The Role of Social Media in Political Participation

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Abstract:

The present study is concerned with the relationship between the use of social media and forms of political participation, in an electoral context. this paper provides evidence that the effect of social interaction on participation is contingent on the amount of political discussion that occurs in social networks. Additional analysis shows the substantive and theoretical importance of such interaction by explaining how it is distinct from the effect of social group memberships and how it enhances the effect of individual education on the probability of participation. This key contribution of this paper is to show that models of political participation that do not account for informal social interaction will be theoretically underspecified. It also shows that such interactions play a crucial role in explicating the role of other factors that predict participation, such as group membership and individual resources. The social media must be used by Parliaments, Parliamentarians, governments and political parties as they are highly effective tools to involve and inform citizens in public policymaking and in the formation of governments. But all these groups must develop strategies to deal with a wide array of both positive and negative effects of these rapidly growing media, argued participants in the final plenary session. However, the workshop noted the social media are such powerful, effective and low-cost information sources that the problems surrounding them cannot and should not stop Parliaments and Members from developing effective ways to use them to inform responsibly and, in so doing, help teach young people how to separate good information from bad.

Keywords: Governments, *Social Media,* Parliaments, Political Parties, Public Policymaking.

INTRODUCTION:

Social media have become an integral part of public discourse and communication in the contemporary society. The fast development of social media has caused major changes pertaining the way people find groups of individuals with similar interests, the nature of information, the available news sources, or the possibility to require and share ideas. It has had major effects on fields such as advertising, public relations, communications, and political communication. More recently, the prominence of social media has been particularly highlighted in politics, given the fact that the use of social networking sites (Facebook) and microblogging services (Twitter) are believed to have the potential of positively influencing political participation.

In response to such observations, the analytic focus of participation scholars has started to move beyond a narrow concentration on the individual characteristics and resources associated with participation, specifically by devoting greater attention to role the environmental determinants of involvement. Despite this trend, one area that still receives little attention is the influence of interaction in social networks on individual levels of

participation. One reason for this inattention is that social interaction is seemingly ubiquitous and may not provide much leverage in sorting participants out from non-participants. Another reason is that existing scholarship highlights the importance of formal social interaction, such as membership in voluntary groups, as a cause of involvement. Consequently, there may be a tendency to assume that the social underpinnings of participation are effectively "controlled for" once formal group memberships are accounted for in empirical analyses.

The rapidly advancing world of information technology affects all spheres of life but none more so than politics and the replacement of authoritarian governance with democratic governance. Easy access to information from around the world promotes liberty, competition and choice. It can also be used to advance respect for the rule of law and human rights and other indices of good governance such as equality and free and credible elections. Use of the new social media enables group thinking to promote concepts such as the independence of the judiciary, the development of civil society, multiparty systems and democratic institutions which are participatory, transparent and accountable. Mr Tambuwal added that the social media challenge the established media by enabling individuals to report their own views on governments. Their ease of access and wide coverage enable wide-spread political participation and such developments in one part of the world can affect other regions very rapidly.

Even though social media has not been previously discussed as an agent of political socialization, our research found that it can be more powerful than traditional media. Social media provides similar features in terms of exposure to information but has the additional benefits of global reach, better quality and greater speed, while also being an interactive platform for political discussion. Chaffee has demonstrated that media plays an important role in the formation of political knowledge, labelling it an important agent of political socialization. Because previous research has shown that political interest and political knowledge are interlinked, enquiring into the political knowledge of youth also examines their political interest.

Youth today frequently get their political information from social media rather than traditional media. The information given is more interactive, user-centered, briefer, easier to process and visually attractive. People are increasingly posting online their views concerning politics and social issues, sharing news articles, 'following' political figures, watching videos connected to politics and 'tweeting' about politics. Use of social media can mean more exposure to information and also a higher interest in politics, but first the audience's attention must be won. Therefore, it can be concluded that social media is suitable to spread knowledge among the youth and implicitly increase their political interest.

In the data provided by the Belgian Political Panel Study, we found a strong positive correlation between political interest and news and a moderate correlation between political interest and content viewed online. Online content consisted of chatting online, writing emails, viewing websites and online news,

blogging, and participating in social networks. All of these variables are connected to social media in some respect, providing different dimensions of social media. However, we found no relation between political interest and time spent online. Therefore, it is clear political interest is influenced by following the news and political content online.

