Organizing Online

Political Participation and Hobbyism on Reddit

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Abstract

Over the last decade, social media has transformed many aspects of society, including how citizens participate in politics. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit are famous for promoting conflict, driving polarization, and contributing to extremism. However, they may also be able to serve as powerful tools for fueling the types of political participation essential to democracy. This thesis examines the similarities and differences in how various online communities discuss political participation by performing a content analysis of user-generated posts and comments in four different Reddit communities during September 2020. During this collection period, organizing-focused, small, and liberal communities discussed substantive participation more than their counterparts did, with voting being the most commonly discussed form of participation. Communities varied in what percentage of their posts and comments discussed participation, with the highest rates at around 30% and the lowest at 0%. Users encouraged others to participate more often than they described their own participation. A higher percentage of posts discussed participation than did comments. These findings suggest that some online communities can be effective outlets for sustained, impactful organizing. They also lend insight into the characteristics of these communities, which are often smaller, with specific community goals and significant restrictions on what type of content can be posted. The data suggests electoral campaigns can have particular success in using Reddit to drive participation. There is also a significant difference in how much liberal and conservative spaces discuss participation that is not strongly supported by prior literature.
Introduction

In the 2020 US Presidential Election, 66.3% of the voting-eligible population voted, making 2020 the highest turnout election since 1900. What caused this profound, rapid increase from the 59.2% who voted in 2016 (Schaul et al., 2020)? Expanded mail-in and early voting necessitated by the pandemic expanded the frontiers of the franchise. Watershed polarization, heightened by President Trump’s unique ability to mobilize both his supporters and opponents, may have provided voters with extra motivation. While these factors almost certainly played a role, perhaps there was a more enduring cause. Although political observers so often slander social media for its deleterious effects on both the tone and level of nuance of political discourse, might it also hold a key to increasing participation in our democracy?

Discussions of the social media’s effects on American politics could benefit from rigorous examinations of the types of conversations happening online and the communities in which they occur. Sometimes the internet can be a tool for exacerbating outrage, but it also has potential to drive the types of political participation that are necessary for the healthy functioning of democracy. The political internet takes a myriad of forms, offering up countless potential methods of engagement. Institutional frameworks of specific websites shape the constraints and incentives of the political activities hosted on their platforms. Determining what structural characteristics lead to productive online political engagement and implementing these findings on new and existing platforms could profoundly improve the health of the American political system.

One way in which the internet can produce socially desirable political outcomes is by acting as a tool for groups to organize to advance a specific policy, candidate, or party. Democratic systems rely on active, sustained participation among significant swaths of the
population. Many individuals have high levels of political engagement that are untethered from outcome-focused participation. Engaging with politics solely through media consumption or abstract discourse not only dampens one’s political agency, it also creates perverse incentives structures for politicians by prioritizing symbolic conflict (Hersh, 2020). Under this framework, online speech that encourages concrete political participation becomes extremely valuable. This thesis uses four online communities on Reddit to investigate the similarities or differences in how online communities discuss political participation.

**Literature Review**

**Social Movements – Collective Action to Create Change**

When an individual wishes to create a change in their community, they generally need to do so in a group. Social movements form when groups with similar goals try to achieve societal or political change through collective action. Movements can dissipate after a singular, flashpoint moment or endure for decades. Social movements require initial resources, including members, leaders, financial resources, skills, connections, etc. (McAdams, 1982). Political parties continually adopt and reject various social movements, as these movements “must create enduring institutional structures in order to survive or prosper” (Lienesch, 1982, pp. 415).

American elections require that the energies of numerous, diverse movements be channeled into what is usually a binary choice between candidates. Citizens may choose a particular candidate because of affiliations with any number of political movements that support the candidate. Parties then target citizens who have made a choice to support a candidate or are considering supporting a candidate and try to transform the ephemeral concept of support into concrete action, known as political participation.
Political Participation

Political participation encompasses “activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take” (Verba and Nie, 1972). Political participation is an “umbrella concept” that covers a wide range of activities. Traditional conceptions of political participation include, but are not limited to, activities such as voting, donating to political or issue campaigns, protesting, boycotting, and placing bumper stickers on cars (Teorell et al., 2006). This broad range includes many high and low impact actions. Electorally focused forms of participation often exist within the institutional structures of political parties or groups associated with these parties.

