

Gateway Political Behaviors: The Frequency and Consequences of Low-Cost Political Engagement on Social Media

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to determine to what extent engagement in easy political behaviors on social media occurs across the range of political interest, what predicts such engagement, and what effect such engagement may have on other political behaviors. It pits the idea that social media may activate the politically uninterested against the idea that social media is just another outlet for the politically interested to demonstrate their engagement. Analyzing survey data collected by the Pew Research Center, it concludes that many people, including the politically uninterested, do engage in easy political behaviors like liking and commenting on political content on social media. When they do, it can lead to greater political activity offline. However, those most likely to engage in easy political behaviors are also those who engage in harder political behaviors, offering support for both the interest and activation hypotheses.

Keywords

social media, political behavior, Facebook, liking, commenting

Introduction

As social media becomes a growing force in everyday American life, it becomes increasingly important to understand its more nuanced effects on political behavior. Most existing research on this front focuses on the use of social media that involves creating content—posting about politics, talking to others on social media, or sharing one’s political affiliation (Bode, Vraga, Borah, & Shah, 2014; Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). Meta-analysis demonstrates conclusively that when people engage in such behaviors on social media, it tends to have a strong positive impact on their political participation (Boulianne, 2015). However, we also know that most people who use social media do not engage in these behaviors at all (Pew, 2012), and in fact most people use social media for primarily social reasons (Kim & Min, 2015; Shao, 2009).

For this reason, it becomes important to consider other, lower cost behaviors that more people engage in via social media. “Easy” political behaviors in social media might include those that respond to political content—most commonly by “liking” or commenting on someone else’s content—rather than the larger task of creating the content in the first place. Facebook is now the largest source of news for

Millennials (Mitchell, Gottfried, & Matsa, 2015), which suggests that many of them may see politics on Facebook but not necessarily seek it out elsewhere (Rainie & Smith, 2012). Engagement with that content, by commenting on it or using the Facebook “like” button (or equivalent mechanisms within other social media platforms), may be a gateway behavior to thinking more about or acting on politics in other realms. Easy behaviors both create political habits, important to sustaining political behavior over the life cycle (Bartels & Jackman, 2014; Plutzer, 2002), and can lead to harder political behaviors over time (Christenson, 2011; Kristofferson, White, & Peloza, 2013; Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009; Vaccari et al., 2015), making this topic of great normative importance. The ability of a small behavior to lead to larger, more sustained engagement suggests that the threshold of interest might be lower for smaller behaviors, but this is something that has not yet been addressed by research.

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This study therefore seeks to explain these three elements of politics on social media. First, who engages with political content by liking or commenting? Is it only the highly politically interested, or are less politically engaged people also drawn to these behaviors? Second, what predicts such engagement beyond political interest? And finally, what are the consequences of these behaviors? In particular, the study focuses on the impact on low interest individuals, to see whether they can be politically activated by engaging in these gateway political behaviors. This goes beyond previous literature by specifically considering the easiest possible political behaviors available via social media. Answering these questions has clear implications, helping those practitioners interested in mobilizing people via social media to know who best to target and how to target them.

Literature Review

Political Behavior

Political behavior is traditionally defined as an “activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action—either directly by affecting the making or implementation of public policy or indirectly by influencing the selection of people who make those policies” (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995, p. 40). Although historically this definition was limited to classic offline political participation, recent work has emphasized that participation is increasingly taking place in online environments as well (Theoharis, 2015). Political behaviors exist over a continuum, including everything from very difficult activities such as running for elected office (Black, 1972), to the relatively complicated act of voting (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980), to the relatively simple act of signing an online petition (Cruikshank, Smith, & Edelman, 2010).

This study focuses on two of the easiest political behaviors: commenting on others’ political postings on social media, and indicating that you “like” them (there is a separate button for each post to indicate such a preference).¹ While any effort to define the difficulty of engagement behaviors is necessarily subjective, these behaviors are defined as easy because they involve relatively few costs, even when compared to other behaviors within social media, but are still active behaviors, in contrast to activities like reading content (Vaccari et al., 2015) or being invited to engage in a political activity (Bode et al., 2014; Bond et al., 2012).

