MOBILIZATION
CHANGE AND POLITICAL
& CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION:
BEFORE AND AFTER THE ELECTION

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black youth project™

Political Participation: Before and After the Election

The 2008 election was historic in many regards, not least of which was the successful campaign of the first major black candidate for president. Much attention has been paid to the sophistication of the Obama campaign in its ability to engage youth and racial minorities in record numbers in both campaign efforts and voting and its successful utilization of the Internet to fund the campaign and generate grassroots support.

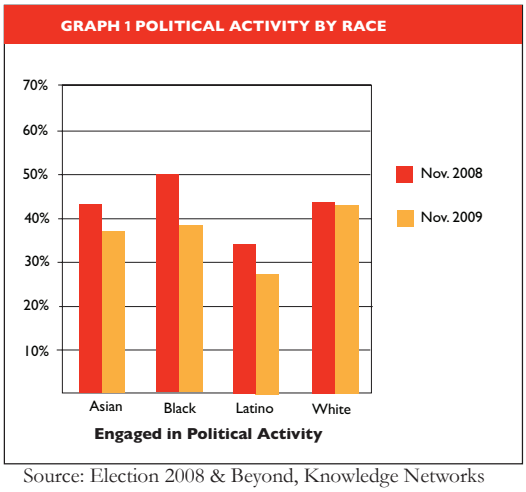
The Election 2008 and Beyond Survey, part of the Mobilization, Change, and Political and Civic Engagement Project, conducted surveys from before (October 17–November 3, 2008) and after (November 24, 2009–January 19, 2010) the election. The results presented here investigate the effects of the 2008 election on political participation for various age and racial groups.

Voter turnout in the 2008 election displayed several novel patterns that differed from previous elections. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, while the number of people who voted increased by 5 million to 131 million, the percentage of registered voters out of those who were eligible decreased from 72 percent to 71 percent. Voting rates changed substantially for different racial groups. Non-Hispanic whites showed a decrease of 1 percent in voting rates, to 66 percent, while blacks, Asians, and Latinos all exhibited a 4 percent increase in voter turnout, bringing them to 65 percent, 49 percent, and 49 percent respectively. With regard to age, youth voters (ages 18–24) exhibited a significant increase in turnout by 2 percentage points, to 49 percent. All other age groups did not experience any significant changes in turnout compared to the 2004 election. The most dramatic increase was seen in the turnout of black youth voters (ages 18–24); at 55 percent, they increased in turnout by 8 percent.[1] Much media coverage focused on the effect of newly mobilized voters in the 2008 presidential election.[2] Both parties, but especially Democrats, focused on turning out Latino voters,[3] and the Barack Obama's campaign helped foment the participation of young voters and racial minorities, groups whose ideological orientation was in line with Obama's political platform. However, no reporting has explored whether these efforts to increase voter turnout affected other forms of political participation or if they had continued effects after the election. In this memo, I investigate the rate and forms of participation of these groups in the 2008 election and if these

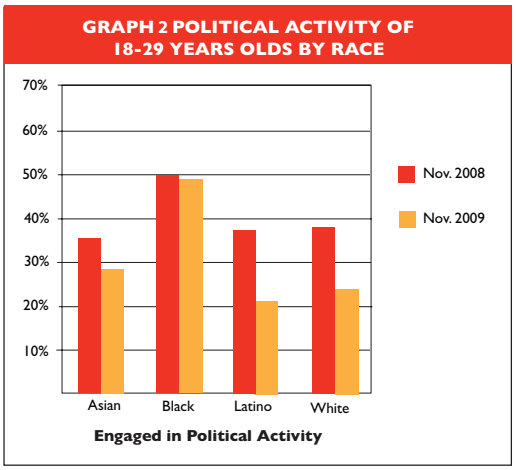
[1]United States Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, "Voter Turnout Increases by 5 Million in 2008 Presidential Election, U.S. Census Bureau Reports," press release, July 20, 2009.

[2]Associated Press, "2008 Election Turnout Hit 40-Year High" CBS News, December 15, 2008, http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/12/15/politics/main4670319.shtml.; Mary McGuirt, "Young Black Turnout a Record in 2008 Election" ABC News, July 21, 2009, http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/story?id=8140030&page=1.

