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Racial Differences in Net Activism?
Quantitative Analysis of Black Political Action Online

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B.A., Georgetown University, 2010

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An abstract of
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Abstract

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Past studies indicate that political behavior diverges as a consequence of race within the American context. This study expands upon past findings by analyzing whether traditionally understood causes of such differences influence online political behavior in a similar manner. In order to accomplish this goal, I analyzed the internet module of the GSS Survey from 2000. This year is convenient both because of data availability and the absence of any effects of the Obama presidency. I conducted logistic regression analyses of race on visiting political websites, and I controlled for a number of variables that are influential in political decision making- highest degree obtained, socioeconomic class, sex, and marital status, age, and political party. I found that African Americans were most likely to visit websites to obtain political information. This finding will aid in predicting political action within the net environment.

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Table of Contents

Academic study of race has adapted in response to changing social environments. This study proceeds in the spirit of the established cannon by extending analysis into the latest area- internet political behavior. I first provide a theoretical and empirical background. Next, I cover my proposed methods and the manner in which I focus on racial categories. Finally, I present my findings and conclusions.

Literature Review

At the outset, I feel that it is necessary to establish the connection between actions in cyberspace and those offline. Selfe and Selfe (1994) explain that "Within the virtual space represented by these interfaces… the values of our culture- ideological, political, economic, educational- are mapped both implicitly and explicitly, constituting a complex set of material relations among culture, technology, and technology users." Stone (1996) buttresses this point by discussing framework: "Bodies in cyberspace are also constituted by descriptive codes that 'embody' expectations of appearance." In effect, one can understand activity on the internet as transformed extensions of processes that occur in real life (IRL). This means that there is a match, albeit inexact, between what social scientists typically expect to find and what they actually observe while studying the online world. Such a gap renders it particularly useful to compare equivalent processes across both mediums.

Early studies from the time when the general public had little web access were largely theoretical. For instance, early on there was an emphasis on identity alteration and fluidity (Turkle 1995 and Stone 1995). This meant that the web allowed people embody numerous identities, perhaps so many that the concept of identity is blurred.

Other early viewpoints built on this identity fluidity theory by suggesting that the web offered the opportunity to create a utopia such as has not previously been seen in human history.

Rheingold (1993) discusses the *electronic frontier* as essentially a global village that will bring people together like never before, a truly last step in the Age of Discovery. In fairness there were contemporaneous detractors such as Doheny-Farina (1996) and Heim (1993), but their opinions were in the minority at the time.

Literature of racial dynamics on the web remains limited, but it grows by the year. Since its inception, a perennial assumption has grown among scholars that the internet that geared toward white men. This occurred because of two largely intertwined historic factors. The first was the disparity in computers in schools between those that were majority Black in the 1980s and those that were majority White. The second was the lack of fiber optic cable and "on-ramps" to net access in minority neighborhoods. This meant that it would become inevitable that "the topology of cyberspace mimics the racial and economic typology of housing and schooling" (Sterne 2000). One of the clearest examples of this is the electronic village created in Blacksburg, Virginia in the late 1990s. The forum and community pages included social clubs and a separate area for senior citizens but did not include women or racial minorities, a testament to the white male essentialism of the web's roots (Kolko 2000, Silver 2000).

In the aggregate, scholars have found evidence of effects of racial identity on web participation. In a landmark study on identity tourism on the net, Nakamura (1999) finds that "the Orientalized male persona… confirms the idea of the male Oriental as potent, antique, exotic, and anachronistic." Hispanics are found to be discouraged from internet use because of a "benign ethnocentrism" that is enforced through the original lingua franca of the web, English (Gomez-Peña 1996). Additionally, customs such as netiquette and certain emoticons may act to create barriers to net participation and collaboration (Bailey 1996, Silver 2000).

Just as in real life (IRL), the web has centralizing tendencies that counteract many of those known to exclude. These have been found for a variety of different groups, including Indians (Mitra 1997), gay men (Shaw 1997), and women (Camp 1996). Common to all of these processes is the desire to invent their own space to discuss common experiences and strengthen their identities.

Despite the assumption of assumed white net neutrality, this group is not exempt from racial dynamics. For instance, there are numerous instances of a process called *cyberwhitening* among supremacist groups (McPherson 2000). *Cyberwhitening* describes the process of attempting to establish a White identity via the patterns of arrangement of a website such as altering language and forming alternative narratives.

