

**Factors Sustaining e-Participation:
A Study of Meetup in the 2004 U.S. Election**

By

**Christine B. Williams
Bentley College
Waltham, Massachusetts**

Abstract

This study investigates the e-participation of Meetup attendees over the course of the 2004 U.S. election and identifies factors related to their continuing or quitting. Its major findings have implications for e-participation. First, e-participants who are initially engaged through online activities will be more apt to continue their participation if they are professionals or college students, reinforce their e-participation through other online political behaviors, and do not experience alienation as a result of external events negatively affecting their cause. Goal attainment can be an incentive to continue participating. In contrast, e-participants are more apt to discontinue a particular online activity if they already were engaged in traditional political behaviors, by switching to offline or possibly alternative online activities and modes. Continued Meetup attendance was associated with stronger personal political commitment and higher political motivation to engage in further participatory activities themselves and recruit others.

Key Words: Meetup, online communities, online social networks, online political organizing, e-campaign, e-participation, e-democracy

The Meetup Phenomenon: Online Communities, Social Networks and the 2004 Election

Meetup.com was founded in 2002 to help “people find others who share their interest or cause and form lasting, influential, local community groups that regularly meet face-to-face” (<http://www.meetup.com/about/>). Meetup events are held throughout the world and encompass a broad variety of categories. Of these, Politics and Activism, Cultures and Communities, Music, Film and Health currently have the most topics. Those interested in attending a Meetup event enroll online for a specific time, date and location, which have been chosen by the group’s organizer, with the assistance of Meetup.com software that determines the presence of a quorum and nearest venue/s. The events for a given topic and group generally recur on a monthly basis, but Meetup rolled out a new platform and structure in summer 2004 that gave the group organizers and attendees more flexibility and control over these logistics.

Meetup’s advanced technology platform and global network of local venues provide a means for creating a type of community that is neither exclusively online nor exclusively offline. It is a hybrid people and technology-based phenomenon, which we have classified as *electronic-to-face* (e2f) community (citation to be added later). As such, it incorporates key strengths of the Internet such as searching, finding and bringing together across time and space (Wellman and Hampton, 1999), and key strengths of “traditional” face-to-face communities, such as commitment, strength, accountability and actionability (Etzioni and Etzioni, 1997 and 1999; Hara and Estrada, 2005).

Virtual communities have been defined as social aggregations that “emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Rheingold, 1993, p. 5; also Kerbel and Bloom, 2005). Scholars have identified, but disagree about, the relative benefits of

online and offline communities (Bimber, 1998; Nip, 2004). For example, the Internet facilitates bonding without being in close proximity either spatially or temporally, across national borders and time zones. It can include and accommodate all types of individuals, in large numbers, who may not have known one another previously. On the other hand, online communities tend to be loosely structured networks with weak identity ties that are difficult to control and have difficulty making decisions (Bennett, 2003).

There are a variety of reasons why online connections may not be as strong as those made face-to-face: individuals can remain anonymous, selectively reveal or contrive personal information and withdraw from the group with relative ease. Offline or face-to-face communities can be more effective with respect to taking action because they better facilitate identifying participants and holding them accountable. Since Meetup is initiated online with interactions offline, it combines some characteristics and advantages of each, which some argue is more effective than a strictly computer-mediated community (Etzioni and Etzioni, 1999; Wellman and Gulia, 1999; Sander, 2005).

Other scholarly debates engage the question of whether Internet based technologies are changing the way that advocacy and activism is practiced, given that they make many aspects of lobbying, campaigning and organizing more effective and efficient (Bennett, 2003; Green and Pearson, 2005; Hick and McNutt, 2002). Bennett suggests that the organizational weakness of online communities may prove to be a core resource for a new politics whose boundaries are much more permeable, thereby changing the political game in favor of resource poor groups. Bimber (1998) sees online communities increasing fragmentation in the political system, but not entirely eroding the influence of political elites, institutions and organized groups as some fear. Nip (2004) concludes her review proposing that a zero sum game is an inappropriate

characterization of the advantages and disadvantages of online and offline communities, an interpretation born out by Wellman, et al, (2001) whose findings show that online interactions supplement face to face communication. This study undertakes to shed further light on these issues through empirical analysis of data on Meetup attendees in the 2004 U.S. election.

The Dean campaign was the first U.S. presidential campaign to extensively use Meetup.com, beginning in December 2002. The Draft Clark movement and several other campaigns soon followed. Hindman (2005) credits Howard Dean with doing something that was smart, brave, and unprecedented in creating a genuinely interactive online campaign. Dean's demonstrable successes on the Web generated the sort of coverage, enthusiasm, and compounded success that candidates usually enjoy only after winning an actual electoral contest. And Dean was not the only beneficiary. John Hlinko, founder and leader of the "Draft Wesley Clark" movement, credits Meetup with allowing growth from one campaign Web site to 100 local chapters in 90 days. Kerry's Meetup numbers similarly increased fourfold from the time of the Iowa contest to the nomination wrap up in mid-March (cite to be added later).

Meetup came to be a signature feature of the Dean campaign. The registrations and attendance as well as geographic spread of his meetings far outpaced those of the other political candidates. For example, John Kerry's peak month, May 2004, drew 15,000, or less than two thirds the number of attendees in Dean's peak month, January 2004 (Sander, 2005). As a result, his campaign captured both the lion's share of press coverage and scholarly attention, earning the designation the first real digital campaign. To illustrate, 1,325 stories in major papers mentioned Dean's Internet effort during the six months preceding the first New Hampshire primary (Hindman, 2005). Was Dean's digital campaign a success because it catapulted him to early and unexpected front runner status, or a failure because he could not translate that momentum into

primary and caucus victories? The Dean campaign was both novelty and anomaly, and as Hindman notes, it has not been easy for scholars to disentangle the role the Internet played in Dean's rise and demise from systemic factors, campaign events, and voters' perceptions of his candidacy.

