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Civic and political volunteering: the mobilizing role of websites and social media in four countries

Shelley Boulianne ⬤ and Kari Steen-Johnsen ⬤

ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of digital media in civic and political engagement, specifically the respective roles of websites vs. social media in relation to volunteering. The study uses four-country (United States, United Kingdom, France, and Canada) survey data collected in 2019 and 2021 ($n = 12,359$). For both types of volunteering, we find that organizations' websites are more strongly correlated with volunteering compared to following organizations on social media. We replicate this finding across multiple countries, two types of analysis, and volunteering for civic and political organizations. Our findings suggest that the informational role of websites is of greater importance than the creation of quasi-membership ties inherent to social media when it comes to mobilizing volunteers. However, engaging in both online activities has the strongest relationship with volunteering, suggesting a need for multi-method communication strategy. This finding is important with respect to developing communication strategies in civic and political groups.

Digital media have become increasingly important as tools of information and communication in society in general as well as within civil society (Margetts, John, Hale, & Yasseri, 2015; Mos, 2021; Svensson, Mahoney, & Hambrick, 2015). During the past two decades, civic groups and political campaigns have indeed made use of digital media to solicit donations, recruit volunteers and communicate with members (Asencio & Sun, 2015; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). This paper examines the role of digital media in volunteer recruitment in civic and political organizations. Volunteering can be defined as "freely chosen, non-remunerated actions taken by individuals aimed at improving the well-being of another person or persons, at no cost to them" (Duncan, 2022, p. 70). While volunteering could happen within and outside of formal organizations (Grothe-Hammer, 2019; Piatak, Dietz, & McKeever, 2019; Prouteau, 2020), we focus on volunteering attached to formal civic and political groups and organizations. In particular, we are interested in the degree to which digital media (websites and social media) mobilize citizens to volunteer for civic and political organizations.

In this paper, we use a four-country survey from the United States (US), United Kingdom (UK), France, and Canada to examine the relationship between digital media use and offline volunteering, exploring digital media's roles in informing citizens about volunteer opportunities (websites) and offering proxy forms of group membership (following organizations on social media). The cross-national survey using a representative sample allows us to test the robustness of the model across 1) types of digital media use (websites and social media), 2) types of volunteering (civic and political), and 3) a variety of national contexts, moving beyond the idiosyncrasies of specific nations, particularly the United States (Boulianne, 2020; Stoycheff, Liu, Wibowo, & Nanni, 2017). We theorize the causal flow beginning with digital media use and ending with volunteering, following existing research (Boulianne, 2020; Enjolras, Steen-Johnsen, & Beyer, 2018).

While recent scholarship focuses on social media's potential for volunteer mobilization (Boulianne, 2022), we find that using websites is more strongly correlated with volunteering compared to social media ties. A significant group of people only use civic and political organizations' websites; few people "only" follow groups on social media. Using both social media and websites yields the largest mobilization effect on volunteering, then using websites (only) followed by social

media (only). We explain that websites offer the depth of information that facilitates recruitment for volunteer work, including the organization's mission, the need for volunteers to support the organization's mission, specific volunteer opportunities, and highlights of volunteers' contributions to the organization. This combination of information helps to turn interested citizens into engaged citizens. Websites have significant mobilization potential, perhaps more so than social media. This finding is important to organizations as they make decisions about resource expenditures on their websites as opposed to their social media presence. The findings support a multi-method communication approach combining a social media and a website component. Moreover, our findings emphasize the need to distinguish between different types of digital media when evaluating their functions and roles in volunteer recruitment.

Digital media and volunteering for civic or political groups

Digital media include any media in which data are communicated via computerized networks, allow communication in a variety of formats, and include sites where people share and exchange information in online communities and networks, such as social networking sites (Gordo, 2020). While websites belong to what has been termed web 1.0. (e.g., information broadcasting), social networking sites are characterized by more opportunities for interacting and sharing information in social networks, i.e., web 2.0 (Boyd, 2008). These differences in affordances may imply different potentials for mobilizing civic engagement.

Digital media are important for raising awareness of organizations and highlighting opportunities to become involved in an organization. Websites are critical for providing information to facilitate volunteer recruitment. Social media are often used as supportive tools, offering links to specific material on the website and providing updates and news about current activities. Social media are also distinctive with respect to their potential for visible interactivity between the organization and interested citizens. Citizens can follow (or like) these organizations' social media accounts (or pages), providing a visible online connection to

these organizations. Creating these ties is similar to signing up to be quasi-members of the organizations without having to complete paperwork or pay membership fees.

In this study, we examine the mobilizing potentials of websites as compared to social media across civic and political volunteering. As noted by Anheier and Salamon (1999), the character and definitions of volunteering differs greatly between societies and cultural context, which necessitates a broad definition when doing cross-country research such as in this paper. Civic volunteering will be taken to include a range of activities, including helping others, and raising and solving societal issues, when carried out within organizations within the domains of culture, leisure, welfare or civic action. In line with a set of other studies (Arvanitidis, 2017; Eimhjellen, Steen-Johnsen, Folkestad, & Ødegård, 2018; Ekman & Amnå, 2012), we thus use a broad definition that encompasses actions directed both toward the social domain, and toward democratic institutions. Political volunteering is here limited to political party involvement and political campaign activity (Zimmer, Smith, & Alijla, 2016). In the literature, civic volunteering has been kept separate from political volunteering, as belonging to different spheres and entailing different logics of action (Evers & von Essen, 2019). It can still be argued that such differences are questions of degree, and dependent on historical and national context (Evers & von Essen, 2019; Zimmer, Smith, & Alijla, 2016). Civic and political volunteering may indeed involve different tasks, but also share a set of similarities in the need to inform, involve and connect people to the organization. In the following section, we elaborate on the role of websites as distinctive information sources and the role of social media in creating ties to such organizations. We discuss the theoretical claims that connect these distinct features to volunteer recruitment, as well as highlight existing research on the topic.

