changed American politics, so too has the Internet, and we believe the result is a new medium through which our individualism and voluntary associational style weave together with both positive and negative results. Our analysis suggests that although the forms of citizenship may be changing, the underlying dynamics remain as Tocqueville described them. That makes this an important moment for undergraduate educators interacting with a generation raised in the Internet age.

A recent report asked, “What would higher education look like if it became a ‘civic learning organization’?” (Boyte, 2008, p. 4). Our analysis begins to answer this question by examining the relationship between undergraduate civic engagement and college courses that motivate students to learn about political and social issues. The results reveal that college courses have an important role to play in maintaining and nurturing civic engagement. Our multilevel models show that students who took courses that pushed them to follow politics and to consider ways of addressing social and public issues were more civically engaged online than those who did not. They also show that students who did not take classes that stressed civic learning showed a significant decrease in offline engagement over time, whereas those who did take such classes did not. In short, students who encountered coursework that encouraged them to think about political issues and pushed them to consider ways to solve political or social problems grew more civically engaged online and maintained civic engagement offline throughout their time at college.

The much higher level of online civic engagement among college students, as compared with offline engagement, is important for educators to bear in mind as they consider ways of working civic learning into their curricula. Undergraduates begin college much more civically engaged online than offline, and remain that way throughout the pursuit of their degrees. For example, the percentage of students who sign petitions offline dropped over time while online petition signing went up. Similarly, students in our study were more likely to read and post comments about political news online than they were to canvass for a politician or write a letter to a newspaper. There is, however, one traditional form of participation a majority of students will partake in: voting. Although most students reported that they distrusted national politicians, a majority planned to vote in presidential elections. But in general, and consistent with prior work, this group was more likely to place their faith in community-focused efforts to solve political problems (Bellah et al., 1985; Nielsen, 2015; Putnam, 2000). Increasingly, these communities are forming online.

These online communities provide political agency to those who might otherwise feel detached and unable to tackle public problems. They allow a new generation of young people to follow political and civic issues that are written about by journalists and citizens alike. The reality of this more participatory news media is that it does not by itself improve public life; yet “the promise is that it could” (Rosenberry & St. John, 2010, p. 5). This goal can be reached first and foremost via engagement with this media—especially among the next generation of citizens—and by the efforts of educators to maintain and build upon that engagement.

We are not arguing that all higher education instructors should bring civic learning into their classrooms, nor do we have a specific model in mind for what that civic learning should look like, as it is likely to vary across diverse disciplines. However, there are small steps instructors can take to bridge the connection between offline and online engagement. For example, history, sociology, and English courses that touch on social or political issues can ask students to blog about how their readings parallel with contemporary political and social topics. Many journalism courses use news quizzes to motivate students to keep up with current events, and these can be complemented with assignments that ask students to post an online comment about an editorial, either within the news source or via social media.

More significant steps can simply be expansions of programming already available at certain universities. Some journalism programs situated in or near diverse urban areas offer students the opportunity to venture into and report on disenfranchised communities, allowing them to learn about the real-world implications of the political issues they engage with in classrooms or online (Nelson & Lewis, 2015). In addition to making these topics more palpable, these opportunities expose students to the kind of community advocacy that exemplifies offline civic engagement. For example, a student’s experience learning about racial discrimination in a classroom is likely to be very different from a student sent into Chicago’s South Side to interview activists seeking better schools for their children and fairer treatment by the police. And by motivating students to move beyond passive consumption of online media to the production of publishable articles, these opportunities offer students the chance to see firsthand how powerful journalism can be.

Yet, these steps need not solely be confined to journalism programs. Many universities already help connect students of any major with professional experience via career counseling, career fairs, or internship opportunities. These resources can easily be expanded to include opportunities at civic organizations. Although students will learn just as many useful professional skills at an affordable housing nonprofit as they would at a consulting firm, only one of these opportunities pushes them into the world of offline civic engagement and public policy. If universities promote internship opportunities at civic organizations by both actively publicizing them and by pointing to the professional development these opportunities provide, they may find many more students seeking these experiences out (Lewis, 2014). These examples reflect both big and small steps college campuses can take to meaningfully nudge students toward civic engagement, and to bring these civic tools into their daily experience.

