Political Ideology and Online Political Participation

by

Victoria Mahon

B.A. (Hons.), University of Windsor, 2020

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the

Department of Political Science

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

© Victoria Mahon 2022

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

Spring 2022

Declaration of Committee

Name:	**Victoria Mahon**
Degree:	**Master of Arts**
Title:	**Political Ideology and Online Political Participation**

Committee:

Chair: **Aaron Hoffman**
Associate Professor, Political Science

Laurel Weldon
Supervisor
Professor, Political Science

Eline de Rooij
Committee Member
Associate Professor, Political Science

Mark Pickup
Examiner
Professor, Political Science

Abstract

Online activism is an important new form of political participation. Who participates in online activism and why? While much research has been done on political ideology and other forms of political participation, we have an incomplete understanding of ideology's relationship with online participation. This paper contributes to this literature by exploring how political ideology relates to online political participation. Since online participation is such a prevalent form of political participation, understanding who chooses to participate is key to knowing how to facilitate democratic discussions. Using publicly available survey data from the American National Election Study and the European Social Survey, I find that, in both the US and EU contexts, the far left and far right are more likely to engage in online participation than those in the centre. In both datasets, the far left participates more than the far right, and this is especially true in the EU context.

Keywords: political participation; online activism; ideology; left-right spectrum

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Chapter 1.   Introduction

Political participation is an important part of a robust democracy. Citizens who feel more involved in politics are more likely to vote, but democratic participation is not just confined to voting. Indeed, many scholars argue that democratic processes like elections are little more than empty shells, vulnerable to reverting to autocratic forms of rule, without active citizen participation (Norris, 2002, p. 42; Weldon, 2011, p. 16). So, as Weldon (2011, p. 16) argues being able to influence public discussion is an important, albeit indirect, avenue for policy influence). Online activism is an important new form of political participation. The internet and social networking services provide new opportunities for finding information and sharing opinions. But we know that though many people do enthusiastically and frequently participate in political activities online, not everyone seizes this opportunity. Who participates in online activism and why?

The nature of political participation has changed significantly with the rapid development of internet technologies such as social media websites. It has been argued that online activism has revolutionized political participation; the internet, when adapted by activists, can be transformative (Polat, 2005; Friedman, 2016). The internet expands the reach of ideas and access to resources (Kaye, 2003; Freelon, 2020; Best & Krueger, 2005), and offers new avenues of recruitment into social and civic participation, like through social media (Shah et al., 2002). There have been many studies on how the internet shapes both online and offline activism and on the motivations for participating in activism online; however, many inconsistencies and gaps in our understanding remain. Existing research points to puzzling contradictions in the reasons that people are motivated to participate in online activism: Sometimes, these motivations are found to be similar to reasons for offline participation and sometimes they seem to be the opposite of such motivations.

For example, take the role of political ideology in online activism: A large body of research has established a positive relationship between party identification, political ideology, and political participation (Verba *et al.*, 1995; Kopocheva, 2021). However, thus far, we have an incomplete understanding of how political ideology shapes *online* political participation. Some scholars have found no relationship between ideology and online participation (Best & Krueger, 2005), while others have found a positive relationship

(Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2017). Furthermore, some research has found that left- or right-wing identification is a determinant of the form and/or extent of online participation, with some finding that the left-wing is more likely to participate in online activism (Kopacheva, 2021) while others argue that left- and right-wing activists use digital media and online participation differently (Freelon, 2020). To begin to make sense of these conflicting findings, this paper will focus on a particular potential motivation for online participation: political ideology. How does political ideology shape on-line activism?

This paper contributes to this literature by exploring how political ideology relates to online political participation. Since online participation is such a prevalent new form of political participation, understanding who chooses to participate is key to knowing how to facilitate these democratic discussions. The internet is the new town square; it is not only a place where people gather information, but also the place where people connect and communicate, and with activist intention it can be transformative for political discussion and social movements. This paper explores how the left and right use the opportunity of digital activism with the aim of providing more insight into the broader academic discussion of online activism. Using publicly available survey data, I ask whether those who self-identify as holding left or right wing ideologies are more likely to participate in online activism, and whether they follow particular strategies depending on whether they are left or right wing?

Using survey data from the American National Election Study and the European Social Survey, I find that, in both the US and EU contexts, the far left and far right on the ideological spectrum are substantially more likely to engage in online participation than those in the centre. In both datasets, the far left participates more than the far right, and this is especially true in the EU context. Additionally, while online participation is the most common form of participation in the US data with 38.76% of respondents reporting that they have posted a political comment online, it is the third most popular form of participation tested in the EU context with only 17.03% of respondents reporting this form of participation. It is possible that the difference between the far left and far right in participation may be a difference in kind, rather than amount, as literature suggests (Freelon, 2020) or that the far right may use the internet in their activism in different ways not measured in these datasets. It is also possible that this difference is a result of the trend in activism more generally of the left being more engaged with social movements than the right (Best & Krueger, 2005). So, because liberal individuals participate more in

other forms of activism and political participation, the internet only marginally advantages the political voice of liberals. Overall, the data is clear that there is a statistically significant difference between the participation of those on the right and left compared to those in the centre. Individuals who align more with the poles of the political ideology spectrum engage in political discussions online more than individuals who are moderate.

Chapter 2.   Key Concepts

In order to discuss online and offline activism and conventional and unconventional forms of participation, it is important to first define some terms I will use in this article. Political participation can be loosely defined as "citizens' activities affecting politics" (Van Deth, 2014, p. 351). However, the list of possible forms of participation is virtually endless, and can include anything from voting to boycotting and hunger strikes to flash mobs. Activism is also a difficult term to pin down, with competing definitions in the literature, and even more difficulty and divisiveness in defining the identity of "activist" (Bobel, 2007). Generally, activism can be understood as public action towards political or social change.

In this article I often refer to political ideology, the left-right spectrum, and partisanship. In the study of motivations for political participation, the literature often discusses the effects of both partisanship and ideology. Political ideology refers to an individual's beliefs on a left/liberal to right/conservative scale, while partisanship refers to the party with which an individual identifies. These concepts overlap as often an individual's party preference will be related to their political ideology. For example, in the US, people who identify as liberal are more likely to vote for or join the Democratic party and people who are conservative are more likely to vote for or join the Republican party. These concepts are related, but this paper will focus on political ideology and use individual self-identification on a liberal or left to conservative or right scale (as opposed to party identification)as the main dependent variable. This is because the data used includes many countries with many different party systems, and looking at political ideology (albeit self-identified and not determined through asking people about specific issues) allows for more direct comparison. I discuss political ideology both in terms of having a strong identification with either the left or right versus being moderate, and in terms of being on the left versus the right of the scale. The left of the scale refers to individuals who identify with "liberal" political ideas and beliefs, and the right of the political scale refers to individuals who identify with "conservative" beliefs and ideas. The far-left or far-right refers to individuals who self-identify as extremely liberal or extremely conservative.

Direct political participation, such as contacting or lobbying politicians, or joining or working in a political party, can be understood as *conventional* political participation.

Unconventional participation, understood as activism outside of routine, official or formal channels for representation or participation, includes activities such as protesting, petitioning, boycotting, and several forms of online activism. These forms of activism are "extra-institutional" in some sense, as they aim to leverage public opinion or pressure more than party officials or elected officials. The line between online and offline activism has become blurry in the 21st century, as so much of everyday life has migrated online, especially after a global pandemic that moved even more of life online due to social distancing and quarantining. For example, even the once offline act of joining a political party and attending meetings could now take place entirely online, with a website for signing up and regular meetings over teleconferencing software like Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Likewise, letter-writing campaigns have often turned into email-campaigns and petitions into online petitions with popular websites such as Change.org.

However, the difference between online and offline forms of activism remains salient for scholars of democratic politics. While many traditionally offline forms of political participation can now be executed online in addition to offline, the effectiveness as well as the reach of such activity may differ when done online or in person (for example, online petitions can reach millions while paper petitions are much more limited). Most germane to the focus of this paper is the fact *that the people who participate in these different forms can also differ.* Further, the internet opens the floor to new forms of participation altogether. For example, on social media websites it is common for people to change their profile picture to show support to a social movement or cause. There is also the ability to like, share, or re-post someone's online comment or image, allowing people to spread a message widely without using their own words.

In spite of these definitional difficulties, I will operationally define online activism as sharing or posting political comments online, in line with the survey questions available from the datasets used in this study. This is due to measurement constraints, though it is meaningful to consider all forms of activism that are undertaken online (both conventional and unconventional), including digital petitions, boycotts, or cyberprotests, as well as new forms of activism, including hashtag activism, fake news, far-left or far-right chat rooms, and hacktivism. Future research should continue to evaluate these different forms of online activity and how they are used differently or in the same way by the left, right, and center. Offline activism includes both unconventional and conventional forms of activism

which take place largely outside of the internet (even if the internet is used in small part for organizing or promoting offline events or demonstrations).

Chapter 3.   Literature Review

In order to better understand the relationship between political ideology and online activism, I turn first to see what we can learn from existing works on the motivations of political participation and specifically, online political participation, as well as the relationship between political self-identification and political participation.

Motivations for Political Participation

Political participation has a large impact on the quality of democracy. An informed and active population is critical to the success of democracy. Not only does political participation lead to more participation in elections, it also is crucial to individuals feeling they are included in public deliberations and able to voice their opinions in a free and fair democracy. Understanding the motivations behind why people participate is important for understanding how to encourage participation, for a healthier democracy and for recruitment into social movements and activism.

The research on the motivations for political participation is broad and there are several key contributions that help us understand why people are moved to participation and activism. The Civic Voluntarism Model (Verba et al., 1995) was originally designed to apply to electoral participation but has also been applied to political participation (Kopocheva, 2021; Barkan, 2004). The civic voluntarism model has three components: resources, engagement, and recruitment. Material resources such as time, money, and skills allow people to be politically active (Verba et al., 1995). People with more socioeconomic status—partially dependent on initial characteristics such as education, race, and gender—are more likely to have resources and more likely to engage in political participation. Engagement also motivates individuals to political participation (Verba et al., 1995). This includes an individual's ideas towards politics, political efficacy, trust in political leaders, or the belief that their actions can make a difference. Issue engagement, or ideas about specific issues that affect individuals personally or that they have strong opinions on, can motivate people to participate. Finally, recruitment by trusted people from interpersonal networks will also motivate individuals towards participation (Verba et al., 1995). Networks can be found in places of work or religious organizations, but also on social networks online.

These political motivation characteristics of political interest, political information, political efficacy, and political ideology are partially dependent on initial characteristics (Kopocheva, 2021). These initial characteristics consist of education, gender, income, race or ethnicity, and other characteristics not originally included such as the Big Five personality traits (Kopocheva, 2021) and religion and spirituality (Hutchinson, 2012).

Additionally, many researchers stress the importance of political efficacy in promoting political participation (Kopocheva, 2021). Political efficacy can be distinguished as internal political efficacy, which consists of an individual's ability to influence politics, and external political efficacy, which consists of the responsiveness of the political system (Kopocheva, 2021, p. 68). Internal political efficacy is linked with conventional, direct forms of political participation, like working in a political party or contacting politicians (p. 69). External political efficacy is linked with unconventional forms of political participation, like boycotting, protesting, and petitioning (p. 69).

