

How do I change politics? Evaluating the effectiveness of political participation modes

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Abstract

While we do have some understanding of how citizens engage in politics, much less is known about their evaluations of which political act they see as the most effective. Of course, such evaluations are likely changing depending on the issue at hand. In this paper we use data from the McGill Student Internet Survey as well as the Canadian Election Survey in 2011 in order to explore the patterns of effectiveness of political acts, including general online actions, forms of participation on social networking sites, or offline political acts. Our main research question is how the evaluation of the effectiveness of different political acts and modes is related to patterns of political behavior and issue position. Our data set allows a unique analysis of a case study displayed in a small experimental survey scenario, in which the policy issue to be influenced (long-gun registry) is held constant depending on the respondent's political attitudes, while respondents choose the most effective form of political influence. Our paper will draw important conclusions about how satisfactory and effective different participation modes are for democratic citizens and why.

***** WORK IN PROGRESS*****

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Introduction

One of the most persistent criticisms of newer forms of political participation has been about their potential effectiveness. There has been some fear that these types of activism require minimal and infrequent effort and do not lead to any major outcomes or effects. Even worse, they might imply that people do something for politics, while in effect they do not reach any goals, and get distracted from the main political issues by the satisfaction that they have participated by just clicking a button. In short, the question is whether these newer forms of political participation are equally effective as electoral or other conventional forms of participation focusing on the parliamentary realm in bringing about political and social change. Few studies have examined this issue explicitly. Indeed, little research has been undertaken to compare the effectiveness of

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various conventional and important emerging forms of political participation. This paper offers one of the first analyses of this issue by focusing on the perceptions of effectiveness of these newer forms of participation compared to the conventional ones.

Literature Review

Since the 1990s, political scientists have called attention to a transformation in political action repertoires in Western democracies (Putnam 2000, Rubenson et al. 2007, Macedo et al. 2005, van Schuur and Voerman 2010). Conventional forms of political participation such as voter turnout, membership in voluntary associations, political parties, unions and other groups, writing letters, participating in rallies, and volunteering in campaigns, the numbers are in decline (ibid). Many scholars and observers interpret this development as a fundamental threat to the survival of healthy communities and democratic political systems. However, not everyone accepts this interpretation or conclusion. Other scholars argue that citizens have developed a multitude of ways to engage in politics outside the parliamentary sphere that they find more suitable, responsible, meaningful, efficient and direct for their political interests and needs (Beck, Giddens and Lash 1997; Bennett 1998; Inglehart and Catterberg 2002; Stolle and Hooghe 2005; Young 2006). This is expressed in political use of social media, online petitions, sharing viral videos for humanitarian causes etc. These scholars claim that we are witnessing a rise of action repertoires resulting from preferences to do something political without a steady affiliation.

Theoretical work has underlined this turn in political participation and has located the emerging action repertoires more clearly outside the electoral and parliamentary spheres (Koopmans and Rucht 2002). Well-known and widely used concepts representative of this theoretical thinking are subpolitics (Beck 1997), creative politics (McFarland 2010), and everyday-making (Bang and Sorensen 2001, Li and Marsh 2008). However, a strong skepticism remains (Putnam 2000, Skocpol 2003).

Are new forms of political participation ineffective?

Newer forms of political participation have been criticized as slacktivism and clicktivism, as politically ineffective and sometimes even as indirectly aiding authoritarian regimes (Gladwell 2010, Morozov 2011, Esfandiari 2010). Gladwell (2010) is skeptical, while social networks are efficient at certain tasks, they do not offer the hierarchical structure and the high standard of motivation needed to mobilize people effectively. According to Gladwell, “social networks are effective at increasing *participation*—by lessening the level of motivation that participation requires”. Morozov argues that social media is a tool used by activists and that social change still requires long-term effort and meaningful engagement with political institutions (Morozov 2011). According to him, we cannot speak of social media induced revolutions in the Arab spring because they were not spontaneous. Esfandiari (2010), writing in 2010 about the revolution in Iran in 2009, argues that there was no twitter revolution *inside* Iran, and that actually, word of

mouth was the most effective organizing tool. Others point out that even after Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak shut down the Internet for a few days, mobilization was not dramatically affected and face-to-face interaction and organization sustained the movement (Aouragh and Alexander 2011, Karagiannopoulos 2012). Additionally, Twitter can spread false or confusing rumors as quickly as it can publicize events on the ground, and “can serve the purposes of Iran’s regime as easily as it can aid the country’s activists” (Esfandiari 2010). However, overall, these critics do not refute that social media have played a role in facilitating political change, but point out that this role is sometimes over stated and under investigated. Henry Farell argues that there is no “smoking gun,” to demonstrate causation (Farell 2011).

As newer and online forms of political actions are more spontaneous, less organized, and more fluid (Stolle and Micheletti 2013), the doubt is whether they provide sufficient links between the citizens and the political system (van Deth 2010). One of the problems is, for example, that within parliamentary democracies, decision-making inevitably will be a long-term process, respecting procedures and consultations. If mobilization campaigns are short-lived events, the fear is that the impact of such campaigns and their resulting political actions will automatically be more limited. The fundamental concern is how the long-term institutionalized decision-making processes can be systematically influenced without an ingrained organizational structure that aggregates citizens’ opinion.

While there has been lots of outspoken criticism against newer forms of political participation, so far, there do not seem to be any systematic, empirical investigations about their effectiveness. While many studies focus on the relationship between online activity (e.g. facebook or online news) and political participation, they do not study the actual political consequences stemming from the political participation itself (Vitak et al. 2011). Thus public intellectuals and journalists such as Gladwell and Morozov are frequently (in fact, almost exclusively) cited to introduce or substantiate criticisms of social media activism or “slacktivism” (see also: Farell 2012). However, none of these claims have been studied systematically.

Many critiques and previous research regarding the ineffectiveness of new and online activism focus on case studies and as such cannot be generalized (Hooghe and Marien, 2012). The KONY 2012 campaign, for example, has been criticized for presenting a narrative that did not lead to meaningful effective action and for presenting an inaccurate portrait of child soldiers and the complexities of the issue (Drumbl 2012). Although the campaign advocated concrete policy goals that included the transfer of the Joseph Kony, the leader of the Lord’s Resistance Army, to the International Criminal Court to face charges of war crimes including conscription of child soldiers, incarcerating commanders is only a “tiny step towards justice” (Ibid). The author concludes that, “the KONY 2012 campaign – and ‘clicktivism’ in general – have short attentions spans and a limited shelf life” (Ibid). However, this study, like many others does not employ empirical techniques to test this claim more thoroughly.

In a random sample of 683 respondents at a large Midwestern university in the U.S, it was found that more intense Facebook use was associated with a decrease in political participation, which was interpreted as capturing a degree of “slacktivism,” although the authors admit other explanations are possible. Additionally, internet activism is portrayed as increasing the number of inactive members of social movements, therefore generating little change (Petray 2011). However, again these claims are just statements.