Although both the Republican and Democratic parties contain multitudes of distinct political movements within their ranks, elections require all these movements’ energies to be channeled into a binary choice between candidates. Citizens may choose a particular candidate because of affiliations with any number of political movements that support the candidate. Voting serves as the foundational, gateway form of participation, although parties continually try to elicit additional forms of participation from their supporters, including volunteering to recruit more voters and donating to candidates. Non-electoral social movements can also mediate their activities through formal or informal institutions. As internet access has become increasingly ubiquitous in the last two decades, both political participation and the larger social movements in which participation exists have adapted to the digital sphere.

Can Social Media Drive Participation in Social Movements and Politics?

The internet may have tremendous potential to act not only as an accelerant for spontaneous, mass movements, but also to have more enduring influences on local and national politics. At the beginning of the 2010s, a number of movements promised great potential for
social media as a tool for mass organizing. Across the globe, Occupy movements used social media platforms to inspire offline activism and organizing to protest perceived financial injustices (Adi, 2015). Occupy Wallstreet activists used Twitter to promote and sustain public gatherings and drive traditional media narratives, all while lacking easily identifiable leaders (Adi, 2015). Two Israeli educational policy protests, the Strollers and Sardines Movements, in the mid 2010s effectively used Facebook to organize and drive their messaging. The Strollers Protest primarily used Facebook to coordinate actions among their local chapters and disseminate information. The Sardines Protest used Facebook as a platform for discussion and interaction with local officials, but did not use it as much to coordinate offline activity (Avigur-Eshel & Berkovich, 2017).

While this research suggests the internet can drive participation, there is also literature that suggests that social media often fails to meaningfully impact participation. Although Black Lives Matter organized massive protests, its official social media accounts primarily disseminated information and engaged in agenda setting, rather than mobilization (Schultz, 2016). Likewise, in Honk Kong’s 2013-14 Umbrella Movement, traditional and alternative media played a far more influential role in driving people to protest than social media did (Abb, 2016). Merry’s content analysis of the NRA and Brady Campaign’s Twitter accounts provides further support by arguing that these issue advocacy groups primarily use Twitter to advance policy narratives and do little online organizing (Merry 2016). Finally, research suggests candidates for office also rarely use social media to promote offline mobilization, with the exception of voting. In 2016, both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump primarily used Twitter for agenda setting (Lee, 2018). Research that fails to find evidence of real participation increases
often focuses on Twitter, suggesting that different platforms may have different capacities to affect participation.

Some forms of traditional political participation exist both online and off, such as donating to candidates. Online behavior influences solely offline forms of political participation, like voting or in-person protesting. Advocacy and issue campaigns have thrived online (Dahlgreen, 2005). Social media allows users not only to engage with issue campaigns online, but also to signal their offline political participation and encourage political participation in others.

Online news seeking strongly predicts online political engagement (Feezel 2016). Exposure to political information online and primarily getting one’s news through social media both predict online expressions of political sentiments (Gil de Zuniga, Jung, and Valenzuela 2012). Brundigage et al. 2014 finds that exposure to ideologically consistent websites, colloquially called echo-chambers, predicts both online and offline participation. While some studies find that exposure to information that does not conform to one’s ideological beliefs indirectly causes increased offline participation, others find no significant relationship (Feezell 2016; Lane et al, 2017). In addition to debating how much the internet has changed political participation, scholars also disagree about how much the internet has changed the pool of potential political participants.

**Does the Internet Affect Who Participates?**

Much of the academic debate over the internet’s effects on political participation center on the mobilization and reinforcement hypotheses. The mobilization hypothesis argues that the internet lowers barriers to gaining information and organizing, which allows new groups to enter politics (Tolbert and McNeal 2003). Social media and online forums also create new
opportunities for people to engage with representatives or leaders. Proponents of the mobilization hypothesis argue that because internet and social media access are so ubiquitous, citizens have more equal abilities to influence the political process, regardless of age, gender, or socioeconomic status.

