

The Effects of Internet Use on Political Participation: Evidence from an Agency Online Discussion Forum

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Abstract

This paper seeks to clarify the relationship between Internet use and political participation. While early theorists touted the potential mobilizing effects of the Internet, empirical studies, to date, have failed to offer compelling evidence of such a relationship. This paper challenges these findings through the analysis of an experimental use of an online discussion forum during an agency strategic planning exercise. The web-based discussion run in parallel to the traditional docket attracted new individuals to participate in the decision-making process and influenced the range of topics discussed. These results suggest that extending opportunities for participation can attract new voices, thereby changing decision-makers' information environment.

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This paper seeks to clarify the relationship between Internet use and political participation. While early theorists touted the potential mobilizing effects of the Internet, empirical studies, to date, have failed to offer compelling evidence of such a relationship (Norris 1999; Bimber 2001). This paper presents data that challenges these findings. It examines the results of an agency decision-making experiment in which the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) ran a web-based discussion in parallel to a traditional docket opened to accept comments on the development of a strategic plan. Comparison of the comments received in the docket with those made through the web-based discussion support the conclusion that the Internet did expand the breadth of voices in the decision-making process, and it appears to have induced at least some politically inactive individuals to participate.

I. The FMCSA 2010 Strategy Planning Process and Data

In 1999, Congress created the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration and mandated that the new agency develop a long-term strategy for improving commercial motor vehicle safety. In August of 2000, FMCSA solicited written comments concerning its strategic plan through a Federal Register announcement. At the same time, to encourage discussion between participants the FMCSA decided to experiment with running an Internet-based dialogue in parallel with the traditional docket.

A new web site, titled the 2010 Strategy and Performance Planning site (2010 Strategy), was created. It provided access to draft reports and background information and included a discussion board for two-way, interactive dialogue. Visitors could either post a message under a new discussion topic or reply to a message in an existing discussion thread. They also had the option to submit an electronic message to the public docket through a link posted elsewhere at the Web site. In addition to the asynchronous discussion, participant interaction was encouraged through an E-mail notification feature used to broadcast new messages daily to all registered visitors. The site was advertised through a mailing to stakeholders, a press release, and internal memos to FMCSA staffers. Both the docket and the web discussion operated through the initial comment stage, release of a draft plan, and comments on that plan.

One hundred individuals and organizations submitted a total of 102 messages to the docket. One hundred sixteen identifiable individuals or groups contributed 339 messages to the Strategy site discussion board, and another 177 messages were contributed anonymously for a total of 516 messages. Of these, 65 were deleted because they violated the terms of use. Another 130 individuals registered and monitored the discussion through automatic email alerts, though posted no messages. The site was also heavily used to download information and review others' comments. In February, the month before comments on the draft plan were due, the 2010 Strategy Web site received 6,750 unique visitors.

II. Results

To examine the extent to which Internet communications affected the quantity and quality of participation in decision-making forums, we begin by comparing the submissions to the traditional docket with the web-based discussion. Overall, the data from the 2010 Strategic Planning exercise support the notion that the inclusion of the web-based discussion did expand participation in FMCSA's decision-making process and possibly attracted new participatory acts. The character of the messages submitted to the 2010 strategy web site differed from the docket submissions in a number of significant dimensions.

First, the character of participants in the web-based discussion differed from those who participated in the docket. Table 1 shows that the docket was dominated by the standard participants of iron triangles of policy-making with 78% of all submission coming from local, state, and federal government bodies, industry, and trade associations and interest groups. Outsiders to these issue networks including individuals, academics, and commercial drivers are not completely silent. Fourteen percent of all docket submission, for example, came from private individuals, but they constitute a minority voice.

Affiliation	Docket		Web-Based Discussion	
Academic/Research	2	2%	30	7%
Commercial Driver	5	5%	90	20%
Government	38	37%	29	6%
Industry	14	14%	42	9%
Membership/Trade Assn.	28	27%	4	1%
Other Non-standard Participants	15	15%	256	57%
Total	102		451	

Chi-squared = 129.3, with 5 d.f. $p < .001$

Table 1: Number of Comments by Source, Docket vs. Web-Based Discussion

The web discussion in contrast was more eclectic. Most noticeable is the prevalence of contributions from non-standard participants, with 20 percent of the messages coming from commercial drivers and another 57 percent coming from other non-standard participants, including private citizens, consultants, small business owners, small interest organizations not known to the FMCSA, and comments submitted anonymously. These differences in participation patterns are highly statistically significant.