[3]National Public Radio, "Latino Voters Gave Obama Boost in Key States," November 5. 2008, http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=96662862



Source: Election 2008 & Beyond, Knowledge Networks

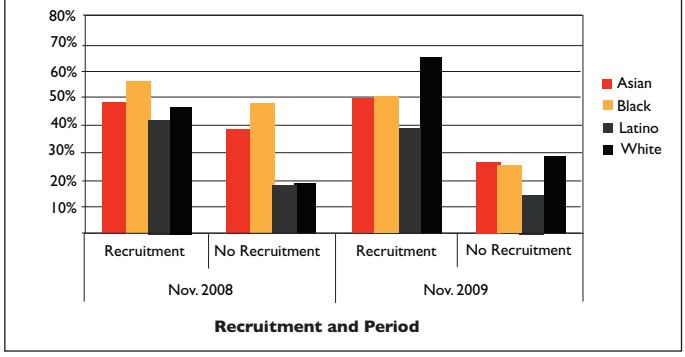


Source: Election 2008 & Beyond, Knowledge Networks

efforts to mobilize voters had effects even after the election was over. Graph 1 displays the change in political activity by race from before to after the election, and graph 2 focuses on political activity by young people. Political activity is characterized by engaging in any of the following activities: attending a political meeting, donating money to a political campaign, volunteering for a campaign, contacting a media outlet, or signing a petition. Political activity decreased among all racial groups, though least noticeably for whites. Blacks experienced the largest drop in political activity after the 2008 election, by 12 percent. Thus, most, if any, of the effects of mobilization on blacks due to the election were not long lasting. However, Asians and Latinos experienced a much less significant drop in participation, of about 7 percent each. Whites were least affected by the passage of time, which is consistent with data that suggest they were least energized by the 2008 election.

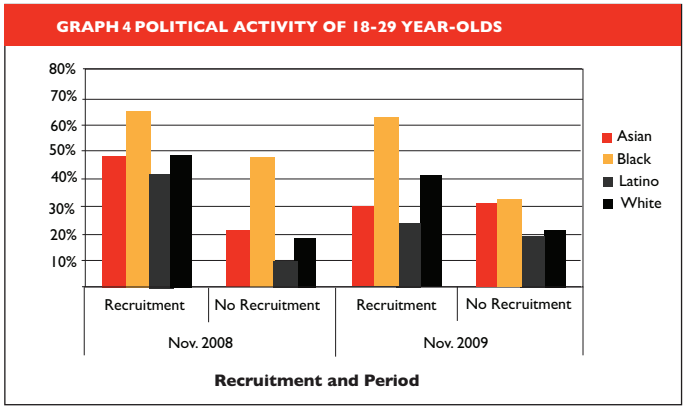
The drop in political participation after the election was more pronounced for white, Latino, and Asian young people, though not for black youth. Among those under 30, whites and Latinos experienced the largest drop in political participation, by 12 and 14 percent respectively, which suggests that activity during the election did not permanently engage either group in the political process. Black youth reported almost no decrease in political activity. It is plausible that the election of Barack Obama had more staying power in terms of political activity for black youth because of two distinct political effects. First, political participation is a habitual activity; people are socialized into politics. For the youth surveyed, the Obama campaign and presidency is their first major encounter with electoral politics, which may habituate them to levels of political participation higher than those who came of age during the Reagan, George H. W. Bush, or Clinton campaigns and presidencies. Second, black youth are

GRAPH 5 POLITICAL ACTIVITY OF 18-29 YEAR-OLDS



Source: Election 2008 & Beyond, Knowledge Networks

GRAPH 4 POLITICAL ACTIVITY OF 18-29 YEAR-OLDS



Source: Election 2008 & Beyond, Knowledge Networks

perhaps particularly affected because of seeing someone who looks like them in the White House. The next sections explore the forms of participation as well as the influence of old and new forms of political outreach.