The cost of a behavior is important because people have limited time, attention, and resources to devote to politics, so “for most of the people for most of the time, the psychological costs and inconvenience” of finding political information, processing it, and engaging with it in some way is a significant barrier to participation (Neuman, 1991, p. 146; see also Tewksbury & Rittenberg, 2012), and research shows that the lower the cost of participating, the more people will do it (Earl & Kimport, 2011).

Posting about politics, for instance, requires one to search for political information (generally outside of social media),

find something of interest, and give at least marginal thought as to how to portray it (i.e. what to write as a caption). Commenting on someone else’s political story cuts out the first two steps, and liking arguably removes the third as well. This conceptualization of cost of participation as being related to its difficulty is echoed in other research as well, including work on political activism (Noel, 2016), online petitions (Cruikshank et al., 2010), and even non-political online behaviors (Preece, Nonnecke, & Andrews, 2004). Common ways of referring to this include “lower-threshold political behaviors” (Vaccari et al., 2015, p. 222), low-cost political behaviors (Theoharis, 2015), and “tiny acts of political participation” (Margetts, John, Hale, & Yasseri, 2016, p. 34). Specifically, when I refer to gateway political behaviors, I mean (1) behaviors that are political, using the definition indicated above—“activity that has the intent or effect of influencing government action” (Verba et al., 1995, p. 40) and (2) behaviors that are very low cost to the person who engages in them. Thinking about this from the perspective of the classic triad of requirements for political participation is helpful: participation requires resources (skills, time, and money), engagement (interest and motivation), and mobilization (someone asking or encouraging you to get involved) (Verba et al., 1995). The behaviors I focus on in this article, liking and commenting on political content on social media, require engagement and mobilization, but very little in terms of resources—they do not cost money, they take very little time, and require almost no skills (even among those with generally low digital literacy; Eshet-Alkalai & Chajut, 2009).

I use the term “easy political behaviors” as shorthand, but (1) not to imply that these behaviors are easy for everyone (Seidman, 2013) and (2) not to suggest that “technical ease corresponds to depth of engagement” (Tufekci, 2014, p. 205). The ease of these behaviors is relatively subjective, and likely depends upon who is engaging in them, and the context in which they are engaging. Because of the visibility of these acts, they represent a certain performance of self to one’s network (Papacharassi, 2012). This performance can be a stressful endeavor (Goffman, 1959), and research suggests that social technologies may amplify such stress (Gergen, 1991). People engage in some consideration of the wisdom of posting or commenting on political content on social media, with users sometimes choosing to ignore such content rather than reply to it (Bode, 2016a). So, despite the technical ease with which users can like or comment on content, the process itself of deciding whether, when, and how to do so, may not be easy at all.

How important are these easy political behaviors? Some scholars deride these sorts of activities as “slacktivism” (Morozov, 2009), suggesting that social media behaviors “conjure the illusion of activism rather than facilitating the real thing” (Lewis, Gray, & Meierhenrich, 2014, p. 1). Political behavior engaged in on social media is relatively public, and may serve a reputational purpose (Barash, Ducheneaut, Isaacs, & Bellotti, 2010)—that is, I want my

friends to think I care—or a personal satisfaction purpose (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000)—that is, it will make me feel better. Both these motivations might lead people to participate in easy acts for non-political reasons, not caring about the outcomes they produce. There is some evidence, indeed, that such behaviors fail to actually achieve meaningful political change, as compared to more traditional offline political activism (Shulman, 2009).