Echoing prior research (Allen & Light, 2015; Metzger et al., 2015; Zukin et al., 2006), our results paint an optimistic portrait of college students that shows them highly engaged in civic matters, but primarily within digital communities. We find evidence that educators have a pivotal part to play in cultivating and nurturing that engagement, both online and offline. By making civic learning either a part of more college classes or a larger part of a select few, instructors can motivate students to consider the many online and offline options for civic engagement that are at their disposal. Younger people do not need to be taught how to navigate the Internet, which means college campuses have the opportunity to exploit the digital literacy of this generation in a way that instills in them a palpable sense of community and political agency. Our data reveal that courses that stress civic learning lead to increases in online civic engagement over time, which means once students find a reason to explore these new tools of “participatory civics” (Zuckerman, 2014), they keep going. Our results are an encouraging sign that college students are more civically engaged than many thought, and that college campuses have the unique ability to nurture and develop that engagement.

In *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Bellah et al. (1985) wrote, “When education becomes an instrument for individual careerism, it cannot provide either personal meaning or civic culture” (p. 293). However, deciding between either preparation for citizenship or a career is a false choice. College campuses can and should provide opportunities for both (Ronan, 2011). Educators are confronted now not only with the challenge of ensuring they prepare students with the skills to successfully navigate the professional world, but also with the challenge of ensuring their curricula speak to contemporary understandings of community and engagement. This article shows what happens when college courses meet this task. These findings should encourage other campuses to follow suit. More broadly, these findings should be seen as evidence that our understanding of participatory democracy must evolve with the times. Online civic engagement should no longer be seen as a worrisome symptom of an apathetic generation, but as a sign of what the future holds for political agency.

## **Acknowledgment**

The authors wish to thank Mary Desler and Emily Hittner for their help preparing the data.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## References

- Allen, D., & Light, J. (2015). *From voice to influence: understanding citizenship in a digital age* (D. Allen & J. S. Light, Eds.). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Andolina, M., Keeter, S., & Zukin, C. (2003). *A guide to the index of civic and political engagement*. Retrieved from <http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/IndexGuide.pdf>
- Baek, Y. M., Wojcieszak, M., & Delli Carpini, M. X. (2012). Online versus face-to-face deliberation: Who? Why? What? With what effects? *New Media & Society, 14*, 363-383. doi:10.1177/1461444811413191
- Bakker, T. P., & de Vreese, C. H. (2011). Good news for the future? Young people, internet use, and political participation. *Communication Research, 38*, 451-470. doi:10.1177/0093650210381738
- Barthel, M., Shearer, E., Gottfried, J., & Mitchell, A. (2015, July 14). *The evolving role of news on Twitter and Facebook*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <http://www.journalism.org/2015/07/14/the-evolving-role-of-news-on-twitter-and-facebook/>
- Beaumont, E. (2011). Promoting political agency, addressing political inequality: A multilevel model of internal political efficacy. *The Journal of Politics, 73*, 216-231. doi:10.1017/S0022381610000976
- Bellah, R. N., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W. M., Swidler, A., & Tipton, S. M. (1985). *Habits of the heart: Individualism and commitment in American life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bobkowski, P. S., & Miller, P. R. (2016). Civic implications of secondary school journalism: Associations with voting propensity and community volunteering. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 93*, 530-550. doi:10.1177/1077699016628821
- Boyte, H. C. (2008). Information age populism. *Tikkun, 23*(5), 48-50.
- Cho, J., Keum, H., & Shah, D. V. (2015). News consumers, opinion leaders, and citizen consumers: Moderators of the consumption-participation link. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, 92*, 161-178. doi:10.1177/1077699014554766
- Christensen, H. S. (2011). Political activities on the Internet: Slacktivism or political participation by other means? *First Monday, 16*(2). Retrieved from <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3336/2767>
- Clogston, J. (2014). *Post-print democracy: The decline of newspapers and the effects on political information, political participation and political power* (Doctoral dissertation, Johns Hopkins University). Retrieved from <https://jscholarship.library.jhu.edu/handle/1774.2/37155>
- Dilliplane, S. (2011). All the news you want to hear: The impact of partisan news exposure on political participation. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 75*, 287-316. doi:10.1093/poq/nfr006
- Doherty, C., Kiley, J., Tyson, A., & Jameson, B. (2015). *Beyond distrust: How Americans view their government*. Retrieved from <http://www.people-press.org/2015/11/23/beyond-distrust-how-americans-view-their-government/>

