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Armchair citizenship and ontological insecurity: Uncovering styles of media and political behavior[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Media effects research has established a positive relationship between media and news consumption and political action—a “more-more” pattern. This paper identifies a coexistent “more-less” pattern in which more political engagement on social media is associated with limited political behavior offline. Traditional approaches that treat media behavior as an independent variable and political behavior as dependent miss this finding. Instead, this paper treats configurations of media and political behavior as styles, identified through latent class analysis (LCA). The data come from an original survey of American citizens about their encounters with political content on social media, their media habits, and their online expression of political attitudes to assess whether and how these media behaviors undermine their political and civic engagement offline. The latent class analysis of these data reveals three styles, which we label “actives,” “passives,” and “armchair citizens” (i.e., more-less). We then seek to make sense of this armchair citizen style—who would choose this style of media and political participation? An LCA regression model predicting membership into the armchair citizen class suggests that armchair citizen style is associated with experiencing what Giddens’ called “ontological insecurity.”

1. Introduction

Some people engage in heated political debates on Facebook but do not find time to vote. They may follow politicians or read news on Twitter but are reluctant to attend rallies or contact their congresspeople. Such people are who we call *armchair citizens*—politically engaged online, but not offline.¹ There is a long history of scholarship critical or dismissive of this style of political action. Early media effects work implied that media consumption “narcotized” people into inaction (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948). Later scholars (Putnam, 2000) feared that passive forms of media consumption would undermine Americans’ civic life by trading political, social, and civil

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¹ By labeling this behavioral pattern as armchair citizenship, we seek to avoid the anti-agentic trappings of “narcotizing dysfunction” or “slacktivism.” The language of armchair citizenship moves away from assuming apathy, and instead towards viewing this as a style of media and political engagement that warrants explanation.

engagement for hours sitting in front of the television. Today such fears extend to the practice of staring into smartphones. Popular accounts demonize “slacktivism” and lament Americans’ diminishing civic and political commitments (Morozov, 2011; Gladwell, 2010).

Despite such accounts of how media engagement dupes the public, most empirical research cannot find persuasive evidence of a negative relationship between media consumption and political participation. Scholars at the intersection of media and political engagement argue instead that media engagement tends to be *predictive* of political participation. News media exposure and political behavior are linked in a “virtuous” cycle (de Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006; see also Eveland & Scheufele, 2000; Norris, 2000), online news seeking encourages voting (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; Tolbert & McNeal, 2003), and using social media for information positively predicts civic and political participation online and offline (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). Across countries, social media increases political participation in both online and offline contexts (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021). Again and again, media effects research finds a *positive* relationship between media consumption and political participation—a “more-more” pattern. As one meta-analysis of studies on social media use and participation found, “more than 80% of coefficients are positive” (Boulianne, 2015).

This presents a puzzle. Are armchair citizens a phantom or a threat? Contemporary scholars of media effects suggest this negative relationship between media consumption and political behavior *does not exist*. Alternatively, those who criticize the media’s capacity to “narcotize” the public see armchair citizenship as a *threat* to civic life, democracy, and the health of our political system. In contrast to both positions, this paper (1) offers evidence that armchair citizens exist, and (2) argues that armchair citizenship is a response to social circumstances rather than indicative of civic and political deterioration.

We make two interventions along these lines. First, empirical work modeling a relationship between media practices and political engagement renders armchair citizens invisible, which we correct by using latent class analysis (LCA). Our analysis reveals a robust class of Americans who engage political news and content online but who are limited in their offline political participation. To identify armchair citizens, we analyze an original Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) survey of a nonrepresentative sample of U.S. citizens. The survey asks about respondents’ political engagement on social media, media habits, online political expression, and offline political and civic engagement. Using LCA allows us to identify independent patterns of media use and political participation. Latent tendencies—how patterns across variables hang together—make visible particular *styles* of media use and political participation. Ultimately, our analysis reveals three classes of people who have different configurations of social media and political engagement. We label these classes: actives (i.e., more-more), passives (i.e., less-less), and armchair citizens (i.e., more-less). Going further, our findings offer a surprising contrast with this literature on media and political participation. Not only do we identify the class of armchair citizens, we find that armchair citizens are *more prevalent* in our sample than people who engage in high rates of political engagement both on social media and offline (actives).

Second, by comparing how armchair citizens differ from the members of the active and passive class, we find that armchair citizens appear to actively *select* into online spaces for their political action. This, we argue, is a response to their sense of “ontological insecurity” (Giddens, 1991) rather than a “media effect.” We find that armchair citizens are much more likely to say the world is changing “too fast.” In response armchair citizens select into online spaces where they can feel more secure. We argue that our approach of identifying and explaining cultural *styles* of media and political behavior—theorized as configurations of practices and behavior—improves upon more established approaches that look at media practices as causes of political behavior.

2. Literature review

2.1. Media effects on civic and political participation

Concerns that media consumption has harmful effects on citizens’ political activities have a long history in scholarship on media and mass culture (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972; Bernays, 1928; Lasswell, 1971 [1927]). Lazarsfeld and Merton argue that mass media has functions and *dysfunctions*. Dysfunctions inhibit the growth of a good society. Identifying *narcotizing dysfunction*, they argue that the media encourages political thought and talk while *inhibiting political action*. When citizens are overwhelmed with news coverage, they engage in compulsive media consumption therefore trade keeping up with the news and talking politics for action.

As an increasing meed of time is devoted to reading and listening, a decreasing share is available for organized action... The interested and informed citizen can congratulate himself on his lofty state of interest and information and neglect to see that he has abstained from decision and action... He comes to mistake knowing about problems of the day for *doing* something about them (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948: 105–106).

While this hypothesis is intriguing, subsequent scholars did not find evidence for narcotizing dysfunction (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Wyatt et al., 2000) and noted challenges in measuring the concept (Hart, 1996).

In a similar vein, Putnam (1995 and 2000) suggests that media consumption is correlated with civic apathy. Putnam argued that the privatization of leisure and increases in media consumption limit social capital and consequently political life. Put simply, people make more time for television and less time for civic life. Subsequent studies of television undermined Putnam’s arguments about media’s influence on civic decline (Holtz-Bacha & Norris, 2001; Katz, 1996; Katz et al., 1997; Liebes & Peri, 1998), and critiques how Putnam treats media a monolith, finding different effects of news v. entertainment (Keum et al., 2004). Newspaper reading and television news watching appear to be positively correlated with political efficacy and political interest (Kanervo et al., 2005; Keum et al., 2004).

A related but distinct line of inquiry examines the phenomenon of “slacktivism.” A modern take on narcotizing for the social media age, concerns about slacktivism suggest that social media encourages low-effort forms of online activism (e.g., token support like retweets or changing profile pictures) that substitute for and suppress long-term activist efforts offline (Kristofferson et al., 2014). Put

more bluntly by Morozov, slacktivism is when “our digital effort make us feel very useful and important but have zero social impact.”² Slacktivism contrasts with a more hopeful view that dominated the advent of social media. Many scholars at that time predicted that putting personal networks online would mobilize political action. Social media seemed poised to amplify the “more-more” effect of the news, combining personal influence and news consumption (Katz, 2014).