Understanding e-Participation: Framing the Research Questions

Social networks figure prominently in the scholarly literature explaining civic engagement and political participation. The inspiration for Meetup.com is partly attributed to Robert Putnam's book *Bowling Alone* (2000), whose definition of social capital refers to the collective value of all social networks and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other. He and others (e.g., Green and Pearson, 2005) see social capital as a key component in building and maintaining democracy. Sander (2005) characterizes Meetup as "*alloy social capital*", in which the interweaving of virtual and real strands will be stronger in producing social capital in the same way as alloy metals are stronger than their constituent elements. More than individuals, a community requires self-sustaining, enduring social interaction, which an online medium can facilitate quickly and cheaply through social software such as Meetup.com. According to Green and Pearson, the strength of the tie can determine the level of commitment and support for maintaining the tie. Because the Internet can provide new opportunities for communicating latent ties initiated online can be develop into weak and then strong ties (Haythornthwaite, 2002). Hara and Estrada (2005) note that while the Internet lowers participation barriers, the power of the technology depends on its ability to mobilize resources, activities and participants.

Rational choice theories of participation in the vein of Riker and Ordeshook (1962), Mancur Olson's *Logic of Collective Action* (1971) and Wilson (1973)¹ posit that incentives are necessary to stimulate a rational individual in a latent group to act in a group-oriented way, and the benefits derived from their participation must outweigh the costs.² Hara and Estrada (2005) identify some of the benefits (resources in their terminology) that online communities can provide (or have to leverage): knowledge, sociability, personal and group identity support. Case studies of online social networks offer some preliminary confirmatory evidence. Bennett (2003) finds that communities which survived beyond their initial planned action did so because they provided other useful services and created successor organizations. Kerbel and Bloom (2005) attribute the survival of Dean's online community to an astute decision by the campaign to become an advocacy group for progressive candidates for local office.

The literature on political participation examines the question from the other direction, the behavior of individuals, focusing primarily on characteristics related to their resources (time, money and skills) and civic orientations (attitudes they hold toward themselves or the political system) that create a predisposition to political activity (Leighley, 1995). Most of these studies are grounded in the standard socioeconomic status model, particularly the classic study by Verba and Nie (1972), following in the tradition of rational choice theory. A competing, mobilization model emphasizes contextual factors, or the environment in which the individual is situated (e.g., institutional structures and voluntary associations that might shape participatory opportunities) or attributes associated with particular types of participation- campaigning or lobbying vs. voting).

¹ Treatments by Moe (1980; Knoke (1986; 1990) extend or critique rational choice theories of political participation and voluntary associations.

² In Riker and Ordeshook's calculus of voting $V = pB - C + D$ where p = probability of vote "mattering"; B = "utility" benefit of voting; C = costs of voting (time/effort spent); and D = citizen duty, goodwill feeling.

These are viewed as mediating the relationship between resources and civic orientations (i.e., socioeconomic status) and political participation (Leighley, 1995). A misspecification problem can arise since participation is known to enhance resources and civic orientations (e.g., efficacy), but rational choice treatments assume and model these as causal variables. That incomplete view is partly a consequence of having few studies that examine individuals' participatory behaviors over time to confirm that they endure, or that undertake to explain why high-status individuals quit participating (Leighley, 1995). The survey protocol and sample that comprise our Meetup study afford an opportunity to address this set of questions empirically.

Our investigation into who continued and who quit attending Meetups over the course of the 2004 election pursues three lines of inquiry. We begin with the standard socioeconomic model and examine the impact of age, gender, race or ethnicity, marital status, income bracket and occupation. Studies on the digital divide differentiate Internet users (or the online community) from both the general population and traditional attentive publics or political influentials (Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet, 2004). As we have seen, continuing to participate is likely causally distinct from the initial decision or act of participating, and the distribution of our sample on these measures is skewed toward the high status end. This line of inquiry and comparison with other studies of political participation will help flesh out the nature of these differences.

Next, we examine contextual factors, particularly those associated with the mobilization model: timing of (or path to) of involvement, Meetup meeting attributes, external political events as well as personal participatory histories and partisan attachments. Finally, we consider the recursive effects of Meetup participation on attendees' perceptions and behaviors. Of course, we can not presume or determine causality from our recall data because of respondents' faulty

memories or rationalization after the fact. However, this is a problem applicable to both groups, and we can at least identify systematic differences between the two. In addition, many of the questions are forward looking, that is, we asked respondents to estimate the likelihood of their engaging in particular behaviors in the future. The next sections describe our methodology and sample, followed by a description of the operational measures.

Methodology and Sample

This national survey was conducted between October 15 and November 7, 2004. (The U.S. presidential election was held November 2, 2004.) An electronic link to the survey was sent out via email invitation to all attendees who had completed one of six previous Meetup surveys between Fall 2003 and summer 2004 and had indicated they were willing to participate further, providing their email address for that purpose. (See <http://www.meetupsurvey.com> for further details.) The survey was prepared and responses collected using Perseus Survey Solutions XP (5.0) software. The survey included 40 substantive questions and four identifiers for respondent number, topic, location, and month of attendance. Of the 40 substantive questions, 21 asked respondents about their Meetup experiences, 13 asked about their political activities and preferences, and six asked about demographic characteristics. Of the 21 Meetup questions, five were open ended.