Other scholars have other models for explaining why people are motivated towards activism and political participation. Klandermans and Oegema (1987) distinguish four steps toward participation in social movements: becoming part of the mobilization potential, becoming target of mobilization attempts, becoming motivated to participate, and overcoming barriers to participation.

Oegema and Klandermans (1994) identify reasons for non-participation. The challenge for social movement organizations is to transform action preparedness into action participation, and as a result, they must address reasons that lead to non-participation. The authors identify two routes to non-participation: "non-conversion" (coming from barriers to action and an indifferent social environment) and "erosion" (from declining action preparedness throughout the campaign and a social environment perceived as less and less supportive). Understanding the reasons for non-participation can be helpful for understanding the necessary environment for individuals to be motivated towards political participation.

Klandermans (1997) makes the argument that participation occurs because of three core concepts of the social psychology of protests: injustice, efficacy, and identity (Klandermans, 1997). A sense of injustice is an important motivator for collective action and the formation of a social movement. Often injustices arise from a sense of moral

outrage at how authorities handle a societal problem like illegitimate inequality or human rights violations (for example: the feminist movement, the civil rights movement, and the BLM movement). Efficacy refers to the idea that collective action has a reasonable possibility to change the situation. Identity relates to the definition of a "we" group that is experiencing or witnessing the unjust treatment and a "they" group that is an institution or authority responsible for the injustice (Klandermans, 1997). According to Klandermans (2013), the three fundamental reasons people are moved to participate are: people may want to change their circumstances, they may want to act as members of their group, or they may want to express their views.

Fisher et al. (2017) go further and show how individual's motivations to participate represent an intersectional set of issues and how coalitions of issues emerge. After surveying random participants in the Women's March on Washington in January 2017, they found that individuals were motivated to participate based on their own social identities. However, many participants also listed reasons for participating beyond their own social identities, showing how coalitions are built within the progressive movement. Fisher et al. (2018) further refine these findings in a later analysis which includes marches from the entire first year of Donald Trump's presidency, exploring the motivations of participants. They find patterns of issues emerge; however, the patterns are not consistent, and we cannot interpret this activism as a unified intersectional movement. In fact, individual's motivations for joining protests or marches can come from a variety of sources beyond identities, including even random chance of walking by a protest at the right time.

Gender can also intersect with how individuals engage in political participation. Schlozman et al. (1995) find that men and women use different forms of activism, have different concerns, and get different things out of it. They find that "women [are] more likely to engage in informal, grassroots, and organizationally based activities and to focus their energies at the local level" (Schlozman, 1995, p. 271). Because women are more likely to use extra-institutional methods of participating in politics, I would expect that women may be more likely to use online activism and utilize it as a tool for mobilizing and advocating for policy change and social movements.

Online Activism

Online activism is a form of political participation that has grown substantially over the last several decades with increased accessibility to the internet and the development and popularity of social media. The internet has become a communal space for sharing opinions and beliefs, finding and sharing information, and creating communities. Friedman (2016) argues that the internet is not necessarily transformative to social movements, but it can be when activists adapt it to their purposes. Technology itself, including the internet, is socially constructed. The internet and those who use it shape each other; the internet was a blank slate that activists shaped into what they needed it to be (Friedman, 2016). Now, the internet functions as a communal space for sharing ideas, raising awareness, and mobilizing because of the way it has been constructed. Though some scholars have been concerned about the internet as a space for "slacktivism"—low risk, low reward activism—a wealth of research has shown that online participation not only leads to all other forms of participation, but also is a valuable form of activism in and of itself.

Scholars have researched the predictors of both online and offline activism and the reasons for individual political participation. Many scholars have argued that one such predictor of political participation is political information and interest. Putnam (2000) argues that people who read the news are more equipped to understand issues and hold politicians accountable and are therefore more likely to participate. Social networking services increase the likelihood of accidentally receiving political information through newsfeeds and shared posts, and therefore increase political information, a necessary resource for political participation (Kopocheva, 2021). Johnson and Kaye (2003) and Freelon (2020) found positive relationships between internet-based political information and political interest and both offline and online participation. Identification with a party has a positive relationship with political participation as well (Kopocheva, 2021), but as I will discuss in the next section, the research is not conclusive on the effect of political ideology and online political participation.

Kopocheva (2021) expands on the Civic Voluntarism Model, which has been extensively tested on conventional and unconventional political participation, and online participation as well to a lesser extent. Kopocheva (2021) adds an analysis of the dimensions of social and political trust, two characteristics not originally included in the Civic Voluntarism Model (p. 70). Previous research has found that social trust has a positive relationship with unconventional activism (p. 70). However, building on the work of Yang and DeHart (2016), the author finds that social trust is unrelated to online activism.

Political trust has been found to be positively related to conventional forms of participation, but not with unconventional forms of participation (Kopocheva, 2021, p. 70). Building on the work of Theocharis, de Moor and van Deth (2019), they find that political trust has a significant negative effect on online political participation. Interestingly, Kopocheva (2021) also finds that recruitment is positively related with online activism. Contradictory to earlier research that argue offline mobilization is only significant for offline participation, Kopocheva's results show a spillover effect where mobilization either online or offline is significant for participation online or offline (2021, p. 77).

Best and Krueger (2005) find that the factors predicting online participation often differ from the factors that predict offline participation. Even so, a consistent predictor of political participation both online and offline is socioeconomic status. They find that people with more socioeconomic freedom are more likely to participate online. Sutton and Pollock (2004) find that women are also likely to participate online. Women are using internet technologies and platforms as a form of empowerment by creating resources and networks for organizing (Sutton & Pollock, 2004). So, I may expect to see women engaging in online activism more than men.

Online activism is, in many ways, similar to other forms of unconventional participation, but the motivations differ in key ways. First, social networking services create an illusion of directness in political participation due to the increasing number of political leaders with accounts on social media websites like Facebook and Twitter. Individuals can feel as though they are able to communicate with these political leaders by sharing their thought or voicing opinions and @-ing their politicians (Kopocheva, 2021, p. 77). Secondly, individuals with lower risk preferences may feel more comfortable participating in online activism due to perceived anonymity, lessening the need for social support (Kopocheva, 2021, p.77). The insignificance of social trust for online political participation could also be explained if many people who are participating believe it to be low-risk and low-reward and acting as what many scholars call "slacktivists" (Kopocheva, 2021, p. 77). "Slacktivism" or "clicktivism" can be defined as "low-cost symbolic actions such as sharing, "liking," changing one's profile image, and generally posting activist content on social media." (Freelon et al., 2020, p. 1197). In relation to this explanation, some scholars have argued that online activism is motivated by a search for attention or a "feel good effect" (Morozov, 2011; Kopocheva, 2021). This is heavily related to the concept of performative activism, where the motivation behind sharing posts or signing petitions is to feel good

about oneself and get attention from others for doing so, without doing "the real work" of activism.

However, despite the labels of "slacktivism" and online activism often being judged as ineffective, a number of studies show that social media is an effective mobilization tool that results in more online and offline participation (Greijdanus et al., 2020; Lee, 2013; Noland, 2017; Freelon et al., 2020). Empirical evidence suggests that people who are interested in politics will participate both online and offline (Freelon et al., 2020). In Lee's 2013 study, they found that participants who signed an online petition were significantly more likely to donate money to related charities, suggesting that exposure to online activism is a significant motivator for subsequent political participation, online or offline. Similarly, Greijdanus et al. (2020) found that social networking services facilitate online activism, and that online and offline activism are positively linked and intertwined. Online activism also enhances the visibility of activism and can mobilise offline political participation (Greijdanus, 2020).

Noland (2017) further explores the relationship between "slacktivism" and other forms of activism. The author finds that the relationship between online and offline activism is strong (2017). Furthermore, Noland argues that "slacktivist" is an ill-fitting name for participants in this form of social cause engagement, which is a valuable form of activism and another important facet of political participation and social movement mobilization (2017). Shah et al. (2002) also find that spending more time online and being more civically engages are positively related. Simply being online and being more exposed to political information and recruitment increases civic engagement more generally.

Online activism, like activism generally, is a difficult term to pin down. It encompasses a broad range of activities ranging from sharing content to high level decision-making as a full-time activist (Freelon, 2020, p. 1201). Importantly, the low-cost forms of online activism add up to substantial differences and contribute to both online and offline mobilization. The reasons why people choose to participate in online activism are similar to motivations for other forms of activism, but there are some key differences and areas for more research in the literature including the impact of political left-right ideology.

Political Ideology and Online Activism

Having a strong political ideological identity has been shown to have a significant positive effect on political participation. Individuals who identify as on the left or right of the political spectrum are more likely to participate in offline participation than moderates. The results are inconclusive, however, when the relationship with online political participation is tested. Some scholars have found no significant relationship (Best & Krueger, 2005), while others find a significant positive relationship (Lilleker & Koc-Michalska, 2017).

Some argue that being on the left of the left-right orientation has a significant relationship with political participation. For instance, individuals that are liberal or left wing are more likely to participate in certain social movements like the feminist movement, BLM, or environmental movements (Warner, 1991, p. 1052; Spies-Butcher & Stebbing, 2016, p. 746). Furthermore, Spies-Butcher and Stebbing (2016, p. 749) found that the association between attitudes towards social movements might stem from a common partisan nature of politics that situates individuals on the left as being more likely to be social movement activists. Those on the left are often advocating for social change—more rights for women and minorities, environmental protections—while the right is more often focused on traditionalism and economic success. The nature of the left to be more friendly towards change and social movements to create change mean that liberal individuals are more likely engage in activism extra-institutionally. The right is more traditionalist and conservative and may be more likely to engage with intra institutional avenues for political participation, suggesting less online activism.

Kopocheva (2021) found that individuals who placed themselves on the left of the left-right divide were more likely to participate in online activism, as well as other forms of unconventional political participation. This in line with the observed trend that those on the left are more likely to be engaged in informal participation than those on the right. Often, those on the left are advocating for social change, and often fighting for more rights for marginalized groups, while the right is more traditionalist (Weldon, 2011). The trend of the left engaging in extra-institutional activism and social movements more than the right could be explained in this way.

This result is in line with Finkle and Opp (1991) who identified that the positive relationship between identification with political parties and unconventional political participation was only significant for some parties (namely, the Greens). Best and Kreueger (2005) also find that online participation tends to relate moderately with liberal

preferences. However, they argue that because offline participation similarly tends toward having more liberal participation than conservative, the Internet only marginally advantages the political voice of liberals.

