Research Report

Liking Obama and Romney (on Facebook): An experimental evaluation of political engagement and efficacy during the 2012 general election

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ABSTRACT

Existing research on the effect of social media use on political behavior has yielded mixed results to date, demonstrating the importance of research examining the effects of varying types of social media communication on political behavior. The experiment reported in this study provides valuable insights into the role of social media in elections. A longitudinal experiment was conducted to assess the effect Facebook use in the 2012 Presidential election had on political information efficacy, external efficacy, and political engagement. Results suggested that while political information efficacy and engagement increased over time, it was not related to following candidates on Facebook.

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1. Introduction

Young voters (18–29 years old) have consistently turned out for Presidential elections in lower numbers than older age groups. The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (2013) reported that only 45% of young voters participated in the 2012 Presidential election, compared to 60% of voters aged 30–44 and 68% of voters aged 45–64. This was a decrease from 2008, when young voter participation was at 51%. Although young voter turnout has often been a goal of campaigns, engaging young voters remains a difficult task. According to Bachmann, Kaufhold, Lewis, and Gil de Zúñiga (2010), many young voters do not participate in behaviors traditionally associated with political engagement, but that does not mean they are not participating at all—they just do so differently. Their research suggests that by consuming news online, the Internet can increase participation by allowing young voters to gain information and engage with others (Bachmann et al., 2010). Social network sites in particular have been touted as an important element of Barack Obama's winning campaign in 2008 (Carr, 2008). However, research on this question is mixed, with some studies suggesting Facebook does nothing to improve political engagement or efficacy (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; Gustafsson, 2012; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010; Woolley, Limperos, & Oliver, 2010) and others finding that it does

(Fernandes, Giurcanu, Bowers, & Neely, 2010; Gibson & McAllister, 2011). None of this research has examined the possible mechanisms for a Facebook effect. It could be group pages, the candidates' page, status updates from friends, or the facilitation of increased communication with weak ties that drive any potential Facebook effect.

The purpose of this study is to isolate the use of Facebook by candidates during an election as a possible mechanism for a social media effect. We believe candidate pages are an ideal location to focus because, as opposed to uncontrolled comments from friends and acquaintances, these pages reflect how candidates choose to frame themselves to potential voters. This study extends existing research on the role of social media in politics by exploring the possible effects of candidate communication through Facebook on the engagement and efficacy of potential voters. By using an experimental design with real candidates, this study is the first to demonstrate the potential normative value of social media.

1.1. Social media & political communication

Hargittai and Hinnant (2008) call youth the "most plugged in" age group because they use the Internet and social media for a variety of reasons including political information seeking. By going online, young people are able to create their own political messages while also sharing content created by others (Bachmann et al., 2010). In fact, one study suggests that having a preference for digital media as opposed to print predicts online political participation for young people (Bachmann et al., 2010). But can

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that online participation ensure offline political action? Gibson and McAllister's (2011) analysis of Facebook and the 2007 Australian federal election suggests that candidates' posts to their pages were capable of converting a small number of voters during the election. Likewise, Bakker and de Vreese (2011) found a positive relationship between online engagement and political activity offline. Together these studies demonstrate support for some positive effects of the Internet and social media on political engagement.

Overall, research findings on social media and political engagement has been mixed. While much of the literature suggests there are many benefits to social media or Internet use, for the most part the effects found for political engagement have been small (Boulianne, 2009). Some researchers argue that, at best, social media is simply another outlet for those who are already engaged offline rather than an opportunity to increase engagement among those who were otherwise unengaged (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; Gustafsson, 2012). Research on Facebook as a site for political engagement finds that online participation is likely, but it is unclear if that translates into voting and further action offline. One study of the 2008 Presidential election found that Facebook groups for candidates facilitated political dialogue and civic engagement among college students (Fernandes et al., 2010). A similar analysis of Facebook groups, however, found them to be polarizing and partisan (Woolley et al., 2010).