This sample is demographically similar to the subset of 119 respondents identified as Meetup attendees in a survey of Nielsen/NetRatings prepared for the Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet (IPDI). They surveyed 1,392 people online who accessed political and news Web sites from November 26 to December 31, 2003. Our sample has more attendees who are 65 years or older and fewer who are 18 to 24 years of age. It also differs from the IPDI sample in having a higher proportion of female attendees, and a lower proportion of single,

unmarried individuals. This sample has more attendees in the \$25,000 to \$40,000 income bracket, and fewer in the over \$150,000 income bracket. The two distributions are similar enough to conclude that this sample is representative of the Meetup attendee population, given the assumed quality of the one drawn by Nielson/Net ratings.

[Table 1 about here]

The Meetup venues of these attendees encompassed 41 states (there were none from Arkansas, Hawaii, Indiana, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota or Utah), plus the District of Columbia and two Meetup venues abroad. The sample contains 243 valid responses from 91 Howard Dean Meetup attendees, 38 John Kerry attendees, 12 Wesley Clark attendees, 5 Dennis Kucinich attendees, 2 John Edwards attendees, 1 George Bush attendee, and 12 non-presidential candidates. Another 68 had attended Meetups for Democracy for America, the Democratic party or local party organizations; 8 had attended issue topics and 3 did not indicate what Meetup they attended.

This survey sampled from Meetup attendees of all the presidential candidates, political parties and issue groups. Because these topics did not enroll participants equally, comparing their distribution with that reported on the Meetup.com website provides another indication of the degree to which this sample is representative of the population of political Meetup topic attendees. When Howard Dean dropped out of the presidential race in February 2004, his political organization and Meetup topics were reconstituted under the name Democracy for America. Thus in October 2004 when this sample was obtained, Meetups for Howard Dean no longer existed. It is therefore necessary to compare this sample distribution with the Meetup.com population distribution both in October and back in February when Dean was still a candidate and his Meetups were being held.

Dean's Meetup attendees dwarfed all other political topics with 188,600 registrants in February 2004. That represented 55.8% of the total population of his plus those of John Kerry, Wesley Clark, Dennis Kucinich, John Edwards and George Bush. In our sample, these respondents are 61.1% of that total. Our October sample has twice as many Kerry attendees and half as many Clark attendees than the Meetup.com population in February. That is to be expected since Kerry was the nominee apparent in March and Clark had dropped out earlier in February. Next we look at the distribution of attendees in the October Meetup topics population, eliminating Dean and replacing his topics with those of Democracy for America and the Democratic party, which largely took over his members. Our sample has half as many DFA attendees and more Democrats, but adding these two groups together in our sample and in the Meetup population, the proportions are closer. Wesley Clark Meetup attendees responded to our survey despite their candidate's early withdrawal from the race. Together these two sets of comparisons suggest that our sample is a reasonable approximation of the actual population of attendees as recorded in Meetup.com registrations for February and October of 2004.

[Table 2 about here]

Measures Related to Change in Meetup Attendance

The variable of interest in this study is the respondent's Meetup attendance history over the course of the 2004 presidential election campaign. The survey asked whether they continued attending the same Meetup topic throughout (23.5%), continued with the same topic and added one or more others (28.6%), continued but switched topics (14.1%), or quit attending (33.8%). For purposes of analysis, those who continued were combined into one group (N=155) that could be compared with those who quit (N=79).

This study seeks to understand the differences in the Meetup perceptions and behaviors of those who continued and those who quit attending and relate these to predictors of political participation. The survey uses three and five category scales to measure respondents' attitudinal and behavioral response to Meetup, rating the stimulus item high value, medium value or low value; strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree; or very likely, somewhat likely, undecided how likely/unlikely, somewhat unlikely, very unlikely. The predictors of political participation include the demographic characteristics age, gender, occupation, marital status, income and racial/ethnic heritage. Correlates of political participation include the traditional forms of voting frequency, donating to political candidates or causes, and volunteering. In addition, the survey asks about forms of e-participation: frequency of Internet use, number of political websites visited, and online donations. From these responses we created two indices, Traditional Activism and e-Activism to determine their relationship to Meetup attendance records.

In addition to fixed choice questions about the respondents' perceptions of, and responses to, the Meetup experience, several open ended questions probed the reasons behind those beliefs and behaviors. This study focuses on the probe that asked why the respondent continued attending (the same, different or additional) Meetup or quit attending. There were 36 respondents who did not supply any reason in response to the question; 52 supplied two reasons and 3 supplied three reasons. Each additional reason was coded separately and reasons were coded in the order the respondent presented them. This analysis confines itself to the first reason offered because within the continuer and quitter groups the number citing the same second reason ranged between 0 and 5, too few for comparative analysis.

For purposes of analysis, the reasons supplied by respondents were coded into ten categories. It is important to note that the reason codes do not differentiate positive from negative comments so that they can be applied equally to continuers and quitters. For example, a respondent may have indicated that the reason for continuing or quitting had to do with how their Meetup/s were organized or how well they achieved their goals or completed tasks. Those who continued tended to frame that in a positive way while those who quit tended to frame it in terms of a complaint (about meetings being disorganized or not accomplishing anything). Similarly, those who commented on either the leadership or participants did so both in positive, approving and negative, critical lights. Some who specified a candidate reason mentioned that the person (usually named) who they supported dropped out and they did not support or approve of the others (or of the presumed nominee specifically) and became alienated. In contrast, other respondents said that they specifically wanted to support and aid a different named candidate or the presumed nominee as the motivator for their attendance. Finally, with respect to the reason for changing the Meetup group or topic, examples include comments such as their group fell apart, they joined other (local candidate or political activism) groups independent of Meetup, they switched to DFA, Democrats, Kerry or some other topic in response to campaign events (e.g., determination of the Democratic nominee). The ten coded reasons are: candidate, personal (such as time commitment or date), location of Meetup, group or topic change, Meetup leadership, Meetup participants, organization of meetings, accomplishments of meetings, external political considerations, or other. (See Appendix 1.)