Having covered the specific online race literature, fundamental questions remain regarding the interplay of the internet and political behavior. Certainly, there is a vast literature on networks and collective action (Bernstein, 2005; Poletta and Jasper, 2000), More specifically, it is noteworthy that previous studies have found such connections. For instance, Mesch and Levanan (2005) find a positive correlation between online and offline community activism.

Moreover, Lim (2008) finds that there is essentially no evidence to support the notion that strong direct ties between individuals is more effective in recruiting activists, concluding that the contents of relationships and shared identities, rather than the strength in their connections, forms the foundation of interpersonal influence in political activism. Parker and Song (2006) buttress this notion when they find that collective identities are enhanced by online interaction.

The study will focus on particular racial differences with respect to online political behavior, which may arise because of previous findings suggesting that offline political

engagement may be considered unique to different groups. Below, I cover such empirical literature, incorporating political differences and behavioral orientations. These provide the baseline for linking offline conditions to those online.

Socioeconomic status and education have traditionally defined the differences in political behavior among different racial groups within social science discourse (Verba and Nie 1972; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995). This is conceptually sound, but SES impacts voting behavior in different ways for blacks and whites (Liu et al. 2009), suggesting that different social and political processes are operating for the two groups.

Socioeconomic status serves as a valid predictor of voting behavior only for white voters. In addition, measures of social activism predict voting behavior only for whites. In fact, the only measure of social capital that predictably increases black voting is church attendance (Liu et al. 2009).

Kidd (2007) buttresses this notion of differences through analysis of black allegiance to the Democratic Party. He finds that Democratic Party identification is the most important factor in terms of black voter preference. Despite socially conservative values, blacks are still more likely to vote for a black democrat over a black Republican.

In addition, Henderson (1996) finds that age is an important factor for white voting behavior, but it is not predictive for blacks. Blacks who were of age to participate in the Civil Rights Movement voted at similar rates as those who became adults after the movement. Plus, the factors that allow prediction of voter turnout change over time for blacks. Sex, income, and party strength predict black turnout in the 1976 election; yet, the predictive variables diminished significantly by 1996. In that election cycle, the only predictive variable is party strength. These findings characterize black voting as heavily-influenced by period-related factors, suggesting

that particular candidates and conditions with respect to the black community are the most important predictive factors. On the whole, these election-specific factors show that the use of variables differ for different communities, and as a result, examining such factors by race can maximize social scientists' ability to predict future political behavior.

As with voting behavior, races differ in terms of behavior online. For instance, Jackson (2009) finds differences in moral conceptualizations of online behavior based on race. In particular, she discovers that blacks are more accepting of virtual behavior that advances individual goals, while whites are more likely to exhibit rule-based orientations. The study suggests that internet morality is best conceptualized within a cultural group perspective.

Individuals may point to the digital divide as determinative in the differences in internet behavior, using the argument that varying levels of SES lead to differences in internet access and social capital; however, Jackson (2009) finds that this is not the case. Analysis of the motivational, affective, and cognitive attitudes with respect to the internet yields a number of differences independent of factors that produce the digital divide, namely access to the internet. For instance, Jackson (2009) also finds that blacks use email at a greater rate than whites and are more likely to use the web to search for personally relevant information. This effect brings the apparent demographic preponderance of Whites on the internet into question. Indeed, as Jackson suggests, Black use of the internet to obtain information may include political research, potentially exceeding that of Whites and Other groups. This is what prompts the present study.

Hypothesis

There is sufficient background evidence to expect differences in political and internet behavior based on race. Based on an overall assessment of previous studies, I expected to find greater white political participation on the internet. If Whites use the web more and are more

comfortable with most of its content, it is likely this spans across a variety of web mediums, including political content. This leads to the following hypothesis:

1) Blacks will be less likely to use the internet to access political information online.

Based on Jackson's (2009) recent leads regarding disproportional Black internet use for acquiring information I also find the following alternative hypothesis reasonable:

2) Blacks will be more likely to use the internet to access political information online.

I investigate this phenomenon by examining the extent to which individuals visit politically-oriented websites to obtain information. This is indicated by the *polwww* variable as well as its binary derivative called *polwwwbn*. I created *polwwwbn* by combining the two categories of visiting political websites "1 or 2" and "3 or More" into one category, while I retained the "none" category.

Methods

I use the General Social Survey from 2000's Internet Politics Module to quantitatively examine the question of whether there are differences in race and online political action. I initially conduct cross tabs of the three categories of *polwww* by race categories, principally Black, White and Other. Following cross tabs, I conduct a series of logistic analyses of racial categories and *polwwwbn*, which I operationalize by means of whether the respondent visited any political websites. I control for a number of the variables that are frequently cited to influence political behavior (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980, Leighley and Nagler 1992). These

include educational attainment, socioeconomic class, and gender. I have also included age and party affiliation, as many find that they correlate with political action.