However, several aspects of these behaviors make them of normative interest. First, they may be gateway behaviors to other, more traditional types of political behavior. Recent work has shown that people who engaged in harder politically oriented social media behaviors like posting about politics or discussing politics with others on social media were then more likely to engage in traditional offline political behaviors (Bode et al., 2014; Boulianne, 2015; Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014; Rojas & Puig-Abril, 2009; Vaccari et al., 2015; Yang & DeHart, 2016;). Social movement campaigns take advantage of this by making small “asks” initially to get people involved, and then moving them up the “ladder of engagement” (Han, 2014; Karpf, 2010). And some have gone so far as to describe social media behaviors as “new forms of collective action that unleash the potential for revitalizing civil society in the twenty-first century” (Karpf, 2016, p. 60, see also Margetts et al., 2016). This study will allow us to determine the extent to which this extends to lower cost political behaviors.

Simply being exposed to political content via social media—even easier than the behaviors considered in this study—also has political implications. Those exposed to politics are able to recall that political information, with potential for political knowledge gains (Bode, 2016b). Exposure to political content on social media can increase the likelihood of offline participation (Kim, Chen, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013; Vaccari et al., 2015). And engaging in social media, even in non-political ways, can also lead to offline political behavior intentions (Bode, 2012). Research has yet to examine whether this holds for easier social media political behaviors.

Finally, these behaviors are semi-public. Each time a user comments on a story or likes it, that information is shared with the rest of her social network. This provides additional exposure for others to be exposed to the political story which prompted the like or the comment in the first place, thus spreading the political information even further. And these small visible gestures like changing one’s profile picture can aggregate, creating a more supportive political environment, especially for marginalized populations (Vie, 2014), and “scale up to make a major contribution to political mobilization” (Margetts et al., 2016, p. 54).

Political Interest

As Markus Prior (2010) puts it, “some people are more interested in politics than others” (p. 747). Those who are more

interested pay more attention, talk to others about politics, and engage in greater political participation (Verba et al., 1995). Political interest is often measured directly, asking simple questions like, “How much interest do you generally have in what is going on in politics” (British Election Study, as cited in Prior, 2010), or “Some people don’t pay much attention to political campaigns. How about you?” (American National Election Study, as cited in Shani, 2012). The benefit of measuring it directly is a clean self-report. However, such self-report may be subject to bias, as seen in experiments in which political interest self-reports are substantially affected by question order (Bishop, Oldendick, & Tuchfarber, 1984; Lasorsa, 2003). For this reason, I employ a related concept as a proxy for political interest—political conversation. In general, those who are more interested in politics should be talking about it more frequently than those who are not interested in politics.²

Again, there are three determinants of participation: resources (skills, time, and money), engagement (interest and motivation), and mobilization (someone asking or encouraging you to get involved) (Verba et al., 1995). The second factor—political interest—is strongly and consistently associated with participating in politics. This is echoed in social media, as those who engage in politics on social media are among the highest in political interest (Bode & Dalrymple, 2016). Together this could mean that although social media gives an alternative means of political expression, it is not necessarily reaching a new audience. Instead, those participating on social media are those who are politically interested and therefore already motivated to participate in other ways.

However, social media may provide a unique environment with regard to political information. Other research shows that many social media users—even those who are not interested in politics—are “incidentally exposed” to politics in that realm (Bode, 2016b; Kim et al., 2013; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2015). That is, people are exposed to politics on social media even when they are not seeking it out. This includes users across a range of political interest—both those who are high in interest and low in interest can still be incidentally exposed to political information (Bode, 2016b).

This conflict in the literature suggests the question of understanding who engages in low-cost political behaviors on social media, and to what effect, is not yet settled by existing research. Theory instead leads to two competing hypotheses. First, it is possible that this is a rich get richer story—that those who engage in politics on social media, even in a superficial way, are simply those who engage in politics in other venues—talking to people offline, voting, and the like (Verba et al., 1995). The advent of cable news, for instance, allowed those most interested in politics to see and learn more, while allowing those less interested to opt out of politics almost entirely (Prior, 2007). This theory would suggest that (1) those most interested in politics are the ones liking and commenting on political content on social media, and

the corollary (2) those not interested in politics are not doing so. This is the *political interest hypothesis*. Testable hypotheses related to the political interest hypothesis include the following:

H1. Political interest, as proxied by political talk, is related to (a) liking political content on social media and (b) commenting on political content on social media, such that those who are more interested in politics are more likely to engage in these behaviors.