Demographic and Political Predictors of Meetup Attendance

Studies have shown that political participation is related to demographic attributes associated with socioeconomic status, age and gender (Leighley, 1995). So too is Internet use,

but in different directions (Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet, 2004). This study affords the opportunity to determine whether Meetup attendance, as a form of electronic e-participation, is affected and in what way. Dividing the sample into two groups, those who continued and those who quit, allows comparison on age, gender, race or ethnicity, marital status, income bracket and occupation. Difference of means or proportions t-tests or Chi square tests were performed on each variable, resulting in only two significant relationships: between attendance and race/ethnicity and between attendance and occupation group. There is no significant difference between the continuers and quitters on age, gender, marital status or income bracket.

There is a significant difference between whites and non-whites with respect to Meetup attendance behavior: non-whites had a higher rate of continuing and lower rate of quitting than whites (see Table 3). However, there are very few non-whites in the sample (28 or 12.2% of the 230 respondents who answered the question), so the finding should be viewed with some caution. It does replicate voting turnout studies that show that after controlling for income, African Americans vote in higher percentages than do white Americans. While there is no statistically significant difference between whites and non-whites with respect to income bracket, this sample as a whole has higher income than the U.S. adult voting population generally, in effect, controlling for income. This finding also seems to corroborate Fuchs, et al. (2000) whose study showed that institutional political capital was more important for blacks and Latinos than whites, especially with respect to local political participation.

[Table 3 about here]

Occupational category also differentiates those who continued from those who quit attending Meetups. The variable was ordered consistent with expectations about campaign

participation levels: those not currently employed are coded 1, trades and services are coded 2, students are coded 3, and professionals are coded 4.³ As Table 3 shows, the relationship is significant, but weak: service providers or tradespersons and those not currently employed were more likely to quit and less likely to continue attending Meetup than were students and professionals. The finding is consistent with other studies that show a relationship between occupational status and political participation. More specifically to the point of e-participation is the Political Influentials study by the Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet (Graf and Darr, 2004). Although this survey did not ask about occupation, it did include a question on education level, which is highly correlated with occupation. Their findings show that Online Political Citizens are more likely to have some college education (35%) and even more likely to hold a four year college degree (59%) than the U.S. adult population.

The Dean campaign advanced the argument that its online, grassroots campaign brought new people into the political process and energized them. The claim has been at least partially validated (Sander, 2005; citation to be added later) and should be examined with respect to how Meetup participation evolved over the course of the campaign. Did the route by which people became involved in the campaign make a difference to their continuation or cessation of Meetup attendance? If Dean is correct, the group that became involved because of Meetup, should be more energized and hence consistent in its attendance record than those that were already involved and subsequently attended one or more Meetups. The latter might be more inclined to drop out and continue their political activities independently of Meetup. Table 4 shows the

³ The 74 respondents classified as trades and services include clerical and office service workers (15), health, safety, education or government service workers (52), skilled tradespersons and artisans (5), agricultural (1), domestic, food or institutional service workers (1); professionals include business, scientific, professional fields (79). There are 11 students and 68 not currently employed. Retaining only the 52 health, safety, education and government service employees and eliminating the 22 clerical and other trades in the service category produces the same cross-tabulation results.

cross-tabulation of Already involved vs. Meetup got me involved with Meetup continuers vs. quitters. The relationship is statistically significant, but the strength of the association only weakly confirms the Dean campaign's claim.

[Table 4 about here]

To determine whether it is the means and timing of recruitment that matters here we test two alternative explanations. First, we examine those who identify themselves as progressives politically, and those who said they were strong Democrats or Green party identifiers (the most liberal and partisan groups) relative to those who do not identify with those groups and compare their Meetup attendance records (continuing vs. quitting). Neither the strong Democrats, Greens, nor progressives show higher propensities for quitting or continuing than other partisan identifiers. The differences are not significant (data not shown).

Second, we examine whether the propensity to quit or continue depends on which Meetup topic group the individual attended. Table 5 shows the percentage that quit for each candidate, party and issue group. Those having fewer than one third quitting were the Meetups for Kerry, Bush, non-presidential candidates, Democracy for America, the Democratic party, local parties, and issue groups. Dean Meetups lost over forty per cent of their attendees; so did the other losing candidates Edwards, Clark, and Kucinich, but there are so few of their attendees represented in this sample that those percentages should not be considered a reliable estimate of the quitters. These data suggest that campaign events, in this case losing, affect whether members of a Meetup topic group continue or quit. A cross-tabulation of those attending Meetup topic groups of candidates who lost their bid for the nomination vs. all other groups with Meetup continuers vs. quitters produced a positive correlation (Kendall's Tau-b = +.28), significant at the .001 level (data not shown). We conclude that events that have a negative impact on a Meetup

group's focus and goal attainment as well as the means and timing of individuals' recruitment to the group both affect whether their participation is sustained.

[Table 5 about here]

If events related to the Meetup group's topical focus and goal attainment affect attendance records, other external political factors might have some impact as well. Our survey can offer some insights into this possibility through an examination of attendees' responses to why they continued or quit attending Meetup over the course of the campaign. Of the ten categories of open ended response codes, three reasons were provided by more than ten per cent of respondents who answered the question: group or topic change, candidate, and personal, which together account for just over half the reasons supplied. The percentage offering the remaining coded reasons ranges from three to seven per cent (see Table 6).