Websites as rich information sources

Early research on digital media and volunteering extended theories of traditional media (newspaper, television, radio) into the online realm (Jennings & Zeitner, 2003). An early study found that

volunteering in 1982 was positively correlated with following public affairs online in 1997 (Jennings & Zeitner, 2003). Subsequent research has challenged these theoretical claims and the causal flow. Digital media offer affordances beyond traditional news media and can provide a broader spectrum of information to citizens about their community and its needs, and may therefore serve as a tool to mobilize citizens (Emrich & Pierdzioch, 2016; Shah, Schmierbach, Hawkins, Espino, & Donavan, 2002). Citizens can use digital media to discover information about the community and political organizations as well as identify opportunities to contribute (Piatak, Dietz, & McKeever, 2019). In particular, websites are rich sources of information about the organization's history and mission. These sites can help inform citizens about the need for volunteers in particular organizations, indicate the types of volunteering opportunities available, facilitate application processes for volunteers, and highlight the accomplishments of existing volunteers. Unlike the short messaging available on social media, websites can offer more detailed information. Also, organizations can use videos to highlight the impact they have on the community such as happy children receiving a free meal, which can create emotional ties to both the organization and the clients being served. They can use videos to show what volunteers do, i.e., their tasks, which might help convince citizens to become involved.

Nevertheless, the specific mobilization potential of websites has been largely ignored in the scholarship connecting volunteering and digital media use. An exception is Emrich and Pierdzioch (2016) who surveyed German Red Cross (GRC) volunteers and found the use of the GRC website increased volunteers' willingness to engage further with the organization. However, the study was based on a survey of volunteers, leaving questions about how citizens, more generally, use this information source and how the use of this source relates to their likelihood of volunteering.

Instead, studies use different measures of online activities. For example, Stern and Adams (2010) test hours spent in online groups and the effects on volunteering, finding positive relationships using a sample from two cities in the United States. Another set of studies considers generic measures of Internet use, including access, whether respondents use the Internet, and hours of use. A study of 3,000 Swedes shows hours spent online has little impact on volunteering (Vilhelmson, Thulin, & Ellder, 2017). In contrast, a Swiss study finds hours of Internet use are negatively correlated with volunteering, particularly among young people; the relationship is, however, moderated by social media use, reinforcing the point that social media are distinctive (Filsinger & Freitag, 2018). Pearce, Freelon, and Kendzior (2014) find a positive relationship between Internet use and volunteering based on a survey of citizens in Azerbaijan. Using data from the 2013 US Current Population Survey, Piatak, Dietz, and McKeever (2019) find Internet access in the home positively correlates with informal and formal volunteering, but negatively correlates with hours spent volunteering. Filsinger, Ackermann, and Freitag (2020) studied Internet use and volunteering in 27 countries and find positive correlations. Overall, existing studies tend to demonstrate positive correlations between digital media use and civic volunteering, but the studies that focus on generic measures of Internet use are limited with respect to advancing theoretical explanations.

In terms of volunteering for campaigns (political volunteering), several studies assess the role of digital media in increasing access to information (Bimber & Copeland, 2013; Koc-Michalska, Gibson, & Vedel, 2014; Towner & Muñoz, 2018). Bimber and Copeland (2013, p. 130) use the American National Election Study 1996, 1998, 2000, 2004, and 2008 to examine the effects of "any information about this election campaign on the (Internet/the Web)" on working for a political party or campaign. They find a positive correlation, but it is only statistically significant in 2008. They explain this finding in terms of Obama's distinctive digital campaign strategy as well as the rise of social media, which alters how information flows to citizens.

Towner and Muñoz (2018) studied US Boomers in the 2012 election campaign. They offer more nuanced approaches to studying campaign information including the source of information: online newspapers, national TV news websites, campaign websites, Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and blogs. Twitter and campaign websites are the only sources

that significantly correlate with volunteering for a campaign or party (Towner & Muñoz, 2018). Finally, a study of the 2012 French presidential election measures a variety of political social media uses and "performing any voluntary work for a party (like distributed leaflets, posting posters)" (Koc-Michalska, Gibson, & Vedel, 2014, p. 243). They find the relationship is significant at the .10 level, but not at the .05 level ($n = 2,630$). They also model the relationship as flowing from volunteer work to social media use, which may also explain the null effects. This body of research suggests the relationships between digital media uses and political volunteering are positive; however, when focusing on digital media as an informational tool and volunteering for political campaigns and organizations, the relationship may not be statistically or substantively significant.

Social media networks as providers of quasi-memberships

Social networking sites – or social media – also serve informational functions. However, these tools do not allow the rich details offered by websites. In particular, some platforms, such as Twitter, restrict the length of the post, which limits the details that can be provided. In response, many organizations use social media to link to their websites, relying on citizens' motivation to follow the link to find more information. In this way, the two types of uses may relate as a sort of "ladder" with following groups on social media being a bottom rung or entry point; the use of websites may be higher rung up the ladder.

Information flow on social media depends on friends' and followers' networks (Easley & Kleinberg, 2010). Moreover, given their network functionalities, social media are critical to the formation of and participation in groups as well as interpersonal ties (Chan, Chen, & Lee, 2017; Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009; Wells & Thorson, 2017) that can lead to the request to volunteer (Musick & Wilson, 2008; Oesterle, Johnson, & Mortimer, 2004; Ryan, Agnitsch, Zhao, & Mullick, 2005). An important aspect of this is motivation, which is linked both to the fact that information emanates from people to which one is connected (who are on one's

friends list) and to the potential for expressing emotions and interacting with others as part of the information process (Boyd, 2011; Papacharissi, 2015).

Formal social ties, often measured by membership in organizations, are repeatedly shown to be strongly linked to volunteering in the United States (Klofstad, 2011; Musick & Wilson, 2008) and in Europe (Grasso, Yoxon, Karampampas, & Temple, 2019); organizational memberships also correlate with civic engagement more generally (Enjolras, Steen-Johnsen, & Wollebæk, 2013; Nah, Namkoong, Chen, & Hustedde, 2016; Prouteau, 2020). People with organizational memberships are more likely to volunteer because 1) they receive information about volunteer opportunities and specific volunteer roles, 2) they are more often asked to volunteer, and 3) they develop emotional bonds with other members (Musick & Wilson, 2008; Oesterle, Johnson, & Mortimer, 2004; Piatak, 2016; Ryan, Agnitsch, Zhao, & Mullick, 2005).