There is some evidence for slacktivism. Kristofferson et al., (2014) suggest slacktivism occurs especially in public displays (v. private) as a form of impression management rather than political commitment. Hsiao and Yang (2018) find high social media use is negatively associated with offline activism among Sunflower movement participants, but that social media mobilizes offline activism for low and medium social media users. Despite some evidence in favor of slacktivism, most of the literature finds support for the initial enthusiasm that social media would boost political participation (e.g., Boulianne 2019, Ksiazek et al. 2010, Lu et al. 2016, Skoric & Zhu 2016, Yamamoto et al. 2015). Scholars of movements note social media’s capacity to coordinate publics, plan protests, and rapidly scale up mobilization (Bode et al., 2014; Tufekci, 2014; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). Research on online activism assesses the use of social media for political intervention and suggests that some “cloud activists” are equal in the political commitments but organize online instead (Hsiao & Yang, 2018). Few find evidence correlating social media use with decreasing political participation (e.g., Theocharis & Lowe, 2016).

The challenge with this research on social media and participation is that much of this work emerges from a social movement perspective. As such, much of this research focuses on people we call “actives” and misses those people who might be active on social media but inactive offline. Additionally, they focus on outcomes like coordination and mobilization, rather than assessing a broader swath of political activities. Like Bennett and Segerberg, we take the view that “greater restraint is in order for those who outright dismiss digitally mediated engagement as mere ‘slacktivism’ or ‘clicktivism’...likewise...equally inflated optimism about ‘Twitter Revolutions’ might be tamped down” (2013: 14).

Taking a broader view, media effects studies that assess the effect of news and media consumption on political participation would conclude that armchair citizens are not common in the U.S. (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; Boulianne, 2015; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Kanervo et al., 2005; Tolbert & McNeal, 2003; Valenzuela, 2013). This literature strongly suggests a more-more pattern: more news consumption is correlated with more political participation. Most studies show a positive relationship, while some demonstrate no significant correlation. None find a negative relationship between news consumption and political engagement. Despite the fact that *the majority of Americans fit a “less-less” profile*, the narrative of this literature is that engaging media—especially news—is virtuous and linked with increasing political participation.

2.2. The problem with media effects

The media effects research described above focuses on discrete behaviors rather than sets of practices in combination. Such studies model a relationship between news and media consumption or engagement (as an independent variable like time watching news programming) and measures of participation (as a dependent variable like likelihood of voting). A meta-analysis of these studies compared measures (Kanervo et al., 2005). When measuring media consumption, they variously consider hours spent consuming media (e.g., TV, talk radio, reading newspapers), or “active” news consumption (e.g., paying attention to news, news seeking, calling in to radio programs). To measure participation, they use typical measures of political action (e.g., writing to media/politicians; attending public meetings/rallies; voting; membership in political groups) and civic engagement (e.g., club/community group participation and volunteer work). A media effects approach presumes that media consumption in part *causes* political behavior.

Our approach differs from these earlier studies. We argue that scholars concerned with media effects are better served by looking for the latent patterns of participants’ media use and political participation. We move away from using a dependent variable of political participation to instead focus on the *patterns* of media use and political participation as a *style*. Here we follow our lead from Eliasoph and Lichterman’s (2003) discussion of styles of “civic participation” (see also Edgell Becker 1999). We treat styles (e.g. active, passive, or armchair citizenship) as our dependent variable and the phenomena to be explained.

This move has a number of advantages over analyses that treat discrete acts of media consumption as direct predictors of discrete political behaviors. A focus on style allows media to have differential effects on participation, making visible patterns of behavior like armchair citizenship that might get averaged out in a regression because of more common styles (passives). Establishing a style across a set of practices allows us to take a more comprehensive understanding of how people’s media and political behaviors *hang together*. Once established, we can ask what leads people to engage in these styles and identify mechanisms that might better explain this them. Rather than asking “does reading the news correlate with voting” which leaves a mechanism opaque, we can ask different kinds of questions like: “what mechanisms might explain why some people may want to be an active media consumer *and* active politically in the civil sphere?” or “What might explain why some adopt an armchair citizenship style of political engagement?” This gets us closer to human motivations than much work on media effects.

While there is substantial evidence to suggest that engaging social media and keeping up with the news is predictive of political participation, we suggest the literature has missed a subset of the population that combines higher levels of social media engagement with politics and low levels of traditional political participation—our armchair citizens. Before we walk through our LCA identifying an armchair citizen class, let us first introduce the mechanism we believe drives people to adopt an armchair citizen style: ontological insecurity.

² Morozov, Evgeny. 2009. “From slacktivism to activism.” *Foreign Policy*. September 9. Retrieved Oct 20, 2021. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/09/05/from-slacktivism-to-activism/>

2.3. Ontological insecurity

The concept of ontological insecurity comes from Giddens (1991). Ontological insecurity captures a sense that the world is moving under your feet and that you cannot trust social life to abide by expected rules. Rules and routines give people a sense of continuity and comfort in that the world will reliably behave in anticipated ways. “Ordinary day-to-day life involves an *ontological security* expressing an *autonomy of bodily control* within *predictable routines*. The psychological origins of ontological security are to be found in basic anxiety-controlling mechanisms” (Giddens, 1991: 50). Citing Garfinkel’s breaching experiments, Giddens theorized that an inability to predict the outcomes of everyday interactions leads to an overwhelming sense of dread and anxiety. How, then, do people respond to these anxieties?

Numerous scholars have picked up this concept of ontological (in)security and anxiety management to explain media and political behavior. With respect to media behavior, some have theorized that people use media to manage anxieties emerging from ontological insecurity (Areni, 2019; Georgieu, 2012; Silverstone, 1993). People’s practices around media are often routinized (e.g. daily newspaper reading, regularly checking social media, watching the evening news), and regular media engagement can offer a sense of stability and security. Areni (2019) argues that social media imparts a sense of ontological *security* to those who experience insecurity in their everyday lives. Political talk online may provide low-stakes identity affirmation in an insecure world. That reliance on media for routine also opens people up to exposure to destabilizing event or experiences that increase a sense of insecurity. Ostertag (2010) notes that news and media consumption can make us aware of chaos and instability in the world around us while people may simultaneously also use the news to cultivate a sense of ontological security. Media participation, therefore, may be a hollow refuge for managing anxiety and ontological insecurity. While people may value the stabilizing routine of engaging media, that same media may lead to upheavals around one’s place in the world.

This anxiety has effects on political behavior in that anxiety must be managed: “what manifests in social and political behavior are the routines, practices and narratives of everyday life that hold its [anxiety’s] awareness at bay” (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020: 246). With regard to politics, ontological insecurity has been linked to (Garland, 2002:155 and Wozniak, 2016) and support for populism (Steele & Homolar, 2019; Homolar & Scholz, 2019). Perrin et al. (2014) found that people’s sense of status anxiety that comes from ontological insecurity is correlated with expressions of support for the Tea Party. Tepper (2011) finds that respondents’ belief that the world is “changing too fast” predicts desire for the government to engage in increased control over TV content. Tepper also suggests that communities may prefer *symbolic* action as a response: “To seize control, communities, like individuals, resort to symbolic action – attacking, promoting, or reordering their symbolic environment in order to reassure themselves of some sort of normalcy” (2011: 62). Status anxiety may lead people to vocalize support for political agendas or actions that reinforce their identity and return to normal, but this may be limited to symbolic expression online rather than riskier and more public political behavior.