Freelon et al. (2020) argue that in the United States and the industrialized West, left and right wing activists use online activism in different ways. Left wing activists, according to Freelon et al., are more likely to use online methods such as hashtag activism, sharing and trending, and organizing offline protests (p. 1198). They also mount the argument that hashtag activism and other "clicktivism" methods commonly used by the left are politically consequential and effective at mobilizing both online and offline participation. The right wing, however, tend to use different methods such as manipulating legacy media, migrating to right wing platforms, and working with partisan media to spread their messages (p. 1198). The authors explain these differences in methods with fundamental differences between the left and right. First, mistrust in mainstream media and news has been escalating among American and European conservatives for decades, a driving force for the creation of, and migration to, right-wing media environments (p. 1198). This is exacerbated by the common conservative belief that "Big Tech"— companies which own the internet's most widely used websites, including Google, Facebook, Twitter, Apple, and Amazon—are biased against them (p. 1198). This comes from the far-right belief that the media has become too far left and growing distrust in the media from the populist far-right. These beliefs cause the far right to more radically oppose common news and media platforms. They migrate to platforms more supportive of their political views and use those platforms in their online political participation. At the same time, the centre-right's presence on social networking services has diminished, leaving the far-right as the dominant conservative presence in online political settings (p. 1198).

So, while some studies have found that the left is more likely to participate in online activism, it may be that the measurements used are simply less able to capture the types of activism that the right is participating in. It could also be that the retreat of the centre-right in online activism has simply reduced the number of individuals participating from the right wing. While the far-right wing is active online and often make their presence more known and promote their messages more aggressively through strategic manipulation of algorithms (Freelon et al., 2020, p. 1199), the far-right is still only a part of the right wing. This isolation of far-right actors complicates analysis and results in asymmetric polarization (Freelon et al., 2020, p. 1201). It may also be the case that the "clicktivism" of

the left wing is both effective and low-cost, leading to more left-wing individuals wanting to participate, than right-wing methods which can be at a higher cost (moving to new platforms, working with conservative media, etc.). In addition to the fact that more left-wing online activism is taking place on traditional social networking services and are therefore able to connect with more people more easily from a broader range of backgrounds. By contrast, right wing activists frequently use their own exclusive media ecosystems, while still operating with large social networking services out of necessity (Freelon et al., 2020, p. 1199). Boxell et al. (2017) hold a differing opinion, arguing that internet use does not cause more polarization, contrary to popular belief and theories of echo chambers. Instead, they find that polarization among US adults is more common among those least likely to use the internet in their 2017 study. While polarization is increasing in the US, they argue the internet's effect is likely small or mixed. Other explanations for polarization in the US include partisan unity, generational differences, and access to political knowledge.

There is also a large body of research on the spread of misinformation and disinformation by left- and right-wing activists as a form of political action and furthering goals. The literature shows that these methods are more prevalent on the right side than the left (Freelon et al., 2020). There are a few explanations for why this may be. Evidence from psychological studies show that conservative individuals are more likely to seek out closed media environments ("echo chambers") that facilitate the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories (p. 1200). Conservatives are also more likely than liberals to share this type of content (p. 1200). Finally, the mainstream media outlets that the right is typically more wary of, and the left is more likely to rely on, are the media outlets that have a history of fact-checking norms that are more effective at preventing disinformation (p. 1200). The authors, however, point out that while there is evidence that the right wing uses misinformation, there is simply less research done on the left wing in this regard. All in all, research around the impact of political ideology and self-identification on the liberal to conservative scale or with certain parties on online political participation is inconclusive. This paper will attempt to add to the literature on motivations for online political participation and answer the research question: Are left or right wing individuals more likely to participate in online activism?

People who can identify where they place themselves on an ideological scale are also more likely to have more political knowledge and opinions on political issues. They

are able to identify that they belong on the left/liberal side of the spectrum because they are aware of and care about issues that liberal politicians, media outlets, and activists speak about. Likewise, those who place themselves on the right/conservative side of the scale are politically aware enough to self-identify. It stands to reason that people with political knowledge and opinions are more likely to engage in online political discourse and online activism, as well as other forms of political participation. I would expect that the individuals on the far ends of the spectrum have more developed political opinions and therefore, engage in online activism more than those in the centre. I hypothesize that it will be the case that individuals who self-identify as far left and far right will be more likely to engage in online political participation than those who self-identify as moderate.

Literature that suggests those on the far right are more likely to use alternative methods of online activism and use the internet to organize in a different way (Freelon, 2020). The left is likely to use low-cost, effective methods of online activism ("clicktivism") like hashtag activism, commenting, and sharing, while the far right may be more inclined to other methods which can come at a higher cost (moving to new platforms, working with conservative media, etc.). Considering the datasets I use in this study measure online activism on the dimension of sharing or posting comments online, I expect to see the far left more represented in the data than the far right. Additionally, a number of studies have found that the left wing is more engaged with activism and social movements than the right wing., since the right is less likely to challenge existing authorities and more likely to engage with established avenues. As the left wing is typically pushing for social change while the right wing is more traditional, it is also likely that the left side of the spectrum, and especially marginalized people, have a greater need for informal participation and activism - and that challenge the status quo (Weldon, 2011). I would expect that this trend would continue in the online context. I also hypothesize that individuals on the left will participate in online activism more than those on the right.

Chapter 4.   Data and Methods

This study uses two datasets for the analysis: the 2018 European Social Survey (ESS) and the 2020 American National Elections Studies (ANES) Time Series Study. The ESS is a cross-sectional survey collected every two years. It measures attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour patterns of diverse populations in more than thirty European nations. The ANES study is conducted every four years, before and after an election, and uses both face-to-face and internet samples. This study samples U.S. citizens aged 18 or older living in the United States. These datasets were chosen because they provide a comprehensive measure of the variables necessary to estimate the influence of political ideology on online activism.

The 2018 ESS contains questions on left-right placement, as well as a measurement of online activism, including these questions on the survey: "Have you posted or shared anything about politics online, for example on blogs, via email or on social media such as Facebook or Twitter" as well as measures for other unconventional and conventional modes of political participation. The 2020 ANES study includes several questions on left-right/liberal-conservative ideology, as well as several questions on political participation including online activism, in particular, this question: "During the past 12 months, have you posted a message or comment online about a political issue or campaign, or have you not done this in the past 12 months?". The ESS also has the advantage of being generalizable across European societies when country-level variation is controlled for in the model. Using both the ANES and ESS in this study further allows for more generalization of the findings, in addition to allowing for comparison.

It is important to note that these two survey datasets were collected two years apart. The ESS dataset is from 2018, while the ANES dataset is from 2020. Therefore, the ANES responses may be swayed by the pandemic, while the ESS survey was taken before the COVID-19 pandemic. I believe it is still worthwhile to use this data as it is the most up to date at the time of writing this paper. I discuss the potential impacts of the pandemic on the findings in the analysis of this paper.

Dependent Variables

The ANES dataset includes several variables on various forms of political participation. Of particular interest is a question that has asked respondents: "During the past 12 months, have you posted a message or comment online about a political issue or campaign, or have you not done this in the past 12 months?". Other unconventional political participation questions include signing an internet or paper petition, joining a protest march, rally, or demonstration, and attending political meetings, rallies, or speeches in person. I have also included two measures of conventional political participation. These include contributing money to a political party and contacting a federal elected official. All of these variables have binary yes or no answers. The wording of all questions can be found in Appendix III.

The ESS dataset also includes several variables on political participation. Of particular interest is the question: "There are different ways of trying to improve things in [country] to help prevent things from going wrong. During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following? Have you... ...posted or shared anything about politics online, for example on blogs, via email or on social media such as Facebook or Twitter?" There are also several more questions on unconventional political participation, including displaying a campaign badge, signing a petition, participating in a lawful public demonstration, and boycotting certain products. It also includes three measures of conventional political participation, including contacting a politician, working in a political party or group, and working in another organization. All of these variables have binary yes or no answers.

It is important to note the measurement issues that could arise from the differences between the ESS and ANES datasets. First, the ESS uses a 0-10 left-right scale while the ANES uses a 7 point liberal-conservative scale. Liberal-conservative is used to discuss left-right as in the US, the place of the ANES, it is somewhat common to use these terms interchangeably, despite "liberal" and "conservative" meaning different things in different contexts. Also, the ANES was taken in 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ESS was taken in 2018, before the pandemic. Implications of this are discussed late in this paper. I justify using these datasets because they still allow me to compare the left to the right and over a wide range of countries.

Independent Variables

In the ANES dataset, there are two questions for judging political ideology. First, participants were asked to place themselves on a scale of 7 from extremely liberal (1) to extremely conservative (7) with (4) being moderate/middle of the road, as well as options for "refuse", "don't know", or "haven't thought much about this". In the second (and subsequent) question, participants who answered moderate or unsure were asked "If you had to choose, would you consider yourself a liberal or a conservative?" and given a question that creates a forced choice between liberal or conservative (unless they say they "don't know" or refuse to answer). Because so many respondents (1201 of 6768) selected "haven't thought much about this", I recoded this answer to the first question using the answers to the second question (which prompted them to answer either liberal or conservative) to place them at slightly liberal (3) or slightly conservative (5).

From the ESS dataset, I will be using a left-right scale as my main independent variable. The question asks participants to place themselves on a 0 to 10 scale, where 0 means left and 10 means right. The ESS also asks a question to gauge political interest, which I use as a control. Based on the review of the literature and this paper's focus on political ideology and participation, including political interest in the analysis allows me to control for how *interest* in politics relates to online participation. Political interest in both the ANES and ESS is measured on a scale of 1 to 4, with (1) being very interested and (4) being not at all interested.

The ANES and ESS datasets also include several characteristic questions, the answers to which I can use as control variables for characteristics such as gender, income, education level, and age. From the ANES dataset, I include sex, total household income, education level, race, and age as control variables in my analysis. From the ESS dataset, I include sex, total household income, years of education, and age as control variables in my analysis because it does not include race. I also control for state fixed effects in the ANES dataset and country fixed effects in the ESS dataset.

Statistical Models

After controlling for missing cases, the ANES data set included between 735 and 7357 valid observations, depending on the form of political participation used in the analysis (as some variables have missing values). The ESS dataset includes between 42,083 and 42,176 valid observations across all countries, again depending on the form

of political participation measured in the analysis. Figures 1 and 3 show plots of the ANES and ESS dependent variables of interest in this study by plotting them on the liberal to conservative scale. Figures 2 and 4 show these plots by sex on the liberal to conservative scale. I then employ regression analysis in four models and find the association between political ideology and online political participation to be statistically significant and substantively important. Similarly, I conduct an analysis of the ESS data. My findings for the ESS data also reveal a statistically significant and substantively important association between left and right ideology and participating in online activism.

Chapter 5.   Results

I start my analysis by looking at all forms of political participation by Liberal (Left) to Conservative (Right) scale. I then focus on the measure for online political participation. The motivation for looking at other forms of participation is to be able to compare political ideology's effect on online activism with other forms of political participation. When looking at all forms of political participation, I first look at participation across the liberal (left) to conservative (right) scale. I also show this participation separately by sex for men and women. I then focus in on online participation and find that there is a statistically significant relationship with those on the left and right participating more in online political discussions, when controlling for sex, age, education, income. I find difference in the left and right, the extremes from the centre, and men and women, where women are slightly more likely to engage online overall, though in the ESS, conservative men are more likely to post than conservative women.