Social media ties between a civic organization and the individual person may be an important condition for mobilization to volunteer. A key recruitment mechanism is civic organizations encouraging volunteering by directly asking people for help (Musick & Wilson, 2008; Oesterle, Johnson, & Mortimer, 2004; Ryan, Agnitsch, Zhao, & Mullick, 2005). Civic organizations may use social media to establish more contact points with citizens that function as semi-formal ties between individuals and the organization, allowing for such recruitment.

The role of social media in mobilizing volunteers depends on the use that individual citizens make of them, which is closely linked to the affordances that social media offer. Indeed, in some ways, following organizations' social media profiles is a new form of quasi-membership in that organization, without requiring the payment of fees or the completion of detailed application forms. Social media, in particular, present an opportunity to interact with organizations and express support and affiliation through different activities, such as following or liking their pages and sharing their posts. In addition, expressing identification with a civic organization on social media may be considered a step in assuming the role of a volunteer by adopting the

corresponding values, norms, and attitudes (Musick & Wilson, 2008).

As noted by Boulianne (2022), some platforms make it easier to follow, like, and share posts due to their affordances. Instagram, historically, did not allow for the sharing of posts (Bossetta, 2018). In addition, different platforms have opportunities to target users with advertisements. Political parties and candidates can pay for advertising on some platform, which helps to promote their pages and accounts to specific groups (Bossetta, 2018). Finally, the effects of different platforms may differ in terms of how much time and resources that organizations invest in their profiles on those platforms; Boulianne (2022) used this explanation to explain the larger mobilization effects of Facebook on volunteering compared to Twitter and Instagram.

As mentioned, Filsinger and Freitag (2018) suggest that social media have a distinct role in mobilizing volunteers, particularly young people. In addition, a longitudinal three-wave study from Norway (2012, 2014, 2016) shows following the Facebook groups of voluntary organizations increases the likelihood of volunteering in NGOs (Enjolras, Steen-Johnsen, & Beyer, 2018). Using a cross-sectional and cross-national sample, Boulianne (2022) examines Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter use in relation to both online and off-line forms of civic engagement using a pooled sample of four countries. She finds using Facebook to follow civic groups triples the odds of volunteering offline for a civic group, but all correlations between these three platforms and four types of civic activities are positive and statistically significant. Following civic groups on these different platforms creates standby citizens who are sympathetic to an organization's mission and ready to engage when requested to do so (Boulianne, 2022).

We might expect the same process to occur for political volunteering. Following a candidate or political party on social media opens up the communication channel to recruit volunteers. As mentioned in relation to civic volunteering, social media increases the contact points, supplementing e-mail efforts or phone calls. Political parties can post information about specific campaign events that require citizens' involvement, such as door-to-door canvasing, distributing leaflets, or helping at political rallies. Indeed, Gibson (2015) examines how election campaigns have become more grassroots with individual citizens left to campaign for parties on their own. She discusses how this "citizen-initiated campaigning" means parties lose some control over the messaging while gaining access to free labor. Despite this downloading of work on to citizens, digital media remain important for mobilizing this free labor (Gibson, 2015).

Individuals who establish a social media tie to a candidate or party may also develop emotional ties to these entities, as we claim in relation to civic groups. As political party membership is in decline (Gibson, Greffet, & Cantijoch, 2017), these online organizational ties may serve as an important substitute. Gibson, Greffet, and Cantijoch (2017) discuss different forms of associations with political parties: digital activists, friends, and audience in relation to the 2012 French Presidential election. Following the social media accounts of politicians and political parties is a type of "friend" activity that creates an emotional bond between the candidate and the citizen (Gibson, Greffet, & Cantijoch, 2017). We seek to follow up on this line of research by examining volunteering activities and using a cross-national sample.

This body of research leaves many unanswered questions including the distinct role of social media as opposed to organizations' websites as well as what aspects of digital media use (information or networking) matter most for volunteer recruitment. In particular, we seek to compare these uses to determine which type of use has larger roles, but we also consider the singular uses to isolate the distinct effects of social media versus websites. What are the estimated effects of exclusively using social media? We also consider how social media and website may work in combination (see the "ladder" discussion presented earlier), testing our theoretical claims outlined at the beginning of this paper. Our first research question is:

RQ1: *To what extent does the relationship between digital media use and volunteering differ for websites versus social media ties?*

Differential effects: type of organization and country

The relationship between digital media use and volunteering may differ depending on the type of organization (civic or political group) or the country. In this section, we outline the theories and findings related to differential effects. As pointed out, civic and political volunteering are rarely studied within the same framework (Zimmer, Smith, & Alijla, 2016), and have tended to be seen as disparate activities, even though they share practical similarities (Evers & von Essen, 2019). Boulianne (2020) summarizes the effect sizes of 300 survey-based studies testing the relationship between digital media use and engagement in civic and political life. She finds few cross-national differences, and argues a reason for this might be that digital media are more important for mobilizing <u>civic</u> activities (as opposed to political activities) and the infrastructure supporting civic activities is similar across countries, such as petitions, GoFundMe, etc. In support of this argument, she published a series of articles examining digital media use and civic engagement using cross-national data (Boulianne, 2022; Boulianne, Copeland, & Koc-Michalska, 2022). In all of these studies, the estimated effects of digital media use on civic engagement (volunteering, donating, political consumerism) are fairly consistent across the different countries.

In contrast, Boulianne (2020) proposes that political activities may be a distinct set of activities with country-specific mobilization patterns. Voting and donating to campaigns are subject to country-specific laws governing citizens' engagement in these activities. In the study of digital media effects, most cross-national research focuses on election campaigns (Boulianne, 2020). This study picks up the theme of civic versus political activities but focuses on volunteering as a practice that is popular in both domains. As such, we consider:

RQ2: *To what extent does the relationship between digital media use and volunteering differ for civic versus political organizations?*