TRADITIONAL PARTICIPATION BY AGE AND RACE

People often become involved in political forms of participation due to the encouragement of others. Many partisan groups, such as political parties, specific interest groups, and labor unions, as well as nonpartisan organizations, such as churches, schools, and neighborhood groups, engage in political recruitment in order to increase political activity by targeted groups. The presence of such recruitment is obvious during electoral campaigns. As noted above, the Obama campaign targeted young voters and certain racial groups whose participation was projected to sway the election in Obama's favor. This tactic is especially salient given that previous work has indicated that whites are more active in traditional forms of political participation, followed by blacks, then Latinos.[4] For youth of all races, the main determinants of participation in traditional forms of politics are the presence of recruitment and political interest. Our results show that the 2008 election complicates this general pattern. Prior to the election, the difference in activity by those who were recruited and those who were not was much smaller than after the election. Graphs 3 and 4 display this trend for both age and race. During the run-up to the 2008 election, young people ages 18–29 were indeed the most affected by recruitment, demonstrating a 27 percent increase in political activity with the presence of recruitment. Only those over 60 demonstrated a comparable increase (31 percent). The effect of recruitment is independent of the election, as is shown in the data from 2009; all age groups except those ages 18–29 were actually more politically active when recruited than they reported being during the election.

Sydney Verba, Kay Schlozman, and Henry Brady, Voice and Equality (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

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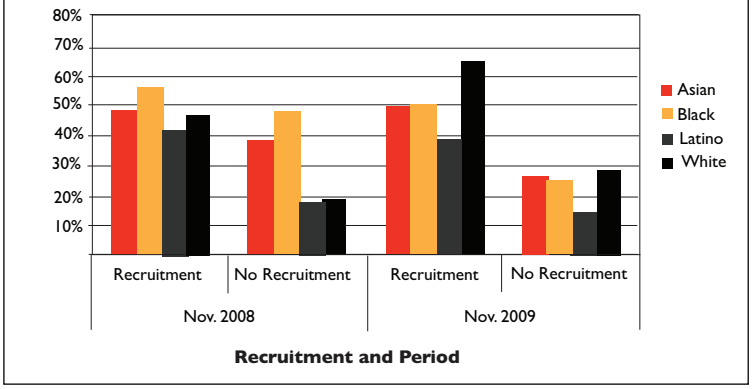


Graph 4 disaggregates the 18–29 year-old component by race. While Latino young people were the most affected by recruitment before the 2008 election (increasing from 11 percent to 44 percent), a year after the election the presence of recruitment most affected black and white young people (the reported rate of participation doubled). The effect on Latino young people during the 2008 presidential campaign is a stark finding; the fourfold increase demonstrates that a possible reason that Latinos are traditionally not seen as a highly active political demographic is most likely an effect of lack of mobilization rather than lack of political will or interest. The need for recruitment to mobilize political activity was less important for black youth during the 2008 election but became a crucial factor in mobilizing that population a year after the election, pointing to an effect of the election itself in mobilizing black youth.

Graph 5, which displays political activity by race regardless of age, confirms this conclusion. There is virtually no difference in political activity for blacks regardless of whether they were recruited prior to the election, while a year after the 2008 election, blacks who were recruited participated politically at twice the rate as those who were not recruited. The election itself may have been the recruiting force for blacks to be encouraged to participate politically. The recruitment effect for whites was much more pronounced than for blacks prior to the election, suggesting that the election itself did not energize whites to participate.

This conclusion is supported by the comparatively lower turnout of whites in the 2008 election. In general, traditional political participation responds both to interest and attempts by groups to reach out and encourage political participation. The question of what effect the election had on nonpolitical participation remains.

CIVIC PARTICIPATION, BY AGE AND RACE

Civic engagement is often not explicitly political. However, even non-explicitly political civic engagement is important for understanding how individuals can change their local and national surroundings through participation as well as how they develop social capital and the necessary skills for further

Table 1. Type of Participation

	Neighborhood Work		Community Service	
Race	2008	2009	2008	2009
Asian	13%	15%	26%	28%
Black	18%	16%	26%	27%
Latino	13%	13%	27%	26%
White	15%	15%	29%	30%

Source: Election 2008 & Beyond, Knowledge Networks

Table 2. Type of Participation

	Neighborhood Work		Community Service	
Age	2008	2009	2008	2009
18–29	12%	12%	26%	25%
30–44	15%	12%	31%	32%
45–59	16%	14%	27%	25%
60+	15%	20%	27%	33%

Source: Election 2008 & Beyond, Knowledge Networks

Table 3. Civic Participation By Race among 18–29-Year-Olds

	Neighborhood Work		Community Service	
Race	2008	2009	2008	2009
Asian	22%	12%	22%	14%
Black	11%	18%	22%	29%
Latino	9%	9%	23%	25%
White	13%	12%	28%	25%