In the focus groups, during discussions of the factors that triggered political interest, family was most commonly cited. However, when the discussion developed, media — especially Twitter and Facebook — surfaced as valuable sources of political information. Participants acknowledged the importance of social media in the acquisition of political information. Moreover, even when online news and newspapers were mentioned, the participants noted that those sources were found on social media through pages or people they 'followed'. Participants showed a clear preference for getting their political information from social media, as it is more accessible, up-to-date, and provides opportunities for political discussion through seeing other people's opinions. Our research found that the predominance of social media as the preferred mode of acquisition of political information by young people is indisputable, and their political knowledge is positively influenced by it.

Participants showed some sophistication in their engagement with the information on social media either by sharing it or being critical of it, discussing it or testing its validity. Discussing the information provided on social media can in itself increase interest in the issue. According to the findings, most participants admitted that they enjoy discussing issues online. They also affirmed that if their friends shared an article, they were more likely to read it and get interested in the topic, giving evidence of peer effects in socialization. Additionally, most participants acknowledged they constantly keep track of their newsfeed on Twitter and Facebook, bringing continuous passive exposure to information and up-to-date awareness of what is happening in politics. Some even acknowledged that social media subconsciously influences them and their interests. However, most participants seemed unaware of the impact the exposure provided by social media has on them, even though they spoke at length about social media in relation to their acquisition of political information.

Our research clearly concluded that social media positively influences political interest due to the constant exposure to concise, accurate, global information; and use of social media has the potential to increase political interest. These findings could have real impact because of the evidence that social media can be used to increase the political interest of youth and their political knowledge. This is a finding for politicians to ignore at their peril.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLITICS

The use of social media in recent elections, worldwide, has significantly intensified, especially among young adults. Of interest for this particular age group is the rise of social media use for political information, creating user-generated content and expressing political views. As answer to the growing political use of social media, researchers have investigated these media's effects on political behavior such as political participation. Social media can be defined as a collection of

internet-based applications that expand the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that permit the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Social networking sites are the interface between people and social media, and for many the "Internet" is synonymous with social networking sites. One of the most interesting characteristic of social media is represented by the term "user-generated content", which refers to different forms of media content, publicly available and created by end users. Therefore, people use social media not only to consume online information, but also to produce unique content themselves, transforming from content "consumers" to content "producers".

The era of new media can be looked at, in terms of three evolutionary phases. The first phase started in the beginning of the 1990s and it is characterised by the dominant presence of entertainment media formats and old-fashioned communication technologies in the political arena, which were merely driven by profits. In the second phase, which began in the mid-1990s, technological innovations (the Internet, World Wide Web, and the e-mail) made space for new political platforms. The novelty of these new media was mainly found in the interactivity feature. Lastly, the third phase was marked by the Web 2.0 applications which allowed an even higher level of interactivity: if in the second phase people could comment on articles written online by journalists, in the Web 2.0 era users can generate their own content by using wikis and social networking sites.

Through social networking sites, political organisations and candidates have not only the possibility to directly communicate with their publics, but also to interact with them (two-way communication). In turn, through social networking sites, voters are given a platform to share their opinions and to be heard. For instance, Robertson et al. (2010) found that Facebook has a significant effect on young voters decisions. Moreover, Banaij & Buckingham (2010) determined that young people used social networking sites with the purpose of finding political information, particularly information that couldn't be found in the traditional media, fact which proves Robertson et al. (2010) argument that citizens use social networking sites in order to gather information about political organizations and candidates, as well as to communicate with them and express their opinion.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The acts representing political participation included in various researches throughout the years have not significantly changed. However, the definition of this concept encountered a development. For instance, political participation and civic participation are intertwined concepts, allowing the concept of participation to expand to civic activities. This view is also noted in Norris" definition which describes participation as "any dimensions of social activity that are either designed directly to influence government agencies and the policy process, or indirectly to impact civil society, or which attempt to alter systematic patterns of social behaviour".

The most common view, explains political participation as a set of activities that citizens perform, with the purpose of influencing the government's structure, policies, or officials. It refers to behaviour that could affect government actions through

various activities, either directly by influencing the creation or implementation of policies, or indirectly by influencing the political actors that make those policies. Citizens can elect political representatives, who make policies that will regulate how much they have to pay in taxes and who are the beneficiaries of social programmes. They can also be part of organisations which aim to directly influence these policies. By engaging in public debate, they can also express their interests, preferences or needs.

The most common form of participation is voting - a unique political act which allows the views of the majority of people to be represented. However, it is important to acknowledge that political participation goes beyond the actual act of voting and it implicates taking part in different political activities, such as attending a political event, working for a candidate, donating money to a candidate's campaign, wearing a button/sign in support of a candidate or attempting to convince others how to vote. There are referred to as forms of offline political participation. The importance of differentiating between two types of political participation: offline and online. Online types of political participation are: gathering political information online articles, sending an email to a political candidate, visiting a political candidate's website, donating money to a candidate or a political party online. Nevertheless, only few studies actually employ this distinction in practical research. Jung et al. (2011) argue that these two constructs should be examined separately, mainly because of the cost required by online and offline political activities. Considering the cost-effective feature of online

political forms, people who, generally, would not participate in politics due to cost barriers, may engage in political activities over the Internet by donating money online, sending emails to public officials, etc.