The four countries studied in this paper are quite similar in their levels of Internet penetration and social media use. Internet penetration is high (90% in the US, 95% in the UK, 92% in France, and 94% in Canada) (Newman, Fletcher, Robertson, Eddy, & Nielsen, 2022). Vaccari and Valeriani (2021) offer a framework for understanding cross-national differences in citizens' engagement with election campaigns. They do not explicitly include volunteering for the campaign but include a similar measure about distributing leaflets along with five other campaign activities. They suggest cross-national differences may depend on electoral competition (majoritarian vs. proportional), mass media system (liberal, polarized pluralism, democratic corporatist), and political organization (candidate-centric vs. party-centric). For example, France may differ from the UK because the French media system is polarized pluralist, whereas the UK's is liberal. The UK may differ from the US and France because its political structure has a party-centric vs. candidate-centric organization. Canada would follow the UK on these dimensions. We examine whether this theoretical framework works to understand cross-national differences in volunteering in four countries. We explore:

RQ3: *To what extent does the relationship between digital media use and volunteering differ by country?*

Methods

Our survey data were collected in 2019 and 2021. We have 12,359 respondents from four countries (US, UK, France, and Canada) with approximately 1,500 in each country in each year. Lightspeed Kantar administered the survey and used strict quotas related to age, sex, and education to ensure representation of the population. Table 1 includes the sample characteristics; each of these percentages is within three percentage points of the official statistics for the country (French Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, 2017, 2017; National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies, 2018; Office of National Statistics, 2011,

Table 1. Percentages for each variable across countries.

	All %	US %	UK %	France %	Canada %
Volunteering for a political party or campaign	8	11	7	8	6
Visiting website of a political party or candidate	39	45	33	37	41
Following a political party or candidate on social media	14	20	11	11	15
Volunteering for a nonprofit or charity	27	31	24	27	25
Visiting website of nonprofit or charity	55	57	54	53	58
Following a charity on social media	14	15	17	10	13
Age 25 to 34 years	17	18	17	15	17
Age 35 to 44 years	16	16	16	16	16
Age 45 to 54 years	17	17	18	17	18
Ages 55 and up	39	38	38	42	40
Lower college	18	19	10	18	26
Bachelor's degree	24	27	27	17	24
More than a bachelor's degree	9	14	7	9	7
Income, Quintile 2	19	22	15	24	16
Income, Quintile 3	23	17	28	25	21
Income, Quintile 4	21	24	14	19	26
Income, Quintile 5	18	18	22	16	17
Females	51	52	49	51	53

2016; Statistics Canada, 2016, 2017; US Census, 2015, 2017). The data and replication files are available: https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.22779062.v1

The largest cross-national differences relate to visiting political websites and following political organizations. Overall, 39% of respondents visited a candidate or political party's website in the past 12 months, with this rate highest in the US and lowest in the UK (Table 1). Likewise, 20% of respondents in the US follow a political party or candidate on social media, whereas only 11% of respondents do so in the UK and France. Pooling the sample across countries, 14% of respondents follow a party on social media.

In contrast, 55% of respondents (pooled across countries) visited a website of a nonprofit organization or charity (e.g., an environmental organization or the Red Cross) in the past 12 months. As for following civic organizations on social media, 14% of the sample had done so, which is similar to the following rates for political organizations on social media.

As for other statistical controls, we include household income, which was measured in the relevant currency for the respective country. We divided the sample into 20% groupings in each country. These categories were converted into a series of dummy variables for analysis. All variables are converted into dummy variables to facilitate interpretation from a logistic regression analysis. In addition to income, we account for

the year of data collection (2019 versus 2021) and the country.

We have two dependent variables: civic volunteering and political volunteering. To assess civic volunteering, we asked, "In the past 12 months, have you … volunteered offline for a nonprofit organization or charity (like an environmental organization or Red Cross)?" Approximately 27% of the sample volunteered for a charity (n = 12,359) with the US respondents more likely to volunteer than respondents in other countries (Table 1). As for political volunteering, we asked, "In the past 12 months, have you … volunteered for a political party or campaign (like distributing leaflets)?" This survey question was borrowed from Koc-Michalska, Gibson, and Vedel (2014). Approximately 8% of the sample volunteered for a political party or candidate (n = 12,359). Political volunteering is far less common than volunteering for civic organizations. The time period covered is November 2018 to October 2019 and March 2020 to February 2021. France was the only country not to have a national election in the time period covered by data collection. Despite this, volunteering rates in France were identical to the overall rates for the pooled sample.

Results

For Research Question 1, civic volunteering and visiting nonprofit websites are strongly and positively related (Table 2). Those who visit a charity website are five times more likely to volunteer for

Table 2. Logistic regression for civic and political volunteering.

	Civic volunteering				Political volunteering			
	b	S.E.	ExpB	p	b	S.E.	ExpB	p
Visiting website of a charity	1.661	0.057	5.264	<.001				
Visiting website of a political party					2.039	0.103	7.684	<.001
Following a charity on social media	0.880	0.060	2.410	<.001				
Following a political party on social media					0.835	0.079	2.304	<.001
Age 25 to 34 years	-0.344	0.084	0.709	<.001	-0.346	0.113	0.708	.002
Age 35 to 44 years	-0.547	0.087	0.579	<.001	-0.679	0.121	0.507	<.001
Age 45 to 54 years	-0.958	0.089	0.384	<.001	-1.365	0.142	0.255	<.001
Ages 55 and up	-0.900	0.078	0.407	<.001	-1.224	0.117	0.294	<.001
Lower college	0.235	0.066	1.265	<.001	-0.059	0.113	0.943	.601
Bachelor's degree	0.336	0.060	1.400	<.001	0.245	0.094	1.278	.009
More than a bachelor's degree	0.529	0.082	1.697	<.001	0.557	0.119	1.746	<.001
Income, Quintile 2	0.011	0.078	1.011	.884	0.034	0.125	1.034	.789
Income, Quintile 3	-0.082	0.076	0.921	.278	0.045	0.123	1.046	.713
Income, Quintile 4	0.041	0.077	1.042	.594	0.142	0.124	1.153	.253
Income, Quintile 5	0.140	0.080	1.151	.080	0.292	0.126	1.339	.021
Females	-0.271	0.047	0.763	<.001	-0.515	0.076	0.598	<.001
Data collected in 2021	-0.076	0.023	0.927	.001	-0.017	0.037	0.983	.645
France	0.032	0.065	1.033	.618	0.006	0.100	1.006	.953
UK	-0.294	0.067	0.745	<.001	-0.134	0.103	0.874	.194
Canada	-0.250	0.065	0.779	<.001	-0.359	0.103	0.699	<.001
n	11,441				11,437			
Nagelkerke R Square	.252				.263			