Our interest lies in determining whether those who continued attending offered different explanations for their behavior than those who quit attending. If so, what is the nature of those differences? As discussed above, we are concerned with the stimulus object attached to each reason, not whether the respondent expressed it in a positive and favorable or negative and critical way. Since this coding method does not confound affect with the reason given, we avoid associating specific reasons with continuers and others with quitters. It affords a more robust means of comparing those who exhibit the two kinds of attendance behavior and testing for significant differences in their propensity to supply some categories of reasons over others.

Table 6 reports the percentages of quitters and continuers who supplied each category of reason for their attendance behavior. The largest significant differences (between 19 and 27%) occur on group or topic change, candidate and personal, followed by the smaller difference (11%) on group accomplishments, with the rest falling between 1.6 and 5.9%. Nearly 60% of

those who quit attending Meetup cited candidate or personal reasons for doing so, whereas nearly half of those who continued cited group/topic change or accomplishments as the motivating factor. Disappointment and/or alienation following Dean's withdrawal or Kerry's nomination are recurring themes among quitters, although some merely stated that their candidate dropped out without specifying the name. Switching groups to help the nominee or other (local) candidates to win election, or to help the Democratic party or the grassroots movement (through DFA) more generally is the predominant explanation offered by continuers. References to their Meetup's accomplishments also tend to distinguish them from the quitters, but the difference is not nearly as large.

[Table 6 about here]

These findings suggest that the motivations underlying the decision to continue or quit reflect a fundamental difference in outlook. Quitters are responding to negatives, namely unfavorable circumstances related to their personal situation or unfavorable external events that diminish the possibility of actualizing their group's purpose. For the 2004 presidential Meetup topics, a contender's primary or caucus losses and withdrawal from the race presented such a negative outcome with finality. Those who continued participating focused on positives, finding additional or alternative vehicles for directing their energies and engaging their participation. They also referred to accomplishments of their Meetup group.

The motivators that underlie the participatory behaviors of these two groups appear to be mirror images of each other. Haythornthwaite (2002) offers a possible explanation. Under conditions of change, online communities are more susceptible to dissolution than strong-tie networks. She attributes this to the dependence of new media on weak ties rather than robust ones that have connections via multiple relations and multiple media. The latter is apropos of

our Meetup continuers, by virtue of their past history (prior and usually traditional political activism) and subsequent adaptive response (joining new group/s). The take away lesson for organizers is grounded in rational choice theories of political participation: reduce costs (e.g., of inconvenient meeting schedules) and increase benefits (i.e., the likelihood of success) by providing vehicles with realizable goals. Offer alternative participatory vehicles when the group's goals and benefits have been achieved or if they become unattainable.

We turn next to an examination of whether respondents' previous or other offline and online political behaviors do, in fact, play a role in determining whether e-participation will be sustained. If Meetup is indeed illustrative of a new and unique electronic (in this case, Internet facilitated) mode of participation, we expect that the influence of these prior and other behaviors will differ depending upon whether they are offline (i.e., traditional) or online (i.e., e-participation) in nature. To assess these research questions, we created two indices of prior and other political behaviors, Traditional Activism and e-Activism. The traditional measure includes four items: voting frequency (coded 0 for never, 1 if respondents answered rarely, some elections, years and offices or majority of elections, years and offices; 2 if respondents answered nearly every election, year and office); make campaign contributions to candidates and to groups or causes (coded 0 if no, 1 if either offline or online and 2 if both ways), and volunteered (0 if no, 1 if this is the only election, 2 if for more than one election).⁴ The range of possible index scores is 0 to 8; the average for the sample is 6.1.

The e-Activism index is computed by summing the scores on five items: have made on-line donations to candidates and to groups/issues (coded 0 for no and 1 for yes); have visited a

⁴ Computing the Traditional Activism index with alternative items for contributing to candidates and groups, where 0 is none and 1 is less than \$500 and 2 is more than \$500, does not change the results. The two variants of the index correlate +.70 and neither produces statistically significant differences between the mean scores of quitters and continuers.

candidate's website (coded 0 for no and 1 for no); have visited a political party website, e-discussion group or weblog this election cycle (coded 0 for no, 1 for only one party's site, and 2 for several parties' websites); and have visited political activism websites (0 for no, 1 for between 1 and 4 sites, and 2 for 5 or more sites). The range of possible index scores is 0 to 7; the average for the sample is 5.2.

Difference of means t-tests were carried out to ascertain whether those who quit and those who continued had different offline and online political activism profiles. Table 7 shows an interesting contrast in the way these measures relate to attendance records. While quitters and continuers do not differ significantly on Traditional Activism, they do differ significantly on e-Activism.⁵ The results are consistent with the interpretation that the two indices tap independent forms of political behavior, and specifically that Meetup is part of a broader constellation of e-participation behaviors. Moreover, it suggests that these various forms of electronic participation can be mutually reinforcing, much as Verba and Nie (1972) found that active memberships in traditional voluntary associations increase participation in traditional communal activity, campaign activity and voting.⁶ It is also consistent with Pollock (1982) who demonstrated that this effect is independent of socioeconomic status, and further, that those who are active in such political action or lobbying groups tend to specialize in participatory modes related to the political process. And, they do so without benefit of an attitude set conducive to creating a durable predisposition to participate. Should our finding be replicated by other studies, it would provide empirical evidence that e-participation represents a change in the political process.

⁵ The correlations between the two indices is +.39 and +.38 for the original and alternative variants of Traditional Activism index, respectively.

⁶ Weber, Loumakis and Bergman (2003) found that online activism was positively associated with a variety of political activities, including traditional ones; Tolbert and McNeal (2003) found that online election news consumption was positively associated with voting turnout, particularly in presidential elections. Because their samples, independent and dependent variables differ from those in this study, the results are not directly comparable.