H2. Those who are not politically interested do not (a) like political content on social media or (b) comment on political content on social media.

Note that these two hypotheses are meant to test two versions of the political interest hypothesis. The first tests whether political interest and gateway political behaviors are related. The second tests a more extreme version of this, that *only* those who are politically interested are engaging in gateway political behaviors.

Alternatively, streams of literature suggest that social media use in general and political use of social media more specifically can be gateways to broader political engagement (Christenson, 2011; Kim et al., 2013; Kristofferson et al., 2013; Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009; Vaccari et al., 2015). This theory suggests that social media can play an activation role, such that even those who are *not* terribly interested in politics might still engage with politics on social media, which might eventually lead to broader political engagement.³ This is the *activation hypothesis*. Testable hypotheses associated with the activation hypothesis include the following:

H3. Those who talk less about politics will engage in (a) liking political content on social media and (b) commenting on political content on social media.

H4. Among those talking less about politics, engaging in (a) liking political content on social media and (b) commenting on political content on social media will predict broader offline political engagement.

Note that H2 and H3 are competing hypotheses (i.e. only one can be supported), but the other hypotheses are not in direct conflict.

Methods

In order to test the hypotheses posed above, the study employs survey data collected by Pew Research Center's Internet, Science, and Technology Project. Although secondary data analysis is not ideal, given the inability to customize the measures to my concepts of interest, Pew data are representative and well-respected in the field (Bhattacharya, Yang, Srinivasan, & Boynton, 2016) and appropriate for the scope of this study. The total sample includes 2,253 individuals in

the United States (1,352 respondents contacted by landline with a response rate of 11.1%, and 901 respondents contacted by cell phone with a response rate of 10.8%), phoned by live interviewers from 20 January to 19 February 2012 (using Random Digit Dialing). It should be noted that interviews were conducted during a relatively high salience political period, including the first Republican primaries for the 2012 presidential election. Although the data are now several years old, other research shows that social media commenting patterns are mostly flat in the United States (Reuters Digital News Report, 2017), suggesting the data are still appropriate to examine. Data are weighted to account for number of adults in each household, and then to simulate the United States general population in terms of sex, age, education, race, Hispanic origin, region (US Census definitions), population density, and telephone usage.⁴

Measures

All variables are described in Table 1. The two variables of interest are commenting on political content and liking political content. Measuring them separately offers the benefit of examining whether they act differentially, or whether different sorts of people engage in them. These are measured using the following statements: "Have you ever done any of the following on a social networking site? Clicked the "like" button in response to POLITICAL comments or material posted by someone else" (39% say yes),⁵ OR "Posted a positive comment in response to a POLITICAL post or status update from someone else" (47% say yes). The survey does not define what constitutes political content, allowing respondents to decide this matter for themselves, though generally definitions of political content on social media are consistent (Vraga, Bode, Smithson, & Troller-Renfree, 2016).

The dependent variable used to consider activation is whether respondents report increasing political activity as a result of social media experiences: "Have you, personally, ever become MORE active or involved in a political issue after discussing it or reading posts about it on a social networking site?" (25.5% say yes).

Key independent variables include how often you post about politics: "Thinking about everything YOU HAVE POSTED recently on social networking sites, such as status updates, comments, or links to news stories—about how much of what you have posted is related to politics, political issues or the 2012 elections?" (0 = *none* to 4 = *almost all of it*; $M=0.60$, standard deviation [SD]=0.96); as well as how often your friends post about politics: "How about the people you are friends with on social networking sites? How much of what THEY SHARE AND POST is related to politics, political issues or the 2012 elections?" (0 = *none* to 4 = *almost all of it*; $M=1.28$, $SD=0.98$). Pew also measures the extent to which users perceive political agreement in their networks: "How often do you agree with the political opinions or political content your friends post on social networking

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of All Variables.