- Freelon, D., McIlwain, C. D., & Clark, M. D. (2016). *Beyond the hashtags: #Ferguson, #Blacklivesmatter, and the online struggle for offline justice*. Retrieved from <http://www.cmsimpact.org/blmreport>
- Hargittai, E., & Shaw, A. (2013). Digitally savvy citizenship: The role of internet skills and engagement in young adults' political participation around the 2008 presidential election. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 57, 115-134. doi:10.1080/08838151.2013.787079
- Hoffman, L. H., & Thomson, T. L. (2009). The effect of television viewing on adolescents' civic participation: Political efficacy as a mediating mechanism. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 53, 3-21. doi:10.1080/08838150802643415
- Kahne, J., & Sporte, S. (2008). Developing citizens: A longitudinal study of the impact of classroom practices, extra-curricular activities, parent discussions, and neighborhood contexts on students' commitment to civic participation. *American Educational Research Journal*, 45, 738-766.
- Kang, J. C. (2015, May 4). Our demand is simple: Stop killing us. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/10/magazine/our-demand-is-simple-stop-killing-us.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/10/magazine/our-demand-is-simple-stop-killing-us.html?_r=0)
- Katz, E. (1996). And deliver us from segmentation. *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 546, 22-33.
- Ksiazek, T. B., Malthouse, E. C., & Webster, J. G. (2010). News-seekers and avoiders: Exploring patterns of total news consumption across media and the relationship to civic participation. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 54, 551-568. doi:10.1080/08838151.2010.519808
- Lee, S. H. (2015). News engagement versus news consumption: Does online news use promote civic engagement? *Electronic News*, 9(2), 75-90. doi:10.1177/1931243115581415
- Lewis, D. A. (2014). Engagement and citizenship: A new core for the university. *Journal of General Education*, 63, 57-63. doi:10.1353/jge.2014.0003
- McMillan, J. J., & Harriger, K. J. (2007). *Speaking of politics: Preparing college students for democratic citizenship through deliberative dialogue*. Dayton, OH: The Kettering Foundation.
- Metzger, M. W., Erete, S. L., Barton, D. L., Desler, M. K., & Lewis, D. A. (2015). The new political voice of young Americans: Online engagement and civic development among first-year college students. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 10, 55-66. doi:10.1177/1746197914558398
- Moy, P., Manosevitch, E., Stamm, K., & Dunsmore, K. (2005). Linking dimensions of internet use and civic engagement. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 82, 571-586. doi:10.1177/107769900508200306
- Nelson, J. L., & Lewis, D. A. (2015). Training social justice journalists: A case study. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, 70, 394-406. doi:10.1177/1077695815598613
- Nielsen, R. K. (2015). *Local journalism: The decline of newspapers and the rise of digital media*. London, England: I.B. Tauris.
- Paek, H.-J., Yoon, S.-H., & Shah, D. V. (2005). Local news, social integration, and community participation: Hierarchical linear modeling of contextual and cross-level effects. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 82, 587-606.
- Peer, L., Malthouse, E., & Calder, B. (2003, August 27-31). *Estimating the effect of news media consumption on political participation*. Paper presented at the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia Marriott Hotel, Philadelphia, PA.

