

Study finds 18- to 24-year-old group more politically active, but not more knowledgeable

August 13 2009

A study by three Kansas State University graduate students finds that the 18- to 24-year-old demographic became more politically active during the 2008 U.S. election season through the use of new media, but that the young adults were not necessarily more knowledgeable about politics.

The K-State study examined young adults' media consumption and the effects of new media on their political knowledge and political activism. While the study showed that 18- to 24-year-olds were actively engaging in politics through media such as blogs and YouTube, their involvement did not increase their knowledge.

The K-State researchers conducting the study, all master's [students](#) in journalism and mass communications, were Keunyeong Kim, and Sookyong Kim, both from Manhattan, and Chance York, Wamego. William Adams, K-State professor of journalism and mass communications, was the project adviser. The research was presented at the 2009 Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication convention.

"Politicians in general are so reliant on political polling, but politicians are not examining how much the voter knows about the issues they're voting on," York said.

The study targeted the 18- to 24-year-old demographic and examined the group's usage of new media. The researchers surveyed more than 160 undergraduate students in February about their use of both traditional

media sources, including radio campaign commercials, and new media sources, like blogs, to obtain information about presidential candidates and their campaign issues.

"We were trying to find what information sources 18- to 24-year olds were looking at and how that might have affected their political activism and their level of political knowledge," York said.

The survey's measures for political activism included yes or no questions that dealt with traditional and online forms of political involvement. The traditional methods of activism included volunteering for a presidential candidate's campaign or attending a candidate's rally, while online forms of involvement included checking a presidential candidate's campaign Web site. The measure for political knowledge was similar to a current events quiz with questions like the name of the U.S. secretary of defense.

The survey also measured the demographics of the students, including their political affiliation and ideology and whether they voted in the 2008 election.

"We found that the students were really politically active," York said. "They talked about the campaigns with their friends, and a lot of people got online on a social networking site to talk about the campaigns. Not many wrote blogs, but a considerable amount kept up with blogs."

The study also found that most students were not politically knowledgeable, York said. For instance, many students did not know what Guantanamo Bay was; some said it was a Caribbean resort.

There also was a set of people that were both politically active and knowledgeable, and there was a high correlation between those two variables and voting.

"People who were actually voting were both active and knowledgeable, and that wasn't affected by whether the student was a Democrat or Republican, or liberal or conservative," York said.

Additionally, the study indicated that among the 18- to 24-year-old demographic, the individuals who voted were not the ones using new media to obtain political information.

The researchers also looked at the different types of new media, such as those that would be considered "gatekeepers," where an editorial member controls the flow of knowledge, and "gatewatchers," where information flows more freely.

The study showed that the more people used new media that would be considered "gatewatched," such as blogs, the more likely they were to be politically active -- but not politically knowledgeable. New media that would be "gatekept," such as online news articles, had less of an impact on political activism and no significant effect on political knowledge. Survey respondents' use of traditional media did not play a significant role in their political activism or political knowledge.

York said the study has limitations, particularly since the students were not selected from a random sample.

"What we can't say is that this is true for all 18-to 24-year-olds, and statistically we can't make a significant inference," York said. "However, there is not a lot of research in this area, and so trying to forge out that path is a good start."

Source: Kansas State University ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: Study finds 18- to 24-year-old group more politically active, but not more knowledgeable (2009, August 13) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-08-year-old-group-politically-knowledgeable.html>

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