How might the literature on ontological insecurity explain the behavior of armchair citizens? Armchair citizens may avoid political participation while engaging online because social media increases their sense of security and alleviates anxiety. If the world changes too quickly, some people might not share the same reality as others in their community. To make sense of rapid changes, people may seek out the news or like-minded media sources. Ontological insecurity in the public sphere could increase social media use, but it is also possible that high social media use reinforces ontological insecurity. Paradoxically social media might increase their anxiety about how the world is spinning out of control. An unsteady sense of place in the world might make traditional political action challenging, opting instead for symbolic expressions in low-stakes online settings.

We have laid out our approach to conceptualizing armchair citizenship and outlined how ontological security may operate as a mechanism that encourages people to adopt this style of media and political behavior. We will now describe our survey data, discuss how we constructed our armchair citizenship dependent variable, and summarize our independent variables and associated hypotheses.

3. Data and analysis

We developed an original Qualtrics survey of media, political, and civic attitudes and behavior (Qualtrics, 2022). To measure political engagement, we borrow from the *Participation in America* survey—These surveys offer standard questions about political and civic engagement, protest behavior, and other political action.

To measure media behavior, we devised a series of questions to capture how people consume and engage social media. We asked about use of specific platforms, posting practices, responding practices, and engagement with news and political content. We also asked about political leanings, where they go for information, and which sources they trust.

We collected our sample via a survey we administered through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk), restricting our sample to adults over 18 living in the United States. MTurk’s platform supports posting tasks, like a Qualtrics survey, offering compensation for workers willing to complete the task. MTurk allowed us to affordably capture a large sample to test our suspicion that armchair citizenship was a hidden tendency in the population. Given the literature consistently suggests a strong “more-more” pattern, collecting a representative sample using a survey firm would be difficult to fund and risky should the data confirm the pre-existing patterns in the literature. MTurk offers an inexpensive way to establish proof of concept.

Affordability comes at a cost—we cannot claim we have a truly representative sample of Americans. For us, the question is whether our sample is representative *enough*—should our data produce suggestive findings that we might reasonably expect to find similar patterns in a representative sample. The literature on MTurk samples and data quality suggests that MTurk is appropriate for an exploratory study such as this and MTurk studies are increasingly published in prestigious journals. MTurk has been shown to better capture national demographics of the U.S. population than in-person or college convenience samples (Goodman & Paolacci, 2017;

Weinberg et al., 2014). Compared to college convenience samples, MTurk samples have more sociodemographic variance, consist of respondents who are more observant, and produce arguably higher quality data (McDonnell et al., 2022:892). Compared to nationally representative samples MTurk samples tend to be comparable in regional variation, urban-rural distribution, and employment, but tend to be higher educated and younger (see McDonnell et al., 2022 for a summary of these tendencies). Further, research conducted through MTurk reproduces results comparable to traditional randomly-sampled surveys (Berinsky et al., 2012; Mason & Suri, 2012; Weinberg et al., 2014).

We do not claim the proportion of armchair citizenship in this sample is representative of the American public, but a strong tendency in a nonrepresentative sample would suggest that other studies have missed this phenomenon. While MTurk workers' inclination toward online work may inflate the proportion of armchair citizens in our sample, our goal was to identify whether they substantially exist *at all*. Future studies based on a representative sample using random population-based surveys can assess the generalizability of these findings and offer a more accurate account of the distribution of armchair citizens. We collected responses in April 2018 and used attention checks to assess and ensure data validity.

In addition to media consumption and political practice measures, the survey included a measure of ontological insecurity, and we asked about their media consumption, political ideologies, and demographic characteristics. Our measures are described below. The analytic sample was $N = 712$ after listwise deletion across all of the dependent, independent, and control variables, which we discuss below. Descriptive statistics are listed in Table 1.

3.1. Constructing the dependent variable: armchair citizenship

3.1.1. Latent class regression

To account for distinct styles of political citizenship, we asked a battery of questions around people's social media and offline political behavior. We asked respondents about posting, sharing, and responding to political news content over social media, alongside classic questions about civic and political participation. These variables are listed and described in Table 2. There were 11 variables in total: six media use variables³ and five political practice variables.⁴ While not exhaustive, these capture a multitude of ways citizens engage politics online and offline.

Rather than assessing if particular indicators of media consumption independently predict differences in particular indicators of political participation, we sought to find a configuration of behavior where greater than average engagement with political media content was also associated with lower than average political behavior offline. We used LCA to identify groups of respondents who provide similar response patterns across the 11 variables. Using LCA allowed us to inductively identify a group with a response pattern indicative of armchair citizenship.⁵

Why use LCA to identify the presence of armchair citizens, rather than simply correlating media consumption with political participation measures? LCA allows us to isolate styles of political participation (e.g., armchair citizens) that are otherwise washed out in media effects scholarship. As we've discussed, media effects research looks to identify a linear relationship between media consumption and political participation (e.g., are people who consume news more likely to contact their congressperson?) to test whether peoples' media engagement explains their political action. This leads to claims like reading the news leads people to vote or protest, or watching sitcoms on TV suppresses such political activity. We believe it unlikely that singular media practices lead directly to singular political actions. Instead, these practices work as an ecosystem and we believe people navigate through this ecology of media and political action through patterned styles. A focus on styles let us assess how a variety of behaviors tend to hang together as configurations, without narrowly implying direct effects of media behavior. Taking this style-forward approach requires a method like LCA.

The goal of LCA is to detect these unobserved groups—or "latent classes"—from a set of observed and (usually) unordered categorical variables (McCutcheon, 1987). LCA groups together people who share similar responses across variables and therefore allows us to capture as a class those people who share a tendency toward a style across a range of practices. This leaves open multiple pathways of expressing a style rather than making too-narrow claims about how media practice "x" causes political action "y." LCA is a type of finite mixture model—i.e., a latent variable method that expresses the probability of an observed response pattern across a set of variables as the weighted sum of a set of group-specific joint response probabilities, where the groups are unobserved in the raw data (Masyn, 2013:552). Each latent class is defined by its distinctive response pattern across the observed variables; they are found by maximizing, across respondents, the joint probability that (1) any given respondent will belong to a certain class and (2) that they would pick the variable categories that they do, conditional on being in that class. Since the classes are mutually exclusive, the set of classes can itself be conceptualized as a latent nominal variable that explains away the associations between the observed categorical

³ Note that all our media use variables specifically measure *political* media use. Some in the slacktivism literature would consider this a form of activism, but it is not typically included in measures of political participation.

⁴ We borrowed the political practice variables from the political participation literature (Verba and Nie 1972), with the addition of a question about attending demonstrations from the National Study of Protest Events (Beyerlein et al. 2018). We do not include a measure of voting because it is generally an unreliable measure that does not accurately reflect behavior. These measures do not measure activism, but rather low-risk democratic engagement.