The reference groups are: those aged 18 to 24 years; with a high school education or less; in the first income quintile; males; respondents from 2019; and the United States.

civic organizations (ExpB = 5.26, $p < .001$). Political volunteering and visiting political party websites are also strongly and positively related (Table 2). Those who visit a political party website are almost eight times more likely to volunteer for political organizations (ExpB = 7.68, $p < .001$). Civic volunteering and following a nonprofit organization on social media are also strongly correlated (Table 2). Those who follow a charity on social media are more than twice as likely to volunteer for civic organizations (ExpB = 2.41, $p < .001$). Those who follow political parties on social media are more than twice as likely to volunteer for political organizations (ExpB = 2.30, $p < .001$). Political volunteering and following political parties on social media are strongly correlated (Table 2). Overall, the relationships between websites and volunteering are much stronger than social media and volunteering (RQ1). This pattern is replicated for both civic and political volunteering (RQ2).

To help isolate the distinct role of websites versus social media, we created a series of dummy variables to indicate whether the respondents only followed civic (or political) organizations on social media but did not use the related website and whether the respondents only visited a civic (or political) organizations' website but did not follow them on social media. We also created a variable about whether they both followed these groups on social media and visited the related website.

For the civic dimension, 1% ($n = 175$) of respondents exclusively followed these organizations on social media (did not use websites), 43% ($n = 5,313$) of respondents exclusively visited a civic organizations' websites (did not follow on social media), and 12.5% ($n = 1,544$) of respondents completed both activities. Approximately 43% ($n = 5,324$) did not do either of these activities. The patterns suggest that people who visit websites exclusively are a distinctive and sizable group of people.

When we add these variables to the regression model, we replicate the findings from Table 2 – using websites has stronger connections to volunteering, compared to social media use. Specifically, we find that that exclusively visiting civic organizations' websites has a larger coefficient (ExpB = 5.59, $p < .001$) compared to completing neither of these online activities. For following a civic organization on social media, the coefficient is positive, but not as large as that observed for visiting websites (ExpB = 4.59, $p < .001$). However, this analysis demonstrates that completing both of these online activities, compared to neither of these activities (the reference group), yields the largest increase in the likelihood of volunteering for a civic organization (ExpB = 12.51, $p < .001$).

For political parties, we completed a similar analysis. Approximately 3% ($n = 341$) of respondents exclusively followed political parties on social media, 28% ($n = 3,404$) of respondents exclusively visited political parties' website, and 11.6% ($n = 1,436$) of respondents completed both online activities. Approximately 58% ($n = 7,176$) did not do either of these activities. Again, we see that people who visit websites exclusively are a distinctive and sizable group of people.

When we add these variables to the regression model, we replicate the findings from Table 2 in terms of the stronger mobilization role of websites as opposed to social media. Exclusively visiting a political party's website has a larger coefficient (ExpB = 8.42, $p < .001$) compared to respondents who do not engage in either of these activities. The coefficient for website is much larger than the coefficient for social media. Following political parties (exclusively) more than triples (ExpB = 3.58, $p < .001$) the likelihood of volunteering for a political party. However, this analysis demonstrates that completing both of these activities, compared to neither of these activities (the reference group), yields the largest increase in the likelihood of volunteering (ExpB = 18.42, $p < .001$).

Younger people (18- to 24-year-olds; the reference group for the model in Tables 2 and 3) are more likely to volunteer for both civic and political organizations compared to older age groups. Those with a bachelor's degree or more are more likely to volunteer in civic and political organizations compared to those with a high school education or less (Tables 2 and 3). Income is not related to civic or political volunteering. Females are less likely to volunteer compared to males; this difference is larger for political volunteering compared to civic volunteering. Finally, civic volunteering was slightly less common in 2021 compared to 2019. However, there are no significant differences in political volunteering when comparing 2019 and 2021.

In terms of cross-national differences, Canadian respondents are less likely than American respondents to volunteer in civic or political groups (Tables 2 and 3). France respondents do not differ from American respondents in the rates of civic or political volunteering. UK respondents are less likely to volunteer in civic organizations compared to American respondents; however, they do not differ from American respondents in terms of political volunteering.

Research Question 2 is about the differential effects of our key variables on civic and political volunteering across countries. Appendix A Tables A1 and A2 present the country-specific results, replicating the models presented in Table 2. To simplify the presentation of results, Figure 1

Table 3. Logistic regression for civic and political volunteering.

	Civic volunteering				Political volunteering			
	b	S.E.	ExpB	p	b	S.E.	ExpB	p
Only following charity/party on social media	1.52	0.178	4.59	<.001	1.28	0.250	3.58	<.001
Only visiting website of charity/party	1.72	0.060	5.59	<.001	2.13	0.114	8.42	<.001
Both following on social media and visiting website	2.53	0.075	12.51	<.001	2.91	0.120	18.42	<.001
Age 25 to 34 years	-0.34	0.084	0.71	<.001	-0.34	0.113	0.71	.003
Age 35 to 44 years	-0.55	0.087	0.58	<.001	-0.68	0.121	0.51	<.001
Age 45 to 54 years	-0.95	0.089	0.39	<.001	-1.34	0.141	0.26	<.001
Ages 55 and up	-0.89	0.078	0.41	<.001	-1.20	0.117	0.30	<.001
Lower college	0.24	0.065	1.28	<.001	-0.05	0.112	0.96	.685
Bachelor's degree	0.34	0.060	1.41	<.001	0.24	0.094	1.27	.010
More than a bachelor's degree	0.55	0.081	1.73	<.001	0.56	0.119	1.75	<.001
Income, Quintile 2	0.01	0.078	1.01	.884	0.02	0.125	1.02	.870
Income, Quintile 3	-0.09	0.075	0.91	.214	0.04	0.122	1.05	.715
Income, Quintile 4	0.03	0.076	1.03	.685	0.14	0.124	1.15	.247
Income, Quintile 5	0.14	0.080	1.15	.089	0.29	0.125	1.34	.020
Females	-0.27	0.047	0.76	<.001	-0.51	0.076	0.60	<.001
Data collected in 2021	-0.07	0.023	0.93	.001	-0.02	0.037	0.98	.657
France	0.05	0.065	1.05	.462	0.00	0.099	1.00	.962
UK	-0.28	0.066	0.76	<.001	-0.13	0.103	0.87	.191
Canada	-0.24	0.064	0.79	<.001	-0.37	0.102	0.69	<.001
n	11,493				11,489			
Nagelkerke R Square	.253				.265			

