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Bowling Online: Youth, Participatory Politics, and New Media

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Introduction

This investigation explores trends of youth political engagement by comparing levels of formal political activity and informal political activity by means of new media. It also considers the value of informal participation in a democracy by evaluating its relationship with voter turnout.

- Studies of political participation generally measure institutional involvement like political parties, campaigns, and petitions.
- Analysts largely maintain that the declining institutional activity of young Americans is a product of apathy and corrosive to democracy.
- Emerging research with a broader conception of political participation suggests that youth practices have been transformed with the advent of new media.
- Informal, participatory political engagement is not guided by formal institutions and offers youth peer-based forums for dialogue and deliberation of ideas.
- Access, circulation, and production of political content is independent from traditional sources of information and influence such as newspapers, political parties, and interest groups.

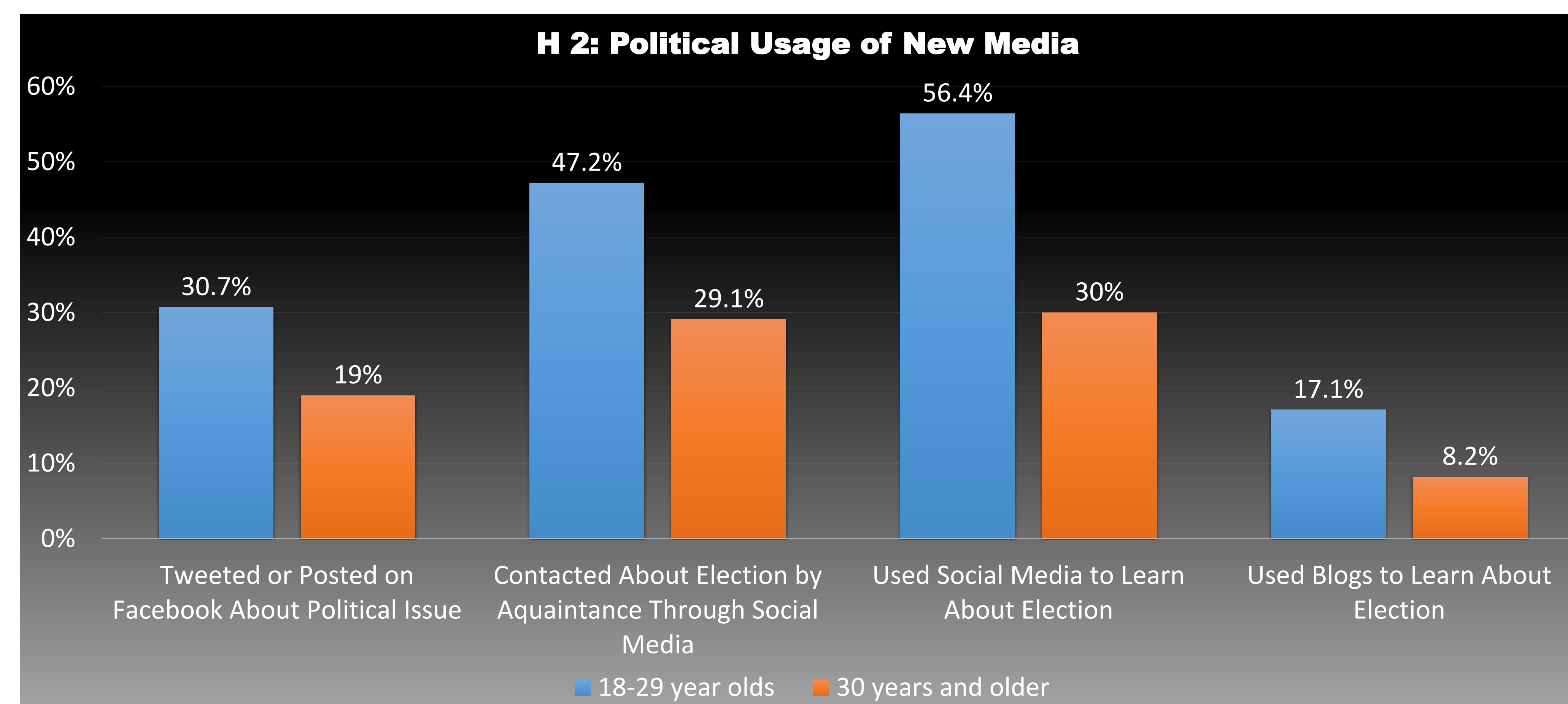
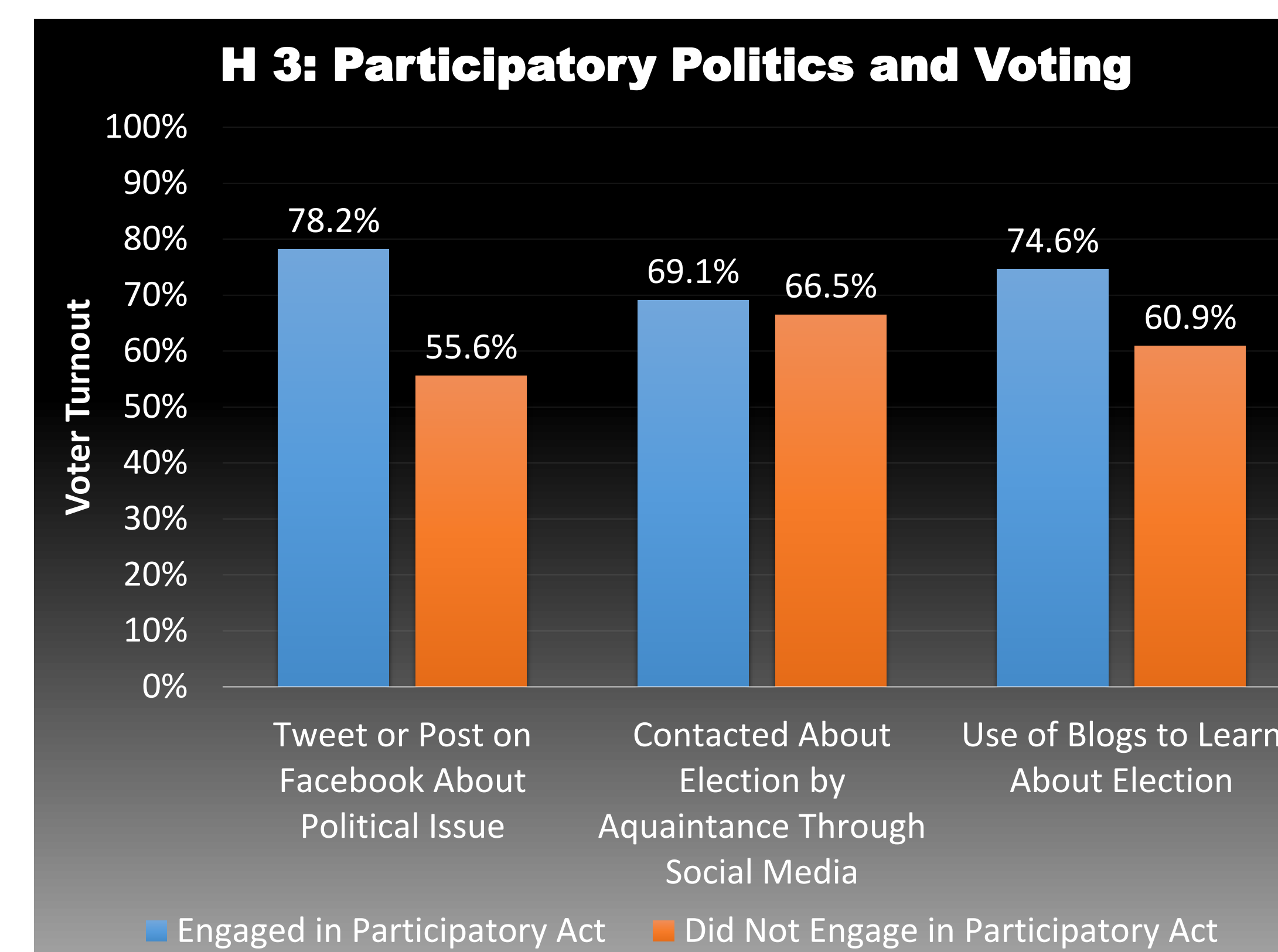
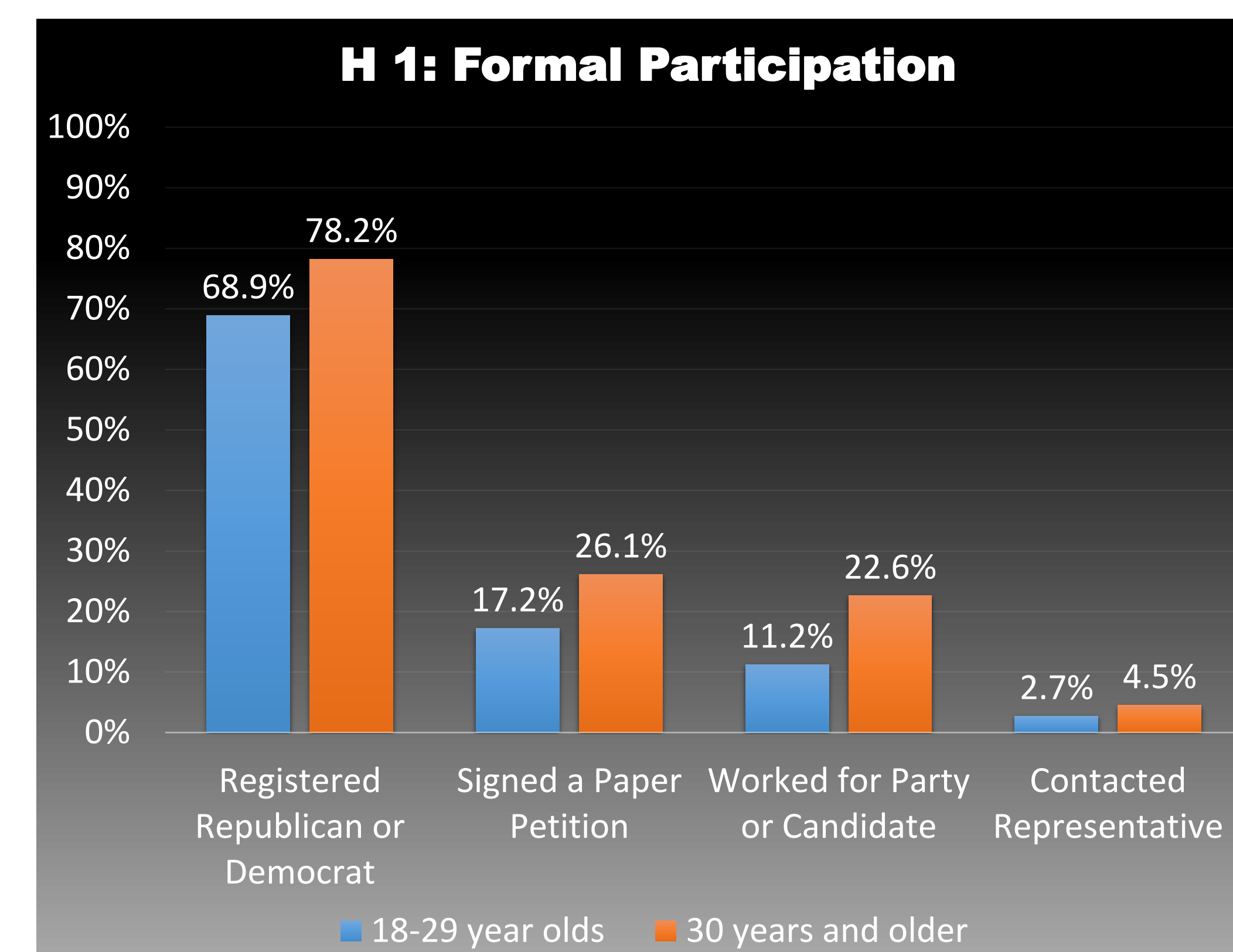
Democracy in the Digital Age