⁵ We used LCA rather than latent profile analysis (LPA)—which estimates latent classes from continuous observed variables instead of categorical ones—because some of the input variables in Table 2 consist of only three categories in their original scale. Calculating means and variances on these variables are precarious exercises with these variables. We therefore "binned" each of the observed variables in Table 2 into dichotomous variables (shown in Table 3), which we discuss in more detail later in this section.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics.

Variable	Mean (SD)/Proportion
Latent Classes	
Armchair Citizens	0.31
Actives	0.10
Passives	0.59
Ontological (In)Security	
Too Fast	0.52
Media Consumption Controls	
Online Media	0.58 (0.31)
Too Much	0.38
Political Controls	
Interest in Politics	2.13 (0.72)
Partisanship	
Conservative	0.24
Moderate	0.34
Liberal	0.42
Ideological Extremity	0 (1)
Congress	0.91 (0.78)
Government	1.64 (1.04)
Informed	0.85
Justices	2.23 (2.85)
Demographic Controls	
Age	1982 (10)
Female	0.43
Non-White	0.17
Income	4.67 (2.91)
Urbanicity	
Rural	0.20
Urban	0.34
Suburban	0.47

Note: All statistics derived from cases after listwise deletion ($N = 712$). Proportions may not sum to 1 due to rounding. The latent class proportions are the estimate population shares. For the income variable, the mean of 4.65 is between 4 = “\$40,000 - \$49,999” and 5 = “\$50,000 - \$59,999.”

Table 2
Variable summaries for LCA.

Variable	Description
postpol	How often do you post political content online? (0 = never; 6 = multiple times a day)
smsup	[In the past year] I shared about a politician I supported. (0 = never; 2 = often)
smsup	[In the past year] I shared about a politician I disliked. (0 = never; 2 = often)
frreply	Replying to [friends’] political content. (0 = unlikely; 4 = likely)
frshar	Sharing [friends’] political content. (0 = unlikely; 4 = likely)
smissue	[In the past year] I shared news articles about an issue I care about. (0 = never; 2 = often)
contact	[Have] contacted, or attempted to contact, a politician or a civil servant to express your views. (0 = have not and would never; 3 = in the past year)
demo	[Have] took part in a demonstration. (0 = have not and would never; 3 = in the past year)
fund	[Have] donated money or raised funds for a social or political activity. (0 = have not and would never; 3 = in the past year)
media	[Have] contacted or appeared in the media to express your views. 0 = have not and would never; 3 = in the past year)
rallyever	[Have] attended a political meeting or rally. (0 = have not and would never; 3 = in the past year)

variables. For details on our LCA procedure, please refer to our methodological appendix.

There are two important points that must be discussed before moving on to an interpretation of the latent classes derived from our 11 political practice and social media use variables. The first point is one of clarification: as Table 2 (and the original variable scales shown in Table 3) shows, all of the observed indicator variables are measured at the ordinal level. However, since we are interested in identifying respondents who have high engagement with social media and low engagement with offline political practices, we dichotomized all variables so that, effectively, 1 = “no/little engagement” and 2 = “high engagement” (see Table 3 for how each variable was converted from its original scale to a dichotomy). Dichotomizing the variables came with the benefit of “standardizing” the scales across the variables and thereby making class interpretation easier without losing the “low”-“high” differences that we are ultimately interested in.

Second, this paper seeks to identify what predicts membership in each class. LCA has advantages here compared to traditional media effects research. By treating armchair citizens as a group of people rather than armchair citizenship as a series of disaggregated effects (e.g., TV suppresses voting) we can then assess what correlates with each “style” of media and political behavior. Therefore we not only estimate the latent classes, but also model how the probability of class membership varies as a function of other covariates. We

Table 3
Dichotomous coding for 11 LCA input variables.

Social Media Use Variables					
Original Scale	postpol Dichotomous Coding	Original Scale	smsup Dichotomous Coding	Original Scale	smsup Dichotomous Coding
0 = Never 1 = Rarely 2 = Once a month 3 = <i>Once a week</i> 4 = <i>Twice a week</i> 5 = <i>Once a day</i> 6 = <i>Multiple times a day</i>	1 = Once a month or less 2 = <i>Once a week or more</i>	0 = Never 1 = <i>Sometimes</i> 2 = <i>Often</i>	1 = Never 2 = <i>Sometimes/Often</i>	0 = Never 1 = <i>Sometimes</i> 2 = <i>Often</i>	1 = Never 2 = <i>Sometimes/Often</i>
Original Scale	frreply Dichotomous Coding	Original Scale	frshar Dichotomous Coding	Original Scale	smsup Dichotomous Coding
0 = Unlikely 1 = Somewhat unlikely 2 = Neither likely nor unlikely 3 = <i>Somewhat likely</i> 4 = <i>Likely</i>	1 = Unlikely or neither likely/unlikely 2 = <i>Likely</i>	0 = Unlikely 1 = Somewhat unlikely 2 = Neither likely nor unlikely 3 = <i>Somewhat likely</i> 4 = <i>Likely</i>	1 = Unlikely or neither likely/unlikely 2 = <i>Likely</i>	0 = Never 1 = <i>Sometimes</i> 2 = <i>Often</i>	1 = Never 2 = <i>Sometimes/Often</i>
Offline Political Behavior Variables					
Original Scale	contact Dichotomous Coding	Original Scale	demo Dichotomous Coding	Original Scale	fund Dichotomous Coding
0 = Have not and would never 1 = Have not but might do it 2 = More than a year ago 3 = <i>In the past year</i> 4 = <i>Twice a week</i> 5 = <i>Once a day</i> 6 = <i>Multiple times a day</i>	1 = No 2 = <i>Yes</i>	0 = Have not and would never 1 = Have not but might do it 2 = More than a year ago 3 = <i>In the past year</i> 4 = <i>Twice a week</i> 5 = <i>Once a day</i> 6 = <i>Multiple times a day</i>	1 = No 2 = <i>Yes</i>	0 = Have not and would never 1 = Have not but might do it 2 = More than a year ago 3 = <i>In the past year</i> 4 = <i>Twice a week</i> 5 = <i>Once a day</i> 6 = <i>Multiple times a day</i>	1 = No 2 = <i>Yes</i>
Original Scale	media Dichotomous Coding	Original Scale	rallyever Dichotomous Coding		
0 = Have not and would never 1 = Have not but might do it 2 = More than a year ago 3 = <i>In the past year</i> 4 = <i>Twice a week</i> 5 = <i>Once a day</i> 6 = <i>Multiple times a day</i>	1 = No 2 = <i>Yes</i>	0 = Have not and would never 1 = Have not but might do it 2 = More than a year ago 3 = <i>In the past year</i> 4 = <i>Twice a week</i> 5 = <i>Once a day</i> 6 = <i>Multiple times a day</i>	1 = No 2 = <i>Yes</i>		

use latent class regression to do this, which simultaneously estimates the classes and the regression coefficients describing the extent to which a one-unit change in a covariate is associated with a change in the log-odds of class membership relative to a reference class (Linzer & Lewis, 2011:8). We used the polCA package in R (Linzer & Lewis, 2011) to estimate the latent class regressions.⁶

We estimated six different latent class models—ranging from a loglinear independence model (i.e., a 1-class solution) to a 6-class

⁶ The regression method still finds the latent classes that maximize a log-likelihood function, but this time altering the expectation-maximization algorithm with a Newton-Raphson step (Linzer and Lewis 2011:8).

solution—regressing the latent class membership probabilities on the covariates outlined in the “Independent Variables” below. We estimated each of the six models 10 times and selected the solution that maximized the log-likelihood. We then chose the model solution with the smallest BIC statistic: the three-class solution. Once we decided on a three-class solution, we then estimated 20 three-class models with different random starting parameter values (for the expectation-maximization algorithm) and then chose the particular solution with the smallest BIC statistic.⁷

We now turn to an interpretation of those three classes.