While many academics of new social media and online political tools believe in their effectiveness, also in this camp the claims are mostly based on speculations. Most obviously, the accounts of the Arab spring and other youth movements are often linked to the role of social media, as the cause for their success. Wael Ghonim, a google executive and protestor, famously stated that the Egyptian revolution would not have begun without online communications (Karagiannopoulos 2012). Comunello and Anzera (2012) describe two polarized opinions: those of the ‘digital evangelists’ who define social media as indispensable and the ‘techno realists’ who deem social media to be mostly irrelevant to the political action. The Internet can be described as a ‘sphere of dissidence’ during the Egyptian revolution, where activists could share opinions and contribute to decision-making and as such the internet made a “revolutionary contribution,” but it may still be overall best understood as a tool (Aouragh and Alexander 2011). Yana Breindl adds, “The internet does not solve all obstacles to collective action. It provides, however, a networked infrastructure and tools for organizing, coordinating and campaigning’ (2012).

New social media are seen as a powerful tool for organizers because they reduce the transaction costs of communicating and facilitates the rapid dissemination of information (Lynch 2011) as well as providing space for the expansion of activist networks (Lim 2012). It is also claimed that the “positive developments in the once repressive state of Burma can be at least partly attributed to the dedication of bloggers, rogue video journalists and students activists” (Kingston and Stam 2013). However, in the article, the precise relationship between the activists and the political changes were not investigated.

Sharing viral videos are a common action in participating politically in the social media-sphere. These videos are sometimes criticized as a shallow form of ‘awareness-raising’ and criticized for misrepresenting the subjects they seek to affect. For example, some critics claim that social media activism “has a tendency for being fast, thin and many,” (Merlyna 2013). In order for political videos to be effective and go viral, narratives need to be simple and causes that are associated with low risk activism, like sharing a video, have a better chance of going viral (Ibid). However, the actual consequences of the videos going viral are not studied directly.

Some studies analyze the content of political websites (social movement websites and NGO websites) in order to see *how* organizations take advantage of new mediums of communications in order to promote civic engagement, but the analysis stops there and does not lead to follow-up studies on how campaigns have mobilized people into action, changed the views of leaders or political parties or other important actors (Stein 2009, Obar, Zube and Lampe 2012, Lindsey and Stam 2013, Petray 2011).

Finally, while the existing literature is generally optimistic about the effects of new forms of participation, especially through social media, (Obar, Zube and Lampe 2012, Theocharis 2012), they are also aware of the need for a more in-depth understanding of how these actions reach their goals (Obar, Zube and Lampe 2012). In sum, while claims about the potential effectiveness or ineffectiveness of newer and online forms of political actions are rampant, we really have little knowledge about this issue.

Of course, it is not so surprising, because the effectiveness of any political act is very difficult to determine and there is no widely agreed upon method to measure effectiveness and political influence (Hooghe and Marien 2012). There are a number of reasons for this, including the nature of policy-making, the definition of success of a campaign and related actions, the changing targets of political action outside the common parliamentary sphere, and other factors (unrelated to political action) that might also be related to political change.

The number of actors involved in policy outcomes makes it very difficult to trace the thread of causality from participation to outcomes. For example, recently, after the collapse of a factory in Bangladesh in April 24th, 2013 and the death of over 1,000 factory workers, major retailers such as ZARA and H&M, have agreed to sign a building and fire safety accord strengthening their factory standards (*BBC News*, 2013). However, it is very unclear whether these actions were the result of international actors putting pressure on these companies, western consumers, the worker unrest and protests demanding higher salaries that followed or the tragedy itself.

Additionally, “success” of participation is a difficult concept to define. Success can be broadly characterized as outcome goals and process goals. Evaluating the outcome of the process itself is difficult because researchers “cannot be sure if an effect is due to public participation efforts or to other variables.” Process goals focus on the means of participation, and focus on information exchange, group process and procedures (Chess and Purcell 1999). It is important not to conflate process goals with product goals when assessing the effectiveness of participation, since the same act can be successful in achieving one set of goals, but not the other (Rosener 1978).²

² In order for an evaluation of participation to be successful, the goals of the participatory act and standard for measuring cause and effect must be established prior to the participatory act (Rosener 1978).

Whereas the question of effectiveness for conventional forms of political participation focuses primarily on the analysis of public policy change (e.g. as a result of pressure on parliaments to pass legislation) or direct political change (as after an election campaign leading to different parties taking office), the assessment for newer and online forms is more complex because its actions are not solely or ultimately concerned with changes in government action. Determining its influence in bringing about change therefore must rely on expanding the general view of political effectiveness to include not only how government is influenced, but also how these forms affect other individuals, raise general public awareness for their cause, and how they shape the values and behaviors of other targeted actors. Ultimately, the effectiveness investigation needs to focus on how political action addresses and solves real-life political problems. In other words, how close do activists come to reaching their goals? What is the degree to which their activism solves actual political problems on the ground (e.g. does the activism really reduce the use of child soldiers) (Stolle and Micheletti 2013)?

Sometimes success (of social movements) is determined by the achievement of the goals articulated. Participatory acts and movements can be compared on the basis of which accomplished more of their intended goals. However, the comparative difficulty of identifying goals might implicitly favor one movement or form of participation over another from the beginning of an analysis (Nathanson 1999). Success of protest movements was defined by William Gamson as having two dimensions: the first is policy change in response to the demands of the group and the second is the acceptance of the group itself as a legitimate political actor (Rochon and Mazmanian 1993). The authors additionally identify the changing of social values as a third goal of social movements (Ibid). The amorphous space of online political participation might make these goals difficult to translate to newer forms of participation – for example, does everyone who tweets a revolution’s hashtag become a part of the ‘protest group’ that Gamson defined?

Finally, the success of movements is only partially due to emphasis on participation and involvement in the policy process (Ibid). The study of the effects of social movements has been neglected in the literature. “We lack systematic empirical analyses that would add to our knowledge of the conditions under which movements produce certain effects” (Giugni 1998). While some first studies have been undertaken to address this gap in the literature on specific forms of political participation such as political consumerism (Stolle and Micheletti 2013), we do have little general knowledge on newer forms of participation. One way of addressing this issue is by examining how citizens themselves think about the effectiveness of various political acts.

People’s perceptions of different forms of political participation:

A few studies examine the perception of the effectiveness of various political behaviors. Some scholars believe that participation and intensity of participation (in social movements) depends in part on the individual evaluation of the effectiveness of the act

(Passy and Guigni 2001). Still, studies on the perceived effectiveness of political action repertoires are scarce.