I operationally define educational attainment as a variable for the highest degree obtained, which describes the most highly valued degree that the respondent has acquired. This encompasses less than high school, high school, junior college, bachelor's degree, and graduate school.

I particularly focus on the black category largely because of the differentiating historical effects that impact the group, namely the impacts of discrimination and social/technological capital (Kolko 2000, Silver 2000). If these effects are extant, the black group should show tendencies suggesting differentiating activity. Moreover, the Black category represents a more methodologically convenient minority group in that there is considerable research on the group, and it is somewhat more culturally homogenous when compared to other minority groups within the US context.

Findings

I examine political activity on the web through visiting political websites. The purpose of my analysis is to demonstrate racial differences in visits political websites. I do so in two stages, The first one confines attention to crosstabulations, initially of differences among members of Blacks, White and Other race, next via a simple White-Black contrasts in a population from which respondents of other races have been removed. The results are presented in the crosstabulations (Table 1 and Table 2) below and though logistic regressions (Table 3 and Table 4). The second stage consists of logistical regressions of polwwwbn on three-race (While/Black/Other) racial categorizations is used, two race dummies at a time –plus control variables.

Table 1 provides the crosstabulation for race, operationalized as White, Black and Other categories[1]. Chi-square tests for statistical significance follow.

Table 1

Crosstabulation of Race (White, Black, and Other) with Political Website Visits				
Number of Political Website Visits	**Race**			
	White	**Black**	**Other**	**Total**
None	132 63.7%	8 36.4%	10 71.4%	160
1 or 2	39 18.4%	5 22.7%	2 14.3%	48
3 or More	38 17.9%	9 40.9%	2 14.3%	51
Total	209	22	14	245

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	8.304[a]	4	.081
Likelihood Ratio	7.584	4	.108
Linear-by-Linear Association	.720	1	.396
N of Valid Cases	245		

a. 4 cells (44.4%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 2.63.

The crosstabulation of Table 1 shows differences in the rates of visiting political websites. The plurality of black participants have visited three or more sites to obtain political

[1] The relatively small N result results from survey design and simultaneous non-responses.

information. Moreover, a majority of Blacks visited political websites, totaling 63.6%, nearly matching the percentage of non-whites who visited no political websites. Sixty-three point seven percent of such participants had not visited any of such websites. Only 17.9% of non-black participants visited three or more sites, while 40.9% of blacks had. There is a particular difference in the Other category, where 71% had no political website visits. This underscores the surprising finding that Blacks are more likely to use the web to gather political information than Non-Blacks, more than twice as likely as either Whites or the Other grouping of race. Chi-square tests reveal that these differences are not significant at the 0.05 test level when all races are considered separately as in Table 1 (although the Pearson Chi-square does attain significance at a 0.08 probability level). Still, Black identity is significant at the .05 level when it is compared to combined "Non-black" categories (Table 2).

Table 2

Crosstabulation of Race (Non-Black and Black) with Political Website Visits

Number of Political Website Visits	Race		
	Non-Black	**Black**	**Total**
None	142 63.7%	8 36.4%	150 61.2%
1 or 2	41 18.4%	5 22.7%	46 18.8%
3 or More	40 17.9%	9 40.9%	49 20%
Total	223	22	245

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	7.925[a]	2	.019
Likelihood Ratio	7.182	2	.028
Linear-by-Linear Association	7.851	1	.005
N of Valid Cases	245		

a. 2 cells (33.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 4.13.

For simplicity I provide a variant of the above analysis comparing Black with White categories for a population of only Blacks and Whites. This is because the historic white domination of the web, referred to in the literature review, would suggest greater pervasive web activity for the white group specifically.

Table 3

Crosstabulation of Race (White and Black) with Political Website Visits			
Number of Political Website Visits	**Race**		
	White	**Black**	**Total**
None	132	8	140
	63.2%	36.4%	60.6%
1 or 2	39	5	44
	18.7%	22.7%	19%
3 or More	38	9	47
	18.2%	40.9%	20.3%
Total	209	22	231

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	7.584[a]	2	.023
Likelihood Ratio	6.903	2	.032
Linear-by-Linear Association	7.507	1	.006
N of Valid Cases	231		

a. 2 cells (33.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 4.19.