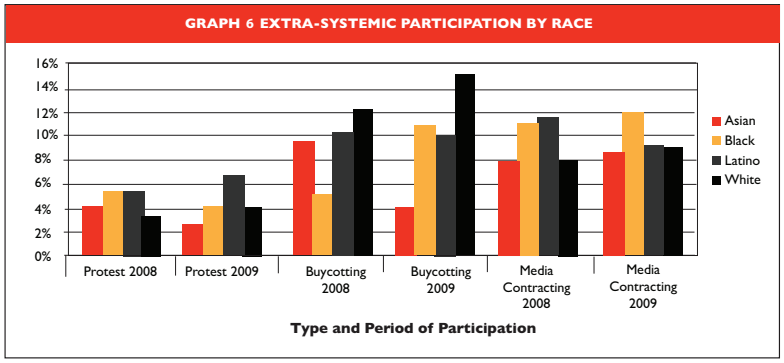
Source: Election 2008 & Beyond, Knowledge Networks

participation.[5] Social capital is a concept that denotes the connections one has with others through voluntary association that allows them to be more productive and efficacious in social action. Thus, an analysis of the trends of nonpolitical participation by age and race offers insight into the dynamics of the development of social capital surrounding the 2008 election. This social capital matters for the ability for people to influence their communities, but also because it is often the building block for forms of political participation, both traditional forms as discussed above and extra-systemic forms, discussed below. Tables 1 and 2 compare two types of civic participation: working with people in one's neighborhood on any issue or problem and engaging in volunteer work with any organization, such as a child's school, a church, or the neighborhood.

Rates of civic participation did not change significantly from before to a year after the election. Both the racial and age breakdown of the data demonstrate that people of all types were no more inclined to participate in efforts to improve their neighborhood or in community service before or after the elections.

Table 3 isolates one age group, young people ages 18–29, and considers their nonpolitical participation by race. Disaggregating the data allows us to see that black youth, unlike blacks as a whole, were much more likely to report engaging in work in their neighborhood after the election that before it. They also reported engaging in community service much more (by 7 percent) than before the 2008 election. This suggests one of two conclusions. Either black youth were the only group to experience a trade-off between their normal levels of community and neighborhood volunteerism and their election-specific political activity, or because of the election, black youth cultivated a lasting desire to be engaged in

[5]Robert Putnam, Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).



improving their surroundings. Because we do not have data prior to the 2008 election, it is impossible to say which of these hypotheses is more likely, but the data do demonstrate that black youth are much more likely than their youth counterparts to civically participate a year after the election.

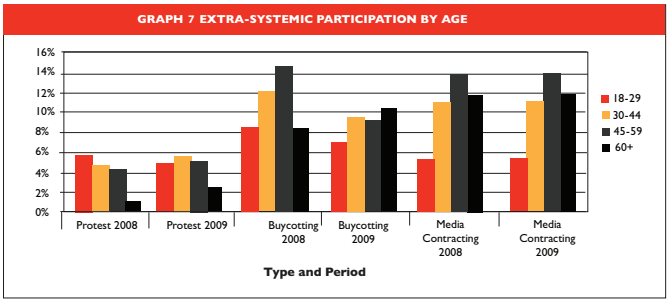
Tables 1, 2, and 3 also show that in general, people are more inclined to engage in volunteer work of various stripes than in work characterized mainly by aiding their neighborhood. These results generally conform to other findings that suggest that all groups engage in civic activity at a much lower rate than they engage in voting[6] and that the majority of nonpolitical civic participation occurs in religious-affiliated groups that may or may not tie people to their neighborhoods.[7]

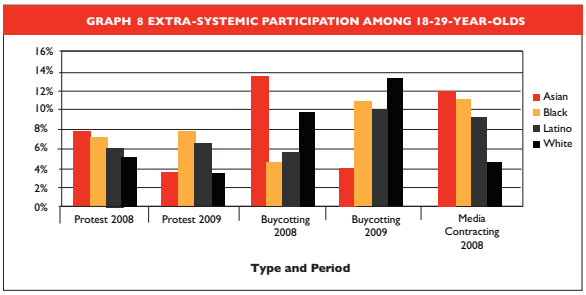
EXTRA-SYSTEMIC PARTICIPATION BY AGE AND RACE

Not all forms of participation, political or civic, takes the form of traditional, organizational and institutionally focused forms. The latter half of the 20th century saw both the rise and decline of mass protests and rallies as an explicitly political but nonsystemic form of participation. Furthermore, people have begun to see their consumer choices as politically relevant. Consumer choice is activated politically not just in terms of boycotting goods or stores that support political positions that individuals disagree with but also with buycotting, or explicitly purchasing goods or from vendors that support political positions that individuals agree with, turning values into practices.