	Mean	Standard deviation	Range
Like			39% yes, 61% no
Comment			47% yes, 53% no
More involved			26% yes, 74% no
Posted politics on SM	0.60	0.96	0–4
Friends post politics on SM	1.28	0.98	0–4
Agree with politics on SM	1.24	0.72	0–3
Talk politics	2.89	1.01	1–4
Partisanship			27.2% R; 37.2% I; 35.6% D
Ideological strength	0.78	0.68	0–2
Gender			49% male, 51% female
Age	46.4	18.3	18+
Education	4.30	1.71	1–7
Income	4.74	2.46	1–9
Race (minority)			24% minority, 76% majority
Ethnicity (Hispanic)			14% Hispanic, 86% non-Hispanic

D: Democrat; I: Independent; R: Republican; SM: social media.

For fuller description of all variables, see text. For survey documentation, see <http://www.pewinternet.org/datasets/february-2012-search-social-networks-and-politics/>

sites?” (0 = *never* to 3 = *almost always*; $M=1.24$, $SD=0.72$). Finally, general interest in politics is captured by the question: How often, if ever, do you talk about politics or current events with your family and friends? (1 = *never* to 4 = *very often*, $M=2.89$, $SD=1.01$).

The models also include other politically relevant variables, including party (Republican, 27.2%; Independent, 37.2%; Democrat, 35.6%), and strength of ideology (a folded scale from a 5-point ideology scale, ranging from 0 to 2, $M=0.78$, $SD=0.68$). Additionally, basic demographics are included, consisting of gender (51.3% women), age ($M=46.4$, $SD=18.3$), education ($M=4.3$, $SD=1.7$, where Category 4 reflects technical, trade, or vocational school), income ($M=4.74$, $SD=2.46$, where Category 4 reflects US\$30–40,000 annual household income), race (23.8% non-White), and ethnicity (14.2% Hispanic).

Results

The first step in understanding easy political behaviors is simply considering how frequently they tend to occur. About 38.6% of the sample reports commenting on others' political posts, and 47.4% at least occasionally like political posts. For both measures, this constitutes a minority of respondents, but a strong minority nonetheless. It remains to be seen whether this consists of only the politically interested, or others as well.

Before formally testing the hypotheses outlined above, consider a simple test: the percentage who report liking and commenting by the frequency with which they post about politics on social media. The short logical leap here, supported by research showing that those who engage in politics on social media are strongly interested in politics (Bode & Dalrymple, 2016), is to consider posting about politics on

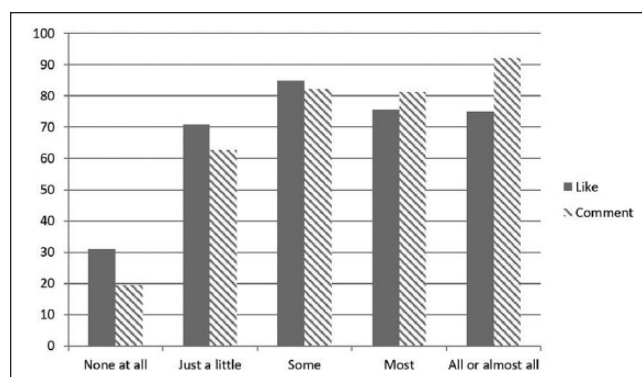


Figure 1. Frequency of liking and commenting by level of posting about politics.

Chi-square for like = 654.4 ($p < .01$) and comment = 981.1 ($p < .01$).

social media as a proxy of political interest. If only those who are posting about politics—already a relatively low-cost political behavior and therefore a conservative test—are engaging in liking and commenting behavior, this would support the political interest hypothesis. If liking and commenting occurs throughout levels of posting politics, however, it would suggest some support for political activation.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of respondents in each level of political posting who report commenting or liking on political content. While levels of commenting and liking are significantly higher for those who post about politics than for those who do not (supporting H1), it is noteworthy that a substantial minority of those who do not post about politics are still engaging in easy political behaviors. About 31.1% of those who never post about politics do still like political content, and 19.5% go so far as to comment on others' political postings. This supports H3 and explicitly refutes H2, and

Table 2. Logistic Regression Estimating Liking and Commenting About Politics.