The reinforcement argues that the internet does not radically change political participation, but rather exacerbates existing inequities and reflects the same social stratifications as offline participation. Offline participation skews heavily towards older, more-educated, wealthier people, who vote, donate, and volunteer at higher rates than younger, poorer people (Oser et al. 2013). The reinforcement hypothesis builds on the civic voluntarism model, which finds that the main reasons people do not participate in politics are “because they can’t, because they don’t want to, or because no one asked them” (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, 15). On the first front, proponents of the reinforcement hypothesis argue that the same fiscal, temporal, and educational constraints that prevent lower income and younger people from participating offline exist online. Additionally, if people lack interest in politics, the internet will not change this. Proponents of this model admit that the internet does lower barriers towards asking people to engage with politics, but they argue that older, more-educated, and wealthier people online are still much more likely to recruit people similar to themselves, which will drive further stratification (Kreuger 2006).

More recent research suggests that while the internet does allow for the mobilization of some new groups, it also reinforces some existing inequities. The internet succeeds at bringing more young voters into the political process. Contemporary online political participation reflects a relatively even gender split, which runs contrary to older conventional wisdom that said that internet political spheres were male-dominated. However, online participation demographics
reflect offline stratifications on the basis of socioeconomic status, education, and political interest (Oser et al. 2013). As internet access becomes more ubiquitous, the mobilization hypothesis may continue to become more accurate.

**Online Political Engagement and Partisanship**

Liberal Democrats are more likely to be politically active on social media than conservative/moderate Democrats, or Republicans are (Pew, 2018). 44% of self-identified liberal Democrats reported encouraging others to “take action on issues that are important to them” and 43% reported having “taken part in a group that shares an interest an issue/cause” (Pew, 2018). These numbers are around 25-30% for moderate Democrats and Republicans. Similarly, Democrats are more likely than Republicans to say that social media is important for “creating sustained movements for social change” (Pew, 2018).

Although both groups commonly seek ideologically reaffirming communities, “Republicans are prone to online selective exposure and reinforcing effects.” (Feezell 2016). Both groups are more likely to engage with politics online when exposed to ideologically consistent information than they are when exposed to ideologically differing information. However, only Republicans are more likely to participate online when showed ideologically reaffirming material than when they are showed information with no viewpoint (Feezell 2016).

**Political Hobbyism**

Although politics traditionally served as a venue for people to advance personal and group interests, the last forty years of American history saw the rise of another form of political engagement, “political hobbyism” (Hersh, 2020). Political hobbyists consume political news for entertainment, debate their friends, and vote at high rates, but rarely, if ever, volunteer, organize, or take substantive action to influence the political process. Hersh contrasts hobbyism with what
he variously calls “pursuing power” or “real politics,” the process by which communities meet with officials, protest, and act to advance personal and group interests. The groups diverge along gender, race, and class lines. Hobbyists are more likely to be men, white, and socioeconomically secure, suggesting they do not feel an urgent need to affect politics. Hobbyists also contribute to incentive structures that encourage politicians to prioritize symbolic conflict over substantive policy agendas. Hobbyists give attention to figures driving nationalized conflicts that often do not result in policy changes. (Hersch, 2020). Typical actions of hobbyists, like signalling support for candidates or issues online, fall into traditional definitions of political participation. However, these acts are often low-impact, as the point of the action is not a political end, but rather the action itself.

The prevalence of hobbyists is inextricably tied to the rise of social media. Online platforms can excel at incentivizing symbolic speech and gestures with little tangible impact. However, they also have potential to serve as effective organizing tools. If some online communities contain high levels of hobbyism while others successfully drive political participation, then importing the cultures and institutional structures of the latter to the former could increase rates of political participation. The first step in this project is gaining a better understanding of the similarities and differences in how online communities discuss political participation.

**Methods and Data**

I performed a content analysis of posts and comments in a range of politically-focused communities on Reddit, called subreddits, to determine how much each type of community discusses substantive, generally offline, political participation. Using Reddit’s Application Programming Interface and RStudio, I pulled the top 5 posts from four subreddits – r/politics,
r/conservative, r/voteblue, and r/bullcity – approximately every other day from September 3 – 21, 2020 between 5 and 9pm. For each post, I also analyzed the top 5 comments, and the top reply to each comment. The front page of a subreddit at any given moment is determined by a combination of post recency and Reddit’s voting mechanism, which allows users to either upvote or downvote posts (Salihefendic, 2015). A subreddit’s top posts and comments reflect the voices that a community collectively chooses to elevate. All posts were categorized as either signaling participation or not. A post could signal participation by describing the poster’s participation, encouraging the reader to participate, or both. Participation signaling posts fit in seven categories – Registering to Vote, Voting, Volunteering/Organizing, Donating, Running for Office, Protesting, and Other. All participation signaling comments were similarly categorized as describing or encouraging participation in the same seven categories.

