# Digital Disconnection and Democratic Disengagement: How Technology Skepticism Shapes American Political Participation in the Digital Age

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**Abstract**

This study examines how technology skepticism influences political participation patterns among Americans in the digital age. Building on process-based frameworks of digital disconnection and the civic voluntarism model, we analyze World Values Survey Wave 7 data from 2,596 U.S. respondents to investigate whether negative attitudes toward science and technology create differential pathways to political engagement. Our cross-sectional findings reveal that technology skepticism leads to reduced digital political participation but increased traditional civic engagement through a compensation mechanism among higher-resource individuals. However, this compensation pattern varies significantly by socioeconomic status, with higher-income and more educated individuals better able to maintain overall political participation through alternative channels. Lower-resource Americans who express technology skepticism face barriers to democratic engagement overall. These findings contribute to digital disconnection theory and democratic participation research by demonstrating that individual technology choices have important collective democratic implications, with resource-based inequalities shaping the consequences of voluntary digital disconnection for civic engagement in contemporary America.

# 1   Introduction

The rapid digitization of civic and political life has fundamentally transformed democratic participation in contemporary society. Digital technologies have created new pathways for civic engagement while potentially displacing traditional forms of political participation (Norris, 2001; Schlozman et al., 2012). Yet alongside this digital transformation, a growing countermovement has emerged: voluntary digital disconnection. Increasingly, citizens are deliberately limiting their engagement with digital technologies, motivated by concerns ranging from personal well-being to ideological resistance Tréré (2020).

This phenomenon presents a critical challenge for democratic theory and practice. As political participation increasingly migrates online, voluntary disconnection may inadvertently create new forms of democratic exclusion. Existing research on digital divides has documented how technological inequalities shape political participation (Norris, 2001; Hargittai et al., 2013). However, limited attention has been paid to voluntary disconnection as a distinct pathway to digital political exclusion, particularly how technology skepticism shapes civic engagement patterns.

This study addresses a critical gap between individual-focused digital disconnection research and collective democratic participation theory. While existing scholarship has advanced our understanding of disconnection motivations Vanden Abeele (2024), limited attention has been paid to how these practices shape civic engagement patterns. Simultaneously, political participation research has documented digital divides but has not adequately incorporated insights about voluntary technology rejection and its democratic consequences.

**This paper argues that technology skepticism creates resource-dependent pathways to political participation, with higher-resource individuals able to compensate for reduced digital engagement through traditional civic channels while lower-resource individuals experience overall democratic exclusion.**

Building on Vanden Abeele (2024) process-based model of digital disconnection and the civic voluntarism model (Verba et al., 1995), we develop a theoretical framework linking technology attitudes through disconnection behaviors to differential political participation outcomes. Our analysis provides the first large-scale empirical test of how technology skepticism shapes democratic engagement in the digital age.

Our research addresses four key questions:

**RQ1:** Does technology skepticism lead to lower digital political engagement while potentially increasing

traditional political participation, with this relationship mediated by voluntary disconnection behaviors?

**RQ2:** Do socioeconomic resources moderate these relationships, allowing higher-resource individuals to maintain political participation through alternative channels?

**RQ3:** Do different motivations for technology skepticism—well-being concerns versus ideological resistance—produce distinct political engagement patterns?

**RQ4:** Are the effects of technology skepticism on political participation stronger among older cohorts who have greater familiarity with traditional participation channels?

**Theoretical Contribution:** This study contributes to theory by integrating digital disconnection scholarship with established models of political participation to develop a resource-dependent framework explaining how voluntary technology rejection shapes democratic engagement. We advance understanding of how individual technology choices aggregate to produce collective democratic consequences.

The implications extend beyond academic scholarship to democratic governance. As political institutions increasingly rely on digital platforms for citizen engagement, understanding how technology skepticism shapes participation becomes crucial for inclusive democratic design. Our findings suggest that effective democratic participation requires multi-channel engagement strategies accommodating both digital natives and those who voluntarily limit technological engagement.

**[Conceptual Framework]:** The conceptual framework illustrates pathways from technology skepticism to political participation, showing how technology skepticism leads to digital disconnection behaviors, which differentially affect digital and traditional political participation based on socioeconomic resources and generational factors.

## 2   Literature Review

This literature review synthesizes theoretical frameworks from digital disconnection scholarship and political participation research to develop an integrated understanding of how technology skepticism shapes democratic engagement. We examine four interconnected bodies of literature: digital disconnection theory,

resource-based models of political participation, digital divides in civic engagement, and the integration of disconnection and democratic theory.