	Liking			Commenting		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Gender	−0.16	0.10	.12	0.03	0.11	.81
Age	−0.02	0.01	.01	−0.01	0.01	.13
Education	0.17	0.04	.01	0.17	0.04	.01
Hispanic	−0.20	0.16	.22	−0.28	0.17	.10
Non-White	0.03	0.13	.80	0.13	0.13	.32
Income	−0.03	0.02	.21	0.01	0.03	.92
Party (D)	0.12	0.07	.07	0.38	0.07	.01
Ideological strength	0.35	0.08	.01	0.01	0.08	.90
Political talk	0.37	0.07	.01	0.28	0.07	.01
Post politics	0.52	0.06	.01	1.10	0.07	.01
Friends post politics	0.01	0.07	.85	0.22	0.08	.01
Perceived agreement	0.59	0.08	.01	0.47	0.08	.01
Constant	−2.00	0.31	.01	−3.96	0.34	.01
Nagelkerke <i>R</i> ²	.24			0.37		
<i>N</i>	597			598		

SE: standard error.

suggests there is at least the potential for these people to become politically activated as a result of these easy behaviors.

So there is some evidence for the political activation hypothesis—even a substantial portion of those who never post about politics themselves are engaging with political content generated by others. In order to further explore the political interest hypothesis, a pair of regressions are estimated, with liking and commenting as the respective dependent variables (see Table 2). Because the variables are measured dichotomously, logistic regression is the most appropriate model estimation (Gujarati, 2003).

Several things are worth noting. Most importantly, political talk is playing a clear role in determining who likes and comments on political content, supporting the political interest hypothesis. Those who talk about politics offline are also engaging in political conversations on social media. This is further reinforced in that those who post more about politics are also more likely to like or comment on political content.

Other variables that play a consistent role include education—those more educated are more likely to engage in easy political behaviors—and perceived political agreement of one's network. This likely relates to the way in which the commenting measure is phrased: “posted a positive comment in response to a POLITICAL post or status update from someone else”—which essentially excludes anyone who is commenting in a negative way, making it more likely that people comment on posts they agree with. However, other research supports the idea that people comment more on content they agree with (Reuters Digital News Report, 2017). Age also plays a role, but only for liking content—younger people are more likely to do so than are older people. This may reflect different social norms within different age cohorts (Bolton et al., 2013), or

lower familiarity with the affordances of the platform among less tech-savvy generations (Smith, 2014). Interestingly, when it comes to liking content, ideological strength—from either side—is predictive, whereas this is not true for commenting, where Democrats are more likely to engage. This point is worth expanding. The literature is divided as to the extent to which liberals and conservatives exist in echo chambers on social media. Some research suggests that Democrats have more homogenous online networks than do Republicans (Colleoni, Rozza, & Arvidsson, 2014) so if Democrats see (or at least think they see) more ideologically congruent information, they may be more likely to engage with it. However, research also suggests that liberals are more likely to disseminate cross-ideological content on social media (Barberá, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, & Bonneau, 2015), which could suggest that increased likelihood of commenting results from a willingness to post on both ideologically congruent and incongruent content.

Finally, as the initial look at the relationship between political posting and easy social networking sites' (SNS) political behaviors supported the political activation hypothesis, a model is estimated examining to what extent this activation is actually taking place in terms of spurring more traditional political behavior among the least interested (see Table 3). Here, the sample is restricted to only the lower levels of political talk (a proxy for political interest)—those who say they talk about politics rarely or never (32.4% of the sample, *N*=104). This allows us to see whether those who are not already involved in politics are being activated by the easy behaviors—commenting and liking on politics on social media—that they engage in. The outcome of interest is the measure reflecting whether someone has increased political activity as a result of social media experiences (25.5% overall say yes, 14% of low

Table 3. Logistic Regression Estimating Increased Political Activity as a Result of Social Media, Among the Least Politically Interested.