The reference groups are: those who neither follow nor visit the website of the charity/party; those aged 18 to 24 years; with a high school education or less; in the first income quintile; males; respondents from 2019; and the United States.
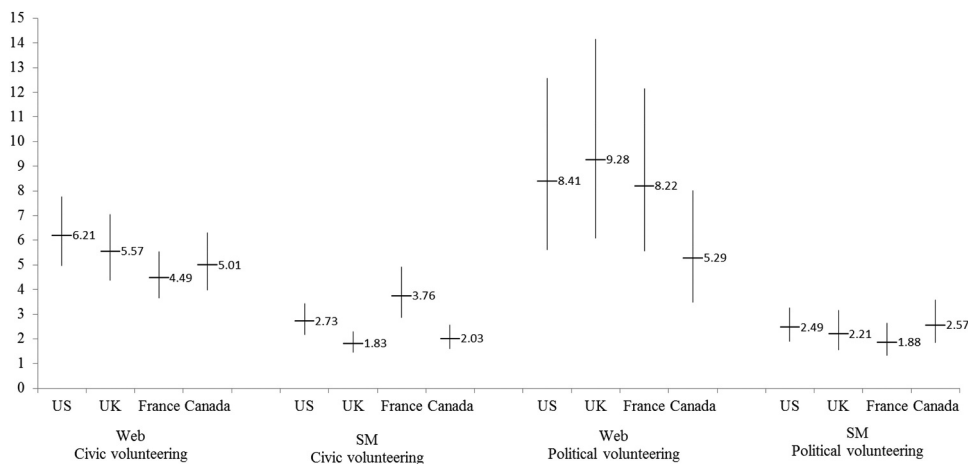
Figure 1. Marginal effects of key variables in four countries.

includes the marginal effects for our two key independent variables and our two dependent variables, comparing across the four countries. The estimates are provided with 95% confidence intervals. Confidence intervals that overlap suggest a similar marginal effect estimate. In other words, an overlap in the intervals means no significant differences. We did not conduct a country-specific analysis of Table 3 because of the very small group of social media (only) users; as noted above, only 135 respondents pooled across four countries exclusively followed the social media accounts of civic organizations. This group is too small to divide into a country-specific analysis.

Looking at civic websites and civic volunteering, the country-specific estimates are similar (RQ2). The 95% confidence intervals overlap each other, which suggests no significant differences between the four countries. In other words, the findings are robust across countries. In terms of following civic groups on social media, France has a larger estimate than the UK and Canada (Figure 1). France is a deviant case in terms of civic volunteering (RQ3). For the three other countries, websites clearly have larger marginal effects compared to social media; for France, however, the estimates are quite similar for websites and social media on civic volunteering.

In terms of political volunteering, the country-specific estimates are similar for the role of websites (Figure 1). As observed with civic volunteering, these website estimates are much larger than the effect estimates for following political groups on social media. For political volunteering, all four

countries are similar in their estimates. In sum, no cross-national differences are evident with respect to the role of digital media in political volunteering (RQ3). As observed with the pooled sample, organizational websites are more strongly correlated with volunteering compared to social media ties to organizations (RQ1).

Discussion

In this paper, we examine the role of digital media use on civic and political volunteering. We find the role of websites is greater than the role of social media in terms of predicting volunteering in civic and political organizations. This finding is replicated with two types of analysis (Tables 2 and 3). This finding is replicated for civic and political volunteering. The finding is also replicated in all countries (except in France for civic volunteering). However, given the finding is replicated in seven different comparisons (see Figure 1), the question is whether the France/civic volunteering finding is a theoretical anomaly or a statistical anomaly. Further research should study how French civic organizations may use social media differently than civic organizations in other countries. In particular, because following charities on social media has a stronger role in predicting volunteering in France compared to other countries, these organizations might offer some lessons for other countries on how to effectively mobilize citizens on social media. Additional research should use a content analysis of civic organizations' digital

media in these four countries to examine the different uses and their implications on volunteer recruitment. Overall, we find that both types of digital media uses have strong positive correlations with both civic and political volunteering.

Capitalizing on the large sample size, we split the respondents into four groups: social media followers, website users, users of both, and non-users. This additional analysis helps isolate the distinct role of websites versus social media. We explain the distinct roles in terms of the greater access to rich sources of information on organizational websites. Respondents who exclusively used civic or political organizations' websites were more likely to volunteer; the coefficient is larger than the coefficient for those who exclusively follow these organizations on social media. The combination of uses (both social media and websites) has the strongest role in mobilization to volunteer for civic and political groups. Further research should consider how this combination of uses occurs. In particular, do following social media accounts serve as a stepping stone toward website use (as suggested by the "ladder" discussion)? Or do people use websites first, then follow social media accounts to obtain news and updates? The findings suggest that both types of use can mobilize citizens to volunteer, suggesting that recruitment strategies should include both social media and websites.

Also, our measure of exclusively follow social media accounts offers some insights into the clicktivism or slacktivism debates, which claim that people engage in low-effort activities without following through with more effortful activities, such as volunteering. Very few people exclusively follow (a low-effort activity) organizations; only 1% of respondents for civic organizations and 3% for political groups. While the role of social media is smaller than websites, following social media accounts of civic and political groups has substantial positive roles in volunteer mobilization. In Table 2, the coefficient suggests that following social media accounts of civic and political groups doubles the odds of volunteering. In Table 3, we isolate the distinct role of social media and the coefficients are larger than those in Table 2. In sum, the data offer strong counter evidence that people engage in low-effort activities (e.g., following) and avoid the more intense high-effort activities (e.g., volunteering).