3.1.2. Interpreting the classes

The response probabilities, conditional on class membership, are visualized in Fig. 1. These probabilities can be interpreted as the probability that a respondent assigned to that particular latent class will answer that survey item with that response.

The class interpretations are straightforward. The armchair citizen class (leftmost) tends to have the highest probabilities of reporting high engagement on the social media use variables but low probabilities of reporting engagement in offline political behavior (though not the lowest). These respondents are *armchair citizens*, following a “more-less” pattern. The “actives” class (in the middle) tends to have respondents who are politically active on both social media *and* offline.⁸ These respondents follow the “more-more” pattern of social media consumption and offline political participation. Finally, the “Passives” class (rightmost) are the opposite: they report not being politically active at all, either on social media or offline. This is the “less-less” pattern.

Descriptively, both armchair citizens and actives have high likelihoods of engaging social media around politics than passives. Armchair citizens appear more similar than different on these social media measures, but the general pattern suggests that armchair citizens appear slightly more likely to post political content, share content about politicians, and share news articles about issues they care about. Looking at offline political behavior variables, Armchair citizens are very similar to the passives, with the exception of being slightly more likely than passives to donate or raise funds. Like the passives, armchair citizens do not usually take part in demonstrations, rallies, or contact the media to express their views.

The LCA partition estimated about 58.77% of the sample to be passives. This is not unexpected; most U.S. citizens are not active news readers, not politically active on social media, and not politically active offline. This passive pattern appears to drive most of the explanation for the media effects on political behavior reported in the literature. Surprisingly, armchair citizens *compose the second largest group*: 30.94%, with only 10.28% actives. This is evidence that linear models that emphasize the dominant more-more/less-less pattern to the presence of armchair citizens as noise in the residual. LCA reveals armchair citizens are not noise but a coherent style that traditional regressions of media consumption on political behavior miss. Our data suggest that armchair citizens’ “more-less” pattern of media consumption and political participation is, perhaps, *more prevalent* in the U.S. population than is the “more-more” pattern that the literature often discusses. More research with a more representative sample would need to be conducted to confirm these findings.

3.2. Independent variable and central hypothesis

As we showed in the LCA, there is an identifiable pattern in our sample wherein some people are very engaged on social media but do not participate in conventional political behavior offline. We’ve referred to this behavioral tendency as armchair citizenship. Next we go on to test whether ontological insecurity is associated with adopting an armchair citizen style of media and political behavior.

To test ontological insecurity, we asked respondents about the sense of the pace of social change. If people feel like the world is changing too quickly, that suggests they are experiencing ontological insecurity. We suggest that ontological insecurity is associated with the armchair citizen style.

Hypothesis: *People who believe that things are changing too fast are more likely to engage in armchair citizenship.*

To test this hypothesis, we borrow a question from the DDB Life Style Survey data used by Putnam (2000) and later by Tepper (2011) to measure ontological insecurity. We asked respondents to agree or disagree with the statement: “Things are changing too fast today.” This variable, called “Too Fast,” is operationalized with 0 = disagree and 1 = agree.

3.3. Controls

3.3.1. Media consumption controls

Online Media:

Armchair citizens might have higher preferences for online media relative to those who are politically active. We therefore control for the extent to which respondents consume online media. The variable, “Online Media,” is measured as the proportion of a respondent’s information sources that are online—i.e., online newspapers, online magazines, social media, or other places on the internet (versus print newspapers, print magazines, radio, TV, or books and other printed material).

⁷ The BIC statistics across the three-class solutions were, unsurprisingly, not very different from one another.

⁸ Note that “actives” are not the same as “activists.” Our political measures are for political participation, which casts a wider net than activism. Those who are politically active may not undertake high-risk political activism, but participate in low-risk democratic engagement, like contacting a politician, donating money, or attending a political meeting or rally. These measures generally capture those who are actively participating in politics beyond voting, including but not limited to activists.

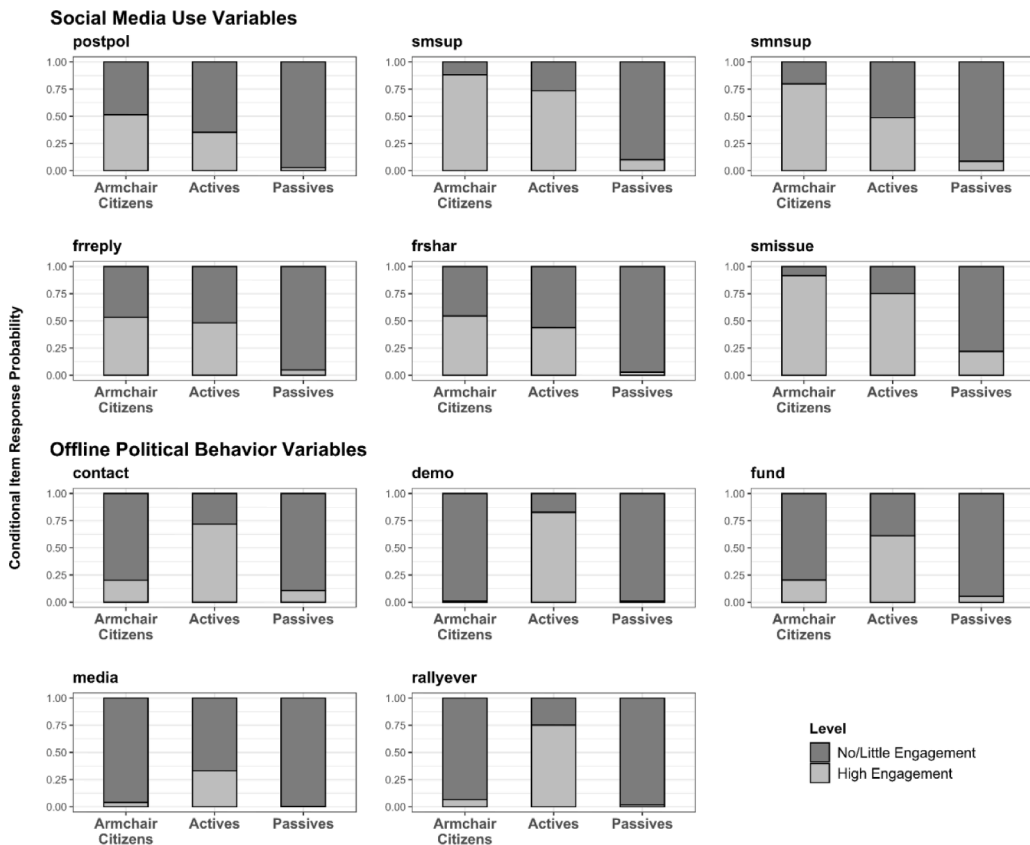


Fig. 1. Conditional item response probabilities across latent classes

Note: Each probability is interpreted as the probability that a respondent assigned to that class will answer that survey item with that response category. Estimated class membership distribution: $P_{AC} = 30.94\%$, $P_A = 10.28\%$, $P_P = 58.77\%$.