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Gender	0.51	0.31	.10
Age	−0.03	0.01	.05
Education	0.04	0.11	.70
Hispanic	1.01	0.42	.02
Non-White	−1.90	0.44	.01
Income	−0.06	0.08	.39
Party (D)	0.42	0.24	.07
Ideological strength	0.01	0.23	.99
Post politics	0.54	0.29	.06
Friends post politics	0.36	0.19	.06
Perceived agreement	0.52	0.25	.04
Comment	1.11	0.38	.01
Like	0.77	0.33	.02
Constant	−2.98	1.12	.01
Nagelkerke <i>R</i> ²	.34		
<i>N</i>	104		

SE: standard error.

political talkers say yes). Because this variable is measured dichotomously, logistic regression is the most appropriate model estimation (Gujarati, 2003).

Most importantly, both liking and commenting on political content predict someone being more likely to increase political activity as a result of social media experiences. This provides support for the political activation hypothesis and for H4 specifically—for at least some people, even the easiest political behaviors on social media may provide a means by which to begin engaging in politics.

Other relevant variables include demographics—with younger, Hispanics, and Whites more likely to increase political activity—as well as perceived political agreement with one's network. This suggests that any activation taking place is likely happening as a result of exposure to congruent information, rather than a sparking effect of exposure to disagreeable information, though future research should investigate this specifically.

Discussion and Conclusion

Several findings are worth highlighting. First, there is substantial support for *both* the activation theory and the interest theory. While those most engaged in politics are also most likely to engage in easy political behaviors on social media, supporting research linking political interest and participation (Verba et al., 1995), this is *not* to the exclusion of the less politically engaged, as a majority of those who post “just a little” politics engage in easy political behaviors, and even a substantial minority of those who never post about politics do so as well (Figure 1). Commenting and liking may be a sufficiently low threshold of political activity that even the politically uninterested or unengaged are able and willing to

engage in them at least occasionally. This has important implications for our understanding of decreases in political participation in general—perhaps this deficit is not as large as some scholars have posited (Putnam, 2000). This further suggests that incidental exposure to political information on social media (Bode, 2016b; Kim et al., 2013) can lead to significant political behaviors, even for those normally unmotivated to do so.

And this easy engagement has major implications. Those who engage in liking and commenting of political content are significantly more likely to report increasing offline political activities as a result. This suggests that easy political behaviors can be gateway behaviors to more significant political activities, at least for some people and under the right conditions. Theoretically, the question remains as to when, why, and for whom easy political behaviors function in this way. Future research should endeavor to discover what the circumstances are that promote moving from easy to more difficult behaviors, and what the range of those behaviors—both online and offline—look like. But these findings have practical implications for social movements and organizations interested in using social media to mobilize users. Focusing on small acts of political participation can pay off by encouraging more demanding acts later on.

These findings have practical implications for political organizers as well. While these data are only cross-sectional, it seems possible that by creating content that encourages people to engage with it through likes and comments, they may eventually be able to activate those users to a higher level of political activity. This means that political organizers or others interested in mobilizing people via social media should not limit their targeted audience to the most politically engaged. Rather, even those who are less interested in politics can be encouraged to engage in small acts of politics, and those can lead to increased engagement over time.

Theoretically, this lends further evidence to the idea that those concerned about political behaviors that start and end with a click may be overstating things (Morozov, 2009). Rather, it seems that small acts of politics may lead to larger acts of political behavior—a complementary relationship rather than a substitution of one behavior for another (Leyva, 2016). This is positive news for society—rather than a rich-get-richer situation, even those who would otherwise be opting out of politics (Prior, 2007) are now able engage on social media.