This crosstabulation simplifies the analysis found in Table 1. A large majority of those in the White group have not visited any websites to acquire political information. Sixty-three point two percent of whites had not visited any political websites. This is twice the rate of the black group. Similarly, blacks are greater represented in both those who visited one or two political websites and for those who visited three or more political sites. In fact, black visits to three or more sites are greater than twice the rate of whites. The results are significant well below the .05 level, providing a high degree of assurance that a relationship may exist between black racial identity and political activity via the web.

Now, I test whether a statistically significant model does in fact exist using logit. I control for highest degree obtained, socioeconomic class, sex, and marital status, age, and political party. Table 4 shows the correlation matrix of these variables (without political party) to demonstrate the appropriate use of the variables and abrogate any concerns about multicolinearity. Education, age, and black are significant, which does not conflict with the hypothesis.

Table 4

		Did you visit a political website?	Education	Marital Status	Social Class	Sex	Age	White	Other	Black
Did you visit a political website?	Pearson Correlation	1	.211**	.145*	.053	-.105	-.279**	-.096	-.052	.160*
	Significance (2-tailed)		.001	.023	.407	.102	.000	.136	.422	.012
	N	245	245	245	243	245	245	245	245	245
Education	Pearson Correlation	.211**	1	-.033	.292**	-.057**	-.074**	.116**	.006	-.136**
	Significance (2-tailed)	.001		.081	.000	.003	.000	.000	.751	.000
	N	245	2799	2798	2785	2799	2791	2799	2799	2799
Marital Status	Pearson Correlation	.145*	-.033	1	-.112**	-.034	-.338**	-.161**	.039*	.157**
	Significance (2-tailed)	.023	.081		.000	.075	.000	.000	.038	.000
	N	245	2798	2816	2802	2816	2808	2816	2816	2816
Social Class	Pearson Correlation	.053	.292**	-.112**	1	-.016	.109**	.123**	-.059**	-.100**
	Significance (2-tailed)	.407	.000	.000		.406	.000	.000	.002	.000
	N	243	2785	2802	2803	2803	2795	2803	2803	2803
Sex	Pearson Correlation	-.105	-.057**	-.034	-.016	1	.060**	-.055**	-.014	.072**
	Significance (2-tailed)	.102	.003	.075	.406		.001	.004	.464	.000
	N	245	2799	2816	2803	2817	2809	2817	2817	2817
Age	Pearson Correlation	-.279**	-.074**	-.338**	.109**	.060**	1	.140**	-.142**	-.065**
	Significance (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.001		.000	.000	.001
	N	245	2791	2808	2795	2809	2809	2809	2809	2809
White	Pearson Correlation	-.096	.116**	-.161**	.123**	-.055**	.140**	1	-.493**	-.811**
	Significance (2-tailed)	.136	.000	.000	.000	.004	.000		.000	.000
	N	245	2799	2816	2803	2817	2809	2817	2817	2817
Other	Pearson Correlation	-.052	.006	.039*	-.059**	-.014	-.142**	-.493**	1	-.109**
	Significance (2-tailed)	.422	.751	.038	.002	.464	.000	.000		.000
	N	245	2799	2816	2803	2817	2809	2817	2817	2817
Black	Pearson Correlation	.160*	-.136**	.157**	-.100**	.072**	-.065**	-.811**	-.109**	1
	Significance (2-tailed)	.012	.000	.000	.000	.000	.001	.000	.000	
	N	245	2799	2816	2803	2817	2809	2817	2817	2817

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 5 is a correlation matrix of political party with visiting political websites. None of the effects are significant, suggesting that the statistical impact in the overall model will be negligible.

Table 5

		Did you visit a political website?	Republican	Independent	Other	Democrat
Did you visit a political website?	Pearson Correlation	1	.025	.029	-.036	-.046
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.696	.652	.577	.475
	N	245	244	244	244	244
Republican	Pearson Correlation	.025	1	-.474**	-.075**	-.397**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.696		.000	.000	.000
	N	244	2805	2805	2805	2805
Independent	Pearson Correlation	.029	-.474**	1	-.110**	-.584**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.652	.000		.000	.000
	N	244	2805	2805	2805	2805
Other	Pearson Correlation	-.036	-.075**	-.110**	1	-.092**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.577	.000	.000		.000
	N	244	2805	2805	2805	2805
Democrat	Pearson Correlation	-.046	-.397**	-.584**	-.092**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.475	.000	.000	.000	
	N	244	2805	2805	2805	2805

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Next, I provide logistic regression of race and visiting political websites, focusing on White and Black political web use relative to political web use by persons of Other races. Table 6 focuses on Black and Other political web use. In conjunction with Table 7, I test for Black-Other and White-Black differences in political web use in the context of a statistical control for all the non-reference (or non- left out or non-benchmark) categories.