A recent empirical study based on a representative survey of Belgian citizens as well as MPs from Belgium and seven other European countries, examined the perceived effectiveness of various political acts, and found that both citizens and members of parliament viewed voting as the most effective political act in influencing decision makers and agreed that the internet and illegal protests are the least effective ways. Variation between MPs from different countries however, was present in the ranking of the acts in the middle of this spectrum. According to the authors, 'more generally we can observe that activities that are on the rise in Western societies are in general seen as relatively less effective,' (Hooghe and Marien, 2012). Additionally, in Belgium, women, younger people, higher educated and French speaking respondents deemed non institutionalized participation to be more effective than men, older people, those with lower education and Dutch speaking respondents did (Ibid). Politicians tended to ascribe more importance to political parties, contacting politicians, and media attention while citizens viewed social-movement oriented forms of participation as more effective (Ibid). This research suggests that there are systematic differences between those who find non-institutionalized forms of participation effective and those who are not. Some of these differences might be captured by age and ideology (see Stolle and Micheletti 2013, chapter 3 on the relationship between political consumerism and left self-placement).

However, another study found differences in the perception of voting between majority and minority youth living in greater London. Data based on the results of fourteen focus groups that interviewed English, Bangladeshi and Congolese youth (both above and below voting age) revealed differences in the perception of effectiveness of political acts between the different groups. While the Bangladeshi and Congolese participants largely perceived voting and non-conventional political participation to be *ineffective* channels for influencing politics, English youth generally agreed that voting was the *only way* to achieve meaningful representation in the political system. Additionally, English youth participated in and believed in the effectiveness of collective action and non-conventional legal forms of participation much more than minority youth. Generally, all three groups rejected the effectiveness of illegal forms of non-conventional participation (Prachi and Barrett 2012).

One study looked at the perceived effectiveness of voting in pre-adults from a sample of 18 elementary and high schools in the U.S. Voting was not viewed as an especially effective participatory act. Younger students view voting as more effective than the older students do. However, most respondents believe that voting is good. So, interestingly, approval of voting and belief in the effectiveness of voting are weakly related. Other participatory acts were generally considered more effective than voting (Minns 1984).

The results of a focus group study of 20 participants in the demonstrations at El-Tahrir Square in 2011 confirmed the assumptions of those who believe in internet mobilization. The study reported that 95% of respondents believed social networking sites have played a very significant role in the Egyptian Revolution, and 5% claimed they played a significant role. All participants considered social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to be vital platforms for mobilizing action and support (Mansour 2012), indicating that special events might help to boost the perception of effectiveness of certain participation types.

In sum, first research shows that voting is often not seen to be the most effective form of participation. Perceptions of effectiveness of newer and non-institutionalized participatory acts vary by specific events experienced, ideology, age, and other factors. However, little research has shown how the effectiveness perceptions are related to the practice of non-institutionalized and online forms of political participation. If these forms are really seen to be as ineffective as some scholars claim, why do people practice them increasingly?

This paper offers a new analysis of perceptions of effectiveness of political acts. This study means to highlight that the debate about effectiveness also urges and challenges scholars to include considerations about the effectiveness of all forms of participation on delivering the public goods, policies, or societal innovations and solving the problems that these actions intend to address. The remainder of this paper is empirical, and takes a first step into measuring people's perceptions of effectiveness in two case studies.

The first case deals with the issue of the long gun registry, where respondents of a Canadian adult survey can choose which political actions they would follow to convince politicians to change their mind to match with the respondents' preferred policy outcome. This case study allows us to understand whether people think differently about which participation act might be most suitable depending on their issue position (support or opposition to an issue) and ideological stance. The second case study is conducted among university students and measures the broader perceptions of various political acts in relation to activities in these acts. The student sample is very active politically online, and thus offers an important test case for how the practice of non-institutionalized forms relate to the perceptions of their effectiveness.

Based on this review, the current study proposes the following hypothesis:

The first hypothesis is related to earlier findings and utilizes the online experiment on the specific issue of the long-gun registry. We expect that people who oppose the gun registry (and who are asked to convince politicians to adopt their viewpoints) will think differently of the effectiveness of online forms of participation than people who support it. Specifically:

H1: Individuals with more left-wing issue positions believe that less- institutionalized forms of political participation (online activism, petitioning and protesting) are more effective, compared to more individuals with more right-wing issue positions.

There is also not much doubt that the practice and perceptions of effectiveness of offline forms of participation are related, with the exception of voting. Thus we expect:
H2: There is a positive relationship between offline political behavior and the perceived effectiveness of these political activities.

Finally, there is an implicit assumption that those who practice online forms of political activism do not necessarily believe in their effectiveness:

H3: There is no relationship between online political activism and its perceived effectiveness to influence political decisions.

Data and methods

Data for this study came from the 2011 Canadian Election Study (CES) pre-election and post-election survey waves and from a two-wave panel study of undergraduate students at a large English speaking University in Canada (ISPS).

Canadian Election Study - Survey experiment

We used data from a survey experiment to investigate how individuals' socio-demographic background, political attitudes and their issue position about a certain political issue may affect their perceived effectiveness of different political actions to make sure that the policy reflects their convictions. The survey experiment was implemented in the last post-election Web survey wave of the 2011 Canadian Election Survey (n=743)³. This experiment sought to distinguish the perceived effectiveness of different political actions to influence the long-gun registry policy between Canadians who believed that the long-gun registry should be kept and Canadians who opposed the long-gun registry. Therefore, participants supporting the long-gun registry and participants opposing the long-gun registry were assigned to different vignette questions. Participants opposing the long-gun registry were presented with a story about Sara who opposed the long-gun registry. The local Member of Parliament opposes her viewpoint and has vowed to fight to keep the long-gun registry. However, Sara wants to make sure that the policy will change to be more consistent with her own beliefs and convictions. Participants who indicated to support the long-gun registry were presented with a story about Sara who believes that Canada's long-gun registry should be kept. Sara's local Member of Parliament opposed her viewpoint and has vowed to fight to scrap the long-gun registry. However, Sara wants to make sure that the policy will continue to reflect her own beliefs and convictions. After reading the story, both participant groups were asked to rate the effectiveness of different political actions if Sara wanted to take action and have an impact. In total 767 participants took part in the study. Almost sixty percent (n=447) of the participants were exposed to the pro long gun registry vignette question, as they previously indicated to be in favor of the policy, whereas around forty percent (n=317) received the vignette question opposing the

³ For more information on the sampling design and attrition of the different survey waves in the Canadian Election Study, see: Stolle et al. 2013.

long-gun registry. The remaining three participants who refused to indicate their issue position on the long-gun registry were excluded from the analysis.