[Table 7 about here]

To understand the combined impact of demographic and political predictors of Meetup attendance a logit regression analysis was conducted. Attendance is coded 0 for quit and 1 for continued. The independent variables entered into the model are the e-Activism index; occupational category (coded 2 for students and professional, 1 for all others); timing (coded 1 for already involved and 2 if Meetup involvement came first); topic attended (coded 0 if attended topic of losing candidate and 1 for all other topics); and reason (coded -1 for candidate or personal reasons, +1 for change in group or topic and 0 for all other reasons). Although the percentage of variance explained and cases correctly explained are both modest (see Table 8), the analysis is a useful method of determining the significance and relative weight of each factor relative to Meetup attendance. The timing of a respondent's political engagement and degree to which s/he is active in other online political behaviors are not significant. The categories of reasons and absence of negative events (e.g., a candidate who lost or withdrew) are the most important factors in sustaining e-participation through Meetup.

[Table 8 about here]

Impact of Attendance on Meetup Perceptions and Behaviors

So far the analysis has considered Meetup attendance from the vantage point of dependent variable. We next investigate whether attendance, as an independent variable, has spill over effects on how participants perceive and respond to their Meetup experience. Those who continue and quit attending would be expected to hold different views of Meetup. This survey asked respondents to assess the value of Meetup personally, and as a vehicle for providing informational, social and action value. Four questions asked whether they strongly agreed to strongly disagreed that Meetup events were useful, they would say positive things

about them, the events made them feel part of whatever the topic's focus was, and whether their support for the topic's focus (candidate, group or issue) was much stronger to much weaker as a result of attending Meetup. Higher mean scores indicate higher agreement. Table 9 reports these results. All of the difference of means tests are significant. Using the same 5 category scale of strongly agree to strongly disagree, a set of six questions asked respondents whether as a result of attending Meetup they would encourage others to learn more, work for, or vote in accordance with its topic, and whether they themselves would work for, contribute money to, or vote in accordance with its topic. Again, Table 9 (part 1, section 2) shows that all of these mean differences are significant and in the expected direction: continuers score higher than quitters.

[Table 9 about here]

The degree to which Meetup is perceived to be a valuable informational, social, and action tool is different than asking about its impact on the respondent. Respondents were asked to assign a rank of low, medium or high to items measuring each of these three value domains. Informational value encompassed items specific to issues, candidates, political strategies, supporters and events or activities. Interpersonal benefits that had social value included meeting others with similar interests, feeling part of the group, the Meetup experience, exchanging ideas, and working with others for common goals. The items rated for political action value were mobilizing the uninvolved, empowering me to get politically involved, motivating me to participate in activities generated by the Meetup, organizing and coordinating participation of the group. The second part of Table 9 shows the results of the difference of mean rankings comparing those who continued and those who quit attending Meetup by value domain and item. None of these are significant. The rankings on all items skew in the favorable direction, between medium (2) and high (3).

We conclude that participants differentiate between their personal experience and the efficacy of the participation vehicle. This does not necessarily mean that our respondents are being more objective in their value assessments of the latter. It is also possible that those engaged in various modes of e-participation, including Meetup, are enthusiastic about the use of technology generally, and for purposes of political organizing specifically. In our sample, 80% report using the Internet several times a day and 90% or more report having visited a political candidate, party and/or issue website. That is at least three times greater than the proportion of Online Political Citizens reporting such visits in the survey conducted by the Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet (Graf and Darr, 2004).

The Future of e-Participation: Implications for Research and Politics

The lines of inquiry developed and investigated in this study are derived from rational choice theory's standard socioeconomic model, contextual factors related to the mobilization model and their reciprocal effects on perceptions and future behaviors. These respondents' Meetup attendance behavior is most similar to the difference other studies find between groups that evidence high and low participation rates in voluntary associations and political campaigns: members draw heavily from professional occupations and college students. Both newcomers who became involved through Meetup and e-Activists were more likely to continue attending, but traditional predictors such as strong or more liberal partisanship did not discriminate among continuers and quitters. On the other hand, negative external events affecting respondents' personal circumstances or the prospects for achieving goals related to their Meetup topic were associated with a lower likelihood of continuing. Meetup attendance is not only a response to these contextual factors, it seems also to have feedback effects on civic orientations and

behaviors: those who continued evidenced stronger personal political commitment and higher political motivation to engage in further participatory activities and to proselytize others.

These findings suggest several avenues that future studies of e-participation might pursue. First, they can draw upon, test, and extend the theoretical and empirical findings from earlier studies of the logic of collective action and membership in voluntary associations. The online community is more than a different demographic (that over-represents and reinforces traditional political elites so long as the digital divide persists). The Internet facilitates a different route to political engagement and produces activists who specialize in this mode, and find reinforcement to continue or expand their e-participation so long as they are not impeded by negative personal circumstances or deflated by unfavorable external events. If traditional influences like partisanship and ideology are not motivators, what other institutional, process or contextual factors do matter? Or, is e-participation simply more tenuous than traditional political participation? Social network theory and findings might help to identify sets of attitudinal and behavioral dispositions that convert the latent and weak ties typical of online communities into strong ones. Do hybrid, e2f communities such as Meetup have advantages over those that are solely online and virtual, and do the latter, over time produce the former and even offline ones? These findings and others (Sander, 2005) offer some preliminary, confirmatory evidence.