Reddit

Much of the existing literature on online participation focuses on social media sites that may not be conducive to community-building and organizing. Twitter lacks a function that would allow users to form groups of like-minded individuals or individuals in the same area. Facebook might provide the a better platform for creating groups and building communities, but at present the “Facebook Groups” feature is difficult to study. In contrast, the social media website Reddit allows users to interact in specific communities, giving it potential as an organizing hub. Reddit remains an understudied venue of political activity. A better understanding of how one of the largest sites in the country interacts with the political process would be invaluable to the academy’s understanding of online political participation in the US.

Alexa.com lists Reddit as the seventh most visited website in the US and the third most popular social media site, behind Youtube and Facebook (Alexa.com, Feb. 9, 2021). The website
is divided into different communities, called subreddits, which have a wide range of autonomy to set their own content moderation policies, which are enforced by users known as moderators. Reddit is anonymous. Users post content on Reddit and other users can comment on this content and upvote or downvote content. Every post is contained within a specific subreddit. Each subreddit has a distinct focus, from politics to TV shows to hobbies to memes. The naming convention follows the format r/subredditname (e.g. r/politics is a subreddit about politics).

Reddit is primarily popular among younger internet users. In 2019, 22% of American adults ages 18-29 used Reddit, while 14% of adults ages 30-49 used it, 6% of adults ages 50-64, and 1% of adults older than 65 (Clement, 2020). In addition to skewing young, Reddit’s user base is disproportionately male, as 15% of American male adults used the platform in 2019, while only 8% of female adults used it (Clement, 2020). In 2019, 14% of Hispanic American adults used Reddit, followed by 12% of white and 4% of black American adults. Reddit’s American userbase also has a wealth gap, as the platform is used by 15% of adults with an annual household income over $75,000, 14% between $30,000-$74,999, and 6% under $30,000. Similarly, 15% of American adults with a college degree and 14% of adults with some college used Reddit in 2019, while only 6% of adults with a high school degree or less used the platform. As Reddit’s userbase skews male, college educated, and wealthier, it contains a similar demographic composition to Hersh’s identification of the class of political hobbyists.

**Characteristics of the Four Subreddits**

Previous studies of political participation on Reddit have focused mainly on larger subreddits. Soliman et al. 2019 create a characterization of political conversation Reddit by examining the two largest liberal subreddits and the two largest conservative subreddits. Guimarães et al. 2019 conduct a similar analysis based on the biggest American and global
political subreddits. This paper includes both previously studied subreddits (r/politics and r/conservative) and subreddits that rarely, if ever, draw academic attention (r/voteblue and r/bullcity).

Although all are focused on the US, each of the 4 chosen subreddits represents a different kind of online community. R/politics is a large subreddit, with 6.7 million subscribers as of October 8, 2020 (reddit.com/r/politics, 2020). As of June 1, 2020, the largest subreddit had approximately 50 million subscribers and the second largest had approximately 30 million, so r/politics is not one of the platform’s biggest communities (reddit.com/r/politics, 2020). Its “About Community” section of its frontpage states, “/r/politics is for news and discussion about US politics.” (reddit.com/r/politics, 2020) Although the subreddit lacks an explicit ideological or partisan viewpoint, its top posts and comments consistently reflect a liberal viewpoint. R/politics is one of the most widely studied political subreddits. (Soliman, 2019) Although most of its rules focus on technical aspects of acceptable posting, they also prohibit “incivility,” “personal attacks,” “hate speech,” “trolling,” and “solicitation” (reddit.com/r/politics, 2020).

R/conservative is somewhat smaller than r/politics, but still quite large, with 482 thousand members as of October 8, 2020 (reddit.com/r/conservative, 2020). R/conservative promotes right-wing beliefs and priorities. It is also a staple of prior academic research on Reddit (Soliman, 2019). Its rules require “civility” and prohibited acts include “racism,” “spam,” “brigading” by users from other communities, and activity that violates its mission statement, which is “The place for Conservatives on Reddit” (reddit.com/r/conservative, 2020).