Feeling Overwhelmed by Media:

We controlled for whether respondents felt overwhelmed by the volume of news circulating on social media. People who are overwhelmed might actively avoid news. Alternatively, as Merton and Lazarsfeld’s narcotizing dysfunction would suggest, the “outpourings of the media enable the twentieth century American to “keep abreast of the world” yet “this flood of information may serve to narcotize, rather than to energize the average reader or listener” (1948, 105). By controlling for feeling overwhelmed by the news we can better isolate the effects of ontological insecurity – rather than just insecurity due to the volume of news. We measure this with the dichotomous variable “Too Much.” Respondents were asked: “Do you feel overwhelmed by the amount of news on social media?” (0 = no; 1 = yes).

3.3.2. Political controls

Interest in Politics:

We controlled for the respondent’s own interest in politics with the following question: “How interested would you say you personally are in politics?” The answers ranged from 0 = “Not at all interested” to 3 = “Very interested.” This continuous variable is called “Interest in Politics.”

Partisanship:

We controlled for the respondent’s political position with the following question: “We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. I’m going to show you a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal point 1 to extremely conservative point 7. Where would you place yourself on this scale?” Respondents used a continuous sliding scale to position themselves between 1 and 7. Larger values indicate a more conservative respondent, while smaller values indicate a more liberal candidate. We binned the partisanship scale into three roughly equal intervals using the cut() function in R, labeling them “liberal,” “moderate,” and “conservative.” The reference category is “moderate.”

Ideological Extremity:

We controlled for the respondent’s ideological extremity politics by using the same question for the partisanship variable. “Ideological Extremity” (1) standardizes the partisanship variable to range from -1 (more liberal) to +1 (more conservative), and (2) takes the absolute value of the scores, so that the “Ideological Extremity” variable ranges from 0 (not at all partisan or ideological) to +1 (strong ideological commitment, whether liberal or conservative).

Political Efficacy:

A sense of efficacy is a predictor of political participation (Valentino et al., 2009), possibly more than knowledge (Solhaug, 2006). Moeller et al. (2014) show that active participation in online politics correlates with political efficacy. We controlled for respondents' sense of political efficacy at an individual and group level. We asked respondents: (1) "If you attempted to contact Congress, how likely is it that the Congress would give serious attention to your demands?"; and (2) "How much say do people like you have about what the government does?" The first variable, "Congress," was coded from 0 = "none" to 4 = "a great deal." The second variable, "Government," was coded from 0 = "not at all likely" to 3 = "very likely."

Feeling Informed:

Knowledge about current events differs throughout the population, so we controlled for the extent to which the respondent sees themselves as well informed. Respondents answered: "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? I feel I have a pretty good understanding of the important political issues facing America." Answers ranged from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree." Lower level categories were sparsely chosen, so we created a dummy variable where 0 = "do not agree" and 1 = "agree to some extent."

Political Knowledge:

Lastly, we controlled for actual political knowledge, as compared to perceived knowledge. We asked respondents: "Off the top of your head, can you name any of the Supreme Court Justices?" We offered nine text boxes to enter the justices' names. The "Justices" variable counts the total number of Supreme Court Justices correctly named, ranging from 0 to 9.

3.3.3. Demographic controls

Age:

We controlled for age using the year the respondent was born.

Gender:

We controlled for gender using a dichotomous variable, where 0 = male and 1 = female. Male was the reference category.

Race-Ethnicity:

Table 4

Estimated change in log-odds of being an active/passive relative to being an armchair citizen.

	Actives vs. Armchair Citizens		Passives vs. Armchair Citizens	
	$\hat{\beta}$	$SE_{\hat{\beta}}$	$\hat{\beta}$	$SE_{\hat{\beta}}$
Ontological (In)Security				
Too Fast	-0.894***	(0.174)	-0.636**	(0.220)
Media Consumption Controls				
Online Media	-0.380***	(0.094)	0.616*	(0.289)
Too Much	0.631**	(0.182)	-0.368	(0.211)
Political Controls				
Interest in Politics	0.643**	(0.236)	-0.567**	(0.178)
<i>Partisanship (ref = Moderate)</i>				
Conservative	-0.760***	(0.160)	-0.237	(0.139)
Liberal	0.684***	(0.126)	0.004	(0.150)
Ideological Extremity	-0.104	(0.163)	-0.200*	(0.100)
Congress	-0.057	(0.204)	-0.570**	(0.166)
Government	-0.052	(0.196)	-0.099	(0.125)
Informed	0.058	(0.087)	-0.265	(0.252)
Justices	0.129**	(0.060)	-0.070	(0.041)
Demographic Controls				
Age	-0.001***	(0.000)	0.001***	(0.000)
Female	0.567**	(0.195)	-0.138	(0.199)
Non-White	0.021	(0.125)	-0.530*	(0.255)
Income	-0.072	(0.068)	-0.000	(0.037)
<i>Urbanicity (ref = Urban)</i>				
Rural	-0.645***	(0.100)	0.267	(0.248)
Suburban	-0.291	(0.171)	0.611**	(0.212)
Constant	-0.000	(0.001)	-0.001	(0.001)
Entropy R^2	0.870			
BIC ₃	6351.695			
Δ BIC ₃₋₄	-19.939			
Δ BIC ₃₋₂	-126.742			
Δ BIC ₃₋₁	-1667.861			
Pearson's χ^2	2904.828			
G^2	885.446			
N	712			

Note: Negative coefficients indicate a higher likelihood of being an armchair citizen.

* $p < .05$,

** $p < .01$,

*** $p < .001$ (two-tailed t-tests).

We controlled for race-ethnicity using a dichotomous variable, where 0 = white and 1 = non-white. White was the reference category.

Total Household Income:

We controlled for estimated total household income in the previous year (before taxes) with an 11-category variable, ranging from 0 = “Less than \$10,000” to 11 = “More than \$150,000.” We treated this variable as a continuous measure.

Urbanicity:

We controlled for urbanicity using a three-category variable, where 0 = rural, 1 = urban, and 2 = suburban. Urban was the reference category.

3.4. Analytic strategy

As stated before, we use latent class regression to test our hypotheses for membership in the armchair citizen class. We use the armchair citizen class as the reference in the models below. As such, two separate models are reported: one for the armchair citizen contrast with the actives, and another for the armchair citizen contrast with the passives.