American National Elections Studies (2020)

First looking at the ANES dataset, the proportion of respondents who report participating in the various forms of participation measured in this study are as follows: 9.36% of respondents report that they have attended a protest in person, 5.47% of respondents report that they have attended a political meeting in person, 28.48% of respondents report that they have signed a petition, online or offline, 14.89% of respondents report that they have contacted a political official, 13.26% of respondents report that they have attended a political meeting online, 12.91% of respondents report that they have contributed money to a political party, and 38.67% of respondents report that they have shared or posted a political comment online. Figure 1 displays the proportion of people participating in these forms of activism by self-identification on a liberal to conservative scale.
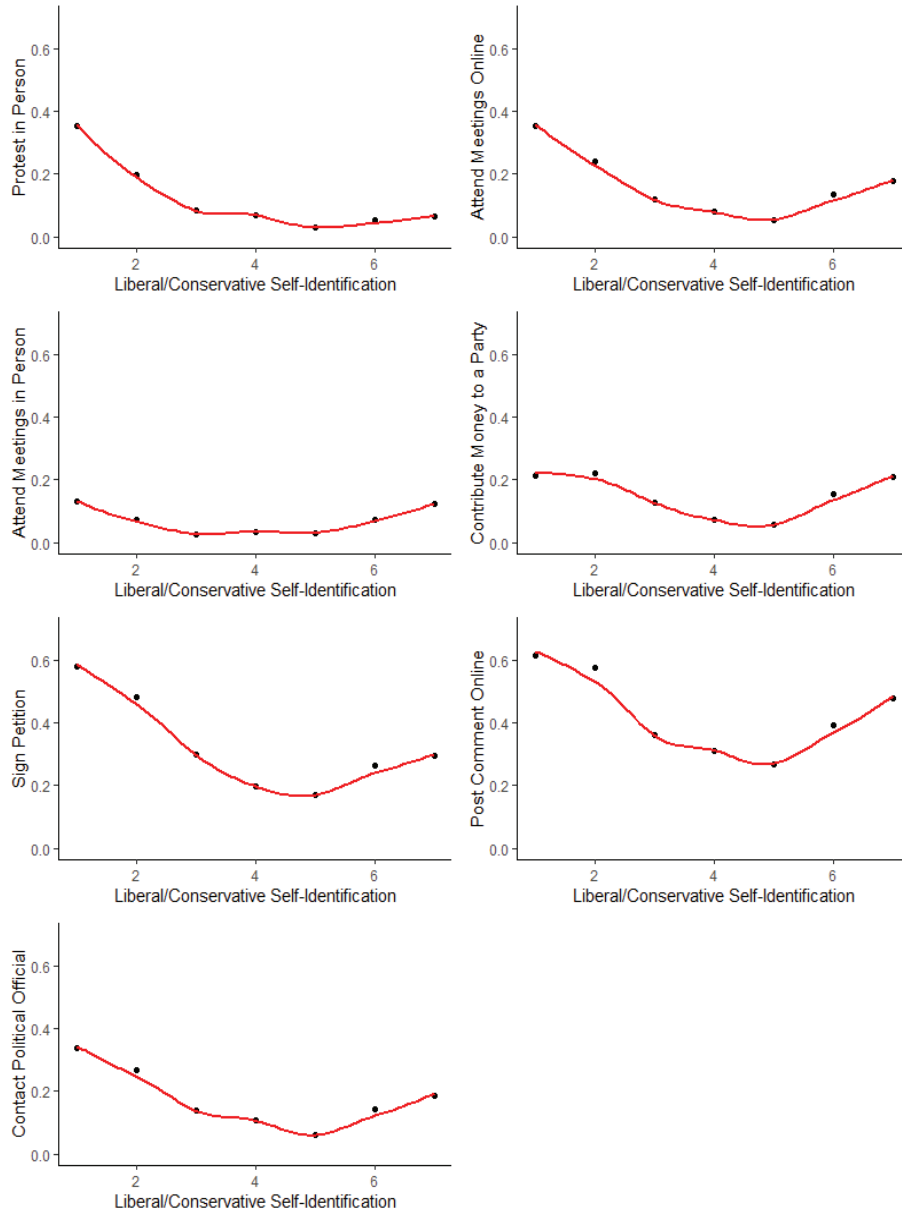
Figure 1. Proportion of People Participating by Liberal to Conservative Scale (ANES 2020)

It is interesting to note the polynomial U-shape of each of these graphs. For all measures of political participation, there is a higher proportion of the sampled respondents reporting to participate on the far-left and far-right of the scale.

It is important to note that these graphs all have smoothed lines to better visualize the shape of the graphs, so it important to not overstate the relationship when interpreting the graphs. People on the left and the right are participating at different rates in all these

areas, even though across all these forms there is an increase in the far left and right. Some forms of participation are more uncommon in this sample, such as attending political meetings in person which has an average of 5.47% of respondents reporting that they have partaken in this form of political participation. Other variables have higher levels of participation. For instance, the online activism variable of posting comments online has the most participation, with an average of 38.67%, ranging from 25% to 65% on the liberal to conservative scale.

Figure 2 shows the proportion of people participating in these forms of political participation on a liberal to conservative scale by sex (male and female).[1] The red line represents male respondents and the blue line represents female respondents.

---

[1] The variable in ANES is a binary variable for sex with only male and female as options. I want to recognize that sex is not a binary, but I am working within the available data.
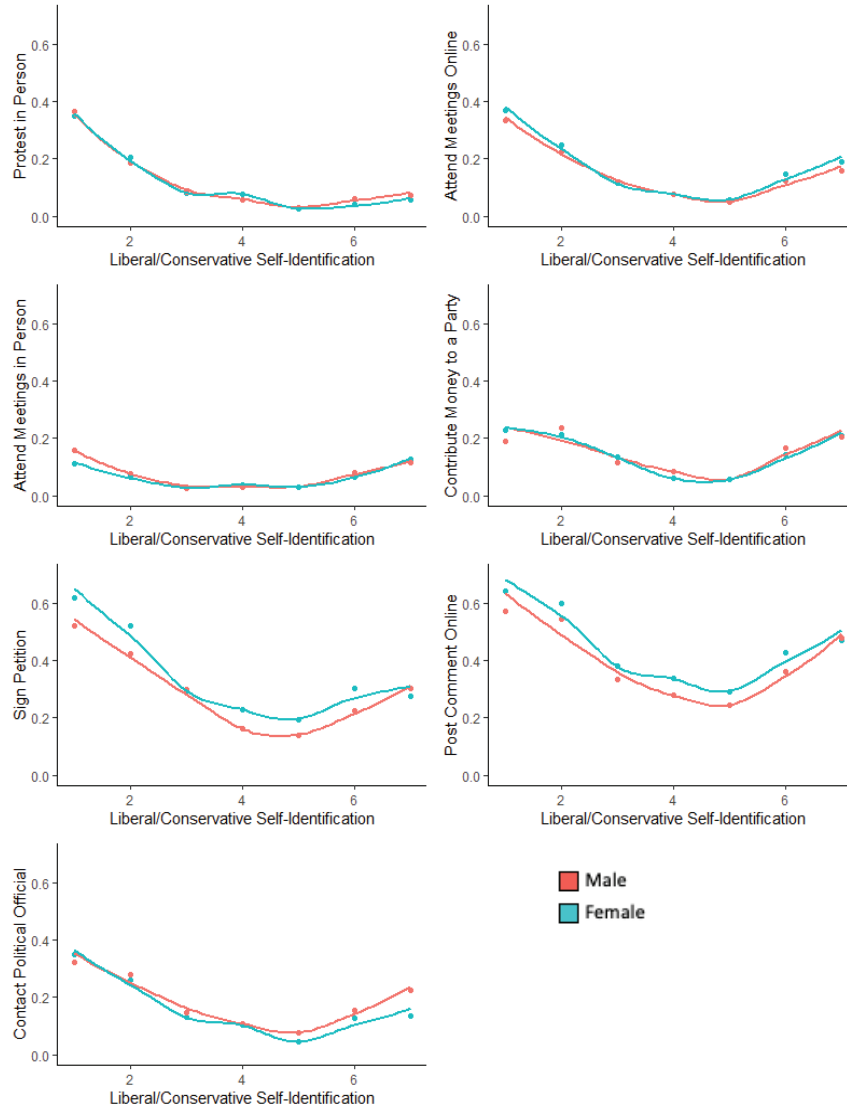
Figure 2. Proportion of People Participating on Liberal to Conservative Scale by Sex (ANES 2020)

Overall, there are only slight differences in terms of the distribution of these variables by sex, but there are some interesting observations. Women have higher levels of participation in petitioning online or in person and in posting comments about political issues online, while men are more likely to contact political officials.

Table 1 examines the relation between the main variable of interest in this study, sharing or posting political comments online—i.e., online activism. This regression analysis includes four models and finds that the relationship seen above in the graphs is statistically significant even controlling for other possible determinants of online activism.

Table 1. Regression on Online Political Participation by Sex, Age, Race, Household Income, Education Level, Political Interest, and State Fixed Effects (ANES 2020)

Table 1: Regression Analysis of Posting Comments Online (ANES)

	Dependent variable:			
	Posts Comments Online			
	OLS			logistic
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Liberal/Conservative Self Identification	−0.036*** (0.004)	−4.673*** (0.478)	−3.637*** (0.495)	−16.175*** (2.287)
Liberal/Conservative Self Identification (Squared)		7.123*** (0.478)	4.878*** (0.485)	21.903*** (2.255)
Controls			X	X
State Fixed Effects			X	X
Observations	6,768	6,768	6,768	6,768
Adjusted R^2	0.014	0.046	0.115	

Note: 'Controls' refers to control variables for education, political interest, sex, income, and age.

See Appendix I for the full table including controls. The first model is a simple linear regression of online activism on the liberal and conservative self-identification variable. This is a linear probability model (linear regression on a categorical variable). This first model produces a statistically significant correlation coefficient, where an increase of 1 on the liberal to conservative scale produces an expected decrease in likelihood of posting comments online by 3.6%. The adjusted R-squared value is small at 0.014, so this first model does not explain much of the variance in posting political comments online.

The second model includes the polynomial term of the liberal and conservative self-identification variable squared. The liberal/conservative self-identification score is on a 1-7 scale, with 1 as extremely liberal, 4 as moderate, and 7 as extremely conservative. By adjusting the scale to set moderate at 0, with extremely liberal now at -3 and extremely conservative now at 3, and this would adjust the intercept downwards. Then, I can interpret the coefficients. An increase in conservatism produces a large decrease in probability of posting political comments online. The coefficient is -4.673, implying a 467.3% decrease,

noting that this is a binary variable in an OLS regression which is why this value exceeds 1. After making this adjustment, I can interpret the coefficient of the squared term as the effect of a respondent's distance from moderate (0) on posting comments online. The coefficient is 7.123, as a result the prediction is that respondents who are further from moderate are significantly more likely to post political comments online than those who are closer to moderate. The linear term shows that liberals are more likely to post comments online than conservatives and the squared term shows that respondents who are liberal and conservative are more likely to post political comments online than moderates. Taken together, this implies that extreme liberals are more likely to engage online than extreme conservatives, and both are more likely to post online than moderates. Model 2 still does not include the control variables, but it does produce a statistically significant polynomial term. The adjusted R-squared value increases from 0.014 to 0.046 but is still small.