R/voteblue is the only one of the four communities expressly devoted to political activism. Its purpose is “promoting and helping elect down-ballot Democrats all across the United States of America” (reddit.com/r/voteblue, 2020) It is much smaller than r/politics or

R/bullcity is the only local community of the four, focusing on Durham, North Carolina (reddit.com/r/bullcity, 2020). This is the only community of the four that is not solely focused on politics. Although r/bullcity discusses local, state, and national politics, it is primarily focused on non-overtly-political local affairs. 38% of the posts analyzed in this study were politically focused. R/bullcity is the smallest of the 4 subreddits, with 17 thousand members. Prohibited acts include “soliciting,” “spam,” and “abusive language” (reddit.com/r/bullcity, 2020).

**Types of Political Participation**

Each comment or post that signals participation is categorized by the type of participation discussed. These modes of participation derive from Hersh’s model of power politics, and are designed to capture most, if not all, of the ways an individual can meaningfully influence their local community, state, or nation. Most of these forms of participation require offline action, although some, like donating, can be done online. Forms of participation like volunteering/organizing shifted towards online models during the pandemic.

These categories require users to articulate specific, participation signaling language. Some posters may have been trying to signal participation through vague appeals to “take action” but lacked the specificity to warrant categorization and were thus excluded. Users employed a wide lexicon to signal each type of participation. For example, a comment describing voting might say something like “I just got my mail-in ballot today,” while a comment encouraging voting might say something like “everyone needs to go to the polls in this election.” A user could
signal volunteering with phrases like “I made phone calls for a candidate” or “here is a link to get involved.” Calls to register to vote, donate, or volunteer often contain links to applicable websites. Some political subreddits hold “Ask Me Anything” (AMA) sessions, in which a poster describes their experiences and answers questions. AMAs provide platforms for current or former candidates for office to describe and encourage others to participate by running for office. Users could signal participation by describing or encouraging involvement in marches, pickets, boycotts, or any number of additional activities. The “Other” category included rarely mentioned, idiosyncratic forms of participation like participating in the Census. After determining whether each post and comment signaled participation and categorizing the ones that did, I compiled the data.

**Results**

R/voteblue had the highest percentage of participation-signaling posts, 45%, and the highest percentage of participation-signaling comments, 32.6% (see Figure 1). R/bullcity was second, with 27.5% of posts and 21% of comments signalling participation, although only 37.5% of r/bullcity posts were political in nature. In r/politics, 11.1% of posts and 9% of comments signaled participation. R/conservative had 0 posts and .2% of comments signaling participation. There is a significant gap between the levels of participation signalling of each community.
Effects of Community Type

Both post and comment data strongly suggest that smaller communities have higher rates of participation signaling speech. The two small subreddits, r/voteblue and r/bull city, had substantially higher rates than the two big subreddits, r/politics and r/conservative (see Figure 2). Posts and comments on larger subreddits reach a broader audience, so it could still be true, for instance, that r/politics is more useful for spreading participation signaling speech than r/voteblue.
The high rates of participation signaling speech in r/voteblue and r/bullcity suggest that organizing-focused subreddits are the most conducive to promoting participation, followed by local subreddits, and then ideological subreddits (see Figure 3). R/conservative did not promote participation. R/politics, while not explicitly ideological, consistently elevates liberal content and functions as a sort of liberal parallel to r/conservative.

Figure 3 – Frequency of Participation Signaling by Subreddit Type (R/Voteblue Not Counted as Ideological)
Although r/voteblue is primarily focused on organizing, it does have a clear partisan, and thus ideological, valence, which somewhat complicates this picture. When the “Ideological” group of subreddits expands to include r/voteblue, its frequency of participation signaling increases (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4 – R/voteblue Counted as Ideological**

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**Frequency of Types of Participation Signaled**

Voting was the most commonly signaled form of participation (see Figure 5). 4.3% of posts described the poster’s voting, followed by volunteering/organizing with 3%. 9.7% of posts encouraged voting, followed by 4.2% of posts encouraging registering to vote and 2.4% encouraging volunteering/organizing. 2.5% of comments described the commenter’s voting, while 1.4% described donating. 5.9% of comments encouraged participation and 2.1% encouraged volunteering/organizing.
In r/bull city, 10% of posts described voting and 15% encourage voting. The second most common form was registering to vote, with 2.5% of posts describing and 7% encouraging. 6.7% of comments encouraged voting and 8.7% described voting. Just 2.3% of comments encouraged registering, while 2.8% described volunteering/organizing.