Nevertheless, this paper follows a more conservative approach and considers these digitally networked acts as potential factors that might increase political participation (online and offline), and not as standalone forms of participation. Considering the fact that participation represents a key element is political communication, understanding what facilitates citizens" political activities has been a major point of interest for researchers. Within communications, the foundation of the theoretical development of political participation is mainly represented by informational media use. When it comes to traditional media use, findings are consistent with regards to the fact that reading newspapers is positively associated with political participation.

METHODOLOGY:

A path analysis via this structural equation modeling approach is useful because it evaluates the general fit of the model and tests other competing models in comparison with the theorized model. To achieve both model parsimony and control, demographics variables were controlled using the residualization procedure. This involves regressing all of the study variables on the control variables and then using the residuals of the study variables in the substantive analyses.

Because these cross-sectional analyses do not resolve the causal direction, the path model in this study does not prove causality. It is simply a test of the statistical validity of the causal

assumptions we made based on the theory. In addition, this study did not test alternate causal orderings of the ten sets of endogenous variable blocks contained in our model (i.e. political interests, news media use, citizen media use, online political interaction, offline political discussion, political information efficacy, external efficacy, perception of peers' participation, subjective norms, and political participation).
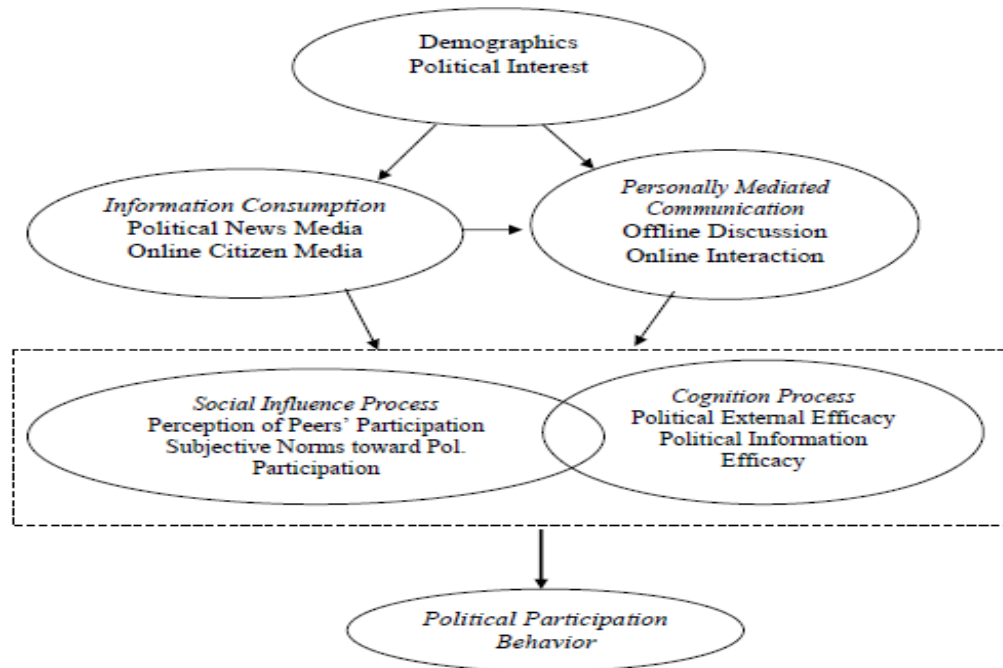

Figure 1: A model of the political participation process

	Component	
	News media use	Online citizen media use
Network TV news Web sites	.728	
Television news shows	.725	
Newspaper	.648	
News pages of Internet service providers	.580	
Print media news Web sites	.543	
Video-sharing Web sites		.766
Social networking sites		.742
Micro blogs		.714
Ordinary citizens' blogs		.704
Online forums and discussion boards		.681

Table 1: Factor loadings of political news media use and social media use

The variables included in this model accounted for 12% of the variance in political interest, 9% in social media political information use, 14% in news media use, 40% in online political interaction, 35% in offline political discussion, 6% in perception of peers' political participation, 21% in subjective norms of political participation, 28% in external political efficacy, 50% in political information efficacy, and 57% in political participation. As is apparent almost all predicted paths were statistically significant and in the hypothesized direction.