Graph 6 presents the data on extra-systemic participation by race and compares them to a more traditional form of participation, contacting the media. Interestingly, while far fewer people engaged in protesting than in contacting the media, whites engaged in buycotting (buycotting is the explicit use of one's purchasing power to support businesses that have social and political stands that one agrees with, as opposed to boycotting, where one withholds money from businesses one disagrees with) more often than contacting the media. Buycotting, while not widespread, increased slightly a year after the election for all racial groups except Latinos. While is it impossible to attribute this rise in buycotting to the election, the increase suggests that more people are using their wallets to express their political

[6] J Eric Oliver, Democracy in Suburbia (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).
[7] Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, Voice and Equality.





positions. Such pocketbook politics may be greater during a poor economy where people may be scrutinizing their consumer choices. This may also be a result of the electoral cycle because during the presidential election, more sources of political information are available and thus may increase the sensitivity or degree of reception of information that would inform efforts such as buycotting. Alternatively, though not exclusively, the increase of buycotting may be because more companies are being explicit about their politics (such as the trend to tout products as eco-friendly or to engage in charitable campaigns to fight diseases). Regardless of the cause, this trend of increasing buycotting ought to be of interest for companies, scholars, and activists alike.

Rates of extra-systemic participation did not change significantly from before the election to after the election, suggesting that extra-systemic participation is just that: participation that is additional to more traditional forms, like electoral politics. It is unsurprising that these forms of participation are not responsive to cyclical and predictable changes in the traditional political calendar.

Graph 7 shows extra-systemic participation by age. The only group that showed any potentially meaningful change after the election was 45–59–year-olds, who had a propensity to contact the media. Overall, the election did not change how people of different ages engaged in extra-systemic participation. In general, extra-systemic participation remains more marginal than traditional political and civic participation.

Graph 8 represents the data of 18–29-year-olds by race. White and Asian youth reported engaging in protest at a lower level after the election, while black and Latino young people reported consistent levels of engaging in protest.

While black and Latino young people were also more consistent in contacting the media, they demonstrate an almost twofold increase in boycotting a year after the election. This may indicate that while black and Latino youth were more comfortable with traditional forms of participation and with protesting, which has a longstanding

Table 4. Internet Participation By Age

	Political Internet Activity		Political Blogging		E-Mail Media Outlet	
Age	2008	2009	2008	2009	2008	2009
18–29	21%	15%	5%	5%	3%	3%
30–44	23%	25%	3%	2%	4%	4%
45–59	23%	22%	1%	2%	6%	7%
60+	26%	31%	1%	3%	5%	7%

Source: Election 2008 & Beyond, Knowledge Networks

Note: "Political Internet Activity" includes posting comments on blogs or online articles.

Table 5. Internet Participation By Race

	Political Internet Activity		Political Blogging		E-Mail Media Outlet	
Race	2008	2009	2008	2009	2008	2009
Asian	19%	19%	6%	3%	4%	3%
Black	21%	14%	5%	5%	4%	6%
Latino	10%	11%	3%	3%	4%	4%
White	27%	27%	1%	2%	4%	6%

Source: Election 2008 & Beyond, Knowledge Networks

Note: "Political Internet Activity" includes posting comments on blogs or online articles.

Table 6. Internet Participation of 18–29-Year-Olds By Race

	Political Internet Activity		Political Blogging		E-Mail Media Outlet	
Race	2008	2009	2008	2009	2008	2009
Asian	18%	8%	14%	3%	11%	3%
Black	32%	21%	11%	12%	9%	10%
Latino	10%	9%	7%	3%	3%	1%
White	21%	13%	3%	4%	1%	3%

Source: Election 2008 & Beyond, Knowledge Networks

Note: "Political Internet Activity" includes posting comments on blogs or online articles.

history in the black community and has been an increasing feature in Latino politics surrounding immigration, buycotting is only recently coming to be experienced as a viable means of transforming values into practices for these minority youth cohorts.