For r/politics, 6.7% of posts encouraged voting followed by registering and volunteering/organizing with 4.4%. 6% of comments encouraged voting and 1.6% described voting. Only 1.6% of comments encouraged registering and volunteering/organizing, while .2% described voting. However, 4.4% of posts described volunteering/organizing and running for office, while only 2.2% described voting. This exception derives from Ask-Me-Anything (AMA) posts by candidates for office.

R/voteblue generally continued these trends. Voting was encouraged in 17.5% of posts and 13.0% of comments, followed by donating, which was encouraged in 7.5% of posts and 6.7% of comments. An equal percentage (5%) of posts described voting,
volunteering/organizing, and donating. However, r/voteblue users were much more likely to describe their own donating, with 6.7% of comments describing donating and only 1.5% of comments describing voting. R/conservative had zero posts signaling participation and one comment signaling participation, specifically one describing voting.

Protesting was the least signaled form of participation. No posts signaled it and only four comments, all from a r/bullcity post about a local worker protest, encouraged it.

The Language of Participation Signalling

Participation signaling was more common in posts than in comments. 20% of posts signaled participation, with 9.7% describing and 12.7% encouraging, while only 13.7% of comments signaled participation, with 5.3% describing and 9.1% encouraging (see Figure 6). This trend held for all subreddits except r/conservative, which had a negligible amount of participation signaling in both comments and posts.

Figure 6 – Participation Signaling in Posts v Comments

Generally, posts and comments were more likely to encourage the reader to politically participate than they were to describe the poster/commenter’s participation. 12.7% of posts
encouraged participation, while 9.7% of posts described participation (see Figure 7). Similarly, 9.1% of comments encouraged participation and 5.3% described it.

*Figure 7 – Encouragement v Description*

![Bar chart showing the percentage of posts and comments that encourage or describe participation. The x-axis represents categories (Percent Encourage, Percent Describe) and the y-axis represents frequency. The bars for posts and comments are color-coded: blue for posts and orange for comments. The chart shows that posts encourage more participation than comments, and posts describe less participation than comments.]

The overall discrepancy in encouragement vs. description frequency was driven by r/voteblue, where 30% of posts encouraged participation while 15% described it (see Figure 8). 23.7% of comments in r/voteblue encouraged participation and 10.7% of comments described it. In r/politics, 6.67% of posts encouraged participation and 8.89% described it, while 6.9% of comments encouraged it and 2.9% described it. For r/bullcity, 15% of posts encouraged and 15% described. 10.6% encouraged and 11.5% described. R/conservative’s only participation signalling speech was a comment describing voting.
Conclusions

The Type of Community Seems to Determine the Frequency of Speech Types

Although these results are not generalizable, they contain useful insights about what sorts of online communities are conducive to driving offline participation among their members. Small communities had far higher rates of participation than large communities, suggesting these may be more effective options for political organizers. However, many more people see participation-focused speech on large subreddits, so there may be a tradeoff between the reliability of small online communities and the potential for impact of large ones.

Local online communities also seem to be an effective option for political organizing. These findings support Hersh’s hypothesis that political organizing and impact are most achievable at small scale, local levels. Hersh also suggests local political organizing as an avenue for driving civic engagement and restoring public trust in government. R/bullcity’s success as a political forum suggests that the internet may be an effective tool for this work, especially given
the constraints of in-person meetings during the pandemic. It is not surprising that the most participation-focused subreddit was the one explicitly devoted to activism, but r/voteblue does show this model can be effective on Reddit.

Overall, these results suggest that Reddit can be a useful tool for political organizing. Communities’ abilities to create their own rules and self-moderate speech allow conversations to stay focused on specific issues. For instance, R/voteblue discourages discussions of the presidential election and removes posts and comments from other ideological viewpoints or supporting other political parties. These rules practices reflect a tradeoff between open discussion and community focus. Future studies could try to compare rates of participation signaling speech on Reddit to other commonly used social media platforms as well as further examining the impact of various content moderation policies.