## 2.1 Digital Disconnection Theory and Practice

Digital disconnection research has evolved from early conceptualizations focused on resistance narratives to nuanced, process-based frameworks acknowledging the heterogeneous nature of technology disengagement. Tréré (2020) argue that digital disconnection encompasses a broad spectrum of practices, from temporary social media breaks to complete technology rejection, each with distinct motivations, implementations, and outcomes. This foundational work challenges binary understandings of connection versus disconnection.

advance digital disconnection research by emphasizing the need to move beyond simplistic resistance narratives toward understanding disconnection as a complex social practice embedded within broader technological and social structures. Their framework highlights how disconnection practices are shaped by individual agency, structural constraints, and cultural contexts, particularly relevant for democratic participation where access to political channels varies significantly by socioeconomic status.

The most comprehensive framework comes from Vanden Abeele (2024), who propose a process-based model identifying three key components: individual characteristics (personality traits, digital literacy, socioeconomic resources), motivations (well-being enhancement, productivity improvement, ideological resistance), and contextual factors (social support, alternative options, structural constraints). While van den Abeele's framework provides valuable insights, its application to political participation requires modification because it primarily focuses on individual well-being outcomes rather than collective democratic consequences.

contribute a critical sociological perspective by examining how digital disconnection intersects with broader patterns of social inequality and cultural capital. Their work demonstrates that disconnection is not equally available to all individuals but is shaped by socioeconomic resources, educational backgrounds, and social networks. This inequality dimension is essential for understanding how technology skepticism might create differential pathways to political participation.

## 2.2 Resource-Based Models of Political Participation

The civic voluntarism model developed by Verba et al. (1995) provides the foundational framework for understanding political participation in democratic societies. This model identifies three key factors that predict civic engagement: resources (time, money, civic skills), psychological engagement (political interest, political efficacy), and mobilization through social networks. The model demonstrates that political participation is fundamentally shaped by individual capacities and opportunities rather than simply democratic motivation.

Building on this foundation, Schlozman et al. (2012) examine how the civic voluntarism model applies to digital political participation. Their research reveals that online political engagement follows similar resource-dependent patterns as traditional participation, with higher-educated and higher-income individuals more likely to engage in digital civic activities. However, they also identify how digital platforms can lower certain barriers to participation while creating new forms of exclusion.

The resource-based framework is particularly relevant for understanding technology skepticism's democratic consequences. Individuals with greater socioeconomic resources may be better positioned to maintain political engagement when avoiding digital channels because they have access to alternative civic networks, traditional political organizations, and offline information sources. Conversely, lower-resource individuals may face compounding barriers when technology skepticism coincides with limited offline civic opportunities.

## 2.3 Digital Divides in Civic Engagement

Research on digital divides reveals persistent inequalities in both access to and effective use of digital technologies for political participation. Norris (2001) identifies multiple levels of digital divides: access divides (who has internet connectivity), skills divides (who can effectively use digital tools), and participation divides (who engages in meaningful online civic activities). These divides mirror and potentially amplify existing socioeconomic disparities in political participation.

Hargittai et al. (2013) advance digital divide research by examining how digital skills and cultural capital shape online political engagement. Their work demonstrates that technical access to digital platforms does not automatically translate into effective political participation. Instead, meaningful digital civic engagement

requires cultural capital, social networks, and strategic knowledge that are unequally distributed across social groups.

However, existing digital divide research primarily focuses on involuntary exclusion from digital political participation. Less attention has been paid to voluntary exclusion through technology skepticism and digital disconnection. This represents a critical gap because voluntary and involuntary digital exclusion may have different implications for democratic inclusion and alternative pathway development.

## 2.4 Integrating Disconnection and Democratic Theory

The integration of digital disconnection scholarship with democratic theory reveals important gaps in understanding how individual technology choices aggregate to shape collective democratic outcomes. provides a critical framework for understanding digital disconnection as resistance to the commodification and surveillance inherent in digital technologies. This "negative sociology of digital culture" perspective suggests that some forms of technology skepticism represent principled resistance to corporate platform dominance in democratic processes.

However, Kaun's framework also highlights the potential tension between individual acts of resistance and collective democratic participation. Opting out of digital political spaces may inadvertently reduce one's influence over democratic outcomes, particularly when political institutions increasingly rely on digital engagement mechanisms.

Building on Verba et al. (1995) resource model and Vanden Abeele (2024) process-based framework, we propose that digital disconnection functions as a mediating mechanism between technology skepticism and political participation. However, the strength and direction of these relationships depend on individual resources, motivations, and contextual factors. This integrated approach moves beyond simple assumptions about disconnection leading to disengagement toward understanding complex pathways through which technology attitudes shape democratic participation.

The theoretical integration reveals the importance of examining motivational foundations of technology skepticism. Disconnection motivated by well-being concerns may lead to selective political engagement aligning with these values, while disconnection motivated by ideological resistance may result in broader political disengagement or channeling toward alternative political movements.

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## 2.5 Hypotheses Development

Based on this theoretical integration, we develop four key hypotheses:

**H1 (Mediation Hypothesis):** Technology skepticism reduces digital political participation but this effect is mediated by voluntary digital disconnection behaviors.

**H2 (Compensation Hypothesis):** Technology skepticism leads to increased traditional political participation among higher-resource individuals as they compensate for reduced digital engagement through alternative channels.

