

People who participate ‘beyond voting’ are different

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Although only 50 to 60 percent of Americans vote in presidential elections, and only 35 to 40 percent vote in midterm elections, voting is still the most common form of political participation. This is why most research on the connection between participation and policy outcomes focuses on voting. Research shows that voting does make a difference in several policy areas, including welfare-benefit levels, federal grant awards and senator roll-call votes.

But does becoming more involved in ways that don’t involve voting affect policy choices? Voting has been stable or has declined in the past few decades, but there are new opportunities for participation beyond the vote. Not only petitioning and protesting, but new forms of involvement via social media have allowed citizens to become more politically active.

In a recent study, we looked at one aspect of this participation-policy connection by asking whether people who participate in these new or different ways have different policy preferences than those who participate more traditionally. Our evidence speaks to a prominent explanation for why voting may affect policy outcomes: Because voters are likely to also be politically active “beyond voting,” they are able to convey their policy preferences to decision-makers through several avenues at once.

This “communication hypothesis” assumes that all voters have similar policy preferences, so that voters who are also politically active in additional ways can be thought of as the representative communicators of these preferences. For example, a politically active voter favoring an immigration policy that calls for protecting the borders represents the voices of non-active voters. If this were true, then more opportunities for citizen engagement wouldn’t change things very much. If, in contrast, people who engage in new kinds of participation have different preferences than people who don’t, then new kinds of participation are going to reveal *different* preferences over policy to decision-makers. We used a new statistical technique (latent class analysis) to assess how citizens combine the act of voting with other kinds of offline and online political engagement. Once we identified distinctive types of participators, we then assessed whether their policy preferences differed in meaningful ways from those who “only” vote.

Our study identifies four types of voters (Figure 1):

(1) “All-around activists” (5 percent of voters), who are highly active in all participatory opportunities.

(2)“Traditional campaigners” (8 percent of voters), who are particularly active in traditional offline campaign activity.

(3)“Persuaders” (12 percent of voters), who are highly engaged in online means to communicate directly to representatives.

(4)“Low engaged” (76 percent of voters), who are unlikely to be politically active beyond voting.

We then compared the policy preferences of non-voters to the preferences of these four types of participators on key campaign issues in the 2008 election, namely tax policy, health-care regulation, environmental protection and abortion (Figure 2). Our evidence suggests that there is little difference between the preferences of nonvoters and those who vote but do little else. However, we did find meaningful differences among the different types of voting participators in their views on important policy issues in the 2008 campaign. Policy-relevant findings include three main points:

All-around activists consistently report different policy views from those who vote but do little else.

The “traditional campaigners” (with an offline focus) and the “persuaders” (with an online focus) are different from low-engaged voters on the environment and abortion issues.

We see the greatest difference in policy preferences between the different types of participators (Figure 2a) on tax policy, the most salient policy issue in the 2008 campaign.

Our study shows that we can’t assume that high-communicating voters represent the policy concerns of all voters. Differences between voters who engage in different ways will become more relevant as more online forms of political engagement emerge. Our work also suggests that elected officials hear different messages from people participating in different ways, with potential consequences for politics. Citizens appear to specialize in different types of participation and, as a result, convey different policy positions to government officials. Without understanding the mix of the messages conveyed to elected officials, we are unsure how effective the vote, or any other sort of political activity, is in democratic politics in the country today.

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This post is part of the [Scholars Strategy Network](#) series on civic engagement between elections.

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