- Portney, K., & O'Leary, L. (2007). *Civic and political engagement of America's youth: A report from the Tisch College National Survey of Civic and Political Engagement of Young People*. Retrieved from <http://activecitizen.tufts.edu/downloads/FinalReport1.pdf>
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Ronan, B. (2011). *The civic spectrum: How students become engaged citizens*. The Kettering Foundation. Retrieved from <https://www.kettering.org/catalog/product/civic-spectrum-how-students-become-engaged-citizens>
- Ronson, J. (2015). *So you've been publicly shamed*. New York, NY: Picador.
- Rosenberry, J. (2010). Virtual community support for offline communities through online newspaper message forums. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 87, 154-169.
- Rosenberry, J., & St. John, B. (2010). *Public journalism 2.0: The promise and reality of a citizen-engaged press*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Rothenbuhler, E. W., Mullen, L. J., DeLaurell, R., & Choon Ryl, R. (1996). Communication, community attachment, and involvement. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 73, 445-466.
- Schuman, R. (2014, September 8). The birth of the #FergusonSyllabus. *Slate*. Retrieved from [http://www.slate.com/articles/life/education/2014/09/ferguson\\_and\\_college\\_education\\_sociology\\_and\\_history\\_professors\\_teach\\_the.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/life/education/2014/09/ferguson_and_college_education_sociology_and_history_professors_teach_the.html)
- Shah, D. V. (1998). Civic engagement, interpersonal trust, and television use: An individual-level assessment of social capital. *Political Psychology*, 19, 469-496. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3792174>
- Shah, D. V., McLeod, J. M., & Yoon, S.-H. (2001). Communication, context, and community: An exploration of print, broadcast, and internet influences. *Communication Research*, 28, 464-506.
- Shah, D. V., Schmierbach, M., Hawkins, J., Espino, R., & Donovan, J. (2002). Nonrecursive models of internet use and community engagement: Questioning whether time spent online erodes social capital. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 79, 964-987. doi:10.1177/107769900207900412
- Shaker, L. (2014). Dead newspapers and citizens' civic engagement. *Political Communication*, 31, 131-148. doi:10.1080/10584609.2012.762817
- Smith, A. (2013). *Civic engagement in the digital age*. Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/04/25/civic-engagement-in-the-digital-age/>
- Stephen, B. (2015, October). Social media helps Black Lives Matter fight the power. *Wired*. Retrieved from <http://www.wired.com/2015/10/how-black-lives-matter-uses-social-media-to-fight-the-power/>
- Tocqueville, A. d. (2012). *Democracy in America* (English ed.). Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund.
- Warren, R., & Wicks, R. H. (2011). Political socialization: Modeling teen political and civic engagement. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 88, 156-175. doi:10.1177/107769901108800109
- Wolin, S. S. (2003). *Tocqueville between two worlds: The making of a political and theoretical life*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Zuckerman, E. (2014). New media, new civics? *Policy & Internet*, 6, 151-168. doi:10.1002/1944-2866.POI360
- Zukin, C., Keeter, S., Andolina, M., Jenkins, K., & Delli Carpini, M. X. (2006). *A new engagement? Political participation, civic life, and the changing American citizen*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

## Author Biographies

**Jacob L. Nelson** is a doctoral candidate at Northwestern University's Media, Technology, and Society program. He researches issues in news production and consumption.

**Dan A. Lewis** is a professor at Northwestern University's School of Education and Social Policy, and the director of the university's Center for Civic Engagement. He has written or edited seven books, including *Gaining Ground in Illinois: Welfare Reform and Person-Centered Policy Analysis* (2010). At the Institute for Policy Research, he has directed major projects on community reactions to crime, the deinstitutionalization of state mental health patients, and Chicago school decentralization.

**Ryan Lei** is a doctoral candidate in social psychology, with specific interests in stereotyping and prejudice. His research examines the nuances of how intergroup bias is expressed and regulated.