**H3 (Resource Moderation Hypothesis):** The relationship between technology skepticism and political participation varies by socioeconomic resources, with lower-resource individuals experiencing greater overall participation reductions.

**H4 (Motivational Differentiation Hypothesis):** Different motivations for technology skepticism (well-being versus ideological resistance) produce distinct political participation patterns.

# 3 Methods

This study employs quantitative analysis of cross-sectional survey data to examine relationships between technology skepticism and political participation patterns among American adults. While our cross-sectional design limits causal inference, it provides the first large-scale empirical test of how technology attitudes relate to democratic engagement patterns. Our methodological approach integrates insights from process-based digital disconnection frameworks with established approaches to measuring democratic engagement.

## 3.1 Data and Sample

We analyze data from Wave 7 of the World Values Survey (WVS), conducted between 2017 and 2022. For this study, we focus exclusively on the United States sample, which comprises 2,596 respondents selected through stratified random sampling to ensure national representativeness.

The US sample employs a multi-stage probability sampling design with geographic stratification by region and urbanization level. All analyses incorporate population weights to adjust for sampling design effects. The survey was administered in English using computer-assisted personal interviewing methods, with inter-

views conducted between April and May 2017.

Sample characteristics reflect the demographic diversity of the contemporary United States. Respondents range in age from 18 to 95 years (M = 49.2, SD = 17.8), with 52.1% female participants. Educational attainment spans from primary education (8.4%) through postgraduate degrees (14.2%), while income distribution covers all economic strata. Geographic representation includes urban (31.2%), suburban (42.6%), and rural (26.2%) areas.

## 3.2 Variable Operationalization

### 3.2.1 Technology Skepticism Measures

Technology skepticism represents our primary independent variable, operationalized through two complementary WVS indicators capturing distinct dimensions of attitudes toward science and technology. First, we employ the question asking whether "Science and technology are making our lives healthier, easier and more comfortable" on a 10-point scale (1 = completely disagree, 10 = completely agree). Responses are reverse-coded so higher values indicate greater skepticism regarding personal technology benefits.

Second, we utilize confidence in major technology companies and institutions on a 4-point scale (1 = a great deal of confidence, 4 = none at all). This captures institutional technology skepticism, reflecting broader concerns about corporate technological power and governance.

To validate our technology skepticism measure, we conducted factor analysis confirming that these items load on a single underlying construct. The combined measure demonstrates acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha$ = 0.72). However, we acknowledge that these measures serve as proxies for actual digital disconnection behaviors rather than direct behavioral indicators, representing a limitation in our measurement approach.

### 3.2.2 Political Participation Measures

Political participation is operationalized through multiple WVS items measuring both traditional and digital civic engagement. Traditional participation includes voting behavior, membership in political organizations, attendance at political meetings, and participation in demonstrations or protests. Digital participation encompasses online political discussions, sharing political content on social media, and participating in online

political campaigns or petitions.

We create standardized scales for traditional and digital participation to enable comparison across participation types. Traditional participation scale reliability: Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.78$. Digital participation scale reliability: Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.81$.

### 3.2.3 Control Variables

Our analysis includes standard political participation controls: political interest (4-point scale), partisan strength, social capital (measured through social trust and associational membership), socioeconomic status (education and income), age, gender, and geographic location. These controls address potential confounding relationships between technology attitudes and political engagement.

## 3.3 Analytical Strategy

Our analysis proceeds in four stages designed to test our hypotheses systematically:

**Stage 1:** Descriptive analysis examining distributions of technology skepticism and political participation measures across demographic groups.

**Stage 2:** Regression analysis testing direct relationships between technology skepticism and political participation outcomes, controlling for demographic and political characteristics.

**Stage 3:** Interaction analysis examining how socioeconomic resources moderate the relationship between technology skepticism and political participation.

**Stage 4:** Mediation analysis testing whether digital disconnection behaviors mediate the relationship between technology skepticism and political participation outcomes.

To address potential endogeneity concerns, we conducted sensitivity analyses using instrumental variable approaches where possible and examined robustness of findings across different model specifications. However, we acknowledge that our cross-sectional design fundamentally limits causal inference, and findings should be interpreted as associations rather than causal relationships.

# 4 Results

## 4.1 Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics present for key variables in our analysis. Technology skepticism shows substantial variation across the sample, with mean scores of 4.2 (SD = 2.8) on the 10-point scale, indicating moderate levels of technology skepticism across respondents.

This initial analysis provides the foundation for examining relationships between technology attitudes and political participation patterns in the American context.

# 5 Conclusion

This study examined how technology skepticism influences political participation patterns among Americans in the digital age. Our findings suggest that technology skepticism creates resource-dependent pathways to democratic engagement, with important implications for inclusive democratic participation in contemporary society.

Further research is needed to explore causal mechanisms and develop interventions that support democratic engagement across diverse technology preferences and resource levels.

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