4. Results

The latent class regression results are presented in Table 4. We outline the results below.

4.1. Ontological insecurity

Following the work of Giddens and others on ontological insecurity, we hypothesized that a sense of ontological insecurity might lead people to engage in an armchair citizenship style of media and political behavior. We assessed whether people who thought things are changing too fast might be more likely to be armchair citizens. We find strong evidence to support this hypothesis. Compared to actives and passives, armchair citizens are much more likely to claim that things are changing too fast. This is the only variable which is (1) significant in the comparisons to both actives and passives and (2) where the direction of the relationship is the same. This gives us confidence that ontological insecurity is the *distinctive difference* for understanding the armchair citizen style. Fig. 2 depicts the difference in predicted probabilities of being in each class by our measure of ontological insecurity (“too fast”). The predicted probability of being an armchair citizen for a respondent who the world is changing too fast is about 38% while the same probability for a respondent who does *not* think this is about 24%. This means that, for a respondent who has the mean answer to all other predictor variables but who goes from thinking the world is *not* changing too fast to thinking that it *is* changing too fast, the probability of them being an armchair citizen increases by about 15 points. This is about a 58% increase. The same percent change for the probability change for actives and passives is a 35% decrease and 16% decrease, respectively. This figure makes clear the stark differences in how members of these classes answer the “too fast” question.

4.2. Media consumption controls

We controlled for the proportion of news sources consumed online (“online media”). Armchair citizens consume a higher proportion of their news online than actives, but armchair citizens consume a lower proportion of their news online than passives.

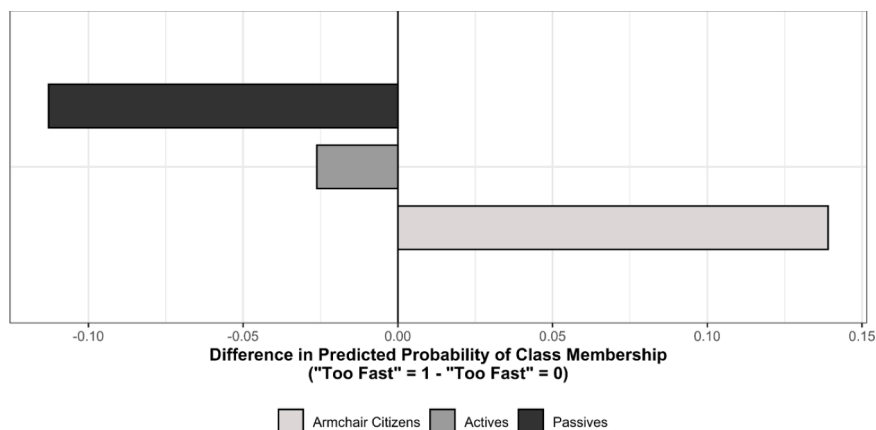


Fig. 2. Differences in predicted probabilities

Note: Bars lengths indicate the difference in predicted probabilities when going from a 0 on the “Too Fast” variable to a 1. Predicted probabilities are derived from the LCA regression results in Table 4. Predicted probabilities are adjusted predictions at the means (APMs; Williams 2012), meaning that all control variables are held at their sample mean values.

Ultimately, it appears armchair citizens find themselves somewhere between actives and passives in their online (versus offline) news consumption. We also controlled for whether respondents felt overwhelmed by the amount of news on social media. Compared to actives, armchair citizens were less likely to feel overwhelmed by news on social media. Feeling overwhelmed by the amount of news on social media (“Too Much”) has a statistically significant *negative* association with armchair citizenship when compared to actives. There was not a significant difference when armchair citizens were compared to passives. To summarize, comparing armchair citizens to actives, armchair citizens consume more of their news online and are less likely to feel overwhelmed by the volume of news. This suggests that compared to actives, armchair citizens may have a certain ease or preference for engaging online rather than offline and a willingness to consume, share, and comment on news on social media.

4.3. Political controls

Armchair citizens tend to be less interested in politics than actives in our sample (“intpol”). Armchair citizens are no more likely to say they feel informed about politics in America (“informed”), but armchair citizens appear to have less factual knowledge of national politics (“justice”) than actives. Armchair citizens are more likely to identify as conservative (“partisan”) than actives and actives lean more liberal. Compared to actives, our measures of ideological extremity (“ideo”) and respondents’ perceived political efficacy (“govsay”) and “congress”) are not correlated with being in the armchair citizen class.

Compared to passives, we find that armchair citizens are *more* interested in politics. Armchair citizens are no more or less partisan than passives in our sample. Armchair citizens appear to express more political efficacy than passives on one of our measures (“congress”) but not the other (“govsay”). Our respondents’ degree of ideological extremity (“ideo”) or our test of respondent’s knowledge of current national politics (“justice”) were not correlated with being an armchair citizen in our comparisons with passives.

To summarize the political controls (see Table 5 for a narrative summary), armchair citizens are less interested in politics than actives, but more interested than passives. Compared to actives, armchair citizens have less political knowledge and are more conservative. Compared to passives, armchair citizens are more ideologically extreme and feel more political efficacy.

4.4. Demographic controls

Compared to actives, armchair citizens are older, more male, and more rural than urban. Compared to passives, armchair citizens are younger, more urban than suburban, and less White For a narrative summary of demographic control patterns see Table 6.

5. Discussion

To summarize, we first identified three latent classes within our sample, which we have labeled *actives* (relatively more online media, more offline political participation), *passives* (relatively less online media, less offline political participation), and *armchair citizens* (relatively more online media, less offline political participation). These classes confirm a story established in previous research that most U.S. citizens seem to be passive, but that for some engaging media is associated with offline political action. While most Americans do not appear interested in engaging politics online or offline, some minority of people adopt a more active style, engaging in political behavior on social media and offline.

Moving beyond this finding established in the literature, our findings tell an *important and surprising* story. Looking for latent classes revealed a third style of media and political behavior that complicates the “virtuous cycle” narrative: Armchair Citizens.⁹ In our sample, armchair citizens are more prevalent than actives, comprising about one third of our respondents and three times the size of our actives class. In seeking to identify characteristics that predict membership in the armchair citizen class, our strongest finding is that respondents with an armchair citizenship style are more likely to believe things are changing too fast. This offers evidence for our ontological insecurity hypothesis.

We learn that there are important differences in media behavior for armchair citizens compared to actives and passives. Compared to actives, armchair citizens do not feel overwhelmed by news on social media and consume a larger proportion of their news online. This suggests they feel more comfortable in online spaces than actives. In light of our results on ontological insecurity, our media controls indicate that while armchair citizens are more ontologically insecure about the world, they are not overwhelmed by news online. Armchair citizens are less interested in politics, less knowledgeable about political matters, and more conservative than actives. Armchair citizens are also older, more male, and more rural than actives.