When we compare background characteristics of supporters and opponents of the L-G registry, we find that women are overrepresented among the supporters, whereas the opposite is true for the policy opponents. Table 1 does not yield any statistically significant age and income differences between both groups. However, there seems to be a significant difference in the education level of both groups. Supporters of the long-gun registry tend to be slightly higher educated, compared to opponents. Both groups show also differences in their first language learned and still understood. Eighty percent of the English-speaking participants oppose the l-g registry, compared to 68 percent of their French-speaking-counterparts. The French-speaking participants are more likely to support the l-g- registry, compared to the English. Finally, opponents of the l-g registry are more likely to identify with the conservative party, whereas supporters of the l-g registry identify themselves more with the Liberal party, NDP or the PQ.

Table 1 Demographic and socioeconomic differences between supporters and opponents of the long-gun registry

	Pro L-G registry	n	Contra L-G registry	n	Sign test
<i>Gender</i>					
Men	42.5	190	57.1	181	15.81***
Women	57.5	257	42.9	136	
Age (mean)	55.1	446	56.0	316	-.85
Income (mean)	3.2	416	3.3	297	-.56
Education (mean)	8.1	445	7.5	317	4.16***
<i>Mother tongue</i>					
English language	67.6	296	80.1	253	26.85***
French language	23.7	104	9.2	29	
Other language	8.7	38	10.8	34	
<i>Party identification</i>					
Conservative party	15.0	65	47.9	148	95.28***
Liberal party	38.8	168	21	65	26.41***
NDP	15.2	66	6.8	21	12.43***
PQ	11.1	48	1	3	28.82***
Green party	3.7	16	2.6	24	.71
Other	12.9	56	19.7	61	6.29*

Note: N=764, significance test Chi-square statistics or independent sample- t-test, *: p<.05, **: p<.01, ***: p<.001. Cell entries are percentages or means when indicated.

Internet Student Panel Survey

In order to answer the question how individuals' perceived effectiveness of political actions may affect actual engagement in these political participation modes, we use

data of a two-wave panel survey among undergraduate students at a large English speaking University in Canada. The initial survey was conducted in April/May 2011. Participants were recruited through an invitation e-mail that was sent to all registered undergraduate students' official university e-mail address (n=14,039). In the invitation e-mail students were asked to fill in the online questionnaire whereby potential participants were informed that not participating in the research project would not affect their grades or academic results. As an incentive to take part in the study, students were informed that completing the online survey would give them a chance to enter a lottery where they could win one of two prizes, i.e. a \$100 gift certificate from a bookstore, computer store or music shop or an iPad. The invitation e-mail allowed students to click through a link that guided them to the online survey, which took approximately 15 minutes to fill-in. In total 1,238 students visited the website of the online survey and started the online questionnaire whereby 1080 students completed the survey. This results in a final response rate of 8 percentⁱ.

March 1, 2012, the second wave of the online survey was administered to the 891 respondents of the first wave who gave their consent to be contacted for participation in the second wave of the projectⁱⁱ. From the 891 respondents, 526 students (59 percent) completed the survey. An important issue in analysis with panel data is the length of the time lag between the waves. The current study employed a time lag of ten months between the first and the second survey, hence allowing enough time for potential causal effects of perceived effectiveness of political actions on actual political activity to evolve.

Of the total respondents (n=526, i.e. panel sample), 63 percent are women and 37 percent are men, reflecting roughly the composition of the student body. The ethnic distribution of the sample is 76 percent White, 20 percent Asian, 2 percent Hispanic, and 1 percent Black. As for respondents' citizenship and country of birth, 83 percent of the participants said to have Canadian citizenship, and 68 percent of the respondents indicated to be born in Canada.

We find a few attrition effects for the second wave in the distribution of ethnicity and country of birthⁱⁱⁱ. Survey drop-outs are more likely to be born in another country than Canada (42 percent versus 32 percent, Chi-square=10.591, p=.001) and are more likely to be visible minorities (37 versus 30 percent, Chi-square=6.543, p=.011), compared to non drop-outs. Attrition is not correlated with the main variables of interest, i.e. online and offline political participation. In short, we can conclude that attrition does not pose a serious threat for the internal validity of our study. As a result, the dataset is suited to answer our research questions.

Main variables of interest

Effectiveness of political activities

In the survey experiment participants evaluated the effectiveness of political participation activities in their ability to influence policy stances on the long-gun

registry. Participants were asked to rate the effectiveness of five political actions on a scale from 0 (=least effective) to 10 (most effective). The political actions from which they could choose are contact the local Member of Parliament to demand action, become a member of a party in which her (Sara's) view is represented, participate in a protest in favor/against the long-gun registry, Sign a petition in favor/against the long-gun registry, and finally engage in online activism in favor/against the long-gun registry.

The Internet Student Panel Survey measured students' evaluation of effectiveness of political activities to influence political decisions on a more aggregate level and independent of a specific political issue. First, participants were asked to evaluate political activities in their effectiveness to influence political decisions, rather than to influence one specific policy. Second, political participation modes were evaluated on an aggregate level, whereby students were asked to evaluate engagement in political activities offline, engagement in political activities on the Internet generally, and more specific engagement in political activities on social networking sites. Similar to the CES study, participants were asked to rate the effectiveness of these political activities on a scale from 0 (=not effective) to 10 (=very effective).

Political participation

For the analyses of the 2011 CES, we employed the four political participation items that correspond with the items measuring participants' self-evaluation of participation in a protest activity, signing a petition, becoming a member of a political party, and online activism. All participation activities are dummy coded with 1=respondents who participated at least once during the past year, and 0=otherwise.

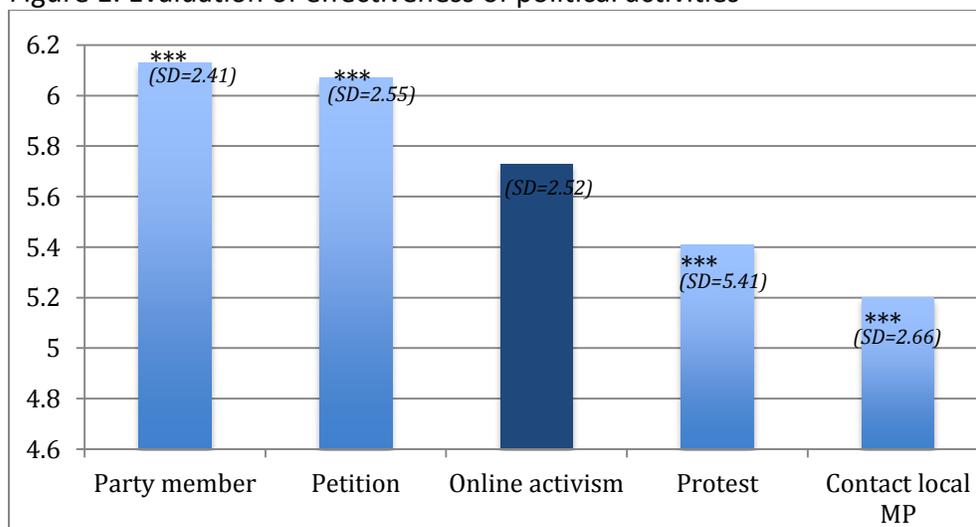
For the analyses on the data of the ISPS we created sum-scales for offline, online and Facebook-mediated political participation, both in wave 1 and wave 2. Facebook participation is measured by items that ask about sharing or commenting political opinions on Facebook walls of friends or other private citizens, liking or joining an institutionalized or non-institutionalized Facebook group for a political or societal cause or creating one. For the analyses we created a sum-scale with the four participation items, ranging from 0 to 4. In order to capture online and offline political activities, we focused on active forms of political participation, whereby we exclude passive forms such as looking up information about politics and current affairs. In order to allow us to compare the results for online and offline political participation, we employed similar measures for the online and offline counterparts, i.e. signing or collecting signatures for a petition, contacting a politician or government official, boycotting or buying products for political, ethical or environmental reasons; donating or raising money for a social/political purpose, and taking part in a march or demonstration.