Finally, what can be learned about e-participation from these findings that would be useful to organizers and activists? First, they should identify and understand the costs and benefits of e-participation for their recruits and online community members, developing or adjusting what the group does and how it operates to decrease the former and increase the latter. Meetup.com solicits such feedback to improve its own platform and services and makes some of

that information available to its organizers that they could, but do not necessarily, use.⁷ e-Participation depends not merely on provision of a collective good, but also on personal benefits and low costs. Our Meetup attendees clearly saw themselves participating in a purposive group. Unfavorable external events took a high toll (Dean's loss), but e-participation could be sustained by redirecting or transforming the group (to the Democratic Party, Democracy for America). Candidates and campaigns are ephemeral; parties and interest groups are not. Activists need to understand this difference when using the Internet to mobilize around an action or outcome and creating an online 'movement.' While the strategies and what they produce might be sequenced, they are not interchangeable (Wilson, 1973). Finally, e-participation can create tangible value for campaigns (money, volunteers, word of mouth), quickly and efficiently, across geographic and social boundaries (friend and acquaintance groups, but not so much socioeconomic class), but online organizers will have to weigh the costs of cultivating those loyal participants against their diminished managerial control (King and Walker, 1992; Kerbel, 2005).

⁷ Formerly and tellingly, they were referred to as meeting hosts who did not have continuing responsibilities or longevity. After May 2005 these organizers paid a monthly fee for their topic group, a financial burden that could be passed on to attendees/members, but endowed them with stakeholder status.

Tables

Table 1
Meetup Sample Demographics

Age	This sample (N=243)	IPDI sample (N=119)
18-24 years	3.0%	15.1%
25-34 years	11.6%	15.1%
35-54 years	39.5%	48.7%
55-64 years	24.0%	16.8%
65 and older	21.9%	4.2%

Gender	This sample (N=243)	IPDI sample (N=119)
Male	39.2%	48.7%
Female	60.8%	51.3%

Race	This sample (N=243)	IPDI sample* (N=119)
Black	1.3%	4.3%
White	87.9%	93.9%
Asian/Pacific Islander	0.9%	1.7%
Hispanic/Spanish Am./Chicano	3.5%	
Am. Indian/Native American	0.4%	
mixed	2.2%	
other	3.9%	

*The IPDI sample does not code Hispanic, Oriental/Asian, Am. Indian, mixed, or other.

Marital Status	This sample (N=243)	IPDI sample (N=119)
single	21.5%	34.5%
married	55.4%	53.8%
divorced	14.2%	10.1%
widowed	3.4%	1.7%
partnered*	5.6%	

*The IPDI sample does not code partnered.

Household Income	This sample (N=243)	IPDI sample (N=119)
0 to \$25,000	14.7%	15.1%
\$25 to 40,000	21.3%	12.6%
\$40 to 80,000	35.1%	35.3%
\$80 to 100,000	11.1%	15.1%
\$100 to 150,000	12.4%	13.4%
Over \$150,000	4.9%	8.4%

Table 2
Distribution of Meetup Attendees' Political Topics

Meetup Topic: Presidential candidates	October 2004 subsample (N=149)	This	February Meetup.com population = 338,200
Howard Dean	61.1%		55.8%
John Kerry	25.5%		13.8%
Wesley Clark	8.0%		19.7%
Dennis Kucinich	3.4%		7.0%
John Edwards	1.3%		2.7%
George Bush	0.7%		1.0%

Meetup Topic: candidates, DFA, Democrats	October 2004 subsample (N=112)	This	October Meetup.com population = 404,683
Democracy for America	25.0%		40.9%
John Kerry	33.9%		33.8%
Democratic party	23.2%		15.9%
Dennis Kucinich	4.5%		4.7%
John Edwards	1.8%		2.9%
George Bush	0.9%		1.4%
Wesley Clark	10.7%		0.3%

Table 3
Demographic Differences in Meetup Attendance

Race/ethnicity			white	non-white	Total
			1.00	2.00	
MeetupCont	.00	Count	71	5	76
		% within whiteNW	35.1%	17.9%	33.0%
	1.00	Count	131	23	154
		% within whiteNW	64.9%	82.1%	67.0%
Total		Count	202	28	230
		% within whiteNW	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi Square = .05; Kendall's Tau-b = +.12

Occupational category*			unemployed	trades	student	professional	Total
			1.00	2.00	3.00	4.00	
MeetupCont	.00	Count	29	29	3	17	78
		% within occupation	42.6%	39.2%	27.3%	21.5%	33.6%
	1.00	Count	39	45	8	62	154
		% within occupation	57.4%	60.8%	72.7%	78.5%	66.4%
Total		Count	68	74	11	79	232
		% within occupation	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi Square = .03; Kendall's Tau-c = +.19

*trades= clerical, office services, health, safety, education or government service, skilled trades, artisans, agricultural, domestic, food or institutional services; professional=business, scientific, professional fields.

Table 4
Demographic Differences in Meetup Attendance

Time of Involvement			Already	Meetup 1st	Total
			1.00	2.00	
MeetupCont	.00	Count	43	28	71
		% within When1OR2	37.7%	26.2%	32.1%
	1.00	Count	71	79	150
		% within When1OR2	62.3%	73.8%	67.9%
Total		Count	114	107	221
		% within When1OR2	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Chi Square = .05; Kendall's Tau-b = +.12

Table 5
Percentage Quitting by Meetup Topic

Topic & number of Attendees	% quitting
Howard Dean (91)	44.4
John Edwards (2)	100.0
Wesley Clark (12)	66.7
Dennis Kucinich (5)	40.0
George Bush (1)	0
John Kerry (38)	20.6
Non-presidential candidate (12)	33.3
Democracy for America (28)	10.7
Democratic party (26)	26.9
Local political party (14)	14.3
Issue group (8)	12.5
TOTAL valid responses (237)	