We did not offer directional hypotheses on cross-national effects because we argue – in line with existing research (Boulianne, 2020)—that these effects may be consistent across these four Western democracies, especially in relation to civic activities. These consistent findings align with the results of a meta-analysis of digital media use on civic and political participation (Boulianne, 2020). However, we systematically test country-specific results to examine this theory in relation to volunteering and digital media (Figure 1). In our sample, the American respondents are more likely to visit websites of political parties, but the differences do not manifest in differences in the estimated effects of this variable on volunteering. The findings replicate Towner and Muñoz's (Towner & Muñoz, 2018) finding that visiting campaign websites increases volunteering in the context of the 2012 US presidential election. We find the results are consistent across all four countries – websites have the same mobilizing potential for political volunteering in the US, UK, France, and Canada. As mentioned, prior studies of social media use in France do not find large effects on working for a campaign (Koc-Michalska, Gibson, & Vedel, 2014), but our new study finds substantial effects in France. This new finding could be explained by French citizens' greater uptake of social media since the 2012 election and/or changes in how campaigns and civic organizations use social media to mobilize volunteers.

A panel design with repeated measures would greatly advance our understanding of causal flows. Further research should explore the causal relationship between different types of digital media use with regard to volunteering, a high-effort form of civic engagement that is critical to the survival of civic and political organizations. We model the causal flow following existing research (Boulianne, 2020) based on a longitudinal (time-series) study (Enjolras, Steen-Johnsen, & Beyer, 2018). More recently, Erhardt and Freitag (2021) use a panel design to test the direction of causality. They find it depends on the type of digital media use – e-mail is more of a predictor than an outcome of membership in associations. In their models, e-mail and online information are the only digital

media uses with positive correlations with civic engagement. These positive effects are consistent whether online information and e-mail are modeled as the predictors of civic engagement or the outcomes. These findings validate our modeling choice but, more importantly, bolster our findings that digital media's effects on engagement in civic and political life should be theorized in terms of information and networking effects.

This paper is distinctive in its comparative approach. We compare websites to social media, civic versus political volunteering, and finally four countries. We find robust findings across these dimensions. The positive relationships between digital/social media and offline volunteering are similar across national contexts. Visiting websites and following nonprofits on social media have consistently positive and significant correlations across the four countries. Comparative research is useful for assessing the robustness of models across a variety of contexts (Loader, Vromen, Xenos, Steel, & Burgum, 2015). However, researchers should be careful about focusing on differences at the expense of seeing similarities (Boulianne, 2019). These four countries are quite similar in relation to digital media effects and volunteering, even though they are dissimilar in relation to the composition of their nonprofit sectors (Salamon & Anheier, 1998) and political systems (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021).

While considerable attention has been given to the role of social media in shaping civic and political engagement (Boulianne, 2015), our findings suggest visiting websites has a stronger (positive) correlation with volunteering. This indicates the importance of the informational function inherent to websites, which is distinct from the way information is pushed through social networks on social media. While building websites likely costs more than creating and maintaining a social media account, the larger coefficients suggest the costs may be worth incurring. Both variables have large positive relationships, but websites have a stronger correlation, suggesting that information, rather than quasi-membership, is more important in the recruitment process for volunteering. We argue that organizations' websites offer rich information about the organization, including its mission and need for volunteers. This information, along with more practical information about specific volunteer opportunities and application processes, leads to stronger correlations between websites and volunteering. We do not know if the stronger information needs are unique to volunteering as a distinctive form of civic engagement. In particular, volunteering is a demanding form of activity compared to donating to charities or candidates. Because volunteering is fundamentally embedded in mutually binding networks that can enable collective action (Wilson & Musick, 1998), this type of time-intensive collective action may demand greater information prior to making a commitment to volunteer for the organization.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Logistic regression for civic volunteering.

	US				UK				France				Canada			
	b	S.E.	ExpB	p	b	S.E.	ExpB	p	b	S.E.	ExpB	p	b	S.E.	ExpB	p
Visiting website of nonprofit or charity	1.827	0.114	6.214	0.000	1.717	0.121	5.565	0.000	1.502	0.106	4.491	0.000	1.611	0.118	5.009	0.000
Following a charity on social media	1.004	0.117	2.730	0.000	0.602	0.117	1.826	0.000	1.324	0.138	3.758	0.000	0.707	0.120	2.029	0.000
Age 25 to 34 years	-0.660	0.163	0.517	0.000	-0.169	0.168	0.844	0.313	0.023	0.180	1.023	0.899	-0.598	0.174	0.550	0.001
Age 35 to 44 years	-0.722	0.170	0.486	0.000	-0.491	0.176	0.612	0.005	-0.357	0.185	0.700	0.055	-0.653	0.178	0.520	0.000
Age 45 to 54 years	-1.415	0.177	0.243	0.000	-0.933	0.182	0.393	0.000	-0.480	0.187	0.619	0.010	-0.979	0.180	0.376	0.000
Ages 55 and up	-1.423	0.155	0.241	0.000	-1.059	0.163	0.347	0.000	-0.313	0.164	0.731	0.057	-0.856	0.159	0.425	0.000
Lower college	0.293	0.135	1.341	0.030	0.353	0.165	1.424	0.033	0.170	0.126	1.185	0.177	0.295	0.120	1.343	0.014
Bachelor's degree	0.351	0.123	1.421	0.004	0.371	0.116	1.449	0.001	0.287	0.131	1.333	0.029	0.479	0.122	1.615	0.000
More than a bachelor's degree	0.714	0.149	2.042	0.000	0.434	0.184	1.544	0.018	0.230	0.169	1.259	0.173	0.685	0.177	1.984	0.000
Income, Quintile 2	-0.080	0.155	0.923	0.608	-0.074	0.167	0.928	0.656	0.097	0.151	1.101	0.523	0.124	0.161	1.132	0.440
Income, Quintile 3	-0.056	0.165	0.945	0.734	-0.293	0.142	0.746	0.040	-0.153	0.154	0.858	0.320	0.100	0.150	1.105	0.506
Income, Quintile 4	0.362	0.155	1.436	0.019	-0.280	0.172	0.756	0.103	-0.162	0.165	0.850	0.325	0.066	0.143	1.068	0.647
Income, Quintile 5	0.504	0.164	1.655	0.002	-0.150	0.153	0.861	0.328	-0.022	0.179	0.978	0.903	0.087	0.159	1.091	0.584
Females	-0.395	0.093	0.673	0.000	-0.241	0.103	0.786	0.019	-0.300	0.095	0.741	0.002	-0.129	0.096	0.879	0.177
Data collected in 2021	0.004	0.046	1.004	0.935	-0.093	0.049	0.911	0.055	-0.075	0.047	0.928	0.110	-0.148	0.047	0.862	0.001
n	3015				2761				2791				2874			
Nagelkerke R Square	.339				.244				.234				.213			

The reference groups are: those aged 18 to 24 years; with a high school education or less; in the first income quintile; males; and respondents from 2019.