Analysis

Figure 1 presents the mean scores for participants' evaluation of effectiveness of engagement in different political activities to influence the policy regarding the long-gun

registry. Participants evaluated becoming a member of party in which their view is represented as most effective political activity to have an impact on the policy regarding the long-gun registry. Signing a petition is ranked as second most effective political activity. Furthermore, participants evaluated becoming a party member ($M=6.13$, $S.D.=2.4$, $t(701)=-4.26$, $p<.000$) and signing a petition ($M=6.07$, $S.D.=2.55$; $t(705)=-3.82$, $p<.000$) as significantly more effective, compared to engaging in online activism ($M=5.73$, $S.D.=2.52$), such as starting and joining a Facebook group. However, Canadians believe that engaging in online activism is significantly more effective to influence long-gun registry policy decisions than participating in a protest activity ($M=5.41$, $S.D.=2.56$; $t(694)=3.52$, $p<.000$) or contacting a local member of parliament to demand action ($M=5.20$, $S.D.=2.66$; $t(660)=4.31$, $p<.000$). Surprisingly, participants evaluated contacting a local MP as least effective political activity to influence the long-gun registry policy. In short, despite the fears about the ineffectiveness of engagement in the online political sphere and the increased debate about ‘slacktivism’, the results indicate that participants thought of online activism not as the most effective nor as the least effective political activity.

Figure 1. Evaluation of effectiveness of political activities

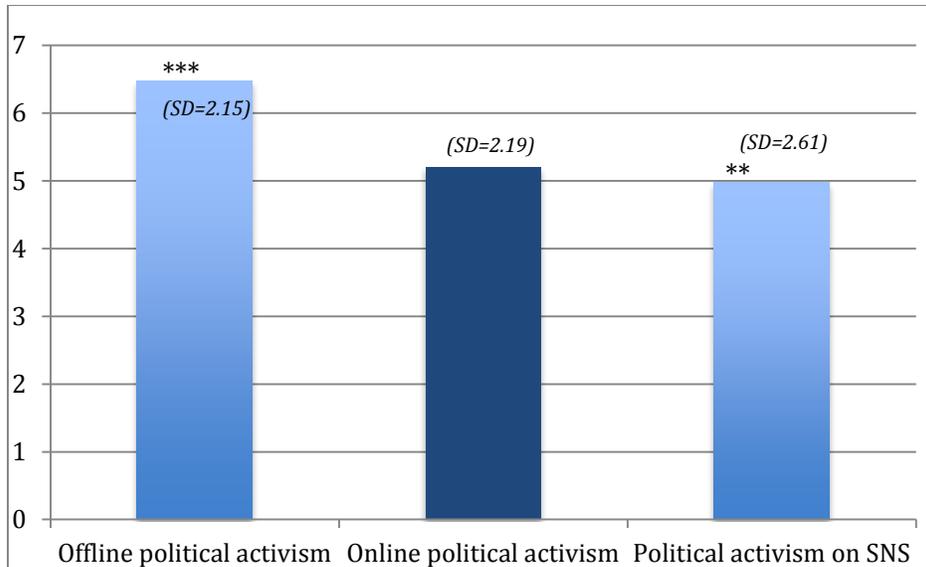


Note: source CES 2013. Cell entries are mean values and standard deviations in parentheses. Paired-samples T-test of significance to test statistically significant differences in the evaluation of effectiveness of online activism and other participation modes: ***: $p < 0.001$, **: $p < 0.01$, *: $p < 0.05$

Figure 2 displays the mean values of students’ perceived level of effectiveness of offline political activities, general online political activities and political activities on social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, to influence political decisions. First, when we compare the general perceived levels of effectiveness of the undergraduate

students and the participants from the CES, we see that the evaluation levels for online political activism among the ISPS and the CES participants are very similar, albeit slightly higher for the latter participant group. Undergraduate students consider engagement in offline political activities ($m=6.48$, $SD=2.14$) more effective to influence political decisions, compared to engagement in political activities on the Internet more generally ($m=5.21$, $SD=2.19$; $t(560)=-11.85$, $p<.000$). In addition, undergraduate participants evaluate engagement in political activities on social networking sites ($m=4.98$, $SD=2.61$; $t(560)=2.72$; $p<.01$) to be less effective, compared to engagement in general political activities on the Internet. Although students are heavy Internet users and are increasingly using the online sphere and social networking sites to engage in political activity, students consider Internet-mediated political participation to be less effective for influencing political decisions, compared to offline political activity. Of course, a direct comparison with the Canadian Election Study results are impossible because the question wording is really different. Whereas students react to more general formulations of activism, CES participants are really asked to think through a political issue. In a next step we will examine how socioeconomic background characteristics, attitudes and issue position affect perceptions of effectiveness of different political acts.

Figure 2. Evaluation of effectiveness of political activities



Note: Source Internet Student Panel Survey, n=561. Cell entries are means values and standard deviation in parentheses. Paired-samples T-test of significance to test statistically significant differences in the evaluation of effectiveness of online activism and other participation modes: ***:p <0.001, **:p<0.01, *:p<.05

Explaining perceived effectiveness of political actions

In order to examine why individuals consider certain political participation modes more effective than others, we estimated an OLS regression model for the evaluation of all five political activities. These models set out to examine whether there are significant differences in the perceived effectiveness of political activities to influence the long-gun registry policy among Canadians who support the long-gun registry and their counterparts who oppose the long-gun registry. The main goal of supporters of the long gun registry is to make sure that the long-gun registry policy remains in place, whereas the goal of opponents of the long-gun registry is to make sure that the policy will be scrapped. In both cases the local Member of Parliament opposes the participant’s viewpoint. In addition to participants’ issue position on the long-gun registry policy, we also include socio-economic background variables, i.e. gender, age, education level, income, and mother tongue, in the models. The models also control for satisfaction with Canadian politics, strength of issue position, strength of party identification, political interest, post-materialist political knowledge, knowledge about political figures and media news use (TV, radio, Internet and newspaper) effects. Finally, the models also test for past political participation. This allows us to examine the relationship between citizens past political behavior and their evaluation of these political actions.