Compared to passives, armchair citizens consume less of their news through online sources. Armchair citizens are more interested in politics, more ideologically extreme, and feel more political efficacy than passives. Armchair citizens are younger, more urban, and

⁹ Theoretically, this framework implies a fourth possible style: less-more. People in this cell typically would not engage in politics via social media, but would be active in their offline political participation. Searching for cases that might fit this style, at most 1.7% of our sample might fit this profile, and they were not picked as an LCA class in our analysis. We are reluctant to speculate about this group given their lack of representation in our data. It could be that using a Qualtrics internet survey panel may have suppressed the number of people who do not engage in much social media. We suspect that a representative sample would have difficulty finding this style, given that a recent Pew study finds that 86% of Americans get their news online, with the majority of young people accessing via social media (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/12/more-than-eight-in-ten-americans-get-news-from-digital-devices/>). For those small percentage who engage in this less-more style, they are politically active but may just prefer not to be public about their politics or get into debates in an online setting.

Table 5

Narrative summary of political controls on being in armchair citizen class (versus Actives and Passives).

	Armchair Citizens v. Actives	Armchair Citizens v. Passives
Interest in Politics	AC less interested in politics, Actives more interested	AC more interested in politics, Passives less interested
Feel Informed	No Difference	No Difference
Political Knowledge	AC less knowledgeable, Actives more	No Difference
Partisanship	AC more Conservative, Actives more Liberal	No Difference
Ideological Extremity	No Difference	AC more ideologically extreme, passives less
Political Efficacy	No Difference	AC feel more efficacy, Passives less

Table 6

Narrative summary of demographic controls on being in armchair citizen class (versus Actives and Passives).

	Armchair Citizens v. Actives	Armchair Citizens v. Passives
Age	AC are older, Actives are younger	AC are younger, Passives older
Income	No Difference	No Difference
Gender	AC are more male, Actives more Female	No Difference
Urban v. rural	AC are more rural, Actives more Urban	No Difference
Urban v. suburban	No Difference	AC are more urban; Passives more suburban
Race	No Difference	AC are less White, Passives more White

less white than those adopting a passive style.

What insights does this portrait of armchair citizens reveal? Our data tell a story of armchair citizens that paint them as feeling uneasy about changes in the world, interested in politics (but not as much as actives), feel more political efficacy than passives. That uneasiness about the world may keep them away from politics in the streets, but they appear more comfortable in online spaces than actives—meaning they engage in politics and express their political efficacy on social media rather than in public at a rally or contacting a politician. They are less informed than actives, but informed enough to be aware of and attentive to how things are changing. They tend to be more conservative than actives (and older, male, and rural)—they may be more resistant to the changes around them and taken-for-granted traditional ways of being. What does this tell us about how ontological security is operating as a mechanism?

5.1. Ontological insecurity

Believing that things are changing too fast *did* predict membership in the armchair citizen class as compared to the active and passive classes. That armchair citizens have a sense that things are changing *too fast* suggests a lack of control, a break from expectation. For Giddens, a sense that “chaos lurks” is always a threat (1991, 36). If change is chaotic and unpredictable, people might demobilize and hunker down with what feels safe, rather than risk the public sphere. Some see change as concerning, but assured that those changes are explainable and potentially fixable. Others see chaos, and tuck back into their shell.

Those adopting an armchair citizenship style may seek out social media to increase ontological security, as [Areni \(2019\)](#) suggests, but high usage of social media to get the news may also reinforce a sense that things are changing too fast. As such, social media may reinforce ontological insecurity and commitment to armchair citizenship. Consuming news online and engaging in political exchange on social media is a double-edged sword, serving as a way to stay informed about the chaos while affirming the ontological insecurity that inhibits people from taking political action offline. This offers further evidence in line with [Perrin et al. \(2014\)](#) and [Tepper \(2011\)](#) that ontological insecurity could illuminate a variety of puzzling and under-explained modes of political engagement. Perrin et. al. find ontological insecurity is predictive of *expressions* of support for the tea party but did not analyze whether they had *actively* joined them. In this sense, ontological insecurity may encourage low-risk symbolic politics ([Tepper, 2011](#)) like engaging in dialogue and debate on social media.

5.2. Social media

Our analysis offers insight into how ontological insecurity and social media practices push people toward an armchair citizen style. Online media is the dominant source of political information (as opposed to a mix of social media, print, TV, radio, and newspapers) for armchair citizens (compared to actives). Paired with our finding that armchair citizens do not feel overwhelmed by the volume of news on social media, this may indicate that online spaces work differently for armchair citizens than the offline spaces about which they feel insecure. One interpretation is that social media may be a refuge for those uncomfortable with offline political action. The affordances of social media may facilitate these tendencies. Practices of curating feeds, anonymous commenting, lurking, or trolling may protect from threats to ontological security. In this sense, social media can be made to feel safe even as the offline world changes too fast.

Our findings on how informed armchair citizens are suggest they are less informed relative to actives. Thinner knowledge might result from solely participating in social media for information. Scrolling through headlines and 140-character tweets might allow people to stay current without deeper context. It is possible that Lazarsfeld and Merton may have been right that “being informed” sometimes prevents political action, but not because armchair citizens achieve an astute political awareness, satisfying their sense of

civic duty. Instead, it is possible to know the issues without enough context or confidence to know how to act.

6. Conclusion

Our novel approach—using LCA to identify different styles of media and political engagement— confirms the presence of the “virtuous” more-more style, but also finds evidence for a comparable tendency toward armchair citizenship among about of our respondents. Some Americans actively consume political news and participate in dialog around politics on social media, but also avoid engaging in political action offline. Imagine, if you will, two people who turn their Facebook profile black, share a post about Black Lives Matter, or engage in a Twitter debate about racism and policing. One may be buoyed by this online participation and seek out rallies or donate to anti-racist causes—some of which they have learned about through social media. This pattern aligns with research on media effects, movements, and social media that offer an agentic view of media that mobilize people into action. Another person may engage in those *same social media activities*, but their political activity begins and ends online, never acting on those politics by voting, attending a rally, or donating money to a cause they support. This latter person would normally be associated with political apathy, slacktivism, or narcotizing dysfunction. We take a more neutral stance, preferring to see this person as adopting an armchair citizenship style. Much needs to be done to understand the contours of this style of media and political engagement.

Are people who are disinclined to act politically offline, perhaps due to ontological insecurity, *selecting into* the safety of social media platforms? Or does social media have a narcotizing effect, leading people to engage in the medium at the expense of offline political participation? It is difficult to tease out the causal direction of the relationship without longitudinal data, though we believe our evidence lends more support for the former. Future studies with population-based random samples can better assess these questions.

Does armchair citizenship permit greater freedoms to engage in politics for those experiencing ontological insecurity? What might be the political effects of online-only engagement from those who adopt this style? Even if the behavior is predominantly online, those who engage in armchair citizenship still act politically. Social media gives space for political expression that might have been kept private, due to ontological insecurity. Armchair citizens might take to social media to be political in ways that weren't possible before. The distinction between more-more and more-less tendencies demands further inquiry to assess whether armchair citizenship is a source of potential political power. Research is needed to adjudicate whether armchairs are a good place to take a nap, or a new platform for political participation with new tactics and opportunities for political action.

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Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:[10.1016/j.poetic.2023.101764](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2023.101764).

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