

The Mobile Presidential Election

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INTRODUCTION

A number of scholars (e.g. Campbell, 1960; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993) argue that the reason why some individuals are less likely to vote is based on costs and benefits. In particular, the young have to expend greater energy (costs) to get registered, familiarize themselves with the candidates and issues and get to the polls. In addition, they have greater competing demands on their time (which can include school, job search and dating); therefore, the benefit from voting can be less (Wolfinger & Rosenstone 1980, pp. 55-60; Rosenstone & Hansen 1993, pp. 163-169). Adding support to this argument is McAtee & Wolak (2011) who found that lack of information is the reason most often cited for not participating.

The obstacles these voters face can be overcome by high stimulus and information rich elections. During such elections (e.g. presidential elections), individuals are bombarded by election news, which dramatically lowers the cost of obtaining information. In addition, the excitement surrounding a high profile election makes its outcomes seem more significant and increases the perceived benefit of participating. These findings suggest that solutions to low turnout should encompass lowering the cost of participating or increasing the perceived benefits or both.

One method of increasing the perceived benefit is through making personal appearances often referred to as the “ground war.” This is an older technique for campaigning that involves both phone calls and house-to-house canvassing.

Over time this method has taken a backseat to the “air wars” or using mass media such as Internet, television or radio to reach voters. Recently, however, national candidates have begun making the “ground war” a more significant part of their campaign strategy. One reason is that the electorate has become more polarized. Because the political center is shrinking, it no longer seems as practical to make broad appeals to the electorate. Instead, reaching out to the base with targeted messages is becoming a major strategy. For example, modern presidential campaigns typically spend 70-75% of their war chest on the “air war.” In 2008, however, the Obama campaign only spent 50% of campaign funds on the mass media and instead elected to focus more money on the “ground war” (Hershey, 2013).

The “ground war” has become easier with advances in cell phone technology. A Pew Internet & American Life Project Survey (2012) found that approximately 88% of registered voters own a cell phone and made extensive use of it for political activities. The survey also found that smartphone owners were particularly apt to use their cell phone for political activities including fact checking political statements and taking part in political discussion on social network sites.

The fact that citizens are using their cell phones for activities ranging from fact checking candidate statements in real time to presenting their own personal views on social network sites has not been lost on candidates. Recently, some political candidates have adopted a number of strategies using cell phones to reach the electorate including integrating Mobile Apps into their campaign

strategy for connecting with the public. Mobile Apps have been used for a variety of activities ranging from newsletter registration to micro-donation, “a payment or donation a person has charged to their mobile device bill,” and polling (Pessin 2010). For example, Missouri Democrat Tommy Sowers used an App to have supporters pay the \$50 fee for admission to a political fundraiser (Quittschreiber, 2011).

These examples are just anecdotal. What do we know about the effect mobile phones are having on increasing voter turnout? Americans are turning to their cell phones for news and information on the presidential campaign, and candidates are adopting “ground war” strategies that utilize the widespread adoption of smartphones. Does smartphone related political activism influence early voting or getting first time voters to the polls? To examine these questions, this chapter presents an examination of the 2012 presidential election and the role mobile phones played in campaign efforts to mobilize voters.

BACKGROUND

Both researchers and pundits alike made early predictions on how new telecommunication technology (Internet) might influence political participation. Forecasts ranged from hopeful to pessimistic. Theoretically, there was reason to be encouraged. The Internet had potential to both decrease the “cost” of participation and increase the perceived “benefits.” There are several ways the Internet might help to lower costs. The first is through making political information easier to obtain through online news. It might also reduce the cost of participation through providing individuals with opportunities to discuss politics. Initially, this would have taken place through venues such as chatrooms, but would later expand to include social network sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

Going online to discuss politics may act as an additional means of obtaining political information, and discussing politics with others

might also encourage participation. This follows from deliberative democracy, one of the earliest theories linking political participation and the media. Underlining this theory is the idea that when people take part in political conversations, they form opinions that ultimately translate into political participation. The media acts as a catalyst for conversation; it provides individuals with information to use during discussion (Bryce, 1888; Tarde, 1899; Dewey, 1927). Political discussion may also motivate individuals to consume greater political information. Findings by Mutz (2002) suggest that individuals are more likely to seek out additional information when confronted with arguments that are disagreeable to them.

Despite these predictions of increased political activities, there were also doubts. A principal concern was the “digital divide” or a difference in Internet usage based on access. Early research found that the same demographic variables that predict Internet usage also predicted political activities such as voting (Putnam, 2000; Norris, 2001; Alvarez & Hall, 2004). This may mean that the Internet will increase already existing gaps in participation (Davis & Owen, 1998; McChesney, 1999; Norris, 2001). Since these early studies, Americans have come online in increasing numbers. The National Telecommunication and Information Administration (NTIA) found that the percentage of U.S. citizens with Internet access has risen with 68.2% of households having broadband access at home and 72% of citizens having Internet access at some location outside of the home including work, school or library (NTIA, 2011, p.5).

Although Internet usage is rising, there were other reasons why early researchers were concerned that the Internet might not have appreciable impact on participation (Davis & Owen, 1998; Margolis & Resnick 2000). Individuals determine what media they will consume and activities they will engage in. If they did not take part in political activities such as reading news and discussing politics prior to the Internet, there is no reason to believe that they will start taking part in political

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