Model 3 builds on Model 2 and includes the polynomial term, but it also includes the controls for sex, age, race, total household income, education level, political interest, and state fixed effects. The important thing to note here is that between Models 2 and 3, the added controls do not change much in the results of the regression analysis, though the R-squared value increases significantly to 0.115. This means the results of Model 2 are robust to controlling for sex, age, race, income, and education level. See Appendix I for full table including controls.

Model 4 is a logistic regression including all controls and the polynomial term. Logistic regression is used to capture the issue of exceeding 1 in the OLS regression that stems from the categorical nature of the dependent variable (0 or 1: online participation or not). This logistic regression confirms the U shape polynomial seen in the graphs because the squared self-identification term is positive, and the simple self-identification term is negative. Models 1, 2, and 3 show similar results, and this analysis serves as a robustness check for those results. Overall, the regression analysis shows that some of the key differences seen in the graphs are statistically significant, namely that the left and right do engage in political participation, specifically online participation, more than those in the centre.

One of the main hypotheses of this paper is that liberals in general post political comments online more than conservatives. I also include a Welch independent samples

t-test to determine if there is a difference of amount between liberals and conservatives in participating in online political participation. I defined respondents who identified as slightly liberal, liberal, or extremely liberal as liberal and respondents who identified as slightly conservative, conservative, or extremely conservative as conservative. I tested the null hypothesis that liberal and conservative respondents would have no difference in whether or not they engage in online political participation. The t-statistic is 10.185 with a p-value of 2.2^{-16}. I reject the null hypothesis at the 0.05 significance level. Liberal respondents are more likely to post and share political comments online than conservative respondents.

I also include a t-test of the extremes of the scale to compare those who identified as extremely liberal (N=335) and extremely conservative (N=1322) on participating in online political participation. I tested the null hypothesis that there would be no difference in liberals and conservative in whether or not they engage in political discussions online. The t-statistic is -11.8 with a p-value of 2.2^{-16}. I reject the null hypothesis at the 0.05 significance level. Extreme liberal respondents are more likely to post and share political comments online than extreme conservative respondents.
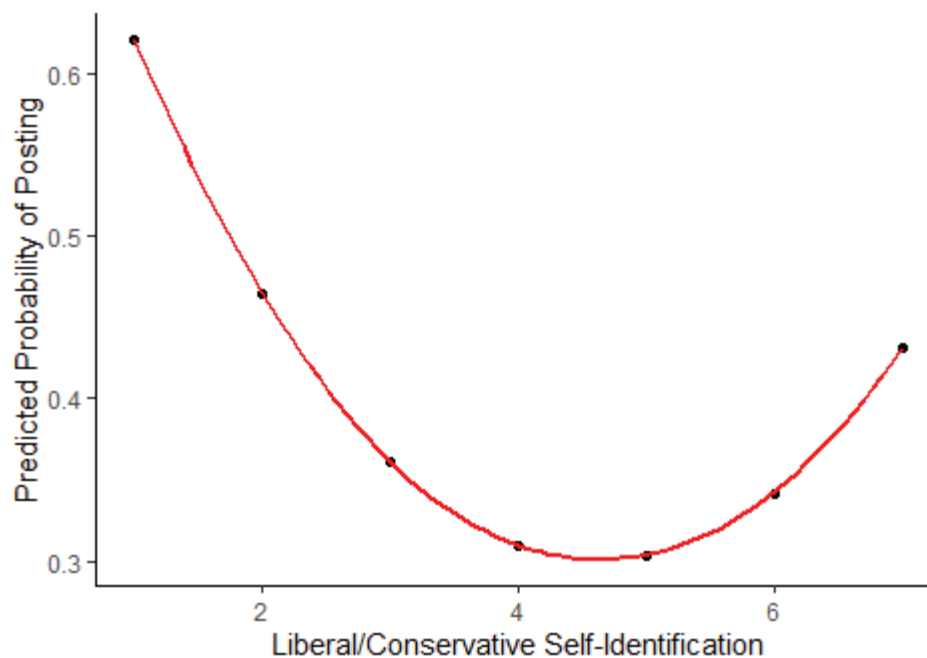

Figure 3. Predicted Probability of Posting Comments Online by Liberal/Conservative Self-Identification (ANES 2020)

Figure 3 shows a predicted probability plot. This figure shows the predicted probability that a given individual at a certain level on the liberal/conservative scale will post a political comment online, holding every control variable at a constant. The constant for each variable is the mean of continuous variables or the mode of factor variables. This graphs predicts that an individual who is extremely liberal will engage in online political participation the most. A person who is extremely conservative is also somewhat likely to engage in online political participation, and the least likely to post political comments online are those who would identify in the centre.

European Social Survey (2018)

Now looking at the ESS dataset, the proportion of respondents who report participating in the various forms of participation measured in this study are as follows: 16.69% of respondents report that they have contacted a political official, 17.52% of respondents report that they have worked for an organization, 27.27% of respondents report that they have signed a petition, 20.34% of respondents report that they have boycotted a product, 4.69% of respondents report that they have worked for a political party, 9.37% of respondents report that they have worn a badge, 8.23% of respondents report that they have attended a public demonstration, and 17.03% of respondents report that they have shared or posted a political comment online. See Appendix IV for a list of countries and sample sizes in the ESS. Figure 4 displays the proportion of people participating in these forms of activism by self-identification on a left to right scale.

Overall, the ESS participation online is 4th most common at 17.03%, while in the ANES it was the most common at 38.67%. This is a substantive difference. Posting online is more common overall in the American context than in Europe. The European results include many aggregated results from
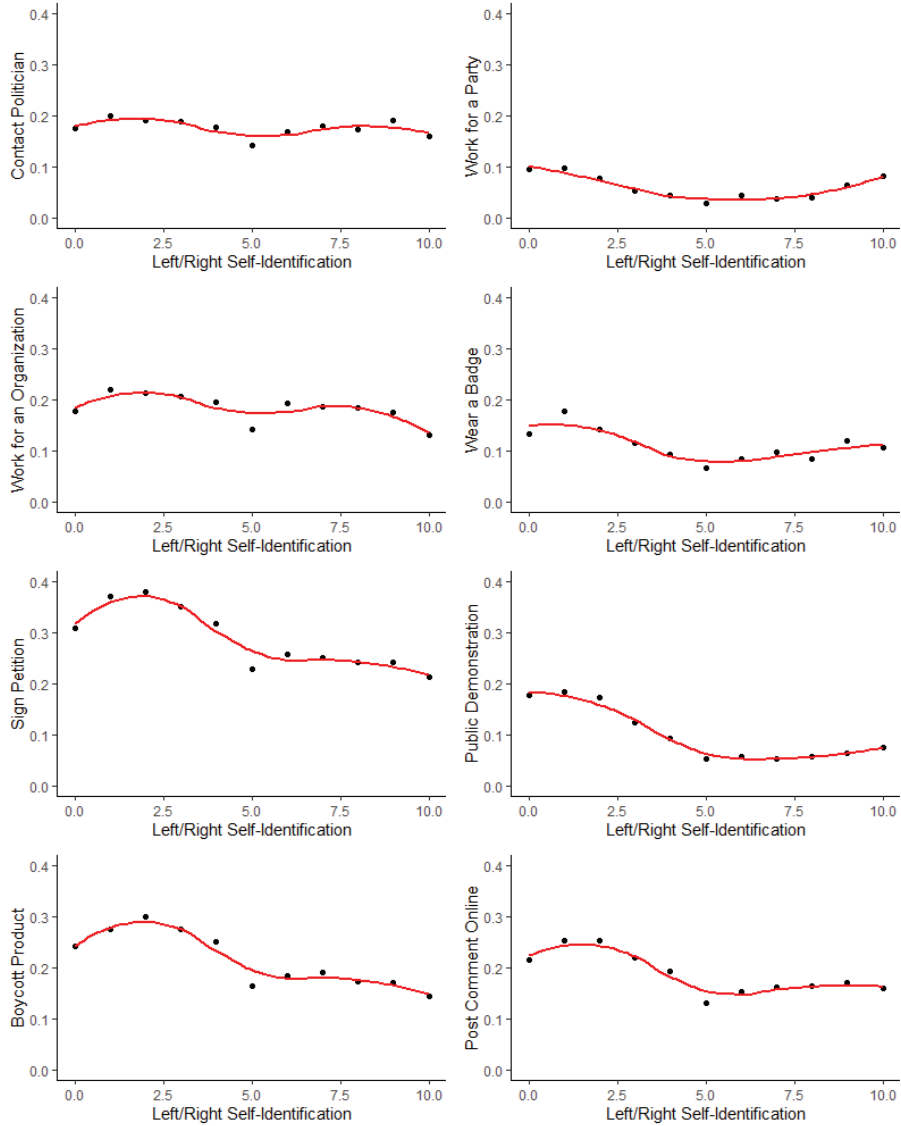
Figure 4. Proportion of People Participating by Left to Right Scale (ESS)

Similar to the ANES analysis the polynomial U shape is common among several forms of political participation, including contacting politicians, working in a party, working in an organization, and wearing a badge. Attending public demonstrations, like in the ANES, is more likely among liberals, as is boycotting products and signing petitions. The main variable of interest, sharing or posting political comments online, also has this shape with the left being more likely to post online than the right. Interestingly, these graphs have a trend of dipping down at the far ends of the spectrum, especially on the farthest left as compared to the left.