With the growth of electronic communication and the Internet, political engagement has taken new and unfamiliar forms. Blogging, commenting on blogs or social networking sites, and other forms of Internet activity have been utilized by political parties and individuals alike. What effect these novel and nonsystemic forms of participation will have is an open question, but scholars are excited about the new opportunities for political expression and engagement.

What is most striking about the data presented in tables 4, 5, and 6 is that, during the election, at least a fifth of most groups engaged in some form of Internet-based political activity, including sending political e-mails, signing online petitions, or posting comments on blogs or articles online. In the twenty or so years of the Internet's existence, people have begun to integrate it fully into all aspects of their life, to the degree that for some groups, Internet political activity surpasses traditional organization in neighborhoods and forms of extra-systemic participation. The notable exception are Latinos, where only 10 percent of survey respondents indicated that they had engaged in Internet political activity. It remains to be seen why this population lags behind others in political use of the Internet, though this finding is important for those interested in using new technologies for reaching out to traditionally marginalized populations.

An interesting feature of the data is also the lack of change in the degree of Internet political activity from before and after the election. The Obama campaign's use of the Internet has been touted by some news media as the key to his nomination and ultimate victory in 2008.[8] It may be the case that people were already using the Internet politically and the Obama campaign tapped into an existing politically active Internet community and was more successful at organizing disparate political groups.

The data also show that people in general were not likely to blog or use the Internet to contact traditional media like newspapers, television, or radio. The low rate of political blogging also suggests that the election had little effect on whether people were motivated to engage in Internet activity that they otherwise were not engaged in. While more people have integrated e-mail into their daily lives, the same cannot be said for blogging. This suggests that people engage in political activity in ways that are for the most part familiar to them, and as the Internet becomes more familiar to more people, we can expect a rise in the number of people who use it as a political outlet.

Some of these general patterns do not hold for youth respondents. Asian and black youth were much more likely to report contacting traditional media outlets via e-mail during the election than any other groups in the survey (table 6). Furthermore, Asian young people reported a significant drop in use of the Internet in all three items a year after the election. However, a pattern that does hold is the much lower use of the Internet by Latino youth. Again, those who are interested in using new information technology to reach particular groups ought to consider the differences in Internet use in order to most effectively target and mobilize supportive voices.

WHAT THE 2008 ELECTION CAN TELL US ABOUT 2010 AND BEYOND

Although 2010 is not a presidential election year, this research on political participation reveals that when campaigns resonate with different groups of voters and reach out to them, they significantly increase the participation of those groups in political activity. Some people are more disposed to participate than others and for them, the added recruitment will have little effect, but for those who for whatever reasons are more inclined to inactivity, added recruitment could significantly increase the capacity of the campaign because of added volunteers, money, and political support. However, political parties cannot depend on this recruitment to have long-lasting effects on political

[8]Claire Cain Miller, "How Obama's Internet Campaign Changed Politics," New York Times, November 7, 2008; Sarah Lai Stirland, "Propelled by Internet, Barack Obama Wins Presidency" Wired, November 4, 2008.

support. When recruitment ceases, so too does the political activity of those who were recruited. The one group that this does not hold for is black youth. It remains to be seen if, as this cohort ages, participation remains high. But if it does, it may mean that campaigns would do well to tap into this already-mobilized population to effectively get out the vote and increase participation by other groups. Even with the proclamations of a new type of politics with the Obama campaign, the most effective means of changing politics is constant engagement with individuals who otherwise would not participate politically.

As for nonpolitical civic engagement, extra-systemic participation, and Internet activism, most people seem to engage in these types of activities regardless of the national electoral political cycle. Trends of buycotting and using the Internet for political purposes suggest that people are integrating politics into their daily lives. If these trends continue, then predictions of the Internet as a new democratic commons may not be as far-fetched as they once seemed. What is perhaps troubling is the low rate of use of the Internet by Latinos. If campaigns focus more resources on Internet campaigns, they may unintentionally lock out a population already known for low electoral participation. In order to effectively recruit and engage Latinos, especially Latino young people, campaigns in the 2010 election and beyond ought to target their efforts in more traditional media and outreach. Furthermore, as people see their economic choices as being possible of positive expressions of politics as opposed to boycotting, which, as a sanctioning mechanism, may have systematic effects on how political issues, such as global warming, global disease spread, and poverty, are integrated into corporate actions. Given the consumerism of modern America, linking of politics to economic choices presents more opportunities for people to be involved without engaging in costly political organization.