Table 6
Reasons for Quitting vs. Continuing Meetup Attendance

Reason		MeetupCont ¹	
		.00	1.00
Candidate (withdrawal)***	Count	26	17
	%	33.3%	13.2%
Personal (time)***	Count	20	8
	%	25.6%	6.2%
Change in group or topic***	Count	7	47
	%	9.0%	36.4%
Location	Count	7	4
	%	9.0%	3.1%
Meeting leadership	Count	6	8
	%	7.7%	6.2%
Meetup participants	Count	5	11
	%	6.4%	8.5%
Meeting (dis)organization	Count	4	4
	%	5.1%	3.1%
External politics*	Count	2	12
	%	2.6%	9.3%
Accomplishments (or lack of)**	Count	1	16
	%	1.3%	12.4%
Other	Count	0	2
	%	.0%	1.6%
Provided reason	Total #	78	129
		100.0%	100.0%

Note 1: 0= quit; 1= continued (with same, different or additional topics)

* significant p = .05; ** significant p = .01; *** significant p = .001

Table 7
 Traditional and e-Activism: Quitters vs. Continuers

Assessment item	Quitters (N) Continuers (N)		Significance level
	0	1	
Traditional Political Activism index	5.83 (70)	6.17 (151)	.10
e-Activism index	4.86 (70)	5.31 (152)	.03
Totals	(79)	(155)	

Table 8
Logit Analysis of Predictors of Meetup Attendance

Independent Variables	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Occupation: all others vs. students & prof.	.936	.437	4.581	1	.032	2.549
Timing: already vs. Meetup 1st	.321	.403	.634	1	.426	1.379
Topic: losing candidate vs. all others	1.230	.408	9.085	1	.003	3.423
Reason: cand./pers. (-1), all others (0), change/accomp. (+1)			27.302	2	.000	
Reason(1)	3.050	.586	27.114	1	.000	21.118
Reason(2)	1.913	.587	10.640	1	.001	6.775
e-Activism scale	-.114	.143	.635	1	.426	.893
Constant	-3.375	1.005	11.281	1	.001	.034

Cox & Snell R Square = .27; percentage correctly predicted 76.2.

Table 9
Personal Assessments of Meetup: Quitters vs. Continuers

Assessment item		Quitters	Continuers	Significance level
		0	1	
Perceptions & experience	Found Meetup events useful	3.87	4.41	.001
	Will say positive things about	4.08	4.42	.001
	Made to feel part of	3.94	4.50	.001
	Own support increased*	3.74	4.14	.01
Actions**	will encourage others to learn more about	4.17	4.56	.001
	Will encourage others to work for	4.05	4.45	.001
	Will encourage others to vote based on	4.25	4.59	.01
	Will personally work for	4.14	4.53	.01
	Will personally contribute to	3.97	4.31	.01
	Will personally vote based on	4.30	4.60	.01

*5 point scale; other three perceptions are 3 point scale; 1= low

**5 point scale where 1= strongly disagree and 5= strongly agree

Assessment item*		Quitters	Continuers	Significance level
		0	1	
Informational value	On political issues	2.45	2.41	.72
	Candidate's background	2.35	2.28	.47
	Political strategies	2.53	2.54	.89
	Who the supporters are	2.67	2.55	.12
Social value	Meeting others with similar interests	2.84	2.82	.73
	Feeling part of this group or topic	2.61	2.77	.08
	Sharing in the Meetup experience	2.49	2.56	.45
	Exchanging ideas with others	2.65	2.63	.87
	Working with others on common goal	2.72	2.69	.73
Action value	Mobilizing the uninvolved	2.19	2.21	.90
	Empowering me to get involved	2.47	2.56	.36
	Motivating my participation in M. activities	2.44	2.51	.46
	Organizing & coordinating group's actions	2.44	2.54	.31

*3 point scale where 1= low, 2= medium and 3= high value

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Appendix I

Illustrative Examples of Reasons for Continuing or Quitting

Reason category	Reasons given by Continuers	Reasons given by Quitters
Personal	"I wasn't employed full-time when I first started but now find less energy for the meet-ups"	"work schedule" "inconvenient time" "My hearing is impaired."
Location	As the election has neared...I have been so busy with our own events and meetings that is was impractical to continue attending meetups in another county. There have not been meetups in our county.	"Because they keep holding them in a city 1 to 2 hours away."
Candidate	"Believed in candidate" "I wanted to do whatever I could to elect John Kerry."	"I did not have enthusiasm for other candidates after Dean left the race." "I quit attending when it was apparent that John Kerry would be the nominee."
Change in group or topic	"Because the new meetup group was more directly involved with the Kerry for President campaign." "Dean for America became Democracy for America, and we kept meeting as the same group, even though the focus of the group shifted from candidate to advocacy." "Extended meetups to state candidates"	"I quit since I started attending local Meetings (not related to the Meetup system)"
Meeting organization	"Only one of the groups was focused on topic."	"I did not like the way it was run."
Meetup accomplishments	"continued to attend because it was an active stimulating group that was accomplishing a lot and making a big difference in the kerry campaign"	"It seemed to turn into a dinner meeting without real talk about politics or candidates."
Meetup leadership	"I became a Meetup coordinator for various progressive groups." "Jason Brown at the DFA, Pasadena chapter, is an excellent host. He always has excellent speakers."	"They were leaderless. It was the blind leading the blind." "The effort was led by individuals whose self importance and point of view was more important to them than the issue at hand."
Meetup participants	"Because it is great to be able to meet with like minded folks and discuss topics that are interesting to me."	"I was put off by some of the other regular attendees."
External politics	"There is an election coming." "Regime change is urgent."	"Texas not winnable for Kerry."
Other	none	"I don't know."