Table 6
Main contributions of independent demographic variables on visiting websites to obtain political information. (Significance from logistic regression analysis).

Race (Black vs. White) and Political Website Visits

	B	**S.E.**	**Wald**	**df**	**Sig.**
Highest Degree Obtained					
< High School			9.862	4	.043
High School	-2.372	.883	7.221	1	.007**
Junior College	-1.256	.488	6.632	1	.010*
Bachelor	-.988	.692	2.035	1	.154
Graduate	-.823	.494	2.776	1	.096
Social Class					
Lower Class			7.669	3	.053
Working Class	2.368	1.360	3.033	1	.082
Middle Class	1.631	1.157	1.987	1	.159
Upper Class	2.303	1.118	4.243	1	.039*
Marital Status					
Married			1.854	4	.763
Widowed	-.116	.407	.081	1	.776
Divorced	.274	.795	.119	1	.731
Separated	.368	.484	.580	1	.446
Never Married	-.579	.997	.337	1	.562
Party Affiliation					
Democrat	.378	..399	.898	1	.343
Independent	.373	.372	1.009	1	.315
Other	1.756	1.228	2.046	1	.153
Age	-.044	.012	12.991	1	.000**
White	.326	.657	.246	1	.620
Black	1.682	.793	4.498	1	.034*
Sex	.184	.303	.369	1	.544

Notes:
N = 242
*$p < 0.05$.
**$p < .01$
.

Table 6 shows the effects of White and Black identity for political website visitation while controlling for sociodemographic factors that impact voting. The likelihood of a White slope is not statistically significant from the "other" benchmark; however, Black visits are significantly more likely than visits by members of "Other" races.

To see whether Black or Other races visit more often than Whites, I estimate regressions with Black and Other dummies and place White as the left out category. (See Table 7.)

Table 7
Main contributions of independent demographic variables on visiting websites to obtain political information. (Significance from logistic regression analysis).

Race (Black vs. Other) and Political Website Visits

	B	**S.E.**	**Wald**	**df**	**Sig.**
Highest Degree Obtained					
< High School			9.862	4	.043
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Age	-.044	.012	12.991	1	.000**
Other	.326	.657	.246	1	.620
Black	1.356	.552	6.033	1	.014*
Sex	.184	.303	.369	1	.544

Notes:
N = 242
*$p < 0.05$.

$^{**}p < .01$

.

Other identity is not statistically significant within the model; however, the difference between Black and White political web use is significantly better than the 0.01 test level.

Note that education level, particularly high school and junior college, is also significant in the logit regressions. Attending junior college or high school tends to affect website visitation. Effects of Upper Class are nearly significant at the 0.05 level. This affect requires further analysis in future papers.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, I have analyzed the impact of race on political behavior online. I operationalized political behavior through visiting websites to obtain political information than are members of other race (White and Other as analyzed here). My results provide evidence that Blacks are more likely to utilize the web to find political information, which belies expectations suggested by past research. Such evidence suggests the possibility that blacks will visit websites that place an emphasis on social justice within the community (Brown 2009). This means that the historical experiences of discrimination among African Americans may lead them to greater activism to bridge gaps of financial or legal inequality. Such a drive would conceivably lead them to greater action in the political milieu. In addition, the effects of racism on the web itself may place Blacks into positions where they feel a need to counter antagonistic political commentary. Alternative political culture perspectives must also be considered, such as Powell's (1993) study on racial differences in attitudes on government spending.

This disparity between theoretical expectations and my empirical findings summons continued study of internet use and political behavior through the prism of race. The statistical significance of measures within the chi-square statistics and logistic regressions of White-Black

and Other-Black comparisons provide sufficient evidence to reject the initially posed hypothesis that Blacks use the internet less than other groups to obtain political information. Although this finding does not provide conclusive evidence, it suggests that there may be a dynamic of compartmentalization of web interests. Further study of this phenomenon is welcome, and qualitative studies of the dynamics are in order. Qualitative studies such as interviews may provide researchers with the historical and emotional bases for political use of the web. Highlighting these differences will aid social scientists in their attempts to pinpoint emergent political movements and assess the strength of online political outreach efforts. Holistic understanding of racial differences within the web context will provide the next venue for the racial and political canons.

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