Figure 5 shows the proportion of people participating in these forms of political participation on a liberal to conservative scale by sex (male and female). The red line represents male respondents and the blue line represents female respondents.
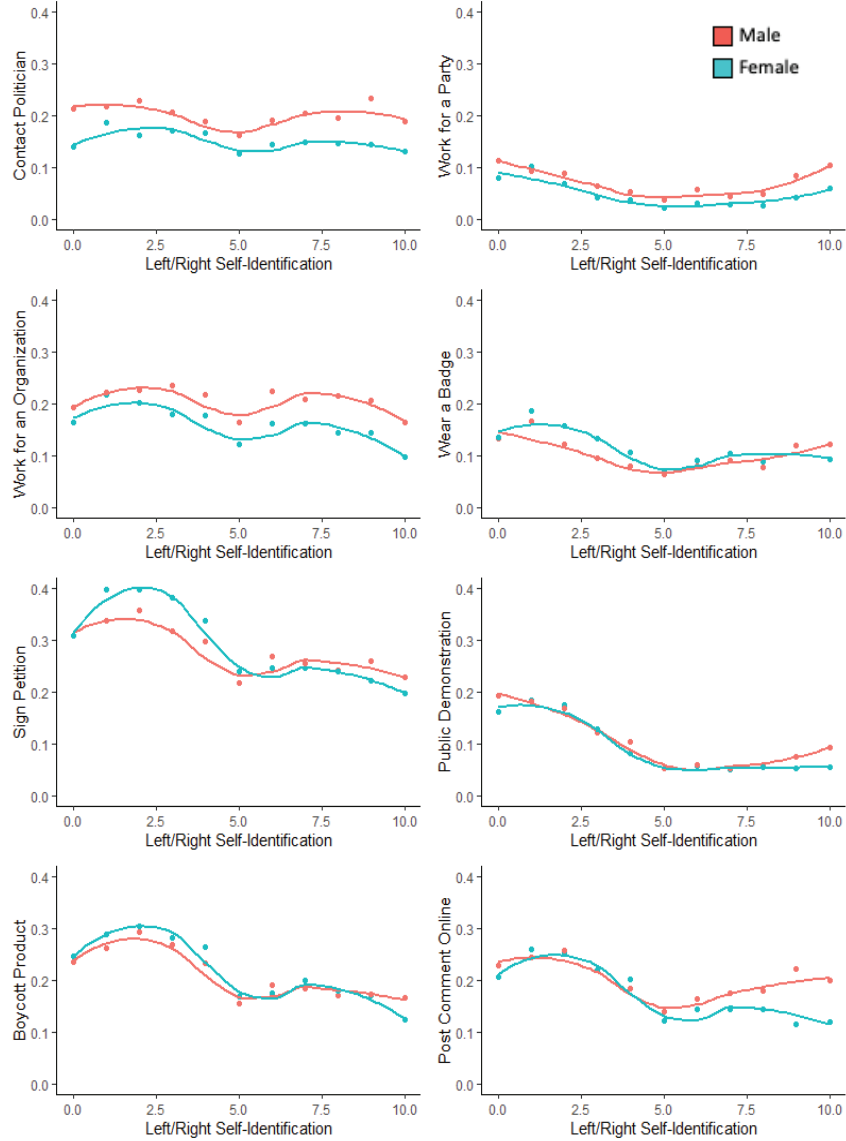
Figure 5. Proportion of People Participating on Liberal to Conservative Scale by Sex (ESS)

Similarly to the ANES, sex does not make a particularly large difference in the trends of political participation, however the difference is larger in the ESS dataset, particularly for conventional forms of political participation. Males are more likely contribute to a politician, work in a party, and work for an organization (more conventional forms of

political participation). For many of the other variables, there is an interesting relationship where it appears as though liberal women are more likely or equally as likely to sign a petition, boycott a product, attend a public demonstration, post a comment online, and wear a badge. Conservative women, however, see a dip below men on the far right of each of these variables.

Table 2 examines the hypothesis related to the main variable of interest in this study, sharing or posting political comments online—i.e., online activism. This regression analysis includes four models and finds that the relationship seen above in the graphs is statistically significant with controls.

Table 2. Regression on Online Political Participation by Sex, Age, Household Income, Education Level, Political Interest, and Country Fixed Effects (ESS 2018)

Table 2: Regression Analysis of Posting Comments Online (ESS)

	Dependent variable:			
	Posting Comments Online			
	OLS			logistic
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Left/Right Self Identification	−0.011*** (0.001)	−4.633*** (0.381)	−3.882*** (0.370)	−24.397*** (2.772)
Left/Right Self Identification (Squared)		3.171*** (0.381)	2.961*** (0.372)	23.563*** (2.772)
Controls			X	X
Country Fixed Effects			X	X
Observations	41,642	41,642	41,642	41,642
Adjusted R^2	0.004	0.006	0.099	

Note: 'Controls' refers to control variables for education, political interest, sex, income, and age.

See Appendix II for the full table including controls. This regression analysis of the ESS dataset was done in the same way as the regression for the ANES dataset. The first model is a simple linear regression of online activism on the left and right self-identification variable. This first model produces a statistically significant correlation coefficient, where an increase of 1 on the left to right scale produces an expected decrease in likelihood of

posting comments online by 1.1%. The adjusted R-squared value is small at 0.004, so this first model does not explain much of the variance in posting political comments online.

The second model includes the polynomial term of the left and right self-identification variable squared. It is a linear regression on the self-identification and the self-identification squared. An increase towards the right of the scale produces a large decrease in probability of posting political comments online. The linear term shows that the left is more likely to post comments online than the right and the squared term shows that respondents who are on the far left and right are more likely to post political comments online than those in the centre. Taken together, this implies that the far left are more likely to engage online than the far right, and both are more likely to post online than the centre.

Model 3 builds on Model 2 and includes the polynomial term as well as the controls for sex, age, total household income, education level, political interest, and country fixed effects. The results of Model 2 are robust to controlling for sex, age, income, education level, political interest, and country fixed effects. Model 4 is a logistic regression including all controls and the polynomial term. It confirms the U shape polynomial seen in the graphs because the squared self-identification term is positive and the simple self-identification term is negative. The R-squared values are quite small, like in the ANES regression, but the third model has a higher R-squared of 0.099. Overall, the regression analysis confirms that the results seen in the graphs are statistically significant and the left and right do engage in in online participation more than those in the centre.

Similar to the ANES, I also did a Welch independent samples t-test to answer whether those who identify as belonging to the left or right are more likely to participate in online political participation. I defined respondents who identified as 0-4 on the 0-10 left-right scale as left and respondents who identified as 6-10 on the 0-10 left-right scale as right. I tested the null hypothesis that left and right respondents would have no difference in whether or not they engage in online political participation. The t-statistic is 12.245 with a p-value of 2.2^{-16}. I reject the null hypothesis at the 0.05 significance level. Left respondents are more likely to post and share political comments online than right respondents. I also include a t-test of the extremes of the scale to compare those who identified as far left (N=2861) and far right (N=2649) on participating in online political participation. I tested the null hypothesis that there would be no difference in those who responded extremely left (0 or 1 on the 1-10 scale) and extremely right (9 or 10 on the 1-

10 scale) in whether or not they engage in political discussions online. The t-statistic is -6.27 with a p-value of 3.781^{-10}. I reject the null hypothesis at the 0.05 significance level. Far left respondents are more likely to post and share political comments online than far right respondents.
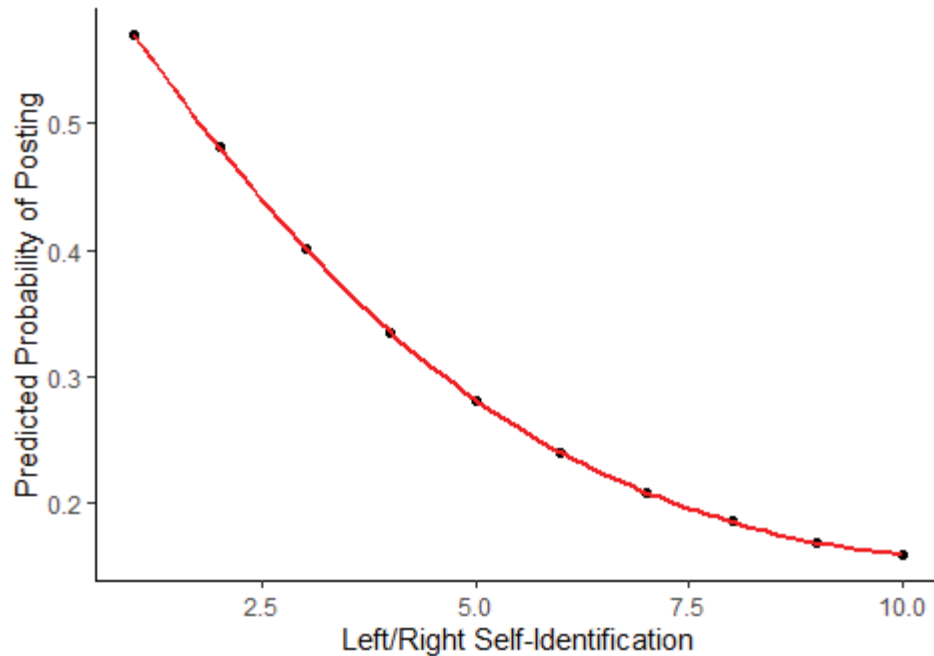
Figure 6. Predicted Probability of Posting Comments Online by Left/Right Self-Identification (ESS 2022)

Figure 6 shows a predicted probability plot. This figure shows the predicted probability that a given individual at a certain level on the left/right scale will post a political comment online, holding every control variable at a constant. The constant for each variable is the mean of continuous variables or the mode of factor variables. This graphs predicts that an individual who is extremely liberal will engage in online political participation the most. Unlike in the ANES, this plot predicts that the probability to engage in online political participation decreases along the left-right scale, and predicts the least participation for the far-right.

Chapter 6.   Discussion

The aim of this paper was to compare the left and the right in their political participation activities. There is a wealth of evidence that stronger political identification with the left or right is positively correlated with offline participation, but this relationship was not clear for online participation. The results of this study from ANES and ESS samples shows that there is a clear relationship with stronger ideological placement and political participation, including online participation. The differences between the far-left and moderates and the far-right and moderates is statistically significant for online activism. There are several interesting observations between the ANES and ESS datasets, as well as amongst the datasets by different variables of political participation.

In the first set of graphs for the ANES dataset, the plots show that the U-shape produced by the far left and right participating more than those in the centre is stronger for some variables than for others. The first graph, for in person protests, is interesting as it does not appear to have this same shape, and it appears instead that only being more liberal is related with attending protests in person, with those on the far left being up to 25% more likely to attend protests than those in the centre. There are a few explanations for why that might be. It could be that in person demonstrations and protests are a method of political participation more used by those on the left or it could be that there is a measurement bias stemming from the fact that those on the right are less likely to claim that they attend protests. It could also be a sign of the times—namely post-Trump and the electoral success of the right –so the Left is protesting more against Trump, etc. In the graphs for signing a petition online or in person, contacting a political official, and attending a political meeting online, the U shape is still apparent, but the far left is more likely to participate in each of these ways than the far right.

In the graphs for attending a political meeting in person, and contributing money to a political party, the U shape is very pronounced, with the far left and far right being more likely to participate in these ways than respondents who identify closer to centre. The U shape is also prominent for the online activism variable, with those on the far left being up to 30% more likely to share or post a comment online than those in the centre, and those on the far right being up to 20% more likely than moderates. In the context of political participation, where increases in participation can lead to increases in other forms

of democratic participation like elections and democratic stability, a difference this large is significant.

The same graphs plotted by sex for the ANES dataset produce similar results and a similar shape. However, there are some interesting differences. Women have higher levels of participation in petitioning online or in person and in posting comments about political issues online, while men are more likely to contact political officials. In the US context, it appears that women are more likely to engage in these more unconventional forms of political participation, including online activism. Conservative men, on the other hand, are more likely to participate in the conventional form of political participation of contacting political officials.

The ESS graphs are somewhat similar to the ANES plots, but there are several key differences and observations that could point to some differences between the US and European contexts. First, the ESS graphs have the common feature of dipping downwards (towards lower levels of participation) at the far ends of the left-right spectrum, especially on the far-left side. There are a few things that could explain this. First, it could be that there are fewer people answering on the far ends of the spectrum, making it less representative. It could also be due to the measurement from ESS because the way it's measured is this 0-10 scale of left to right rather than a 7-point scale of extremely liberal to extremely conservative (as in the ANES). It could also be that those on the far left (and to some extent the far right) feel more disenfranchised and are less likely to work within political systems through intra-institutional avenues such as contributing to parties, working for organizations, wearing a badge, or signing petitions.

