

Chapter 79

Social Media and Voter Participation

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ABSTRACT

This chapter looks at the political trends associated with using social media sources as a way to enhance participation in national elections. It is hypothesized that participation has declined across groups and through time, regardless of the new uses of social media in political campaigning. The historical significance of voter participation is examined using Alexis De Tocqueville's and Robert Putnam's frameworks. The path is paved to examine both the importance of new media in the election process and its drawbacks. A national empirical test is presented that examines the correlation between race categories, genders, and age ranges, with the percentage of voter turnout in each presidential election year from 1964 to 2008. Regression analysis is also conducted to examine the predictive nature of increased time on national voter participation. The correlation and regression results are presented, indicating that, in general, participation has continued to decline among most groups, regardless of the perceived access and connection provided by social media outlets. However, a slight change after 1996 may indicate an effect from social media presence. The data presents a starting point for future evaluation of e-government effects on national voter participation in the election process, providing a benchmark for later empirical tests.

INTRODUCTION

Social media outlets, utilizing Web2.0 technologies, have become widely available and active in the political sphere both in the United States and globally. This chapter will take a look at the

trends of national voter participation and assess the impact on voter participation in the presidential election process. As media are argued to be a political institution (Cook, 2005), it seems an essential task to look at the unregulated segment of such an institution and assess its effects on American civic life. With the introduction of new social media and the Web 2.0 technologies, including Facebook,

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MySpace, Twitter, SecondLife, political blogs and You Tube, traditional communication avenues in the political sphere have been altered. Citizens can become fans of representatives, support elections, begin constitutional petitions and protest current policies from the comfort of their homes. They can upload edited video, uncensored, for millions of viewer to watch, with minimal effort. These changes, however, may have little to do with tangible outcomes in civil society, examining a simple trend in national election data.

Since it is also assumed that new social media technologies have changed the institutionalization process of cooperation, connection and participation, we intend to look at the extent of these changes overtime, advancing a simple empirical test of the claim that civic participation changed after Obama used social media in his presidential campaign in 2008. This chapter will consider if the social media outlets can be argued to have enhanced voter participation to date and look at ways to evaluate enhanced participation in the future. The fundamental research questions of this chapter include: How has the development of Web2.0 technologies changed voter participation? How has participation been expanded and for whom? Has the change been a positive transition for civil society or has the use of social media created further disenfranchisement masked in an illusion of participation? We hypothesize that voter participation has not been enhanced by the introduction of social media technologies at the national level, but that the public perception of connectedness has been artificially inflated.

In order to address these questions, the following framework will be employed. First, a review of civic participation literature will be presented, including Robert Putnam and Alexis De Tocqueville to provide a theoretical grounding in the modern philosophical conception of associations and civic participation. Building on the historic theoretic grounding, two contemporary theories are briefly considered, both addressing aspects of virtual governance. Next, an analytic

analysis will be conducted using the US Census Bureau's results from every presidential election between 1964 and 2008. The results are recorded as a percentage of overall turnout in each category examined. Comparisons will be made between general turnout, between age groups, between genders and between races to look for any indication that the introduction of new social media has enhanced participation. Finally, recommendations for further research and awareness will be presented to advance the possibility of enhancing the tools' viability through political associations. The final analysis and recommendations will provide examples of politically harmful uses of social media, including the July 2010 termination of Shirley Sherrod, in an attempt to raise awareness about the tools potential power as well as unintended outcomes.

BACKGROUND AND CONCEPT CLARIFICATION

Prior to the presentation of this analysis, there are many concepts utilized in this chapter that deserve and require grounding: the use of the term "Web2.0," voter participation, social capital and social media. A brief description of the concepts referred to in this chapter are offered and defined, as to avoid confusion with the use of words that are often misunderstood, misused and thought to have a variety of socially accepted meanings. First, Web2.0 has been widely used to describe virtual interactions. For the purposes of this chapter, the definition is limited to the ability to have interactive information sharing within the social media framework. O'Reilly, who coined the term suggests that Web 2.0:

is about data. It's about our data – both the data we contribute explicitly and the data that are implicit...Likewise, social media aren't just about the contributions that people make deliberately or explicitly, such as when you upload a video to

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