

Chapter 59

From Street Protests to Facebook Campaigns: Political Cynicism, Efficacy and Online Political Engagement of Sri Lankan Students

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ABSTRACT

This study examines effects of political cynicism and efficacy on online political engagement of Sri Lankan undergraduates. A survey was conducted among 155 Sri Lankan undergraduates that support the views of the Inter-University Student Federation (IUSF), an evidently anti-government student movement that claims to be dedicated to protecting free education in the country. Initial analysis showed that respondents were highly cynical (mean: 4.49 on a 1 to 5 scale). The study hypothesized that both political cynicism and efficacy exert a positive impact on online political engagement of respondents. The study also tested the effects of two moderators (extent of Facebook use, and the year of study). Results showed that political cynicism exerts a positive impact (standardized coefficient: .274, $p < .000$) on online political engagement, and this effect is positively moderated by the extent of Facebook use (standardized coefficient: .261, $p < .000$). Results also showed that internal political efficacy is not a significant predictor of the dependent variable.

INTRODUCTION

Social networks provide interactive platforms for local communities to play a more active role in politics. Political behavior on social networks is affected by factors including citizens' trust in government and frustration towards politics. Although many researchers have studied political cynicism and efficacy in the context of offline politics, these constructs have not been examined adequately in the context of online social networks. Several researchers have paid attention on political cynicism and efficacy with

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special attention on online politics (e.g. English et al., 2011; Hanson et al., 2010; Chang et al., 2009). However, further studies are required to examine effects of political cynicism on online political engagement in developing context, South Asian context in particular. This study suggests that online political engagement should be examined in specific contexts, considering issues that affect local communities. Political participation is context-dependent. A citizen's interest in different policy issues may directly affect his/her engagement in each debate. Therefore, examining political engagement in specific contexts is a better approach to understand dynamics of online political engagement.

Many researchers have focused on specific cases or contexts to study public participation in politics and policymaking (e.g., Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Rowe, Marsh, & Frewer, 2004; Halvorsen, 2003). Accordingly, selecting a policy issue that has inspired online activism would help model online political engagement. Developing countries are rapidly developing their ICT infrastructure, and South Asia is no exception. As a result, citizens in South Asian countries increasingly embrace social media. Political engagement in South Asian countries is important to study as these countries have unique political cultures. There is a dearth of studies that focus on social media activism in South Asia. This study attempts to fill this gap by examining political cynicism, efficacy, and online public engagement in the context of student activism in Sri Lanka. In many countries, university students are considered radical and politically active. This is the case in Sri Lanka where undergraduates are considered radical, politically active, and organized. Accordingly, this study focuses on examining relationships among political cynicism, efficacy, and online political engagement of Sri Lankan undergraduates.

This study surveyed supporters of the Inter-University Student Federation (IUSF), Sri Lanka. IUSF is a non-registered student movement consisting of voluntary members. Its membership mainly consists of undergraduates representing student unions in national universities in Sri Lanka. Although IUSF is a non-registered body, it is a main political force in the country that has critically influenced the higher education sector in Sri Lanka for more than three decades. This movement was started in 1978 as a leftist student movement. Currently, membership of IUSF consists of student unions representing 16 universities and higher educational institutes in Sri Lanka (see "www.iusfsl.org,"). This movement considers protecting free education as its primary responsibility, and it has fought relentlessly against privatization of higher education. Supporters of IUSF are generally explained as cynical, radical, and anti-government. This group is sufficiently computer-literate and familiar with Web 2.0 platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and blogs. During the last three decades, they have used several forms of influence such as petitions, class boycotts, street protests, and even hunger strikes to fight for their cause. However, this group seems to be increasingly embracing social media to spread their message across different groups and promote their activism. The IUSF Facebook page is very active, and many unions representing IUSF also maintain their own Facebook pages. They use these pages to promote their activism. IUSF supporters are a suitable population to study engagement of a group that is generally considered to be cynical. This study focuses on this specific context to tap into possible relationships among political cynicism, efficacy and online public engagement of pro-IUSF undergraduates.

RELATED LITERATURE

Online political engagement has been subject to extensive research. Recent literature related to this topic cover a range of factors such as political efficacy (e.g., Chan & Guo, 2013), motivations and predispos-

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