In Table 2, model 1 we present the results of the OLS regression estimating self-evaluation of the effectiveness of online political activism to influence political decisions regarding the long-gun registry policy. It shows that men are less likely to evaluate online political activism as more effective, compared to women. Participants with

English as their first language also perceive online activism as less effective, compared to the one's with French as their mother tongue. The results also indicate a positive relationship between political interest and the dependent variable. In addition, the results display a negative relationship between individuals' knowledge of political figures and their perceived effectiveness of online political activism to influence the long-gun registry policy. In other words, it seems that individuals who are more knowledgeable about political figures and politicians believe that online activism is less effective to influence political decisions of local members of parliament (however, this is also the case for other forms of participation). As can be seen, news consumption patterns do not affect participants' evaluation of online political activism.

The differences in issue positions played an important role in hypothesis 1. Participants who are against the l-g registry evaluate online activism to be less effective, compared to supporters of the l-g registry. This might be related to the political orientation of l-g-supporters. As demonstrated in previous research and as expected, individuals with a more left-wing orientation (e.g. support for the l-g- registry) are expected to be more in favor of less institutionalized forms of political participation, including the online political sphere (Stolle and Micheletti 2013).

Finally, as expected in hypothesis 3, past participation in online activism is not significantly related to the evaluation of its effectiveness. Canadians who previously engaged in political activism online do not believe that online activism is more effective, compared to citizens who did not previously participate in online activism. This result supports hypothesis 3, which predicted a zero-relationship between self-rated effectiveness of online activism and actual engagement in the online political sphere. This suggests that online activists have different motivations for their engagement.

Table 2 OLS regression estimating evaluation of effectiveness of signing a petition

	Online activism	Petition	Protest	Contact	Party member
Gender (ref = female)	-.106*	-.188** *	-.091*	-.093*	-.102*
Age	.108*	.081	.043	.065	.005
Education	-.044	-.085	-.041	-.112*	-.038
English language (ref= French language)	-.170**	-.154**	-.157**	-.064	-.039
Other language (ref = French language)	.031	-.041	-.025	.069	.030
Income	-.019	.009	.007	.008	-.005
Contra Long gun registry (ref = pro)	-.091*	.018	-.025	.010	.043
Attitude strength l-g registry	.068	.103*	.088*	-.003	-.007
Satisfaction Canadian politics	.056	.043	-.041	.095*	-.010

Party ID strength	-.011	.070	.047	.049	.032
Political Knowledge: pol. Figures	-.098*	-.104*	-.097*	-.080	-.052
Soft political Knowledge	.079	-.051	-.025	-.053	.049
Political interest	.209***	.143**	.104*	.109*	.088
News TV	-.031	.023	-.025	.041	.020
Newspaper	-.032	-.032	.001	.038	.019
News radio	.051	-.019	.006	.059	.075
News Internet	-.083	-.025	.006	-.013	.063
Past engagement in political activity	.053	.081*	.092*	-	.088*
R square	.108	.129	.079	.086	.046
N	593	611	598	582	616

Note: source: CES 2013, Cell entries are standardized regression coefficients.

When we look at models 2 and 3, which present the results for the perceived effectiveness of the two remaining non-institutionalized activities, i.e. petitioning and protesting, we see that the findings are similar to the estimates predicting the perceived effectiveness of online political action but not in all regards. The first main difference is that the results did not indicate a significant effect of individuals' issue position on the evaluation of signing a petition. The more left-wing supporters of the l-g registry do not believe that petitioning and protesting are more effective to influence political decisions about the long-gun registry. Thus, we can only partly support hypothesis 1. The hypothesis only holds for online political activism but not for the other non-institutionalized forms. Second, although there is no association with issue position, the results suggest a positive relationship with strength of issue position. Participants who have a stronger opinion about the long-gun registry, independent of whether they oppose or support the policy, rate signing a petition and petitioning as more effective. Finally, contrary to the results for online activism we find that past petitioning and protesting is positively related to the evaluation of these activities. Canadians who previously protested or signed a petition believe this political activity to be more effective to bring political change, compared to participants who did not engage in these activities during the past twelve months. This again suggests the special position of online activism, where this is not the case.

Models 4 and 5 (table 2) present the results for perceived effectiveness of two more conventional or institutionalized political activities, respectively contacting a local Member of Parliament and becoming a member of a political party that supports your political views⁴. Similar to previous results, women tend to believe that both political

⁴ This estimation model for perceived effectiveness of contacting a local MP does not include past contacting of (local) Members of Parliament, because past participation for this political activity was not measured in the 2011 CES study.

activities are more effective, compared to men. Contrary to the results for the less institutionalized activities, there is no statistically significant relationship between language and perceived effectiveness. French-speaking Canadians believe less institutionalized activities to be more effective, compared to their English-speaking counterparts. However, both English and French-speaking Canadians expect the same from the institutionalized political activities. In addition, the results yield a negative significant effect of participants' education level and their evaluation of effectiveness of contacting local MPs. Higher educated participants find contacting the local MP less effective, compared to less formally education participants. Canadians who are more satisfied with Canadian politics are also more likely to positively evaluate contacting local MPs. It is not surprising that participants who are more satisfied with Canadian politics are also more likely to expect more from institutionalized political actions. Finally, also here the results suggest a positive relationship between past membership of a political party and the evaluation of its effectiveness to change political decisions regarding the I-g registry policy. Thus, we can support hypothesis 2, which predicted a positive association between political behavior and perceived effectiveness for all offline political activities.

In sum, we sought to investigate how issue position and past political behavior are related to the evaluation of political actions to influence political decisions. Given the recent debates about the potential of online political activism to change politics, we aimed to focus on potential differences in the predictors for online political activism and offline political activities. What makes people think that certain political actions are more valuable than others? The main difference between the evaluation of Internet-mediated political activism and political activism off the Internet lies in the issue position and past political behavior. First, issue position seemed to only matter for the self-rated effectiveness of online political activism. We found that supporters of the long-gun registry, who are in general more left-wing oriented, are more likely to evaluate online activism as more effective, compared to opponents of the I-g registry. Participants' evaluation of effectiveness of offline political activities was not related to their issue position. This suggests that participants believe the online political sphere to be more favorable to influence political decisions in favor of one side of the political spectrum. A second important difference in the estimation models for the evaluation of online and offline activism is the effect of past political behavior. We found that citizens who previously engaged in offline political activities rated these political actions as most effective to change political decisions regarding the I-g registry. This finding was consistent for all offline political activities. However, there seems to be no relationship between past engagement in online political activism and the self-evaluation of its effectiveness. Again, this seems to highlight that online political engagement has a special place, and does not work as offline forms. People who engage in them do not necessarily believe in their effectiveness. This relationship might be based in the fact that people engage in both institutional and non-institutional forms of participation, but rate the effectiveness of the former consistently higher. In the following section we will focus on these differences and make a more stringent test of the relationship between

political behavior and the self-evaluation of effectiveness of these political action repertoires to change political decisions.