Similarly to the ANES, the general shape of the graphs is similar after including sex, however the difference is larger in the ESS dataset, particularly for conventional forms of political participation. Men are more likely contribute to a politician, work in a party, and work for an organization (more conventional forms of political participation) in Europe compared to the US. For many of the other variables, there is an interesting relationship where it appears as though liberal women are more likely or equally as likely to sign a petition, boycott a product, attend a public demonstration, post a comment online, and wear a badge. Conservative women, however, fall below men in terms of level of participation on the far right for each of these variables.

Interestingly, the proportion of overall respondents participating in online political participation is smaller in Europe than in the US context. The proportion of ANES respondents who reported sharing or posting a political comment in the last twelve months was 38.67%, while it was only 17.03% of ESS respondents who reported the same. Sharing political comments online is the most common form of political participation included in this study from the ANES, but only the fourth most common in the ESS data. One reason for this could be that that these two survey datasets were collected two years apart. The ESS dataset is from 2018, while the ANES dataset is from 2020. Therefore, the ANES responses may be swayed by the pandemic, while the ESS survey was taken before the COVID-19 pandemic. This is a significant difference, and everyone's increased use of internet during the pandemic could be a factor in the heightened level of online activism found in the ANES dataset.

The ANES data was also collected during an election year in America when it may be the case that online discourse includes political comments more. Nevertheless, across both surveys online political participation is a way for individuals to engage in democratic deliberations, and there were statistically significant differences in the left and right for who engaged in online activism more.

People who identify as far left or far right are more likely to participate in online political discussions than those who identify as moderate. Controlling for sex, age, education, income, state/country fixed effects, and political interest, this finding is statistically significant. People who identify as on the extremes of the ideological spectrum are more likely to have more extreme positions on policy and politics. They can self-identify where they belong on the political spectrum because they are aware of and concerned about the issues that politicians, media outlets, and activists who share their ideology discuss. Because they place themselves so strongly, they are more likely to share their opinions if they are stronger and they are more sure of their opinions on certain political matters. Someone who identifies as slightly liberal, compared to someone who is extremely liberal, will perhaps have more nuanced takes on political matters and maybe would be less likely to share an opinion online. People with more political knowledge and opinions are more likely to participate in online political discourse and activism, as well as other types of political participation. People on the extremes of the political spectrum have more developed political ideas and, as a result, engage in more online activity than those who identify as moderate.

In both the ANES and ESS, there was a statistically significant difference between the left and the right. Respondents who self-identified as liberal/left were more likely to post or share political comments online than respondents who self-identified as conservative/right.

Chapter 7.   Conclusion

This study set out to test the relationship between left-right ideology and political participation, specifically online political participation. Online activism is an important and prevalent form of political participation in our democracy. While some have been concerned that online activism is ineffective or calling it "slacktivism" or "clicktivism", a wealth of research has shown that online participation leads to all other forms of political participation. Furthermore, online participation is more than simply a new avenue for political participation. I argue that online activism is more than taking offline interpersonal discussions or activism to a digital platform. The internet is transformative. It enables people to come into contact in ways they would not have before. Take the #MeToo movement for example. Women sharing their stories with sexual harassment and assault was revolutionary—these discussions were not taking place offline in mixed sex groups on such a large scale. The internet organizes and amplifies discussions in a unique way that is a blend of the personal and public. It makes space for particular discussions and voices in a way that gives context to these actions.

Online political participation influences the quality of our democracies, not just because all forms of political participation are related and it can lead to more offline participation or turnout in elections, but also because it is crucial to the success of a democracy that citizens feel they are a part of democratic deliberations. Whether the left or the right is more involved in these discussions online has been contested in the literature. This study shows that both the left and right are involved more than those who self-identify as moderate, and that this difference is statistically significant.

There are a few important differences between the ESS and ANES data sources. First, the ANES is done in the US only, while the ESS includes data from 29 countries aggregated together. There are several important cultural differences across European countries. By aggregating the data, the overall trends seen likely vary significantly across countries, and this study may be missing these differences. Also, the ESS and ANES data sets were collected in different time periods, the ESS in 2018, before the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ANES in 2020 at the start of the pandemic. This difference could affect the overall levels of time spent online and therefore the amount of online political participation as well. Also, the ANES study is collected at the time of the American election,

when there may be more discussion online as a result of the politically contentious time period, while the ESS includes many countries who all have elections at different times. All of these factors may contribute to why the data shows that the ANES respondents overall are more likely to participate online than the ESS respondents. However, even with different levels of overall participation online, both the ESS and ANES show that the far left and right participate more than the centre and that the left participates more than the right.

The ANES and ESS datasets do not delve into the types of online activism in their questionnaires and thus the question of if the left and right participate online differently is not answered in the data. Still the difference between participation in online activism among those on the far left and far right and those in the centre is robust. On the variable for online activism, the difference is as much as 30% more for those on the left and 20% more for those on the right in the ANES data. In the ESS data, the difference is as much as 12.5% more for those on the left and 5% more for those on the right. This difference is statistically significant and robust. In comparison to percentage differences between the ideological spectrum and other forms of participation, such as voting in elections, this difference is significant. When compared to other forms of political participation, it is evident that there is a relationship between political ideology and political participation, both offline and online.

While both those on the left and the right participate in online activism more than those in the centre for both ANES and ESS, there is a difference between the far left and far right as well. In both datasets, the left participates more than the right. This may be a difference in amount, but it is also possible that this is a difference in kind. As the literature suggests (Freelon, 2020), it could be that those on the far right participate in online activism in a way that is not measured in the ANES or ESS surveys. It is also possible that this difference is a result of the trend in activism more generally of the left being more engaged with social movements than the right (Best & Krueger, 2005). Those with liberal political ideologies are more likely to engage in activism than those on the rights, likely because they are more likely to be advocating for marginalized groups and doing so outside of traditional direct participation methods like voting. So, because liberal individuals participate more in other forms of activism and political participation, the internet only marginally advantages the political voice of liberals.

The ends of the left and right spectrum are more likely to participate in online activism than those in the centre, and the far left participates in online activism more than the far right. Overall, this study demonstrates that individuals who self-identify as father right and left are more likely to participate in online activism than those who self-identify as moderate. Those on the far left slightly more likely to participate in online activism, or at least the online activism measured in the data, than those on the far right. Further research into the types of online political participation that the left and right engage in would help to explain this difference more. In conclusion, these results indicate that political participation, and specifically online political participation, is most common among those with strong political ideologies. Further research should also be done on the interesting gender differences seen in the ESS data to see if the differences on the right of the scale are contextual and how they change country to country (in a way that the aggregated data does not show). Online political participation is an important part of the democratic discussion and can lead to more participation in other facets of democracy, including offline participation and voting in elections. Understanding who is motivated to online activism will allow activists, scholars, and political leaders to better motivate more political participation and facilitate democratic discussions online.

References

American National Election Studies. 2021. ANES 2020 Time Series Study Full Release [dataset and documentation]. July 19, 2021 version. www.electionstudies.org

Barkan, S. E. (2004). Explaining public support for the environmental movement: A civic voluntarism model. *Social Science Quarterly*, *85*(4), 913-937.

Best, S. J., & Krueger, B. S. (2005). Analyzing the representativeness of Internet political participation. *Political Behavior*, *27*(2), 183-216.

Bobel, C. (2007). 'I'm not an activist, though I've done a lot of it': doing activism, being activist and the 'perfect standard' in a contemporary movement. *Social movement studies*, *6*(2), 147-159.

Boxell, L., Gentzkow, M., & Shapiro, J. M. (2017). Greater Internet use is not associated with faster growth in political polarization among US demographic groups. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *114*(40), 10612-10617.

ESS Round 9: European Social Survey Round 9 Data (2018). Data file edition 3.1. NSD - Norwegian Centre for Research Data, Norway – Data Archive and distributor of ESS data for ESS ERIC. www.europeansocialsurvey.org

Finkel, S. E., & Opp, K. D. (1991). Party identification and participation in collective political action. *The journal of politics*, *53*(2), 339-371.

Fisher, D. R., Dow, D. M., & Ray, R. (2017). Intersectionality takes it to the streets: Mobilizing across diverse interests for the Women's March. *Science Advances*, *3*(9), eaao1390.

Fisher, D. R., Jasny, L., & Dow, D. M. (2018). Why are we here? Patterns of intersectional motivations across the resistance. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, *23*(4), 451-468.

Freelon, D., Marwick, A., & Kreiss, D. (2020). False equivalencies: Online activism from left to right. *Science*, *369*(6508), 1197-1201.

Gerbaudo, P. (2020). The pandemic crowd. *Journal of International Affairs*, *73*(2), 61-76.

Greijdanus, H., de Matos Fernandes, C. A., Turner-Zwinkels, F., Honari, A., Roos, C. A., Rosenbusch, H., & Postmes, T. (2020). The psychology of online activism and social movements: Relations between online and offline collective action. *Current opinion in psychology*, *35*, 49-54.

Han, H. C. (2020). *Moved to Action*. Stanford University Press.

Hutchison, E. D. (2012). Spirituality, religion, and progressive social movements:
Resources and motivation for social change. *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in
Social Work: Social Thought*, *31*(1-2), 105-127.

Johnson, T. J. & Kaye, B. K. (2003). A boost or bust for democracy? How the web
influenced political attitudes and behaviors in the 1996 and 2000 presidential
elections. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics, 8*(3), 9-34.
https://www.doi.org/10.1177/1081180X03008003002

Klandermans, B., & Oegema, D. (1987). Potentials, networks, motivations, and barriers:
Steps towards participation in social movements. *American sociological review*,
519-531.

Klandermans, B. (2013). Motivation and types of motives (instrumental; identity,
ideological motives). *The Wiley‑Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political
Movements*.

Kopacheva, E. (2021). How the Internet has changed participation: Exploring distinctive
preconditions of online activism. *Communication & Society, 34*(2), 67-85.

Lee, Y. H., & Hsieh, G. (2013, April). Does slacktivism hurt activism? The effects of
moral balancing and consistency in online activism. In Proceedings of the
SIGCHI conference on human factors in computing systems (pp. 811-820).

Lilleker, D. G., & Koc-Michalska, K. (2017). What drives political participation?
Motivations and mobilization in a digital age. *Political Communication*, *34*(1), 21-
43.

Morozov, E. (2011). *The net delusion: How not to liberate the world*. London, UK:
Penguin UK.

Noland, A. (2017). Social media activists: Analyzing the relationship between online
activism and offline attitudes and behaviors. *The Journal of Social Media in
Society*, *6*(2), 26-55.

Norris, P. (2002). *Democratic phoenix: Reinventing political activism*. Cambridge
University Press.

Oegema, D., & Klandermans, B. (1994). Why social movement sympathizers don't
participate: Erosion and nonconversion of support. *American Sociological
Review*, 703-722.

Polat, R. K. (2005). The Internet and political participation: Exploring the explanatory
links. *European journal of communication*, *20*(4), 435-459.

Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. NY: Simon & Schuster.