- Engagement is the foundation of democracy. Democratic, political engagement requires not only means of involvement, but mediums through which individual input may be aggregated into collective decisions and influence government action.
- Political involvement is stimulated by civic and social engagement. This was long defined by membership in local, interest-based associations and paralleled involvement in political institutions.
- However, the Internet has redefined the civic spheres of youth. To a large extent, social connections are now accessed and maintained online.
- New media provides youth peer-based platforms for political expression and collaboration, and it facilitates virtual communities that can be mobilized for political action.
- The ultimate question remains, to what extent do these informal acts yield observable, political consequences?

Hypotheses:

- H 1:** Youth (age 18-29) are less likely than Americans age 30 and older to be involved in formal means of democratic participation: political parties, campaigns, petitions, and contact with elected officials.
- H 2:** Youth are more likely than Americans age 30 and older to use new media for political expression and information.
- H 3:** Youth who engaged in acts of participatory politics online are more likely to vote than those who did not.

Data



*Data from the 2012 American National Election Survey

Findings

H 1: Formal Participation

The results showed that levels of formal participation are consistently lower among youth than for those age 30 and older. With the exception of political party membership, formal political participation as measured by the selected variables is scarce, and this is even more pronounced among youth.

H 2: Political Usage of New Media

Youth are notably more likely to use new media for political expression and information than those age 30 and older. Not only do youth more frequently produce and access political content using new media, it is more likely that new media will serve as a platform for political outreach by others.

H 3: Participatory Politics and Voting

Each of these acts was found to make a statistically significant difference in voting turnout of youth. While the use of blogs as a source of election information made a difference, the use of social media as a source of election information was rendered statistically insignificant.

Conclusions

- Although youth engage less in formal politics, they are more likely to use new media to engage in informal politics.
- New media is a greatly relied upon tool for youth through which they can both express and receive political information.
- Engaging in informal, participatory politics through new media increases likelihood of voting among youth. Sending a 'tweet' or Facebook post about a political issue made a significant difference in voting, implying that this expression does, in fact, translate into real democratic consequence.

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