Exploring Factors Associated With Digital and Conventional Political Participation in the Caribbean

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ABSTRACT

The use of social media is becoming a feature of political engagement in the Caribbean. This article investigates factors associated with digital and conventional political participation in Jamaica, Trinidad & Tobago, Guyana, Surinam and Haiti using 2012 AmericasBarometer dataset. Based on logistic regression, attitudinal factors positively associated with digital political participation are: political understanding, support for democracy, conventional political participation, and internet usage. Digital political action is less likely for the politically tolerant. Engagement in protest is positively associated with digital political action, signing petition, greater levels of education, being male but less likely for those who use the internet. These findings demonstrate that digital political action and conventional political participation are mutually reinforcing.

KEYWORDS

Caribbean, Democracy, Digital Action, Internet, Political Efficacy, Political Participation

INTRODUCTION

There has been worldwide diffusion of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) as participatory social media tools. This diffusion of ICTs presents opportunities for individuals to participate in the affairs of their communities in relation to pertinent social and political issues, especially through the use of participatory social media such as Twitter, Facebook, or Orkut. The creation of social media facilitates the emergence of new and free cyber-based forums for discussions on matters of general public interest (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010); providing mobilizing information and news not available in other media (Valenzuela, 2013, p. 3); and as a mechanism to share political information (Davis, 2010). In view of that, citizens around the world have become increasingly interested in the use of digital technologies such as mobile phone and internet-enabled devises to engage in campaigns for social and political change (Joyce, 2010), which is considered a relatively new phenomenon (Edwards, Howard, & Joyce, 2013).

In using internet and mobile phones, people interested in effecting change with respect to social and political issues could build social networks, organize political action and mobilize for political

activism. In that context, the rise of new technologies may facilitate people's awareness of current social and political issues coupled with providing them with the tools to actively participate in public life (Ward & Vedel, 2006); and politically mobilize and engage new groups that are traditionally underrepresented in more traditional forms of participation (Norris, 2001). These tools may facilitate easy access to information from a variety of sources and further enhance diffusion of protest practices leading to the development of citizens who are better-informed and equipped to participate in the decision-making processes of their communities—in order to bring about the desirable socio-political change.

A number of studies which examined the uses of social media for citizen engagement show that they are platforms for promoting political discussions, organizing offline political activities, developing civic skills, mobilizing for political motives, stimulating political expression (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014); and consistently enhancing political participation (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009; Vitak et al., 2011). It is in that context that social media use may enhance political knowledge and efficacy which may facilitate political participation (Jung, Kim, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2011; Boulianne, 2015).

Recent studies demonstrated that the use of social network sites to seek or consume political information is significantly related to offline political participation (Conroy, Feezell, & Guerrero, 2012; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, Valenzuela, 2012; Skoric & Poor, 2013). Similarly, there is a positive relationship between online expression and offline political engagement, such as protest participation (Macafee & De Simone, 2012). Such evidence so far is mostly limited to Western industrialized nations. To what extent are these phenomena observable in small island states in the Caribbean which have different social, cultural and political contexts?

In the Caribbean, there has been a dramatic increase in the ownership of new technology such as smart phones, tablets, etc. Interestingly, it is not just the ownership of such new technology that is on the rise, it is also apparently enabling a growing number of people to use social media such as Facebook and Twitter to get and share political news, get information on government services, and for entertainment. In that regard, governments across the region are looking into the potential for using social media to enable citizens make their opinions about pertinent social and political issues known. Crucial to the region's development will be the extent to which it can harness social media to compensate for its steady decrease in conventional political participation (Broome & Adugu, 2015). This notion raises the following pertinent research questions.

Research Question 1: How do the characteristics of individuals who engage in conventional political participation differ from those who engage in the growing phenomenon of digital political action?
Research Question 2: To what extent are the socio-demographic and attitudinal profiles of those who engage in conventional political participation different from those who engage in digital political action?

Answers to these questions are important for theorizing on the nature of both digital and conventional political participation in the context of the Caribbean nations used in this study.

CARIBBEAN POLITICAL SYSTEM: AN OVERVIEW

The major political system in the Caribbean is democracy, with multi-party systems. Democratic politics is institutionalized. Countries in the region have competitive party systems which are essential for democracies. In that context, the Caribbean is among the most democratic regions of the developing world. As in advanced democracies, political parties in the Caribbean organize, educate and mobilize citizens to make their voices heard and take action for desirable changes in their respective societies. The region continues to experience changes in government due to free and fair elections—with generally high rates of voter participation.

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