My review of the literature suggests more failures to use social media for offline organizing than successes. These failures stem from an inability to transfer online engagement to offline participation. Small-scale communities like r/voteblue and r/bullcity that have found success could provide helpful models for future organizers of larger-scale social movements.

**Partisanship and Participation**

The complete lack of participation-signaling speech in r/conservative, compared to much higher levels in r/voteblue and r/politics, is a surprising finding. Because Republicans are more likely to select their news exposure to conform to pre-existing ideological beliefs and selection to ideologically conforming content predicts online political engagement, r/conservative could have reasonably been expected to have higher rates of participation signaling speech than r/politics. However, studies like Feezell 2016 do not make a distinction between speech that engages with political themes online and speech that explicitly signals tangible participation.
The gap between conservative and liberal participation signaling rates could reflect larger trends about differences in internet use based on ideology. It could also result from peculiarities specific to r/conversative. Democrats’ tendency to believe that social media is an important part of modern social movements and political change could also make them more conscious of focusing on offline participation. Additionally, Democratic messaging in 2020 was hyper-focused on the mechanics of voting and preventing voter suppression (Rutenberg, 2020), so this could be an instance of users following different elite cues based on party. This difference in nature between conservative and liberal political speech and participation signaling needs further study to discover if it holds up in other examples and find potential causal mechanisms.

**Reddit’s Demographics, Political Hobbyism, and Participation**

Additional research could combine research on rates of participation within subreddits with demographic surveys of the subreddit’s userbase. For example, if r/conservative skewed more male or white than Reddit as a whole, as the demographics of the Republican party might suggest (Bump, 2020), this could provide support to Hersh’s research on political hobbyist demographics, given r/conservatives low rates of participation signaling speech. Similarly, demographic data would be useful in answering questions related to the mobilization and reinforcement hypotheses. Given Reddit’s overall demographics, subreddits that successfully drive political participation would provide support for the reinforcement hypothesis, as Reddit is primarily wealthy, college educated, and male, although the platform’s youth would somewhat complicate this picture. Subreddits that fail to drive participation provide support for neither theory. However, there is currently no data on the demographics of these subreddits to use to draw strong conclusions.
Overall, I found more speech discussing substantive participation and fewer signs of hobbyism that I initially expected. R/bullcity’s high rates of participation signalling lend credence to Hersh’s theory that local organizations offer the most fertile ground for substantive participation. R/bullcity’s political posts and comments were also the least negative and rarely contained divisive rhetoric. However, the discussions of participation signalling in national communities like r/voteblue and r/politics complicate this picture. In addition to their frequency, they were also generally attached to appeals to negative partisanship, using this fear to stress the necessity of participation. Local participation can lead to positive, healthier participation, but having fewer hobbyists will not be enough to fix political polarization.

**Movements and Participation in an Election Year**

As the data collection window came approximately a month and a half before an election, the data reflects political movements’ channeling their energies towards direct electoral participation. Most of the participation-focused speech on these subreddits concerned the 2020 election. Users highlighted the goals and concerns of numerous social and political movements, but usually through the prism of partisan electoral politics. Voting and registering to vote and donating to campaigns were commonly signaled, and much of the speech concerning volunteering/organizing was about supporting candidates for office. More research is needed to determine if rates of participation signaling speech would change in off-years. Presumably, they would decrease, but it is possible that they might shift towards other forms of political participation.

**The Language of Participation**

The gap between rates of speech encouraging participation and describing it suggests that Reddit users think urging others to participate will be more effective than describing their own
participation, which makes intuitive sense. This framework does assume users are intentional political actors and not primarily motivated by other desires, like wanting to share their personal stories. The positive effects on participation from being in a political network come both from being encouraged to participate and psychological motivation to conform to the group, driven by descriptions of participation (Miller et al, 2015 & Carlson et al, 2020). Many Reddit users seem to view themselves as part of an active, impactful community of political participants.

**Further Research**

Reddit offers scholars many untapped opportunities to better understand the nature of online political discourse, especially as it pertains to discussions of political participation. Many Reddit users attempt to get other members to participate by describing their own participation or encouraging participation. Studies that could track the efficacy of these efforts would be the next logical step in understanding the societal and political impact of individual subreddits. Legions of political subreddits exist, providing a host of potential venues for analysis.
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