The degree to which the web-based discussion achieved the FMSCA manager's goal of a broader discussion between stakeholders and agency employees was, nevertheless, limited by a number of factors. Trade associations and interest groups, an important source of expertise, did not actively participate, contributing only four comments to the web discussion. In addition, within discussion threads participation was more homogeneous. Finally, agency personnel did not participate openly. It is possible that they posted some of the anonymous messages, but the extent of this activity is not known.

The division of participation between the two alternative forums is noteworthy. Only six participants who submitted comments to the docket also participated in the web discussion, and in five of those cases, the participant simply posted their docket comments to the web. This lack of cross discussion is all the more remarkable in that the web site provided links directly to the docket, making submissions to the docket no more difficult than contributions to the web discussion.

Second, responders to the docket had much greater previous contact with the FMCSA. To generate input into the planning process, FMSCA contacted over 1500 individuals in industry, trade associations, and other organizations known to be concerned about motor carrier safety issues. Over 85 percent of those who submitted comments to the docket had been contacted in this manner. In contrast, the web site drew most participation from individuals that the FMSCA had not identified as likely respondents with only five comments from those who had been previously contacted. The others must have learned about the site from the press release, the Federal Register, links from the FMCSA or DOT web sites, by word of mouth, or general web searches.

Third, the topics broached in the web-based discussion also differed from those in the docket, expanding the range of topics discussed by commentators and introducing new voices and concerns to the strategy exercise. We coded each message on whether it addressed one of nine specific issues. Each message could address more than one topic. Not surprisingly, submissions to the docket were more comprehensive addressing an average of 3.9 issues. In comparison, messages posted to the web discussion were more focused and only addressed .72 topics on average.

Despite the fact that each message was more focused, the corpus of the web discussion expanded the discussion. Table 2 presents a comparison of topics addressed by docket submission versus the web discussion. Some topics, such as the commercial carriers were of equal interest, but the web discussion focused on different areas – with more concern on roadway conditions, regulatory and enforcement policy, and passenger car drivers. These differences are even starker when one focuses on commercial drivers and other non-standard participants. Commercial drivers who participated in the web discussion

were much more likely to be concerned with enforcement policy, commercial vehicle design, and passenger car driver behavior than other participants. Other individuals were also more likely to raise issues of commercial vehicle design and were twice as likely as commentators to the docket to raise issues of the roadway conditions.

	Docket	Web Discussion All Comment	Web Discussion Commercial Drivers	Web Discussion Other Non-standard participants
Regulatory & Enforcement Policy	7.3%	14.8%	19.0%	16.7%
Goal Attainment	8.0%	2.2%	0.0%	2.8%
Working Relationships	10.5%	3.1%	0.0%	2.1%
Safety Data, Research & Technology	17.8%	8.4%	3.8%	4.2%
U.S. Mexico Border	2.7%	0.8%	0.0%	0.7%
Commercial Carrier	29.4%	29.1%	25.3%	28.5%
Commercial Vehicle	6.0%	7.8%	11.4%	11.1%
Roadway & Environment	8.9%	15.6%	12.7%	22.9%
Passenger Car Driver	9.4%	18.2%	27.8%	11.1%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 2: Percentage of Issue Mentions, Docket vs. Web-Based Discussion

Finally, more anecdotal evidence concerning who participated in the web-based discussion also supports the interpretation that the web-based discussion drew in new participants to the decision-making process. The web site attracted input from organizational members that typically do not relate with regulatory authorities and have different work responsibilities, training, and experience than typical regulatory representatives. For example, the governmental affairs representative from a commercial passenger carrier submitted written comments to the docket. At the same time, a driver from that company submitted comments to the web discussion raising divergent concerns.