The relationship between Perceived effectiveness of political actions and political participation

In order to examine how individuals' perceived effectiveness of political actions affects engagement in these political participation modes we rely on data of a two-wave online panel survey of undergraduate students at a main English speaking university in Canada (ISPS). In other words, we measure the effects of students' perceived effectiveness of offline political actions, online political actions, and Facebook mediated political activity to influence political decisions on their engagement in these political activities. We test these effects in table 6 and 7, which provide the coefficients from regressing perceived effectiveness of offline, online and Facebook political actions on engagement in these participation modes in the second wave, while controlling for socio-economic background (gender, education of the participant's mother and mother tongue), Internet use (frequency of Internet use, time spend on Facebook, and number of Facebook friends) political attitudes (political interest, internal political efficacy, strength of party affiliation) political knowledge, and news media use (TV, radio, newspaper and online news use). All control variables in the OLS regression analysis are measured in wave 1. In addition, the panel study measures the outcome measure, i.e. political participation, in both wave 1 and wave 2. This allows us to measure the relationship between perceived effectiveness and engagement in political action in wave 2, controlling for prior participation in wave 1, hence allowing stronger causal inference than cross-sectional studies. The main purpose of employing an OLS lagged dependent variable regression model is to account for participants' prior levels of political engagement when assessing the impact of their perceived effectiveness on political activity in wave 2.

We conducted the analyses in 3 stages. First, we present the base model, which focuses on the effects of the independent variables on political participation in wave 2. In a second step we add the lagged dependent variable, i.e. political participation in wave 1. Finally, we test the interaction effect of our main variable of interest, i.e. perceived effectiveness of political activity, with the lagged dependent variable. This allows us to examine differential effects of individuals' perceived effectiveness of political participation modes on engagement in these activities between individuals with different past participation experiences. The main goal here is to disentangle whether past participation experiences and one's perceived effectiveness of these activities have a reinforcing effect on future participation.

Table 7 presents the OLS regression models estimating participation in offline political activity in wave 2. The base model suggests that, as expected, political interest has a positive effect on participants' offline political engagement. Participants who read more frequently a newspaper are also more likely to engage in offline political activities. Finally, participants' who believe that offline political participation is more effective to

influence political decisions are more likely to engage in offline political activities, thus confirming hypothesis 3. When we look at the second model that includes lagged political offline engagement in wave 1, the results display a strong positive effect of offline engagement in wave 1 and wave 2. When controlling for past offline participation reading a newspaper is no longer a statistically significant predictor for offline participation in wave 2. Finally, the positive significant interaction term of the evaluation of effectiveness of offline political action and past engagement in offline participation in model 3 implies that the effect of perceived effectiveness of offline political actions on the dependent variable is greater for participants who previously engaged in offline political participation. The results suggest that past experience in offline political engagement reinforces the positive effect of perceived effectiveness.

Table 7 Predicting effect of perceived effectiveness of offline political action on offline political participation

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Gender	.015	0.62	.063
Education mother	.007	.004	.005
English language	.035	.056	.060
Other language	.029	.026	.025
Internet use	-.073	-.037	-.038
Facebook use	-.032	-.044	-.038
Facebook friends	.045	-.021	-.024
Political interest	.266***	.175**	.175**
Internal pol. Efficacy	-.062	-.028	-.033
Strength party affiliation	.012	.010	.015
Political knowledge	.005	-.036	-.041
News TV	-.076	-.016	-.009
Newspaper	.124**	.041	.034
News radio	.051	.045	.046
News Internet	.019	.018	.017
Perceived effectiveness	.118**	.085*	-.227
Lagged DV	-	.444***	.439***
Perceived effectiveness X Lagged DV	-	-	.326*
R square	.124	.292	.307
N	448		

Note: source: Source Internet Student Panel Survey, Coefficients are standardized regression coefficients, ***:p<0.001, **:p<0.01, *:p<.05

Table 8 presents the results for both general online activism and more specifically Facebook activism. As seen in the first column of table 8, the more participants are interested in politics, the more they would engage in general online activism. The evaluation of effectiveness of online activism is not related to participation in online activism, contrary to the findings for offline activism. In other words, students who

evaluate online activism as more effective to influence political decisions do not engage more in online activism, compared to students who find online activism less effective. The same finding holds for Facebook activism. There is no statistically significant relationship between the evaluation of effectiveness of Facebook activism and engagement in Facebook activism.

Table 8 Predicting effect of perceived effectiveness of online political action on online political participation

	General online activism			Facebook activism		
	M1	M 2	M 3	M 1	M 2	M 3
Gender	.043	.094*	0.95*	.060	.048	.047
Education mother	-.020	.016	.016	.001	.024	.024
English language	.025	-.008	-.009	.048	.022	.023
Other language	.023	-.010	-.010	.068	.054	.054
Internet use	.016	-.007	-.007	-.022	-.003	-.003
Facebook use	.016	-.015	-.015	.123*	.052	.052
Facebook friends	.086	.016	.016	.109*	.004	.007
Political interest	.159**	.027	.026	.204***	.080	.080
Internal pol. Efficacy	-.051	-.048	-.048	.018	.018	.021
Strength party affiliation	.004	-.010	-.010	.014	.037	.036
Political knowledge	.086	.026	.027	-.006	-.031	-.031
News TV	-.029	-.007	-.007	-.015	-.017	-.016
Newspaper	.080	.041	.041	.017	.009	.010
News radio	.047	.025	.024	-.022	.012	.010
News Internet	.068	.071	.071	.082	.060	.060
Perceived effectiveness	.059	.041	.046	.076	.079	.115
Lagged DV	-	.567***	.582***	-	.470***	.526***
Perceived effectiveness X Lagged DV	-	-	-.017	-	-	-.076
R square	.088	.368	.368	.143	.314	.315
N	490			449		

Note: source: Source Internet Student Panel Survey, Coefficients are standardized regression coefficients, ***:p<0.001, **:p<0.01, *:p<.05

Taken together, these results are in line with the findings based on the 2011 CES data. Analyses of both survey data indicate that individuals' perceived effectiveness of political activities can be expected to predict political behavior in the case of offline political activities. However, the results do not hold for the relationship between perceived effectiveness of online activism and actual engagement in online political participation, confirming the second hypothesis.