The study is limited mainly by its use of secondary data. Pew provides a wealth of high-quality data free to the public, but their measures are not always ideal. Many of them are measured dichotomously, including key variables of liking and commenting, preventing the ability to distinguish the effects of dosage of these behaviors. We certainly might expect that someone who likes lots of political content might be different, and be affected differently, than someone who likes political content only occasionally. The measure of political conversation, while helpful, is not a traditional way

of measuring political interest, and therefore future research should repeat these analyses with alternative specifications of political interest. And the measure of offline activity is limited in that it is both related directly to social media in its wording (requiring respondents to attribute causality related to political participation directly to their use of social media), and in that it is measured at the same time as the social media behaviors. Future research can and should improve on these issues by employing more nuanced measures, with multiple response categories, independent of social media and measured across time.

More broadly, these measures are limited by self-report bias (Groves et al., 2009), and by the ability of users to accurately recall their own exposure to and use of social media in these relatively specific contexts (Vraga, Bode, & Troller-Renfree, 2015). Recall has been shown to be particularly problematic when asking about media use (Tourangeau & Rasinski, 1988), and even more so when dealing with social media use, which is often overreported (Guess, 2015; Junco, 2013). This study cannot tell the difference between an actual relationship between gateway behaviors and other political behaviors, and a tendency to overreport both among some participants. Future research should use alternative research designs to ensure that these biases are not responsible for the results reported here.

This also brings cross-sectional data to bear on a question that would benefit most from panel data. This is partly mitigated by the phrasing of the dependent variable, which emphasizes change, but, as described above, we are then dependent on the ability of users to self-report change, which may be asking too much. Future research should incorporate over-time data in order to disentangle the mechanisms of causation between easy political behaviors and more traditional political behaviors.

It is also worth considering the extent to which these patterns hold outside the United States, where differences in social norms, Internet usage, and political systems may all play a role in forming reaction to political content on social media (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2015), and outside salient electoral contexts, such as that of the presidential primary season examined here. Finally, it is worth noting that these data were collected in 2012, and there is some evidence to suggest that social media (Evans, Pearce, Vitak, & Treem, 2016) and politics writ large (Wells et al., 2017) have both changed meaningfully since that time, even if commenting patterns have not (Reuters Digital News Report, 2017). Future research should consider the extent to which these findings hold in a changing political context. All these limitations suggest a particular caution in interpreting the results.

Despite these limitations, this study offers an important data point for better understanding the role that very-low-cost political behaviors may play in the modern media environment. The answer offers something for everyone—although the highly politically interested are most likely to take

advantage of these tools, even the least interested are also often willing to engage in low-cost social media political behaviors. And when they do, there is some potential for those behaviors to spread to offline realms as well.

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Notes

1. At the time of this study, like was the only “reaction” that Facebook allowed. In 2016, Facebook updated the like button to include other emotional options, including love, haha, wow, sad, and angry.
2. Granted, there is some conceptual slippage here. One could imagine people who are interested in politics but extremely introverted, or people who are uninterested in politics but end up talking about it because of their network’s interest. Both cases would be misclassified by using political conversation as a proxy for interest. But in general, the two should go together. Given that Pew does not measure political interest directly, this is the closest and most appropriate measure to use.
3. Historically, political engagement has been conceptualized and measured as participation in politics that occurs offline; there is no reason that political engagement need be limited to the offline realm (Theocharis, 2015). For this study, I employ the traditional measure of offline political participation for simplicity, but not as a normative judgment about the relative value of offline and online political participation.
4. For more information on the data collection, see <http://www.pewinternet.org/datasets/february-2012-search-social-networks-and-politics/>
5. It is worth noting that while this measure is generically phrased in terms of social networking sites, the term “liking” is used relatively specifically on Facebook, whereas other platforms often refer to “favoriting” (YouTube, Twitter), or “upvoting” (Reddit). This may prime users to think more of their Facebook behaviors than other social networking site behaviors.

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