Schlozman, K. L., Burns, N., Verba, S., & Donahue, J. (1995). Gender and Citizen Participation: Is There a Different Voice? *American Journal of Political Science*, *39*(2), 267–293. https://doi.org/10.2307/2111613

Shah, D., Schmierbach, M., Hawkins, J., Espino, R., & Donavan, J. (2002). Nonrecursive models of Internet use and community engagement: Questioning whether time spent online erodes social capital. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *79*(4), 964-987.

Sutton, J., & Pollock, S. (2000). Online activism for women's rights. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, *3*(5), 699-706.

Swank, E., & Fahs, B. (2013). An intersectional analysis of gender and race for sexual minorities who engage in gay and lesbian rights activism. *Sex Roles*, *68*(11), 660-674.

Van Deth, J. W. (2014). A conceptual map of political participation. *Acta politica*, *49*(3), 349-367.

Verba, S., Schlozman, K. L., & Brady, H. E. (1995). *Voice and equality: Civic voluntarism in American politics*. Harvard University Press.

Weldon, L. (2011). *When protest makes policy: How social movements represent disadvantaged groups*. University of Michigan Press.

Appendix A. Full Regression of Posting Comments Online (ANES) Table

Table 3: Full Regression Analysis of Posting Comments Online (ANES)

	Dependent variable:			
	Posts Comments Online			
	OLS			logistic
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Liberal/Conservative	−0.036***	−4.673***	−3.637***	−16.175***
Self Identification	(0.004)	(0.478)	(0.495)	(2.287)
Liberal/Conservative		7.123***	4.878***	21.903***
Self Identification		(0.478)	(0.485)	(2.255)
(Squared)				
Age			−0.003***	−0.012***
			(0.0003)	(0.002)
Sex (Ref: Male):				
Female			0.072***	0.344***
			(0.012)	(0.055)
Education (Ref: Some High School):				
High School			−0.004	0.001
			(0.032)	(0.161)
Some College			0.076**	0.392**
			(0.031)	(0.156)
Associate Degree			0.055	0.289*
-Occupational			(0.036)	(0.175)
Associate Degree			0.045	0.247
-Academic			(0.037)	(0.181)
Bachelors Degree			0.027	0.161
			(0.031)	(0.156)
Masters Degree			0.024	0.149
			(0.033)	(0.164)
Professional Degree			0.021	0.139
			(0.039)	(0.190)
Income (Ref: Less Than $9,999):				
$10,000 - $14,999			0.092**	0.472***
			(0.036)	(0.173)
$15,000 - $19,999			0.078*	0.390**
			(0.040)	(0.193)
$20,000 - $24,999			0.063*	0.323**
			(0.033)	(0.161)
$25,000 - $29,999			0.098***	0.490***
			(0.037)	(0.175)

$30,000 - $34,999	0.068**	0.356**
	(0.034)	(0.161)
$35,000 - $39,999	0.112***	0.558***
	(0.037)	(0.175)
$40,000 - $44,999	0.108***	0.530***
	(0.034)	(0.162)
$45,000 - $49,999	0.060	0.299*
	(0.038)	(0.181)
$50,000 - $59,999	0.074**	0.378***
	(0.029)	(0.139)
$60,000 - $64,999	0.060*	0.306*
	(0.034)	(0.161)
$65,000 - $69,999	0.100**	0.496***
	(0.041)	(0.192)
$70,000 - $74,999	0.102***	0.500***
	(0.036)	(0.170)
$75,000 - $79,999	0.130***	0.631***
	(0.038)	(0.179)
$80,000 - $89,999	0.075**	0.381**
	(0.031)	(0.149)
$90,000 - $99,999	0.138***	0.666***
	(0.034)	(0.160)
$100,000 - $109,999	0.068**	0.341**
	(0.030)	(0.143)
$110,000 - $124,999	0.072**	0.360**
	(0.033)	(0.158)
$125,000 - $149,999	0.092***	0.451***
	(0.033)	(0.156)
$150,000 - $174,999	0.062**	0.319**
	(0.032)	(0.151)
$175,000 - $249,999	0.048	0.251
	(0.032)	(0.152)
$250,000+	−0.015	−0.047
	(0.031)	(0.152)
Race (Ref: White):		
Black, non Hispanic	−0.075***	−0.363***
	(0.021)	(0.104)
Hispanic	−0.044**	−0.207**
	(0.022)	(0.102)
Asian or Native Hawaiian	−0.058*	−0.279*
/Other Pacific Islander,	(0.032)	(0.156)
non-Hispanic Alone		
Native American/	−0.019	−0.081
Alaska Native or	(0.041)	(0.193)
Other Race, non-Hispanic Alone		

Multiple Races, non-Hispanic			−0.005 (0.032)	−0.021 (0.148)
Political Interest (Ref: Very Interested):				
Somewhat Interested			−0.130*** (0.014)	−0.559*** (0.065)
Not Very Interested			−0.277*** (0.018)	−1.277*** (0.088)
Not at All Interested			−0.353*** (0.025)	−1.771*** (0.138)
State Fixed Effects			X	X
Observations	6,710	6,710	6,710	6,710
Adjusted R^2	0.013	0.045	0.103	

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

46

Appendix B. Full Regression of Posting Comments Online (ESS) Table

Table 4: Full Regression of Posting Comments Online (ESS)

	Dependent variable:			
	Posts Comments Online			
	OLS			logistic
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Liberal/Conservative	−0.011***	−4.633***	−3.882***	−24.397***
Self Identification	(0.001)	(0.381)	(0.370)	(2.772)
Liberal/Conservative		3.171***	2.961***	23.563***
Self Identification		(0.381)	(0.372)	(2.772)
(Squared)				
Years of Education			0.010***	0.062***
			(0.001)	(0.004)
Age			−0.001***	−0.021***
			(0.00004)	(0.001)
Sex (Ref: Male):				
Female			0.010**	0.077**
			(0.004)	(0.031)
Household Income (Ref: First Decile):				
Second Decile			0.002	0.100
			(0.009)	(0.079)
Third Decile			−0.002	0.054
			(0.009)	(0.078)
Fourth Decile			0.004	0.134*
			(0.009)	(0.077)
Fifth Decile			0.024***	0.263***
			(0.009)	(0.075)
Sixth Decile			0.024***	0.250***
			(0.009)	(0.075)
Seventh Decile			0.046***	0.362***
			(0.009)	(0.074)
Eighth Decile			0.031***	0.248***
			(0.009)	(0.075)
Ninth Decile			0.050***	0.356***
			(0.010)	(0.076)
Tenth Decile			0.042***	0.296***
			(0.010)	(0.076)
Political Interest (Ref: Very Interested):				
Quite Interested			−0.129***	−0.727***
			(0.006)	(0.041)
Hardly Interested			−0.197***	−1.345***
			(0.007)	(0.047)
Not at All Interested			−0.232***	−1.909***
			(0.008)	(0.069)
State Fixed Effects			X	X
Observations	34,766	34,766	34,766	34,766
Adjusted R^2	0.004	0.006	0.100	

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Appendix C.

Survey Questions

Questions from ANES survey

Online political participation: *During the past 12 months, have you posted a message or comment online about a political issue or campaign, or have you not done this in the past 12 months?*

Protest in Person: *During the past 12 months, have you joined in a protest march, rally, or demonstration, or have you not done this in the past 12 months?*

Attend Meetings in Person: *Did you go to any political meetings, rallies, speeches, dinners, or things like that in support of a particular candidate?*

Attend Meetings Online: *Did you participate in any online political meetings, rallies, speeches, fundraisers, or things like that in support of a particular candidate?*

Contribute Money to a Party: *Did you give money to a political party during this election year?*

Sign Petition: *During the past 12 months, have you signed a petition on the Internet or on paper about a political or social issue, or have you not done this in the past 12 months?*

Contact Political Official: *In the past twelve months, have you contacted a federal elected official, such as a member of Congress or the President, or someone on the staff of such an official?*

Self-Placement on 7-point Liberal/Conservative Scale: *Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?*

If R had to choose: *If you had to choose, would you consider yourself a liberal or a conservative?*

Political Interest: *How interested would you say you are in politics? Are you very interested, somewhat interested, not very interested, or not at all interested?*

Sex: *What is your sex?*

Education: *What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?*

Summary Age

Summary Total Family Income

Summary Self-Identified Race/Ethnicity

Questions from ESS Survey

Online Political Participation: *There are different ways of trying to improve things in [country] or help prevent things from going wrong. During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following? Have you... posted or shared anything about politics online, for example on blogs, via email or on social media such as Facebook or Twitter?*

Contact Political: *There are different ways of trying to improve things in [country] or help prevent things from going wrong. During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following?*
Have you... contacted a politician, government or local government official?

Work for a Party: *There are different ways of trying to improve things in [country] or help prevent things from going wrong. During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following?*
Have you... worked in a political party or action group?

Work for an Organization: *There are different ways of trying to improve things in [country] or help prevent things from going wrong. During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following?*
Have you... worked in another organisation or association?

Wear a Badge: *There are different ways of trying to improve things in [country] or help prevent things from going wrong. During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following?*
Have you... worn or displayed a campaign badge/sticker?

Sign Petition: *There are different ways of trying to improve things in [country] or help prevent things from going wrong. During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following?*
Have you... signed a petition?

Public Demonstration: *There are different ways of trying to improve things in [country] or help prevent things from going wrong. During the last 12 months, have you done any of the   following?*
Have you... taken part in a lawful public demonstration?

Boycott Product: *There are different ways of trying to improve things in [country] or help prevent things from going wrong. During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following?*
Have you... boycotted certain products?

Left/Right Self-Placement: *In politics people sometimes talk of "left" and "right". Using this card, where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right?*

Political Interest: *How interested would you say you are in politics? Are you very interested, quite interested, hardly interested, or not at all interested?*

Income: *Using this card, please tell me which letter describes your household's total income, after tax and compulsory deductions, from all sources? If you don't know the exact figure, please give an estimate. Use the part of the card that you know best: weekly, monthly or annual income.*

Education: *About how many years of education have you completed, whether full-time or part-time? Please report these in full-time equivalents and include compulsory years of schooling.*

Summary Sex

Summary Age (Calculated with Year Born)

Appendix D.

ESS Countries and Online Political Participation

Table 5. ESS Countries and Online Political Participation		
Country	**Sample Size**	**Proportion of Online Political Participation**
Austria	2257	0.153
Belgium	1688	0.193
Bulgaria	1343	0.051
Switzerland?	1413	0.160
Cyprus	566	0.085
Czech Republic	2165	0.159
Germany	2260	0.200
Denmark	1504	0.274
Estonia	1711	0.119
Spain	1439	0.225
Finland	1683	0.197
France	1830	0.227
Great Britain	1995	0.238
Croatia	1606	0.120
Hungary	1395	0.052
Ireland	1934	0.172
Iceland	808	0.243
Italy	1983	0.172
Lithuania	1247	0.133

Latvia	636	0.090
Montenegro	757	0.099
Netherlands	1548	0.163
Norway	1357	0.308
Poland	1233	0.082
Portugal	951	0.221
Serbia	1272	0.133
Sweden	1489	0.290
Slovenia	1075	0.121
Slovakia	976	0.060