Table A2. Logistic regression for political volunteering.

	US				UK				France				Canada			
	b	S.E.	ExpB	p	b	S.E.	ExpB	p	b	S.E.	ExpB	p	b	S.E.	ExpB	p
Visiting website of a *political party or candidate*	2.129	0.205	8.408	0.000	2.228	0.216	9.280	0.000	2.106	0.199	8.218	0.000	1.665	0.212	5.288	0.000
Following a *political party* or *candidate* on social media	0.911	0.137	2.486	0.000	0.793	0.181	2.210	0.000	0.631	0.173	1.879	0.000	0.945	0.169	2.574	0.000
Age 25 to 34 years	-0.807	0.201	0.446	0.000	0.141	0.244	1.151	0.563	0.094	0.242	1.099	0.698	-0.731	0.249	0.482	0.003
Age 35 to 44 years	-0.702	0.208	0.496	0.001	-0.695	0.284	0.499	0.014	-0.628	0.271	0.534	0.020	-0.920	0.263	0.399	0.000
Age 45 to 54 years	-2.079	0.274	0.125	0.000	-0.917	0.299	0.400	0.002	-1.032	0.307	0.356	0.001	-1.266	0.285	0.282	0.000
Ages 55 and up	-1.733	0.219	0.177	0.000	-0.987	0.267	0.373	0.000	-0.728	0.244	0.483	0.003	-1.361	0.246	0.256	0.000
Lower college	-0.131	0.219	0.877	0.549	0.169	0.285	1.185	0.552	-0.077	0.211	0.925	0.713	0.095	0.225	1.099	0.673
Bachelor's degree	0.120	0.181	1.128	0.506	0.314	0.194	1.369	0.105	0.322	0.197	1.380	0.101	0.465	0.205	1.592	0.024
More than a bachelor's degree	0.625	0.208	1.869	0.003	0.891	0.274	2.438	0.001	-0.024	0.265	0.976	0.927	0.748	0.280	2.113	0.008
Income, Quintile 2	-0.038	0.230	0.963	0.869	0.235	0.273	1.265	0.391	0.258	0.243	1.295	0.288	-0.309	0.292	0.734	0.289
Income, Quintile 3	-0.270	0.259	0.764	0.297	0.251	0.237	1.285	0.290	0.178	0.253	1.195	0.482	-0.099	0.256	0.906	0.698
Income, Quintile 4	0.384	0.227	1.469	0.090	-0.178	0.302	0.837	0.556	0.230	0.270	1.258	0.395	-0.075	0.245	0.928	0.759
Income, Quintile 5	0.658	0.233	1.932	0.005	-0.018	0.264	0.982	0.945	0.226	0.288	1.253	0.433	0.114	0.260	1.121	0.661
Females	-0.557	0.137	0.573	0.000	-0.584	0.173	0.558	0.001	-0.465	0.156	0.628	0.003	-0.320	0.164	0.726	0.051
Data collected in 2021	0.011	0.066	1.011	0.864	0.180	0.081	1.197	0.027	-0.160	0.076	0.852	0.034	-0.140	0.081	0.869	0.083
n	3014				2759				2790				2874			
Nagelkerke R Square	.344				.276				.235				.209			

The reference groups are: those aged 18 to 24 years; with a high school education or less; in the first income quintile; males; and respondents from 2019.

Table A3. Logistic regression for civic and political volunteering with political interest.

	Civic volunteering				Political volunteering			
	b	S.E.	ExpB	P	b	S.E.	ExpB	p
Visiting website of a charity	1.542	0.058	4.673	0.000				
Visiting website of a political party					1.774	0.106	5.896	0.000
Following a charity on social media	0.832	0.060	2.298	0.000				
Following a political party on social media					0.569	0.082	1.766	0.000
Age 25 to 34 years	-0.332	0.084	0.717	0.000	-0.337	0.114	0.714	0.003
Age 35 to 44 years	-0.540	0.087	0.583	0.000	-0.703	0.123	0.495	0.000
Age 45 to 54 years	-0.962	0.089	0.382	0.000	-1.436	0.143	0.238	0.000
Ages 55 and up	-0.966	0.078	0.381	0.000	-1.415	0.120	0.243	0.000
Lower college	0.219	0.066	1.245	0.001	-0.095	0.114	0.910	0.404
Bachelor's degree	0.281	0.060	1.325	0.000	0.162	0.095	1.175	0.088
More than a bachelor's degree	0.450	0.082	1.569	0.000	0.421	0.121	1.523	0.000
Income, Quintile 2	-0.018	0.078	0.982	0.821	-0.018	0.127	0.982	0.887
Income, Quintile 3	-0.111	0.076	0.895	0.143	0.011	0.124	1.011	0.931
Income, Quintile 4	0.005	0.077	1.005	0.946	0.099	0.125	1.104	0.429
Income, Quintile 5	0.076	0.081	1.079	0.345	0.207	0.127	1.230	0.102
Females	-0.182	0.048	0.834	0.000	-0.413	0.078	0.662	0.000
Data collected in 2021	-0.062	0.023	0.940	0.008	-0.002	0.037	0.998	0.947
France	0.143	0.066	1.153	0.030	0.147	0.101	1.158	0.148
UK	-0.243	0.067	0.785	0.000	-0.094	0.104	0.910	0.365
Canada	-0.197	0.065	0.822	0.002	-0.279	0.103	0.756	0.007
Political interest	0.281	0.028	1.324	0.000	0.557	0.052	1.746	0.000
n	11,490				11,486			
Nagelkerke R Square	.263				.285			

The reference groups are: those aged 18 to 24 years; with a high school education or less; in the first income quintile; males; respondents from 2019; and the United States.