Robertson, Vatrapu, and Medina's (2010) study on the posting patterns of users on candidate pages in the 2008 Presidential election found that many people who post tend to be one-time or moderate rather than high-frequency posters. The researchers suggested patterns of political behavior on Facebook are closely tied to knowledge and commitment to a candidate—the more invested a potential voter becomes the more likely they are to engage online in discussion in support of that candidate (Robertson et al., 2010). This is consistent with Boulianne's (2009) claim that those who engage through the Internet are more likely to start out more politically motivated (interested). In short, these studies indicate that those participating online are doing so because they were already politically interested and not because their online behaviors made them become engaged. All together, though these studies point to a growing trend of political discussion online, they do not provide a consistent account of whether that discussion leads to offline political engagement. Knowing this, we ask the following RQ:

> RQ1: How does following candidates on Facebook during an election effect the political engagement of Facebook users compared to those who do not follow candidates?

1.2. Political efficacy

Efficacy can be a question of both political information and external political efficacy (Kaid, McKinney, & Tedesco, 2007; Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010). External efficacy is the extent to which an individual feels they have a say in/influence over their political system (Kenski & Stroud, 2006). Political information efficacy (PIE) is the degree to which voters feel they have enough information to participate in politics (Kaid et al., 2007). Gaining information should be a primary function of online political behavior, and should thus increase information efficacy. PIE is especially important because low levels of information efficacy can decrease confidence in political knowledge and prevent young people from voting in an election (Kaid et al., 2007; Tedesco, 2011).

Research on external efficacy and the Internet has been mixed. Kushin and Yamamoto (2010) suggested that there is no relationship between efficacy and using Facebook. However Kenski and Stroud (2006) found a limited positive relationship between engagement online and external efficacy. Research on PIE

(Tedesco, 2007, 2011) suggests the Internet is capable of increasing efficacy in young adults. Interactive sites are especially likely to increase information efficacy (Tedesco, 2007). Vitak et al.'s (2011) research on the 2008 U.S. Presidential election did not find a relationship between internal efficacy and Facebook use. However, Warner, McGowen, and Hawthorne (2012), Warner, Hawthorne, and McGowen (2014) found that those with high levels of PIE were more likely to use social media to engage in political discussion. While they were unable to test the causal direction of the relationship, they argued for the possibility of a recursive relationship in which political communication through social media would also increase PIE. Given the inconsistencies in past research results, we pose the following questions:

> RQ2: How does following candidates on Facebook during an election effect the political information efficacy of Facebook users compared to those who do not follow candidates?
> RQ3: How does following candidates on Facebook during an election effect the political external efficacy of Facebook users compared to those who do not follow candidates?

2. Materials and method

2.1. Participants

This study was completed by 135 college students recruited from introductory communication courses at two large Midwestern universities. Participants were provided with the opportunity to earn course credit in exchange for participation. The mean age of the participants was 20.56 (SD = 3.71, range 18–49, mdn = 20). There were 85 females (63.0%) and 50 males (37.0%). The majority of the participants identified as White (82.2%), followed by Black/African–American (8.9%), Hispanic/Latino(a) (7.4%), Asian (5.2%), and Native-Hawaiian/Pacific Islander/Other (0.7%). Participants were placed into one of two groups for the duration of the study: Presidential (following Romney/Obama) or Control (following no candidates). There were 77 participants in the Presidential group (57.0%) and 58 in the Control group (43.0%).[1] Uneven group sizes are attributed to attrition; Time 1 reported 164 participants between the Presidential (n = 82) and Control (n = 82) groups and Time 2 reported 154 participants between the Presidential group (n = 77) and the Control group (n = 77). It was at Time 3 that significantly more individuals in the Control group failed to return to complete the survey, while the Presidential group maintained the same number from Time 2.

2.2. Procedures

Upon agreeing to participate in the study, participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups. Participants assigned to the Presidential group were asked to follow only Obama and Romney, while those assigned to the Control group were asked to follow no candidates from any election on Facebook (none of the participants in this group followed candidates prior to the study). For those following candidates, status updates and posts from the candidates should have appeared in their Facebook newsfeeds such that they would have been frequently exposed to the candidates' Facebook communication. Participants were asked to report how often they saw posts from candidates in their newsfeed, and a majority of participants in the Presidential group were regularly

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[1] This data is part of a larger project that consisted of 270 participants placed into one of four groups: Presidential (Obama/Romney), Senate 1 (Warren/Brown), Senate 2 (Kaine/Allen), and Control (no candidates). Participants from the Senate 1 and Senate 2 groups were excluded from analysis for this particular study based on the questions posed.