It remains possible that those who participated on the 2010 Strategy web site would have participated on the docket in any case, and that the observed differences between the docket and the web discussion are the result of self-selection of participants into the two forums. To investigate this possibility we examine all of the FMSCA dockets requesting comments that were opened in the year beginning in February 2000. The 553 comments submitted to the 2010 strategy web site is high. In 14 of the other 16 dockets, the FMSCA received at most 30 submissions. Two dockets, however, did receive a greater response: a rulemaking concerning standards for commercial drivers licenses and a petition to create a pilot program for drivers under the age of 21.

Compared to the 14 routine dockets, the 2010 Strategy had both a greater level of participation and broader representation among those who do participate. As seen in Table 3, the pattern of comments for the routine decisions falls into the tradition of iron triangles, dominated by interest groups and industry. Based on these comparisons, it does appear that the 2010 Strategy site successfully attracted new participants to the FMSCA decision-making process.

The 2010 Strategy docket is more similar to the other two that generated greater interest, but consideration of the particulars of the other dockets suggests that the web discussion still played a role in attracting new participants. In the commercial license standards docket the large number of comments is deceptive. Only about one hundred of these comments were unique contributions. Over 675 submissions to the docket were copies of a form letter, the result of an orchestrated union effort to get their member drivers to oppose the proposed standards. Excluding those letters, the distribution of the source of comments is similar to that of other rulemakings, and not as broad as the 2010 strategy exercise.

Affiliation	2010 Strategy Web and Docket comments	Routine Decisions	Commercial Driver's License Standards ¹	Young Drivers Pilot Program ²
Government	12%	14%	2%	1%
Industry	10%	12%	2%	2%
Membership/Trade Assn.	6%	54%	2%	2%
Academics	6%	0%	0%	1%
Commercial Driver	17%	0%	92%	10%
Non-standard Participants	49%	20%	3%	84%
Total Number of Comments	553	100	781	1674

¹ Based on a random sample of 134 comments ² Based on a random sample of 145 comments

Table 3: Affiliation of Commentators by Forum

The docket concerning a proposed pilot program to reduce the commercial driving age is more complex. Based on a random sample of comments, a very high percentage of comments came from individuals writing on their own behalf. This heavy involvement on the part of individuals appears to have been driven by media coverage. A Lexus–Nexus search during the 15 months following the request for comments identified 47 stories and editorials in the print media on the proposed pilot program. In contrast, not a single story concerning the 2010 strategy development could be found. Although media coverage did boost the quantity of comments, it did not greatly expand the terms of the debate. Virtually all of the comments from non-standard participants were terse paragraphs proclaiming their opposition to the proposal. Unlike the strategy web site, there were no new ideas broached or interaction among commentators.

In sum, this comparison with other dockets suggests that web-based discussion opportunities are a sufficient but not necessary component for expanding the amount and range of comment. News coverage and mobilization by mediating organizations also play a role in facilitating participation. Nevertheless, the 2010 Strategy web site elicited more comment than other standard decisions and a broader range of comments. The response to the 2010 Strategy site may have been a function of the docket topic having a broader appeal. This affect is unlikely to have been great, however, given that the DOT had never received as much interest in previous strategic planning exercises.

III. Conclusions

This paper presented evidence from an experiment with web-based discussion supporting agency decision-making. It provides an interesting contrast to existing studies that have found little or no effects of the Internet on democratic participation. The evidence does indicate that the web-based discussion increased the number of comments received by the FMSCA, expanded the range of constituencies that were heard, and broadened the topics on which respondents commented. Although from the perspective of agency decision-makers participation expanded, it is less clear whether the opportunity to offer comments expanded overall rates of participation. Most, if not all, non-standard respondents could be members of midlevel elites that were already active in other political forums, though it appears more plausible that at least some of these commentators were activated by the opportunity presented to them.

Further study is warranted to examine the eventual impacts of broadened participation on agency decision-making. FMCSA managers did review all comments, but the impact on the eventual strategic plan is difficult to evaluate. Comments from both the written docket and web-based discussion were considered at both the drafting stage and the subsequent revision, yet manager comments indicate that neither had a significant impact on the final plan, largely because the managers had already had much contact with many stakeholders.

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