The three exceptions, which were parsed from the initial model, are the expected direct links between political news media use and political participation and between online citizen media use and political participation. Although direct relationships between these variables were not observed, indirect effects were detected. Besides, the hypothesized direct relationships between communication activities and social normative and cognitive variables are partially supported, that is, some specific communication activities are only directly associated with specific social influence and cognitive variables. The pattern of direct and indirect relationships observed in these data yielded an interesting portrait of the role of communication activities in political participation and the complex social normative and cognitive processes related to communication effects on political participation.

This result suggests that participation is not simply a matter of endowing people with resources. Personal resources must be combined with social resources in a way that encourages political participation for people to become active in politics. This is evidence that social factors are especially important for people who possess human capital. Although people who have little personal resources benefit from social interaction, those substantive benefits pale in comparison to those experienced by high status individuals. So while a social network model helps explain the behavior of two anomalous groups (low status participants and high status non-participants), this demonstration also shows that we cannot fully understand the importance of even individual characteristics without accounting for the micro-sociological environment surrounding individuals. As such, it implies that the social dimensions of participation are crucially important also for understanding the impact of individual resources.

DISCUSSION:

Experience shows that attention to the importance of social networks for explaining participation does not always meet their ascribed importance. For example, a substantial body of work focuses on explanatory factors that are best understood as individual characteristics, including early research on socioeconomic status and later work investigating civic resources and the psychological underpinnings of involvement. Among the body of work that does examine environmental factors, there is a preoccupation with features of the political context and formal group occupation. Both sets of literature tend to de-emphasize or, at least, do not prioritize the importance of social networks in understanding involvement. Just as these scholarly literatures provide substantial insight, they also direct our attention away from another factor that is also

crucially important – the social underpinnings of political action.

This paper illustrates that a failure to incorporate social network factors in to our models of participation has led to a misunderstanding of how group memberships, network intimacy, and individual resources contribute to involvement. Most importantly, it highlights the fact that social influences on participation are worthy of detailed and extensive inquiry as well. Along these lines, this paper builds on previous research by providing a more solid conceptual foundation for this kind of work. Specifically, the results presented here have important implications for the manner in which empirical scholars treat social effects in models of participation. For example, one common approach to "controlling" for social effects is to include broad measures of social connectivity, such as marital status, or measures of civic engagement, such as church attendance and group membership. Not only do the results demonstrate that the first measure only roughly controls for the social process underlying participation, but it illustrates that social interaction effects are not synonymous with group membership effects. Overemphasizing the importance of such group memberships without acknowledging more informal social processes may undervalue the impact of social forces on participation.

Additionally, there is evidence that not all forms of social interaction are important. One claim made by proponents of social capital is that social involvement exposes people to community norms and promotes interpersonal trust, factors which in turn make political involvement more likely. Although the model

and results outlined here do not contradict those claims, it does provide a mechanism deriving hypotheses about when social networks should support political action. It also helps promote a more detailed understanding of the social foundations of participation, one that moves beyond using rough measures of social interaction such as marriage. More generally, the results highlight the potential pitfalls of over-individualized models of political participation. Specifically they imply that any model that does not account for the impact of politically relevant social interaction will be underspecified. Although there are some clear limits on the data used to examine these findings, they illustrate that we may overestimate the importance of personal resources because their application may rely on the types of social interaction experienced by the individual.

As a discipline, more attention should be devoted to unraveling the underlying social dynamics that spur movement off of the sidelines and onto the field in electoral politics. The model supported by the evidence here implies that one fruitful line of work will examine implications stemming from the main assumption of the social network model employed above – that social interaction is important when it helps increase individual levels of political information. This assumption provides the foundation for a potentially rich investigation of the social foundations of involvement. A second line of inquiry is to explore the link between different types of networks, the substance of discussion and involvement. The fact that political conversations are more influential when carried on between spouses opens a number of

questions about the relationship between source-effects and substance-effects in promoting participation. Finally, this paper suggests that we must think seriously about the factors that drive political interaction in social networks.

CONCLUSION:

This study provides interesting findings and indicates directions for future research as discussed above. As new communication tools and information resources, the Internet not only expands information access, but also braids people into a new personally-mediated society. While the Internet has fostered people's moving online to discuss politics, the influence of networked technologies on politics and society requires more theoretical construction and empirical examination. In general, this study indicates that opposed to the uniform effects in mass media, differential informative media use and interactive interpersonal channels play different roles in shaping political participation, and these effects are mediated by different social-psychological processes. In addition to cognitive mediation processes, scholars should also consider normative influence of communication activities on political participation, especially as people have more opportunities and channels to received information, communicate with other citizens, and voice their own opinions.

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