Discussion

We have examined two data sets and different scenarios of measuring the perceived effectiveness of political participation. Our results have shown that the perceived effectiveness of participation depends somewhat on the ideological orientation of the respondent. More left-leaning people are more open to evaluating the effectiveness of online participation as higher compared to right-leaning or conservative respondents. This also reflects differences in their participation profile.

However, generally all analyses indicated that the engagement in online activism does not relate to higher levels of effectiveness ratings, whereas offline consistently activism does. Our findings might lend support to the idea that online activism should not be considered as a valuable form of political participation. People engage in online activism whether or not they believe that these activities have the potential to change political decisions. One could argue that people engage in these activities, because they are available and to show other people that they care regardless whether they think it might have a political impact. However, the zero-findings of evaluation of effectiveness for engagement in online activism could also be due to a measurement effect. People who engage in online forms of activism and social-networking political actions might have different political goals in mind, which might make the question about effectiveness to change politics more meaningless. Although the core of political participation is meant to influence political decisions, some activities aim to do this in a more direct way, whereas other activities try to influence in a more indirect way. Contrary to most offline political campaigns, not all online campaigns put forward a clear political goal. Think for instance about the recent equality campaign that urged Facebook users to change their profile picture to a red equality sign in support of gay marriage. Although the final goal of this political campaign on Facebook might be to affect political decisions regarding the rights of gay people, this is not necessarily obvious to the engaged 'activists'. Facebook users could change their profile picture for various reasons, such as supporting friends, family members, sharing their opinion with their broader Facebook network, etc. Although most political scientists acknowledge the indirect effects of political opinion expression and triggering awareness for specific political causes on political decision making, this relationship is not necessarily evident for citizen activists. Still, our results do little to refute the doubts about the effectiveness of online participation in the traditional sense. Their power probably lies more in the agenda-setting nature of their messages.

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Appendix

Descriptives of variables used in analyses– CES 2011

	min	max	mean	SD
Gender	0=female	1=male	.49	.50
English	0=otherwise	1= English as first lang.	.73	.45
French	0=otherwise	1= French as first lang.	.18	.38
Other language	0=English or French	1= other language	.10	.29

Age	18 years	97 years	55.46	14.06
Education level	1=no schooling	11=professional degree or PhD	8	1.86
Income	1= less than \$30,000	5=more than \$110,000	3	1.31
Issue position	0=pro l-g registry	1=contra l-g registry	.41	.49
Strength issue position	0=no opinion	3=strongly (dis)agree	1.62	.55
Political interest	0=not at all interested	10=very interested	7.19	1.99
Strength party ID	0=no party ID	3=very strongly party identification	1.82	.98
Satisfaction Can. politics	1=not at all happy	4=very happy	2.57	.78
Knowledge about political figures	0=no correct answers	3= 3 correct answers	1.74	.95
Post-materialistic knowledge	0=no correct answers	4=4 correct answers	3.03	1.08
TV news	0=watch news on TV 0 days a week	7=watch every day news on TV	5.14	2.41
Newspaper	0=read newspaper 0 days a week	7=read every day newspaper	3.87	4.49
Radio news	0=listen news on radio 0 days a week	7=listen every day to news on radio	4.69	4.40
Internet news	0= use Internet 0 days a week for news	7=use Internet every day for news	3.71	5.65
Protesting	0=did not engage during past 12 months	1=did engage in this activity during the past 12 months	.10	.31
Petitioning	0=did not engage during past 12 months	1=did engage in this activity during the past 12 months	.42	.49
Online activism	0=did not engage during past 12 months	1=did engage in this activity during the past 12 months	.40	.49
Member pol. party	0=did not engage during past 12 months	1=did engage in this activity during the past 12 months	.22	.42
Effectiveness protesting	0=least effective	10=most effective	5.41	2.56
Effectiveness petitioning	0=least effective	10=most effective	6.07	2.55
Effectiveness	0=least effective	10=most effective	5.73	2.52

online activism				
Effectiveness contacting MP	0=least effective	10=most effective	5.20	2.66
Effectiveness party membership	0=least effective	10=most effective	6.13	2.41

Descriptives of variables used in analyses– ISPS 2011-2012

	min	max	mean	SD	Cronbach's alpha
Gender	0=female	1=male	.39	.49	
English	0=otherwise	1= English as first lang.	.59	.49	
French	0=otherwise	1= French as first lang.	.18	.39	
Other language	0=English or French	1= other language	.23	.42	
Education mother	1=less than high school diploma	6=more than university degree	4.44	1.42	
Political interest	1=not at all interested	4=very interested	2.28	.88	
Strength party ID	0=no party ID	3=very strongly party identification	1.52	1.20	
Int. pol. efficacy	1=hardly any politicians care what people like me think	5=most politicians care what people like me think	2.73	.93	
Political knowledge	0=no correct answers	5=5 correct answers	2.02	1.69	
TV news	1=rarely or never	4=every day	1.9	1.1	
Newspaper	1=rarely or never	4=every day	2.0	1.1	
Radio news	1=rarely or never	4=every day	1.7	1.0	
Internet news	1=rarely or never	4=every day	3.4	.09	
Internet freq.	1=I hardly or never use the Internet	6=5 hours a day or more	4.78	.91	
Facebook freq.	0=I hardly ever or never use Facebook	6=more than 3 hours a day	2.97	1.43	
Facebook friends	0=0 Facebook friends	11= 1000 friends or more	4.23	2.30	
W1 online pol. Participation	0=no participation	4=participated in all 4 activities	1.27	1.32	.616
W1 offline pol. participation	0=no participation	5=participated in all 5 activities	1.48	1.46	.659

W1 Facebook pol. participation	0=no participation	5=participated in all 5 activities	1.43	1.14	.512
W2 online pol. Participation	0=no participation	4=participated in all 4 activities	1.25	1.37	.655
W2 offline pol. participation	0=no participation	5=participated in all 5 activities	1.32	1.39	.630
W2 Facebook pol. participation	0=no participation	5=participated in all 5 activities	1.36	1.16	.611
Effectiveness online pol part.	0=not effective at all	10=very effective	5.21	2.19	
Effectiveness offline pol part	0=not effective at all	10=very effective	6.48	2.15	
Effectiveness FB pol part	0=not effective at all	10=very effective	4.98	2.61	

ⁱ We expect that the lower response rate is due to the fact that the survey was conducted at the end of the academic year which overlapped with the final exam session.

ⁱⁱ As compensation for participation in the survey students were given the opportunity to enter a lottery where they could win one of six \$50 gift certificates from Amazon.ca.

ⁱⁱⁱ There are no statistically significant differences between the socio-demographic background characteristics, gender and citizenship.